

The Link between Alcohol Consumption and Sexual Violence: Review and recommendations

Shelby Kitt

Simon Fraser University

This paper explores the nature of the relationship between alcohol consumption and sexual violence against women. It has been estimated that by adulthood, approximately 25% of women have been sexually assaulted in their lifetime and a wealth of research has established a correlation between alcohol consumption and sexual assault. Here, we review a triad of explanations for this correlation and routes through which the likelihood of sexual violence is increased. Major precipitating factors are reviewed including the cognitive deficits caused by alcohol consumption in perpetrators and/or victims, and how alcohol acts as a catalyst for social misinterpretation. The nature and prevalence of rape myth is reviewed in terms of its role in sexual violence occurrence and acceptance within the general public. Finally, this paper outlines some of the major damaging impacts that sexual violence has on its female victims. This paper is largely informed by the work of psychological researcher Antonia Abbey and provides a good general foundation for the understanding of the relationship between alcohol and sexual violence. Recommendations are made in terms of important future research, as well as the development, implementation and maintenance of various programs that support victims of sexual assault.

Keywords: Sexual assault, alcohol consumption, rape myth, prevention

There is an epidemic occurring in western cultures that affects a disturbingly large proportion of women. Sexual assault is defined by the Institute on Alcoholic Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA; 2011) as any “forced sexual acts, including forced touching or kissing, verbally coerced intercourse, and vaginal, oral and anal penetration”. Extensive psychological research has indicated a relationship between alcohol ingestion and sexual violence, with the scientific community unanimously recognizing a strong correlation (Lovett & Horvath, 2009). Although alcohol is not considered to be a prerequisite for sexual violence (Abbey, 2011), their frequent co-occurrence is grounds for further investigations of causation. This relationship has been investigated extensively in the psychological community and various factors have been attributed to the causes behind this relationship.

This paper will investigate the following questions surrounding alcohol and sexual violence: a) Of what nature is the relationship between alcohol and sexual assault b) What are the major precipitating factors behind this relationship c) What damaging impacts can be seen in terms of victim adjustment, and d) How does the public experience reactions to sexual violence and alcohol. It is important to recognize that while alcohol-related sexual violence against women is a serious and important topic of study, the fact remains that the majority of men do *not* engage in sexual violence. This paper does not suggest that all or even most men are likely to engage in sexual violence, but that risk may increase when alcohol becomes a factor.

Sexual assault is considered by many to be an epidemic as it occurs in high numbers with many instances going unreported entirely. According to

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NIAAA it is conservatively estimated that at least 25% of American women have been sexually assaulted, either in adolescence or childhood. Equally shocking, approximately 18% of women in America have been raped (Paul, Zinzow, McCauley, Kilpatrick, Resnick, 2014), that being unconsenting vaginal, anal or oral penetration (NIAAA, 2011). The prevalence of sexual assault against males is understudied, however it is assumed to be significantly less frequent than sexual assault against females (Choudhary et al., 2012). As this is the case, sexual violence will suggest female victims and male perpetrators exclusively for the purpose of this present paper.

It is well known that unfortunately, the majority of sexual assaults are not reported to law enforcement officials. This is due in large part to the fact that most women who experience sexual assault and rape are not strangers to the male perpetrator, among other factors (Paul et al., 2014). According to NIAAA, less than 20% of rape fits the criteria of 'stranger rape', that being an instance of rape where the perpetrator is a complete stranger to the victim. The vast majority of rape instead is considered 'acquaintance rape', in which it is committed by someone that the victim knows, such as an acquaintance, friend, co-worker, date, or spouse (Abbey, 2011). A recent American study suggested that a rape victim is most likely to officially report a rape when she had consulted with other people who had encouraged her to do so (Paul et al., 2014), compared to women who either had not consulted with others or when her support system had not encouraged her to report. This study goes on to discuss the implications of formal rape reporting for the victims, including potential for emotional support and relief as well as potential risks (Paul et al., 2014). Studies such as this highlight the highly sensitive nature of rape reporting, a concept which will be re-visited later in this paper during recommendations.

Research almost unanimously suggests that alcohol ingestion (by the victim, perpetrator, or both), and sexual violence are positively correlated with one another. Approximately half of all unreported and reported sexual assaults involve the consumption of alcohol by either the perpetrator, the victim or both. Typically, it is seen that if the victim is consuming alcohol, most likely so is the male perpetrator (Abbey et al., 2011). As is the case with any two factors that are correlated, a triad of explanations must be considered (Abbey, 2011). The first of three explanations rests on the assumption that alcohol plays a causal role in sexual violence, an explanation that is the most intuitive and is supported by much psychological research. A recent study of college men in romantic relationships illustrated this explanation. Research by Shorey, Stuart, McNulty and Moore (2014) found that on days where alcohol is heavily consumed by college-aged men (at least 5 drinks), the prevalence of sexual and violent aggression increased dramatically compared to days of absent drinking. These findings contribute to a growing body of research that suggests positive relationships between acute alcohol consumption and sexual violence (Shorey et al., 2014). The second possible broad explanation of the correlation between alcohol and sexual violence is the inverse of the former, that sexual violence plays a causal role in alcohol ingestion. Although this is a more difficult explanation to defend intuitively, there are many instances in which a desire to be sexually active or aggressive results in the consumption of alcohol by the perpetrator, and pressuring of female victims to ingest alcohol (Romero-Sánchez & Megías, 2010). This pressure from male perpetrators for female victims to ingest large amounts of alcohol is a very common occurrence in many instances of sexual assault (Romero-Sánchez & Megías, 2010). Ensuring that a female victim is drunk is beneficial for a male perpetrator for several reasons. It allows him to easily gain

physical dominance over a physically incapacitated female, lowers her inhibitions, and decreases the amount social responsibility or blame should he be caught engaging in nonconsenting sexual activity (Romero-Sánchez & Megías, 2010). The third broad explanation of the relationship between sexual violence and alcohol is that there is a third variable at play which is responsible both for the ingestion of alcohol and the occurrence of sexual violence (Abbey, 2011). Psychological research indicates that some personality traits such as impulsivity and mindsets like conservatism are strongly linked to both heavy drinking and sexual aggression (Lambert & Raichle, 2000). This third explanation would mean that some men who commit sexually violent crimes do so not as a main result of alcohol consumption, but as a result of a personality trait or pervasive mindset. It is important to identify which of the three types of interactions apply to any individual, as interventions for sexual offenders would vary depending on the cause of the act. If for example a man commits sexual offenses because he is drunk and would otherwise not have acted aggressively sober, the sensible course of treatment would be to treat his heavy drinking. However, if he both drinks and commits sexual offenses because of an underlying personality trait, it would be more beneficial to engage him in therapy to manage the expression of these traits and therefore reduce the likelihood that he will reoffend.

Abbey, a leading psychological researcher on the topic of alcohol and sexual assault, has developed a theory that postulates two routes through which the likelihood of alcohol-induced sexual assault is increased. The first route occurs in the early hours of an encounter that will ultimately lead to a sexual assault, most likely at a bar or party. As is described by Abbey (2011), men frequently look for cues from a woman that they believe is an indication that she is sexually interested in him. In many instances when men

are sober, these signals or 'signs' that women give are misinterpreted as sexual interest when there is in fact none. Intoxication greatly exacerbates the effect of misinterpretation, as alcohol results in cognitive deficits that cause men (and all individuals) to attend to the most salient cues or 'signs' in any given situation (Abbey, 2011). In instances where two people are at a bar or party and the man or both parties are consuming alcohol, cues such as dancing, laughing, and engaging in long conversation can be easily misinterpreted as interest, particularly when the man is intoxicated. At the same time that these 'yes' cues are perceived, frequently men will dismiss or ignore equally obvious 'no' cues, like backing away or a woman making repeated excuses to leave (Abbey, 2011). This again occurs during sobriety, and once again is exacerbated by intoxication. This phenomenon is similar in nature to a confirmation bias, in which evidence supporting a given belief (that a woman is sexually interested in a man) is readily noticed and accepted, while evidence refuting said belief is ignored and minimized (Aronson et al., 2012). This route can often lead to the second route through which alcohol can increase the likelihood of sexual assault occurring. In the second route, a man may react aggressively when a woman rejects his sexual advances. Often in acquaintance rape, there was an encounter and flirtation which preceded the actual sexual assault in which men could misinterpret the intentions of women and as a result feel 'led on' or 'teased' by the woman once she ultimately rejects him sexually (Abbey, 2011). This rejection can be dangerous as in many instances, men's cognitive deficits as a result of alcohol and their previously held sexist beliefs can result in their justification of sexual assault. This is seen in men who, after being convicted of sexual violence or rape, insist that their victim was 'asking for it', or 'deserved it'.

Male perpetrators however are not the only parties who are affected by alcohol and increase

the likelihood of sexual assault. Research by Loiselle and Fuqua (2007) was conducted in attempts to experimentally investigate the link between alcohol consumption and women's accuracy at risk detection in a risky sexual vignette. Forty-two young women were recruited and randomly assigned into conditions in which they were asked either to drink alcohol or were given a placebo drink. They were then required to listen to a date-rape audiotape vignette and give feedback regarding the riskiness of the vignette situation. Results of the study indicated that women who have consumed even minimal amounts of alcohol (blood alcohol concentration was an average of .04 for women who were assigned to the alcohol-drinking group) were significantly less likely to recognize risk in a potentially risky situation. This again testifies to the effects of alcohol on cognitive functioning even in small amounts, and shows how the risk of sexual assault can increase dramatically as a result of alcohol ingestion. Another interesting and notable observation is that women in this study who had consumed alcohol indicated higher rates of rape myth acceptance, a concept which is discussed in detail shortly.

Further evidence that alcohol potentially increases the risk of victimization in women lies in the research of Pumphrey-Gordon and Gross (2007). This research indicates that women are far less likely to resist sexual aggression or persistence when they are intoxicated, *or* when they are expecting to receive alcohol from the male pursuer if they continue to tolerate his advances. Some studies suggest that women's heavy episodic drinking is a proximal risk factor in sexual assault and rape, having identified "incapacitated rape", which is rape of a woman who is too intoxicated to resist an attack, as the most common occurrence of rape within college settings (Testa & Livingston, 2009).

As previously mentioned, ensuring that his victim is drunk is beneficial for a male perpetrator as he is likely to be held less accountable for his

sexual violence by his peers. This is a phenomenon commonly referred to as 'rape myth', occurring where the female rape victim is held at least partially accountable for the assault she has endured (Suarez & Gadala, 2010). In a study designed to examine the effects of intoxication on attributions of blame in a rape incident, 187 college students were required to read scenarios of an instance of rape in which either the victim, offender, both or neither were intoxicated by alcohol, and were required to make a series of judgments about the situation and responsibility of each individual involved in the rape (Richardson & Campbell, 1982). Results of the study indicated that when the offender was drunk, students rated the situation as being more reasonable than when the offender was sober, and rated the male offender as less responsible for the rape (Richardson & Campbell, 1982). Additionally, female victims were rated as more responsible for the rape occurring when she was drunk (Richardson & Campbell, 1982). This study has worrisome implications regarding the perception of sexual assault by third parties, as it seems to suggest that in many instances, the responsibility of rape may fall partially on the victim instead of the perpetrator. Moreover, rape myths continue to be very prevalent in today's society and in several ways contribute to the prevalence of rape (Suarez & Gadala, 2010). A meta-analysis of rape studies (37 total) by Suarez and Gadala was conducted, with results clearly showing that men in general display a significantly higher rate of rape myth acceptance (RMA) than women (2010). There appears to be a prototype of male who endorses RMA, which includes characteristics like sexism, classism, racism, heterosexism and ageism (Suarez & Gadala, 2010). These findings conclusively suggest that it is mainly men who endorse RMA, and that there are a series of characteristics that are usually correlated with men who take the position of RMA. Another factor that has been found to perpetuate RMA is the notion of 'just

world' beliefs. Researchers Lambert and Raichle (2000) suggest a relationship between victim-blaming attitudes and the just world hypothesis, which states that some people engage in victim-blaming in an attempt to preserve their view that people receive what they deserve. According to this research, people who are firmly conservative in their views are more likely to want to uphold traditional power dynamics between dominant and non-dominant groups (Lambert & Raichle, 2000). Together, this research cautions that a 'just world' belief, especially when held by a hyper-conservative person, increases the likelihood that a rape myth will be accepted and blame will be assigned to the victim of sexual assault.

It is therefore reasonable to suggest that during trials of rape, it could be useful to address whether jurors hold such beliefs, as it may influence the outcome of a trial (Hammond et al., 2011). A study by Stewart and Jacquin (2010) demonstrated this danger in an experiment where 229 mock jurors were asked to rate the defendant of a mock rape trial as well as the victim in their perceived responsibility for the rape that took place. The study found that the jurors who were highest in rape myth acceptance attributed highest amounts of blame to the victim, particularly when the situation described the woman as having been under the influence of drugs or alcohol during the rape incident. Jurors who did not accept rape myth attributed the highest amount of blame to the defendant, regardless of whether or not the victim was intoxicated by drugs or alcohol during the assault (Stewart & Jacquin, 2010).

A study by Toomey et al. (2012) was conducted in attempts to determine whether neighborhoods with high densities of alcohol establishments had higher rates of violent crimes, including rape. Four American cities were compared and findings found a positive correlation between number of alcohol establishments and frequency of violent crime

being reported in the area. The authors of this study concluded that as a result of their findings, in addition to previous findings regarding the relationship between alcohol and sexual assault (and all violent crime), community leaders ought to be wary of increasing the density of alcohol establishments in their neighborhoods (Toomey et al., 2012).

To this point we have seen that alcohol and sexual violence are positively and strongly correlated, identified the three main ways in which we can interpret the correlation between alcohol and sexual violence, and have discussed possible precipitating factors and routes through which likelihood of sexual assault increases. It is important to furthermore note the significant damage that sexual violence can cause a woman, and the relationship between post-assault adjustment and the involvement of intoxication during the assault. A questionnaire developed by Davis et al. (2012) was administered to 225 men between the ages of 21 and 35 who had reported both inconsistent condom use and heavy episodic drinking, the aim of which was to assess the association between alcohol consumption and condom use during rape perpetrated by young men (2012). The results of the questionnaire indicated that while intoxicated, men were significantly less likely to use condoms during penetrative sexual assaults, with the rate of rape without condom being 70% overall. This lack of condom use during penetration can result in both pregnancy and the transmittance of sexually transmitted infections (STI; Carole et al, 1990). This of course can have catastrophic consequences for the female victim as she is forced not only to live with lasting emotional and psychological scarring of having endured sexual assault (Krulowitz, 1982), often manifesting as post-traumatic stress disorder (Watson et al., 2012) but is also at risk of further damage in the form of pregnancy or contracting an STI.

There is very new and budding interest in the psychological community regarding the

relationship between adjustment of sexual assault victims and the involvement of intoxication during the initial assault. It has been established that significant obstacles face sexual assault victims particularly when they were intoxicated during their assault (Wenger & Bornstein, 2006). For example, victims are less likely to receive compensation and justice in the form of prosecution of their perpetrators when the female had ingested alcohol at the time of the incident (Wegner & Bornstein, 2006). This can obviously have very damaging effects on the recovery process of victims. It is suggested that future research focus on the recovery process of women who have experienced sexual assault while intoxicated compared to those who have experienced similar assault while sober in terms of cognitive, psychological and emotional adjustments.

Early in this paper, the implications of rape reporting were outlined and the importance of formal reporting has been noted in terms of victim's healing success. It is suggested here that while it is valuable for many women to report their sexual assaults, this may not be an ideal choice for some victims of rape. Loss of anonymity, social isolation, re-victimization and harm from the perpetrator are all potential negative consequences related to formal reporting of a sexual assault (Paul et al., 2014). For some women, these consequences may outweigh the emotional support and justice brought forth by identifying a perpetrator and seeking legal action. For this reason, it is recommended that future programs and/or social campaigns are developed to support victims in formal rape reporting, while simultaneously remaining sensitive to possible consequences. Ultimately, the decision to report must lie with the victim herself.

In an attempt to eradicate victim-blaming and socially upheld notions of systemic violence, community engagement events like the "Slut Walk" should be championed. This campaign to

end a phenomenon popularly termed "slut shaming" originated in Toronto, Canada and has become somewhat of a global movement. These events are positive examples of the potential for change in the social sphere of sexual violence against women, and it is recommended that similar events be developed and promoted to continue this effect. The goal of these 'walks' and other such events should focus on the eradication of rape myth acceptance, prevention of future sexual assaults and a show of community support for assault victims and all women.

Future research on the subject of alcohol and sexual violence ought to focus on rehabilitation programs for men who commit sexual assault as a result of a personality trait, as described earlier. Within the psychological community, it is widely known that personality traits are notoriously difficult (if not impossible) to modify, therefore the expression of these traits must be targeted in treatment.

Finally, it is recommended that future researchers investigate the efficacy of cognitive restructuring techniques in the 'treatment' of sexual violence perpetuating attitudes like Rape Myth Acceptance. Psychological research has long considered cognitive factors when studying sexual offenders (Drieschner & Lange, 1999), however little or no research has currently been conducted on the possibility of cognitive restructuring for non-offenders who hold Rape Myth beliefs. This is important research as it could potentially help to discontinue a culture of victim-blaming.

In conclusion, it is well documented in psychological literature that there is a relationship between alcohol consumption and sexual violence. There are three distinct ways in which the correlation between alcohol and sexual assault can be interpreted, and there are many demonstrated precipitating factors that can lead to an instance of sexual violence. Some of the most salient factors that are thought to contribute to the pervasiveness of alcohol-

involved sexual violence include alcohol-induced cognitive deficits in males who misinterpret signals of attraction and react aggressively to rejection, and in females who are less likely to notice and react to inappropriate or risky aggression from men. Other precipitating factors include rape myth acceptance and a demonstrated prototype of male who is likely to display RMA, and finally the density of alcohol establishments present in a given urban neighborhood. A host of damaging impacts can be seen in women who have suffered sexual assault, including lasting emotional and psychological damage, as well as possible risk of infection transmission or pregnancy. There is also a need to further investigate the relationship between progress in recovery and the involvement of alcohol in sexual assaults. Finally, we can see that there is cause for concern regarding the public perception of rape and the attribution of blame. The existence of rape myth acceptance and cognitive distortions of women is cause for concern both in men who are likely to commit sexual offenses, and in jurors who are responsible for assigning blame to the perpetrator. As this is the case, future research in the field of alcohol and sexual violence should focus on methods to correct the public's perception of rape myth, as well as other campaigns to eradicate sexual violence in general.

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