

Acquaintance Rape and the Attribution of Responsibility: The Role of Alcohol and Individual Differences

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ABSTRACT

This study attribution of responsibility and blame for different levels of alcohol intoxication and involvement for an acquaintance rape scenario. Comparisons of conditions in which both the victim and the offender were equally intoxicated revealed that participants rated the victim as more responsible for a rape incident after the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Additionally, although females are granted greater responsibility for a rape incident when they have consumed alcohol, they are not held blameworthy for their misfortune. Regardless inebriation, males were always attributed greater responsibility for the rape incident; however, when drinking, a woman was attributed increased responsibility for the outcome of the incident.

INTRODUCTION

Despite popular belief that rape is an act committed by strangers, acquaintance rape, or date rape, is a frequent form of sexual assault (Van Wei & Gross 1995). Statistics show that at least 85% of rapes or attempted rapes are perpetrated against college women by non-strangers (Walsh & DeVellis 1997). According to Stormo, Lang, and Stritzke (1997), only about 5% of date rape victims report these incidents to legal authorities. A primary reason for frequent underreporting may be the victim's tendency to assume or be assigned responsibility of blame for the incident (Stormo et al. 1997). Findings in a college survey stated that rape victims do not report rape incidents because they believe their own actions will be judged negatively, they feel embarrassed, they feel some degree of personal responsibility for the rape, and/or they were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the attack (Finkelson & Oswalt 1995). Furthermore, "victim blame" and diminished perpetrator responsibility have been exacerbated in rape incidents that involved alcohol (Stormo et al. 1997). Several researchers have theorized that alcohol use may be a significant factor in rape cases (Richardson & Campbell 1982). For this reason, it has become increasingly important to study the role of alcohol in judgments of blame and responsibility in rape cases that involved alcohol consumption.

Wild and Graham (1993) presented evidence that implicates alcohol consumption with aggressive behavior and violent crime. Stormo (1997) suggested that drinking women are viewed as more sexually promiscuous than non-drinking women. Norris and Cubbins (1992) found that drinking women were considered more sexually available, more likely to take pleasure from being seduced, and more likely to engage in foreplay and intercourse. Therefore, when sexual encounters occur in conjunction with drinking, these situations are less likely to be considered rape (Stormo et al. 1997). Although the relationship between alcohol consumption and rape is not completely clear, one study found that when vic-

tims had consumed alcohol prior to being assaulted, they were held more accountable for the attacks than were non-drinking victims (Scronce & Corcoran 1995). These studies suggest that lower levels of responsibility are assigned to the perpetrator with alcohol consumption prior to rape (Stormo et al. 1997).

The current study was designed to examine the role alcohol consumption plays on attribution of responsibility and blame for rape. It was hypothesized that the consumption of alcohol in a rape case would result in more responsibility and blame being attributed toward the victim instead of the perpetrator. That is, in conditions where both the victim and the perpetrator have been drinking, the victim is expected to be blamed more than the perpetrator. It was further hypothesized that the victim would be seen as more careless and sexually promiscuous when under the influence of alcohol than when she was sober.

METHOD

Subjects

There were 35 participants in the experiment (15 men and 20 women). They were recruited from introductory psychology classes at a midwestern university. Their ages ranged from 17 to 37, with a mean age of 22 years. Each participant volunteered to take part in the study and received course credit for his or her participation.

Materials

Werner Stritzke, of the University of Australia, approved a request to utilize rape scenarios and questionnaires from an earlier study.

The one-page scenario describes an off-campus party that is attended by Cathy and John, who are unacquainted classmates. John approaches Cathy by offering her a beverage. After awhile, Cathy reveals that the roommate she had come to the party with would not be going home that night. John offers Cathy a ride, and the two leave together. After they arrive at Cathy's apartment, John asks to use the bathroom and Cathy lets him inside. After a few minutes of talking and a few consensual kisses, John forces himself on Cathy. Despite her verbal and physical resistance (she gently pushes him back and tells him to stop, then she yells "No!" and tries to get away), John does not stop until he has completed intercourse with her. Half of the participants received scenarios and corresponding questionnaires from the alcohol condition and the other half received scenarios and questionnaires from the no alcohol condition.

Procedure

When participants arrived for the experiment, the study was explained to them, their consent to participate was obtained through a prepared consent form, and they were informed that they could discontinue the experiment at any time without penalty. Each participant was given a packet containing the consent form, an instruction page, a version of a one-page rape scenario, and a corresponding questionnaire.

Participants were asked to read their randomly assigned scenarios, and then answer questions pertaining to those scenarios. In an attempt to simplify discrimination between responsibility and blame, definitions of these constructs were provided. Responsibility was defined as "the extent to which each person's choices and/or actions, regardless of immediate awareness of potential consequences, contributed to the outcome of the incident." Blame was defined as "a value judgement about the extent to which one should be held accountable for the outcome and perhaps experience future consequences" (Stormo et al. 1997). Blame and responsibility were measured using 6-point Likert scales (Stormo et al. 1997); ranging from 1 (not at all blameworthy/responsible) to 6 (entirely to blame/responsible). Separate scales were used for both blame and responsibility with separate ratings of each for both victim and perpetrator.

Finally, participants answered a series of questions concerning victim and perpetrator accountability, liability, choice, and intent. These variables were utilized in determining the amount to which participants believed each decision made by the characters was a contributing factor to the rape (Stormo et al. 1997). At the conclusion of the study participants were debriefed on the purpose of the study.

RESULTS

The results for the hypothesis that the consumption of alcohol in a rape case will result in more responsibility and blame being attributed toward the victim rather than the perpetrator was partially supported. Additionally, the expectation that the victim would be attributed a higher level of blame when inebriated, where both the victim and offender were intoxicated, was also partially supported.

Accountability

The results of the accountability measure were analyzed within the context of the participants' gender, and victim and offender sobriety (alcohol vs. no alcohol). An analysis of variance, with repeated measures on the last factor was used to obtain these results. On overall accountability, a significant main effect was found between the attribution of accountability toward the victim and the offender. In addition, a significant interaction was found between a victim who had not consumed alcohol, a victim who had consumed alcohol, a perpetrator who had not consumed alcohol, and a perpetrator who had consumed alcohol. No significant interaction effect was found for character gender and participant gender. Furthermore, no significant differences were found for attribution of responsibility for the three-way interaction of character gender, alcohol intake, and participant gender.

Accountability Means			
	Attributions	Alcohol	No Alcohol
Victim	5.65	4.40	6.90
Offender	10.90	11.35	10.45
Character Gender and Participant Gender			
Male	10.46		
Female	21.00		

Choice

In addition to assessing the accountability of both victim and offender, participants were asked to rate the control the victim and the offender had over the incident's outcome. There was a significant effect due to gender on the control the offender and victim exercised with their choices. However, no interaction effect was found between a victim who consumed alcohol, a victim who had not consumed alcohol, and a perpetrator who consumed alcohol, and a perpetrator who had not consumed alcohol. Additionally, no interaction effect was found for character gender and participant gender. Finally, there were no significant differences due to character gender, alcohol intake, or participant gender.

Choice Means			
	No Alcohol	Alcohol	Attributions
Victim	5.85	7.85	6.85
Offender	17.30	16.80	17.08
Character Gender and Participant Gender			
Male	36.80		
Female	23.76		

Liability

Research participants rated the liability of the victim and offender for the result of the rape in their assigned scenarios. The attribution of liability to the victim and offender was analyzed. No significant correlation was found between liability and character gender or liability and alcohol intake.

In addition, a significant difference was not found for attribution of liability for the interaction of character gender and participant gender. Likewise, there were not significant differences in the attribution of liability due to character gender, alcohol intake, or participant gender.

Intent Means			
	Attributions	No Alcohol	Alcohol
Victim	3.73	3.85	3.60
Offender	31.00	31.70	30.30
Character Gender and Participant Gender			
Male	36.80		
Female	33.48		

Intent

Due to recommendation from Stormo et al. (1997), the responses for general intent and sexual intent were combined to form a single measurement of intent. There was a significant difference between the intent assumed of the victim and the intent assumed of the offender. Attribution of intent was not significantly different between a victim who consumed alcohol, a victim who had not consumed alcohol, an offender who consumed alcohol, and an offender who had not consumed alcohol. There was no significant difference in the attribution of intent between character gender and participant gender. Lastly, there were not significant differences due to character gender, alcohol intake, or participant gender.

Liability Means			
	Attributions	No Alcohol	Alcohol
Victim	0.75	0.55	0.95
Offender	10.90	11.35	10.45
Character Gender and Participant Gender			
Male	10.46		
Female	12.36		

Blame

Ratings of blame for victim and offender were analyzed using two questions in which blame was defined as "a value judgement about the extent to which one should be held accountable for the outcome and perhaps experience future consequences because of it" (Stormo et al. 1997). There was a significant difference in the attribution of blame to the victim and offender. Significance was also found for the interaction between gender and attribution of blame. However, no significant interaction was found between the sobriety of the victim and offender and the attribution of blame. There was no significant correlation between participant gender, the gender of the characters in the scenarios, and their sobriety.

Blame Means			
	Attributions	No Alcohol	Alcohol
Victim	0.75	1.20	1.60
Offender	5.60	5.50	5.70
Character Gender and Participant Gender			
Male	6.53		
Female	7.28		

Responsibility

Participants attributed responsibility to the victim and offender for the outcome of the rape incident. Responsibility was also assigned a definition so that all participant responses would be based on the same understanding of the term. Responsibility was defined as "the extent to which each person's choices and/or actions, regardless of immediate awareness to potential consequences, contributed to the outcome of the incident" (Stormo et al. 1997). There was a significant difference between the attribution of responsibility to the victim and the attribution of responsibility to the offender. However, no significant correlation was found between the attribution of responsibility and the sobriety of the victim or offender. There was no significant correlation between the attribution of responsibility and character gender or participant gender. Finally, there was no significant difference in the attribution of responsibility due to character gender, alcohol intake, or participant gender.

Responsibility Means			
	Attributions	No Alcohol	Alcohol
Victim	1.75	1.30	2.20
Offender	5.73	5.80	5.65
Character Gender and Participant Gender			
Male	7.07		
Female	7.72		

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that the consumption of alcohol by both the victim and the offender would result in heightened responsibility being attributed to the victim rather than the offender was partially supported. Also partially supported was the hypothesis that in a case where an equal level of alcohol was consumed by both victim and offender, the victim will be attributed more blame than the sober victim. This study found that overall, males were assigned more responsibility and blame for the rape than females. However, inebriated females were assigned more responsibility when they consumed alcohol than sober females. In addition, sober males were assigned more responsibility for the rape than inebriated males.

Previous literature shows that a victim will be seen as more careless and sexually promiscuous when under the influence of alcohol. This investigation presents findings similar to previous research: increased attribution of responsibility to a drinking victim. However, data concerning overall blame were not reproduced. Our findings suggest that it is not

the consumption of alcohol that is the leading factor of increased attributions of victim responsibility, but the presence of intoxication, which increases others' beliefs that a female rape victim bears a greater personal share of responsibility for her tragedy. On the other hand, both females and males were attributed increased blame for the rape incident when alcohol was consumed than when it was not. Together, these findings suggest that although females are considered more responsible for being raped when they have consumed alcohol, they are not held as blameworthy.

In addition to responsibility and blame, other variables were considered to help determine the degree to which participants believed that each decision made by the characters was a contributing factor to the outcome as a rape incident. Among these additional variables were accountability, choice, liability, and intent. Males were assigned more overall accountability, choice, liability, and intent than females. The attribution of these variables to inebriated females was greater than to sober females. In contrast, these variables were more heavily attributed to sober males than inebriated males. It appears that the contribution of the characters' decisions to the outcome as a rape incident is larger for inebriated females and sober males. Thus, findings suggest the conception that victims under the influence of alcohol are seen as more careless and sexually promiscuous than victims who have not been drinking. However, rapists not influenced by alcohol are viewed as particularly accountable for their choice to rape.

A number of important conclusions can be drawn from the present investigation as well as previous investigations of acquaintance rape. Most importantly, because of greater physical vulnerability when drinking, and because intoxication may be viewed by some as an invitation that one has consented to sex, it is suggested that women can make themselves safer by avoiding a situation in which heavy drinking is centrally involved. Situations in which drinking behavior is not well controlled should be avoided (Stormo et al. 1997). Avoidance of such circumstances will improve a woman's own decision-making and lessen her blame as perceived by others in the event of rape. Women who have been raped may also be perceived as contributing to their own misfortune when they have engaged in behaviors that make them more susceptible to a potential rapist (Stormo et al. 1997).

Although some important conclusions can be drawn from this investigation, several of its limitations, most of which involve sampling issues, should also be discussed. Participants in the current study consisted only of college students. College students may not be representative of all groups, because women from many different age groups and all walks of life can be victims of acquaintance rape. Additionally, the number of female and male participants were not equal, lessening the strength of the comparisons. Future studies would be improved through the use of a larger and more diverse sample of both males and females. This study has helped clarify some aspects of acquaintance rape, but more research is needed to fully understand the intricacies of the relationships between the victim, the rapist, and their society.

RAPE SCENARIOS

Alcohol Condition Scenario

Cathy and her roommate Laura decided to go to a party that Laura's boyfriend was having at his house. At the party, Cathy recognized a number of friends and classmates. One of these people was a guy named John whom she had recently noticed in one of her classes. John and Cathy made eye contact and she smiled. John approached and asked her if she wanted a Coke or a beer. Cathy said, "Sure, I'd like a beer," and he had the same. As they were talking, they both continued to drink and eventually were drunk enough to feel very dizzy and have trouble thinking clearly and walking with much coordination. After a couple of hours of socializing, Cathy mumbled that she wanted to go home, and John offered to give her a ride. Cathy said "OK," commenting that the roommate that she had come with had just told her that she planned to stay at the party all night. Both were still very drunk, and as John drove to Cathy's nearby apartment, it was obvious that he had limited control of the car. Once there, he asked Cathy if he could use the bathroom so they staggered to the door, Cathy fumbled with her keys and let him inside. Afterwards, they sat on the living room couch and talked for a few minutes. Then John kissed Cathy on the lips. Cathy responded, saying she really had a good time with him at the party. After several deep kisses, John started to unbutton Cathy's blouse and caress her breasts. Cathy gently pushed him back and told him to stop. John continued anyway, saying that he knew she wanted him. Cathy yelled "No!" and tried to get away, but John restrained her and raped her.

No Alcohol Condition Scenario

Cathy and her roommate Laura decided to go to a party that Laura's boyfriend was having at his house. At the party, Cathy recognized a number of friends and classmates. One of these people was a guy named John whom she had recently noticed in one of her classes. John and Cathy made eye contact and she smiled. John approached her and asked her if she wanted a Coke or a beer. Cathy said, "Sure I'd like a Coke," and he had the same. They started talking, and after a couple of hours of socializing, Cathy said she wanted to go home and John offered her a ride. Cathy said "OK," commenting that the roommate she had come with had just told her that she had planned to stay at the party all night. Then John drove Cathy to her nearby apartment. Once there, he asked if he could use the bathroom and she let him inside. Afterwards, they sat on the living room couch and talked for a few minutes. Then John kissed Cathy on the lips. Cathy responded by saying that she really had a good time with him at the party. After several deep kisses, John started to unbutton Cathy's blouse and caress her breasts. Cathy gently pushed him back and told him to stop. John continued anyway, saying that he knew she wanted him. Cathy yelled "No!" and tried to get away, but John restrained her and raped her.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Please indicate whether you are male or female and your age. The questions below refer to the incident described in the scenario you have just read. Please read each item carefully and respond according to the instructions. If you have any questions, please ask the experimenter to help you.

(1) Assume that the only drinking by **Cathy** on the day of the party was that described in the scenario. Please circle the letter corresponding to the statement that best describes **Cathy's** state of intoxication: a) She did not drink any alcohol and was sober. b) She drank some alcohol and was slightly intoxicated. c) She drank a lot of alcohol and was very drunk.

(2) Assume that the only drinking done by **John** on the day of the party was that described in the scenario. Please circle the letter corresponding to the statement that best describes **John's** state of intoxication: a) He did not drink any alcohol and was sober. b) He drank some alcohol and was slightly intoxicated. c) He drank a lot of alcohol and was very intoxicated.

Please answer the following questions related to **Cathy's** involvement in the scenario on a scale of zero to six, where zero is "not at all" and 6 is "very much".

- (3) How similar do you feel to **Cathy**?
- (4) Picturing yourself as the woman in the scenario, how likely is it that this incident could occur as described?
- (5) In relation to your own drinking habits, how similar do you feel to **Cathy**?
- (6) How much did **Cathy** intend the outcome of the evening to be as described?
- (7) How much did **Cathy** contribute to the outcome of the evening?
- (8) How much did **Cathy** get what she deserved?
- (9) How much did **Cathy** have a choice in the outcome?
- (10) How much did **Cathy** want the evening to end as described?
- (11) How much does **Cathy** deserve to be punished for the outcome?
- (12) How much did **Cathy's** behavior provoke the outcome of the evening?
- (13) How much did **Cathy** want to have sex with John when they kissed?
- (14) How much did **Cathy** purposely contribute to the outcome of the evening?
- (15) How much did **Cathy** want to have sex with John when she told him she had a good time with him at the party?
- (16) How much could **Cathy's** actions be viewed as critical for how the evening turned out?
- (17) How much should **Cathy** be morally condemned for the outcome of the evening?
- (18) How much was **Cathy** able to act differently in order to influence the outcome of the evening?
- (19) How much was **Cathy** able to take control over the evening?
- (20) How much did **Cathy** have "sex on her mind" when she entered her apartment?
- (21) How much do you hold **Cathy** blameworthy for the outcome of the incident described?
- (22) How much do you hold **Cathy** responsible for the out-

come of the incident described?

Please answer the following questions related to **John's** involvement in the scenario on a scale of zero to six, where zero is "not at all" and 6 is "very much".

- (23) How much did **John** intend the outcome of the evening to be described?
- (24) How much did **John** contribute to the outcome of the evening?
- (25) How much did **John** have a choice in the outcome?
- (26) How much did **John** want the evening to end as described?
- (27) How much does **John** deserve to be punished for the outcome?
- (28) How much did **John's** behavior provoke the outcome of the evening?
- (29) How much did **John** want to have sex with Cathy when they kissed?
- (30) How much did **John** purposely contribute to the outcome of the evening?
- (31) How much did **John** want to have sex with Cathy when she told him she had a good time at the party?
- (32) How much could **John's** actions be viewed as critical for how the evening turned out?
- (33) How much should **John** be held morally condemned for the outcome of the evening?
- (34) How much was **John** able to act differently in order to influence the outcome of the evening?
- (35) How much was **John** able to take control over the situation?
- (36) How much did **John** have "sex on his mind" when he entered Cathy's apartment?
- (37) How much do you hold **John** blameworthy for the outcome of the incident described?
- (38) How much do you hold **John** responsible for the outcome of the incident described? **"Responsibility" has been defined as the degree to which a person should be held accountable for contributing to the outcome of the event.**
- (39) In view of this definition, how much would you hold **Cathy** responsible for the outcome of the incident described?
- (40) In view of this definition, how much would you hold **John** responsible for the outcome of the incident described? **"Blame" has been defined as the degree to which a person should be held accountable for contributing to the outcome of an event and, in addition, deserves to be morally condemned or censured for behavior.**
- (41) In view of this definition, how much would you hold **Cathy** blameworthy for the outcome of the incident described?
- (42) In view of this definition, how much would you hold **John** blameworthy for the outcome of the incident described?

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