



The role of social drinking factors in the relationship between incapacitated sexual assault and drinking before sexual activity



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Incapacitated sexual assault (ISA) is common among college students.
- Examined relationships among ISA, social drinking factors, and drinking before sex
- ISA was indirectly associated with drinking before sex.
- Drinking norms and social drinking motives were associated with ISA and drinking.
- Interventions targeting ISA should include social drinking factors.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 March 2015

Received in revised form 15 July 2015

Accepted 10 August 2015

Available online 12 August 2015

Keywords:

Incapacitated sexual assault

Drinking motives

Drinking norms

Alcohol use

Sexual activity

ABSTRACT

White House Council on Women and Girls (2014) highlighted sexual assault prevention as a high priority issue in need of immediate attention. A risk factor associated with sexual assault victimization and revictimization is drinking before sexual activity. The current study examined the relationship between incapacitated sexual assault (ISA) and drinking before sexual activity. Given the typical social context of both drinking before sexual activity and sexual assault in college settings, social-related drinking factors including drinking to conform motives, social drinking motives, and perceived drinking norms were examined. Six hundred and three undergraduate college women completed a survey online assessing history of ISA, social factors associated with drinking, and frequency of drinking before sexual activity. Path analysis indicated that both ISA before college and since entering college were associated with higher perceived drinking norms, more social drinking motive endorsement, and more drinking to conform. However, only higher perceived drinking norms and more social drinking motive endorsement were associated with *both* more severe ISA histories and more frequent drinking before sexual activity. Thus, a more severe ISA history was indeed associated with more frequent drinking before sexual activity and social factors related to drinking played a significant role in this relationship. Social factors can be easily targeted through brief interventions and these findings can inform future programming to promote more careful use of alcohol in social and sexual situations.

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1. Introduction

White House Council on Women and Girls (2014) highlighted college sexual assault as a high priority issue in need of immediate attention. In fact, President Obama recently launched “It’s On Us”, a public awareness campaign for sexual assault on college campuses (Somanader, 2014). Approximately 1 in 5 college women has experienced sexual assault (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2009). Most assaults are perpetrated by a man known to the victim

(Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000) and up to 70% of sexual assaults on college campuses involve alcohol use by the victim, the perpetrator, or both (Reed, Amaro, Matsumoto, & Kaysen, 2009). Research suggests that sexual assault increases subsequent drinking (Bryan et al., in press; Kaysen, Neighbors, Martell, Fossos, & Larimer, 2006; Lindgren, Neighbors, Blayney, Mullins, & Kaysen, 2012). Therefore, it is essential to examine potential mechanisms that explain this relationship. Understanding such mechanisms can inform prevention and intervention efforts. The current study examined social drinking factors using indirect effect path analysis when assessing the relationship between incapacitated sexual assault (ISA) history and drinking before sexual activity. ISA is defined as unwanted sexual activity when the victim is incapacitated by alcohol and unable to give consent.

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Alcohol use before sexual activity is common on college campuses. Among casual sexual encounters on college campuses, 60 to 80% involve alcohol consumption (Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009; Lewis, Granato, Blayney, Lostutter, & Kilmer, 2011). The prevalence of drinking before sexual activity and of ISA on college campuses highlights the need to examine drinking before sexual activity as a correlate of sexual assault. Furthermore, sexual activity in college frequently occurs in social contexts such as parties, at dormitories, fraternity houses, or at bars (Paul & Hayes, 2002). Given that perceived drinking norms are one of the strongest predictors of drinking in college (Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007), it is important to examine the role of drinking norms and other social motivation factors like drinking to conform and social drinking motives to understand the relationship between a history of sexual assault and current drinking before sexual activity.

1.1. Drinking before sexual activity

Little research has examined mechanisms of ISA victimization beyond the examination of heavy drinking as a mechanism through which ISA victimization may occur. Logically, drinking before sexual activity is associated with sexual victimization and ISA; yet it has received scant research attention. Previous cross-sectional studies show that sexual assault is associated with more frequent drinking before sexual activity (Howard & Wang, 2005; Testa & Dermen, 1999). Although the nature of sexual assaults is heterogeneous and spans a wide variety of tactics used by perpetrators, a substantial number of ISAs are preceded by consensual sexual contact (Harrington & Leitenberg, 1994). A bidirectional relationship may exist (Testa & Livingston, 2009; Testa & Parks, 1996) whereby drinking more before sexual activity is associated with ISA, which is associated with more drinking before sexual activity.

1.2. Sexual assault history and drinking

Sexual assault victimization is associated with the use of maladaptive coping strategies such as substance use (Najdowski & Ullman, 2011). Cross-sectionally, women's drinking habits (e.g., typical frequency and quantity of drinking, and problem drinking) are positively associated with their sexual assault history (Burnam et al., 1988; Kilpatrick, Edmunds, & Seymour, 1992; Koss & Dinero, 1989; Siegel & Williams, 2003). Longitudinal research also suggests that sexual assault is associated with subsequent alcohol use and abuse (Bryan et al., in press; Gidycz, Hanson, & Layman, 1995; Kilpatrick Acierno, Resnick, Saunders, & Best, 1997; Lindgren et al., 2012). However, some longitudinal studies find no link between sexual victimization and drinking (Mouilso & Fischer, 2012; Testa & Livingston, 2000). These studies did not differentiate between sexual victimization type (e.g., ISA compared to forced sexual assault) and two studies (Testa & Livingston, 2000; Yeater, Montanaro, & Bryan, 2015) did not include ISA. Cross-sectional work shows that individuals with an ISA history compared to nonvictims show higher frequency and quantity of alcohol consumption, less use of drinking protective behavioral strategies, and more negative consequences from drinking (Gilmore, Stappenbeck, Lewis, Granato, & Kaysen, 2015; Marx, Nichols-Anderson, Messman-Moore, Miranda, & Porter, 2000; Nguyen, Kaysen, Dillworth, Brajcich, & Larimer, 2010). Additionally, one longitudinal study (Kaysen et al., 2006) found that ISA was associated with increased alcohol use and negative consequences in the subsequent years after the incident. Furthermore, women with an ISA history are at risk for ISA revictimization (Messman-Moore, Ward, & Zerubavel, 2013) and women with a sexual assault history before college are at heightened risk for experiencing sexual assault during college (Martin, Fisher, Warner, Krebs, & Lindquist, 2011).

Alcohol use is a consistent risk factor for experiencing sexual assault (e.g., Gidycz et al., 2007; Messman-Moore, Ward, & Brown, 2009; Testa, Hoffman, & Livingston, 2010). Women experience sexual assault when

drinking more than their typical amount (Mouilso, Fischer, & Calhoun, 2012) and problematic alcohol use (Messman-Moore et al., 2013) and drinking before age 18 (Testa, Livingston, VanZile-Tamsen, & Frone, 2003) are associated with ISA. Additionally, heavy episodic drinking increases the risk for ISA (McCauley, Calhoun, & Gidycz, 2010) and in 85% of ISAs drinking is voluntary (Lawyer, Resnick, Bakanic, Burkett, & Kilpatrick, 2010).

1.3. Drinking norms, drinking to conform and social drinking motives

Descriptive drinking norms, the perceived norms about the alcohol use of one's peer group, are strongly related to drinking (Neighbors et al., 2007). College students overestimate the amount that their peers drink and these perceptions are associated with more alcohol use (Collins & Spelman, 2013; Quinn & Fromme, 2011). ISA is associated with higher estimates of peers' drinking frequency in sexual minority women (Gilmore et al., 2015), however, nothing is known about the relationship between ISA and drinking norms in heterosexuals.

Motivations for drinking such as drinking to conform (i.e., drinking to avoid teasing or to fit in) and social drinking motives (i.e., drinking as a way to celebrate; Cooper, 1994) are also important to consider in the relationship between ISA and drinking before sexual activity. These social motivations have yet to be examined when assessing the relationship between drinking and sexual assault victimization. This dearth of research is surprising given that both drinking to conform and social motivations for drinking are conceptually related to drinking norms and the social contexts in which college students drink before sexual activity (Bogle, 2008; Cooper, 1994).

Social drinking motives are one of the most common reasons for drinking in young adults (Cooper, 1994; Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005) and strongly predict more drinking in college students (Lewis et al., 2010). Additionally, drinking to conform and social drinking motives are associated with more drinking in social situations (Cooper, 1994), contexts where casual sex is common (Bogle, 2008; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006), increasing the risk of sexual assault. Indeed, ISAs often occur in social situations (Abbey, Ross, McDuffie, & McAuslan, 1996; Testa et al., 2003). Perpetrators target women who are drinking alcohol and drinking men compared to nondrinking men are more likely to behave aggressively (see Abbey, 2002 for a review). Men perceive drinking women as more sexually interested than nondrinking women (Abbey, Zawacki, & McAuslan, 2000; George et al., 1997). Furthermore, the Cognitive Ecological Model of women's response to male sexual coercion (Nurius & Norris, 1996) suggests that women are less attuned to social cues of risk when making friends, socializing, and dating.

2. Current research

For many, college provides a high alcohol consumption environment that thrives on social norms, social drinking, and pressure to conform (see Borsari & Carey, 2001 for a review) and intricately links alcohol and sexual activity (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010). Given that ISA often occurs in social situations (Abbey et al., 1996; Testa et al., 2003) and the tendency to drink before sexual activity is associated with ISA victimization (Howard & Wang, 2005; Testa & Dermen, 1999), it is imperative that we understand the social factors related to drinking before sexual activity and how they relate to ISA. Additionally, to the extent that ISA is associated with higher perceived drinking norms (Gilmore et al., 2015), a history of multiple ISAs and specifically ISA in college may be associated with higher perceived drinking norms and stronger endorsement of drinking motives related to social convention. The present research examines the roles of drinking norms, social drinking motives, and drinking to conform. We hypothesize that ISA history will be associated with perceptions of higher perceived drinking norms, more social drinking motives, and more drinking to conform, which will all be associated with more drinking

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