

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Is It Dating Violence or Just “Drunken Behavior”? Judgments of Intimate Partner Violence When the Perpetrator Is Under the Influence of Alcohol

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Background: Previous research has shown a strong bias for laypersons to believe alcohol use and aggression to go hand-in-hand (see Quigley & Leonard, 2006). Furthermore, research has shown that alcohol use can be seen as a mitigating circumstance for aggression, resulting in a reduction of blame and accountability (Bullock, 2002; Katz & Arias, 2001; Tryggvesson, 2004). **Objectives:** The present study investigated observers' judgments of intimate partner violence (IPV) when the perpetrator was under the influence of alcohol. We hypothesized that participants would view violent behavior as more common and less abusive if they thought the perpetrator was under the influence of alcohol. **Methods:** College students ($n = 79$) viewed a video depicting an increasingly abusive interaction between college-age dating partners (see Witte & Kendra, 2010) and half of the participants were lead to believe that the perpetrator was drinking alcohol prior to the interaction. Participants rated the videotaped vignette at four timepoints to assess the degree to which they believed the interaction was normal/common and abusive. **Results:** Observers judged the abusive behavior as more common and less abusive when alcohol was involved, but only for psychologically abusive behaviors and moderately severe physically abusive behaviors. **Conclusions/Importance:** The results of this study provide support for the notion that direct observers of IPV judge moderately abusive behavior as more common and less abusive when alcohol is involved. With this, theories concerning alcohol expectancies and interpretations of interpersonal violence can be more readily applied to real-life scenarios, such as in the validity of eye-witness testimony.

Keywords intimate partner violence, alcohol expectancies, observer judgments

INTRODUCTION

Relationship violence is a serious and growing social problem. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, it is estimated that between 20% and 70% of adults in the United States have been involved in some form of intimate partner violence (IPV) in their lifetime (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005). This violence is most prominent in women between 18 and 35 years of age (Catalano, 2012). Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) found that 86% of college students reported having been a victim of either psychological, physical, or sexual IPV. In addition, Rutter et al. (2012) found that 23% of female undergraduates and 21% of male undergraduates reported experiencing physical victimization by a romantic partner (Rutter, Weatherill, Taft, & Orazem, 2012).

Alcohol use frequently co-occurs with IPV, especially male-perpetrated IPV. Numerous studies have supported the finding that male-perpetrated physical aggression is often associated with alcohol use (Cunradi, Ames, & Duke, 2011; Fals-Stewart, 2003; Murphy, Winters, O'Farrell, Fals-Stewart, & Murphy, 2005; Smith, Homish, Leonard, & Cornelius, 2012; Testa & Derrick, 2014). In a study using daily diary methodology, Moore et al. found that participants' rates of perpetrating psychological and physical aggression were two to three times higher on drinking days compared to nondrinking days (Moore, Elkins, McNulty, Kivisto, & Handsel, 2011). Other studies have shown that alcohol use is involved in up to half of all IPV incidents (Caetano, Schafer, & Cunradi 2001; Chermack, Fuller, & Blow 2000), which has been found to

be true in samples of college students (Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008).

Due to the undeniable link between violence and alcohol use, it is no surprise that laypersons hold a belief that drinking and aggression go hand-in-hand (see Quigley & Leonard, 2006). People have expectations about “drunken behavior” and one such expectation is that individuals under the influence of alcohol may become aggressive and violent. Research shows that aggressive behavior is often expected or anticipated when alcohol is involved (Jones, Corbin, & Fromme, 2001). In fact, individuals who have this expectation tend to engage in more aggressive behavior while intoxicated than those who do not hold this belief (Pabst, Kraus, Piontek, Mueller, & Demmel, 2014; Quigley, Corbett, & Tedeschi, 2002; Zhang, Welte, & Weiczorek, 2002). Borders, Barnwell, and Earleywine (2007), for example, found that, after drinking, significantly more aggressive and hostile feelings were reported by individuals expecting alcohol to increase aggression, independent of the amount of alcohol consumed. In addition, Rapoza and Drake (2009) found that aggressive alcohol expectancies were associated with the amount of sexual aggression perpetrated by men. Furthermore, Field, Caetano, and Nelson (2004) found that individuals who stated that they had a “strong” or “very strong” likelihood of becoming aggressive after consuming alcohol were approximately three times more likely to engage in IPV than those who did not have this expectation.

This tendency to expect aggression when alcohol is used can lead to biased judgments about individuals and events (see Jones & McGillis, 1976). Indeed, observers’ judgments of IPV are often influenced by the presence of alcohol in the violent altercation. Although the literature is complex, alcohol can be seen as a mitigating circumstance for the violence; accordingly, the perpetrator is relieved of a certain amount of blame for the event (Quigley & Leonard, 2006). Previous studies have shown that when perpetrators have been drinking, observers find them less responsible for their actions and excuse the abusive behavior more readily (Bullock, 2002; Katz & Arias, 2001; Tryggvesson, 2004). Under these circumstances, the situation is blamed for the abuse; it is the fault of the alcohol rather of the perpetrator. Katz and Arias (2001) found that, in cases of severe alcohol-related violence, individuals assigned less blame to intoxicated perpetrators than to sober partners. Furthermore, in Richardson and Campbell (1982), respondents not only reduced the blame to the perpetrator (i.e., male rapist) when alcohol was involved, but the situation (i.e., the perpetrator’s intoxication) was judged as more responsible when alcohol was involved than when it was not a factor. This pattern of blame reduction is often explained by Kelley (1973) discounting principle, which states that blame is distributed among all potential causes of the event, thus, decreasing the amount of blame to any single cause.

Alcohol-related expectancies, such as those relating to aggression, may be embedded in an “alcohol schema” that, once activated, can lead participants to somehow define the aggressive behavior as “drunken behavior” instead

of abuse or violence and, in turn, excuse the behavior as if it is “normal.” Alba and Hasher describe schema-based processing as an encoding process that is influenced by “a guiding schema or knowledge framework that selects and actively modifies experience in order to arrive at a coherent, unified, expectation-confirming, and knowledge-consistent representation of an experience” (Alba & Hasher, 1983, p. 203). Thus, an alcohol schema may color observers’ views of the event and lead to biased memories, judgments, and attributions.

Much of the research on judgments and attributions of IPV has used written vignettes that describe a scene or a situation that participants evaluate (e.g., Katz & Arias, 2001). This method may make it easy for participants to “fill in the gaps” with schemas and stereotypes, which may lead to biases in interpretations (e.g., Sleed, Durheim, Kriel, Solomon, & Baxter, 2002). A lapse in the literature exists for whether directly viewing an interaction (i.e., video) would carry this same bias. In other words, would judgments of an event differ based on alcohol use of the perpetrator if the observers actually watched the event take place? A large body of literature on false memory and schema-based processing would suggest that eyewitnesses can be similarly biased (see Alba & Hasher, 1983; Loftus, 2005). Sleed et al. (2002) investigated rape judgments using both written and video vignettes and found that participants were more likely to blame the victim and less likely to define the situation as rape when the vignette was written. The authors attributed these results to the abstract nature of written scenarios that allow participants to apply their own schema and stereotypes to the depicted situation (Sleed et al., 2002). With a video vignette, participants may be more constricted in their ability to apply these same types of biases because they are actually viewing the event first-hand.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether judgments of an abusive argument differed depending on whether or not the perpetrator was (believed to be) under the influence of alcohol at the time of the event. The present study used a video vignette depicting dating violence. Half of the participants were told the perpetrator was under the influence of alcohol during the interaction while the other half were not given this information. We hypothesized that participants would rate the violence as more normal/common and as less abusive when the perpetrator was thought to be under the influence of alcohol compared to when there was no mention of alcohol.

METHOD

Participants

There were 79 participants (46 women and 33 men) in the present study. Participants were undergraduate students from social and behavioral science courses; most received course credit for participating in the study. Approximately 86% of the participants were Caucasian, 5% African American, and 9% “Other.” Students ranged from ages 18 to 23, with an average age of 19.22 ($SD = 1.26$) years.

Materials

Demographic Questionnaire. Participants completed a short demographic questionnaire that included questions regarding age, gender, and race.

Video Vignette. Participants watched a videotaped vignette depicting a psychologically and physically abusive interaction between Caucasian, heterosexual college-aged dating partners. In the beginning of the interaction, the perpetrator accused his girlfriend of infidelity. She then denied the allegations and the argument escalated. There were four predetermined pauses in the video, which divided the argument into four segments. The first two segments depicted psychological abuse (i.e., controlling comments made by the perpetrator in the first segment and insulting remarks during the second segment) and the final two segments depicted escalating psychological abuse along with physical abuse (i.e., the perpetrator punched the sofa and grabbed the victim's arm in the third segment and the perpetrator forcefully grabbed the victim and slapped her across the face in the fourth segment).

Previous research has validated this video vignette for use in research on perceptions of IPV (see Witte & Kendra, 2010). Specifically, Witte and Kendra (2010) found that female participants ($n = 182$) indicated that (1) the perpetrator's behavior escalated over the course of the argument and (2) the perpetrator's behavior was "abusive" in segments 2, 3, and 4, and more abusive than the victim's behavior in each of the four segments. Furthermore, over 92% of the participants rated the video as realistic and believable (Witte & Kendra, 2010).

Norm Judgments. Participants rated the following statement at each of the four timepoints to assess the perceived normality of the behavior over the course of the interaction: "I think many people would act like [the perpetrator] in this situation" on a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Abuse Judgments. Participants rated the following statement at each of the four timepoints to assess the abusiveness of the behavior over the course of the interaction: "I think [the perpetrator]'s behavior is abusive" on a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Procedure

This study was part of a larger study on beliefs and behaviors related to IPV and was approved by the college's Institutional Review Board prior to data collection.

In groups of 6, participants met in a large room to provide informed consent. After signing a consent form, each participant entered an individual, smaller room with a personal computer. By random assignment participants were given one of the following statements:

1. In the video, Ben is arriving at his girlfriend's house. Before arriving at Amanda's house, Ben stopped by a bar to have a few drinks with his friends.
2. In the video, Ben is arriving at his girlfriend's house. Before arriving at Amanda's house, Ben stopped by McDonalds to have some dinner with his friends.

All participants were instructed to press the space bar to begin the video. At several predetermined times on the video the participants were provided instructions on the computer to pause the video using the space bar and complete several paper and pencil ratings, which were in front of them on the table. When finished with the ratings participants were instructed to press the space bar to resume the video to continue with the study.

Data Analysis

Participants rated the following question to assess the effectiveness of the alcohol manipulation: "What was [the perpetrator] doing before he arrived at [the victim's] house?" This was an open-ended question that was coded as a '1' if the participant indicated that the perpetrator had been drinking alcohol or a '0' if the participant's response did not mention drinking. Of 79 participants, 69 answered correctly and were used for the analyses. The final sample included 30 men and 39 women with a similar racial breakdown and average age as the original sample (as described above).

Two separate repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted to analyze the main research questions. For the analysis of perceived normality ("Many people would act like [the perpetrator]"), study condition (alcohol vs. no alcohol) served as the between-subjects factor and the duration of the video served as the within-subjects factor (four timepoints). For the analysis of perceived abusiveness ("I think [the perpetrator's] behavior is abusive"), study condition (alcohol vs. no alcohol) served as the between-subjects factor and the duration of the video served as the within-subjects factor (four timepoints).

RESULTS

Norm Judgments

For the ratings of perceived normality, there was a significant main effect of time on ratings of perceived normality [$F(3, 66) = 25.82, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .28$, using a Greenhouse–Geisser correction for the violation of sphericity], such that the four ratings decreased as the video progressed and the intensity of the argument escalated. There was a marginally significant main effect for condition [$F(1, 66) = 4.25, p = .043, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .06$]; participants in the alcohol condition believed the perpetrator's behavior was more normal/common than participants in the no alcohol condition. There was a marginally significant interaction that clarified these main effects [$F(3, 66) = 2.01, p = .086, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .36$, using a Greenhouse–Geisser correction]. The differences between conditions (alcohol vs. no alcohol) were significant for the second timepoint ($p < .002$) and marginally significant for the third timepoint ($p = .068$), but not for the first ($p = .592$) or last ($p = .200$) timepoint. In other words, when the psychological aggression was increasing, those in the alcohol condition rated the behavior as more normal/common than those in the no alcohol condition, but when the altercation became blatantly aggressive and

physically violent, all participants made similar ratings, regardless of their study condition.

Abuse Judgments

For the ratings of perceived abusiveness (“I think [the perpetrator’s] behavior is abusive”), there was a significant main effect of time on ratings of perceived abusiveness [$F(3, 67) = 71.22, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .52$ using a Greenhouse–Geisser correction], such that the four ratings increased as the video progressed and the intensity of the argument escalated. There was a marginally significant main effect for condition [$F(1, 67) = 4.75, p = .033$, partial $\eta^2 = .065$]. Participants in the alcohol condition rated the perpetrator’s behavior as slightly less abusive than participants in the no alcohol condition. There was a marginally significant interaction that clarified these main effects [$F(3, 67) = 3.51, p = .065$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$ using a Greenhouse–Geisser correction]; the difference between conditions (alcohol vs. no alcohol) were significant for the first ($p = .021$) and marginally significant for the second ($p = .058$) timepoints but not for the third ($p = .381$) or fourth ($p = .372$). In other words, when the argument began (with controlling statements from the perpetrator) and the psychological aggression started to increase, those in the alcohol condition rated the behavior as less abusive than those in the no alcohol condition, but when the altercation became blatantly aggressive and physically violent, all participants made similar ratings, regardless of their study condition.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined observers’ judgments of IPV when the perpetrator was believed to be under the influence of alcohol. Previous research has shown a strong bias for laypersons to believe alcohol use and aggression to go hand-in-hand (see Quigley & Leonard, 2006). Furthermore, research has shown that alcohol use can be seen as a mitigating circumstance for aggression, resulting in a reduction of blame and accountability (Bullock, 2002; Katz & Arias, 2001; Tryggvesson, 2004). Based on this past research, it was expected that observers in the present study would view the perpetrator’s behavior as more normal, or common, and as less abusive if they believed alcohol was involved, as if the aggression was expected to occur.

Participants in the present study watched a video vignette of male-to-female IPV. Prior to viewing the argument, half of the participants learned that the perpetrator in the vignette had been drinking alcohol. Findings were consistent with the hypotheses; the participants who were led to believe the perpetrator had been drinking rated the abuse as less abusive than those that were not led to believe the perpetrator had been drinking. Similarly, participants normalized the behavior of the drunken perpetrator when compared to participants that watched the sober perpetrator.

However, for both ratings (i.e., judgments of normality and abusiveness), differences were clear earlier in the argument when psychological aggression and some moder-

ate physical aggression (i.e., grabbing the arm) took place. By the end of the argument, when the perpetrator slapped the victim, participants in both conditions (alcohol and no alcohol) rated the behavior similarly. In other words, when the behavior was blatantly abusive, there was no discrepancy in judgments according to alcohol use.

Findings are consistent with the alcohol expectancy literature (Quigley & Leonard, 2006) and the literature on schema-based processing (Alba & Hasher, 1983). Because alcohol expectancies for aggression are widely held, and many associate drunken behavior with aggression, participants may have seen the moderately aggressive behavior as consistent with their alcohol-schema. In turn, this might have led them to perceive the event as less serious and as more common when the perpetrator was said to be under the influence of alcohol.

There are limitations to this study due to the size and make-up of the sample. The sample size was not large enough for a more fine-tuned analysis of the data, including an analysis of gender differences. Studies have shown that women view instances of IPV as more severe than men, attributing more responsibility to the perpetrator and less responsibility to the victim (Hamby & Jackson, 2010; Sylaska & Walters, 2014; Terrance, Plumm, & Thomas, 2011). Additionally, Crawford (1984) found that men hold stronger alcohol expectancies for aggression than do women. Consequently, gender may moderate the relationship between the perpetrator’s alcohol consumption and perceptions of interpersonal violence, with male participants viewing the IPV as more normal and as less abusive than female participants. Future studies should investigate whether the perpetrator’s alcohol consumption influences men and women’s perceptions of IPV differently.

In addition, research has shown that the degree of similarity between the participant and the individuals in vignettes influences participants’ attributions about the depicted abuse; the more similarity that exists between the participant and either the victim or the perpetrator, the more likely the participant is to empathize with them and place the responsibility for the abuse on factors external to them (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994). While the actors in the video were Caucasian, as were the majority of participants (86%), a sizable number of participants were of a different race or ethnicity, and these participants may have felt disconnected from the actors in the vignettes, thus skewing their perceptions of event. Future research should investigate whether the degree of similarity between the participant and the individuals in the vignette influences participants’ perceptions of abuse.

In addition, future research should test whether observers of IPV are influenced by not only the perpetrator’s alcohol consumption, but the victim’s alcohol consumption. A study conducted by Stewart and Jacquin (2010) found that victims of rape who had willingly consumed alcohol before their attack were seen as more guilty than victims who had been sober or had been under the influence of marijuana or gamma-hydroxybutrate (GHB). Accordingly, the victim’s alcohol consumption may mod-

erate the relationship between the alcohol intake of the perpetrator and the observer's perception of the abuse.

Future research should also take into consideration individual differences in the observers, such as the participants' attitudes toward IPV and past history with IPV and alcohol use that may influence their observations and judgments. For example, there is ample research on perceptual disturbances (e.g., facial affect recognition, empathic accuracy, and anger/hostile attribution biases) that have been observed among perpetrators of IPV that might influence their judgments of violent altercations (Clements & Schumacher, 2010). In addition, stronger adherence to aggression-related alcohol expectancies may lead to more biased judgments of violent altercations involving alcohol.

CONCLUSION

This study was able to expand upon the existing literature concerning alcohol expectancies and IPV. While most of the research assessing the perceptions of abusive behavior under conditions of alcohol use have used written vignettes to depict violent interactions (e.g. Katz & Arias, 2001), the present study used a video vignette to illustrate IPV. Thus, the results of this study provide support for the notion that direct observers of IPV, similar to individuals who read or hear about instances of interpersonal violence, judge moderately abusive behavior as more common and less abusive when alcohol is involved. With this, theories concerning alcohol expectancies and interpretations of interpersonal violence can be more readily applied to real-life scenarios, such as in the validity of eye-witness testimony.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the article.

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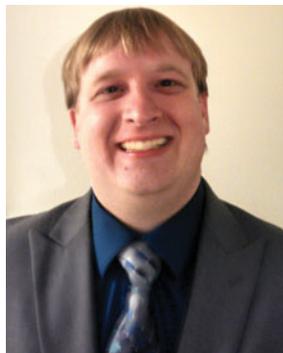


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GLOSSARY

Alcohol expectancies: Expectations about cognitive, affective, or behavioral outcomes associated with alcohol use.

Intimate partner violence: Physical, psychological, or sexual aggression by a current or former intimate partner.

Schema-based processing: A preexisting mental framework modifies observations or experiences to be consistent with the framework.

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