



The role of heavy episodic drinking and hostile sexism in men's sexual aggression toward female intimate partners[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that men's heavy episodic drinking is a significant risk factor for their perpetration of sexual aggression toward intimate partners. The aim of this investigation was to examine how hostile sexism (i.e., antipathy toward women) and benevolent sexism (i.e., subjectively positive, yet patriarchal, views of women) influence the relation between men's heavy episodic drinking and their perpetration of sexual aggression toward intimate partners.

Method: Participants were 205 heterosexual drinking men who completed self-report measures of quantity of alcohol consumption during the past 12 months, hostile sexism, and sexual aggression toward an intimate partner during the past 12 months.

Results: Men's heavy episodic drinking was positively associated with sexual aggression perpetration toward intimate partners amongst men who endorsed high, but not low, levels of hostile sexism. No such interactive effect emerged for men's endorsement of benevolent sexism.

Conclusions: These results have important implications for understanding cumulative risk factors for the perpetration of sexual aggression toward intimates.

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1. Introduction

Men's alcohol consumption has been identified as a significant risk factor for their perpetration of sexual aggression toward women (Koss & Gaines, 1993; Parkhill, Abbey, & Jacques-Tiura, 2009; Testa, 2002). Indeed, about 50% of female sexual assault survivors report that the male perpetrator consumed at least some alcohol prior to the assault (Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAuslan, 2004; Chen & Ullman, 2010). While research suggests that women's alcohol use is more strongly related to sexual assault victimization from non-intimate, relative to intimate, partners (Testa, VanZile-Tamsen, & Livingston, 2007), extant research clearly identifies men's alcohol consumption as a risk factor for their perpetration of sexual aggression toward intimate partners. In particular, research shows that women whose intimate partner has an alcohol use problem are 10 times more likely to report physical and sexual assault victimization

relative to women whose intimate partner does not have an alcohol use problem (Coker, Smith, McKeown, & King, 2000). Moreover, research evidences that approximately 50% of an ethnically diverse sample of female intimate partner sexual assault survivors reported that their assailant consumed alcohol immediately prior to the assault (McFarlane et al., 2005). These data highlight the importance of further examining the effect of men's alcohol consumption on their perpetration of sexual aggression toward intimate partners as well as potential individual characteristics that may influence this relationship. Accordingly, the purpose of the present investigation was to (1) outline how men's pattern of high quantity alcohol consumption may facilitate their perpetration of sexual aggression toward intimate partners and (2) examine hostile sexism as an individual risk factor that may exacerbate this link.

1.1. Alcohol consumption as a risk factor for intimate partner sexual aggression

Theorists posit that alcohol facilitates aggression by impairing higher-order cognitive processes involved in the perception of cues and the regulation of behavior (e.g., Hull, 1981; Pernanen, 1976; Steele & Josephs, 1990; Taylor & Leonard, 1983). In particular, Alcohol Myopia Theory (AMT; Steele & Josephs, 1990; Taylor & Leonard, 1983) postulates that alcohol intoxication facilitates aggression only when there is *inhibition conflict*, or competing pressures between strong cues that instigate and inhibit a social behavior. AMT further

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posits that alcohol will facilitate a shift in *attentional focus* toward the most salient environmental cues. In most real-world sexual situations between intimate partners, cues that instigate sexual activity (e.g., sexual arousal) are more salient than cues that inhibit sexual activity (e.g., a female partner saying “no” to sex); hence, AMT posits that alcohol intoxication most typically facilitates attention toward cues that instigate sexual activity and is associated with increased risk for sexual aggression toward intimate partners.

A substantial literature supports AMT's ability to account for alcohol-related sexual aggression and other disinhibited behaviors (for a review, see Giancola, Josephs, Parrott, & Duke, 2010). Consistent with this framework, higher doses of alcohol consumption are associated with a range of impaired executive functioning abilities (Guillot, Fanning, Bullock, McCloskey, & Berman, 2010) and a proportional increase in aggressive behavior (Duke, Giancola, Morris, Holt, & Gunn, 2011). In keeping with this literature, research evidences that pattern of *heavy episodic drinking*, or a high average quantity of drinks consumed per drinking occasion, portends a significant distal risk for aggressive behavior. Most notably, heavy episodic drinkers experience greater cognitive deficits when intoxicated relative to those who are not heavy drinkers, including significantly poorer inhibitory control (Marczinski, Combs, & Fillmore, 2007), working memory (Weissenborn & Duka, 2003), sustained attention, episodic memory, planning abilities (Hartley, Elsbagh, & File, 2004), and decision making abilities (Goudriaan, Grekin, & Sher, 2007). In addition, heavy episodic drinkers are more susceptible to alcohol's acute aggression-promoting effects (Parrott & Giancola, 2006) and are more likely to report physical violence toward intimates (Heyman & O'Leary, 1995; Hines & Straus, 2007; Leonard & Quigley, 1999).

Pertinent to the present study, this association is also found in the intimate partner sexual aggression literature. Research indicates that a history of heavy episodic drinking is positively associated with men's self-reports of sexual aggression toward their female intimate partners (Gallagher, Hudephol, & Parrott, 2010; Gallagher & Parrott, 2010; Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & McGrath, 2007). Moreover, research indicates that men with a history of heavy episodic drinking are three times more likely to report sexual aggression toward their female intimate partners than those who report fewer than five drinks per drinking occasion (Caetano, McGrath, Ramisetty-Mikler, & Field, 2005). It should be noted that the aforementioned research supports the distal effects of alcohol on intimate partner sexual aggression. However, men with a history of heavy episodic drinking are more likely than those without a history of heavy episodic drinking to be intoxicated across contexts, which may include sexual situations with intimate partners.

Inasmuch as heavy episodic drinkers are intoxicated in sexual situations with intimate partners, it is important to note that acute alcohol consumption is associated with men's cognitive misperceptions during sexual situations with dating partners and acquaintances. Specifically, research evidences that men who drink heavily prior to sexual assault incidents are more susceptible to misperceiving women's sexual intentions (Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001; Jacques-Tiura, Abbey, Parkhill, & Zawacki, 2007; Parkhill et al., 2009; Zawacki, Abbey, Buck, McAuslan, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2003) and to perpetrating more aggressive sexual assaults via the use of verbal pressure and threats of or actual physical force (Abbey, Clinton-Sherrod, McAuslan, Zawacki, & Buck, 2003). Given that many intimate relationships may involve past consensual intimacy, heavy drinking men may be particularly vulnerable to misperceiving their partner's sexual cues when experiencing alcohol-induced cognitive deficits. As such, the relation between men's heavy episodic drinking and intimate partner sexual aggression accentuates the importance of understanding additional factors that influence this relationship.

To this end, scholars have examined myriad attitudinal variables that play a role in men's sexual aggression toward women. However,

hostile beliefs about women are among the strongest predictors of men's sexual aggression toward women (for a review, see Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002). This link is parsimoniously explained by ambivalent sexism theory (AST; Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997). As will be reviewed below, ambivalent sexism theory accounts for an attitudinal set strongly associated with men's cognitive misperceptions during sexual situations, and may be applied to understand potential moderators of the link between heavy episodic drinking and sexual aggression toward intimate partners.

1.2. Hostile sexism as a risk factor for intimate partner sexual aggression

Ambivalent sexism theory has garnered strong support as an explanatory framework for men's power-related gender role ideology within heterosexual intimate relationships (for reviews, see Chen, Fiske, & Lee, 2009; Overall, Sibley, & Tan, 2011), and most notably, men's sexual aggression toward women (Abrams, Viki, Bohner, & Masser, 2003; Masser, Viki, & Power, 2006; Viki, Chiroro, & Abrams, 2006; Yamawaki, 2007; Yamawaki, Darby, & Queiroz, 2007). According to ambivalent sexism theory, men hold conflicting ideologies between their desire for power and control over women and their understanding that women are necessary for heterosexual intimate relationships and reproductive success (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997). These dichotomous positive and negative attitudes toward women can result in two distinct components of ambivalent sexism. *Hostile sexist attitudes* reflect men's antipathy toward women who are seen as sexually promiscuous or insubordinate to men, whereas *benevolent sexist attitudes* reflect men's idealization and chivalry toward women who are seen as sexually pure or who exercise fidelity (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997; Sibley & Wilson, 2004).

It is posited that the conflicting cognitions associated with men's coexisting hostile and benevolent sexist attitudes toward women are differentially activated depending upon cues of the target or situation (Chen et al., 2009; Glick & Fiske, 1997). Consistent with this hypothesis, extant research indicates that hostile sexism, but not benevolent sexism, is positively associated with men's acceptance of sexual aggression in situations where a woman is described as declining a man's sexual advancements (Masser et al., 2006; Viki et al., 2006; Yamawaki, 2007). Further, research shows that the relation between hostile sexism and men's propensity to behave like assailants in sexual assault vignettes is accounted for by cognitions related to token resistance, or the belief that the victim really wanted sex and that the victim led the perpetrator on (Abrams et al., 2003; Masser et al., 2006). Collectively, these data evidence that hostile sexist cognitions and the associated misperceptions of the victim's sexual intentions appear to be activated in response to cues of resistance in sexual situations, and thus increase the risk of men's subsequent sexual aggression. In contrast, to our knowledge, no published studies have found a positive association between benevolent sexism and men's self-reported acceptance or perpetration of male-to-female sexual aggression. Rather, research indicates that benevolent sexism is positively associated with the belief that women must have done something wrong (i.e., victim blame) in scenarios where they are victims of sexual assault (Abrams et al., 2003; Durán, Moya, Megías, & Viki, 2010; Viki & Abrams, 2002; Yamawaki, 2007; Yamawaki, Ostenson, & Brown, 2009). Within the intimate partner domain, the elicitation of cognitions associated with hostile sexism, but not benevolent sexism, may heighten the already present cognitive misperceptions that result from drinking high quantities of alcohol in sexual situations with intimate partners.

1.3. The present study

No research exists that examines the effect of men's heavy episodic drinking on sexual aggression toward female intimate partners among men who endorse hostile or benevolent sexism. More surprisingly, to our knowledge only one study to date has directly tested the association

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