



## Using multiple methods to examine gender differences in alcohol involvement and marital interactions in alcoholic probands



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Past 1-month marital conflict was more frequent among female than male alcoholics.
- Marital conflict over 14 days was more frequent among female than male alcoholics.
- Negative and positive marital behaviors were associated with daily intoxication.

### ARTICLE INFO

Available online 30 October 2014

#### Keywords:

Alcohol and marital interaction  
Behavioral observation and daily diaries  
Multi-method assessment of alcoholic couples

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** This study examined gender differences in alcohol involvement and marital interactions among probands with a past 1-year alcohol use disorder (AUD).

**Methods:** Adults with alcohol dependence (37 males and 17 females) and their spouses were recruited from a local substance abuse treatment center and from the local community. Couples completed a series of self-report measures and a 15-min videotaped marital interaction task that was coded for negative and positive behaviors and sequential interactions. Couples also separately called in to an interactive voice response (IVR) system every night for 14 consecutive nights and reported on their spouse's negative and positive marital behaviors.

**Results:** Compared to male probands, female probands reported a) more negative marital interactions in the previous month; b) higher levels of negative reciprocity and a lower positive-to-negative ratio in the marital interaction task; and c) more daily and nightly marital conflict over the 14-day diary period. Negative marital behaviors in the evening by female spouses were associated with higher odds of intoxication among male probands on the following day. In contrast, a) negative marital behaviors by male spouses were cross-sectionally associated with higher odds of intoxication among female probands within the same day; and b) positive marital behaviors by male spouses during the day were associated with lower odds of intoxication among female probands that night.

**Conclusions:** Marital conflict, assessed via multiple methods over multiple time scales, appears to be more frequent among female compared to male alcoholics. Marital conflict predicts daily intoxication among male and female probands.

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### 1. Introduction

The present study used self-report, behavioral observation, and daily process methods (Mohr, Armeli, Tennen, & Todd, 2010) to examine gender differences in the associations between alcohol involvement and marital interactions among married alcoholics. Extensive evidence has documented relationships between alcohol involvement and negative marital interactions, marital dissatisfaction, and marital violence (Leonard & Eiden, 2007; Marshal, 2003), and relationship factors are important predictors of treatment outcomes among adults with alcohol

and other substance use disorders (McCrary, Epstein, Cook, Jensen, & Hildebrandt, 2009; for a review, see O'Farrell & Clements, 2012). Yet, consistent with studies showing gender differences in the associations between marital functioning and health (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001), there is some evidence that the association between alcohol involvement (including alcohol use disorders, or AUDs) and marital discord may be stronger for women than for men (Paolino, McCrary, & Diamond, 1978).

Several theoretical models can illuminate the nature of the association between alcohol involvement and marital interactions. Karney and Bradbury's (1995) Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation (VSA) model of marriage hypothesizes that the development of marital quality and stability are influenced by three broad classes of variables: 1) *enduring*

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vulnerabilities; 2) stressful events; and 3) adaptive processes (e.g., marital interactions that involve problem-solving). Psychiatric disorders such as AUD are enduring vulnerabilities that may a) confer greater risk of exposure to stressors and b) compromise couples' coping efforts (Bruce, 1998; Johns, Newcomb, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2007). Consistent with this hypothesis, evidence showed that more than 80% of women and men seeking counseling for marital problems reported frequent marital disagreements about alcohol use (Halford & Osgarby, 1993).

A more general theoretical model of linkages between marriage and physical health was advanced by Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001). They reviewed evidence that positive marital interactions are directly associated with lower probability of risky health behaviors. Evidence also showed that "marital conflict may be both a precursor and consequence of alcohol and drug abuse" (p. 491). Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton summarized several lines of research showing that the physiological effects of negative marital interactions are stronger for women than for men (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1993).

Consistent with this model, Kessler, Walters, and Forthofer (1998) reported that AUDs were significantly associated with divorce for women but not for men, and Ramisetty-Mikler and Caetano (2005) found that female (but not male) alcohol problems predicted higher odds of marital separation over time. Other longitudinal evidence showed that wives' (but not husbands') AUDs predicted their own and their husband's marital dissatisfaction (Cranford, Floyd, Schulenberg, & Zucker, 2011), and a study using behavioral observation methods found higher levels of negativity and lower levels of positivity in couples with a female alcoholic proband compared to couples with a male alcoholic proband or no alcoholic proband (Haber & Jacob, 1997). However, a study based on a nationally representative sample found no evidence for gender differences in the relationship between AUD and marital dissolution (Cranford, 2014).

The present study used multiple methods to test hypotheses about gender differences in the relationships between alcohol involvement and marital behaviors in a sample of married alcoholics. A limitation of some previous studies is that they focused on between-persons associations between alcohol involvement and marital interactions. Researchers have increasingly turned to daily process methods (Tennen, Affleck, & Armeli, 2000, 2005; Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000) to examine the within- and between-persons associations between alcohol involvement and variables such as coping (Park, Armeli, & Tennen, 2004), daily stress (Armeli et al., 2003), and social interactions (Mohr et al., 2001). Drawing on the VSA model, role incompatibility theory, and previous findings on gender differences in reactivity to marital conflict, we tested the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1.** Negative marital interactions will be more frequent, and positive marital interactions will be less frequent, among females compared to males with AUDs.

**Hypothesis 2.** Daily alcohol involvement will be associated with more negative and fewer positive marital interactions among females compared to males with AUDs.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Alcoholic probands and their spouses were recruited from a local substance abuse treatment center ( $n = 20$  couples) and from the local community ( $n = 34$  couples). Probands from the clinical sample met DSM-IV clinical diagnosis of past 1-year alcohol abuse or dependence, and probands from the community sample screened positive for a past 1-year AUD based on responses to the Rapid Alcohol Problem Screen 4 (RAPS4; Cherpitel, 2002). A total of 54 couples (37 couples with an alcoholic male proband/female partner and 17 couples with an alcoholic female proband/male partner) comprised the final sample

(see Cranford, Tennen, & Zucker, 2010). As shown in Table 1, female probands reported significantly lower personal income than male probands, but no other statistically significant differences were observed.

### 2.2. Procedures

#### 2.2.1. Baseline interview, marital interaction task, and interactive voice response (IVR) system training

At baseline, couples completed a series of questionnaires asking about past 1-month moods, marital interactions, and drinking behaviors. Couples then completed a 15-minute marital interaction task. For this task, couples rated the importance of 10 common marital problems (e.g., money; children) using the Marital Interaction Inventory (Knox, 1971), selected the problem that causes the most intense disagreement between them, and discussed it for 15 min. Videotapes were coded at the Rapid Marital Interaction Coding System (RMICS) Coding Center under the supervision of Dr. Richard Heyman (Heyman, 2004). Equipment problems led to the loss of data from six couples, leaving us with  $n = 48$  codeable interactions. Couples completed an IVR training session immediately following the marital interaction task. Participants called an IVR system separately every day for 14 days, between the hours of 5:00 pm and 9:00 pm, and reported on their drinking behaviors and marital interactions for two periods: 1) *last night after you completed the telephone interview*, and 2) *since you woke up today*.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Past month and daily negative marital interactions

We assessed *past-month negative marital interactions* with the 7-item Social Undermining Scale (Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1996) and three items from the Withdrawn Marital Behavior Scale (Schulz, Cowan, Pape Cowan, & Brennan, 2004). Participants rated the frequency of their spouse's negative behaviors (e.g., criticism) during the past one month using a 5-point scale (0 = *not at all* to 4 = *about every day*), and scores were calculated as the mean of the item scores (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ ). *Daily negative marital interactions* were assessed using 5 of these 10 items, and participants used a yes/no response scale to report on the two time periods. Items were summed to create an index of the total number of negative marital interactions for each period.

#### 2.3.2. Past month and daily positive marital interactions

We assessed *past one month positive marital interactions* with nine items from Manne et al. (2004) and de Koning and Weiss (2002). Participants rated the frequency of their spouse's positive behaviors during

**Table 1**  
Differences between male and female probands.

	Male probands ( $n = 37$ ) M (SD)/%	Female probands ( $n = 17$ ) M (SD)/%	$t/\chi^2$
Demographics <sup>a</sup>			
Age	44.5 (13.4)	40.9 (12.8)	0.9
Education <sup>a</sup>	4.6 (1.0)	4.5 (1.0)	0.5
Personal income <sup>b</sup>	4.5 (2.3)	2.6 (2.2)	2.7*
Length of marriage (in years)	15.4 (14.1)	9.7 (9.3)	1.1
Race/ethnicity (White)	78.4	70.6	0.4
Worked in past week	64.9	47.1	1.5
Any children (yes)	61.1	80.0	1.7
Any children at home (yes)	51.7	41.7	0.3
Substance use			
Ever smoked (yes)	64.9	70.6	0.2
Ever used marijuana (yes)	78.4	82.4	0.1
Ever used cocaine (yes)	41.2	47.1	0.2

<sup>a</sup> Highest level of education completed ranged from 0 = never attended school to 7 = MD, PhD, JD.

<sup>b</sup> Personal income during the past one year ranged from 0 = less than \$1000 to 9 = \$100,000 or more.

\*  $p < .05$ .

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