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College Students' Perceptions about Alcohol and Consensual Sexual Behavior: Alcohol Leads to Sex

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Abstract

The phenomenology of college students' conceptualization of the relations between alcohol and sex are surprisingly understudied. Undergraduates rank among the most-studied populations, yet extant research largely relies on quantitative methods, which are constrained in their ability to give participants a "voice." The current study used focus groups to investigate 14 male and 15 female undergraduates' conceptualizations of the relations between alcohol and consensual sex. Focus group themes indicated gendered and universal relations between alcohol and sex and positive and negative aspects of these relations. A robust relation between sex and alcohol was noted (men and women), and participants reported deliberately seeking out alcohol to indicate sexual willingness (women), reject sexual advances directly (women), and facilitate making sexual advances (men). Implications for educators are discussed.

Keywords

alcohol; sexual communication; qualitative methods; sexual behavior; risky sexual behavior; gender differences

How do late adolescents and emerging adults (the developmental period roughly encompassing 18–25 years of age) understand the relations between alcohol and consensual sexual activity? Reflecting the pathology orientation of most sexuality and alcohol research, little is known about emerging adults' perceptions about exactly how alcohol and consensual sexual behavior are related. Instead, the majority of sexuality research in this area has focused on non-consensual sex, risky sexual behavior, or the negative outcomes associated with sexual activity (see commentary on this issue by Impett & Tolman, 2006; Michels, Kropp, Eyre, & Halpern-Felsher, 2005; Tolman & Diamond, 2001). Similarly, a large proportion of alcohol research with emerging adults has focused on heavy episodic consumption of alcohol, negative consequences associated with alcohol consumption, and individuals' beliefs about these negative outcomes (e.g., Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; Jones, Corbin, & Fromme, 2001; O'Malley & Johnston, 2002; Wechsler et al., 2002). In addition, research that jointly considered alcohol and sexuality emphasizes the role of alcohol in relation to risky sex and sexual aggression (e.g., Buddie & Testa, 2005; Coleman & Carter, 2005; Maisto et al., 2004a, 2004b; Zawacki et al., 2005). These lines of research are important because they have

critical implications for drug education, public health prevention and intervention efforts, as well as for mental health practice. However, these emphases do not necessarily increase and may actually limit our understanding of the relations between alcohol and *consensual* sexual activity, thereby leaving important knowledge gaps.

Despite deeply entrenched cultural views that alcohol and consensual sex go hand-in-hand and that alcohol is an essential ingredient of a romantic encounter (see Crowe & George, 1989; George & Stoner, 2000 for reviews), these perceptions have been comparatively understudied empirically, particularly in emerging adults. Moreover, qualitative investigations, which emphasize the phenomenology of emerging adults' experiences and emerging adults' voices, are fairly uncommon. We sought to bridge this gap with a qualitative investigation that focused on a specific sub-group of emerging adults, heterosexual college students. In particular, we focused on their perceptions of the relation between alcohol and consensual sexual activity and alcohol's role in sexual communication. Because previous research has primarily focused on negative outcomes, negative consequences, and nonconsensual sex (e.g., Hingson et al., 2005; O'Malley & Johnston, 2002; Wechsler et al., 2002), we examined both the *positive* and *negative* aspects of the relations between alcohol and consensual sex and whether these relations held for both women and men. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to investigate, using qualitative methodology, (a) college students' perceptions of the relations between alcohol and consensual sex, (b) their perceptions of the relations between alcohol and sexual behavior, and (c) the similarities (or differences) of these perceptions across men and women.

The Relations between Alcohol and Sexual Behavior in College Students

Although the relations between alcohol and sexual behavior are complex, research has shown that alcohol contributes to engagement in sexual behavior among college students. In particular, numerous empirical studies have demonstrated the association of alcohol with first-time sexual intercourse, new sexual partners, unplanned and unprotected sex, sexual aggression, and sexual assault (Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAuslan, 2004; Cooper, 2002; George & Stoner, 2000; Goldstein, Barnett, Pedlow, & Murphy, 2007; Labrie, Earleywine, Schiffman, Pedersen, & Marriot, 2005; Testa, 2002). For example, Goldstein and colleagues (2007) found that, among a sample of sexually active, high-risk drinking college students, 40% reported engaging in sexual behavior under the influence of alcohol with someone they knew, and 26% reported engaging in sexual behavior with someone whom they had met recently (i.e., in the past three months). Recent findings by Neal and Fromme (2007) indicate that, when evaluating the relations between alcohol and sexual behavior at the event level, alcohol intoxication did not influence the decision to engage in sexual behavior but did decrease the use of protective behaviors (i.e., reduced the likelihood of talking about or using protection) when one did engage in sexual activities.

The Role of Alcohol in Sexual Behavior and Communication

Alcohol expectancy theory (Brown, Goldman, Inn, & Anderson, 1980) and research (Jones et al., 2001) have implications with respect to sexual activity and communication. Alcohol expectancies are beliefs about the likelihood that alcohol will have certain outcomes, and they are typically assessed with self report (quantitative) measures. Beliefs such as, "alcohol makes you more socially skilled" and "alcohol makes you sexy," are examples of alcohol expectancies. Adolescents and emerging adults have many alcohol expectancies about various aspects of sexuality, including sexual enhancement, risk-taking, and disinhibition (Dermen & Cooper, 1994a). Such expectancies are predictive of sexual behavior and drinking in sexual situations (Abbey, Parkhill, Buck, & Saenz, 2007; Dermen & Cooper, 1994a, 1994b; Fromme, D'Amico, & Katz, 1999).

Although research has indicated that adolescents and emerging adults often expect alcohol to facilitate sexual *behavior*, it is unclear to what extent adolescents and emerging adults expect alcohol to foster or hinder sexual *communication*. Some alcohol expectancies related to disinhibition (e.g., becoming more sexually responsive, being less nervous about sex, etc.) imply that sexual communication would be easier and/or more direct. However, research also indicates that emerging adults believe alcohol decreases communication about sexual risks (Dermen & Cooper, 1994a, 1994b) and that consuming alcohol in conjunction with engagement in sexual behavior is associated with discussing fewer sex-related topics among sexually active, drinking college students (Goldstein et al., 2007). Thus, beliefs about alcohol and sexual communication are somewhat paradoxical: on the one hand, alcohol may foster communication that is more direct and leads to the initiation of sex or specific sexual behaviors; on the other hand, alcohol may suppress or inhibit direct communication about topics related to sexual risk-taking. Application of qualitative methods could aid in clarifying how sexual communication and alcohol are related.

Little qualitative work has evaluated how beliefs about alcohol and sex-related outcomes influence sexual communication, particularly with respect to college students and consensual sex. Instead, research has tended to focus on the context in which drinking occurs (e.g., bars), nonconsensual sexual behavior, older or younger populations (e.g., younger adolescents or older adults), or populations outside of the United States (e.g., Coleman, & Carter, 2005; Parks, Miller, Collins, & Zetes-Zanatta, 1998; Parks & Scheidt, 2000). For example, results from Coleman and Carter's (2005) in-depth interviews with 64 English adolescents suggest adolescents believe that alcohol (1) affects their assessment of physical attractiveness, (2) can serve as an excuse for unacceptable social behavior, (3) increases confidence and lowers inhibitions, (4) impairs judgment to react to, or recognize, a potentially risk situation, and (5) can lead to loss of control (e.g., blacking out, memory loss). Although qualitative research has produced informative findings regarding the role of alcohol in sexual communication and sexual behavior, like those described above, it is unclear to what extent findings generalize to U.S. samples. Moreover, qualitative research has been underutilized with college student populations, in general, leaving the literature under-informed about this critical developmental period.

The Present Study

Drawing upon studies by Parks and colleagues (1998, 2000) and Norris and colleagues (1996) and recommendations by Krueger (1994), we used a semi-structured approach that emphasized the social context of our participants. Thus, we used focus group discussions that (a) consisted of a series of broad questions that emphasized participants' experiences as college students and their transition from high school to college and (b) were co-led by undergraduate research assistants. Because we set out to gain a deeper, rather than a broader, understanding of sexual communication among heterosexual college students, we viewed this study as one that would result in the identification and generation of new themes. Thus, rather than approaching this study as an exercise in *hypothesis testing*, we approached it as an exercise in *hypothesis generation*. In particular, we focused our investigation on (1) participants' perceptions of the relation between alcohol and sexual behavior, (2) participants' perceptions of the relation between alcohol and sexual communication; and (3) the extent to which these perceptions were similar or different across genders.

Methods

Research Participants and Recruitment

Research participants consisted of 29 undergraduates from a large, public university in the Pacific Northwest (men = 14, women = 15), between the ages of 18 and 22 ($M = 18.8$ years,

$SD = .90$). Seventy-six percent of the participants were in the first year of college and the majority, 73% ($n = 21$), were Caucasian. The remaining 27% identified as Asian ($n = 4$), biracial ($n = 3$), or African American ($n = 1$). Focus groups were conducted in the winter, thus participants had been in a college environment for at least three months. All participants self-identified as heterosexual. They were recruited from the Psychology Department subject pool and received extra course credit in exchange for participation. To minimize invasions of privacy and to adhere to institutional review board (IRB) requirements, participants were instructed not to participate in groups with their friends or acquaintances.

Procedures

Students participated in a 90-minute session that was audio-taped. Focus groups, comprising the majority of the session, lasted approximately 60 minutes. Groups were single sex, ranged in size from six to eight participants, and were led by two matched-sex moderators (a graduate student and an undergraduate research assistant). There were two men's focus groups and two women's focus groups. After informed consent was obtained, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire.

Participants were asked to abide by the following four ground rules in order to minimize invasions of privacy and maximize confidentiality: (1) to discuss how people their age communicated about sex rather than discussing their specific experiences; (2) not to use any names; (3) to speak one at a time; and (4) to keep what was said in the group confidential. Participants were assured that their comments could not be linked to their identities. In addition, they were told that if they made a mistake and used a name, that the research team would not include that name when making a transcript.

The focus groups began with an "ice-breaker," which allowed the participants to relax and become more comfortable with each other. They were told that they would be shown three brief clips from a young adult romantic comedy, *She's All That*, and would be asked to discuss what was (and was not) realistic with regard to young adult dating/romantic encounters. One of the clips (e.g., a male character asking the female character on a date and complimenting her) was somewhat realistic, and the other two clips were not realistic (e.g., a male character helps his female love interest by having the junior members of his sports team clean her house). The clips lasted for five minutes and the subsequent discussion lasted for ten minutes. In addition to increasing the participants' comfort with each other, the discussion also served to set the stage for the first focus group question (e.g., "How do you think sexual communication has changed over time, meaning from high school to now?"). This question was always asked first. In order to maintain conversational flow, the order of the remaining questions was not fixed and was left to the moderators' discretion. All questions were asked and discussed in every focus group.

The remaining questions focused on specific aspects of sexual communication: gender differences, verbal versus nonverbal communication, sending versus receiving messages related to sexual interest, communication strategies for indicating comfort or lack of comfort with sexual activities, communication strategies for short-term and long-term relationships, and the role of alcohol. This paper focuses only on participants' responses regarding the role of alcohol in sexual communication and sexual behavior. To ensure validity of the data provided, participants were frequently prompted to clarify, amplify, or disagree with comments made.

Focus groups were audio-taped and recordings were transcribed verbatim. Within each transcript, each paragraph represented a separate speaker. To ensure accuracy, transcripts and recordings were compared by two independent research assistants. Agreement was unanimous for the final version of each transcript.

Data Analysis

As noted by experts in qualitative methods (e.g., Krueger, 1994) and researchers who use them (e.g., Parks et al., 1998; Parks & Scheidt, 2000), data analysis for focus groups is a multilevel, iterative process. Each successive stage is intended to clarify the findings of the previous stage towards the goal of developing a classification scheme of the major themes discussed. In the first stage of analysis, three of the co-authors (KPL, DWP, WHG) independently read each of the focus group transcripts and took notes regarding the major themes. Collaborative discussions ensued in which the major themes were identified and discussed, and the data analysis team agreed that alcohol and sexuality were, indeed, major themes. In the second stage of analysis, two of the co-authors (KPL, DWP) independently read the transcripts again with the goal of identifying the individual ideas related to alcohol and sexuality. Through discussion, the co-authors' notes and conclusions were compared, differences were discussed and resolved, and major ideas or sub-themes (i.e., those that were pervasive within or across the focus groups) were identified and agreed upon. In the final stage of analysis, two of the co-authors (KPL, DWP) independently re-read the transcripts with the goal of categorizing each participant's statement within one of the ideas or themes. Joint discussions were used to review coding, discuss and resolve differences, revise original subthemes, and incorporate additional sub-themes as necessary. Finally, one co-author (DWP) identified specific quotations that reflected support for the ideas and themes. The first author (KPL), who conceptualized the study and wrote the focus group script outline, reviewed all quotations and agreed with their inclusion as supporting evidence in the Results section of this paper. The source of each quotation, is indicated in parentheses that follow it, i.e., whether it came from a man's or woman's focus group and whether it was from the first or second of those groups.

Analyses and interpretations, although intended to be objective, are heavily influenced by the perspectives and life experiences of the researchers conducting the investigation. Our team consisted of two European American, heterosexual women; a European American, gay man, and an African American heterosexual man, and our interpretations of the participants' comments were undoubtedly influenced by our specific experiences. Throughout the analytic process, these experiences and perspectives were openly discussed to increase our awareness and to minimize the influence of our biases.

Results

Analysis of the focus group data revealed several broad categories of themes. *Universal Themes* appeared in both the men's and women's focus group transcripts and seemed to operate similarly for individuals of each gender. *Gendered Themes* appeared only in the men's or women's groups and/or appeared to reflect unique aspects of one gender.

Universal Themes

Alcohol leads to sex—Both men and women reported a strong causal link between consuming alcohol and engaging in sexual behavior. A few participants dissented, reporting abstaining from alcohol or reported minimal sexual experience. However, these participants also described their behavior as atypical. The specific mechanisms underlying how alcohol leads to sex varied, but the findings were consistent: college students drank, or went to settings in which drinking occurs, in order to find a sex partner. As one male participant said, "Things might happen that regularly wouldn't happen, when alcohol is involved" (Men 2).

The focus group participants identified multiple potential mechanisms through which alcohol leads to sex. A female participant stated:

I think [alcohol] makes it 100% easier to, at least—not just to talk about [sex], but to act on it. It just is *so* much easier. I know so many people who have done things that

they regret the next day because of alcohol. I know they would not have done them if they hadn't drank. You don't even think about your morals or your family and everything you just do what your body wants at the time. (Women 1)

This speaker noted that alcohol facilitated both sexual communication and sexual behavior, highlighting that an individual, when intoxicated, may be guided most strongly by cues immediately present in the environment (e.g., feelings of sexual arousal) rather than more abstract features (e.g., personally-held morals or values). This latter idea, heard primarily in the women's groups, is consistent with alcohol myopia theory (Steele & Josephs, 1990).

Social events with alcohol increase the likelihood of sex—In all four focus groups, participants indicated that sex is more likely to occur by attending a social event with alcohol. For some, a desire for sex explicitly preceded a decision to attend such an event. For example:

I know so many friends, who would just go, “Well, I kinda want to get some action, so maybe I'll go to the frats tonight!” or something like that. (Women 1)

Related to above, students' remarks indicated that simply holding an alcoholic drink was an indicator, albeit an imperfect one, of sexual availability. Consuming such a drink was also an indicator. Other students noted that one's desire to have sex can increase upon attending an event. Moreover, other students reported being *open* to the possibility of having sex but indicated that they were not attending these social functions with the explicit goal of doing so. Regardless of whether they had such goals, this knowledge – i.e., that *if* one wants sex or is open to having sex, *then* one should attend a social function in which alcohol is being consumed – seemed universal.

Alcohol affects communication skills positively and negatively—Independently, male and female participants agreed that consuming alcohol affected communication in general and, communication about sexual interests or desires, specifically. Participants' remarks seemed to be based on the idea that ingesting alcohol empowered them to jettison culturally- or gender-based prohibitions against direct communication about wanting or being interested in sex. Respondents echo the notions of alcohol as a *social lubricant* or as providing *liquid courage* (for a review, see Greeley & Oei, 1999). Participants not only indicated that it was easier to talk about and engage in sex but also to do so using more direct language and behavior. As will be discussed in the “Gendered Themes” section, there was a gendered component to alcohol having a positive effect on communication, with men emphasizing that alcohol facilitated *initiating* sexual advances and women emphasizing that alcohol facilitated *rebuffing* sexual advances.

Participants of both sexes reported that alcohol decreased communications skills. Some suggested that ingesting alcohol caused communication skills to “just kind of go down the toilet” (Women 2) without identifying a specific mechanism. However, more of the negative consequences of alcohol on communication seemed to result from increased perceptual errors in ambiguous situations. In particular, participants noted that they become less articulate when drinking and poorer judges of others' sexual intentions, a finding consistent with previous (quantitative) studies (see Lindgren, Parkhill, George, & Hendershot, 2008).

Alcohol as an essential element in college student's sexual scripts—Echoed in this shared understanding were participants' discussion of, and agreement about, the progression of events that led to consensual heterosexual encounters (e.g., sexual scripts; DeLamater, 1987). In an alcohol-sex context, the final step before sexual activity occurs appeared to be the relocation from a public to a private space. That is, although a social event provided the context for the beginning of courtship behaviors that lead to sex, the parties involved must move to somewhere else more secluded in order for sex to occur.

We like to seclude ourselves from everybody else. We like to go, you know if we want to like, “Oh, let’s go out, like, on a pier or by the water or something,” you know, where you’re going to be alone. (Men 1) it’s like, ‘Hey, you wanna go sit down?’ or, “Ya wanna go outside?” ... then it’s a smaller, quieter situation or something, and then that’s when they’re making out and everything starts... (Women 2)

Another method by which to invoke privacy, for some, was to physically distance themselves from friends. Going to a party in a group, which seemed to be more typical among female participants, carried with it the implication that group members would go and leave together. Men and women with a goal of casual sex would need to break away from a group at some point. For example, the woman cited above who indicated that going to fraternities was a means by which to “get some action” also stated that people who did so, “... wouldn’t want to go and hang out with their other friends” (Women 1). Such actions also appeared to function to circumvent judgment from peers who make different choices about how to end their evenings.

Gendered Themes

Several main themes unique to participants of each sex emerged. Here we present themes related to men’s drinking followed by themes about women’s drinking.

Unique themes from the men’s groups—For the men, drinking resulted in decreased inhibitions and increased the likelihood they would make more direct comments to women. These comments highlighted desirable physical attributes of a woman’s body or made clear the man’s interest in sex. Men also discussed taking more aggressive physical action (to initiate sexual behavior) when drinking. In particular, men reported being more likely to touch a women in ways that the men viewed as flirtatious or sexual, with less fear of consequences.

Men expressed mostly positive feelings about the ways in which alcohol affected their dating and sex lives. They enjoyed the freedom that comes with the decreased inhibitions associated with alcohol and appreciated the benefits of pursuing women more directly -- i.e., they could meet more women and gain more sexual experience than they would otherwise.

Before any alcohol, they are probably like, “Oh, I shouldn’t do that or maybe she might slap me!” But afterwards, it’s like, “I don’t care if she slaps me! I’m just going to put my hand on her *assets* and see what happens.” (Men 1)

They also noted that women have developed strategies to contend with men under the influence.

The girls always go in groups and they always stay together for safety. Like, when some random guy comes over and starts grinding on them and putting his hands where they don’t want them, the girls will, like, rotate. They’ll take turns [dealing] with the bad guy until they work him out, like, he totally gets the idea. (Men 1)

Men did note two drawbacks to drinking as a means of having sex. First, drinking and then having sex with a woman could result in the beginning of a relationship that (a) he did not actually want and (b) he might continue out of feelings of guilt.

I mean, you could wake up after a party with someone next to you, you know. Then, you start feeling obligated to date them. (Men 1)

Second, men pointed out the “beer goggles” phenomenon, namely, finding partners more attractive when under the influence of alcohol and less attractive when sober. However, the men’s thoughts on this issue were complicated. In the group, they laughed and teased each other about sleeping with an “ugly girl” but, at the same time, showed respect towards the ability to find a woman with whom to have sex.

The unique themes from the men's groups also extended to their beliefs about women, in general, and drinking women, in particular. Some men indicated that women demonstrate their openness to sexual activity by drinking alcohol. Of those men, a few reported encouraging women to drink in order to make them more amenable to sexual advances later. For example:

Yeah, if he buys dinner or buys her a drink, that usually helps a lot, it usually helps to loosen her up a lot. Get some alcohol in the system. (Men 1)

I think guys will think that when girls do that, the girl wants it and I don't know if all the times... that girls are just having a better time, especially if there's alcohol involved. (Men 2)

Unique themes from the women's groups—Whereas the men reported a somewhat consistent desire for sex regardless of alcohol and implicated alcohol as the *catalyst* for seeking sex more openly, alcohol's relation to sex for women operated differently. Some of the women talked about alcohol as the *agent* of sexual motivation, actually making them feel more sexual, more desirous of sexual activity, and giving them the motivation to take charge sexually.

I think alcohol can affect women more in the way they express themselves because it is kinda like a taboo, more of a taboo for women to talk about sex, so they feel like they can talk about it more [after drinking]...(Women 1)

The women in the focus groups indicated that alcohol increased their sexual assertiveness, in terms of communication and behavior. Further, the women noted that alcohol helped them to feel more comfortable eschewing social roles that call for women's passivity where sex is concerned.

In my friend's case, I'll say that her communication – like her ability to read situations will probably go down – but her communication skills would actually get better, cause she would stop worrying about trying to be nice, about other people's feelings, be more bold, and more aggressive, and more verbal. (Women 2)

Nonetheless, they noted that even with alcohol, there were still constraints on direct communication of desired sexual behaviors.

I think... women in general will always feel like they're not supposed to talk about their feelings and desires in the bedroom. I mean, if they [are drinking and] want something sexual, they're not gonna sit down and say, "I like it when you do it like this!" They just point or shove a head or hand... (Women 1)

In addition, women discussed soliciting rejecting men's advances when drinking.

And I think, you know, that is a different set of personalities, but alcohol can give you the opportunity to be the one that tends to say no, and just to be like, "No." (Women 2)

That alcohol could lead to greater sexual assertiveness in rejecting advances is an idea less frequently mentioned (for exceptions, see Atkeson, Calhoun, & Morris, 1989; Davis, 2000). Typically, the converse, that alcohol makes it more difficult to resist sexual advances (e.g., Norris et al., 1996) is highlighted.

Women also noted that alcohol was useful with respect to their concerns about sexuality and having a "good" reputation. They discussed concerns that having multiple (or any) sex partners can be considered "slutty" and stigmatizing. A novel finding in this research is that some women reported drinking alcohol as a preemptive justification – an *anticipatory excuse*, planned ahead of time –to be offered publicly after the event, if they were to be confronted about their socially "deviant" behavior.

You expect to get drunk, and expect to make...dumb mistakes that you can make up for later. (Women 1) I know people who will get drunk and who throw their inhibitions out... but they are also expecting to throw their inhibitions out. So you might not even be that drunk but they just assume that, "Oh, I can make up for that in the morning because I will say I was drunk," and everyone will say, "Oh yeah, that sucks! 'Cause I have been there, too ..." (Women 1)

Interestingly, the women introduced this topic but the men echoed this notion, for women.

I think a lot of times the alcohol is just an excuse for girls who want to have sex and they like need an excuse to go to that level... like, if a girl is open to the idea of having sex, then a lot of time she just needs a catalyst... And the alcohol serves as that [catalyst]. (Men 1)

In addition to providing an excuse for desired sexual activity, alcohol was also viewed as dangerous by women. Women agreed that men become verbally and physically bolder when drinking. At times, the women reported liking this change in behavior, as the male pursuer was a familiar role. However, female participants' comments focused more on how they did not like the men's increased forthrightness and aggressiveness. Many women expressed both a fear of men – more specifically, a fear of being sexually assaulted or raped by men who had been drinking – and a concomitant fear of alcohol itself. One woman stated, "If all the girls are drinking, then nobody is safe" (Women 2). To deal with this perceived increased risk of physical harm, women have developed systems to unite and protect each other from intoxicated men. The same female participant noted, "But if you have at least one chick who's not had anything to drink, she can kind of just make sure that nothing shady is going down" (Women 2). As discussed above, the men were aware of such strategies.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to use qualitative methods to investigate the long-standing, robust association between alcohol and sex (see Crowe & George, 1989; George & Stoner, 2000, for reviews) in a sample of heterosexual college students. Not only did our sample report that there was, indeed, an association between alcohol and sex, but they also indicated they perceived this relation to be causal. Multiple mechanisms underlying this relation were discussed by participants, some of which were universal and others of which were gendered.

Universal Mechanisms

Three mechanisms were mentioned by both male and female focus group participants: sexual communication, sexual cues, and sexual scripts. First, male and female participants were in agreement that communication about sex was influenced by alcohol. Although the nature of this influence was complex, overall, participants reported that alcohol made it easier to communicate about sex, including communicating about (a) desiring sex and/or (b) participating in or initiating sexual activity. Collectively, these findings about the influence of alcohol on sexual communication are consistent with the literature on alcohol expectancies, particularly sex-related alcohol expectancies (e.g., Abbey et al., 2007; Dermen & Cooper, 1994a, 1994b) and the tension-reducing, "liquid courage" effects of alcohol (e.g., Greeley & Oie, 1999; Stoner, George, Norris, & Peters, 2007).

A second universal theme was that alcohol served as a sexual cue. That is, the presence of alcohol in a social setting was perceived to indicate both sexual availability and an increased likelihood that sex would occur. These ideas supplement findings by George and colleagues, among others, that indicate that people who drink alcoholic versus non-alcoholic beverages are perceived more sexually (Corcoran & Bell, 1990; George, Gournic & McAfee, 1988; George et al., 1995; 1997). In addition to replicating these findings using qualitative methods,

our study adds to the extant literature with the finding that some college students *use* their knowledge of alcohol's function as a sexual cue and *choose* to drink to convey their interest in sex. According to these participants, simply holding a beer is a strategic, effective method to indicate sexual interest without having to say or do anything else. That alcohol may be used strategically by college students to indicate sexual interest and availability is an intriguing notion and a hypothesis that should be tested *a priori* in future studies with larger and more diverse samples.

Although our purpose did not include or anticipate discussion of sexual scripts, they emerged as a third universal theme by being the subject of considerable discussion among the focus groups. Alcohol was perceived to function as a sexual cue and a sexual facilitator, and relocating to a more secluded location was viewed as an indication that some type of sexual behavior would ensue. Sexual scripts have received considerable attention in the sexuality literature, and major emphases have been placed on gender roles, the specific events that comprise sexual scripts, the order of those events, and how scripts vary as a function of individual and sociocultural development (e.g., Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Our findings suggest avenues for future research – in particular the importance of elucidating the role of alcohol in a given script, a factor that appears particularly critical among college-age populations. In particular, further research is needed to (a) confirm hypotheses about the existence and generality of alcohol-sexual behavior scripts, (b) expand our characterization and comprehension of them, and (c) evaluate their potential for advancing our understanding not only of consensual, non-problematic sexual encounters, but also nonconsensual encounters and consensual encounters associated with a variety of problematic outcomes (e.g. pregnancy, STI, HIV, infidelity, etc.).

Gendered Mechanisms

In addition to findings about universal mechanisms that underlie the relation between alcohol and sex, there appeared to be mechanisms of a gendered nature to this association. Female participants indicated that alcohol enabled them to express their interest in and desire for sex, and to act on those interest and desires. Interestingly, female participants' comments appeared to indicate an "anticipatory" nature and use of their understanding about alcohol's effects on sex. Alcohol, in essence, may be a tool used by college women to minimize the stigma associated with expressions of female sexuality. Such a hypothesis is novel and should be tested directly in future research. In addition to the more "useful" aspects of the relation between alcohol and sex, women also found the combination of alcohol and sex to be frightening. In particular, they reported concerns about being sexually assaulted or harassed when in situations where alcohol was consumed. It appears then, that women may have an approach-avoid motivation with respect alcohol whereas men may have a more "pure" approach motivation. This hypothesis could and should be tested. For example, implicit social cognition tasks such as the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) could be used to test for gender differences in associations about alcohol.

Men also reported that alcohol had mixed effects related to sexuality. On the one hand, they, too, expressed that alcohol can be both empowering and liberating and, on the other hand, the men describe alcohol as disappointing at times. For example, regarding the former, male participants reported that drinking alcohol enabled them to be extremely direct about wanting sex. They reported perceptions about alcohol making college-age men bolder about their sexual intentions and enabling them to skip various stages of courtship in order to bring about the initiation of sex more quickly. Men also discussed the negative effects of alcohol on sex, specifically regarding the process of obtaining sex and the person with whom one might engage in sexual behavior. For instance, male participants indicated that, when alcohol is involved, it was often easier to obtain sex; that this relative ease made the pursuit of sex less of a challenge

and less exciting; and that alcohol-involved “hook-ups” could lead to an unwanted, protracted romantic relationship.

The responses of male and female participants not only indicated that there were gendered ways in which alcohol influenced sexuality but also that men and women were aware of these gendered effects. For example, male participants indicated awareness of women becoming more interested in sex when alcohol was present and reported that men attempt to use that fact to their advantage, to obtain sex more easily. Additionally, female participants indicated awareness that men become bolder and more predatory about sex and that women, accordingly, become more protective of themselves and more protective towards other women. In a similarly iterative fashion, male participants reported an awareness of women seeking to protect themselves and their female friends, and female participants reported an awareness of men seeking to encourage women’s alcohol consumption. Collectively, the data suggest that there is concordance between the genders about gendered effects of alcohol influenced sexuality, and this hypothesis should be tested.

Education Implications

In addition to supplementing previous findings, the present study extended the current literature in several important ways. For example, participants’ remarks about alcohol increasing sexual assertiveness are intriguing. The possibility that alcohol can increase a woman’s ability to reject sexual advances has not received significant attention in the extant literature. Although this possibility must be subjected to additional research, it has implications for drug and health education practitioners. When designing education programs or conducting interventions, it may be helpful for educators and practitioners to be aware that some female adolescents and emerging adults hold expectancies that alcohol increases their abilities to set sexual limits and boundaries assertively. First and foremost, it is critical to determine (a) whether this belief generalizes beyond the current sample and (b) the accuracy of this belief. For example, in the present study, it was unclear exactly how women rejected men’s advances and the extent to which “sexual assertiveness,” truly reflected participants’ behavior. To the extent that female emerging adults and adolescents are shown to hold beliefs that alcohol increases their abilities to set limits or refuse sex, it would be critically important to address those beliefs directly. It would also be useful to (a) assess female adolescents and emerging adults’ skills at sexual refusals and (b) if appropriate, implement skills training programs to increase female adolescents and emerging adults’ skills at setting limits when they are and are not drinking. Similar educational strategies targeting male adolescents’ and emerging adults’ attempts to *initiate* (vs. refuse) sex may also be merited as the men in our sample described alcohol as increasing their sexual “assertiveness” with regard to initiating sexual behavior.

Additionally, our findings demonstrate that women and men perceive both negative and positive aspects of alcohol’s influence on sexual communication. This finding is consistent with recent qualitative research demonstrating that college students report experiencing many positive consequences of drinking that relate to sexual behavior (Park, 2004; Park & Grant, 2005). For example, Park and Grant (2005) found that, among female college students, alcohol consumption was associated with feeling more relaxed about sex. Park (2004) also found that college students reported, “having a romantic encounter,” and, “sex,” as positive consequences of consuming alcohol. Focusing on negative consequences clearly has important implications for prevention and intervention efforts. However, it is also important for educators and practitioners to be aware that college students both perceive and experience positive outcomes from alcohol. Accordingly, educational programs and interventions that acknowledge that there can be positive things about alcohol use and focus on ways that students can have these positive outcomes, whether with less or no alcohol consumption, may increase students’ perceptions of program/intervention credibility. In addition, given the causal link between

alcohol and sex our participants perceived and their beliefs that alcohol facilitated sexual communication, we believe that it is critically important for education efforts targeted at this age group to (a) provide accurate, potentially corrective, information about the relations between alcohol and sex and (b) teach skills aimed at increasing this groups' comfort with and ability to refuse, limit, *and* initiate sex.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Of note is the small sample size. Determining an appropriate sample size for a qualitative research project is difficult, and several factors ought to be considered, including the aims of the intended research product, the nature of the topic, the quality of the informant's data, the sampling strategy employed, and the study design (Morse, 2000). Our sample and methods allowed us to probe deeply into the respondents' experiences, yielding relatively rich results, but without being overwhelmed with data as in large qualitative samples. However, more participants might have yielded different results. Future qualitative and quantitative research must be conducted to replicate and extend the present findings. In addition, the majority of our participants identified as European-American and heterosexual, and all were college students in a large, public university in the Pacific Northwest. The sample was also limited because participants were recruited through the Psychology Department Subject Pool, and the majority were in their first year of college. Thus, the ideas and sentiments expressed by this study's participants may not, and likely do not, represent the experiences of ethnic minority and sexual minority college students, and they may not extend to similarly aged or older emerging adults.. Also, based on IRB requests, we collected only limited demographic information about the participants. Finally, we did not have permission to re-contact participants in order to provide some measure of validation for our interpretations of their comments. Thus, our analysis only reflects our (the authors') understanding of the major themes and ideas conveyed.

Conclusions

In addition to replicating previous alcohol and sexuality research based predominantly on quantitative methods, these qualitative findings (a) afforded a rich and nuanced snapshot of the dynamics of this complex association and (b) provided several relatively novel insights about the nature of alcohol's role in sexual behavior and communication. College men and women expressed universal and gendered notions about how alcohol leads to consensual sex, primarily by fostering communication and assertiveness and serving as a sexual cue. They also noted how alcohol can complicate early courtship proceedings. These findings also indicated the existence of distinct, readily discernible alcohol-specific sexual scripts. It is clear that college students strive for positive alcohol-laced sexual encounters, which appears to be a potent motive in the construction of their social worlds. While these encounters can go awry and have devastating negative consequences, they can also generate desirable and reinforcing consequences, which have been under-investigated by researchers and have important implications for alcohol and other drug education.

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