Intoxication: An “excuse” for date rape

Problem

It has been reported that approximately 5% of American college women become date rape victims. Furthermore, about 72% of them are intoxicated at the time of their assault. Intoxication among college women is not a negative aberration; peer pressure in college sororities encourages women to drink heavily, thus increasing the likelihood of their being victimized.

Although there have been a number of attempts to examine the role of alcohol as a mitigating factor in acquaintance rape situations, the evidence is somewhat conflicting. Part of the inconsistency may result from ambiguous depictions of intoxication used in the various scenarios employed.

Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that an intoxicated perpetrator would be judged as less responsible and an intoxicated victim would be judged as more responsible for a date rape.

Methodology

In the present research, we employed a clear-cut vignette to examine responsibility in date rape situations involving intoxication. The vignette portrayed a male college student raping a female classmate he met at a party.

The study employed a 2x2x2 factorial design with the following variables: Perpetrator Intoxication, Victim Intoxication, and Participant Gender.

Results

The perpetrator’s intoxication served as a “good excuse” for his behavior. When intoxicated, he was perceived as having less control of his actions (M = 3.87) than when sober (M = 4.82, F(1,106) = 31.69, p < .001), less responsible for the rape (M = 4.52) than when sober (M = 4.83, F(1,106) = 7.22, p < .01) (see Figure 1), and deserving of less punishment (M = 4.48) than when sober (M = 4.82, F(1,106) = 7.52, p < .01).

The victim’s fate was clearly influenced by her intoxication. She was viewed as leading her attacker to believe that she wanted to have sex to a greater degree when she was intoxicated (M = 2.07) than when she was sober (M = 1.69, F(1,106) = 6.96, p < .05). She was also seen as being more responsible for her fate when intoxicated (M = 2.66) than when sober (M = 1.91, F(1,106) = 14.89, p < .001) (see Figure 2).

Conclusions

The present research paints a rather gloomy picture of date rape when alcohol is involved. Both men and women perceived an intoxicated victim to be at fault for her fate, while perceiving her intoxicated attacker as not being at fault. These results seem to corroborate previous findings that intoxication is seen as an excuse for what would normally be completely indefensible behavior and that rape myths enjoy a fairly widespread acceptance within college populations.