The Influence of Perpetrator and Victim Intoxication on Perceivers’
Ratings of a Sexual Perpetrator’s own Awareness of Wrongdoing for his
Sexually Aggressive Behaviour

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The Influence of Perpetrator and Victim Intoxication on Perceivers’ Ratings of a Sexual Perpetrator’s own Awareness of Wrongdoing for his Sexually Aggressive Behaviour

Rape-perception studies have examined the influence of alcohol intoxication on perpetrator blame attributions: However, no studies have examined how intoxication affects perceptions of a sexual perpetrator’s awareness of the wrongfulness of his behaviour despite its relevance to the conceptualisation of responsibility and blame. This experiment investigated the impact of perpetrator and victim intoxication on perceptions of a perpetrator’s own awareness of wrongdoing for acquaintance rape. Undergraduate students (N = 314) read one of four rape-scenarios in which intoxication was manipulated and rated the perpetrator’s awareness of the consequences and wrongfulness of his sexual aggression. Findings supported the hypothesis that participants would assign less awareness of wrongdoing to an intoxicated, compared to sober, perpetrator. Further, males ascribed more awareness of wrongdoing to the perpetrator of an intoxicated, compared to sober, victim. Findings indicate that intoxicated sexual perpetrators are seen as not fully aware of the nature and consequences of their crime.

Keywords: acquaintance rape; alcohol; sexual perpetrator; awareness of wrongdoing; perceptions; university students

Introduction

Extensive literature reports a frequent co-occurrence of alcohol consumption and rape (e.g., Lawyer, Resnick, Bakanic, Burkett, & Kilpatrick, 2010; Ullman, Karabatsos, & Koss, 1999), signalling the importance to consider the impact of perpetrator and victim intoxication in sexual violence research. Alcohol’s role in sexual violence can be explained by its association with multiple risk factors for sexual aggression and victimisation (Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAuslan, 2001). These risk factors include, for example, time
spent in high-risk environments (e.g., bars; Parks & Miller, 1997), the frequency of men’s misperceptions of women’s friendliness as signs of sexual intent (Abbey, McAuslan, & Ross, 1998), and past victimisation (Gidycz et al., 2007). At a proximal level, alcohol intoxication intensifies risk through pharmacological and expectancy effects which may be explained, in part, by intoxicated men’s stronger sexual entitlement cognitions (Davis et al., 2012) and greater acceptance of coercive strategies to obtain sex (Gross, Bennett, Sloan, Marx, & Juergens, 2001), as well as intoxicated women’s impaired ability to appraise risks (Nurius, 2000).

Understanding social perceptions of sexual violence is imperative given that public attitudes underpin biased individual and systematic responses to sexual perpetrators and their victims (Temkin & Krahé, 2008; Ward, 1995). Although extensive rape-perception research has been undertaken in the previous decades, there is a call for up-to-date accounts of these perceptions (Grubb & Turner, 2012) to reflect concurrent changes in attitudes to sexual violence. In Australia, decades of social and legal reforms have paved the way for a positive shift in these attitudes (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2010). Nonetheless, problematic myths about rape are pervasive and, thus, justifications for sexual violence remain ingrained in the cultural understanding of rape (e.g., O’Byrne, Hansen, & Rapley, 2008; Ryan, 2011). Also, the centrality of alcohol in people’s social lives (Grace, Moore, & Northcote, 2009; Pennay, Lubman, & Maclean, 2011) warrants further research to advance the understanding of alcohol’s role in perceptions of behaviours that continue to be common in drinking contexts, such as sexual aggression.

Under the rape-perception paradigm, a number of experimental studies have examined how sexual aggressors’ and rape victims’ alcohol consumption impact on evaluations of their character and behaviour (e.g., Cameron & Stritzke, 2003; Hammock & Richardson, 1997; Norris & Cubbins, 1992; Richardson & Campbell, 1982; Sims, Noel, & Maisto, 2007;
Stormo, Lang, & Stritzke, 1997). It has been argued that observers rely on different attributional principles when evaluating perpetrators and victims of rape; for example, Anderson and Bissell (2011) suggested that, while victim blaming may reflect an attitudinal construct, perpetrator blaming may be contingent on situational characteristics. Testing a model of responsibility and blame that postulates sub-dimensions of accountability, choice, and intent for both concepts and liability as unique for blame, Cameron and Stritzke (2003) found that these dimensions better explained attributions for intoxicated sexual victimisation compared to perpetration, leaving a substantial amount of variance in perpetrator attributions unaccounted for. The authors suggested that other, at present unexplored factors, such as perceptions of the perpetrator’s own awareness of wrongdoing, may be important when evaluating intoxicated sexual perpetrators. Rape-perception literature focusing on perpetrator attributions is relatively scarce, and, to the authors’ best knowledge, no studies have examined the influence of alcohol intoxication at the time of the assault on people’s perceptions of the sexual perpetrator’s own cognitive state.

Beliefs about how alcohol affects cognitions, emotions, and behaviours (i.e., alcohol expectancies; Goldman, Del Boca, & Darkes, 1999) represent a mechanism through which people may make inferences based solely on perpetrators’ and victims’ alcohol consumption. People, generally, expect alcohol to make them and others more aggressive, sexually responsive, cognitively impaired, and sexually vulnerable (Abbey, McAuslan, Ross, & Zawacki, 1999; Fromme & Wendel, 1995; Nicolai, Demmel, & Moshagen, 2010; Young & Oei, 1996). These expectancies signal that observers may link sexually aggressive behaviour and victimisation to alcohol’s pharmacology.

Importantly, the expectation that alcohol impairs cognition may, to some degree, elucidate the finding that intoxicated sexual aggression is perceived as less intended (Cameron & Stritzke, 2003). Such perceptions may carry the implication that rape-
perpetration under the influence of alcohol is seen as an impulsive act in stark contrast to the stereotypical, planned rape committed by an aggressive, mentally disturbed individual (Lev-Wiesel, 2004). Assaults that share fewer characteristics with these stereotypical rapes are consistently evaluated as less serious and more justified via higher perceived victim-precipitation and blame and more lenient perpetrator attributions (e.g., Frese, Moya, & Megias, 2004; Hogue & Peebles, 1997; Krahé, Temkin, & Bieneck, 2007). It is possible that assumptions of a perpetrator’s impaired cognition may be associated with greater leniency in evaluations of his aggressive behaviour since he is seen as different from the “real rapist”.

The presumed link between perceptions of a sexual perpetrator’s cognitive state and justifications for his behaviour may, also, be explained by the conceptual underpinnings of responsibility and blame. These constructs rest on the theoretical assumption of an act being purposeful in nature and committed by an individual who possesses an awareness of the wrongfulness and potential consequences of his actions (Calhoun & Townsley, 1991; Shaver, 1985). Moreover, according to Australian law, criminal responsibility presumes some level of malice aforethought, delineated by the mens rea element of a crime. If the defence can argue successfully that the accused held an honest and reasonable but mistaken belief that the victim was consenting to sexual activity the accused will, consequently, be exonerated from criminal responsibility (for example, see Crowe, 2011)

A body of research has examined the effect of alcohol-involvement on attributions for violent behaviour and substantiates the assertion that alcohol intoxication serves to exonerate a perpetrator’s responsibility, which is demonstrated both by perpetrators’ own explanations as well as observers’ attributions for intoxicated sexual violence (Grubb & Turner 2012). One way of which this exoneration is evident is through the normalisation of violent behaviour under the influence of alcohol (Finch & Munro, 2007; Tryggvesson, 2004). This normalisation, arguably, functions to minimise the perpetrator’s active agency given that
drunken behaviour is constructed as a reflection of temporary impairment rather than some form of underlying motivational, or other personal, factor. Although people generally expect behavioural and cognitive impairment to occur as a result of alcohol consumption (e.g., Fromme, Stroot, & Kaplan, 1993), to the authors’ best knowledge, no studies have investigated how alcohol-involvement affects perceptions of a person’s specific cognitive states, such as his awareness of wrongdoing, in the context of a sex crime. Given that this awareness is fundamental to criminal responsibility in Australian law, an examination of alcohol’s impact on perceptions of awareness of wrongdoing for criminal behaviour is warranted.

Notwithstanding these perceptions, based on current understanding of the antecedents of sexual aggression, alcohol intoxication is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of rape-perpetration. Sexual aggressors share distinctive attitudinal and experiential attributes (Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001) and studies examining alcohol’s distal and proximal role in male sexual aggression are consistent with the assumption that alcohol is more likely to determine when rather than why men engage in these behaviours (Abbey, 2011). The view that intoxicated sexual aggression is committed in the context of a situationally lessened ability to differentiate between right and wrong may, then, serve to obscure sexual perpetrators’ accountability for a violent crime and provide aggressors with socially accepted excuses ex post facto. Many sexually coercive men, in fact, articulate an intentional use of alcohol as a strategy to commit sexual assault (Cleveland, Koss, & Lyons, 1999) or to justify sexually aggressive behaviour (Abbey, McAuslan, et al., 2001).

The tendency for perceivers to excuse intoxicated sexual perpetrators, however, has not been observed consistently in rape-perception research. The double standard that is often discussed in this literature (i.e., an intoxicated perpetrator is seen as less responsible whereas an intoxicated victim is seen as more responsible for rape; Richardson & Campbell, 1982) is
somewhat complicated by the finding that attributions for sexual aggression may, partially, be dependent on victim intoxication (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Perpetrators are sometimes judged more harshly when a victim is portrayed as intoxicated (Hammock & Richardson, 1997; Stormo et al., 1997) which may be due to the social disapproval of a man intentionally taking advantage of a woman who is more inebriated than him (Norris & Cubbins, 1992; Stormo et al., 1997). Accordingly, it seems plausible that perceivers would infer greater awareness of wrongdoing to a sober perpetrator who assaults an intoxicated, compared to a sober, victim.

To the authors’ best knowledge, no rape-perception studies have examined how alcohol-involvement affects observers’ evaluations of a perpetrator’s cognitive state. To address this gap, the current study aims to investigate whether perpetrator and victim intoxication affect perceptions of a perpetrator’s own awareness of wrongdoing for an acquaintance rape. First, it is hypothesised that, compared to a sober perpetrator, an intoxicated perpetrator will be attributed less awareness of wrongdoing for his sexually aggressive behaviour. Second, an interaction effect between perpetrator and victim intoxication is expected; specifically, it is hypothesised that perceivers will attribute more awareness of wrongdoing to a sober perpetrator when he assaults an intoxicated compared to sober victim. However, when the perpetrator is intoxicated, perceivers are not expected to take victim intoxication into account but, instead, assign equally (lowered) ratings of awareness of wrongdoing.

Given that prior research has demonstrated individual differences in perceptions of sexual violence, the consideration of such influences is imperative. Current literature reveals robust findings regarding the impact of rape myth acceptance (e.g., Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999) on perceptions of sexual violence. Rape myths have been defined as “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 134). The endorsement of these myths has been linked consistently with greater
acceptance of sexual violence (e.g., Grubb & Turner, 2012; Krahé, Temkin, Bieneck, & Berger, 2008); therefore, rape myth acceptance will be statistically controlled for in this study.

Another consistent finding relates to participant sex differences. Men are often reported to make harsher judgements of rape victims (e.g., Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Xenos & Smith, 2001), more lenient attributions for sexual aggression (e.g., Mitchell, Angelone, Kohlberger, & Hirschman, 2009) and to endorse rape-accepting attitudes to a greater extent compared to women (e.g., Anderson, Cooper, & Okamura, 1997; Harrison, Howerton, Secarea, & Nguyen, 2008). Although not a primary focus of this study, the analysis allowed for comparisons between men and women based on the body of research revealing sex differences in rape perceptions.

**Method**

**Participants**

Based on a-priori power calculations, the target sample size for the study was 256 people (for a medium effect size and power = .80) with an equal number of males and females. Undergraduate students (N = 314) from a large Australian university participated in the experiment. Difficulties with recruiting males resulted in an unequal ratio of men and women with the sample comprising 98 males and 214 females (two cases unspecified). Participants (M\_age = 21.9 years; SD = 7.18; range = 17 to 68 years) were recruited across several disciplinary areas (e.g., health, business, engineering) and 92% were enrolled in full-time study. Data on ethnicity and socio-economic status were not collected. However, statistics on the diversity of commencing students in year of data collection indicated that 1 in 5 students were international students and just over 1% of students were of Indigenous Australian backgrounds. About 15% of commencing students were of low socio-economic status (Queensland University of Technology, 2010).
Design and procedure

A 2 (Perpetrator Intoxication: sober, intoxicated) X 2 (Victim Intoxication: sober, intoxicated) between-groups design was implemented with participants’ ratings of the perpetrator’s awareness of his own wrongdoing as the outcome variable. Participants were recruited via opportunity sampling through in-class announcements to large groups of students and the female researcher presented the experiment as a study of perceptions of interpersonal behaviour (based on Stormo et al., 1997). Students were informed that participation would involve reading an excerpt of a court transcript and, as such, participants were led to believe that the scenario depicted a real incident. Further instructions were provided in writing with the questionnaire materials. Participants completed the paper-based questionnaire during class time in large mixed-sex groups. To ensure confidentiality and to avoid the potential for defensiveness and social desirability issues, participants sealed their completed questionnaires in envelopes before their submission. Eligible students were offered course credit for their participation; other students were provided with light refreshments (e.g., health bar) as a small thank-you gift.

Due to the potentially distressing nature of the written scenario, to provide participants with an opportunity to reconsider their participation after having read this scenario, the questionnaire was divided into two separate parts. Part 1 contained the scenario description only; after completing this part of the questionnaire, participants were reminded about their right to withdraw. Part 2 contained the outcome measure; manipulation and validity checks; the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, Short Form (Payne et al., 1999); and demographic information. The order of the measures was the same for all participants. Manipulation and validity checks and the rape myth acceptance measure proceeded ratings of the perpetrator’s awareness of wrongdoing to avoid priming participants with concepts relating to the experimental manipulation and “rape” before completing the dependent measure. When all
measures were completed, participants were provided with a debriefing letter explaining the true purpose of the experiment and thanked for taking part in the study.

**Materials**

**Scenario**

The acquaintance rape scenario was adapted from Abrams, Viki, Masser, and Bohner (2003) and described “Jason” and “Kathy” meeting at a party held by a mutual friend. At the end of the party, Kathy invites Jason back to her unit², where she begins kissing and caressing Jason. Jason tries to take her clothes off to have sex with her, but when Kathy tries to get away and asks him to stop, Jason uses force to hold her down and penetrate her. Information relating to the perpetrator’s and victim’s alcohol consumption was provided only in a witness statement section that followed the scenario.

**Experimental manipulations**

The experimental manipulations resulted in four different versions of the scenario. Intoxication was manipulated through information of witness testimonies in the section that followed the rape-description. The section outlined that friends who attended the party had reported to the police that Jason and/or Kathy had not drunk any alcohol (sober condition) or had drunk excessive amounts of alcohol (intoxication condition) during the course of the night. The witness statements did not specify the number of drinks that Jason and Kathy had consumed, but, if alcohol consumption was mentioned, it was indicated that the consumer seemed “really drunk”. In the intoxication conditions, behavioural cues served also to indicate high levels of intoxication (i.e., “Jason and Kathy slurred their words in conversation”). The witness statements did not mention whether the consumption of alcohol was based on the encouragement of others.

**Measures**

**Awareness of wrongdoing**
Three items assessed perceived awareness of wrongdoing: “How much was Jason aware of the potential negative consequences of his actions?”; “How much was Jason able to perceive that his actions could be morally wrong?”; and “How much was Jason capable of understanding right from wrong in this situation?”. Responses were indicated using a 9-point Likert scale (0 = not at all to 8 = entirely). A mean score was calculated for participants who had responded to at least two of the three items and Cronbach’s alpha revealed that the measure was reliable (α = .82).

*Manipulation checks and validity assessment*

Following the completion of the dependent measure, participants were assessed on their level of awareness of the manipulations of perpetrator and victim intoxication. These manipulations were checked by asking participants to rate Jason’s and Kathy’s level of intoxication on a 9-point Likert scale (0 = completely sober to 8 = extremely intoxicated). To assess the ecological validity of the scenario, participants indicated their agreement with the incident constituting “rape” (1 = I strongly believe that it did not constitute a rape to 7 = I strongly believe that it did constitute a rape). Finally, to assess the perceived realism of the scenario participants rated the likelihood that the event could have occurred as described, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = very much).

*Rape myth acceptance*

The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, Short Form (Payne et al., 1999) was used to control for participants’ endorsement of rape myths. The scale consists of 20 items (e.g., “Many women secretly desire to be raped”) including three negatively worded filler items to control for response sets. Participants rated their agreement with statements using a 7-point Likert-scale (1 = not at all agree to 7 = very much agree). Payne et al. reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .87 for the short form of the scale and these data indicated identical internal consistency.
Results

Participants rated the sexual assault scenario as realistic ($M = 4.39$, $SD = .83$, range $= 1-5$) and endorsed strongly the belief that the incident constituted rape ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 1.34$, range $= 1-7$) indicating that the deception was successful and that the portrayed assault was labelled as intended. Manipulation checks revealed that some participants had misunderstood the alcohol intoxication manipulation. Participants who rated the perpetrator’s and victim’s intoxication incorrectly (below the midpoint when portrayed as intoxicated and above the midpoint when portrayed as sober) were removed from the data set resulting in a final sample of 282 participants. Rape myth acceptance (RMA) was significantly correlated with perceived awareness of wrongdoing for females ($r = -.29, p < .001$) but not for males ($r = -.21, p = .052$) and, therefore, included as a statistical control variable in the main analysis for females only. Preliminary descriptive analyses revealed a slight negative skew for awareness of wrongdoing and positive skew for rape myth acceptance. Seven univariate outliers were identified.

A 2 (Perpetrator Intoxication: sober, intoxicated) X 2 (Victim Intoxication: sober, intoxicated) between-groups ANOVA (males) and ANCOVA (females) were conducted with awareness of wrongdoing entered as the dependent variable. These analyses were run separately by participant sex given the uneven number of males and females in the sample. RMA was entered as a covariate in the analysis for female participants. Due to the non-normal distribution of awareness of wrongdoing and RMA scores, main analyses were run with both untransformed and transformed scores which made no difference to the results. The results remained the same also when re-running the analyses without univariate outliers. Therefore, scores were kept in untransformed form and outliers were kept in the data set.

Means and standard deviations for males’ and females’ ratings of the perpetrator’s awareness of wrongdoing as a function of the perpetrator’s and victim’s intoxication and cell sizes are
presented in Table 1. As seen in Table 1, males, compared to females, had significantly lower ratings of the perpetrator’s awareness of wrongdoing.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

**Main analysis, male participants**

Levine’s test revealed that the homogeneity of variance assumption was met, $F(3, 85) = 2.53$, $p = .06$. Consistent with the first hypothesis, a main effect emerged for perpetrator intoxication, $F(1, 85) = 14.33$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$, but, unexpectedly, also for victim intoxication, $F(1, 85) = 4.67$, $p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. Inspection of the means revealed that male participants perceived the perpetrator as less aware of the wrongfulness of his actions when he was portrayed as intoxicated ($M = 4.62$, 95% CI [4.10, 5.13]) compared to sober ($M = 6.04$, 95% CI [5.50, 6.58]). In contrast, male participants perceived the perpetrator as more aware of the wrongfulness of his actions when the victim was portrayed as intoxicated ($M = 5.74$, 95% CI [5.23, 6.24]) compared to sober ($M = 4.92$, 95% CI [4.37, 5.48]). Contrary to the second hypothesis, no interactive effect was found, $F(1, 85) = .44$, $p = .51$, partial $\eta^2 = .005$.

**Main analysis, female participants**

Levine’s test revealed that the homogeneity of variance assumption was met, $F(3, 186) = 1.40$, $p = .25$. RMA was a significant covariate in the analysis, $F(1, 185) = 21.14$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$. The inverse relationship indicated that women’s higher RMA was associated with lower ratings of awareness of wrongdoing. Supporting the first hypothesis, a significant main effect was revealed for perpetrator intoxication, $F(1, 185) = 30.37$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$, but not for victim intoxication, $F(1, 185) = .45$, $p = .50$, partial $\eta^2 = .005$. Inspection of the means indicated that female participants attributed less awareness of wrongdoing to the intoxicated ($M = 5.23$, 95% CI [4.92, 5.55]), compared to the sober ($M = 6.49$, 95% CI [6.17,
Contrary to the second hypothesis, no interactive effect was found, $F(1, 185) = 1, p = .32$, partial $\eta^2 = .005$.

**Discussion**

This study examined the impact of perpetrator and victim intoxication on perceiver attributions of a perpetrator’s own awareness of wrongdoing for his sexual aggression. Given the established tendency to exonerate intoxicated aggressors from responsibility and general expectancies regarding alcohol’s effect on cognition, it was hypothesised that a perpetrator’s alcohol intoxication would serve to lessen perceived awareness of wrongdoing. Further, based on the social disapproval of a man taking advantage of a woman in a vulnerable state, it was hypothesised that participants would assign more awareness of wrongdoing to the sober perpetrator when he was assaulting an intoxicated, compared to a sober, victim. The results supported the former, but not the latter, hypothesis.

In this study, both men and women inferred diminished awareness of wrongdoing to an intoxicated sexual perpetrator. This finding, some might argue, is unsurprising given the robust support for people’s expectancy beliefs relating to alcohol’s impairing effects on cognition (e.g., Adams & McNeil, 1991; Fromme et al., 1993; Nicolai et al., 2010). The significance and implications of this observation, however, become evident when considering the nature of the rape scenario presented to participants. The portrayed “real-life” assault included descriptions of verbal rejection and the use of explicit force, implying that participants expected alcohol’s effect to be strong enough to blur the boundary between right and wrong in the context of an unambiguous sex crime. This assertion is substantiated by the fact that participants reported strong agreement that the scenario constituted rape. Contrary to the assumption of compromised awareness of wrongdoing, however, coercive men may use alcohol intentionally as a strategy to commit sexual assault (Cleveland et al., 1999) or to justify sexually aggressive behaviour (Abbey, McAuslan et al., 2001).
This study’s results may shed light on prior findings that observers tend to excuse intoxicated sexual aggression. For example, Cameron and Stritzke (2003) found that an intoxicated sexual perpetrator was rated as less accountable and liable compared to his sober counterpart and that he had less intention to commit the rape when he was intoxicated. Similarly, Shively (2001) found that intoxicated, compared to sober, perpetrators were perceived as significantly less in control of their sexual impulses. Collectively, these findings suggest that alcohol-involved rape may be constructed as an unintentional act stemming from temporary impairment and lack of self-control which contrasts with the stereotypical planned, violent stranger attack (Anderson, 2007; Krahé, Bieneck, & Scheinberger-Olwig, 2007; Lev-Wiesel, 2004). The presumed diminished level of aforethought may, then, lead to more lenient responsibility and blame attributions and less punitive judgements in legal settings (Hogue & Peebles, 1997).

Prior rape-perception research has revealed a tendency for perceivers to adhere to a double-standard in that intoxicated perpetrators are seen as less blameworthy while intoxicated victims are rated as more responsible compared to their sober counterparts (e.g., Richardson & Campbell, 1982). However, evaluations of sexual perpetrators have been less consistent and some researchers have argued that this discrepancy is due to their partial reliance on victim behaviour or characteristics (e.g., Stormo et al., 1997). In this study, male participants rated the perpetrator, independent of his intoxication, as more aware of the consequences and wrongfulness of his actions when the victim was intoxicated compared to sober. This effect was expected only when the perpetrator was portrayed as sober given the presumed social disapproval of a man taking advantage of a woman that is more inebriated than him.

It is possible that males’ ratings reflect their belief that, independent of the perpetrator’s cognitive impairment, coercing an intoxicated and, thus, vulnerable woman into sex is a
manipulative act although it may be opportunistic. Given the scenario information, an alternate explanation for the finding is that male participants assumed that a sober woman, thus fully aware of her own actions, who brings a man back to her unit after a party intends for a sexual encounter to take place. Consequently, males may have inferred these assumptions on part of the perpetrator and, therefore, attenuated his awareness of wrongdoing regardless of his intoxication. Finally, consistent with previous literature which has demonstrated that men are more lenient in their attributions for sexual aggression (e.g., Anderson et al., 1997), it is noteworthy that male participants in this study, overall, had lower ratings of perceived awareness of wrongdoing compared to females. This finding is consistent with defensive attribution (Shaver, 1970) which posits that, as similarity between actor and observer increases, observers are more lenient in their attributions for an actor’s negative behaviour to protect themselves from blame should the same situation occur to them. Defensive attribution is reliant also on the observer’s perceived likelihood of experiencing a similar situation in the future which, in this context, is corroborated by men’s reported fear of “unintentional rape” while intoxicated (Holtz & DiLalla, 2007).

**Implications and limitations**

The findings of this research have implications in the social and legal treatment of sexual perpetrators. The tendency for perceivers to infer an impaired awareness of wrongdoing to the perpetrator of rape based solely on alcohol intoxication suggests that the claim of not understanding a woman’s sexual refusal may be a successful excuse for sexually aggressive behaviour. In a legal context, this tendency may also equate to a bias to assume a defendant’s mistaken belief in consent in cases involving a perpetrator’s consumption of alcohol. Male jurors’ evaluations of the defendant may be affected also in cases where the complainant has been drinking. Although some Australian jurisdictions explicitly invalidate the defence of mistaken belief when it is based on intoxication at the time of the sexual offence (Heath,
2005), jurors, like others, are vulnerable to biased information processing (Taylor, 2007; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). Legal professionals, similarly, demonstrate a tendency to rely on extra-legal factors in their decision-making, which may, in part, explain the high attrition and low conviction rate for sexual assault cases (Krahé et al., 2008; Temkin & Krahé, 2008).

In addition to implications of a legal nature, observers’ tendency to infer a compromised awareness of wrongdoing to intoxicated sexual perpetrators may mean that rape victims’ support providers (e.g., friends), who are often influential in victims’ decision to report their assault to police (e.g., Patterson & Campbell, 2010), could infer that a perpetrator was not aware that his actions equated to rape due to his intoxication. Support providers’ attributions for an assault will inherently influence their reactions to victim disclosure. Responses that imply that a perpetrator did not understand a victim’s non-consent may serve to trivialise a victim’s experience such that the perpetrator’s assumed naivety to his crime masks his agency and, consequently, increases a victim’s responsibility for not communicating more clearly or resisting more forcefully. The belief that “he didn’t mean to” is part of a rape mythology which, ultimately, serves to justify men’s sexual violence against women (Payne et al., 1999).

The strengths of this study include the use of deception to increase the realism of the scenario, broad recruitment within the university from various disciplinary areas, and the use of a new dependent measure relevant to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of responsibility and blame in future rape-perception research. Despite these strengths, a number of limitations are recognised in the current study. It is acknowledged that order effects may have compromised the reliability of the data. However, placing the awareness of wrongdoing measure (dependent variable) prior to the manipulation and validation checks and the rape myth acceptance scale served to avoid raising suspicion about the experimental manipulation and priming participants with the term “rape”.
Due to difficulties in recruiting males, it is possible that the main analysis for male participants was underpowered. The experimental paradigm is also likely to restrict contextual validity. The use of written vignettes and questionnaire prompts may not adequately capture the natural attribution process when perceivers are confronted with disclosures or other accounts of rape. The vignette methodology is widely used in rape attribution studies but, naturally, oversimplifies the complexity of real-life situations. However, it should be noted that participants rated the scenario as realistic, indicating that the deception was successful.

Given the gendered nature of sexual violence, it is acknowledged that completing the survey in mixed-sex groups in the presence of a female researcher may have influenced participants’ responses, although their anonymity was ensured. Finally, the generalisation of findings is compromised due to the restricted recruitment of university students. However, the sampling of university students to examine perceptions of alcohol-involved rape is, arguably, appropriate, given the observed patterns of alcohol use and unwanted sexual experiences in this population. University students are particularly likely to drink at hazardous levels, placing young men and women in this environment at high risk for experiencing acute alcohol-related harms, such as injury and sexual victimisation (e.g., injury; Kypri et al., 2009; Rickwood, George, Parker, & Mikhailovich, 2011). Moreover, given that sexually victimised women are most likely to disclose their assault experience to peers (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012), this population represents potential support providers for victims. Thus, alcohol-involved sexual violence may be a particularly relatable experience for young men and women in the university population. It should be noted also that efforts were made to recruit participants from various cohorts within the university to attain a more diverse sample. Nonetheless, there is a need to broaden rape-perception research to include more representative samples.
**Future directions**

Perceptions of alcohol-involved sexual assault may be understood better through the systematic investigation of the role of outcome-expectancy beliefs relating to alcohol use and intoxication (Goldman et al., 1999). People generally expect alcohol to make them and others more aggressive, sexually responsive, and cognitively impaired (e.g., Brown, Goldman, Inn, & Anderson, 1980; Fromme et al., 1993; Young & Oei, 1996). A body of clinical and social psychological research has revealed further that these beliefs have a significant impact on the self-fulfilment of expectancy-consistent cognitions, emotions, and behaviours after drinking alcohol (e.g., Abbey, Buck, Zawacki, & Saenz, 2003; Davis, 2010; George, Stoner, Norris, Lopez, & Lehman, 2000). It seems plausible that individuals’ stronger endorsement of the belief that alcohol causes aggression, sexual enhancement, and cognitive impairment would lead to greater leniency in perceptions of an intoxicated perpetrator’s cognitive state when committing rape. As such, the inclusion of an alcohol expectancy measure (for example, The Drinking Expectancy Questionnaire; Young & Oei, 1996) is proposed for future research.

Although no study has assessed directly the impact of perceivers’ alcohol expectancies on rape blame attributions, there is evidence that context-specific expectancies may be relevant to the perception of intoxicated sexual aggression. For example, Norris, Davis, George, Martell, and Heiman (2002) showed that men who endorsed sex-related alcohol expectancies more strongly perceived a lower level of force and indicated higher ratings of a female’s enjoyment in an eroticised rape depiction that involved alcohol. A similar study could establish whether individuals who endorse more strongly the expectancy that alcohol causes cognitive impairment are more likely to attenuate a sexual perpetrator’s naivety to his crime.

Given the finding that men rated the perpetrator’s awareness of wrongdoing as higher when assaulting an intoxicated, compared to sober, victim, there is a need to construct proper hypothesis testing that clarifies the reasons for this tendency. Although we have offered
possible explanations for this finding, these are, at this stage, only stipulations until their validity has been examined further. For example, to test the assumption that men inferred sexual intention on the part of the sober but not the intoxicated victim, a future study could manipulate a victim’s stated intentions in the scenario information.

To overcome the limitations of this study and extend generalisability, it is proposed also that future research use other samples, settings, and procedures. Given the mens rea requirement of criminal responsibility and, therefore, the relevance of the current study’s findings in the Australian legal context, the sampling of professionals within the criminal justice system, such as lawyers, judges, and police officers, is suggested for future research. It is important also to replicate this research experimentally in a legal setting to examine whether alcohol’s attenuating effect on perceptions of awareness of wrongdoing influence juror decision-making or the acceptance of the mistaken belief defence. This replication could be conducted using a mock-jury method (for example, see Finch & Munro, 2007) where participants serve as jurors in re-constructed trials, and verdicts and/or deliberations are analysed. Through providing rich and realistic information upon which participants base their evaluations, this method represents an important future direction to test the external validity of this study’s results. In addition, such a replication could determine whether perceived awareness of wrongdoing accounts for ratings of criminal responsibility or the rendering of verdicts. Thus, the conceptual link between awareness of wrongdoing and responsibility from an observer’s perspective needs to be demonstrated empirically.

Conceptual issues relating to responsibility and blame for sexual aggression, more generally, warrant further empirical tests of its dimensional underpinnings. Future studies should therefore examine a range of underlying constructs concurrently to determine whether awareness of wrongdoing can add to the prediction of direct measures of responsibility and blame (for example, see Cameron & Stritzke, 2003). Such investigations could advance the
theoretical underpinning of rape attribution research and, consequently, increase construct validity. Recognising that observers may engage in different attributional processes in their evaluations of sexual perpetrators compared to victims (e.g., Anderson & Bissell, 2011; Cameron & Stritzke, 2003) is important also, given that awareness of wrongdoing may be relevant only to perceptions of perpetrators.

The use of other procedures or methodologies, similarly, represents an important extension to this study. Other modes of stimulus presentation, such as video-recorded scenarios or news reports, could assess rape-perceptions beyond the “gold-standard” written vignette-based study. Finally, to capture more rich accounts and to avoid questionnaire prompting, a methodology which analyses content or discourse of qualitative data is needed to complement quantitative these findings and, ultimately, bridge overarching perspectives on rape-perceptions (Ward, 1995). The use of a qualitative methodology could clarify whether discounting of an intoxicated perpetrator’s awareness of wrongdoing is a naturally occurring attribution process rather than a response to researchers’ assumptions that observers engage in these attributions. Unlike participants in the current study, jurors, for example, are not explicitly asked about their perceptions of a defendant’s awareness of wrongdoing; however, a finding that observers spontaneously (i.e., without prompting) assume diminished awareness in response to mere information about a defendant’s alcohol consumption may raise more serious concern about biased decision-making in rape trials that involves intoxicants.

**Conclusion**

This research examined the effect of perpetrator and victim alcohol intoxication on perceptions of a perpetrator’s awareness of wrongdoing for committing rape. The results indicated that when a sexual offender is intoxicated, perceivers infer less awareness of wrongdoing for sexually violent behaviour, suggesting that alcohol may function to discount
agency and perhaps, more alarmingly, a perpetrator’s criminal responsibility. This observation has the potential to advance the conceptual definition of responsibility and blame in rape-perception research. More specifically, researchers should consider incorporating items that assess awareness of wrongdoing in their operationalisation of responsibility and blame for sexual aggression. This finding also has important implications in the Australian criminal justice context as it applies to the mistaken belief defence. Ultimately, the continued efforts to understand biased attributions serve the purpose of ensuring fair processing of rape cases throughout the criminal justice process, as well as counteracting aggressors’ excuses for their sexually violent behaviour.
References


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Drinking and alcohol-related harm among New Zealand university students: Findings


Notes

1. Several Western countries (e.g., Canada, New Zealand, USA) have adopted legislation whereby an honest and/or reasonable mistaken belief in consent is an acceptable defence (see, for example, Benedet, 2010; Charlow, 2002; Heath, 2005). It is important to note, however, that the application of this defence varies greatly between countries (and states) in terms of, for example, the threshold of “reasonableness” as well as the burden of proof. In the UK, the abolishment of the “Morgan rule” – which held that the mistaken belief needed to be honest but not necessarily reasonable - meant that the defendant now may have the responsibility to demonstrate that (s)he has taken reasonable steps to ensure the consent of the complainant (see Elvin, 2008).

2. To suit the Australian context, the word “apartment” used in the original scenario (Abrams et al., 2003) was replaced with “unit”. It should be noted also that the word “rape” was not included in the scenario information or the dependent measure in the present study to avoid any bias associated with this label.
Table 1. Means (and standard deviations) for ratings of the perpetrator’s awareness of wrongdoing and cell size as a function of participant sex and perpetrator and victim intoxication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M = 5.33$ (SD = 1.93)$^1$</td>
<td>$M = 5.86$ (SD = 1.75)$^1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$ (SD) $n$</td>
<td>$M$ (SD) $n$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perpetrator intoxicated</td>
<td>Perpetrator sober</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intoxicated</td>
<td>4.90 (1.96) 26</td>
<td>6.57 (1.30) 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sober</td>
<td>4.33 (1.74) 21</td>
<td>5.51 (1.99) 19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ratings are on a 9-point scale (0-8). $^1$The mean difference in ratings between male and female participants is significant, $t(277) = -2.30$, $p = .02$. 
