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Published

2000

Journal Title

Law and Human Behavior

DOI

[10.1023/A:1005519028528](https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005519028528)

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Police Responses to Sexual Assault Complaints:
The Role of Perpetrator/Complainant Intoxication

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Authors' Note. The research reported herein was supported by a research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to the first author. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Regina Schuller, Department of Psychology, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario, M3J 1P3.

Abstract

This study examined the impact of victim and perpetrator alcohol consumption on police officers' evaluations of an alleged sexual assault and their reported likelihood of charging the perpetrator. Two hundred and twelve operational police officers were presented with a vignette depicting an acquaintance rape in which the beverage consumption (beer, cola) of both the victim and perpetrator was systematically varied. Results indicated that the intoxication level of the complainant portrayed in the vignette, as well as the gender of the officer, influenced officers' evaluations of the alleged sexual assault. The more intoxicated the complainant was perceived to be, the more negatively she was viewed. Female police officers evaluated the victim more favorably than male officers. The only factors related to the officers' likelihood of charging the perpetrator, however, involved their assessment of the complainant's credibility and their perception of the likelihood that the perpetrator would be found guilty in a court of law.

Police Responses to Sexual Assault Complaints:
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A critical stage in the prosecution of sexual assault occurs when the assault is first reported to the police. The importance of this juncture in the prosecution of sexual assault was recently demonstrated in a study conducted by Frazier and Haney (1996). By following the progression of 569 cases of sexual assault involving female victims that were reported to a Midwestern metropolitan U.S. police department (during a one year period), these researchers were able to examine systematically the degree of attrition that occurs in the prosecution of these cases. They found that most of the attrition occurred at the initial stage, with only 22% of the cases ending in a referral by the police to the prosecuting attorney. Given the key gatekeeping role played by the police in the progression of these cases through the legal system, an understanding of the factors that influence police decisions about whether or not to proceed with a case of sexual assault is crucial.

As such, the present research focuses on the potential influence of a particular situational factor on police decision making that occurs with some frequency in instances of sexual assault, that is, alcohol intoxication on the part of either the alleged assailant or complainant. The association between alcohol intoxication and sexual assault, particularly acquaintance or date rape, has been well documented in numerous studies (e.g., Frintner & Rubinson, 1993; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Wilsnack, 1984), with estimates of alcohol intoxication in instances of sexual assault ranging from one third to three quarters of all cases (see Testa & Parks, 1996). Although little research has addressed the role of this variable

on police judgements and responses, several lines of research suggest that this variable may indeed be of particular importance to the way in which police handle sexual assault cases. This research, as well as the research examining police decision making in cases of sexual assault, will be reviewed. A study that attempts to address this area of neglect will then be presented.

Gender Biased Beliefs About Alcohol Consumption, Sexuality, and Sexual Assault

Numerous researchers have outlined the various ways in which gender biased beliefs regarding dating, sexuality, and normative drinking practices interact to influence people's evaluations of a sexual encounter (e.g., see Abbey, Ross, McDuffie, & McAuslan, 1996; Leigh, 1995). In general, drinking is considered a traditionally "masculine" behavior (Landrine, Bardwell, & Dean, 1988) and heavy drinking by women is negatively viewed (Gomberg, 1982; Leigh, 1995). This "double standard" is intimately linked to the gender-specific expectancies individuals hold concerning the effects of alcohol intoxication, which, in North America, is frequently associated with sexuality (see Abbey et al., 1996). Along these lines, a number of scenario studies with lay populations have documented the way in which alcohol consumption on the part of the parties involved in an encounter colors people's evaluations and judgements of that encounter.

In a series of studies (George, Cue, Lopez, Cowne, & Norris, 1995; George, Gournic, & McAfee (Study 2, 1988)) research participants were presented with a vignette depicting a heterosexual dating couple in which the beverage consumption (alcoholic or nonalcoholic) of the woman portrayed in the scenario was varied (the man was always portrayed as drinking). When the woman was portrayed as drinking alcohol, she was viewed as more sexually responsive, easier to seduce, and more likely to engage in foreplay and intercourse, compared to her non-

drinking counterpart. In two similar vignette studies (Abbey & Harnish; 1995; Corcoran & Thomas, 1991), which additionally varied the beverage consumption of the male target portrayed in the vignette, it was found that respondents viewed the couple as most sexual and the possibility of sexual intercourse most likely when both parties had consumed alcohol. In light of these findings, Abbey and Harnish (1995) concluded that shared alcohol consumption serves as a cue that “may be misperceived as a sign of sexual intent” (p. 299). In a study conducted by Leigh, Aramburu, and Norris (1992), which utilized a vignette in which sex between the couple had occurred, the presence of alcohol interacted with gender, with male participants rating both targets as sexiest when both were consuming alcohol. Women, on the other hand, however, rendered their lowest ratings of sexuality in this condition.

Findings such as these would suggest that a woman’s claim of sexual assault may be less likely to be believed if she was drinking alcohol at the time of the alleged assault, especially if her male companion was also drinking at the time. A handful of studies have investigated this hypothesis, again by presenting participants with vignettes (in this case, depictions of rape) in which the beverage consumption (alcoholic vs. nonalcoholic) of the two targets portrayed is varied. Using this methodology, Hammock and Richardson (1997) found that victim intoxication was associated with negative evaluations of the victim and increased perceptions of her responsibility, particularly for female respondents. In a similar vein, Richardson and Campbell (1982) found that respondents, both men and women, assigned an intoxicated victim more responsibility for the rape and viewed her more negatively compared to her non-drinking counterpart. In contrast, respondents ascribed less relative blame to the perpetrator and more to the situation, if the assailant was intoxicated as opposed to sober.

Other studies, utilizing a similar methodology, have identified an interaction between victim and assailant drinking (Norris & Cubbins, 1992; Stormo, Lang, & Sritzke, 1997). For instance, Norris and Cubbins (1992) found that when both the man and woman were drinking, respondents were more likely to question the validity of the rape, view the victim negatively, and judge the assailant as more likeable. Stormo et al. (1997) found that when both the victim and assailant described in the scenario had experienced comparable levels of intoxication (either moderate or high compared to low or no alcohol intoxication conditions), the victim was viewed as more responsible and blameworthy, while the assailant was viewed as less responsible and blameworthy. The only exception to this pattern occurred in a condition in which the intoxicated woman had been raped by a man who was less intoxicated than her. In this instance, the assailant was viewed more harshly. Norris and Cubbins (1992) evidenced similar findings when the woman was intoxicated and the man was sober. The authors suggest that, under these circumstances, respondents viewed the situation as one in which the man was taking advantage of an intoxicated woman.

Following from this research, a recent study conducted by Schuller and Wall (1998) examined the role of defendant and complainant alcohol consumption within the context of a sexual assault trial. To this end, mock jurors were exposed to a trial summary in which either one, neither, or both parties were moderately intoxicated at the time of the alleged assault. The researchers found that when the complainant had consumed alcohol, compared to cola, she was viewed as less credible and the defendant was viewed as less likely to be guilty. Although the negative impact of the complainant's alcohol consumption on participants' evaluations of the woman's claim was entirely consistent with the research described above, the impact of the

defendant's alcohol consumption on participants' judgments of guilt was not. That is, when the defendant had consumed alcohol, as opposed to cola, he was perceived as less credible and more likely to be viewed as guilty. Thus, rather than operating as an exculpatory factor, the defendant's alcohol consumption was associated with increased perceptions of guilt. As well, in contrast to the notion that shared alcohol consumption serves as a cue for mutually intended sexual behaviour, the mock jurors were more likely to render a guilty verdict when both the defendant and complainant had consumed alcohol. Similar findings were demonstrated in a second study conducted by these same researchers (Wall & Schuller, in press).

Taken in their entirety, the results from the above studies, tend to suggest that alcohol intoxication on the part of the woman serves to increase her accountability for the event, whereas, with the exception of the findings in Schuller and Wall (1998), it serves to excuse the perpetrator's actions. Consistent with this interpretation, investigations examining people's perceptions of other types of violent encounters have similarly found that drunk, as opposed to sober, victims are blamed more for their victimization. For example, an investigation examining people's attributions of responsibility and blame for a violent interaction (wife assault) found that drunk victims were held more responsible and blameworthy in comparison to their sober counterparts. In two separate studies (Aramburu & Leigh, 1991, 1994) in which respondents were presented with vignettes depicting a violent interaction (e.g., the victim was struck), intoxicated victims (male or female) were blamed more, and held more responsible, than their sober counterparts. Also of note was the finding that, if the victim was drunk, the aggressor was viewed as less blameworthy and responsible and the aggression was viewed as more socially

acceptable. In short, aggression against an intoxicated individual appeared to be viewed as more acceptable than aggression against a sober individual (Aramburu & Leigh, 1991, 1994).

With respect to the impact of the aggressor's alcohol intoxication, however, the findings are somewhat mixed. Although, Richardson and Campbell (1980) found no impact for perpetrator intoxication on judgements, the Aramburu and Leigh studies (1991, 1994) found drunken perpetrators were judged more to blame than their sober counterparts. Wild, Graham, and Rehm (1998) manipulated alcohol use on the part of the perpetrator ("drunk" vs. "merely feeling the effects") across five vignettes depicting a range of aggressive behaviors (i.e., unwanted touching, date rape, assault and rape, vandalism and common assault). For three of the scenarios (unwanted touching, date rape, and assault and rape), the victims' intoxication was also manipulated. They found that respondents perceived the perpetrators' drinking as causally connected to the aggressive behavior. The causal role of the perpetrators' drinking, however, was judged to be less if the victim had been drinking. In only one of the situations depicted (i.e., unwanted touching) did the drinking status of the perpetrator affect the perceived blameworthiness of the perpetrator, with drunk perpetrators in this situation blamed more than relatively sober perpetrators. In two of the three scenarios that manipulated victim intoxication, the blameworthiness of the perpetrator was reduced if the victim was described as drunk.

In summary, researchers have consistently found that alcohol involvement in instances of interpersonal violence influences observers' judgments of the parties involved in the violent encounter. The pattern is quite clear for victim intoxication, with drinking on the part of the victim typically associated with harsher judgments of the victim. The findings are less clear,

however, with respect to assailant intoxication. In some cases, intoxication has operated as an excuse for the perpetrator's actions, while in others it has had no impact or has actually enhanced judgments of responsibility or guilt.

Police Decision Making in Sexual Assault Cases

To the extent that police officers are likely to hold the same societal stereotypes and attitudes held by members of the general population (Muzychka, 1991; **Anna not sure where this ref comes from? I changed the wording of the sentence—you had added it before--is what I am saying attributable to Muzychka? Can you fax me a copy of the paper?**), it is quite likely that alcohol intoxication, may indeed influence their treatment and handling of sexual assault cases. Few investigations, however, have assessed this hypothesis directly. Although not conducted within the context of a sexual assault, Stewart and Maddren (1997) examined the role of alcohol intoxication in police officers' attributions of blame to victim's and perpetrator's of family violence (i.e., a physical assault between two family members). Within the vignette, the gender of the victim, as well as the alcohol consumption (presence vs. absence) of both the victim and perpetrator, were varied. Attributions of blame were found to be related to the presence of alcohol, with drunk victims blamed more than sober victims, and drunk perpetrators blamed more than sober perpetrators. Moreover, although assailants typically were blamed more than victims, when the assailant was sober and the victim was drunk, both were equally blamed for the event.

A handful of studies have examined police decision making more specifically in sexual assault cases. The research that has been conducted tends to suggest that both evidentiary and

credibility factors underlie police decisions as to how, and whether, to proceed with a case (for a review see Frazier & Haney, 1996). For instance, Frazier and Haney found that four factors were associated with police decisions to question a suspect: the presence of a witness, the assailant was a stranger, evidence that penetration had occurred, and evidence that the victim was injured. These findings were entirely consistent with the results of other investigations reviewed by Frazier and Haney. For example, Kerstetter (1990) found that the most influential factors underlying police decisions to classify a case as rape were of an evidentiary nature (e.g., the apprehension of a suspect) and factors related to the severity of the assault (e.g., use of a weapon, injury). Similarly, LaFree (1981) found that suspects were more likely to be arrested if the complainant could identify the suspect and was willing to prosecute, and a weapon had been used. In addition to evidentiary factors, however, are considerations that are reflective of the woman's credibility -- these include whether or not she knew the assailant (Frazier & Haney, 1996), whether she had a history of drug or alcohol abuse (Kerstetter, 1990), or whether she had engaged in what might be viewed as "questionable" behavior at the time of the alleged assault such as gone to a bar alone or used drugs or alcohol (LaFree, 1981; Rose & Randall, 1982). All of these have all been identified as significant predictors of police decisions in sexual assault cases.

In light of these findings, the present research attempted to investigate directly what role, if any, complainant and assailant alcohol intoxication plays in police officers' judgements and decisions in a sexual assault case. Specifically, the study assessed officers' judgements of credibility, their attributions of blame, and their evaluations of the validity of a sexual assault

claim that was presented via a vignette in which the beverage consumption (alcoholic vs. nonalcoholic) of both the man and woman described was varied. In addition, the officers' likely response to the complainant and their perceptions of guilt were also examined. Given the previous findings in the area, it was expected that the intoxicated victim would be evaluated less favorably than the victim who was not drinking at the time of the alleged assault. Given the mixed nature of the past findings pertaining to assailants' drinking behavior, however, specific predictions were not posited for the alleged perpetrator's beverage consumption.

As there is some evidence that the level of blame assigned to victims and perpetrators of acquaintance rape differs for men and women, the impact of gender was also explored. Although, Stewart and Maddren (1996) found no gender differences in police officers' evaluations of the two targets (victim, perpetrator) in a physical assault, a number of studies have consistently found gender differences in people's evaluations of an acquaintance rape, with men typically rendering more lenient judgments than women (see Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). For instance, in the study conducted by Schuller and Wall (1998; see also Wall & Schuller, in press) men, compared to women, were less likely to find the complainant credible and more likely to hold her responsible. Given these findings, it was expected that female police officers would evaluate the complainant more favorably and her claim as more legitimate than would male police officers.

Method

Respondents and Procedure

Participants in the study were 212 operational noncommissioned officers in the state of

Queensland Police Service (QPS). In 1997, the year of the survey, there were approximately 6,277 noncommissioned officers with the ranks of sergeant or constable in the QPS. As only 14.6% of these officers were female ($n = 917$) a stratified sampling technique, with over sampling of female officers, was employed. This strategy was adopted to ensure that an adequate sample of women would be obtained, thereby permitting an assessment of potential gender differences. Using their total listing of operational police officers, QPS randomly selected 200 female officers and 400 male officers and distributed, via mail, a copy of the questionnaire to them. Participation in the study was completely voluntary and 215 questionnaires were returned (three officers returned uncompleted questionnaires), thus, yielding a 35% response rate, with comparable return rates for both male (36%) and female (34%) officers.

The officers ranged in age from 22 years to 53 years, with a mean age of 33.2 years ($SD = 7.6$ years). The officers had worked between 1 and 33 years with QPS ($M = 11.06$ years, $SD = 7.9$) and 41.5% were constables, 27.9% were senior constables, 24.5% were sergeants and 6.1% were senior sergeants. Those officers ($n = 175$) who provided estimates of the approximate size of the population of the area in which their station was located, reported a range from 60 to just over a million ($M = 204,351$; $Mdn = 60,000$; $SD = 358,683$). On average, the female officers, in comparison to the male officers, were younger in age ($M_s = 29.13$ vs. 35.05 , $SD_s = 5.2$ & 7.9 , for women & men; $t(187) = -6.48$, $p < 001$), had served on the force for a shorter duration ($M_s = 6.37$ vs. 13.29 , $SD_s = 5.08$ & 8.03 , for women & men; $t(192) = -7.56$, $p < 001$), and were of a lower rank ($\chi^2(3, N = 209) = 26.06$, $p < .001$), with women being predominantly constables (63 %) and

senior constables (26 %), with few sergeants (6% sergeants, 4% senior sergeants), and men being evenly distributed among the ranks of constable (31%), senior constable (28%), and sergeant (33%; an additional 7% were senior sergeants).

Materials

The data for the study were collected using a questionnaire that was based around a vignette depicting an acquaintance rape. Prior to reading the vignette, the officers were asked to provide demographic information (i.e., gender, age, rank, year they joined the force, population of area in which they were located). They then read a brief vignette depicting a claim of sexual assault. The vignette presented the officers with the following information: The morning after a university toga party, Carol Wilson arrived at the Police Station to press a charge of rape against John Ryans. She stated that she arrived at the party with a group of friends and midway through the evening met John. At the end of the evening, John offered to walk her home to the house she shared with two other students. When they got back to her place, she invited John up for a cup of coffee. After coffee, they started kissing on the couch and John started undoing her toga. She stated that she did not want to have sex. John said that was OK and they continued to fool around. Then he undressed himself and, against her continued objections, penetrated her. Carol Wilson stated that she had not struggled and there was no evidence of bruising. The police interviewed John Ryans. He admitted to having sexual intercourse with Carol Wilson but maintains that she was a willing participant.

Within these basic facts of the case, the beverage consumption of both the alleged perpetrator of the assault and the victim was systematically varied to produce four versions of

the vignette: 1) only the woman had consumed alcohol, 2) only the man had consumed alcohol, 3) both parties had consumed alcohol, or 4) neither party had consumed alcohol. That is, within the vignette, the female target stated that she had either consumed about six or seven alcoholic drinks during the course of the evening or that she had not been drinking alcoholic beverages during the evening, only soft drinks. Similarly, it was indicated that the male target had either consumed about seven or eight alcoholic drinks throughout the evening or had not consumed alcohol that evening, only soft drinks.

Dependent Measures

To assess the officers' perceptions of the alleged rape and their likely responses to the complaint, they were asked a series of questions. These measures are described more fully below.

Credibility assessments: Respondents rated the credibility of both the complainant's claim of rape and the alleged perpetrator's claim of innocence, using 7-point bipolar scales, anchored with the endpoint “not at all credible” and “completely credible.”

Attributions of blame: Respondents rated both targets in terms of the extent to which each party was to blame for what occurred. These responses were obtained using 7-point rating scales, anchored with the endpoint “not at all to blame” and “very blameworthy.”

Evaluations of claim: Eight items, using 7-point rating scales, tapped the validity of the sexual assault claim. Specifically, these items assessed the extent to which the complainant communicated that she did not agree to have sex, that she was interested in sexual intercourse, that she was now lying about the event, and that she was sexually provocative. Participants also

indicated the extent to which the perpetrator honestly believed that the complainant was a willing participant, how reasonable, given the complainant's behaviour, it was for the perpetrator to assume that she was interested in having sex, and, given how far things had progressed, how reasonable it was for the complainant to expect him to refrain from sexual intercourse and to what extent he could be expected to refrain from sexual intercourse.

Responses to complaint: Respondents were asked to indicate, again using 7-point rating scales, how likely it was that they would encourage the complainant to withdraw her complaint and how likely it was that they would charge the alleged perpetrator.

Perceptions of guilt: The officers were asked to indicate, using 7-point rating scales, the likelihood that the perpetrator was actually guilty and the likelihood that he would be found guilty in a court of law.

Perceived level of intoxication: Finally, respondents were asked, using 7-point rating scales, to rate each of the targets in terms of his/her level of intoxication (1= not at all intoxicated, 7=very intoxicated). Participants were instructed to complete these items without referring back to the case scenario.

Results

Preliminary Analyses and Overview

As the intent of the study was to assess the impact of perpetrator and victim alcohol intoxication on officers' perceptions of, and responses to, an alleged sexual assault, initial t-tests were conducted to ensure that the targets were in fact differentially perceived as a function of their beverage consumption. As expected, participants' ratings of the complainant's intoxication

level revealed that when she had consumed alcohol, as opposed to soda, she was more likely to be perceived by respondents as intoxicated ($M_s=4.16$ & 1.46 , for alcohol & soda, respectively), $t(202)=15.93$, $p<.001$. Similarly, the intoxication level of the alleged perpetrator was differentially perceived as a function of his beverage consumption, ($M_s=4.28$ & 1.28 , for alcohol & soda, respectively), $t(168)=20.07$, $p<.001$.

Closer examination of participants' responses, however, revealed that there was considerable variability in respondents' perceptions of the targets' intoxication levels. For instance, when the complainant had consumed only soda, 20% of the respondents indicated some level of intoxication (i.e., responses of two or more on the 7-point scale), with over half of these respondents indicating a level of 3 or more. Moreover, when the complainant consumed alcohol, a fair number of the respondents indicated no or a relatively low level of intoxication (one respondent providing a rating of 1 and 11 % providing a rating of 2 on the 7-point scale). When the male target indicated that he had consumed only soda, 16 % of the respondents provided a rating of greater than one on the 7-point scale, with half of the respondents providing a rating of 3 or more. When the male had consumed alcohol, 7 % indicated a relatively low level of intoxication (one respondent providing a rating of 1 and the remainder providing a rating of 2 on the 7-point scale).

This variability is, perhaps, not surprising given that the beverage consumption was self-reported by the targets in the scenario and, thus, the officers' ratings involved the officers correctly recalling the type and amount of beverage the target reported consuming, an acceptance of the targets' report, and a translation of the beverage consumption into an assessment of its

impact. Given that our interest in the study was the impact of the target's intoxication and that people act on the perceived (Aronson, Brewer, & Carlsmith, 19??), the more sensitive continuous measures involving the officers' perceptions of the targets' degree of intoxication (the subjective meaning they assigned to consumption level), rather than the actual consumption (alcohol, soda) reported by the target in the scenario, formed the independent variables. Thus, the impact of intoxication on the dependent measures (credibility assessments, attributions of blame, evaluations of claim, responses to complaint, perceptions of guilt) were investigated using regression analyses in which gender of participant, perpetrator intoxication level, and complainant intoxication level formed the independent variables. For these analyses, the categorical variable of gender was dummy coded, with men coded as 0 and women coded as 1. The three main effects were entered simultaneously on the first step, followed by the two-, and three-way interactions involving these variables on the subsequent steps. To examine significant effects found in analyses of this nature, significant effects involving the categorical variable are interpreted by inspecting the relevant means, while interpretation of significant effects involving a continuous variable requires inspection of the regression line involving the variable's relation to the dependent measure (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

The results of these analyses revealed a number of main effects for both gender of respondent and perceived complainant intoxication level. No main effects for the perceived perpetrator intoxication nor any of the interactions involving the independent variables were found to be significant. The results of the main effects are presented in Table 1 and are summarized below in terms of each of the significant main effects.

Gender of Participant

The results of the analyses revealed main effects for gender of participant on a number of the dependent measures (see Table 1). Specifically, male officers viewed the perpetrator's claim of innocence as more credible than did female officers. Conversely, the male officers viewed the complainant's claim as less credible, compared to the female officers. Moreover, male officers attributed greater blame to the complainant than did female officers. In addition, over half of the items assessing the claim of rape revealed gender differences, with male officers generally more skeptical of the allegation compared to female officers. Specifically, compared to female officers, male officers were more likely to believe that the complainant was interested in having sex, was sexually provocative, and was now lying about the events. As well, male officers, in comparison to female officers, were more likely to believe, given how far things had progressed, that the alleged perpetrator could not have been expected to stop and that it was unreasonable for the complainant to expect him to stop.

In terms of their likely responses to the complaint, male and female officers did not differ in their ratings of the likelihood that they would encourage the woman to withdraw the complainant. Female officers were, however, more likely than male officers to believe that the perpetrator was actually guilty and that they would charge the perpetrator with rape.

To assess whether any of the demographic differences between the male and female officers could account for the gender differences identified above, a series of regression analyses in which the demographic variables were entered on the first step, followed by gender on the second step, were conducted on those dependent measures for which gender differences were

identified. In all cases, the demographic variables failed to reach significance, and further the addition of gender on step two was found to be significant. Thus, it appears that, although the male and female officers differed in terms of their age, experience, and rank, these variables did not explain the gender differences identified on perceptions and responses to the claim.

Complainant Intoxication

Results of the analyses also revealed a number of main effects for complainant intoxication (see Table 1). The more intoxicated the officers perceived the complainant to be, the less credible they found her claim. Moreover, the more intoxicated they viewed the complainant to be, the less blame they attributed to the perpetrator, and conversely, the more blame they attributed to the complainant. In terms of the participants' evaluations of the claim, just over half of the items were found to be significant (with two of these reaching marginal significance). Specifically, the more intoxicated the officers perceived the complainant to be, the more they viewed her as interested in having sex and the less they viewed her as communicating that she was not interested. As well, the more intoxicated they viewed the complainant, the less reasonable they felt she was in terms of expecting him to refrain from his behaviour. Perceptions of her intoxication level also influenced the officers' perceptions of the perpetrator's beliefs, with those who perceived her as more intoxicated being more likely to believe that he honestly believed that she was a willing participant and that, given her behaviour, it was reasonable for him to assume that she was interested in sex.

Perceptions of the complainant's intoxication level, however, did not influence the officers' reported responses to the complaint or their perceptions of the perpetrator's guilt.

Likelihood of charging the perpetrator

To examine the relationship between the officers' evaluation of the situation and their likelihood of charging the perpetrator, a second regression analysis was performed. The dependent variable in this analysis involved the officers' ratings of the likelihood that they would charge alleged assailant and the independent variables included the credibility assessments, attributions of blame, evaluations of the claim and perceptions of guilt. A significant relationship was found between these variables and the likelihood of the officer charging the perpetrator ($F(14,178) = 8.29, p < .001$). The summary results of this analysis are presented in Table 2. The two variables that contributed to this significant finding were the officers' assessment of the credibility of the complainant and their assessment of whether or not the alleged perpetrator would be found guilty in a court of law. The more credible they found the complainant and the more likely they thought it was that the perpetrator would be found guilty, the more likely they were to charge the perpetrator. The officers' attributions of blame and evaluations of the claim were not related to their reported likelihood of charging the perpetrator. Furthermore the officers' own perception of the perpetrator's guilt was not related to the likelihood of charging the perpetrator.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of both victim and perpetrator intoxication on police officers' judgements and evaluations of a sexual assault claim. Although scenario studies utilizing lay populations have typically found that intoxication on the part of the perpetrator often diminishes people's perceptions of the perpetrator's accountability

in a date rape scenario (e.g., Norris & Cubbins, 1992; Stormo et al., 1997), the results of the present study found that officers' perceptions of the alleged perpetrators's intoxication had virtually no impact on their assessments of the situation. This is entirely * consistent with the findings of Stewart and Maddren (1996), which also found that alcohol intoxication on the part of the assailant did not result in police officers' minimizing or excusing the assailant's violent behavior. In a similar vein, Leigh and Aramburu (1994; see also Aramburu & Leigh, 1991) found no support for the notion that intoxication decreased responsibility attributed to the aggressor. Indeed, in their research alcohol intoxication actually increased attributions of causality and responsibility. Schuller and Wall (1998), which assessed mock jurors' responses within a trial context, similarly found that the guilt of the offender was not minimized, but rather was enhanced if he was drunk, at the time of the alleged assault. In the early 1980s Critchlow (1983) noted the "ambivalence" that exists between a tendency to excuse an intoxicated person for deviant behaviors and a desire to punish the person" (Critchlow, p. 452) and findings such as these may reflect society's changing attitude towards drinking behavior. As Aramburu and Leigh (1994) have argued elsewhere an "alcohol-related account simply may not work these days" (p. 131).

Although no support for the notion that the "bottle may grant a pardon to the perpetrator" (Stormo, et al., 1997, p. 299) was found, there was evidence that the bottle "tends to hold greater blame for the victim" (p. 299). Consistent with the bulk of the research in the area (e.g., Hammock & Richardson, 1997; Norris & Cubbins, 1992; Richardson & Campbell, 1982), perceptions of the complainant's alcohol intoxication, did exert an influence on the officers'

assessments of the case. Specifically, the more intoxicated the officers perceived the complainant to be, the less credible she was viewed, the more interested she was in sexual intercourse, the more likely she was to have communicated that she was interested, the more responsible she was, and, given how far things had progressed, the more unreasonable it was for her to expect the assailant to stop. Perceptions of victim intoxication were also associated with two judgements relating to the perpetrator. The more intoxicated the respondents perceived the victim to be, the less blame they attributed to the alleged perpetrator and the more likely they were to believe that the perpetrator honestly believed that the complainant was willing to engage in intercourse. Thus, similar to other studies (Leigh & Aramburu, 1994), the perpetrator was held less accountable when the complainant was perceived to be intoxicated.

In short, the officers' judgements appeared to be driven more by the victim's drinking behavior than by that of the man's drinking behavior. The differential impact of alcohol intoxication that was evidenced across the two targets, with harsher evaluations of the claimant if she was drinking, provides further confirmation for the existence of a gender-based double standard in people's beliefs about men's and women's drinking behavior. Since other studies (Aramburu & Leigh, 1991; Stewart & Maddren, 1997) have found that intoxicated male victims, compared to their sober counterparts, also are judged more harshly, it is unclear, however, to what extent the negative impact of the alcohol on judgements of the complainant are dependent on the gender of the victim.

It should be noted, however, that although the intoxication of the complainant influenced the police officers' attributions of blame and evaluations of the claim, it had no direct impact on

their assessments of the assailant's guilt or their responses to the claim. The relationship between attitudes held by police officers and their decision to proceed with a complaint is subject to some debate (Hoyle, 1998). Much of the research has focused on the attitudes of police officers and has assumed that these will translate into behaviour. Police officers' attitudes may not necessarily translate into action (Hoyle, 1998; Smith & Gray, 1983). Moreover, police decisions about whether or not to charge an assailant are not restricted to judgements of blame, or for that matter, guilt or innocence of the assailant, but to a range of legal and extralegal factors that may impact on the circumstances of the offence (Stewart & Maddren, 1997).

The two judgements that did relate to likelihood of charging in the present study involved perceptions of the complainant's credibility and the likelihood that the assailant would be found guilty in a court of law. It is interesting to note that the officers' credibility assessments of the complainant were influenced by perceptions of the complainant's intoxication and thus complainant intoxication may indirectly exert an influence on charging practices. The importance of variables impacting credibility assessments has also been documented in the later stages of prosecution (for discussion at the prosecutorial level, see Frazier & Haney, 1996; Lopez, 1992). For instance, a study conducted by LaFree, Reskin, and Visher (1985) identified a set of extra legal factors underlying jurors' verdict decisions in trials of sexual assault. In-depth interviews with 331 jurors who had served in forcible sexual assault trials, revealed that for trials in which consent was at issue (i.e., the alleged victim did not deny that intercourse occurred but contended that it was non-consensual), jurors were less likely to believe that the defendant was guilty if the victim "had reportedly engaged in sex outside marriage, drank or used drugs, or had

been acquainted with the defendant" (p. 397).

The other consistent finding to emerge in the study involved the gender differences that were identified. Overall, female officers, compared to male officers, were more likely to believe the alleged victim's claim, less likely to attribute blame to the victim, and more likely to attribute blame to the perpetrator. Not only were female officers more likely than male officers to believe the complainant's claim, they were more likely than male officers to report that the perpetrator was guilty and that they would charge the assailant. These gender differences mirror the gender differences typically found in the lay population and may reflect the differential beliefs men and women hold regarding rape (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Consistent with this interpretation, Schuller and Wall (1998) found that the gender differences in judgements of guilt identified in their study were mediated by participants' rape related beliefs. Additional research that explores the plausibility of this interpretation in a police sample would be fruitful as it would have implications for how best to structure educational and training programs in the area of sexual assault. Such findings also confirm the importance of having women police officers involved in the initial reporting and handling of sexual assault cases.

The present research findings are of course subject to the usual limitations associated with the vignette methodology employed. The stimulus materials utilized in the study was fairly brief in nature and responses may be entirely different when an officer is confronted face to face with a real complainant. As well, the two targets depicted in the vignette, when intoxicated, were portrayed as consuming comparable amounts of alcohol and judgements may differ entirely under different circumstances (Storm et al., 1997; Wall & Schuller, in press). External validity

would clearly be enhanced with replication using a more lengthy and realistic presentation format that additionally varied the intoxication levels attained by the two targets. Gaining access to police officers for research purposes, however, is often difficult, and a more elaborate set of stimulus materials would probably have resulted in fewer respondents. Related to this point, the response rate of 35%, although comparable with other mailed questionnaires (Gliksman, Smythe, & Eng, 1992; Goyder, 1985), raises some concerns about the representativeness of the sample.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings do suggest that, while intoxication on the part of the assailant has little impact on police officers' judgements, intoxication on the part of the complainant does color their evaluations of the alleged sexual assault. Police officers, regardless of their gender, have similar beliefs about women drinking, and these are consistent with those held by the rest of the community. Although alcohol intoxication did not impact upon their decision to charge the alleged offender, it did relate to assessments of the woman's claim and attributions of blame. As these judgements are likely of importance to the way in which the police proceed with a claim (e.g., vigour in pursuing the case, interviewing the alleged offender, etc.), the findings underscore the need for additional research on police decision making in this arena.

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Endnotes

1. Examination of the 1997 QPS personnel figures indicate that the sample was representative of the distribution of officers across the four ranks. In 1997 38.3% of officers in the Queensland force were constables, 29.7% were senior constables, 24.9% were sergeants, and 6.7% were senior sergeants (Queensland Police Service, 1997).
2. To attain comparable levels of perceived intoxication across the two targets, the female target in the scenario consumed slightly more alcohol than the male target.
3. In addition, a series of one-way ANOVAs treating age, years of experience, rank, and population as covariates were conducted. In all cases, the covariates were not significant.