



The Stem of Misunderstanding

Alcohol and sexual negotiation

By Pamela J. Lannutti and Jennifer L. Monahan

It's a familiar scenario. A woman goes to a party and meets an attractive guy. She talks and flirts with him for a while. They each have a lot to drink. Then, they decide to move away from the party, maybe to an unoccupied bedroom. She is thinking it would be fun to make-out with him and then give him her number to call for a future date. He is thinking they are going to have sex...now! Of course, they don't discuss these expectations before starting to "hook-up," but as things progress he pushes for more and she wants to stop.

Here is her communication challenge: How does she let him know she doesn't want to have sex tonight and, at the same time, make him still want to go out with her in the future? This may be a sticky conversation under the best circumstances, but remember they have both been drinking at the party all night. How will the alcohol they've both consumed impact the way she refuses his unwanted advances and his understanding of her refusal?

Research overwhelmingly suggests that alcohol and sexual negotiation is a dangerous mix. It has been estimated that 50 percent of acquaintance rapes occur when the man, the woman, or both have been consuming alcohol. Even in cases not as extreme as rape, alcohol consumption increases the risk that sexual intimacy will progress beyond the woman's preplanned level. So, what is it about drinking that leads to increases in sexual misunderstanding?

We believe that an important start to answering this question is to take a close look at how alcohol consumption influences the processes involved in making and communicating decisions about sex.

Alcohol consumption and research: How drunk is drunk?

We begin with a few caveats to help you contextualize our research. First, our research is conducted in controlled settings: primarily our research lab. Second, the amount of alcohol consumed is usually sufficient to get the individual legally drunk but not much higher. For example, in most of our studies, participants attained a blood alcohol reading between .06 and .12 g/dl.

Is that "drunk?" Yes. Participants indicate that they experienced the physical sensations and cognitive impairment of alcohol intoxication when at this blood alcohol level. However, they are not "drunk" at the level of complete cognitive impairment or the kind of binge drinking that often occurs on college campuses. Third, our participants are carefully screened social drinkers. They are not people with drinking problems; rather, they are people who drink a few times a week, usually connected to social occasions. In a nutshell, most of our studies involve giving individuals enough alcohol so that they are cognitively impaired and then testing the effects of drinking on their sexual perception and communication behavior.

Perception: The stem of the sexual negotiation process

Sexual negotiation, like all communication interactions, is dependent on a perceptual process that begins and ends with identifying and assigning meaning to cues. Imagine a simple conversation in which a man introduces himself to a woman at a party. There are countless cues available to her: the words from the conversation going on next to her, that nagging idea that her outfit makes her look fat, the rumbling in her stomach, his facial expression as he introduces himself, his tone of voice, the music from the stereo, the idea that he reminds her of her ex, some friends just coming through the door, the idea that he's really cute, the room temperature, and, oh, yeah, the words that he is saying. So, to be able to communicate effectively, she must select the cues that are most valuable to her desired outcome. If she wants a smoothly flirtatious conversation with him, she would do best to focus on the man, his expressions, tone of voice, and words.

Once she selects the cues for attention, she pieces them together to interpret their meaning. From there, she can attempt to communicate an appropriate response to the meaning she derived. Both people must engage in this process of cue selection and interpretation simultaneously throughout the interaction. Broken down like this it seems like a lot of work, but most of us successfully engage in this process effortlessly through out our normal daily living.

Alcohol and misperception

Misunderstandings often occur when we select and interpret cues in the “wrong” way, meaning we arrive at an understanding that is distorted. Indeed, we believe that a major reason people misread cues in social situations is alcohol consumption. Alcohol limits our mental capacity to consider multiple cues and select the most appropriate ones. When intoxicated, people are more likely to select the cues that seem most urgent or most obvious, while missing cues that may be related to future concerns or are more difficult to identify.

For example, a person who believes that safer sex is important is more likely to engage in sexual intercourse with a condom when sober than when drinking. Why? Because when intoxicated he or she is more likely to selectively focus on the immediate cues of sexual arousal than to the warnings embedded in his or her mind about the future negative consequences of sexually transmitted diseases. Today, not tomorrow, is important. My arousal, not my fear of STDs, dominates my thinking. Instead of considering sexual arousal *and* fear of disease, the drinking person myopically focuses on the most relevant cue.

In addition, drinking makes it difficult to interpret cues that are subtle or potentially inconsistent with more salient cues. For example, Antonia Abbey and colleagues, in an article published in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, describe interviews with female victims of acquaintance rape. Women who were intoxicated at the time of their rape reported that they paid attention to cues related to how much the man liked and wanted them, but didn't focus (until it was too late) on cues that might have indicated that he was willing to use force to have sex with them. It's possible to imagine how a man's more subtle initial cues that he might use force—such as attempting to take her shirt off even after she brushed his hand away or mumbled “no”—could be missed or misread by an intoxicated woman if her focus is on arousal rather than risk.

Our research also demonstrates alcohol can distort the interpretive process by which we assign meaning to cues. We conducted a study (see *Human Communication Research*, 2000) in which women (either intoxicated or sober) talked with an attractive man in our lab for ten minutes. The women thought he was just another participant and that the study was about how alcohol affected speech characteristics such as slurring. In fact, the man worked for us and was trained to have a very positive “get to know you” conversation with the woman for the first six minutes of their chat. Around the six-minute mark, he shifted from a warm conversational tone to overtly flirting with her for a minute or two. His flirtatious statements included complimenting her appearance, asking if she had a boyfriend, and suggesting that maybe the two of them could get together after the study. Despite the quite obvious nature of some of his flirtatious comments, intoxicated women were more likely to characterize the man's interest in her as friendly rather than romantic, whereas sober women more accurately assessed his behavior as indicating romantic interest.

A more sinister example of alcohol consumption leading to misinterpretation of cues comes from another of our studies published in *Communication Research* in 2002. Intoxicated participants read several stories about dating couples in romantic situations. In some stories, the woman indicates that she will do certain things but not others (“Don't touch me there,” “I don't want to take our pants off. But keep kissing me.”) as the man persists (“Come on, what are you worried about?”, “You know I really like you. Come on”).

In other words, the man was interested in sex while the woman was giving mixed cues about her interest. The story ends with the man explicitly threatening force to make the woman have sex (“Don't make me hurt you.”). Both sober and intoxicated participants noticed the power and control cues in the man's behavior. However, intoxicated participants were more accepting of the man's behavior and thought that the woman enjoyed what happened more often than sober participants did. In other words, there was evidence that intoxicated participants recognized the man's forceful cues but did not interpret these cues as dangerous or problematic. Interestingly, we found no gender differences for this set of judgments. Intoxicated men *and* women both perceived the man's behavior as aggressive but simply did not see the behavior as problematic the way that sober people did.

Communicating under the influence: Where does alcohol have the biggest impact?

When most people think of communication, they think of it as a process of trying to say the right thing at the right time. When you think about how alcohol consumption may impact sexual negotiation, you may first think about how alcohol consumption affects the things that are said. People use verbal messages to help them reach their goals for a particular interaction, and for their relationships as a whole.

Consider again our initial scenario. A woman is attracted to a man *but* she is not willing to have sex with him tonight. Her goal is to let him down in such a way that leaves it open for another date, another time. Or consider the situation where two friends (one male and one female) go to a bar to have some fun. By the end of the evening, he is drunk and amorous. How does she tell him “no” without ruining the relationship? In both situations, she has to refuse his sexual advances. But at the same time, she wants to make sure that she still appears to be a nice and desirable person, and that he doesn't feel slighted, insulted or angry enough to decide to not see her again or to drop her as a friend. So, she is faced with a complex situation in which her concern about her image and his feelings should affect the way she handles the situation.

It seems logical that alcohol consumption would make the woman's job of addressing all of these concerns more difficult, resulting in intoxicated women using "no" messages that are less successful than those used by sober women. Our research tests that very idea (see studies published in *Communication Studies and Western Journal of Communication* in 2004).

We compared the refusal messages of sober and intoxicated women, and were surprised to find out that their messages weren't very different. Alcohol consumption didn't seem to make a difference in the ways that sober and intoxicated women created messages that said "no" while trying to protect his feelings and their own image. Instead, the variable that had the greatest impact on *how* the woman phrased her refusal was the man's persistence, especially when the man was a new dating partner. The more a dating partner persisted, despite her initial refusal, the more women's messages focused on saying no and the less women's messages focused on protecting his feelings and their own image. When refusing a persistent friend, women seemed concerned with his feelings longer than when refusing persistent dates. Although more research needs to be done in this area, our research suggests that alcohol's biggest impact on sexual negotiation may not be on exactly what is said, but rather on how people come to decide what's important in the situation and how they understand what is communicated to them.

We have highlighted a few key examples here of how the inferences we draw from conversations when drinking are often more benign than the inferences that sober people draw. In addition, drinking doesn't necessarily affect a person's verbal communication behaviors in the same way it affects perceptions. Instead, in the studies discussed above, as well as a few others from our lab, we find that the actual *content* of what people say when drinking and when sober does not seem to differ much, no matter how we try coding their verbal behaviors. These results suggest that perhaps the most important way drinking impacts sexual negotiation and increases the chances of misunderstanding is by affecting the perception process that is so foundational for successful communication. In other words, alcohol's effect on perception during sexual negotiation is the stem of the misunderstandings that emerge.

Successful sexual negotiation is a complicated communication process, and requires us to select and interpret multiple cues, sometimes subtle or conflicting, while aroused, nervous, and excited. This is a difficult challenge. Alcohol consumption makes the challenge of successful sexual negotiation even more daunting. Research demonstrates both men and women are vulnerable to alcohol's deleterious effects on successful sexual negotiation.

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