

He Got Himself Drunk. What Did He Think Was Going To Happen?

When I was a child, I once got my mind set on acquiring a pogo ball. For those unfamiliar with children's pop culture of the early 80's, a pogo ball was essentially a rubber ball with a plastic platform affixed to its midsection. The platform was of course intended to support a user and one could bounce on it in the same fashion as a pogo stick. My desire to obtain a pogo ball was largely fueled by an extensive television campaign enacted by the pogo ball's manufacturer. Some of the kids depicted in the ads seemed to fly ten feet into the air and others apparently used their pogo balls as their primary method of transportation.

Soon enough, I collected my Christmas money and purchased my very own pogo ball. However, the product I took home didn't quite fulfill the experience I had seen modeled in so many advertisements. I quickly found out that the commercials vastly underestimated the learning curve associated with mastering the pogo ball. I never got the hang of it and the pogo ball ripped and became unusable before I could ever do so.

It was a lesson learned early on that not everything the media promotes is as good as advertised. I wish I had known then that I was not a lone victim of corporate seduction. After all, this same force is partly responsible for convincing a good part of my generation that the combination of sex and alcohol usage is a good idea. Few commercial genres are more iconic than that of the hypersexual beer ad. The typical beer commercial is well-known for scantily clad women, sexual innuendo, and the promise of a more vibrant sex life for those who would only purchase the product. Today, these commercials reflect a youth culture that believes alcohol and sexual activity to be kin. This is highly ironic since alcohol is strongly correlated with several undesirable sexual outcomes including sexual dysfunction, lessening of physical sensation, improper contraceptive usage, flawed evaluation of sexual situations, and the 900 pound gorilla of the bunch – sexual assault.

Having worked as an educator on issues of sexual violence, I know that few concepts evoke more disagreement among young adults than the morality of sexual encounters involving one or more intoxicated parties. Where do we draw the line between alcohol-facilitated sexual assaults and mere "drunken hookups"? Try as some might to dismiss the implications of these encounters because they believe them to be a normal part of the youth experience or simply too "gray" to adjudicate, the sheer volume of discord that arises from them demands our attention. Most studies report that alcohol usage is featured in anywhere from one-third to two-thirds of sexual assaults¹ – an unfortunate byproduct of an alcohol-infused and hypersexual culture that is so normalized on many campuses that many sexually active college students graduate without a sober sexual experience.

To avoid dispensing accountability to sexual encounters under the influence is to assign a moral vacuum to a realm of behavior that is a standard part of many youth experiences. Yet attempts to assign objective moral parameters to these behaviors are often met with sheer apathy or with passionate and pre-disposed ascriptions of blame. One only has to throw out a real or imagined heterosexual scenario involving alcohol to watch the sparks fly. "She should have been more responsible and not placed herself in such a vulnerable position." "Nobody put a gun to her head and made her drink." "She got herself drunk. What did she think was going to happen?"

I do believe that there is a place for risk reduction but the kind of one-sided blame that follows heterosexual sexual encounters involving alcohol reveals an entrenched prejudice against women and alleged victims. Students also readily point out alcohol consumption by men in these encounters as well but it is almost always in their defense. "We can't expect the guy to be a mind reader, much less when he's drunk!" "Guys get a little more aggressive when they're drunk. It's just what they do." So, how is it that the very same

factor that raises the culpability of women in sexual encounters – their intoxication – also serves as a mitigating factor for men?

Arguments against intoxicated women who “cry rape” after drunken sexual encounters almost always follow a similar logic. That is, alcohol’s effects are at least superficially understood by all and those who voluntarily consume it should be accountable for the undesirable effects that come along with it. The cited effects of using alcohol cannot be denied. At about a .02% blood alcohol level, inhibitions begin to loosen – encouraging users to engage in behaviors to which they might normally object. Around a .08% blood alcohol level, one’s judgment is significantly affected. Possible blackouts and memory loss begin around a .15% blood alcohol level.² Not to mention that one is more likely to be perceived as more sexually available at all blood alcohol levels. Research shows that the mere consumption of alcohol is enough to communicate that one has a desire to be sexually active, real or otherwise.³ It is this litany of effects that those assaulted after drinking can expect to be held accountable for should they muster the courage to voice a complaint.

Nonetheless, the aforementioned listing of alcohol’s effects is as selective as it is prejudiced against women and victims of sexual violence. The same drug fosters heightened aggressiveness in users. We also observe a gradual decrease in empathy in alcohol consumers (this effect is reportedly most pronounced in men). And going along with societal expectations of sexual availability while under the influence are the social expectations of aggressiveness and risk taking that accompany drinking. Not to mention that the same loss of inhibition so often cited to discredit victims clearly has implications for aggressors as well.

The fact that we actually cite consumption of a substance intimately connected to violence, aggressiveness, and empathy loss in defense of alleged perpetrators only highlights the depths of the biases we bring to discussion of alcohol-facilitated sexual assaults. Should someone crash a vehicle, physically assault someone, or destroy public property while intoxicated, then it is pretty much understood that one’s consumption of alcohol will not avert culpability. Yet this is exactly the logic used with intoxicated sexual aggressors. This is partly allowable because the sheer dynamics of sexual assault do not lend themselves to adjudication (i.e., there is no physical evidence for consent) and because alleged victims are often viewed as accomplices to the crime, particularly if they too were intoxicated.

Men who would not normally engage in aggressive or violent sexual behaviors but do so while intoxicated are deserving of the same kinds of lectures that society heaps on sexual assault victims. That is, they are worthy of being scolded for bringing on the negative consequences of drinking. They should be reprimanded for not knowing their limits. They should be pressed to take responsibility for the decisions they made under the influence. And if society compels women to account for the societal expectation of sex while intoxicated, then men should be compelled to account for the societal expectation of aggressiveness while intoxicated.

Sending the message of a more comprehensive accountability for drunken behaviors to men takes on greater importance once we acknowledge that drunken violence is such a distinctly male phenomenon. Both men and women experience behavioral change under the influence but men succumb to violence and aggression at significantly higher rates than do women. One study found that alcohol consumption increased aggressiveness in men but not in women giving credence to the belief that the combination of aggressiveness and alcohol usage is founded on socialization and societal expectations as much as the physiological effects of the drug itself.⁴ Most of us understand all of this anecdotally anyway. Our remembrances of drunken persons getting into fights or destroying property are largely limited to men. Numerous researchers are taking note of a seeming increase in female aggression but it still remains largely male territory for now. All of this begs the question whenever a male is accused of sexual violence after consuming alcohol: “You got yourself drunk. What did you think was going to happen?”

I know that holding men accountable for sexual aggression under intoxication strikes many as harsh. It is rather easy to view the drawing of such a concrete line in the sand as overkill when we believe the average sexual assault to be a simple and non-violent misunderstanding; but, let us not forget that the stories of survivors of alcohol-accompanied sexual violence are riddled with experiences that go beyond simple misunderstandings. They are stories of women regaining consciousness to find that someone is having sex with them and stories of men ideating plans to incapacitate targets. These egregious instances aside, the prototypical fear voiced by men of being blamed for an encounter in which all parties are “completely wasted” doesn’t exactly map to reality. In truth, observant and honest parties would note that the bulk of “drunken hookups” involve one party of noticeably lesser intoxication and greater capacity than the other. One party must after all have the capacity to coordinate the sexual rendezvous and subsequent activity. Simply put, a great many men involved in these problematic “drunken hookups” are not devoid of functionality and wherewithal. Likewise, they should not be devoid of responsibility.

None of this is to say that there is no place for female responsibility in heterosexual, alcohol-assisted sexual encounters. And it is certainly possible for females to be aggressors in today’s sexually-charged culture. I just contend that it is time to revise the practice of placing absolute attention on the actions of women and alleged victims while at the same absolving men and alleged perpetrators. To do otherwise would be allow men free reign to enact their desires on women who have consumed alcohol and may or may not agree with actions that require their bodies.

It might be argued by some that the reason society spends so much energy discrediting female participants is because they are the complainants far more often than men. They, more so than men, walk away from drunken encounters with grievances to air so it stands to reason that society would be more adept at dismantling their claims and holding them responsible for the consequences of voluntary alcohol usage. It might just be that America, the land of choice and freedom, would turn on any participant of a seemingly voluntary encounter who later feels violated.

Even still, attributing an apparent prejudice against women to a generic disgust for irresponsibility does not rid us of important questions about gender biases and socialization. In deciphering the off-hazy line between sexual assault and “regretted sex,” we would still be left to answer as to just why women tend to show more repentance for alcohol-infused encounters than do men. Perhaps more men *should* regret fantasy-driven flings that ignore the consequences of pregnancy, sexual transmitted infections, and fractured relationships. Perhaps more men *should* regret acquiring sex devoid of intimacy by means of impaired decision making and altered perceptions. One would hope that such behavior would strike an ethical or even practical chord with anyone. But alas, such reactions do not appear to be acceptable for men to display in a peer culture that contends that they should be fans of any and all sexual activity. From this lens, we might surmise that men who mercilessly blame women for their role in alleged sexual assaults are posturing to compensate for a range of emotion that that they either do not possess or are not allowed to display.

¹ Abbey, A.; Ross, L.T.; & McDuffie, D. “Alcohol’s Role in Sexual Assault.” Drug and Alcohol Abuse Reviews: Volume 5 Addictive Behaviors in Women. 1994.

²“Blood Alcohol Level and You: Behavior by Numbers.” Accessed <http://www.factsontap.org/factsontap/naked_truth/by_the_numbers.htm> on May 2, 2006.

³ Abbey, Ross & McDuffie. “Alcohol’s Role in Sexual Assault.” 1994.

⁴ Gussler-Burkhardt, N. & Giancola, P. “A Further Examination of Gender Differences in Alcohol-Related Aggression.” Journal of Studies on Alcohol. Volume 66. May 2005.