

'Wasted' and 'hammered' versus 'buzzed' and 'tipsy' is more than just semantics

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Understanding the natural language that drinkers use to describe intoxicated states can provide critical insight into subjective perceptions of intoxicated states, particularly among specific groups such as college students. This study extends previous research by assessing how college students apply intoxication terms to characters in hypothetical situations, finding that the ways in which the two genders perceive and communicate intoxicated states may help tailor unique measures for prevention and intervention.

Results will be published in the December 2013 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"Drinkers use a complex set of physical and cognitive indicators to estimate [intoxication](#)," said Ash Levitt, a research scientist at the Research Institute on Addictions at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. "In order to quickly and easily communicate various levels of intoxication, drinkers distill these indicators down into distinct sets of natural language terms for intoxication, such as 'tipsy' or 'wasted.' Understanding this language is important as these terms reflect levels of intoxication as well as whether individuals are accurately estimating intoxication levels when they use these terms."

Levitt's previous research examined how individuals use natural language intoxication terms to describe themselves. "We found that self-use of terms differed for moderate versus heavy intoxication levels, and that

women tended to use moderate terms, whereas men used heavy terms. The current study extends this previous work."

"The study of natural language labels used to describe alcohol's effects hasn't received much attention to date," added Mark Wood, a professor of psychology at the University of Rhode Island. "Broadly speaking, there is a long history of research in psychology, particularly social psychology, examining the way that labels applied to behaviors can impact perceptions and subsequent behaviors. This study's key findings – that men's drinking, regardless of whether it is moderate or heavy, is described using terms indicative of excessive consumption such as 'wasted' or 'hammered,' while women tend to couch drinking in more moderate terms such as 'buzzed' or 'tipsy' – corresponds with the way that 'drinking men' and 'drinking women' are differentially perceived. As such, these findings have clear implications for prevention and intervention work with men and women."

As part of a larger online study on the natural language of intoxication, Levitt and his colleagues had 145 undergraduate students from a large Midwestern university participate in a survey during the spring semester of 2007 in return for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of eight vignette conditions in their survey; the number of participants in each cell ranged from 16 to 19, with gender being roughly equal within each cell.

"The current study showed that natural language intoxication terms are applied to others similarly to oneself," said Levitt. "Specifically, results supported previous research by showing that moderate intoxication terms such as 'tipsy' were applied to female vignette characters more than male characters, even when female characters were heavily intoxicated, and that female participants applied these terms more than male participants. In contrast, heavy intoxication terms such as 'wasted' were applied to male vignette characters more than female characters, and male

participants applied these terms more than female participants."

"An important next step for research would be to see whether the inaccuracies in describing intoxication can predict alcohol-related consequences for men and women," said Wood. "Clinicians could use this knowledge to work with men to help correct the notions that being 'hammered' is both typical and acceptable, and with women to increase awareness about the potential dangers of underestimating their own or others' degree of intoxication. It would also be interesting to more directly investigate how natural language labels are connected to judgments of men and women described with heavy and moderate intoxication labels."

"One potential real-world implication that this research suggests is that women may be at increased risk for alcohol-related consequences such as drunk driving if they or their friends underestimate how intoxicated they are by using moderate terms like 'tipsy' to describe them when, in fact, they are heavily intoxicated and heavy terms would be more accurate," added Levitt.

Wood concurred. "Another consequence of underestimating impairment could lead to sexual victimization," he said. "One example of this might be not recognizing a risky situation or overestimating the ability to manage it, such as recognizing and avoiding sexual assault. The finding that women tend to avoid natural language labels that indicate excessive consumption indicates awareness of a [gender](#)-based double standard in which drinking women, and perhaps especially drunk women, are judged more harshly than men. Other research has found that when a woman was drinking moderately – versus drinking soda – on a first date, participants indicated that there was a significantly greater likelihood that the date would end with sex, that the woman was more promiscuous in general, but was rated less favorable in terms of both social appeal and overall impressions."

Wood added that the findings also suggest that the "natural language" men use to describe their own and other men's drinking may promote hazardous beliefs. "These beliefs normalized heavy drinking as both what most men actually do and what they ought or should do," he said. "These beliefs, known in the scientific literature as descriptive and injunctive norms, have been found to influence heavy drinking and [alcohol](#) problems, particularly among younger drinkers like [college students](#). They also provide a potential excuse for typically unacceptable behaviors as something that is normative, acceptable, and even fun. Essentially, in an instance like this, intoxication provides a 'cultural timeout' from regulating one's behavior."

Provided by Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research

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