

Blurred Lines? Sexual boundaries are not really all that blurred

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Meeting people within a bar scene is not usually difficult. Unfortunately, not all contact – whether romantic or sexual – is positive or consensual. In fact, sexual aggression has become a common experience, whether it is related to misperceptions in making and receiving sexual advances, or reflects intentional harassment or other sexually aggressive acts. This study uses an objective observational design to examine bar-based sexual aggression, finding that it often reflects intentional sexual invasiveness and unwanted persistence rather than misperceptions in sexual advances.

Results will be published in the May 2014 online-only issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"Recent data suggests that aggression related to sexual advances is very common nowadays," explained Kate Graham, a senior scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health at the University of Toronto as well as corresponding author for the study. "Last year, we did a study of bargoers in Windsor, across the river from Detroit. Participants were recruited on their way to bars, and then asked additional questions about two common forms of sexual aggression we observed – unwanted sexual contact and unwanted persistence – when they were leaving the bar district: more than 50 percent of [women](#) reported experiencing one or both types of sexual aggression on the evening of the exit survey." Graham is also affiliated with Western University in Ontario, and Curtin University in Australia.

"As noted recently by President Obama, sexual assault continues to be a pervasive problem in our society," added Jeanette Norris, a senior research scientist with the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute at the University of Washington. "Given the large number of young people who socialize together in bars, it is not surprising that a great deal of sexual assault occurs in bars."

"The current study was part of an evaluation of the Safer Bars program, a program we developed to reduce aggression in bars, primarily male-to-male aggression," said Graham. "However, when we saw how much sexual aggression there was, we decided to conduct additional analyses. So these analyses of sexual aggression were in response to how much we observed – which was considerably more than we were expecting."

Both Graham and Norris noted the unique environment women might find within a bar scene.

"I don't think you could get away with this sort of thing in most settings," said Graham. "If a stranger came up to a woman, grabbed her around the waist, and rubbed his groin against her in a university cafeteria or on a subway, she'd probably call the police. In the bar, the woman just tries to get away from him."

Norris concurred. "Bar-based aggression is almost certainly more likely to involve people who do not know each other very well or at all," she said. "This could have at least two consequences. First, perpetrators might be more likely to depersonalize and dehumanize the targeted woman. Second, it might lead perpetrators to feel more 'protected,' that is, to believe they are less likely to suffer any consequences for their actions."

Graham and her colleagues collected narrative descriptions and quantitative data for 1,057 incidents of aggression observed during 1,334

visits to 118 large-capacity bars/clubs (with a capacity of more than 300 people) in Toronto during the years 2000-2002. Approximately two-thirds were dance clubs, while the rest were sports and other types of bars, large pubs, and concert venues. Of the total observed incidents, 258 (24.4%) included sexual aggression. Additional data variables included gender, intoxication, and intent as well as ratings of initiators' invasiveness and persistence, and documentation of targets' responses and intervention by third parties.

"We found that while [misperceptions](#) in the making and receiving of sexual advances do occur, especially in the highly sexualized environment characteristic of many bars, most of it appeared to be intentional harassment or aggression done for the amusement or gratification of the person making the overture, or for the amusement of his friends," said Graham. "This interpretation is supported by the finding that sexual aggression was related to the intoxication level of the target but not for the aggressor – that is, if the incident was about misperception, [it] should involve intoxication of both people. Instead, women who are more intoxicated may be seen as easier or more blameworthy targets, or as targets less able to resist."

Norris agreed. "This might occur for a number of reasons," she said. "For instance, attacking women who are defenseless makes it less likely that a perpetrator will be apprehended or experience any consequences as a result of his actions. These men are the ultimate opportunists. What might also come into play are negative stereotypes about women who drink. Other research has shown that women who drink are often seen as more sexually available than women who do not drink. They may also be seen in generally negative or derogatory ways – as sluts, unfeminine, or generally not worthy of respect – which may provide an excuse for attacking women sexually."

Given that staff rarely intervened, suggesting that this is normative and

generally accepted behavior in bars, both Graham and Norris had suggestions for changes that could be made at a bar level.

"It may help to avoid having male security staff who particularly endorse masculinity norms and asserting identity," said Graham.

"Signs can also be posted in the bar and restrooms indicating that 'bad' behavior, complete with examples, will not be tolerated and that perpetrators will have to leave the premises," said Norris. "A necessary component of this approach is to train staff to intervene: first, a warning, but if the behavior persists, the person will be asked or forced to leave. Men have to be given clear messages that there will be consequences for this type of behavior if we expect men to change. Conversely, the onus should not be placed on women for 'preventing' sexual assault. That said, women can often reduce their risk by clearly and firmly letting a man know that his behavior is not wanted or appreciated or seen as acceptable as soon as he commits an unwanted sexual act." Graham added that women can also vote with their feet by refusing to frequent establishments where sexual aggression is highly invasive or frequent.

Changes also need to occur at a societal level, added Norris. "There need to be clear messages to men about the inappropriateness of any type of sexual aggression. In addition, women need to learn to overcome messages they may have received early in life about being deferential or not wanting to cause embarrassment or 'create a scene.' Women need to be taught to stand up for themselves, to recognize that a sexually aggressive man is someone who has a problem and the onus should be placed on him to stop his unacceptable behavior."

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