

Study suggests that alcohol consumption contributes to self-blame in rape cases

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Credit: University of Birmingham

An experimental study has suggested that alcohol consumption contributes to self-blame in rape, and women who blame themselves may not be as likely to report it.

Following a hypothetical interactive [rape](#) scenario, participants who believed that they had consumed alcohol rather than a non-alcoholic beverage were more likely to self-blame, and those participants who reported higher levels of self-blame indicated that they would be less willing to report the hypothetical rape to the police.

Seventy-nine women between 18-32 years old were randomly assigned to either consume alcohol (mean blood alcohol content of .07 percent) or tonic water, prior to engaging in the scenario. Alcohol expectancy was manipulated by leading half of the participants in each beverage condition to believe that they were consuming alcohol, and the other half tonic water.

Seven days later, participants were surveyed about whether they thought rape had occurred and whether they would report it to the police had it actually happened to them.

Alcohol consumption and expectancy did not affect the likelihood that the nonconsensual intercourse depicted in the scenario was perceived and would be reported as rape—but self-blame did have an effect.

Dr. Heather Flowe, from the School of Psychology and the Centre for Applied Psychology at the University of Birmingham, explained "It is concerning that women in the current study were more likely to blame the hypothetical rape on their behaviour and character if they believed that they had consumed alcohol. It suggests that beliefs about alcohol consumption and women's accountability for rape are important factors in a victim's decision to report rape, and these beliefs can be powerful enough override factual information."

"Further work is needed because, in actual cases, particularly where victims have control over their alcohol consumption, the association between voluntary [alcohol consumption](#) and self-blame could possibly be

even stronger than we observed in this experiment."

The researchers have called for further investigation into the role of alcohol in how victims attribute responsibility for rape, and the implications this has for rape prosecution and victim recovery. Though little is known about the role of self-blame in men's construal and reporting of rape, the researchers indicated that there was no reason to think that their results would not apply to men, but it would need require further research.

The hope is that the results can be used to help develop educational programmes about the role of alcohol in rape victim self-blame. Training programmes about self-blame seem particularly important for first responders (e.g., police, medical and mental health professionals), who are likely to shape the victims' perceptions of self-blame and whether they should pursue legal remedy.

The authors of the study, published in *Aggressive Behavior*, note a limitation in the study in that specific [alcohol](#) expectancies were not measured and as such the role that specific types of outcome expectancies play in rape attributions and rape reporting is an outstanding research question. Further, the [blood alcohol content](#) levels investigated (mean BAC = .07 percent) may limit the extent to which the present results can be generalised. BAC levels in actual cases have been found to range from .04 percent to .39 percent (mean BAC = .19 percent).

Provided by University of Birmingham

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