

Review Article

The Effects of Substance Use on Public Perceptions of Rape Crimes

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Abstract

This paper will review the influence substance use has on public perceptions of rape crimes. We will examine an apparent double standard the public has towards survivors and perpetrators who consumed substances prior to the assault, and we will discuss professional implications and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Perpetrators; Rape crimes; Substance use; Survivors

Introduction

Rape crimes against women are serious, pervasive and growing issues in today's society [1,2]. In the United States (U.S.), rape is the most commonly experienced traumatic event by women [3]. In 2015 alone, there were over 400,000 incidents of rape [4]. It is estimated that up to 20% of women are raped or sexually assaulted during their lifetime [5], and up to 1% of women are raped during the 12-month period [6]. In addition to the high prevalence rates, rape also is one of the most severe traumatic events experienced by women [7]. Survivors of rape are likely to report a broader range of presenting issues [8], have greater symptom severity, and poorer treatment outcomes than women who experienced other types of crimes [9]. For instance, 82% of rape survivors have issues with fears and anxiety [10], nearly half develop depression [11], between 13% to 49% experience issues with alcohol, and between 28% to 61% struggle with illicit drug use [12,13]. Additionally, rape survivors are more likely to experience suicidal ideations and attempt suicide than survivors of other crimes [14].

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Although rape crimes are highly prevalent and a multitude of negative consequences have been documented, these crimes are still highly normalized and excused [15]. The responsibility for the assault often is shifted from the perpetrators to survivors, with the latter being frequently blamed and stigmatized by the public, police and court officers, and health professionals [1,15]. Additionally, the general public frequently excuses perpetrators' actions and grants them leniency in legal proceedings [15,16]. Many factors impact this widespread cultural acceptance however, substance use has been one of the greatest influencers on public perceptions of rape crimes and attitudes towards survivors and perpetrators. The impact of substance use on rape crimes is complex and multi-faceted, and the influence substance use has ranges from stigmatizing to excusatory. In this article, we will provide a systematic review of the impact substance use has on public perceptions of rape crimes and the differential consequences for survivors and perpetrators. Additionally, we will consider future research directions.

Substance Use

The first level of impact of substance use on rape crimes is the high prevalence rates of substance use among both survivors and perpetrators. Researchers have reported that up to 50% of survivors and more than 75% of perpetrators had consumed alcohol prior to an assault [17,18]. Considering that most rape crimes involved the use of substances, the influence it has on public perception highly relevant. Although the use of substances is associated highly with rape, research is inconsistent on the effects substance consumption has on these crimes and the public perception of survivors and perpetrators. The influence of alcohol on rape and rape survivors has been thoroughly investigated over the past 30 years however, empirical studies on the influence of specific illicit drugs on these crimes remain scant.

Investigations on the effects of alcohol revealed that the relationship between alcohol use and rape crimes is complex, and that public perceptions varied greatly when survivors and perpetrators were intoxicated prior to the assault [19]. While survivors generally were attributed with more blame and viewed more negatively if they were intoxicated before the assault [20,21], alcohol use by perpetrators was seen as a potentially exonerating circumstance [20,22]. This double standard held true even in cases when survivors and perpetrators consumed commensurate levels of alcohol. When both survivors and perpetrators were portrayed as equally intoxicated, observers were more likely to see survivors as blameworthy, consider perpetrators less responsible, question the validity of rape allegations altogether, and believe that it would be "unfair" to prosecute perpetrators as criminals [23].

Researchers have consistently supported the notion that survivors who willingly consumed alcohol prior to the assault were viewed less favorably, considered less credible, blamed more, viewed as more willing to have sexual intercourse, held more responsible for the incident, and judged more harshly than women who did not drink before they were raped [1,21,24]. Horvath and Brown [18] concluded

that intoxicated survivors were seen as guilty of “contributory negligence,” and as such, were considered more responsible for their sexual assault.

Negative beliefs about female survivors who consumed alcohol before the assault also were held by police officers and jurors, as higher levels of intoxication were associated with lower credibility ratings of survivors [23,24]. When survivors were drinking alcohol prior to the assault, police officers were more likely to believe that perpetrators genuinely considered sexual intercourse to be consensual. Likewise, survivors’ consumption of alcohol also was more likely to influence police officers’ judgments than perpetrators’ drinking [24]. Additionally, Wenger and Bornstein [25] identified guilty verdicts were less common when survivors were intoxicated before the assault.

Stormo and colleagues [26] noted that consumption of alcohol mediates participants’ perceptions of survivors’ behaviors. That is, when individuals believed rape survivors were under the influence of alcohol, all decisions survivors made were deemed to be contributors to the assault. However, when survivors were perceived as sober, the same decisions were seen as less impactful [26]. Further findings also revealed that women who were under the influence of alcohol also were seen as “more appropriate” for sexual assault and were viewed as more interested in having sexual intercourse [24]. Additionally, survivors who were raped while intoxicated were blamed at a greater rate than women who were raped by force [22].

Perpetrators’ consumption of alcohol, in most cases, had a positive effect on the public’s perception of them. Perpetrators were seen as less responsible and guilty when they were intoxicated prior to the assault [20]. They also were likely to be blamed less when rape survivors were under the influence of alcohol [24,26]. The only exceptions to this trend appear to be situations in which perpetrators were less intoxicated than survivors. If perpetrators seemed to have taken advantage of intoxicated women, they were held more responsible for the assault [27]. Even in cases when perpetrators who were under the moderate influence of alcohol assaulted women who were highly intoxicated, perpetrators were held more liable for the offense [26]. Additionally, perpetrators were seen as more blameworthy if they intentionally gave women large quantities of alcohol without their knowledge [28].

While there is a substantial amount of evidence regarding the impact of alcohol, consumption of illicit substances in rape cases has not been researched thoroughly. Therefore, there remains minimal evidence of how specific drugs influence perceptions of rape crimes, attitudes towards survivors and perpetrators, and attribution of blame. Additionally, researchers who have investigated the effects of illicit psychoactive substances on rape have only focused on marijuana, Gamma-Hydroxybutyric acid (GHB) and D-lysergic acid Diethylamide (LSD). No empirical evidence is currently available regarding the effects of highly consumed illicit substances such as heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine. This lack of investigation is especially concerning since these three substances account for more than a quarter of all illicit adult drug use in 2015 (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration; SAMSHA, 2016).

Girard and Senn [28] conducted one of the most comprehensive studies on the impact of illicit drugs on the public’s perceptions in rape cases. The authors found that drugs had a “marginally stronger” effect on observers’ perception than alcohol. Girard and Senn [28] suggested

that perceptions of legality and stigma attached to illicit drug use played a role in how survivors of rape who consumed drugs were viewed. Voluntary use of drugs, especially by women, was found to have a severe impact. Women who consumed drugs voluntarily were judged harshly, blamed at a higher rate and held more responsible for the assault. The authors concluded that survivors’ voluntary use of drugs decreased their “worthiness as a victim,” and perpetrators in these cases also were more likely to be excused for their actions [28]. Although results presented by Girard and Senn [28] indicated a clear pattern of blame and responsibility attribution, findings from other studies yielded contradictory evidence.

Stewart and Jacquin [24] found no significant differences in the consequences of consumption of alcohol, marijuana and GHB. The researchers indicated that the type of drug women consumed prior to the assault did not influence the assignment of blame or observers’ impressions of survivors. Additionally, Wenger and Bornstein [25] found that survivors who consumed alcohol and LSD were not viewed differently. Survivors who consumed LSD before the assault were not perceived as less credible and were not blamed more than survivors who drank alcohol. Given the evidence that is available currently, it is difficult to conclude with certainty the influence drugs other than alcohol have on perceptions of rape crimes.

Substance use, aside from affecting the public’s perceptions, also influences survivors’ internal experiences. Survivors who consumed alcohol and other drugs prior to the assault felt more shame, guilt and overall responsibility for the crime [21]. Survivors of these crimes were likely to question whether their experience was an actual rape. These beliefs also were found to influence survivors’ willingness to report the assault to the police. Survivors believed that, as a result of their intoxication, they had no “proof” of the crime and were not sure if the offense was serious enough. Female survivors of rape also believed that they would be treated differently by the police and legal system because of their consumption of illicit drugs [21].

Conclusion and Future Directions

Despite the seriousness of rape crimes, and the severity of impact they have on survivors, these crimes are often excused and trivialized in our society. Although many factors contribute to the societal attitudes towards rape, substance use appears to be one of the strongest influencers on public perceptions of these crimes. Extensive research on the impact of alcohol on public attitudes towards rape survivors and perpetrators revealed a troubling double standard that is associated with alcohol consumption prior to the assault. The use of alcohol by women before the assault had a severely negative impact on how they were perceived by the public. Most notably, survivors were attributed with more blame for the rape if they consumed alcohol prior to the assault. Additionally, women who consumed alcohol were viewed as less favorable and credible.

In essence, stigma towards alcohol consumption (and towards persons who drink alcohol) was an active influencer on the public’s view and treatment of rape survivors. These prejudicial attitudes could have a tangible and lasting negative impact on survivors. Ullman [29] found that up to 70% of rape survivors experienced negative reactions following the assault. Survivors of rape who experienced these negative reactions, when compared to survivors who did not face them, were more likely to experience psychological distress, maladaptive coping strategies, delayed recovery and strained interpersonal relationships [13,30]. Thus, survivors who consumed alcohol before the

assault, in addition to the negative effects of the rape itself, have a higher risk of facing a myriad of negative consequences due to public stigmatization.

Conversely to the attitude faced by survivors, previous research has revealed that the use of alcohol by perpetrators had a positive impact on public perception of them. For the most part, perpetrators who consumed alcohol prior to the assault were viewed as less responsible and guilty. Additionally, perpetrators were blamed less in instances when survivors were under the influence. These favorable attitudes towards perpetrators could be a significant contributor to the alarmingly low reporting and prosecution rates in rape crimes. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) [31] reported that both reporting rates of rape crimes and the prosecution of perpetrators are low. If we consider the high prevalence of alcohol use in rape crimes, and the positive perceptions towards perpetrators who used alcohol before the assault, it is likely that attitudes towards alcohol are highly influential. Additionally, consumption of alcohol prior to the assault has led to questions regarding the possibility of rape in those instances. These attitudes also are likely to contribute to the reporting and prosecution rates and impact perceptions of survivors and perpetrators.

In terms of future research, it is imperative to expand the scope of current findings and examine a wider range of licit and illicit substances. While there is a sizable body of research regarding the impact of alcohol, our understanding of the role other substances play in rape crimes is inadequate. Furthermore, the evidence that is presently available is contradictory. Research studies examining the impact of most prevalent illicit substances (e.g., heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine) would be particularly important. In addition to the high prevalence rates, the use of these drugs is often highly stigmatized, which could lead to further and more severe negative consequences for the survivors. Additionally, it would be important to examine the impact substance use post-assault has on public perception. Results from previous studies have indicated that a significant number of rape survivors struggle with substance use post rape. As a result, it is critical to examine if the negative attitudes that were associated with the use of substances prior to the assault would be prevalent post-assault.

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