A Silent Epidemic:
Alcohol and Sexual Violence Within Post-Secondary

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Abstract

Post-secondary institutions are high-risk communities for sexual violence. While sexual violence has always been an issue within post-secondary, it is only recently that the topic of sexual violence has gained more attention from media. This media attention has resulted in a public outcry and has resulted in the creation and implementation of post-secondary sexual violence-specific policies as well as educational initiatives and programming. Furthermore, the public outcry has also led to an explosion of studies being performed within academia, such as the gendering of sexual violence. However, there are also gaps in the literature. For instance, the connections between how alcohol culture and gender ideologies contribute to post-secondary institutions being such high-risk communities for sexual violence is not as emphasized as it should be. This paper aims to demonstrate how alcohol culture and gender ideologies contribute to the phenomenon of sexual violence on post-secondary campuses.

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Introduction

Post-secondary institutions are high-risk communities for sexual violence, and the problem is "severe, persistent, and does not appear to be subsiding" (Moorman & Osborne, 2016, p. 47; Boyle & Walker, 2016, p. 1392). More specifically, it is women in general that are put at an even higher risk than men for experiencing sexual violence (Quinlan, Quinlan, Fogel, & Taylor, 2017, p. 5), and the risk for experiencing sexual violence is even higher when in association with alcohol (Alper et. al., 2004). However, not only is alcohol linked to sexual violence, but the culture of alcohol in general is arguably one of the most common subcultures of post-secondary overall (Krieg and Krause, 2017; Hundersmarck, 2015, p. 49). Together, both sexual violence and alcohol consumption are highly gendered phenomena (Tsuyuki et. al., 2017; Santana. Raj, Decker, La Marche, & Silverman, 2006; Heron, 2003), and it is suggested that women being at such a higher risk than men for experiencing sexual violence is, in part, due to due to alcohol consumption and its subsequent effects on influencing traditional gender ideologies (Krieg & Krause, 2017). Therefore, this paper will argue that it is alcohol culture and traditional gender ideologies that contribute to post-secondary institutions being such high-risk communities for sexual violence. First, sexual violence as its own phenomenon will be discussed, as it is crucial to understand the basics of the issue. Followed by the section regarding sexual violence will be a discussion of alcohol culture and its formation of a relationship to sexual violence and gender ideologies.

Sexual Violence Within Post-Secondary Institutions

It is important to acknowledge that, while sexual violence has always been present,

it is only recently that the crime of sexual violence and its concerning physical and psychological impacts on victims have merited closer attention from media (Quinlan et al., 2017, p. 1). With a greater number of individuals stepping forward to share their life-altering experience(s) of sexual violence, the media has, overall, been forced to increase news coverage regarding post-secondary sexual violence. These news stories and other social movements have brought the issue of sexual violence to the light that it deserves and has, understandably, resulted in a public outcry. In response to this outcry, many post-secondary institutions have created and implemented sexual violence-specific policies (Quinlan et. al. 2017, pp. 9, 292). Other responses to the sexual violence outcry have included the creation and implementation of educational training and initiatives such as bystander training programs or consent-based workshops in an attempt to combat the issue of post-secondary institutions being such high-risk communities for sexual violence and to normalize the idea that sexual violence is a topic that needs to be and should be discussed freely and openly.

Definition of Sexual Violence

Definitions of sexual violence vary from institution to institution. Some institutions refer to "sexual violence" whereas others refer to, for example, "sexual assault" or "sexual harassment". While it may not seem as though the use of different terms are an issue, the differences can contribute to the lack of consensus regarding society's understandings of what sexual violence is or is not (Phillips, 2017, p. 180) and normalize behaviours such as unwanted kissing as non-violent. When sexual violence is thought of as only an assault or harassment, the definition becomes too limited, and it becomes more difficult for a person

or student to understand whether or not their experience is considered violent. Traditionally, sexual assault was thought of as only referring to rape rather than including, for example, instances of unwanted kissing or bodily contact. Today, a broad and all-encompassing definition of sexual violence, according to MacEwan University, is as follows:

> any action carried out without consent, whether physical or psychological, through sexual means or by targeting sexuality, and including all forms of sexual contact, sexual humiliation, sexual exploitation, degrading sexual imagery, sexting, cyber harassment, indecent or sexualized exposure via electronic or social media. (2015, 4.0)

It is important that an all-encompassing definition is used, as it is not only sexual assault that violates one's personal integrity, and it is important to normalize the idea that all behaviours that are considered sexual violence in general are inappropriate and harmful behaviours. When all-encompassing definitions are not used and/or a person has difficulty recognizing that their experience is considered violent, there are issues created around, for example, the decision to not report one's experience(s) to police or other post-secondary authorities. The subsequent effects of people failing to report their experience(s) of sexual violence may lead to the idea that sexual violence is a serious enough behaviour to be reported. In other words, not reporting may become normalized despite the grave consequences that come with being victimized.

Gendered Prevalence of Sexual Violence

It is important to recognize that, within MacEwan's definition of sexual violence (2015, 4.0), the identities of victims and perpetrators are not limited, as sexual violence

 "can occur between individuals regardless of sexual orientation, sex, gender identity, or relationship status (MacEwan, 2015, 1.0). However, although the act is not limited to any identity—such as sex—research has shown the perpetrators to primarily be men with the victims primarily being women (Statistics Canada, 2013). Furthermore, society has normalized the idea that it is females who are the passive victims and males who are the violent perpetrators, and it becomes difficult to believe or understand a situation when these roles are switched to women as being the perpetrators and men being the victims. When studying gender theories of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, the statistics that show women are the primary victims and men as the primary perpetrators are not surprising. Gender ideologies have taught hegemonic masculinity to be centered around power and dominance, whereas emphasized femininity is focused upon compliance with male power and dominance (Kimmel & Holler, 2017, pp. 8-9; Butler, 1999). While it is possible that these two roles are flipped, it is very rare that they are (Kimmel & Holler, 2017, p. 368).

These ideas of power and dominance within the male realm tie into theories of gendered violence. Studies show males to be more violent overall (Kimmel & Holler, 2017, p. 368); however, there are disputes between whether or not this is due to a biological factor or due to the ways in which males are socialized within their families and broader society. In the past and, still, some today believe that male violence is tied to a biological factor such as the amount of testosterone males' bodies contain in comparison to women, but biological and social evidence has disproven this many times (Kimmel & Holler, 2017, p. 248). Rather than biology causing the violence, it is the ways in which males and females

are socialized, which ties back to the discussion of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Furthermore, the ideologies of men as perpetrators and women as victims is prevalent or normalized in society, and this can have an effect on who is believed to be a victim.

Prevalence of Sexual Violence and Sexual Violence Reporting

There have been many attempts made to determine the prevalence of sexual violence within post-secondary institutions, but it is difficult to calculate the precise rate of the crime because "different survey methodologies render vastly different results and measure different intervals and experiences" (Kimmel & Holler, 2017, p. 371); some methodologies study police reports whereas others study victimization surveys. Studying a police report in comparison to a victimization survey will show drastically different results. According to victimization surveys, ninety percent of sexual violence cases are unreported for various reasons that may include, but are not limited to, the victim having a personal relationship with the perpetrator, fear of the reporting process, and/or fear of not being believed (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008, p. 8; Cantalupo, 2016, p. 130). However, despite these criticisms, the numbers that most seem to agree on says that, of a student population, at least thirty-three percent of females and six percent of males have experienced or will experience sexual violence at some point, if not at multiple points, throughout their academic careers (Quinlan et. al., 2017, p. 5). The sad reality of that matter is that the idea of experiencing sexual violence at some point throughout one's academic career seems to be an accepted reality because the idea of it has been so normalized for such a great amount of time.

Effects of Victimization

It is important that victims feel comfortable in reporting incident(s) because there are concerning and detrimental health consequences that arise when an individual is victimized by sexual violence—especially if the needs of the victim are not addressed immediately (Cantalupo, 2016, p. 127). There is a magnitude of health concerns that interest health care professionals but also the victims and families themselves.

> Physical and mental health effects of [sexual violence] have both acute and negative consequences for victims, as well as extensive social and economic consequences. Physical consequences include unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and Hepatitis C, cigarette smoking, and alcohol and drug consumption. Short and long term psychological consequences include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation, lack of sexual enjoyment, and fear (Senn et al., 2013, p. 2).

These detrimental health effects have the potential to lead to negative alterations in academic performance or, in some cases, total withdrawal from the institution. However, these academic consequences are only one of the few tangible costs that a victim may be forced to confront: they may face medical bills and loss of wage pay as well as intangible costs such as pain and suffering they endured. It is also possible that a person begins to engage in substance use, such as alcohol consumption, in order to cope with this idea of pain and suffering.

The Culture of Alcohol within Post-Secondary Institutions

Alcoholic beverages have existed for more than five thousand years, and engagement in alcohol consumption is present across the world (Heron, 2003, p. 1). In general, the consumption of alcohol seems to be a hedonistic pleasure for many, but the

rates, levels, and purposes of alcohol consumption not only vary across cultures but also across demographics such as age. For instance, those that fall within the demographic of post-secondary students, or youth, tend to be among the most frequent and heaviest consumers of alcohol (Demant & Järvinen, 2011, p. 91), and many students meet the criteria for alcohol disorders based on their frequency and rate or amount of consumption (Alper et. al., 2004; Ellis, 2016; Hundersmarck, 2015). The rate at which alcohol is consumed within post-secondary normalizes the culture. However, alcohol culture in general also normalizes traditional gender ideologies that can lead to sexual violence.

Alcohol Culture as a Community

Traditionally, social gatherings are linked with or even revolve around alcohol consumption. It is more common than not to see a family or a group of friends having dinner with glasses of wine or pints of beer, as alcohol consumption in social environments such as dinners has been normalized for numerous centuries (Heron, 2003). In general, however, engagement in alcohol culture is deemed as a collective and community activity. It is expected that one chooses to engage in alcohol culture based on the idea that it is a pleasurable and enjoyable experience (Demant & Järvinen, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Hundersmarck, 2015). In other words, a person does not generally engage in an activity that fails to be enjoyable. Furthermore, those who engage in this culture are expected to "not bring down" the rest of the group; for instance, if one is engaging in alcohol consumption, they are expected to add to the collective cheerfulness of the group (Demant & Järvinen, 2011). If a person is not adding to the collective cheerfulness of the group they

are engaging with, they may be looked at as an outsider or as a type of deviant. This idea of conforming to societal or community expectations, however, can be problematic if the behaviours are, for example, normalizing the idea of violent behaviours, such as sexual violence.

"How to" Engage in Alcohol Culture

Many individuals return home at the end of a work day and wind down with a glass of wine or a pint of beer. In other words, alcohol is a stimulant that can be used to assist in one's relaxation. However, the use of alcohol as a "medication" is frowned upon (Demant & Järvinen, 2011). This idea of alcohol being used as a medication refers to the idea that one should not use alcohol to hide or suppress their emotions or feelings. Furthermore, it is generally frowned upon to reach a point in which one is "uncontrollably intoxicated" (Demant & Järvinen, 2011). However, many post-secondary students engage in this culture with the intent of reaching this point of intoxication, so there is a confusing double-standard that exists in regards to the "appropriate" level of intoxication. In order to combat this, some individuals simply aim for a state of feeling "tipsy" (Zajdow & MacLean, 2014). However, the ways in which alcohol is used and the level of intoxication one reaches is strongly influenced by youth's peer group(s), but it is difficult to measure the extent to which this is true, as people are not fully cognisant of when and how they are influenced (Johnson, 2013, p. 747).

Levels of Alcohol Consumption by Post-Secondary Students and its Effects

Alcohol consumption within post-secondary is portrayed by some media as fun and

involving no detrimental consequences, whereas other forms of media, such as news broadcasting agencies, describe post-secondary alcohol consumption as "rampant and out of control" (Krieg & Krause, 2017, p. 92) which leads to, as previously mentioned, a plethora of health concerns. Health concerns are caused by the consumption of an enormous amount of alcohol. An American study estimated that post-secondary students spend approximately $5.5 billion per year on alcoholic beverages and consume a higher volume of alcohol than other drinks such as soda or coffee (Krieg & Krause, 2017, p. 92), which are already consumed in extremely large quantities. Rates and levels of consumption often varies between genders, though. Studies show that men consume a greater amount of alcohol than women, as one is considered more "masculine" if they can drink a greater amount than others (Alper et al., 2004; Krieg & Krause, 2017). In fact, it is noted that many men engage in alcohol consumption competitions with one another and compare the amounts consumed (Alper et al., 2004). These high rates of consumption are problematic from a health perspective. However, these high rates of consumption are also problematic in the sense that consumption in these competitive ways lead to the normalization of high-risk alcohol consumption. Since the peer group already influences levels and rates of alcohol consumption, it is not a far stretch to say that they also influence other behaviours, such as violent behaviours concerning sexual violence.

This concern for sexual violence by males can lead to females consuming less alcohol than the man due to safety concerns. However, the higher the level of intoxication for an individual, the person held less of a concern for safety (Krieg & Krause, 2017, p. 109). In other words, safety is not always on the forefront of a female's mind. This is problematic because it is suggested that the most influential predictor of a woman

experiencing sexual violence concerns whether or not she had consumed alcohol (Ford, 2017, p. 383). The idea that some women adjust their alcohol consumption based on the fear of experiencing sexual violence is upsetting for many, as there should be an inherent freedom for individuals to do as they wish without fear of something such as sexual violence occurring.

Not only are women more likely to be victimized while under the influence of alcohol, but men are more likely to commit sexual violence if they are under the influence of alcohol (Ford, 2017, p. 384). Many males who are engaging within the culture of alcohol seem to believe that they are entitled to experiences with women's bodies. However, when a female is consuming alcohol around males, their consumption is "more likely to be perceived by men as sexual, energetic, and attractive". In other words, the idea of an intoxicated woman desiring to engage in sexual behaviours with a male has been normalized. Furthermore, the use of alcohol is often used as an excuse for violating one's boundaries or personal integrity (Johnson, 2013, p.749; Zajdow & MacLean, 2014, p. 524). Seeing that alcohol consumption is so high and so normalized in post-secondary, and seeing that males often feel as though they have the rights to engage in sexual behaviours with an intoxicated female, it is not difficult to see how sexual violence is so pervasive on post-secondary campuses.

Gender within Alcohol Culture

It is recognized that alcohol consumption has the potential to lead to increased confidence in both social and sexual situations (Johnson, 2013, p. 748). However, with this increased confidence often comes with the increased prevalence of traditional gender

ideologies. In other words, traits of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are magnified. The social constructionist approach describes gender as being taught; individuals act based on societal expectations and social norms that are "most appropriate" in conjunction with their sex (Butler, 1999) and are socialized into conforming to their expected roles, and there is research that supports the idea of gender identities being "accomplished and performed through drink-related behaviours" (Johnson, 2013, p. 749). The differences in roles lead to differences in one's "career choice [or] parenting behaviour" as well as patterns of alcohol consumption (Krieg & Krause, 2017, p. 92). It is noted that, within alcohol culture, people—especially women—feel the need to conform to these gender expectations (Alper et. al., 2004; Ellis, 2016). When engaging in alcohol culture, women are, generally, expected to wear revealing—but not too revealing clothing, wear make-up—but not too much make-up—and present themselves as sexually available—but not too sexually available. Furthermore, among the females themselves, there is a "competition when it comes to dressing up and looking good" (Ellis, 2016). In other words, females are in continual and constant competition with one another. However, within the spaces that females portray themselves as this image of an emphasized female, many men feel as though they are entitled to experiencing or that they have the right to women's bodies (Alper et al., 2004), which is strongly tied to male domination and female compliance with that domination. In conjunction with alcohol and its effects, blurred lines regarding consent may be created and may be used as an excuse for sexual violence. High-risk alcohol consumption can exacerbate the associations with masculine gender ideologies (Tsuyuki et al., 2017, p. 3) and lead to the occurrence of sexual violence on campus.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the ways in which sexual violence and alcohol are gendered help to create a high-risk community for sexual violence within post-secondary institutions. While sexual violence as an issue on campus has gained media traction and while alcohol consumption within post-secondary has gained the same media traction, the two topics are not discussed in conjunction with each other enough when compared to the rate at which they occur or are interrelated; in other words, this is a silent epidemic. If society fails to acknowledge that these two topics are interrelated, they will never be discussed openly and honestly in a way that will bring adequate light to the situation.

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