

RESPONSIBLE DISINHIBITION: ALCOHOL AND MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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Abstract: Theories about alcohol's role in stranger violence abound. Theories about alcohol's role in 'domestic violence' do not. The targets of such violence differ as does the nature of the violence towards them. Theory needs to reflect this. This article reviews key theories linking alcohol and violence. Further, it reports women's point of view about the role of alcohol in their partner's violence. The results of the research are summarised and placed within the theoretical model, 'Responsible Disinhibition'. The model is grounded in the women's views and highlights individual responsibility for violence regardless of the level of intoxication. Finally, this article argues that theory needs to reflect the socio-cultural context in which it was constructed - a context that combines two culturally male and culturally tolerated behaviours - heavy drinking and violent behaviour.

Keywords: Alcohol, Violence to women, Feminist perspective, Socio-cultural context, Theory development, Domestic violence.

Rezumat: Teoriile despre rolul alcoolului în violența necunoscuților abundă, însă teoriile despre rolul alcoolului în „violența domestică” nu abundă. Țintele unei astfel de violențe diferă ca și natura violenței împotriva lor. Teoria trebuie să reflecte aceasta. Articolul revizuieste teoriile cheie care leagă alcoolul de violență. Mai mult, reflectă părerea femeilor despre rolul alcoolului în violența partenerului lor.

Modelul teoretic „Dezinhibare Responsabilă” are la bază punctele de vedere ale femeilor și subliniază responsabilitatea individuală față de violență, indiferent de nivelul de intoxicare. În cele din urmă, acest articol argumentează teoria conform căreia, în contextul socio-cultural în care a fost construit, trebuie să se reflecte un context care combină două comportamente culturale tolerate și culturale masculine: alcoolismul și comportamentul violent.

Cuvinte cheie: Alcool; Violența împotriva femeilor; Perspectiva feministă; Contextul socio-cultural; Dezvoltarea teoriei; Violența domestică.

remains under its influence. But to what extent is this tolerance expanding in the private sphere as well? Men's violence against their female intimate partners faces an increasing public investigation, but there is still the need for a better education, prevention and intervention. Adding alcohol within this framework may draw away the attention from such key tasks. Although, ignoring its influence does not support women who endure their intimate partner alcohol-related violence.

While the feminist theories have searched to explain men's violence, they rejected the part played by alcohol and drugs. This article offers a feminist theoretical view that emphasizes the part played by alcohol in men's violence to women. It is based on women's research, who have lived their intimate male partners violence and suggests their points of view relative to their experiences as receptors of this violence and not the points of view of certain external agents or of the men that perpetuate it.

ALCOHOL AND VIOLENCE – THEORETICAL APPROACH

There is no doubt that alcohol is a favouring factor in determining men's violent acts (Galvani, 2003). Yet, there is no concluding evidence that alcohol is directly responsible for a violent behaviour. The existent research indicates only an association of alcohol with an increased risk of violence, when the male performer drank (Leonard and Senchak, 1996; Kantor and Asdigan, 1997; Leonard and Quigley, 1999; Galvani, 2003) and a higher risk for hurting (Eberle, 1982; Berk et al., 1983; Corenblum, 1983).

How does the theory explain the link between them? No existing theory is looking for an explanation of alcohol part in men's violence to women. This gap in theory suggests that this different nature of men's violence to women as against men's violence to men is not fully understood. The existing theory that relates alcohol and violence is primarily neuter regarding genders, and this makes it improper as an explication of alcohol in men's violence against women. Nevertheless, there are series of theories from those psychological ones to the psycho-social ones that have tried to explain the relation between alcohol and crime, including violence.

Alcohol and violence have been associated for centuries. While science has been developing a more clear understanding of alcohol impact on human functioning, the public tolerance of the “atypical” behaviour still

PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

Psychological theories explain the effects of alcohol on the crime, arguing that the drug, the ethanol affects certain biological functions, leading to aggressiveness increase. Bushman and Cooper (1990: p. 341) revise 30 experimental studies meant to find out “whether there is a causal relation between alcohol and aggression”. They reached the conclusion that alcohol might cause aggression but they also pointed out that alcohol would have a less notable impact on behaviour if the studies had been blind or if the participants had been provided with nonaggressive alternative answer. Such methodological parameters throw a shadow of doubt on the accuracy of their conclusion.

While certain studies found evidence that alcohol led to an increase of aggressiveness, others have concluded that it did not matter so much there where increased level of aggression had already existed. Despite these non concordances, the pharmacological argument supports one of the most known theories “Disinhibition theory”. This theory suggests a direct link between alcohol and its pharmacological effect on cognition, especial on the brain centres that control the inhibitions, (Collins, 1982), leading to the “confuse perception and interpretation of the others’ behaviour” (Rossow et al., 1999: p. 1018) which, in its turn, may lead to a conflict that would have not occurred if the person had been sober. Still, the conflict is not the universal result of alcohol effects on cognition, what suggests that its disinhibition properties are not a sufficient explanation of the conflict.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PSYCHO-SOCIAL THEORIES

One of the psycho-social key theories that relate alcohol to aggression is “alcohol expectations” (Collins and Messerschmidt, 1993). This theory suggests that if people believe that alcohol will made them violent when they drink, they will act violently (Collins and Messerschmidt, 1993). Another research concluded that this expectation effect extends to sexual disinhibited behaviour from the part of men and not of women. (George and Norris, 1993). Women had negative expectations regarding drinking and sexual behaviour, expecting that if they had a couple of drinks with a man, this could be a possible prelude for undesired sexual behaviours. It is clear that questions regarding alcohol expectations may reveal significant socio-cultural differences between genders.

Expectations are also playing a major part in the theory of “deviation denial”. This theory suggests that alcohol is used as an excuse for deviant premeditated behaviours. The individual denies the responsibility for such a behaviour blaming the alcohol. Miller et al. (1997, p: 363) suggest that this theory could explain why “the use of alcohol may be related to aggression in some circumstances and why the cultural expectations relative to the use of alcohol may be important in explaining the behaviours when people drink.

Another psychological theory suggests that personality individual features are alcohol-related violent key behaviours. Sumner and Parker (1995) revised the key features that are believed to have contributed to this theory and they concluded that the features “may increase the possibility of both drinking and hurting” instead of being responsible of the crime made as a result of alcohol consumption (Sumner and Parker, 1995: p. 22).

SOCIAL LEARNING AND SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORIES

Social learning and the social theories offer more explanations about the relation between alcohol and violence. They suggest that a person will act in accordance with what he/she has learnt or by imitating other persons (Bandura, 1977). This may be the education given by the parents or the expectations and cultural norms.

Coggans and McKellar’s research on alcohol and aggression in adolescence supports the theory of social learning, suggesting that *home* is the context for learning the behaviour relative to alcohol effects. In their work, regarding risk taking in youth, Plant and Plant (1992: p. 143) concludes that “very often, the behaviours of the young reflect, or even imitate those of parents and of the others within the social environment”. This is important when we take into consideration alcohol in the violence against the women and the way in which messages about alcohol and violence are transmitted to children.

The importance of circumstances and context extended the debate on the impact of the social learning and of socialization about the behaviour relative to alcohol. The intercultural classical study about the relation between alcohol and violence combines social learning with socio-cultural theories, „... people learn about drunkenness what society tells them” (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969: p.172). The research supports this point of view, suggesting that both the formal legal systems and the informal rules of a no matter what circumstance combine themselves in order to control the behaviour (Homel et al., 1992; Fagan, 1993; Tomsen, 1997).

BIO-SOCIAL PSYCHO THEORIES

The interaction of biological, psychological and social factors earned large credibility in the theoretical debate. The research on the alcohol effects concluded that they are the mixture of alcohol, drinker’s characteristics and circumstance (Plant et al., 2002). Similarly, the relation alcohol-violence was theorized as a combination of these factors (Taylor and Chermack, 1993). „Alcohol myopia” (Steele and Southwick, 1985) derives from a combination of physiological and psychological arguments, suggesting that the physiological effect of alcohol eliminates the conflict the person feels when behaving in a particular way, for example violently. While this theory is supported by physiological theories, that relate alcohol to violence, it also requires the presence of a pre-existing conflict about the relevance of certain behaviours. What it does not explain is why the reduction of somebody’s inhibitions leads to the choice

for a negative behaviour in the detriment of a positive one. Similarly, “the hypothesis of cognitive disorganisation” suggests that the “use of alcohol results in attention narrowing regarding certain social clues but not regarding others” and only “the most prominent indices” are taken into account. (Miller et al., 1997: p.362). The way in which such social clues are chosen against others is not properly explained, it depends on the individual, the choice perceived by possible answers and the reflection of a learnt social behaviour.

THEORETIC ANALYSIS

There are two key aspects that these theoretical approaches do not take into consideration sufficiently: (1) cultural approach of drinking and violence; (2) gender differences inherent in such behaviours.

Generally, women drink less than men (Plant, 1997; Waterson, 2000; Lader and Meltzer, 2002; Walker et al., 2002). Moreover, National Bureau for Statistics of 2002, regarding the behaviour of adults who used to drink confirmed that “women drink less” (Lader and Meltzer, 2002). Women are not as violent as men are (James, 1995; Home Office, 2001; Powis, 2002; Flood-Paige and Taylor, 2003). Male wrongdoers represent an increased risk as against female wrongdoers when causing “serious injuries (Powis, 2002).

“Selective disinhibition theory” (Parker and Rebhun, 1995) best includes such cultural and gender differences. Social norms are the key to this theory, the constraint imposed on certain behaviours and the interiorization of different confliction norms, depending on the social situation. The most important part of alcohol in the violence against women is Parker and Auerhan’s thesis, according to which “...the norms that forbid violence in solving the interpersonal disputes in close or intimate relations may be weaker than the norms applied in other interactions: alcohol consumption seems to contribute to the selective disinhibition of a normative apparatus, already weaker. (Parker and Auerhan, 1998: p. 301). The “selective disinhibition” theory acknowledges that the social and individual norms vary. This implies that the norms which forbid violence should be strengthened, especially in relation with the interpersonal relationships. It also allows taking into consideration the socio-cultural factors that influence these norms.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Feminist perspectives are missing from this theoretical debate, notably. The feminist theories about violence are based on the premise that men are violent to women, because violence helps men to maintain power within the relationship, as well as the control on women. Feminist theoreticians criticize other theories for “the weak theorization of the gender” (Scully, 1990; Hearn, 1998), especially, because the research in the field of domestic violence identified power sharing as a protective factor (Yllo and Strauss, 1995; Leonard and Senchak, 1996). Feminist perspectives reject all individualist theories, those concentrating on the victim itself and the theories based on external things, such as alcohol, drugs or sexual abuse from childhood. The theories based only

on these factors are improper. They do not take into consideration the importance of a large socio-cultural context and the gender nature of such violence. Though, total rejection of these factors is perceived wrongly and is too protective with the feminist ideology. Most women do not forget their partners more easily if they are violent and abusive after they have drunk. Results show that women did not blame alcohol and they did not deny their intimate partners’ responsibility for their violent or abuse behaviours. This discovery is contrary to certain studies that suggest that women blame alcohol for their partners’ violence, either under the form of emotional self-protection or in order to minimize their partners’ responsibility (Mullender, 1996; Hearn, 1998; Dobash et al., 2000). Although alcohol played an important part in women’ life, women did not suggest that it would have been “the cause” of violence.

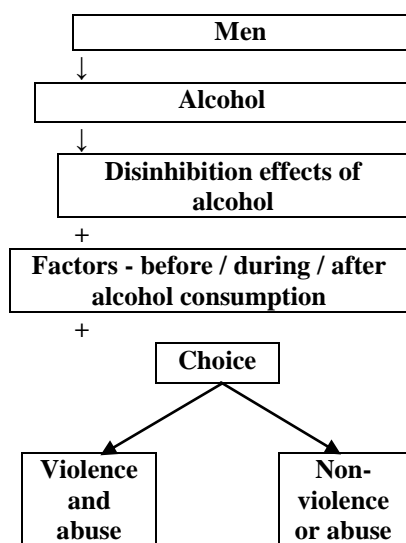
THEORY OF THE RESPONSIBLE DISINHIBITION

The relation alcohol-violence still remains the result of a combination between alcohol and other factors in relation with the individual and his/her environment, during and after ingestion. Women believe that the violent and abusive behaviour of their partners is their choice and should take upon themselves the responsibility for it. Thus, women accepted the psychological and disinhibitory effects of the partners. They believe that there were extra contextual or individual factors that contributed to the violent behaviours of their partners after alcohol use. However, they were very clear in stating that their partners should take upon themselves the responsibility for their behavioural choices, without taking into account the alcohol effects and other factors. This combination of the psychological and individual or contextual factors leads to the occurrence of the “responsible disinhibition” theory. The theory reflects the points of view of the women, according to which men are violent to them after they have drunk, through a combination of alcohol effects, individual or contextual factors and personal choice. It differs from the previous theories, having roots in the women’s points of view and experiences and, as a result, it emphasizes the individual’s need to be responsible for his behaviour after alcohol ingestion. It states that alcohol has disinhibitory effects, but it also mentions that it is the individual’s choice how to behave under its influence, because alcohol does not remove the personal will.

The theory of the “responsible disinhibition” contains elements of other theories, especially of “the disinhibition theory” and “deviation denial”. Though, the added value and difference is that it focuses on the women’s points of view, women who are living the violence relative to alcohol from the part of men. As against the “theory of disinhibition”, this does not accept the point of view according to which the cognitive abilities of the individual are affected by alcohol in such a way as to be unable to inhibit his actions. More, “the theory of deviation denial” suggests that alcohol is used as an excuse for a “deviant” premeditated act. On the

contrary, this theory suggests the individual's responsibility without taking into account the disinhibitory effects of alcohol.

“Responsible disinhibition pattern” (men):



The theory of the responsible disinhibition differs from the deviation denial, because it does not only explain a deviant premeditated behaviour, but it also comprises the post alcohol consumption factors which influence the individual during consumption. There are more similarities that can be observed in the selective disinhibition theory (Parker and Rebhun, 1995). The concept of selection or behaviour choice is associated to the women's points of view, but the selective disinhibition theory places more responsibility on alcohol than on the individual's statement. "Alcohol disinhibits violence selectively, depending on the contextual factors" (Parker and Auerhahn, 1998: p. 300). The theory of the responsible disinhibition places responsibility more on the individual than on alcohol regarding choices selection. It derives from the women's observations according to which alcohol has disinhibitory effects on their partners, but these effects are not sufficient to explain violence and abuse against them. Women indicated that in combination with alcohol, there are other factors that contribute to violence, but in the end, the behaviour choice is of the partner, because the responsibility remains to men and not to alcohol.

THEORY WITHIN CONTEXT

The women's points of view and the new theory have not been created in a cultural and social gap. MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969: p. 172) show that people "become live confirmations of the societies' teachings, they are living in". Nevertheless, the way in which people interpret society's teachings" will be established individually. For example, while the message at social level is "do not hurt women", at individual level, men choose to be violent to their intimate partners, according to the context and circumstances of that particular moment. This is happening within a public framework that brings them public blame, for sure.

More, the messages of the social level about the proper behaviour are not "neuter regarding gender". The social construction of gender roles exercises pressure on people to behave in a way corresponding to their sexual category (West and Zimmerman, 1991) and the roles relative to alcohol consumption and violence to women are not an exception. There is evidence that details the legal forgiveness and the policy of men's violence against women as well as the stigma on the women who drink. (Galvani, 2003). Still, until now there has not been proved the existence of certain genes who should be responsible for transmitting violence from one generation to another or which should matter in transmitting a different attitude in relation with alcohol consumption in men and women. Social construction of gender roles brings about our choices and behaviour, including alcohol consumption and biological differences. Alcohol consumption in men was not touched by the social stigma the way it has been that of women (Ettorre, 1997; Plant, 1997; Allamani et al., 2000; Waterson, 2000). The choice of men who consume alcohol is often seen as a sign of their manhood (Ettorre, 1997; White and Huselid, 1997) and of their sociability (Makela and Mustonen, 2000). The choice of women who drink alcohol is not related to feminism or sociability in the same positive way. Feminism and alcohol are mainly related when the choice of the woman who drinks alcohol or her behaviour after having been drunk are seen as contravening to the role of woman, specific to the gender. Alcohol consumption was considered a masculine field, the research commenting on the environment, gender, masculinity support and power (Hey, 1986; Green et al., 1987; Tomsen, 1997; Willot and Griffin, 1997; Campbell, 2000). Room (1980) in their work about violence and alcohol, they make reference to alcohol as "an instrument of intimate domination". They support the idea that alcohol "becomes an instrument of imposing or reaffirmation of the intimate domination, especially in an epoch of partial emancipation from the part of the subject towards the dominant person".

Inversely, the large alcohol consumption of women is rather related to depression (Gondolf, 1995), sexual availability (Green et al., 1987), difficulties in their relationships (Plant, 1997; Kelly et al., 2002) and the loss of the role (Plant, 1997). Thus, the key difficulty for a woman, who tries to defy alcohol-related violence of their male intimate partner, is to surpass the clear socio-cultural messages that transmit the idea that alcohol ingestion by men and alcoholism are "normal".

Men's violence against women brings about a new challenge. The women who suffer from violence and abuse confront themselves with social, legal and political systems that do not support them properly. The statements about power and control in relationships have been considered radical feminist points of view and have been marginalized or denied by the legislator. The problem is that if the social strong systems, including the criminal justice system, are not been ready to acknowledge the dynamics involved in men's violence towards women, what chances would individually have the women to talk

against a violent partner and to feel confident about being heard? For these reasons, few women tell somebody about their intimate partner's abuse or violence and some of them even strive themselves to keep this a secret.

DOUBLE DANGER

A woman who is living with an alcoholic and violent partner is in double danger. She confronts herself with a double dose of masculine behaviours, both of them being caught in the behavioural cultural. Her lack of confidence in being heard about her partner's violence is exacerbated when alcohol is added to this combination and when the cultural and social messages transmit that alcohol brings about and tolerates a non specific behaviour. Considering this double-edged sword, the chances for a woman to find its way out of an abusive situation, successfully and without obvious signs of help are completely against her, because of the lack of confidence and esteem which result from men's abuse against women. In front of such a double danger, the woman must fight against two strong traditions: alcohol consumption and women's abuse, both of them being deeply rooted in our society, in its policies and practices. More, the combination of these two behaviours serves to exacerbate the risk for violence and abuse against women.

IN CONCLUSION: CHANGING THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

By bringing together both the women's' answers and the new theory, as well as by their positioning within a social and contextual framework, it is obvious that there is the need for a change at individual and society level. The change should address not only to messages and rules of our culture in relation with men's violent behaviour when drinking, but also to gender inequalities. Women's' voices are not strong enough to be heard on their own. Women's' answers and the theory of the responsible disinhibition suggest clearly the need that men should take upon themselves the responsibility regarding alcohol consumption and the behaviour following this. What is difficult is that this contravenes to the socio-cultural messages, which emphasizes the alcohol masculine consumption and violence, as an intrinsic behaviour to their masculine identity. Thus, if for men, the purpose at individual level is to assume the responsibility for drinking, it is understood that the socio-cultural messages that emphasize such behaviours and masculine identities, should also be changed. Room (1980) requires a cultural redefinition in relation with alcohol and its role in violence: „If the power of alcohol as an instrument of domination is the power of a cultural belief that causes violence, that power will exist as long as we still believe in its power, act and react on this basis” (Room 1980: p.8).

Room's point of view about “reaction” is the key. The change should be proactive and introduced at society level, disseminated and supported by legislation, policies and practices that should be efficiently enforced at local level, as well.

In its turn, this should cause the change at individual level. Still, according to Room (2001: p.197) special attention must be paid to “the conditions in which the expectations of a culture about the drunkards' behaviour must change”. These conditions should not take into consideration the social and cultural construction of gender parts. Such a change will take place in the moment when women, who endure men's violence and abuse due to alcohol, will be properly acknowledged and approached.

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