

## **Brooke Haugen's Presentation Notes for 2005 Sociology Research Institute, University of Minnesota "Do drinkers let other drinkers off the hook?"**

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study investigates how people make judgements about deviant acts (physical assault, robbery, and theft) and the culpability and responsibility of offenders and victims. In particular, this research attempts to ascertain how the use of alcohol by the offender and/or victim influences those judgements. To investigate this, I wanted to answer the following research questions: How do people make judgements about deviant acts (physical assault, theft, robbery) and the role of the people involved (offender, victim)? And How does the use of alcohol by an offender and/or a victim influence those judgements? Before I could answer these questions, I researched background information on the topic.

### **HYPOTHESES**

A few hypotheses that I made before conducting my research are as follows:  
I believe that below-average drinking participants will rate an intoxicated offender more responsible and above-average drinkers will rate the intoxicated offender less responsible. In situations where the offender was intoxicated, overall, I believe the offender will be viewed as less responsible as previous research has suggested. In situations where the victim was intoxicated, I believe that participants will rate the victim with a higher responsibility. When neither the offender nor the victim were intoxicated, I believe the offender will be found more responsible, a police report should be filed will be rated higher, and the victim should not forgive the offender will also be high. When both actors are intoxicated, I believe that the victim will be rated with higher responsibility and that the offender should be forgiven will be rated high. In vignettes depicting an assault, I believe that filing a police report will be rated low and offender forgiveness will be rated high. Finally, in both robbery and theft situations, I believe that participants will rate filing a police report high and offender forgiveness low.

### **ATTRIBUTION THEORY**

The underlying theme of my study is how an observer makes judgements (attributions) about an offense in which alcohol intoxication of the offender and/or victim is present. Attribution theory is the study of the causal interpretations that persons give to events in their environments. Attributions require three criteria to be met: distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency. Distinctiveness refers to the actor's behavior towards this stimulus and their behavior towards other stimuli. Consensus refers to the differences between the actor's behavior and the behavior of others. Consistency refers to the match between the actor's behavior toward this stimulus at this time and the actor's behavior towards this stimulus at other times.

### **ALCOHOL AND DEVIANCE**

The theory of Selective Disinhibition states that alcohol selectively disinhibits aggression depending on contextual factors specific to the situation, the people involved and their relationships to one another, and the impact of bystanders. The theory argues that individuals have internalized norms of proper behavior in certain social contexts. However, people violate norms and may have conflicting sets of norms in the situation. If a situation has the potential to become violent, it takes "active constraint"—a proactive and conscious decision not to use violence to solve the dispute—to prevent violence. In some of these cases, alcohol may cause one to ignore norms that usually prevent individuals from engaging in violent behavior. When alcohol is involved, the nature of the social situation or context in which the behavior takes place is important in determining the outcome of a potentially violent situation.

In relation to this theory, attribution, and my research, the just world hypothesis decreases responsibility of an intoxicated offender, and in some cases increases the blame on the victim. The just world hypothesis explains the increase of responsibility to a drunken victim. Intoxication of the offender may be used as an excuse for their actions because of the belief that alcohol, as a disinhibitor, causes bad behavior, disregarding individual motivation.

### **DEPENDENT VARIABLES**

Following each vignette, participants were asked six questions. (1) To what extent did alcohol influence the offender? Responses were rated on a scale of 1 (Alcohol had no influence on the offender) to 7 (Alcohol influenced the offender's actions 100%). (2) To what extent did alcohol influence the victim? Responses were rated on a scale of 1 (Alcohol had no influence on the victim) to 7 (Alcohol influenced the victim's actions 100%). (3) Should a police report be filed against the offender for what happened? Responses were rated on a scale of 1 (Police report should not be filed) to 7 (Police report should be filed). (4) How responsible is the offender for what happened? Responses were rated on a scale of 1 (The offender is not at all responsible) to 7 (The offender is completely responsible). (5) How responsible is the victim for what happened? Responses were rated on a scale of 1 (The victim is not at all responsible) to 7 (The victim is completely responsible). (6) To what level should the victim forgive the offender? Responses were rated on a scale of 1 (The offender should be forgiven completely by the victim) to 7 (The victim should not forgive the offender at all).

### **METHODS**

I used a survey with an experimental design to conduct my research. The survey was administered to 89 Introduction to Sociology students. The survey started with a few questions about the participants' own drinking behavior. Then, participants received 3 different vignettes describing a physical assault, a robbery, and a theft situation at a house party amongst a single male offender and a single male. After reading each vignette, participants provided ratings of the influence that alcohol intoxication had on the offender and the victim, whether or not a police report should be filed, how responsible the offender and the victim were for what happened, and whether or not the victim should forgive the offender. Each vignette manipulated intoxication of the offender and/or victim using a between-subject experimental design. In other words, because of this manipulation of the intoxication of the offender and/or victim within the three offenses, there were a total of twelve different vignettes; however, each participant was randomly distributed only three of the twelve vignettes. Each vignette was identical in semantic and syntactic content, except for manipulations of the independent variables.

### **RESULTS**

When comparing the above-average and below-average drinkers' responses to the dependent variables, it was found that there was a significant difference in the responses to the dependent variable question 1. This is interesting because the below-average drinkers rated the influence of alcohol on the offender's actions higher than above-average drinkers.

In the situations where the offender was intoxicated, significant differences were found in dependent variable questions 1 and 3. When the offender was not intoxicated, participants responded that a police report should be filed against the offender for what happened.

In the situations where the victim was intoxicated, participants put more responsibility on the victim for what happened.

In situations when neither the offender nor the victim were intoxicated, it was found that the offender should not be forgiven on a personal level by the victim more so than when alcohol was involved.

In situations where both the offender and victim were intoxicated, participants put more responsibility on the victim for what happened.

In the situations where the offender was not intoxicated and the victim was more responsibility was put on the victim for what happened.

## **RESULTS**

In the vignettes that dealt with a theft, participants rated that a police report should be filed against the offender for what happened higher than the other crime types. Participants put more responsibility on the offender in theft cases. Participants thought that the victim in theft cases should not forgive the offender on a personal level.

In the vignettes that dealt with a physical assault, participants ranked filing a police report lower than for the other crime types. Participants put less responsibility on the offender and more on the victim in assault crimes. Participants believed that the victim should forgive the offender on a personal level in assault cases.

In robbery cases, participants put more responsibility on the offender and less responsibility on the victim. Participants also rated that the victim should not forgive the offender on a personal level high in robbery instances.

## **CONCLUSION**

People's perceptions on the connections of alcohol intoxication of an offender and/or victim with certain deviant behaviors are an important social issue. This study had many practical legal implications. These perceptions may be those of everyday people or those of a jury. For instance, the legal system depends heavily on whether intoxication precludes criminal intentions in determining guilt and punishment (Wild et al, 1998). Acts of deviance are detrimental to society, but in some cases, offenders should be viewed as less culpable, and more blame should be put on external factors that also lead to the deviant act.

This study allows theories of perceived culpability for deviant behavior to be tested systematically. My research evaluated the impact of offender and/or victim intoxication on participants' perceptions of (1) the role of alcohol use by the victim and/or offender in causing the robbery, theft, or physical assault, (2) responsibility of the offender and/or victim for the crime, and (3) appropriate level of consequences (police report, not forgiven personally) for the crime.

Although, I found some significant results in my research, there are limitations of this study that could have effected those results. The most obvious limitation of my study was the number of participants (N=89). Because this was such a small number, many of my analyses were found to be not significant. This was true especially for evaluating significance between below-average drinkers' perceptions with above-average drinkers' perceptions. Also, because there was such a small sample size, the results are not strongly generalizable to the greater population. Another limitation of this study was that all the offender and victim sex was male in the vignettes. This research did not look at female offenders or victims or a mix of male and female, so the results of this study can not be compared to female offenders and/or victims.

Another limitation is that attributional biases may have set limits on participants' judgements. It is known that people have a general tendency to attribute others' behavior to personal disposition and one's own behavior to situational factors. These biases may have led participants in my research to generally underestimate the role of situational factors. Future research is needed to determine whether people make the same attributions regarding the role of alcohol, responsibility, and consequences for their own behavior.

Future research could significantly add to the results of my research. It would be interesting to study if the perceptions of participants are different when the offender and/or victim are female. It would also be interesting to study the effects that different acts of alcohol-related deviance had on peoples' perceptions.