



Social Context Matters: Research on Alcohol Use in Relationship to Others

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There is an old saying about people, places, and things making a difference in the process of recovery. And it turns out that recent research continues to show that there is a lot of truth to this adage. For instance, relative to partner drinking, Holden and Rollins (2019) show that how similar or different two partners are in their drinking affects relationship conflict. They examined survey data from 514 individuals who were mostly heterosexual, middle-aged, adult White men and looked at how much each respondent's drinking differed from their partner's drinking. They found that as alcohol consumption between the partners grew more discrepant, they were likely to observe decreasing couple satisfaction and increasing conflict. Additionally, for women in the sample, higher levels of discrepancy predicted increased conflict related to alcohol. In other words, it is not just the sheer amount of drinking that make a difference to conflict in the relationship, but the degree of similarity in the drinking levels.

Relatedly, an online survey of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) adults in romantic relationships (Mitchell & Gamarel, 2018) demonstrated that perceptions of one's partner's heavy alcohol use was related to an increase in the likelihood of the reporter engaging in heavy use, as well as a preference of pursuing couples-based alcohol treatment. Thus, understanding how discrepant or similar drinking is between relationship partners may provide a way into discussion on relationship conflict and potentially into couples-based treatment.

Partner drinking may also have certain protective qualities. Muyingo et al. (2020) used a meta-analysis to examine 17 studies that included over 10,000 couples to see if one partner's alcohol use influenced the other partner over time. Each study measured the romantic partners on at least two points in time, and they did find that there was an influence. In fact, the influence women had was stronger than that of men. Additionally, these influences could be either a risk or a protective factor. So again, assessment of each partner is important and may uncover not only problematic influence, but potentially protective influence.

Perceptions related to social context matter even outside of romantic relationships. Graupensperger, Turrisi, Jones, and Evans (2020) examined the ability of social norms to predict college student alcohol use among students in peer sport clubs. They found that perceived group norms related to drinking predicted self-reported alcohol use. When students identified more strongly with their team, they tended to adhere to the perceived descriptive team drinking norm. Interestingly, norm-based behavior also has intervention power. Carey, Merrill, Boyle, and Barnett (2020) found that text messages promoting pro-moderation drinking

norms had adaptive short-term effects on self-reported drinking among college students. Using an experimental design, they randomly assigned the students (N=121) to either daily texts with accurate drinking norm information or historical facts for 10 weeks. Compared to baseline drinking, those receiving the pro-moderation messages had reduced peak consumption and alcohol consequences at three months post-baseline compared to the control group. Further, relative to the control group, individuals in the pro-moderation message group reported perceiving others as drinking less on their heaviest day. They also perceived others as less approving of negative consequences related to alcohol, as well as more peer approval of using protective behavioral strategies. Unfortunately, these effects did not persist to six months post-baseline, but the initial results showed the power of norm-based interventions.

To summarize, whether in the context of a romantic relationship, a sports club, or peer groups, the way a person is thinking about partner alcohol use is relevant to understanding their drinking. Taking time to identify relevant relationships, assess how those individuals may be using alcohol, and consider how their behavior may influence an identified patient's behavior is worth exploring. Such assessment may benefit understanding antecedents and consequences of use, aspects of relationship conflict or satisfaction, preferences for treatment, and even relevant cognitive standards that people may be using to evaluate their own behavior.

References

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