

COMMENTARY

The broader context of preventing alcohol-related intimate partner violence

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We commend Leonard and Quigley [1] for their strong summary of the evidence of the impact of alcohol on intimate partner violence (IPV). Rather than reiterating crucial points that they have made about the importance of addressing alcohol use among men for whom such use is linked to IPV, we extend their discussion to implications for the broader context for preventing alcohol-related IPV (AIPV).

Leonard and Quigley focus on identifying men for whom the pharmacological effects of alcohol reduce inhibitory cues sufficiently for them to engage in IPV. Within the constraints of their brief review, this focus as a priority issue is justified. However, research and interventions also need to address the various ways that alcohol can affect IPV and various influences. Meta-analysis of experimental research on alcohol and aggression [2] indicates that expectations and learned behaviour are inseparable from the pharmacological effects. Thus, although alcohol may affect IPV partly through pharmacological effects on perceptual and cognitive functioning (e.g. greater attention to salient cues and poorer problem solving), how these effects are experienced and their impact on behaviour will be affected by cultural and situational norms and expectations. Addressing the context of alcohol use is an important addition to addressing alcohol's effects on perpetrators.

We frame our discussion using three theoretical models: (i) the ecological model placing IPV in the context of societal, community, relationship and individual influences [3,4]; (ii) routine activities theory [5] postulating that crime occurs only when there is the confluence of a willing offender, a suitable victim/target and the lack of

a capable guardian to prevent the crime; and (iii) situational crime prevention theory extending routine activity [6,7] to include the environment (e.g. making crime less rewarding, increasing the risk of being caught and societal condemnation) and crime precipitators (e.g. provocation, cues and pressure from others) [8]. In the following discussion, we refer to perpetrators as men and victims as women to reflect the typical gender roles in IPV and abuse.

Figure 1 shows a model incorporating the three theories. Individual-level influences from the ecological model are encompassed under the motivated offender (perpetrator); third parties include guardians (from routine activity theory) but also include 'handlers'—that is, individuals who influence perpetrators' behaviour using knowledge of offenders' 'handles' such as their desire to be highly regarded by friends, family or society [9]. Third parties are mostly ignored in IPV research because IPV often occurs in private, although they can play a role; for example, the presence of other adult men in the household was associated with lower prevalence of IPV [10] among female respondents to the US National Violence Against Women Survey [11].

The figure includes environmental influences and precipitators occurring at all levels of the ecological model and affecting potential perpetrators, victims and third parties, including identifying some of the instigatory and inhibitory factors noted by Leonard and Quigley. Alcohol use is also included in the model, with possible effects on all potential participants in IPV. In the following, we provide a few examples to illustrate how this model highlights opportunities for research and intervention.

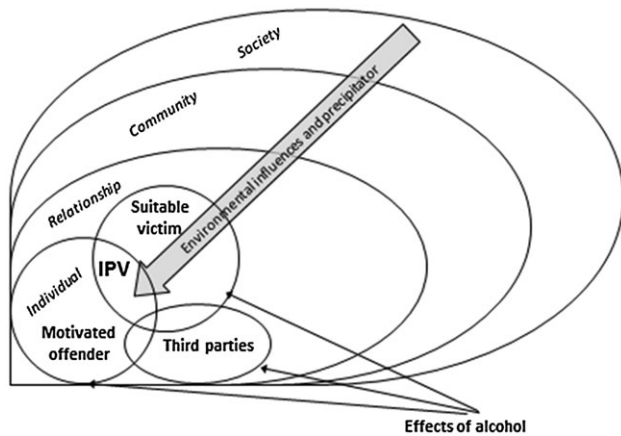


Figure 1. *Alcohol-related intimate partner violence prevention model.*

Societal

Alcohol policies (pricing and outlet density) are examples of societal level environmental factors that may impact AIPV through decreasing frequency of intoxication of potential perpetrators. Although currently there is no strong evidence that alcohol control policies actually reduce IPV [12], most evaluations have been limited to general alcohol policies—research is needed on policies that focus specifically on preventing IPV.

Drinking behaviour is culturally learned, as is violence. Research suggests that people generally believe that individuals are responsible for their actions when drinking; however, they nevertheless see alcohol as an explanation for this behaviour [13]. Thus, despite general consensus in many societies that perpetrators should be held responsible regardless of their level of intoxication, the impact of inhibitory cues on perpetrators (noted by Leonard and Quigley) may be reduced if there are less severe social or legal penalties for intoxicated perpetrators of IPV [for example 14].

In terms of precipitators, alcohol-related violence generally has been related to learn drinking cues such as male concerns about personal power [15] and asserting social identity [16] in drinking contexts. For example, insults are culturally defined precipitators for aggression by young men in bars [17]. However, to our knowledge, there is no evidence of similar alcohol-related precipitators at the societal level relating to IPV.

Community

Contexts that encourage excessive drinking through the availability and promotion of cheap alcohol (e.g. university fraternity parties, bars and sporting clubs) often include the volatile mixture of support for violence generally combined with a culture of sexism and objectification of women [18–20]. These highly masculinised drinking environments may provide potential perpetrators with

the environmental permission and temporal cues that make AIPV more likely. On the other hand, cultural norms that condemn alcohol-related violence including IPV, especially strong condemnation by peers, could reinforce inhibitory control, partly overcoming the disinhibitory effects of alcohol.

In terms of community impacts on potential victimisation, women whose partners are heavy drinkers are at increased risk of IPV. Given that IPV is often hidden, better supports from friends and the community generally for women who are dealing with heavy drinking partners might help decrease women's risk of victimisation from AIPV.

The potential for effective intervention by third parties may be greatest at the community level, although to date this remains mostly unexplored. Research is needed to assess the extent that young men (i.e. potential handlers) are aware of alcohol-related partner abuse by a peer group member and whether they try to reduce his abusive or aggressive behaviour when drinking. Young men are strongly influenced by male peers. Yet, little research has examined the potential to harness this influence for preventing IPV [with some exceptions, for example 21], and these have not focused specifically on AIPV. Research is also needed on the potential role of third parties in discouraging alcohol consumption of friends who are known to drink excessively and become aggressive when they drink.

Relationship

Alcohol-related IPV can be affected by how both victims and perpetrators perceive the role of alcohol [22]. Research with female victims [23,24] suggests that, like society generally, they do not see alcohol as an excuse but they do see it as an explanation. Wilson *et al.*, qualitative research [23] found that some perpetrators used intoxication to disown their violence. In addition, some female victims took on the role of caretakers of their abusive alcoholic partners. Thus, alcohol affected not only the perpetrator's behaviour but also the dynamics of the relationship generally. Formal and informal supports can help victims redefine their role in this relationship environment, while potential handlers can call the perpetrator on his disavowal of his intoxicated behaviour.

Perceptions of the role of the victim's drinking can also affect the context of AIPV. If the victim, perpetrator and/or possible third party attribute IPV at least partly to the victim's drinking, this may increase self-justification for the perpetrator and self-blame of the victim [25], possibly delay the victim in seeking help for IPV [23] and may make third parties less likely to intervene. If the victim and possible guardians are also more likely to excuse the perpetrator's IPV because of his drinking,

this may further reduce the perpetrator's inhibitory control and even allow the perpetrator to drink purposefully prior to IPV in order to use alcohol as an excuse. These are important issues for future research.

Alcohol's role in IPV—the way forward

Leonard and Quigley [1] highlight the importance of treating those who drink excessively and perpetrate IPV, an area where interventions have shown some impact [12]. Our theoretical framework expands consideration of research and interventions to address the following: societal and cultural norms and expectations, the potential role of guardians and handlers, the impact of drinking generally on the relationship and perceptions of the role of victims' drinking—areas that have received little attention to date.

We have focused on IPV involving abuse and control by a male partner toward a female victim, although not all couple violence involves abuse and control. Johnson [26] proposed the distinction between situational couple violence (without intimidation and control) and intimate terrorism, and it may be that the perpetrator's loss of inhibitory control when drinking [1] is more important for situational violence than for intimate terrorism. It may also be that situational violence includes a greater role of third parties. For example, Outlaw [10] found that the presence of other adults was associated with less severe IPV but only for women whose husbands were less controlling [10]. Thus, the opportunities for effective intervention by guardians and handlers may be enhanced beyond our present focus.

Because of the lack of research examining systematically how alcohol is related to IPV, many strategies for preventing AIPV remain unexamined, including addressing the relationship of heavy drinking with instigating/inhibiting factors as noted by Leonard and Quigley. That is why this special journal issue is so timely and important. Our model that combines the ecological model, routine activity theory and situational crime prevention provides a framework for developing and evaluating multiple strategies.

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