The Effects of Alcohol Intoxication and Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies on Lab-Based Partner Aggression

Key Terms Defined

**Intimate partner aggression** – an act performed against a romantic partner with the intent to cause harm. The current study focuses on physical intimate partner aggression, which includes acts such as hitting, punching, and kicking that cause physical harm.

**Emotion regulation** – the attempt to change one’s emotional experience in some way.

**Anger rumination** – an emotion regulation strategy that involves repeatedly thinking about an anger-eliciting experience and how one felt at the time of that anger experience.

**Reappraisal** – an emotion regulation strategy that involves taking a different perspective from the one used initially or seeking an alternative interpretation of an emotional experience.

Background

Identifying risk factors and processes that may lead to intimate partner aggression (IPA) is important in order to develop effective intervention and prevention efforts. This study examines factors that may interact to impact risk for IPA, including alcohol intoxication and two emotion regulation strategies: anger rumination and reappraisal. Alcohol use has been shown to increase risk for aggressive behavior. The Alcohol Myopia Model, a theory used to explain the impact of alcohol intoxication on behavior, suggests that intoxication narrows one’s focus to the most salient cues. In situations where aggression occurs, the most prominent cues are often provoking cues, such as an insulting remark, while aggression-inhibiting cues, such as thinking of consequences of aggressive actions, tend to be less salient. Individuals’ use of emotion regulation in response to anger-eliciting events may impact what cues they perceive in their environment and, therefore, their risk for IPA.

Individuals develop relatively stable trait-like patterns of emotion regulation, yet are also able to engage in specific strategies in response to a particular situation (state emotion regulation). When responding to an anger-eliciting event, both trait and state emotion regulatory strategies may impact the risk for IPA. For example, both trait and state rumination may enhance the effects of alcohol on IPA by increasing one’s focus on provoking cues, while reappraisal may lessen the effect of alcohol on IPA because of its emphasis on interpreting an angering event in a new and less negative way. The aim of the current study is to examine the interaction between these different risk factors in contributing to IPA.

Study

Participants were 69 couples. To meet study inclusion criteria, participants had to be 21 or older, social drinkers, in a relationship of at least four months, and one member of the couple had to be a university student. Couples came to the lab together but completed the study entirely in separate rooms. Participants filled out questionnaires that measured their IPA history and levels of trait rumination and reappraisal. Then each participant was randomly assigned to either drink alcohol or a placebo beverage. Those in the alcohol group drank an amount of alcohol to reach legal intoxication (over .08% as measured by a breathalyzer). The placebo drink was made to taste and smell like it had alcohol in it. Next, participants were told to think about a recent conflict with their partner for two minutes (an angering event) and were randomly assigned to use reappraisal, rumination, or no instructions during the two minutes. After participants completed the recall, they were told they were going to compete with their partner in a reaction time game. Participants were told that the losing partner on
each trial would hear a white noise blast of a volume and duration that was preselected by the other partner. Participants were not actually playing their partner, but instead they were playing a computer program, which is set up so that all participants “lose” the first trial and hear the loudest and longest possible blast. We examined the noise levels participants ostensibly set on the 1st and 2nd trials of the task as measures of unprovoked and provoked IPA. Participants were fully informed of the purposes of the study before leaving. To ensure participants who drank alcohol were safe, they stayed at the lab until they were sober and were either picked up by a friend or provided with a taxi to get home.

Consistent with the Alcohol Myopia Model, results revealed that alcohol intoxication did not lead to greater IPA when examining the first trial of the aggression task (unprovoked aggression). However, participants who drank alcohol were more aggressive on Trial 2 (provoked aggression) than those who did not drink alcohol. Results also showed that alcohol intoxication interacted with emotion regulation to impact risk for IPA. Specifically, higher trait reappraisal was related to lower unprovoked IPA among participants who drank alcohol and were instructed to ruminate about their past conflict. When examining provoked IPA, instructed rumination and trait rumination interacted with alcohol intoxication to predict greater perpetration. In addition, higher trait rumination was related to higher provoked IPA among individuals who were sober and received no instruction for thinking about a past conflict.

**Figure 1**

![Diagram](image)

**Implications for Violence Prevention**

Findings from this study have important implications for reducing IPA perpetration. In particular, our findings suggest that it is important to address both alcohol use and emotion regulation in prevention and intervention efforts. More specifically, when intervening with IPA, reducing individuals’ use of alcohol may in turn help to reduce risk for perpetration of IPA in response to provocation. Interventions that include emotion regulation training may also help to reduce risk for IPA perpetration. For example, increasing trait reappraisal skills, such as taking another person’s perspective when thinking about past relationship conflict, may help to reduce risk for IPA, even when one is intoxicated. Additionally, anger rumination appears to set the stage for IPA, particularly when one is intoxicated and provoked. Explicitly targeting rumination in preventions and interventions to decrease anger rumination may be helpful for reducing risk for IPA perpetration.
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Other resources for information on this topic
http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/prevention.html

References

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