Exploring experiences of, and attitudes towards, voluntary alcohol intoxication and non-consensual sex amongst a student population

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Clare began her departmental funded PhD in January 2008 on a full-time basis. The PhD emerged from a specific interest in sexual offences and the impact of stereotyped beliefs and attitudes about rape case attrition within the Criminal Justice System. The PhD is being carried out in conjunction with the School of Law of Liverpool John Moores University.

Supervisors

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Abstract

Aims and Objectives

The research aims to identify the prevalence of voluntary alcohol use and non-consensual sex amongst a Liverpool based student sample. The research also aims to highlight the frequency with which alcohol related strategies (e.g. intentionally targeting an individual who is too drunk to consent to sex) are used by perpetrators to procure victims. The study will also examine perceptions and misconceptions surrounding sexual consent and the capacity to consent as well as examining a number of beliefs and attitudes regarding alcohol consumption and sexual offences. The PhD aims to develop further understanding of the influence of alcohol on people’s perceptions and judgements of responsibility in rape cases as well as highlighting misconceptions surrounding the law of rape. The research aims to propose strategies for addressing these issues as well as promoting awareness and guidance related to ‘staying safe’.

Methods

The study will adopt a mixed methods approach using quantitative survey data and qualitative semi-structured interview information. The quantitative strand of the research is currently
underway with 800 students to date having completed the relevant on-line questionnaire. Qualitative semi-structured interviews with Merseyside based rape crisis counsellors have just commenced in order to complement and contextualise the quantitative data.

Description of argument/results to date

Whilst much American research has addressed students’ experiences of non-consensual sex when drunk, this is a largely un-examined area in the UK. The current research therefore attempts to address this gap in knowledge and provide an initial estimate of the extent of the problem. The term Drug Facilitated Sexual Assault has received much recent media coverage despite toxicological evidence demonstrating that voluntary alcohol consumption is most frequently associated with a sexual offence, as opposed to the surreptitious administration of a date-rape drug (e.g. Rohypnol). The current research therefore gives precedence to this highly significant substance and focuses on the importance of voluntary self-administration. Historically, research in the field has been conducted from the perspective of women as the victims of sexual offences and men as the perpetrators of such acts. Whilst this perspective has been well justified, it has neglected those instances of male rape and same-sex assault. The current research consequently takes a gender neutral approach with regard to the reporting of rape experiences and the perpetration of non-consensual sexual acts.

Initial review of the data has found high levels of alcohol related rape, the subscription to a number of stereotyped attitudes regarding the victims of alcohol related rape and the intentional use of alcohol related strategies in order to procure sex. Confusion surrounding the law of rape and the concepts of freedom and capacity has also been identified. Full analysis of survey and interview data is ongoing.

Future work

It is anticipated that the next phase of the PhD will involve interviews with barristers prosecuting and defending rape cases. It is anticipated that this will help to gain further insight into the process of rape case attrition, looking specifically at those cases involving voluntary alcohol consumption. This work will also address how a number of the provisions of the 2003 Sexual Offences Act work in practice. It is also anticipated that some of the findings to have emerged from the initial survey will be explored in additional depth in a focus group setting. For example, the widely held attitude that rape is frequently falsely reported to the police.