

December 3rd, 2013

Drinking and Rape: Exploring the Issues

Last month, Slate advice columnist Emily Yoffe published a controversial article entitled "[College Women: Stop Getting Drunk](#)," which launched a multitude of response pieces. The original article focused on the association between alcohol and sexual assault, in its relationship to female binge drinking. SCOPE's goal is to summarize several related articles to provide a jumping off point for continued dialogue and debate. Alcohol abuse and rape are enormous issues facing prevention education (and beyond); SCOPE encourages members to actively engage in the debate and share information and resources.

Yoffe's piece was an attempt to address the important correlation between alcohol and sexual assault. While it begins with the statement, "Let's be totally clear: Perpetrators are the ones responsible for committing their crimes, and they should be brought to justice. But we are failing to let women know that when they render themselves defenseless, terrible things can be done to them," some argue the author misunderstands the fundamental nature of sexual assault prevention education on college campuses. College men and women have consistently been advised to practice responsible alcohol consumption, from pre-orientation onward, for decades.

There is also a problem with the author's experience, given she is neither an advocate nor educator, but an opinion writer. To this end, she neglects to recognize a key aspect of the debate, namely alcohol's use as a drug to facilitate sexual assault. As prevention educators, we understand that risk reduction alone is not sufficient. The specter of victim blaming is also raised by the tone of the article, giving the impression that if women simply stopped getting drunk they wouldn't be raped.

We have included a list of potential discussion questions to further the conversation during staff meetings and in-service events. Following this is a listing of additional articles to help further explore the subject.

1. Given the well-documented connection (though not causation) between alcohol and sexual assault, discuss what other at-risk behaviors can be addressed by reducing binge drinking.
2. Some college men use alcohol as a drug to facilitate sexual assault. What are some ways colleges can address this systemic problem within in the male population?
3. Is it fair to include binge-drinking reduction as part of an overall plan to reduce the risk of sexual assault? How does this compare to other advice such as dressing less provocatively, watching your drink to avoid other drugs being introduced and partying in groups for protection? Is this advice outdated and sexist or part of an overall risk reduction strategy?
4. Discuss the role of rape culture and how this plays a part in the changing attitudes and behaviors regarding sexual assault.
5. Do Yoffe's comments eliminate the potential for male involvement in violence prevention or should they be seen as part of an overall risk reduction approach?

[How to Write About Rape Prevention Without Sounding Like an Asshole](#)

Erin Gloria Ryan at Jezebel suggests that we empower men to intervene, as opposed to just not rape. She also rightly notes that Yoffe's article did not include any survivor resources, an oversight for any advice columnist.

["Dear Prudence" columnist publishes rape denialism manifesto advising women to "stop getting drunk"](#)

Lori Adelman at Feministing reminds us that blaming women for their own rapes is not new and that the real common denominator in rape is rapists, not alcohol.

[College Men: Stop Getting Drunk](#)

Ann Friedman's satire in *New York Magazine* flips the gendered script line by line. She adds that there has been no decline in sexual assault rates with old or current tactics, including those addressing women's substance use.

[To Prevent Rape on College Campuses, Focus on the Rapists, Not the Victims](#)

Amanda Hess, Yoffe's colleague at Slate, frames the issue as a societal one and points out that the original piece limits women's actions. She suggests that the highest impact could be achieved by focusing on perpetrators.

[The Way We Talk About Sexual Assault is Broken](#)

Roxane Gay at Salon makes the important point that advice such as Yoffe's is predicated upon the misguided notion that if young women's behavior is good enough, maybe they can avoid sexual violence. Perhaps most notably, she recognizes that the Slate column and its ilk take an all-or-nothing approach, when reality is far more complicated.

[Don't Shift the Focus From Men](#)

Mychal Denzel Smith in *The New York Times*' Room for Debate adds a male perspective. He writes that not only does binge drinking not cause rape, but Yoffe's comments eliminate the potential for male involvement in violence prevention.

[Denouncing Binge Drinking is not Victim-Blaming](#)

Ruth Marcus at *The Washington Post* notes that she is a friend of Yoffe's, but as another writer outside the fields of education or activism raises the point that the real world differs from a gender studies classroom in terms of political correctness. However, the use of the term "sexual encounters" to describe rape undermines her argument.

[Getting Beyond the 'Drunk Slut' Narrative on College Campuses](#)

Jill Filipovic at Al Jazeera America comes at the debate from an attorney's perspective. She admits that while Yoffe's comments may have been well-intentioned, they give predators license (and survivors doubt) while simultaneously hurting prosecution efforts.

[Should Colleges Be Liable When Binge Drinking Leads to Rape?](#)

Keli Goff at *The Washington Post* hammers home a takeaway message: “telling women not to drink is not an effective intervention.” She instead recommends focusing on community-level approaches, such as alcohol sales and taxes. She also correctly notes that most students do not binge drink.

[Actually, the Link Between Sexual Assault and Alcohol Isn't as Clear as You Think](#)

Tara Culp-Ressler at Think Progress makes the important distinction between the associated, as opposed to direct, relationship between alcohol and sexual assault. She also recognizes the existence of serial perpetrators, many of whom target their potential victims prior to any drinking whatsoever.

In Summary

SCOPE welcomes member feedback and responses to this ongoing conversation.

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