Drinking and Sexual Experience on First Dates Among Adolescents

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Using Steele's inhibitory conflict model (C. M. Steele & R. A. Josephs, 1990) as a framework, the present study investigated the link between alcohol use and the probability that intercourse occurred on 2 different 1st date occasions in a random sample of adolescents and young adults interviewed twice approximately 4½ years apart (Ns = 1,678 and 1,780, respectively). As expected, both between-subjects/within-occasion and within-subjects/across-occasion analyses indicated that the probability of intercourse was significantly higher when the male couple member, but not his female counterpart, drank alcohol. Also consistent with Steele's model, alcohol effects on intercourse probability were found primarily among males who were highly conflicted about having intercourse on the date. Inconsistent with Steele's model, however, a similar effect was not found among highly conflicted females. Results are discussed in terms of a more general variant of Steele's model that allows for both alcohol-related disinhibition and inhibition.

Overwhelming evidence indicates that many adolescents are ill equipped to deal responsibly with their sexuality. About 10% of adolescent females (15 to 19 years old) get pregnant each year (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1991), almost all of them unintentionally. Adolescent women also have the third highest overall rate of sexually transmitted diseases (after homosexual men and prostitutes) and the highest rates of gonorrhea, cytomegalovirus, chlamydia, cervicitis, and pelvic inflammatory disease compared to any other age group (Cates & Rauh, 1985). Moreover, AIDS is now the 6th leading cause of death among adolescents (Centers for Disease Control, 1991), with estimates of the proportion of teens actually infected with HIV ranging from 1 in 500 (Gayle et al., 1990) to as high as 1 in 40 among economically disadvantaged minority youth in several northeastern cities (St. Louis et al., 1991). Despite these risks, the vast majority of adolescents (80% of males; 70% of females) are sexually active by age 19 (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1991). Accordingly, identifying factors that promote or delay onset of sexual activity among adolescents is critically important.

It is interesting that although alcohol is widely reputed to disinhibit sexual behavior (see, e.g., Lang, 1985, for a review), and has been shown to promote riskier sexual behavior when intercourse occurs (see Cooper, 1992, for a review; Cooper, Peirce, & Huselid, 1994), little is known about its effect on the likelihood that sexual intercourse will occur in the first place. Using Steele's inhibitory conflict model (Steele & Josephs, 1990; Steele & Southwick, 1985) as a theoretical framework, the present study therefore examines this issue in a random sample of adolescents who reported on their drinking and sexual behavior on two separate first-date occasions.

Inhibitory Conflict Model of Alcohol-Related Disinhibition

According to Steele's model, alcohol disinhibits behavior primarily as a result of its pharmacologic effects on information processing. By reducing the scope and efficiency of information processing, simple, highly salient cues that instigate behavior continue to be processed (such as sexual arousal), whereas more distal and complex cues that would ordinarily inhibit behavior are no longer adequately processed (such as the possibility of getting pregnant or getting AIDS). Thus, according to this model, alcohol effects on behavior should be strongest under conditions (called inhibition conflict) in which a behavior is controlled by instigatory and inhibitory cues that are strong and nearly equal in force (see Steele & Southwick, 1985, for supporting evidence). When instigatory cues are strong and inhibitory cues are weak, the behavior is likely to occur regardless of the individual's sobriety. In contrast, when instigatory cues are weak and inhibitory cues are strong, the behavior is unlikely to occur, whether or not the individual drinks. Thus, only in situations where both instigatory and inhibitory pressures would otherwise be strong (e.g., the adolescent wants to have sex, but fears its consequences) should the reduced processing of inhibitory cues (i.e., fear of consequences) lead to more extreme social behavior (in this case, intimate sexual contact).

Given this framework, we argue below that males should experience greater inhibition conflict about having intercourse on a first date than females. Accordingly, drinking on the date by the male partner but not by the female partner should be associated with an increased probability of intercourse.
Gender Differences in Conflict About Having Sex in a New Dating Relationship

The argument that male adolescents should be more conflicted than female adolescents about having intercourse on a first date rests on three premises. First, relatively strong prohibitions against having sex on a first date should exist for both male and female adolescents. This assertion is supported by evidence indicating that intimate sexual contact in new dating relationships is considered unacceptable by the overwhelming majority of adolescents and young adults, regardless of their gender. For example, in a recent survey of predominantly White undergraduate students (Roche & Ramsbey, 1993), none of the women and only 3% of the men reported that intercourse was acceptable in a dating relationship characterized by no particular affection; 1% of women and 17% of men approved of intercourse in a dating relationship characterized by affection only; and fewer than half (15% of women; 44% of men) felt that intercourse was appropriate in a dating relationship characterized by love. Only when the couple was in love and the relationship was monogamous was intercourse approved by a majority of students (52% of women; 69% of men). Consistent with the generally proscribed nature of sexual behavior in new dating relationships, only a minority of adolescents reported having ever had direct genital contact (16%) or intercourse (18%) on a first date, whereas nearly 45% reported having done so after a few dates, and 60% to 65% reported having done so in a steady dating relationship (McCabe & Collins, 1984). Thus, intimate sexual contact with a new dating partner is uncommon and socially proscribed for both sexes.

Second, although prohibitions against having sex on a first date exist for both men and women, the strength of these prohibitions should be greater among adolescent women than men. This assertion is supported not only by the consistently lower rates of approval of intimate sexual contact reported by female college students in the above study (Roche & Ramsbey, 1993), but by other evidence as well. Female adolescents are less likely to be sexually active at every age than their male counterparts (Miller, Christopherson, & King, 1993). Relative to their same-age male peers, female adolescents also report fewer sexual partners and fewer casual sex partners (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1988), and they hold less permissive attitudes toward sex in general and toward casual sex in particular (Hendricks, Hendricks, Slapion-Foote, & Foote, 1985). Finally, only females can get pregnant, and females relative to their male partners continue to suffer disproportionately the psychological, social, and financial costs of pregnancy. Thus, as Lang (1985) has argued, the practical and psychosocial consequences of having sex, especially casual sex, should restrain females more than males in this culture.

Third, the strength of factors instigating sexual behavior on a first date should be stronger among male than female adolescents. This assertion is supported by the finding that male college students report a stronger desire for sexual intimacy on a first date than do females, but that this difference diminishes with prolonged relationship involvement (McCabe & Collins, 1984). Male adolescents also appear to require less commitment in a relationship than do females before engaging in sexual behavior (Zeinik & Shah, 1983) and are more likely to cite pleasure, whereas females are more likely to express a desire for emotional commitment as a reason for having sex (Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1985).

When considered collectively, these data suggest that females on the whole are unlikely to experience high levels of conflict about having sex on a first date; not only are relevant inhibiting cues likely to be strong, but instigating cues are also likely to be weak. In contrast, males are more likely to experience high levels of conflict in this situation because of the simultaneous presence of relatively strong inhibiting and instigating cues. According to the logic of Steele's inhibitory conflict model (Steele & Josephs, 1990), we therefore expect drinking by the male partner to exert a more robust effect on sexual behavior on a first date than drinking by the female partner.

Prior Research on Alcohol Use and Intercourse Probability

Although no study has directly tested Steele's model in the domain of sexual behavior, two studies have examined alcohol effects on the probability of intercourse. In a sample of female college students in stable relationships, Harvey and Beckman (1986) found a significant negative relationship between alcohol use and intercourse probability; Leigh (1993) also found a negative relationship in a mixed-sexual-preference sample of men and women in monogamous and nonmonogamous relationships. Thus, although both studies raise the possibility that alcohol actually depresses sexual activity under some circumstances, neither examined the separate effects of male partner use nor looked at sexual behavior that was clearly conflicted. In the former case, there is no compelling reason to believe that having intercourse with one's steady partner should be strongly inhibited or conflicted, whereas in the latter, the heterogeneity of the sample and the resulting differences in meanings associated with sexual behavior across the multiple subgroups precludes, according to the logic outlined above, meaningful predictions about alcohol's effect on sexual behavior.

The Present Study

The present study provides the first clear test of the hypothesis, based on Steele's model (Steele & Josephs, 1990), that alcohol use by the male but not by the female partner is associated with an increased probability of intimate sexual contact in new dating relationships. We used naturalistic data collected from a random sample of adolescents and young adults on two different first date experiences and tested this hypothesis in two ways. First, we conducted cross-sectional analyses to test the independent and interactive effects of male and female partner use on level of intimate sexual contact for each of two dating occasions. Support for our hypothesis would be indicated by a significant positive effect for male use on both occasions, coupled with no effect for female use on either occasion. Second, by using data from the subset of respondents who reported on two different dating experiences and within-subjects analytic procedures, we tested the hypothesis that change in the probability of intercourse covaries with male partner use but not with female partner use. Specifically, we expected the probability of intercourse to decrease across the two occasions if the male partner drank only on the first occasion, to increase if he drank...
only on the second, and to remain relatively constant if he drank on neither or both occasions. Finally, the above hypothesis is predicated on the dual assumptions that males are more conflicted than females about having sex on a first date, and that alcohol effects on sexual behavior are greater among those who are highly conflicted about having sex on the date. Accordingly, we examined both assumptions using data on perceived costs, perceived benefits, and degree of felt conflict about having sex on the date. We predicted that males would report significantly lower costs, higher benefits, and greater conflict about having sex on the date, and that alcohol use would interact with conflict to predict intercourse probability such that alcohol's effects on intercourse are found primarily or exclusively among those who are highly conflicted about having sex.

Method

Sample

Data for the present study were obtained from a two-wave, longitudinal study of adolescents, interviewed initially in 1989–1990 and again in 1994–1995. At Time 1 (T1), random-digit-dial techniques were used to identify a sample of 2,544 adolescents, ages 13 to 19, residing within the city limits of Buffalo, New York. Telephone exchanges concentrated in primarily Black areas of the city were intentionally oversampled. Interviews were completed with 2,052 of the eligible teens for an 81% completion rate. Analysis of completion rates by race, age, gender, and parental socioeconomic status (SES) suggests that, aside from the intentional oversampling of minority youth, the T1 sample was reasonably representative of the population from which it was drawn (see Cooper et al., 1994, for more detail). These adolescents (n = 1,814; 88% of the T1 sample) were re-interviewed 4½ years later (average re-interview interval = 4.7 years ± .4 years). Comparison of the demographic characteristics of re-interviewed and non-re-interviewed respondents revealed no significant differences in race, or in parental education or occupational rank. However, both female respondents (93% vs. 84%), χ²(1, N = 2,052) = 40.1, p < .001, and younger respondents (mean T1 age = 16.7 years vs. 17.2 years), t(2050) = 3.58, p < .001, were more likely to be re-interviewed.

Data for the present study were obtained from the subsample of adolescents who had ever been on a date and had complete data on all variables (ns = 1,678 [82% of the T1 sample], and 1,780 [98% of the T2 sample]). For the present purposes, a date was defined as any kind of planned social activity, like going to a movie, a party, or just hanging out with someone you might have a romantic or sexual interest in. Respondents included in the present analyses did not differ from those who were excluded on gender at either time, though they differed on age and race at T1. The included respondents were significantly older (T1, 15.3 years; T2, 16.0 years; t(1812) = 16.0, p < .001, and more likely to be White (85% White; 82% other ethnic groups, 7% Black), χ²(1, N = 1,814) = 12.5, p < .01, than excluded respondents. Finally, the included respondents were more experienced with sex, drugs, and alcohol at both times; they were more likely to have had sex (71% versus 20% at T1, 93% versus 48% at T2) both χ²(1, N = 1,809) values > 83, p < .001, and to have used illicit drugs (43% versus 11% at T1, 59% versus 35% at T2), χ²(1, N = 1,814) values > 7, p < .01, and were more heavily involved with alcohol, χ²(1, N = 1,814) = 2.5, p < .01. Moreover, controlling for age and race generally reduced but in no case eliminated these differences.

T1 Interview Protocol and Procedures

Face-to-face interviews were conducted by 30 professionally trained interviewers using a structured interview schedule. Interviewers and respondents were always matched on gender and, when possible, on race (approximately 75% of the cases). Ninety-five percent of the interviews were conducted in private interview rooms on the campus of the State University of New York at Buffalo. Free cab transportation was provided to adolescents who requested it. Remaining respondents (n = 110) were interviewed privately in their homes. Average interview length was 2 hr, and respondents were paid $25 for participation. Written informed consent was obtained from respondents, and from the parents of underage respondents, prior to conducting the interview.

The interview contained both interviewer-administered and self-administered portions. Sexual behavior was assessed by interviewer administration of less threatening questions and by private, self-administration with a pencil-and-paper instrument for more sensitive questions. Respondents were provided with simply worded definitions of sexual behavior and contraceptive methods to ensure a common understanding of key terms. Respondents sealed the self-administered booklet in a privacy envelope at the end of the interview. Assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were apparently successful in that only 18 respondents (8%) refused to answer key sexual behavior questions at T1, and only 2 (1%) refused at T2.

T2 Modifications to the Interview Protocol

At T2, data were collected by a professionally trained staff of 24 interviewers following an interview protocol identical to that described above, with two exceptions. First, both the interviewer and self-administered portions of the interview were computerized. The change from pencil-and-paper to computer administration allowed for more reliable implementation of complex skip patterns, eliminated out-of-range and missing responses, and automated data entry (see Rosenfeld, Booth-Kewley, & Edwards, 1993, on the advantages of computer administration). Moreover, methodological studies suggest that computer administration reduces under-reporting of both alcohol consumption and sexual behavior (see Rosenfeld et al., 1993, for a review). Thus, switching from pencil-and-paper to computer presentation of questions may lead to elevated rates of reporting for both behaviors. However, there is no a priori reason to expect that this change should affect the relationship between alcohol use and sexual behavior.

Second, fewer face-to-face interviews were completed on campus at T2 (84%) than at T1 (95%). Not only were more respondents interviewed in their homes (10% vs. 5%) at T2, but 88 out-of-area respondents (5%) were also interviewed by telephone. However, supplemental analyses indicated that interview location and method were unrelated to any of the key date variables, including respondent and partner alcohol use, drug use, or extent of sexual involvement, after age and parental SES (which were related to interview location and method) were covaried out.

Measures

Demographic covariates. Race (coded Black, not Black), gender, and age on the most recent first date were included as covariates in all analyses.

Individual difference covariates. Three individual difference variables that have been linked to both alcohol use and sexual behavior, and hence might underlie and account for their relationship, were assessed and controlled in all analyses testing the link between alcohol use and sexual behavior. Religion was indexed by a standardized composite of two items assessing the importance of religion and frequency of attending religious services (rated on 4- and 5-point scales, respectively; T1, α = .69; T2, α = .71). Thrill and adventure seeking assessed the preference for engaging in dangerous, adventurous, reckless, or risky behaviors, and was measured by a 5-item scale (Bernstein, Hoffman, Santiago, & Diebolt, 1989; T1, α = .72; T2, α = .80). Finally, impulsiv-
ity, measured by a 7-item subscale from the Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness Personality Inventory (NEO-PI; Costa & McCrae, 1985; \( \alpha = .64 \) at T1, and .71 at T2), assesses the tendency to act hastily and without thought, as well as the inability to resist urges and cravings (e.g., for food or cigarettes).

**Alcohol and drug use covariates.** Because typical patterns of alcohol and drug use are likely to be confounded with situational use and could, therefore, give rise to a spurious association between alcohol use and sexual behavior on the date (Cooper, Skinner, & George, 1990), indices of lifetime drug and alcohol use were also included as covariates in all analyses testing the link between alcohol use and sexual behavior.

Lifetime alcohol involvement was assessed by a standardized composite of two items assessing usual quantity of consumption (1 = usually drink only small amounts; 4 = usually drink very large amounts) and frequency of drinking to intoxication (1 = have been drunk a few times in life; 5 = get drunk almost every day). Lifetime abstainers were assigned a 0 on both items; individuals who ever drank but not to intoxication were assigned 0 on the intoxication item (T1, \( \alpha = .84 \); T2, \( \alpha = .77 \)).

At T1, lifetime drug involvement was assessed by a count of the number of different drugs ever used. Included in the list of drugs were (a) marijuana or hashish, (b) cocaine or crack, (c) "any drug not prescribed by a doctor that you shoot with a needle," and (d) "any other drug that you take to get high or feel good." Based on a review of responses to the T1 other category, the list of drugs was expanded to include stimulants and hallucinogens at T2.

**Alcohol use and sexual behavior on the date.** Respondents were asked similar (but not identical) questions at T1 and T2 about the last time they went out on a first date. Detailed comparisons of information on these two dating experiences suggests that fewer than 6% of our T2 respondents (\( n = 103 \)) were likely to have been describing the same first date on both occasions. Hence, the T2 data appear to provide a second, independent sample of first date experiences for the vast majority of our respondents.

At T1, respondents were asked the following three questions about substance use on their most recent first date: (a) whether the respondent drank alcohol (no, yes); (b) whether the respondent used marijuana or any other drug (no, yes); and (c) whether the respondent’s partner drank alcohol or used any other drug (no, yes, don’t know). At T2, respondents were asked identical questions regarding their own use but were asked to indicate whether the respondent drank (0 = no; 1 = yes) on the date at T1 and at T2, and whether he or her partner drank at T2. However, creating a separate measure for T1 partner alcohol use, where alcohol and drug use were not assessed separately, required making certain assumptions. Specifically, because respondent and partner alcohol use were concordant 92% of the time at T2, we assumed that partner use paralleled respondent use at T1. Thus, for 217 cases where the partner reportedly used a substance, we assumed that he or she drank if the respondent drank (\( n = 153 \)). In 54 cases where the partner reportedly used a substance but the respondent did not, we also assumed that the partner drank. This seemed most defensible given that alcohol use alone was eight times more common among T1 respondents than either drug use alone or drug and alcohol use in combination. Partner alcohol use was also assumed to parallel respondent use in the 15 cases at T2 where the respondent did not know whether his or her partner drank alcohol. Self-alcohol use and partner-alcohol use were recoded on the basis of respondent gender to create two dichotomous variables indicating whether the female and male partner, respectively, drank alcohol on the date.

Finally, at T2 only, respondents were asked to indicate how many drinks of alcohol they had consumed on the date and, among the subset who both drank and had intercourse, when their drinking commenced. Respondents who indicated that they began to drink after they had sex (\( n = 9 \)) were treated as nondrinkers in that their drinking could not have caused their sexual behavior.

Respondents also answered a series of questions about what, if any, sexual context occurred on the date. At both times, questions were presented in a self-administered format, and gender specific versions were used to ensure that question wording reflected appropriate assumptions about the respondent’s anatomy. At T1, respondents answered a series of questions using a yes–no–don’t know format, indicating whether they had kissed or “made out” on the date, petted below the waist, petted above the waist, had oral sex, or had vaginal or anal intercourse. For analytic purposes, a four-level variable was computed where 0 = no intimate contact whatsoever; 1 = kissing or ‘making out’ only, 2 = explicit sexual contact short of intercourse (e.g., petting above or below the waist, oral sex), and 3 = sexual intercourse. Because both petting behaviors and oral sex proved to be relatively rare at T1 (see Table 1), and because no alcohol-related differences were observed between kissing and no intimate contact, this question sequence was simplified at T2. Respondents were first asked whether they had any sexual experiences other than kissing or making out on the date; those who answered yes were then asked whether they had vaginal intercourse or anal intercourse. From these data, a three-level variable was created where 0 = no sexual contact or kissing/making out; 1 = explicit sexual contact short of vaginal or anal intercourse (presumably petting and oral sex), and 3 = vaginal or anal intercourse.

Although one reviewer raised concerns about the crudeness of the drug use covariates, they were among the most robust covariates in our model. Moreover, although a more refined measure of illicit drug use in the past 6 months was available at both times, the lifetime measures were deemed more appropriate on logical grounds. Because only 54% of the dates at T1 and 34% at T2 occurred in the 6 months before the interview, controlling for drug use in the past 6 months would control for use that occurred after the most recent first date for most of our sample, which would violate assumptions regarding the causal ordering of variables implicit in our use of a hierarchical entry strategy (Pedhazur, 1982).

At T2, we assumed that the two dates were the same occasion when the following conditions were met: (a) the two dates reportedly occurred within ± 1 year of each other; (b) the same or similar name was given for the partner (e.g., James and Jim); (c) identical patterns of alcohol and drug use were reported for respondent and partner; and (d) the same level of sexual contact was reported for both occasions.

Given our focus on effects of gender of drinker, respondents reporting a same-sex partner (9 females and 11 males at T1; 2 females and 2 males at T2) were dropped.

One reviewer questioned our decision to combine oral sex and petting into a single category. We believe that this decision is defensible, however, for several reasons. First, too few respondents reported having had oral sex at T1 to treat it as a separate category (\( n = 13 \)); thus, combining it with some other behavior was necessary. Indeed, even in combination with petting, this category was the least frequently endorsed at both times (see Tables 1 and 2). Although we might have combined oral sex with petting/making out, these behaviors differ markedly in terms of their underlying normativeness (see Miller et al., 1993, for a review). Given that alcohol effects on behavior are hypothesized to differ as a function of the normativeness of the behavior, combining oral sex and kissing would seem ill-advised. Alternatively, oral sex and intercourse might have been combined. Although these behaviors are similarly nonnormative, intercourse carries far greater risk for both unplanned pregnancy and STDS than does oral sex (e.g., Goedert, 1987). Thus, a clear distinction seemed warranted here as well. That leaves only petting, which is more like oral sex on both dimensions than either of the other two categories of behaviors with which it might have been combined. Second, this grouping of behaviors can be justified in terms of its relation to a well-known developmental sequence: Most adoles-
Costs, benefits, and conflict about having sex on the date. To assess perceived conflict, respondents—regardless of whether they had intercourse—were asked to indicate their agreement on a 6-point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree, with each of three statements reflecting conflict and indecision about wanting to have sex with their partner on that occasion (e.g., "I had a hard time deciding whether or not I wanted to have sex," α = .90).  

In addition, factors thought to inhibit sexual behavior were operationalized as potential costs of having sex on the date. Costs were assessed by five items in which respondents rated the likelihood (on a 7-point scale where 1 = not at all likely and 7 = completely certain) of experiencing each cost if they had sex with their partner on that occasion. Costs included (a) personal costs such as experiencing guilt or violating one’s moral standards, (b) relationship costs such as getting hurt by your partner or hurting your partner, (c) social costs such as disapproval from your friends or getting a bad reputation, (d) getting a sexually transmitted disease, and (e) getting (your partner) pregnant (α = .70 for the 5-item composite).

Finally, factors promoting sexual behavior were operationalized as perceived benefits of having sex on that occasion. The included the following four items rated on the aforementioned 7-point scale: (a) physical benefits such as having a pleasurable orgasm, (b) personal benefits such as improving your mood or feeling more mature or self-confident, (c) relationship benefits such as finding true love or falling in love, and (d) social benefits such as impressing or fitting in with your friends (α = .72 for the 4-item composite). Composite cost and benefit scores were correlated −.02 (ns) and .20, respectively, with conflict, and −.24 with each other. Finally, these measures were included only at T2.  

**Measures used in supplemental analyses.** In light of considerable evidence linking alcohol use to sexual aggression and date rape (Abbey, 1991), any relationship between drinking by the male partner and an increased probability of intercourse is bound to raise questions about whether the male partner coerced his partner into having sex when drinking. To examine this issue, we assessed both the use of coercion or force by the male partner and perceptions of shared responsibility for intercourse. At T1, two items assessed whether the male partner used verbal pressure or threats or physical force to make his partner do any of the sexual activities that occurred on the date. The two items were combined into a single item at T2 asking whether pressure, threats, or force were used to try to make the female partner have sex. The following response options were given: (1) no, (2) yes, verbal pressure or threats only, (3) yes, physical force only, or (4) yes, verbal pressure or threats and physical force. At T2, respondents who had intercourse were also asked, “Whose idea was it to have sex on that occasion?” They answered on a 7-point scale where 1 = completely YOUR IDEA, 4 = equally shared between the two of you, and 7 = completely YOUR PARTNER’S IDEA.

### Results

**Gender Differences in Costs, Benefits, and Perceived Conflict Related to Having Intercourse**

The key prediction that drinking would predict intercourse probability among males but not among females rests on the premise that males experienced higher levels of conflict about whether to have intercourse on a first date. Perceived costs are thought to greatly outweigh benefits among females, whereas costs and benefits are assumed to be more nearly equal among males. To examine these premises, two multivariate analyses of covariances (MANCOVAs) and an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were conducted in which the set of costs, set of benefits, and the perceived conflict measure served as dependent variables.

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5 A subset of respondents (n = 402) indicated that they never thought about having intercourse on that occasion and, hence, did not yield directly scoreable answers for these three items. For analytic purposes, these responses were treated two different ways: (a) they were treated as missing and were dropped from analyses using the perceived conflict variable; (b) such responses were taken to mean that the respondent experienced no conflict about having intercourse on that occasion and, hence, did not yield a score at all. Regardless of which strategy we used, results involving the perceived conflict measure were essentially identical and, in all cases, supported the same substantive conclusions. Results from the latter set of analyses are reported, however, because they use the full sample.

6 Interested readers may obtain a copy of these measures from M. Lynne Cooper.
p < .001. Indeed, 65% of females reportedly felt no conflict among males. Thus, the hypothesized gender difference in orientation to having sexual intercourse on a first date was supported.

Variables; gender was the independent variable, and race and age were covariates.

Results of these analyses were consistent with expectation. Males not only perceived significantly fewer costs—multivariate (MV) $F(5, 1746) = 68.2, p < .001$; all univariate (UV) $F$s $(5, 1746) > 9.0, ps < .01$—and significantly more benefits—MV $F(4, 1739) = 111.4, p < .001$; all UV $F$s $> 75, ps < .001$—they also were significantly more ambivalent about having intercourse on that occasion $(M = 8.1, F(1, 1777) = 462.8, p < .001, \text{MV} F(5, 1749) = 462.8, p < .001)$, and again suggesting that costs and benefits were more nearly equal among males. Thus, the hypothesized gender difference in orientation to having sexual intercourse on a first date was supported.

Tests of the Gender-of-Drinker Hypothesis

As previously indicated, the gender-of-drinker hypothesis was tested by using both between-subjects/within-occasion and within-subjects/cross-occasion analyses. The between-subjects analyses not only provide for replication across two largely nonoverlapping samples of first date experiences, but also permit a more fine-grained analysis of alcohol effects on multiple levels of sexual contact. These analyses can also be assumed to provide the best overall estimate of the population effect in that the fewest respondents are dropped from the cross-sectional analyses. In contrast, the within-subjects analyses provide a stronger test of alcohol’s causal effect on sexual behavior. Covariance procedures, such as those used in the cross-sectional analyses, cannot effectively rule out the possibility that males who drink, or couples in which the male partner drinks, differ from those individuals or couples who do not drink in ways that might account for the observed differences in sexual behavior (see Reichardt, 1979, for a discussion of this issue). In contrast, within-subjects procedures, because they track change within an individual, help rule out the possibility that stable individual differences between drinkers and nondrinkers caused both the drinking and the sexual behavior. Finally, assumptions regarding the distributional properties of the dependent measures are met for the between-subjects but not for the within-subjects analyses. Thus, each approach has offsetting strengths and weaknesses, and together they offer a more compelling test of our hypothesis than either could independently offer.

Between-subjects analyses. Tables 1 and 2 show the percentage of couples who reported different levels of sexual contact by male and female partner alcohol use. Examination of the row and column totals indicate that both substance use and intimate sexual contact were relatively uncommon on first dates. Indeed, for both dating occasions, the vast majority of adolescents reported that neither partner drank and that no intimate sexual contact occurred other than kissing or making out. Finally, examination of the cell percentages show the expected increase in the proportion of couples having intercourse when the male couple member drank alcohol.

To test the significance of this relationship while controlling for the potentially confounding influences of demographic, personality, and experiential variables, we estimated two multinomial logit models (Greene, 1993) using LIMDEP (version 6.0; Greene, 1992) in which the 3-level (T2 data) or the 4-level (T1 data) sexual contact variable served as the dependent measure and male and female alcohol use were the independent variables. All previously described covariates were controlled in both analyses. In addition, to ensure that effects attributed to alcohol were independent of effects due to other drug use (mostly marijuana) on the date, a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent used drugs at T1, and two dichotomous variables indicating whether the respondent and his or her partner used drugs at T2, were also included as covariates.

Note. Cell percentages total 100 across rows; $\chi^2(6) = 70.8, p < .001$. 7

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Engaging in behavior

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Percentage Engaging in Sexual Behavior by Male and Female Couple Member’s Alcohol Use at Time 2

7 We also ran these analyses after dropping cases in which the respondent (at T1) or either partner (at T2) used drugs $(a s = 43$ at T1 and 148 at T2) and obtained essentially identical results for both male and female alcohol use. We elected to report analyses using covariance procedures in the full sample because data from the full sample should provide more accurate estimates of the effect of alcohol use on sexual behavior and also greater power.
As shown in Table 3, results supported our main hypothesis and replicated across dating occasions. The addition of male and female alcohol use variables to the covariate-only model resulted in a significant improvement in the fit of the model to the data at both times. As hypothesized, however, only male use was related to an increased probability of sexual contact on the first date. Specifically, intercourse was significantly more probable on both occasions when the male couple member drank, as were petting and oral sex at T1. Finally, the addition of a Male Use × Female Use interaction term resulted in a significant improvement in the fit of the model to the data at T2, but not at T1. Examination of the individual coefficients showed that this effect was restricted to a single contrast comparing the probabilities of petting/oral sex versus kissing/no intimate contact. The form of the interaction suggested that, when the male partner drank, petting and oral sex were less probable if the female also drank, but that when the male partner did not drink, these behaviors were more probable if the female drank. Thus, with the exception of this single interaction effect, the cross-sectional analyses provide consistent support for the hypothesis that male use but not female use is associated with an increased probability of intimate sexual contact, especially intercourse, on a first date.

Robustness across gender of reporter and across self- versus other report. A series of analyses were conducted to determine whether the above results were invariant across male and female reporters as well as across self- and other reports of drinking behavior. Demonstrating such invariance should ease concerns about the differential validity and reliability of reports of one’s own drinking versus one’s partner’s drinking, and also about the possibility of gender-of-reporter bias. Because data from validity studies consistently indicate that males overreport and females underreport their sexual experiences (see Smith, 1992, and Morris, 1993, for reviews), and because evidence of this bias was found in our own data (a significantly higher proportion of male than female respondents [ps < .05] reported that intercourse occurred on both dating occasions), it seemed especially critical to establish that the differential effect for male drinking held up regardless of whether our respondent was male or female. To examine this issue, a logistic regression analysis was conducted for each dating occasion in which a dichotomous intercourse variable was regressed on self- and partner alcohol use after controlling for the complete set of covariates described above. Gender × Self-use and Gender × Partner use interaction terms were then added to the equation. To the extent that the differential effects for male alcohol use are robust, we would expect both interactions to be significant. Specifically, self-use but not partner use should predict intercourse probability among male respondents, whereas the reverse should be true among female respondents.

Results of these analyses showed that three of the four interaction terms were significant at p < .05, and that the fourth (Self-
Use X Gender at T2) was marginally significant (p = .06). Plotting the interactions revealed the expected pattern of effects. Self-use (bs ≥ .86, ps < .10) but not partner use (bs ≤ -.19, ns) was positively related to intercourse probability among males, whereas partner use (bs ≥ .80, ps < .05) but not self-use (bs ≤ -.06, ns) was positively related to intercourse probability among females. Thus, the differential effects for male and female alcohol use emerged among both male and female respondents, and regardless of whether the respondent described his or her own drinking behavior or that of the partner's.

Within-subjects analyses. To examine change in intercourse probability as a function of male partner use, a mixed-model repeated measures ANCOVA was conducted in which a dichotomous variable indicating whether intercourse occurred on each date served as the repeated (dependent) factor. The between-subjects factor was formed by assigning respondents to one of the four following groups based on whether the male couple member drank alcohol: (a) on neither occasion (n = 885); (b) on the first occasion, but not the latter (n = 98); (c) on the latter occasion, but not the first (n = 276); or (d) on both occasions (n = 84). Covariates included the same set of potential confounders used in the between-subjects analyses above, plus an additional covariate (female partner use) included to control for the possibility that the observed effects might instead be due to the female partner's use.

Support for the predicted effect of alcohol use on the probability of intercourse would be indicated by a significant Group X Occasion interaction. As previously described, we expected little change across occasions in the two groups where the male couple member drank alcohol: (a) on neither occasion (n = 885); (b) on the first occasion, but not the latter (n = 98); (c) on the latter occasion, but not the first (n = 276); or (d) on both occasions (n = 84). Covariates included the same set of potential confounders used in the between-subjects analyses above, plus an additional covariate (female partner use) included to control for the possibility that the observed effects might instead be due to the female partner's use.

Tests of Alcohol Use X Conflict Interactions

To test the hypothesis that alcohol effects on sexual behavior should be greater among those who are more ambivalent or conflicted about having sex, a logistic regression analysis was conducted in which the dichotomous intercourse variable was regressed on gender, alcohol use, perceived conflict, all possible two-way interactions, and the three-way interaction. Contrary to prediction, however, the two-way Gender X Alcohol interaction was not significant (b = .19, p > .20), although the three-way Gender X Conflict X Alcohol interaction was (b = .87, p < .01). Follow-up analyses showed that perceived conflict interacted with alcohol use among males (b = .62, p < .01), but not among females (b = -.29, p > .20). Plotting the interaction (Figure 2) among low and high conflict subgroups (defined by mean scores of 1 and 4, respectively, on the 1 to 6 conflict scale) revealed that intercourse probability increased more than fourfold among high conflict males who drank relative to their nondrinking counterparts. In contrast, the odds increased only slightly or decreased in all other Gender X Conflict subgroups.

According to Steele's model, alcohol's effects in high conflict situations are primarily attributable to its pharmacological properties. Thus, quantity should positively predict intercourse probability and should also interact with conflict such that alcohol effects are strongest under high dose, high conflict conditions. Regression analyses conducted among the subset of respondents who drank (n = 366), however, provided only partial support for these hypotheses. Whereas quantity was significantly and positively related to the probability of intercourse (b = 1.03, p < .05), and quantity interacted with conflict (b = -.52, p < .05), the shape of the interaction did not conform to prediction. Plotting the interaction revealed that dose was unrelated to intercourse probability among high conflict respondents (b = .28, ns) but was significantly and positively related (b = 1.91, p < .01) to prediction.

Note: Three respondents who appeared to be reporting on the same date at both times were dropped from these analyses.

This analysis was identical in all ways to the male-use analysis except that respondents were assigned to the four-level between-subjects factor as a function of female couple member use (ns = 952, 77, 234, and 80, respectively, for the four groups), and male partner use (instead of female use) was included as a covariate.
results also emerged using within-subjects analyses that more
replicated for two, largely independent dating situations using
probable in a new dating relationship when the male couple
conflict model (Steele & Josephs, 1990), the present study pro-
crease in consensual rather than coerced sexual contact.
data suggest that male alcohol use was associated with an in-
of the drinking status of either partner. Considered jointly, these
were perceived to have shared equally the idea to have inter-
those who had intercourse was 4.1, indicating that both partners
it seems unlikely that the effect for male use can be attributed
of males who drank were not reported to have used any force,
partner, and in only one of these cases at T1 and three at T2
did the male partner drink. Thus, given that the vast majority
scored among their low conflict counterparts. Or, said differently,
intercourse probability was elevated among all high dose drunk-
regardless of conflict level, whereas corresponding eleva-
tions were found among low dose drinkers only if they also
were highly conflicted. Finally, neither quantity nor the Quantity
× Conflict interaction differed by gender.

Supplementary Analyses: Was Sexual Contact Consensual or Coerced?

Our final analyses concern the question of whether males who
drank were more likely to coerce their partners into having sex. Examination of the frequency distributions for these variables
showed, however, that only three respondents at T1 and six
respondents at T2 reported use of coercion or force by the male
partner, and in only one of these cases at T1 and three at T2
did the male partner drink. Thus, given that the vast majority
of males who drank were not reported to have used any force,
it seems unlikely that the effect for male use can be attributed
an increase in overtly coercive or aggressive behavior.

This interpretation is buttressed by analyses of the single
initiation item. The mean score on the initiation item among
those who had intercourse was 4.1, indicating that both partners
were perceived to have shared equally the idea to have inter-
ourse. Moreover, responses to the initiation item did not differ
by gender, by respondent alcohol use, by partner alcohol use,
or by the interaction of gender with either respondent or partner
alcohol use. Thus, females perceived themselves to be as respon-
sible for the occurrence of intercourse as did males, regardless
of the drinking status of either partner. Considered jointly, these
data suggest that male alcohol use was associated with an in-
crease in consensual rather than coerced sexual contact.

Discussion

Consistent with predictions derived from Steele’s inhibitory
conflict model (Steele & Josephs, 1990), the present study pro-
vides compelling evidence that intimate sexual contact is more
probable in a new dating relationship when the male couple
member but not the female drinks. Not only were these findings
replicated for two, largely independent dating situations using
a between-subjects analytic procedure, but the same pattern of
results also emerged using within-subjects analyses that more
effectively rule out individual (between-subjects) differences as
a rival explanation for the observed between-subjects effects.
That these findings were robust across respondent gender and
across informant (self vs. partner) further strengthens our con-
fidence in them by helping to rule out alternative methodological
or artificial interpretations such as, males are more likely to
say that they had intercourse when they drank but not actually
to do it. Finally, the fact that we obtained virtually identical
results across occasions despite use of different measures and
data collection modalities indicates that our results are not arti-
facts of a particular operationalization of the alcohol use or
sexual behavior construct. Considered collectively, the robust-
ness of these findings across occasions, analytic strategies,
alternative operationalizations of the alcohol use and sexual be-
havior constructs, data collection methodologies, and data
sources lends considerable weight to the conclusion that use of
alcohol by the male couple member but not his female partner
is associated with an increased probability of intercourse in new
dating relationships. Interestingly, even though these findings
were robust and conform to theoretical prediction, key as-
sumptions underpinning these predictions were largely sup-
ported for males but not for females. Indeed, perceived conflict
interacted with alcohol use to predict intercourse probability
among males, as expected, but not among their female counter-
parts. In fact, contrary to Steele’s model, highly conflicted fe-
males who drank were actually somewhat less likely to report
having had intercourse than their nondrinking counterparts (see
Figure 2). Furthermore, a careful examination of the distribu-
tions of conflict scores among male and female respondents
indicated that the absence of the theoretically predicted interac-
tion effect among females could not be attributed to the lack,
or relative lack, of high conflict females in our sample, as we
had initially expected. Indeed, perceived conflict scores spanned
the full range (from 1 to 6) among both male and female respond-
ts and displayed similar variability across gender groups (SD
= 1.4 in both groups). Moreover, nearly as many female (17%) as
male (22%) respondents had scores >= 1 SD above the mean
of the full sample.

An alternative explanation that may better account for our
findings posits that male and female adolescents experienced
qualitatively different kinds of conflict. Specifically, if males
experienced a type of conflict in which the dominant set of cues
favored behavioral action, whereas the more peripheral, less
easily accessed cues favored behavioral inhibition, we would
expect (due to the greater difficulty of accessing and processing
the more remote cues) alcohol-related disinhibition. This is, of
course, what we observed among high conflict males. In con-
trast, if females experienced a type of conflict in which the
dominant cues favored behavioral inhibition, whereas the more
peripheral cues favored behavioral action, then we might expect
alcohol-related inhibition rather than disinhibition. The fact that
alcohol might lead to behavioral inhibition under conditions
similar to those that may have existed among the females in our
sample is a possibility acknowledged by Steele (see Steele &
Josephs, 1990, footnote 1) and specifically supported by a series
of experimental studies conducted by Brown, Mansfield, and
Skurdal in 1980.

To explore this broader and unanticipated interpretation of
Steele’s model, we conducted supplementary analyses to deter-
mine whether perceived costs and benefits were differentially related to conflict among males and females. Results showed that although high levels of conflict were found primarily among those perceiving both high costs and high benefits (β for Cost × Benefit interaction = -.30, p < .001), the relationship of costs and benefits to conflict did in fact differ across gender groups (β for Gender × Costs × Benefits interaction = .41, p < .05). Examining the form of these interactions revealed that, among males, conflict increased as a function of both increasing costs and benefits (βs = .02 for both, ps < .05), whereas, among females, conflict was driven primarily by the perception of increasing benefits (b = .05, p < .01) and, to a lesser extent, by decreasing costs (b = -.01, p < .10). More important, however, although the gap between perceived costs and benefits narrowed with increasing levels of conflict for both males and females, perceived costs exceeded benefits at every level of conflict among females, whereas perceived benefits exceeded costs at every level of conflict among males.

Taken together, these findings suggest that male and female adolescents experienced qualitatively different types of response conflict, in which cues favoring behavioral action dominated among males, whereas cues favoring behavioral inhibition dominated among females. If we are therefore willing to assume that high conflict indexed qualitatively different psychological states among males and females, then the notion that alcohol reduces the capacity of the weaker of any two competitive tendencies, whether instigatory or inhibitory, to interfere with the stronger may offer the most parsimonious account of the observed gender differences in alcohol effects.

Additional theoretically based expectations regarding the role of perceived conflict and alcohol dose were also not fully supported by our data. Specifically, although quantity was positively related to intercourse probability, as Steele’s model predicts, quantity did not interact with perceived conflict in a theoretically consistent manner. Indeed, the observed pattern was inconsistent with Steele’s model in two ways: We found no dose effect among high conflict respondents, and no conflict effect among high dose respondents. Although it is plausible that the lack of a dose effect among high conflict respondents reflects the influence of alcohol-related expectancies at lower doses, it is less clear how the lack of a conflict effect among high dose individuals can be reconciled with extant theory.

Despite several ambiguities in our findings, the present study makes a number of important contributions. On theoretical grounds, these data support the utility of Steele’s inhibitory conflict model as a framework for conceptualizing alcohol effects on a range of psychologically meaningful behavior, including sexual behavior. At the same time, however, these data underscore the need to conceptualize his model broadly so as to embrace the dual possibilities that alcohol can either disinhibit or inhibit behavior depending on the relative strength of competing instigatory and inhibitory cues in a given situation. It is not so much that Steele’s model is inaccurate in this regard, but rather that he has emphasized alcohol effects on a particular form of conflict—one in which instigatory cues are dominant and inhibiting cues are more peripheral—to the virtual exclusion of other forms of conflict. As a result, the fact that behavior can be governed by qualitatively different forms of conflict, and that alcohol effects on such behaviors could differ dramatically from expectations based on Steele’s common depiction, has been largely overlooked.

These data also underscore the importance of subjective meanings an individual attaches to the behavior that alcohol is thought to affect. Indeed, we were able to make confident predictions about alcohol effects on sexual behavior and to interpret our findings only by a careful consideration of differences in the phenomenological experience of male and female adolescents on a first date. In addition, the present study offers a potentially heuristic framework for understanding gender differences in alcohol effects on sexual behavior. The notion that males and females experience qualitatively different types of response conflict around sexual behavior may provide an important basis for reconciling discrepancies in the existing literature on gender differences, as well as for generating more accurate predictions to guide future research on alcohol’s effects on sexual behavior among females.

From a methodological perspective, the present study offers an externally valid yet rigorous approach for testing theoretical predictions derived from Steele’s model about alcohol effects on sexual behavior. The use of three distinct modalities for testing hypotheses generated by his model (i.e., between- and within-subjects tests of the gender-of-drinker hypothesis and tests of the Conflict × Alcohol interaction) enabled greater confidence in our findings than would the use of any single method alone. For example, results of the Alcohol × Conflict interaction could have been produced by a selective bias (e.g., yoked to the use or nonuse of alcohol) in participants’ recall of their conflict at the time of the sexual encounter. However, this bias was not present in the remaining analyses and could not, therefore, account for those findings as well. Consequently, consistency of findings across methods decreases the number and plausibility of alternative rival hypotheses that can adequately explain the pattern of findings across all three methods. Future research using a diary method could strengthen this general approach, however, by collecting data closer in time to the occurrence of the event, thereby enhancing accuracy of recall.

The present study is also the first to assess conflict directly and to demonstrate the predicted Conflict × Alcohol use interaction. Accordingly, these data suggest that conflict inhibition can be measured in a direct yet meaningful manner and need not be simply inferred as it has been in the past. This innovation may be especially important in studies of naturally occurring behaviors where, as Steele and Josephs (1990) previously noted, inferring the nature and salience of competing cues governing behavior, and hence the level of conflict, would otherwise be difficult.

Finally, on pragmatic grounds, the present study provides empirical support for the widely held but heretofore undocumented assumption that drinking promotes sexual contact. In this regard, our results contribute to a growing literature implicating substance use as a causal factor in sexual risk taking among adolescents (e.g., Cooper et al., 1994; Flanagan & Hitch, 1989) and highly conflicted individuals may be especially motivated to exploit alcohol’s excuse-giving properties, drinking may lead to alcohol-related disinhibition through an alternative causal mechanism (viz. expectancy activation) among this particular subgroup.
Given that abstinence is the only way to completely eliminate risks associated with adolescent sexual activity, factors that promote the occurrence of intercourse per se may be viewed as the ultimate root causes of sexual risk taking.

Results of the present study raise several provocative questions that could be fruitfully explored in future research. First, it remains unclear how the effects of male alcohol use were mediated at the interpersonal process level. Our data suggest that the effect was due neither to overt aggression nor simple initiation by the male couple member who drank. However, we used a single-item measure of initiation that may have obscured more subtle cues that signal readiness or desire for intimate sexual contact, and we did not directly assess who made the first “move.” We also do not know how conflict experienced by one couple member relates to that of his or her partner. To the extent that individual-level conflict is correlated within couples, it may be that alcohol-related disinhibition among males occurs, not because alcohol interferes with the processing of inhibitory cues as hypothesized, but rather because it frees the male partner to act on cues from his partner signaling conflict and ambivalence about having intercourse. Thus, future research using data from both couple members as well as more refined measures of interpersonal process is needed to address more adequately the interpersonal dynamics triggered when the male couple member drinks.

Efforts to more fully delineate the conditional nature of alcohol effects on sexual behavior across the lifespan of a relationship offers yet another useful direction for future research. Both our theoretical reasoning, and the empirical evidence brought to bear on that reasoning, suggest that alcohol effects on sexual behavior may diminish with increasing relationship intimacy among male adolescents. As sexual contact becomes both more normative and less proscribed, the strength of relevant inhibitory cues should diminish, thereby leading to decreased conflict about having sex and weaker alcohol effects. In contrast, alcohol effects may actually increase with increasing relationship intimacy among female adolescents. As intimacy and commitment grow, proscriptions against sexual behavior are thought to decrease while desire for sexual intimacy is thought to increase. Thus, the combination of decreasing prohibitions and increasing desire should, at some point, create among female adolescents the type of response conflict that fosters alcohol-related disinhibition of sexual behavior. Future research monitoring changes in relevant inhibiting and instigating cues, in conflict, and in the nature and strength of alcohol effects on sexual behavior among couples as their relationship unfolds across time could serve to delimit the boundaries of this phenomenon, and thereby vastly enrich our understanding of the interplay between drinking and sexual behavior.

In closing, the present study indicates that alcohol effects on human sexual behavior are both complex and variable and that an adequate understanding of when and how alcohol affects sexual behavior will ultimately require that we grapple with the range of subjective meanings that individual actors attach to sexual experience in specific situations.

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