

# Male barroom aggression: The contributing roles of alcohol, drinking contexts, and perceptions, attitudes and beliefs

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## Why focus on aggression in bars, pubs and clubs?

- Evidence indicates that commercial drinking establishments are “hot spots” for violent crime and injury
- Emergency room studies have identified bars as high risk locations for violent injury
- Many costs to society (social costs, health care costs, and costs due to policing and incarceration)



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## Why focus on young men?

- Although women are sometimes involved in barroom violence, aggression in and around bars is largely a young male phenomenon
- Most aggression experienced by young men occurs in or around licensed premises
- Most aggression at bars involves young men

# Factors contributing to aggression between men in bars:

*Effects of alcohol*

*The drinking context*

*Perceptions, attitudes, beliefs*





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## Role of alcohol

Consistent evidence has shown that alcohol intoxication influences the likelihood and severity of violence



## Role of alcohol

### Examples of pharmacological effects of alcohol

- increased risk taking
- reduced anxiety
- narrowed perceptions (focus on immediate situation)
- heightened emotionality
- impaired cognitive functioning (i.e., information processing, problem solving, ability to consider consequences)



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## Role of alcohol

### Factors contributing to heavy drinking/intoxication

- drinking norms
- pre-drinking/pre-loading/pre-partying
- cheap drinks/drink specials

## Not just alcohol

Pernanen, 1981: “There is no one-to-one relationship between alcohol use and human behaviour” (p.13)

Aggression results from the effects of alcohol *together* with situational and/or individual variables

Pernanen, K. (1981). Theoretical aspects of the relationship between alcohol use and crime. In J. J. Collins (Ed.), Drinking and crime: Perspectives on the relationship between alcohol consumption and criminal behaviour (pp. 1-69). New York, Guilford Press.





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# The drinking context



## The drinking context

Research has shown that the frequency and severity of aggression is associated with characteristics of the barroom environment



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# The drinking context

## Physical environment

- crowding, congestion, poor traffic flow
- environmental irritants/unpleasant conditions
- provoking/frustrating factors (e.g., unwanted contact, bumps, spilled drinks, line-ups)



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# The drinking context

## Social environment

- permissiveness, rowdiness
- sexual overtures, sexual competition

## The drinking context

### Bar staff behaviour

Although security staff are expected to prevent aggression, evidence suggests that many are ineffective in this role:

- inability to control or defuse situations
- inconsistent in enforcing rules
- many are violent themselves

**Not just alcohol and the drinking context....**

**Young men's perceptions, attitudes and beliefs**



- 1) Barroom environment**
- 2) Approval of aggression**
- 3) Effects of alcohol**



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# 1) Perceived role of barroom environment

## Methods

- Focus group interviews with young men
- Participants were given descriptions of typical incidents of aggression in a bar
- Participants discussed why they thought the incidents happened
- We identified emerging themes regarding the contribution of the barroom environment to aggression

# Perceived role of barroom environment

## Findings

### Acceptance and expectation of aggression

- Aggression is accepted, even expected

*“If you go to a bar you have to accept that risk, either you being in a fight or, you know, you turn around and there’s a fight”*



## Perceived role of barroom environment

### The acceptability and expectation of aggression:

- puts people into state of readiness for aggression

*"When you walk into a bar it's almost like you're on guard...because it's happened ever since the bar has existed...it's almost the expectation"*

- prompts people to engage in such behaviour themselves

*"oh well, we're at the bar so we gotta fight"*

# Perceived role of barroom environment

## Anonymity and being someone else

- Unaccountable/anonymous/faceless in a large crowd
  - People won't know who you are
  - People won't notice what you did -- easy to slip into crowd
  - People won't remember you the next day
- Being someone else
  - Step into another identity -- be whoever you want
  - Removes sense of responsibility



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## Perceived role of barroom environment

*"You can be violent without being accountable because so many people are there and so many people do it"*

*"You feel faceless almost...he doesn't know who I am...It doesn't matter what you do...you're faceless and nobody's gonna know what you did"*



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## Perceived role of barroom environment

### Heightened concern with image

- need to look good/tough and to show they will not be pushed around
- concern in front of women
- especially important in the bar (compared with other locations)





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## Perceived role of barroom environment

*“I think image is one of the biggest things when you’re at a bar... ‘Cause it’s like your social setting. It’s where image matters most I’d say... in terms of picking up, in terms of showing off [in front of] your friends...”*



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# Perceived role of barroom environment

## Perceived social pressure to fight

- Social pressure
  - expected to take action when provoked
  - encouraged by friends to respond to provocation
  
- Social consequences of inaction
  - teased/mockered
  - social disapproval



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## Perceived role of barroom environment

*"...at the end of the day you're expected to do something and show everyone else that you took care of the situation and I guess in this situation it came down to him having to throw a punch, which isn't the ideal outcome, but it happens when you're expected to take some sort of action"*

*"We'll show all the ladies by kicking that dude through the door"*

*"I think inaction is one of the worst things he could have done...he'd be mocked by his male friends"*



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## 2) Approval of male barroom aggression

### Methods

- Random sample of adult male students
  - Self-administered questionnaires
  - Young men's approval of barroom aggression
- own approval (e.g. "I disapprove of fights at a bar")
- perceptions of peer approval (e.g. "My male friends disapprove of fighting at a bar")





# Approval of male barroom aggression

## Findings

- Participants who approved of aggression in bars were more likely to experience aggression at a bar
- Participants overestimated peer approval of aggression
- Participants who believed that their friends approved of aggression in bars were more likely to experience aggression at a bar

## Approval of male barroom aggression

These findings suggest that:

- young men believe they are expected by their friends to behave aggressively when provoked
- they behave accordingly to avoid peer disapproval

## 3) Perceived effects of alcohol

### Methods

- same sample (described above)
- participants were given examples of provoking situations that commonly occur in bars
- asked to indicate the extent to which alcohol might affect their behaviour



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# Perceived effects of alcohol

## Examples of questionnaire items

### Cognitive Impairment

- less able to see the whole picture
- less able to think about all my options

### Power/Aggression

- more likely to feel fearless
- more likely to feel strong

### Hyper-Emotional effects

- more likely to become angry
- less able to control my temper



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## Perceived effects of alcohol

### Findings

- Belief that alcohol influences behaviour (particularly Power and Aggression) was linked to experiencing barroom aggression
- Therefore, perceptions about the effects of alcohol may be important, independent of actual effects of alcohol

## Summary



Barroom aggression is linked to several contributing factors, including:

- effects of alcohol
- perceived effects of alcohol
- the barroom environment
- perceptions regarding the barroom environment
- personal approval and perceptions regarding peer approval

## Implications

**Prevention programming must be multi-faceted, addressing:**

- alcohol consumption
  - reduce over-serving through enforcement
  - pre-drinking
  - general drinking norms
  
- young men's perceptions regarding the effects of alcohol
  - change expectations about effects of alcohol – power & aggression

## Implications

- the physical and social environment of the bar
  - reduce crowding, bottlenecks, environmental irritants
  - establish and enforce clear rules regarding unacceptable behaviour
  - improve bar staff behaviour



## Implications

- young men's perceptions regarding the barroom environment
  - reduce concerns with image/status – build self esteem and confidence among less mature men
  - perceived anonymity – reduce crowding, improve surveillance
- young men's acceptance/approval of aggression in bars
  - communicate that bar violence is unacceptable, through legislation, enforcement and licensing (e.g., on the spot tickets/fines)

## Implications

- young men's perceptions regarding peer approval
  - alter perceptions regarding peer norms
  - provide practical skills for dealing with social pressure
  - peers can also play a role in prevention  
(e.g. [www.championshipmoves.com.au](http://www.championshipmoves.com.au)  
“it takes a real champion to keep his mates out of trouble”)

# THANK YOU

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