

Alcohol and Aggression: A Criminological Analysis

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Abstract: The article discusses the connection between aggressive behavior, which is expressed in violent crime and alcohol intoxication. Aggression is inherent to most living creatures and can be constructive or destructive. It is known that alcohol intoxication is a significant factor of aggressive behavior and violent crime. We show that increase in aggression associated with alcohol is most pronounced when the person already has significant aggressive deformations of personality. In many cases, the act of consumption of alcohol itself becomes a psychological mean to subvert conscious judgment and to promote aggression. Authors conclude that criminal legislation should consider the use of alcohol by the criminal prior to committing the crime an aggravating circumstance of violent crimes, such as murder, rape, burglary and some others.

Key words: Personality of a criminal • Intoxication • Violent crime • Behavior

INTRODUCTION

Aggression is a common biological trait of many living creatures. It is inherent trait of their behavior. In many cases aggression has a great biological significance, because maintaining a certain level of aggression can become a factor in survival of species. Acceptable levels of aggressive behavior can be constructive factor in maintaining social relations in a group and in countering external threats. In human society, many social mechanisms take advantage of aggressive behavior, making the emotions behind it a powerful stimulus of constructive social acts. Almost every social competition is aggressive by its nature. Even untransformed forms of aggression can be useful to society in some cases (for example, when acting against the threats of violence). However, aggression often causes deformation and destruction of social relations, immoral behavior and even crime [1].

In criminology, aggression is often associated with violent actions and violent crimes. Violence is considered a medium of manifestation of a person's attitudes toward aggression [2]. Increased levels of aggression are a personal trait common to many criminals [3]. Increased levels of aggression and cruelty in the society are associated with the significant increase in violent crime [1].

Consumption of alcoholic beverages causes alcohol intoxication, which manifests in emotional agitation, which can lead to aggressive actions and other kinds of inadequate behavior. Under influence of alcohol, people tend to recall previously experienced psychological trauma, feel resentment and the need to "avenge" themselves [4]. Very high degree of aggression is associated with the pseudo-epileptic form of an alcohol intoxication [5].

On the other side, consumption of the large doses of alcohol does not raise the level of aggression. In a state of a severe intoxication person often loses contact with surrounding, ceasing to respond to the outside stimuli [5]. Aggression is uncommon in such state. Extreme states of intoxication are characterized by serious disorders of consciousness, which prevent all kinds of activity, including aggressive antisocial behavior.

Aggressive reactions caused by mild and moderate alcoholic intoxication can and should be considered in the process of criminal lawmaking. We propose that committing the crime in the state of alcoholic intoxication should be considered an aggravating circumstance of violent crimes. To justify this proposal, we should consider the effect of alcohol on the manifestation of natural aggressive reactions of a person.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We use common scientific methods, such as formal logic, systematic and structural decomposition and analysis. To show that the effects of alcohol intoxication associated with aggressive behavior are well known to ordinary people, we conducted a survey of a 150 students of Southwest State University (Kursk, Russia). We asked them to describe the effect of consumption of alcohol on aggressive behavior in connection with the personal traits of a drinker. A closed questionnaire was used to categorize the answers. We also used crime rate statistics provided by the Ministry of Interior of Russian Federation.

RESULTS

Analysis of prior publications shows that there is no doubt that the alcohol consumption effects aggressive behavior. Meta-analysis of 30 publications conducted by the scientists from the University of Missouri shows that the size of such effect in most cases is estimated as moderate and in some cases as severe, but the effect of intoxication is comparable to effect of other factors leading to aggressive behavior [6]. Study by D.M. Dougherty et al. shows that the influence of alcohol is comparable with such other factors of violence as the desire to gain and maintain social status, graphic depictions of aggressive behavior in mass media and video games, possession and carrying of weapons etc. [7].

The increase in aggressiveness associated with alcohol consumption can be quite lengthy and can last for several hours [8].

There are several explanations of the increased levels of aggression after the consumption of alcohol. First, the pharmacological effects of ethanol include suppression of inhibitory centers of the brain, which normally prevent aggressive behavior and also cognitive, physiological and emotional disorders. Second, aggression can be connected to the personal traits of a drinker or to the circumstances of alcohol consumption. B. J. Bushman and H. M. Cooper note that neither the first, nor the second cause alone can explain all the observed aggressive displays associated with drinking [6].

There are significant gender differences in occurrence of aggressive behavior associated with alcohol intoxication. Study by P. Hoaken et al. suggests that as females are significantly less aggressive than

males, alcohol consumption by females has lesser effect on manifestations of aggression than other provoking factors [9].

Interestingly, the effect of alcohol on the aggressive behavior is not evident in heavy drinkers and alcoholics. There is no significant increase in aggression levels after consumption of alcohol in these groups. B.J. Bushman, H. M. Cooper attribute that to the increased tolerance to the effects of ethanol [6]. It must be noted, however, that prolonged alcohol abuse frequently leads to the accentuation of personality disorders and to the degradation of personality. It is well known that symptoms of alcoholism include increased excitability, hysterical and affective reactions and lack of self-criticism [10]. Frequent alcohol abusers are aggressive even when sober and alcohol consumption does not increase their likelihood to engage in violent behavior due to increased alcohol tolerance and physiological dependence on ethanol.

There are reasons to believe that the individual personal traits and expectations associated with consumption of alcohol may have decisive influence of the impact of alcohol on aggression [11]. Study by P.R. Giancola et al. shows that an increase in aggression is most pronounced in individuals who are characterized by increased irritability even when sober. Persons with lower irritability are less prone to aggression in drunk and sober state alike. The intensity of aggression is also lower in such persons [12].

Zhang L. *et al.*, tie the realization of the aggression in drunken state to a person's belief that having a drink can somehow increase their merits that are commonly associated with aggressive behavior (such as physical strength, masculinity etc.). People who have such beliefs are much more prone to the aggression after drinking some alcohol than people that do not have such expectations [13].

While there are many subtle factors affecting the aggression in sober and drunken state, we may also presume that the drinker knows that alcohol consumption frequently stimulates aggression. This effect of ethanol is very common and well known. A survey conducted by authors among the students of the Law Faculty of Southwest State University shows that the vast majority (over 80 %) of people questioned thinks that alcohol raises the level of aggressiveness. 30 % of respondents also noted that aggressive behavior in the drunken state is more common among people who act aggressively even when they are sober.

Dose of the consumed alcohol also effects the characteristics of aggressive behavior. However, it has only secondary importance in comparison to the personal traits of a drinker, all in all, its effect is not very significant [6].

If alcohol consumption has significant effect on aggressiveness, it should result in the increased number of violent crimes committed in the state of intoxications. This assumption is confirmed by crime rate statistics. According to the Ministry of Interior of Russian Federation, in 2012, more than a quarter of all crime (25.1 %) is committed in the state of alcohol intoxication. Of all the crimes endangering life and health, more than 40 % were committed in the state of alcohol intoxication. More than 60 % of killers and 70 % of rapists were intoxicated at the time of their crime [14].

Discussion. We have shown that there is an objective connection between the consumption of alcohol and aggressive behavior, which has consequences that are relevant to criminal law and criminology.

First, increased aggressiveness influences the criminal activity and the social danger of crimes committed in the drunken state. The root cause of most violent crimes (such as murder, infliction of bodily injury, rape) is the social conflict that can be resolved by legal or criminal actions. When there are no factors that increase aggressiveness, such as consumption of alcohol, pain, emotional disorder etc., a person is inclined to choose nonviolent way to solve this conflict. In the presence of such factors the likelihood of person choosing the violent way and the intensity of violence increase [7].

Second, despite that the alcohol consumption acts as external factor of a crime, the fact that the crime was committed in the state of alcohol intoxications is the evidence of the negative traits of the personality of the criminal. We have established that alcohol "releases" the individual traits of a personality associated with the violent behavior. Antisocial characteristics are more common among "drunk" criminals. That fact calls for strengthening of criminal penalty and other measures associated with violent crimes committed in the state of alcohol intoxication. The person who drinks alcohol to release its violent "inner self" should not be considered the accidental criminal. Such crime should be considered premeditated.

Some argue that the intoxication should be considered a mitigating circumstance of a crime because they think that drunk person loses control of their behavior to some extent. This is not the case. Given sufficient incentive, the person can fight and control the

emotional disorders and aggressive tendencies associated with intoxication. K.E. Grattan-Miscio and M. Vogel-Sprott in their study show that despite the fact that alcohol increases number of errors people make during some trial, if they are given small monetary reward for successful completion of such trial, the number of errors decreases significantly, almost reaching the rate achieved in sober state [15].

Therefore, it is unlikely that intoxication causes such severe loss of self-control that can be sufficient to justify the mitigation of responsibility of persons who commit violent crime in the state of alcohol intoxication.

Third, as stated previously, the impact of alcohol consumption on the aggressive behavior significantly depends on whether the person is predisposed to aggression. The drinker is usually aware of the possible adverse consequences of alcohol use (including the peculiarities of the reaction of his own organism to the consumption of ethanol). If a person knows that he or she is more likely to express aggression in drunken state and in spite of that consciously bring themselves to a state of intoxication, we can conclude that the social danger of such a person can be assessed much higher than the danger of average perpetrator of violent crime.

CONCLUSION

We suggest there is the need for special regulation of criminal responsibility for aggressive and violent behavior of intoxicated persons. We propose to consider the perpetration of crime in the state of intoxication an aggravating circumstance of such crimes as murder and manslaughter, infliction of bodily harm and battery, rape and sexual assault, robbery, as well as some other, in which the violence plays the essential. There are examples of such approach in the criminal legislation of some countries of the world (for example, Bulgaria and Colombia).

Is also necessary to study other relevant criminal reactions of the human body associated with alcohol intoxication (emotions, cognitive processes, libido) in order to improve the criminal law governing the liability for crimes committed in a state of intoxication.

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