



# Daily Alcohol Use and Relationship Processes in Romantic Relationships

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## INTRODUCTION

- While some recent research has shown alcohol to have positive effects in daily social interactions (aan het Rot, 2008), most studies examining drinking in romantic relationship contexts have only focused on alcohol's negative effects (see Roberts & Linney, 2000, for a review).
- However, it is reasonable to expect drinking to have both positive and negative effects on relationship functioning, depending on amount consumed and whether couple members drank together or separately.
- Moreover, many of the extant studies on these phenomena are limited in that they:
  - Use non-normative samples such as individuals in treatment for alcoholism or domestic abuse,
  - Typically use only male reports, ignoring the complementing female reports,
  - Over-rely on cross-sectional study methodologies.
- Therefore, not only are many studies not adequately representing normative drinking in romantic relationships, but they are also not capturing reports from both couple members, and thus, not able to determine how one member's behaviors affects the other. Moreover, the lack of assessing these phenomena by means of a daily methodology hinders the understanding of how these processes vary from day to day.
- Thus, the current study used a daily diary procedure in which both couple members recorded their alcohol use and relationship functioning over approximately 3 weeks to permit a test of 3 hypotheses.

## HYPOTHESES

- We expect light to moderate drinking on a given day to predict positive relationship functioning (e.g., increased intimacy) the next day, whereas heavy drinking should predict poorer relationship functioning (e.g., increased negative partner behaviors). Together, these would be manifest in a significant curvilinear effect of consumption on relationship functioning.
- We expect drinking with one's partner (versus apart) to predict an increase in positive relationship functioning and a decrease in negative relationship functioning.
- Drinking with one's partner might also interact with amount consumed to moderate drinking's effects on subsequent relationship functioning.

## METHOD

### Overview of Study Design, Participants, and Procedure

- Participants were 81 adult (18-47 years) couples in romantic relationships of at least 30 days duration (mean duration = 1.90 years).
- Diary reports assessing alcohol use and relationship functioning were completed twice daily over a 21 day period by both couple members.
- Analyses were based on a total of 2909 a.m. reports and 2926 p.m. reports.

### Measures

- Drinking Items:** Three items assessed daily alcohol consumption.
- Drinking Quantity:** A single item assessed how many standard drinks (i.e., 12 oz. beer, 4 oz. wine, 1 oz. liquor) respondents consumed during the drinking session.
- Drinking to Intoxication:** A single item assessed the extent to which respondents drank to intoxication during the drinking session (on a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 = "Not at all" and 5 = "Extremely").
- Drinking with One's Partner:** A single item assessed with whom respondents drank during the drinking session. Responses indicating drinking occurred with one's partner were coded 1 and all other responses were coded 0.
- Relationship Functioning Items:** Four measures assessed daily relationship functioning.
- Intimacy:** One's own and one's partner's intimacy were assessed each morning with a composite of 3 items asking respondents how "close," "happy," and "in love" with their partners they were at that moment on a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 = "Not at all" and 5 = "Extremely."
- Negative Behaviors:** One's own negative behaviors (as reported by one's partner) and one's partner's negative behaviors (as reported by the individual) during the day were assessed each evening with a composite of 9 items (e.g., "Did your partner criticize you today?") on a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 = "NO!" 2 = "no" 3 = "maybe" 4 = "yes" and 5 = "YES!"
- Negative Events with One's Partner:** Each evening participants were asked to think about the most stressful thing that occurred that day. Only events in which participants said their partners were involved were used in analyses. A composite of 10 items assessed the impact of the negative event (e.g., "To what extent did this event make you feel incompetent or stupid?") on a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 = "Not at all" and 5 = "Completely."
- Positive Events with One's Partner:** Each evening participants were also asked to think about the best thing that occurred that day. Again, only events which involved one's partner were used in analyses. A composite of 4 items assessed the impact of the positive event (e.g., "To what extent did this event make you feel competent or capable?") on a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 = "Not at all" and 5 = "Completely."

## METHOD (cont.)

**Analyses:** Analyses were conducted using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2004). Daily reports of alcohol use and relationship functioning (modeled at Level 1) were nested within individuals (controlling for variation between genders at Level 2) which were nested within couples (controlling for variation between couples at Level 3). Next day relationship functioning was predicted by current day alcohol use controlling for prior relationship functioning.

## RESULTS

Unstandardized coefficients from all models can be seen below in Table 1.

### Hypothesis 1: Mixed support was found for Hypothesis 1.

- One's drinking quantity on a given day significantly predicted an increase in one's reports of negative events with one's partner and negative partner behaviors the next day. It also predicted corroborating partner reports of next day negative events.
- As expected, drinking to intoxication on a given day similarly significantly predicted increases in next day negative events (reported by both couple members) and respondent reports of negative partner behaviors, as well as a significant decrease in next day partner intimacy.
- Contrary to expectation, drinking of any amount did not significantly predict subsequent positive relationship functioning. In fact, the significant curvilinear effect (see Figure 1) indicating that reports of next day negative events with one's partner increases as a function of one's drinking up to about 6 drinks, at which point it levels off, was the opposite of the hypothesized curvilinear effect.

### Hypothesis 2: Support was found for Hypothesis 2.

- Drinking with one's partner on a given day significantly predicted an increase in one's intimacy the next day in models for drinking amount and drinking to intoxication.
- Drinking with one's partner on a given day also predicted a decrease in next day negative partner behaviors, as reported by the respondent.

### Hypothesis 3: Limited support was found for Hypothesis 3.

- Drinking with one's partner significantly interacted with drinking amount on a given day to predict one's partner's intimacy the next day (see Figure 1). That is, partners of those who drank away from them experienced decreased next day intimacy as a function of drinking quantity, whereas this pattern was not true when individuals drank with their partners.

Table 1. Effects of current day drinking on next day relationship functioning.

Predictors	Outcomes							
	ND Pos Events (Own)	ND AM Intimacy (Own)	ND Pos Events (Part.)	ND AM Intimacy (Part.)	ND Neg Events (Own)	ND Neg Behaviors (Own)	ND Neg Events (Part.)	ND Neg Behaviors (Part.)
Hypothesis 1								
CD Drinks	.011	-.011	-.004	--	.095*	.011*	.045**	.001
CD Drunk	-.021	-.031	-.030	-.038†	.049†	.024*	.087**	.008
CD Drinks <sup>2</sup>	ns	ns	ns	ns	-.010*	ns	ns	ns
Hypothesis 2								
CD DWP (Drinks Models)	.062	.161***	.092	--	.061	-.077*	.122	-.006
CD DWP (Drunk Models)	.147	.185***	.124	.091	.137	-.087*	.093	-.019
Hypothesis 3								
CD Drinks X DWP	ns	ns	ns	.026*	ns	ns	ns	ns
CD Drunk X DWP	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns

†  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$   
 ND = Next day; CD = Current day; DWP = Drink with partner; Parentheses indicate who is reporting.

Figure 1. Curvilinear trend of next day negative events with one's partner as a function of current day drinking quantity.

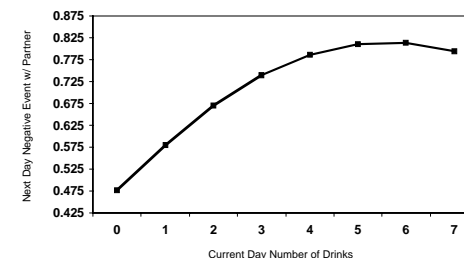
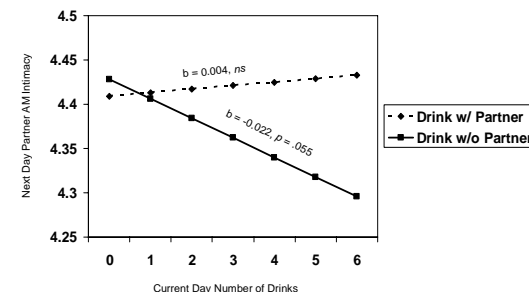


Figure 2. Drinking quantity by drinking with one's partner interaction on next day partner intimacy.



## DISCUSSION

Overall, the nature of drinking's effects on subsequent relationship functioning depends on the amount of alcohol consumed and the context in which the drinking occurred.

- Drinking quantity and drinking to intoxication had uniformly negative effects on subsequent relationship functioning, which is in line with previous research.
- However, drinking with one's partner versus apart was shown to be beneficial to subsequent relationship functioning as it was associated with an increase in certain beneficial relationship processes and a decrease in other deteriorative processes. Furthermore, drinking with one's partner can moderate certain effects of drinking on subsequent relationship functioning.
- Our study showed the importance of using reports from both couple members. It allowed us to place drinking within a broader relationship context (e.g., drinking with one's partner), and perhaps more importantly, it allowed us to determine if there were corroborative reports on the same outcome between respondents and their partners (e.g., negative events with one's partner).
- Our study was not without limitations. Of note, the items assessing positive and negative daily events could have been more detailed. First, the items did not specifically ask respondents to think about the best and worst thing that occurred that day with their partners. Instead, whether the events occurred with one's partner was secondary to the event itself. Second, because we did not ask participants what the events actually were, it is not possible for us to determine the severity of the events. In other words, the best event with one's partner on a given day may be truly significant in the context of the relationship, whereas the worst event that day may indeed be nothing more than a triviality.
- Future research examining drinking and relationship processes should continue to implement daily diary methodologies and reports from both couple members. Additionally, researchers should be careful to include items that are relationship and partner specific, and to assess specifics when asking respondents about daily events.