

# Alcohol-intoxicated witnesses to intimate partner violence

Memory performance and perception of aggression and guilt

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Avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd från Samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligens försvaras fredagen den 18 mars kl. 10.00 2016, sal F1, Psykologiska institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Gisli H. Guðjónsson, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, United Kingdom.

Avhandlingen grundar sig på följande tre artiklar:

- I. Hildebrand Karlén, M., Roos af Hjelmsäter, E., Fahlke, C., Granhag, P. A., & Söderpalm Gordh, A. (2014). Alcohol intoxicated eyewitnesses' memory of intimate partner violence. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, *21*, 156–171. doi: 10.1080/1068316X.2014.951644
- II. Hildebrand Karlén, M., Roos af Hjelmsäter, E., Fahlke, C., Granhag, P. A., & Söderpalm Gordh, A. (2015). Alcohol intoxicated witnesses: perception of aggression and guilt in intimate partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, doi: 10.1177/0886260515599656. pii: 0886260515599656. [Epublication ahead of print]
- III. Hildebrand Karlén, M., Roos af Hjelmsäter, E., Fahlke, C., Granhag, P. A., & Söderpalm Gordh, A. *When to interview intoxicated witnesses to intimate partner violence: when still drunk or when sober again?* Manuscript submitted for review.



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**ABSTRACT**

Hildebrand Karlén, M. (2016). *Alcohol-intoxicated witnesses to intimate partner violence: Memory performance and perception of aggression and guilt*. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Alcohol affects memory and perception in many different ways. In legal contexts, this is a serious problem, as many witnesses to violent crimes are alcohol intoxicated. Although the relationship between alcohol and different forms of violence (e.g. intimate partner violence [IPV]) is well established, research is lacking regarding how intoxication affects witnesses' reports. The general aim of the present thesis was to examine how alcohol affected witnesses regarding their memory and perception of aggression and guilt in an IPV scenario. In Study I and II, participants ( $n = 87$ ) drank an alcoholic beverage (0.7 g/kg) or juice before viewing a film picturing IPV, and were interviewed 10 min after. In addition, they rated how aggressive they perceived the involved parties to be in different stages of the interaction and how guilty they perceived them to be. In Study III ( $n = 136$ ), the dose (0.8 g/kg for men; 0.75 g/kg for women) and timing of the interview were altered. Fifty percent of the intoxicated/sober participants were interviewed twice, directly after the film and then again one week later. Fifty percent were interviewed only after one week. The aim of **Study I** was to examine whether alcohol and gender affected the completeness, accuracy, and type of information in witnesses' reports. Women had a higher blood alcohol level than men at the 0.7 g/kg dose. Reports by alcohol intoxicated women were less complete than, but just as accurate as sober women's were, while intoxicated and sober men did not differ regarding completeness or accuracy. Intoxicated women reported fewer actions and a smaller amount of subjective information, but no difference was found between the groups regarding reported number of objects, thoughts/feelings and verbal information. The aim of **Study II** was to examine to what extent alcohol affected how aggressive and guilty witnesses perceived the involved parties to be. Intoxicated participants (0.7 g/kg) perceived physically aggressive behavior as less aggressive, but neutral behavior as more aggressive, than sober participants did. The intoxicated participants perceived the parties to be more equally guilty, while the sober participants attributed more guilt to the man alone. The aim of **Study III** was to examine whether alcohol (dose 0.8 g/kg for men, 0.75 g/kg for women) and time of interview affected the completeness, accuracy and type of information reported by the witnesses. Severe intoxication (BAC = 0.08 - 0.15), but not moderate (BAC 0.04-0.08), diminished report completeness but not accuracy for the witnesses who were interviewed directly after the event. All witnesses gave shorter and less accurate reports one week later, but having been interviewed directly after the event was associated with greater completeness of reports given one week later. Generally, severely intoxicated witnesses (BAC = 0.08 - 0.15) reported fewer actions and less verbal information, but just as many objects, as sober and moderately intoxicated witnesses did. Alcohol has a complex impact on perception of escalating aggression, which may be caused by its anxiety-reducing/disinhibiting effects. Intoxicated witnesses' more even distribution of guilt might be due to an increase in heuristic processing and reliance on gender stereotypes in an IPV scenario, where the man uses offensive aggression and the woman defensive aggression. In conclusion, alcohol affected witnesses' memory and perception of aggression and guilt, all of which are important aspects to consider in a legal setting. Further research should investigate higher alcohol doses and whether these results can be replicated in more naturalistic conditions.

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*Keywords:* alcohol intoxication, witnesses, intimate partner violence, memory, aggression, guilt

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