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"Getting high" and unsafe sex

*Assignment for
The Norwegian Gay Health Committee
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Point of departure

- ◆ *Increasing drug use at gay venues – new party drugs are getting common*
- ◆ *The "safer sex" norm may be weakening, especially among the younger group*
- ◆ *The effects of intoxication on unsafe sex is controversial – the debate is fierce and rather ideological*



The assignment

- ◆ *Focus: Men who have sex with men, recreational alcohol and drug use*
- ◆ *Method: Review of research literature*
- ◆ *Assess the tenability of methods and results*
- ◆ *Elucidate the connections between intoxication and unsafe sex*
- ◆ *If relevant: Suggest measures to be taken against intoxication and unsafe sex*



"Connection" and "cause"

- ◆ *Covariation is not the same as a cause/effect relationship*
- ◆ *Research into causal connections must control for other conditions*
- ◆ *Some relationships are "linear", others "non-linear"*
- ◆ *"Statistical significance" does not imply explanatory power*



Effects determined by culture

- ◆ *We interpret and misinterpret our bodily states*
- ◆ *Beliefs about the effects of intoxicants vary between cultures*
- ◆ *Expectations control the "effects" – we get intoxicated if we believe we have consumed an intoxicant*
- ◆ *«Attribution»: Intoxication becomes the cause, and the excuse, for everything we do when intoxicated*
- ◆ *Intoxication facilitates escape from fear*



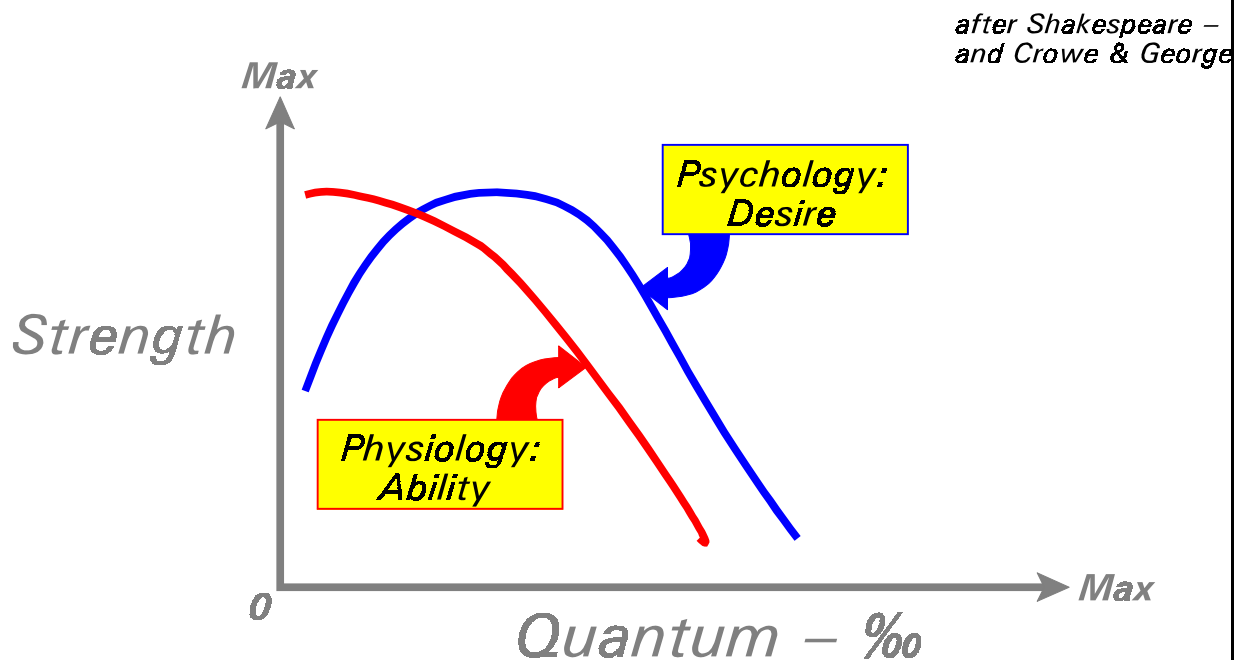
Effects on sexuality

	Alcohol	«Poppers» Amphetamine	«Ecstasy»	Cocaine
Excitability/ sensuality	Strengthening unlikely	Probably strengthened	Strengthened indirectly?	Probably strengthened
Erection	Impaired	Effect uncertain	Possibly impaired?	Possibly impaired?
Orgasm	Impaired	Intensified; prolonged?	Probably impaired	Strengthened indirectly?

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Sex: Effects of intoxication



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Effects on self-control

	Alcohol	«Poppers» Amphetamine	«Ecstasy»	Cocaine
Energy	Impaired	Increases temporarily	Increases	Increases
Judgment	Impaired	Probably impaired	Probably impaired	Varies
Inhibition	Possibly impaired	Possibly impaired	Possibly impaired	Possibly impaired

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Research strategies



Circular argument: Sex when intoxicated = risk



Juxtaposition without connection: Intoxication. Sex.



General covariation: Intoxication; sex



*Specific covariation:
Sex-when-intoxicated; unsafe sex*



*Time series:
Intoxication-and-risk then-and-now –
Sex-episodes with-and-without-intoxication*

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Men who have Sex with Men

- ◆ *MSM who use more alcohol and drugs are sexually more active and liberal, and possibly less consistent in safer sex practices*
- ◆ *MSM who frequently have sex when intoxicated, probably also have more risky sex*

but ...:

- ◆ Episode studies do *not* indicate that MSM take greater risks when having sex on alcohol or drugs than when sober

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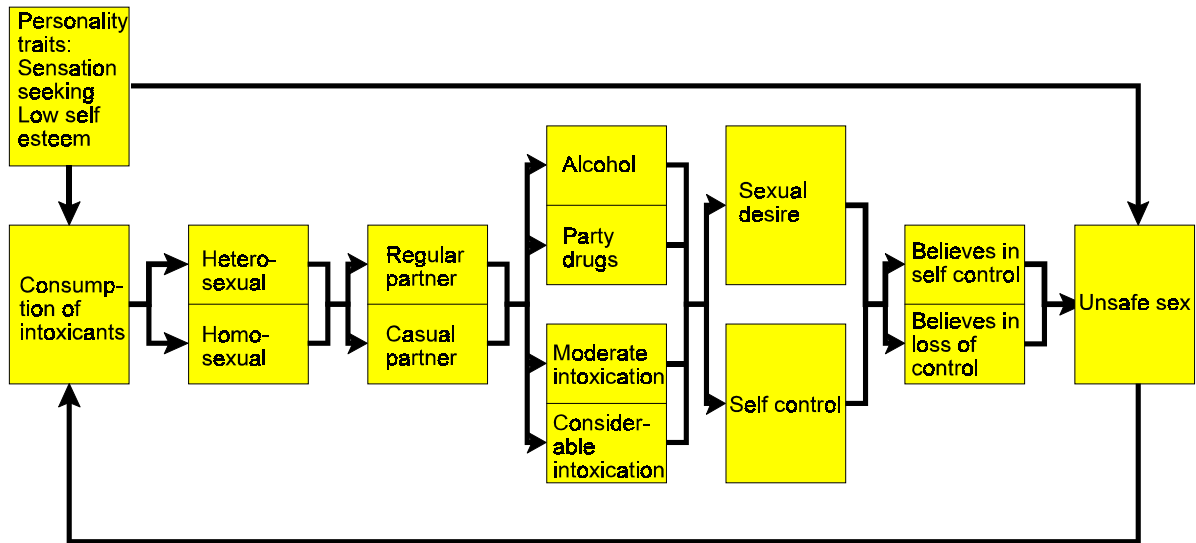
Intoxicants and unsafe sex – conclusion

- ◆ Intoxicants have a (varying) chemical potential to influence *desire and self control*
- ◆ Many other circumstances influence unsafe sex
- ◆ Recreational use of intoxicants does not appear to have a decisive influence on sexual risk taking among men who have sex with men

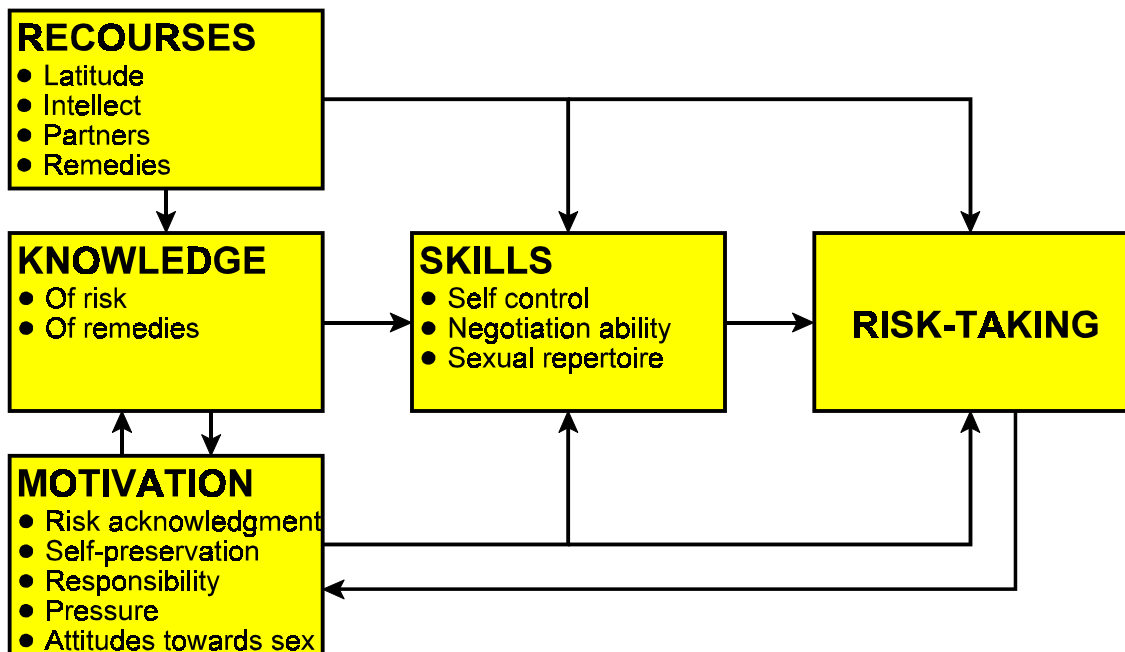
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Intoxication and unsafe sex: Connections?



Causes of unsafe sex



Preventive measures – after all?

YES, because

- ◆ alcohol and drug use is a "marker", if not a cause
- ◆ there probably is a general connection between intoxication and sexual risk

NO, because

- ◆ "anti drug" strategies may be rejected as puritanism and moralism
- ◆ alcohol and drug prevention is an extremely difficult task



Two preventive measures

- ◆ *Counteract self-fulfilling prophecies:*
Attack intoxication as an excuse
- ◆ *Consider the "state dependent learning" phenomenon:*
When intoxicated, we are more likely to remember whatever we have learned when intoxicated



A message on self control

My, was I drunk last night.

*But I didn't get into a fight.
And I didn't go near my car.*

*So why didn't we
use a condom?*

