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Why we drink: Researchers talk to young couples about habits

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Psychologist Simon Sherry poses for a photo on Tuesday at his downtown Halifax practice that overlooks the new NSLC Cannabis location on Clyde Street. - Ryan Taplin

If you're a researcher looking into drinking behaviour, the university campus might be compared to a great big petri dish.

So it's perhaps not a shock that an ongoing study at Dalhousie University into romantic relationships and alcohol consumption has turned its gaze on campus life.

The research team — which includes Simon Sherry, Sherry Stewart and undergrad researcher Nacera Hanzal — is looking for romantic couples aged 19 to 29, each of whom has had at least 12 drinks in the past year and one must be an undergraduate university student.

"If they've had at least 12 alcoholic drinks in the last year, almost assuredly they've also drunk alcohol in a problematic way, especially if they are university students," said Sherry, a clinical psychologist and addictions researcher at Dalhousie University, in an interview Wednesday. "When you get to Dalhousie, if you're a drinker, unfortunately you're also likely to drink in an unhealthy way."

Both members of the couple must participate at the same time in the assessment, which will be done in a controlled laboratory setting. (If you're interested, email cpstudy18@gmail.com.)

"What our research is showing is that couples may influence one another in terms of the motives for drinking, they may influence one another in terms of why they drink alcohol," said Sherry, whose studies into alcohol and relationships goes back about 10 years.

This research has included looking at heavy episodic drinking, or binge drinking, in the context of married or otherwise long-term couples and how they can influence one another's habits. While those studies confirmed there is an association between relationships and binge drinking, they didn't look into the exact reasons behind that association, Sherry said.

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"This (latest) study represents the first time we'll be examining the influence of one partner on another partner in terms of drinking behaviour within a more controlled lab situation."

For example, one or both members of a couple might drink in an attempt to make a good time better, what Sherry calls enhancement-related drinking. This type of behaviour would apply to the party-hard environment of university life.

But there are a range of motives that people will draw upon when they engage in drinking behaviour, he said. "For example some people may drink to relieve an aversive state of tension, they may drink to relax and unwind, . . . others to conform, to be one of the crowd."

The next step in the research, hopefully next year, will look beyond the romantic couple context into the drinker's larger social network.

Exploring drinking and relationships is more than an academic exercise, Sherry said.

"It's enormously important because it has implications for assessing and treating individuals with alcohol problems.

"We need to recognize that alcohol problems are not situated in an individual isolated from their social context. And increasingly we need to involve loved ones and family members in the treatment of an individual struggling with drinking problems, knowing that those people can have a profoundly positive or profoundly negative influence on the outcomes of treatment."