Drink Driving vs. Drunk Driving: One Letter Makes All the Difference

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Alcohol consumption and driving do not mix. In 2011, 36% of all fatal road traffic incidents in the United States were alcohol-related.\(^1\) Descriptors used for the phenomenon of driving under the influence of alcohol include: driving under the influence, driving while intoxicated, drinking and driving, drink driving, and drunk driving. The terms drink driving and drunk driving are used most commonly by the general public, presumably due to their brevity. I propose that the term drink driving is superior to the term drunk driving, and that the term drunk driving should be discarded. The UN named 2011-2020 as the decade for road safety and the time is right to improve the way we speak about road traffic accidents, and in particular, accidents related to alcohol use.

The problem with the term drunk driving is two-fold. Firstly, it only addresses a subset of the problem. Drink driving encompasses all acts whereby an individual consumes alcohol and then proceeds to drive a vehicle, placing themselves at higher risk for a road traffic incident; drunk driving gives a false impression that only those that are drunk should avoid driving. Secondly, the term drunk is very ambiguous, and thus, its use to describe a very serious public health issue when a perfectly good substitute exists, is a potential threat to the efficacy of public health interventions.

If the evidence showed that only drunk driving (assuming that this applies only to people who are drunk) is a problem, then this choice of terminology would not be an issue. However, this is not the case. Studies have shown that a moderate consumption of alcohol greatly increases the risk of injury and death following a road traffic incident.\(^2\) 16-20 year old male drivers with a blood alcohol content (BAC) reading as low as 0.010-0.019 have 1.55 times the risk of injury and death following a road traffic accident as a matched cohort with a BAC of 0. The risk rises to 17.32 with a BAC of 0.050-0.079 in the same demographic.\(^3\) Clearly, we would be doing society a grave injustice by merely focusing public health campaigns on a literal translation of drunk driving.

According to the Oxford dictionary, drunk as an adjective is defined as “affected by alcohol to the extent of losing control of one’s faculties or behavior.”\(^4\) Imprecision exists as to how much a person has to drink to be classified as being drunk, and also whether this loss of “faculties or behavior” has any influence on driving. This ambiguity is in stark contrast to the use of the term drink driving, which clearly imparts the message that if you have had alcohol to drink, you should not be driving.

A PubMed literature review revealed no studies examining how people interpret the meaning of being drunk. However, the variability in how moderate drinking —supposedly a more precise term—is defined has been studied.\(^5\) Interestingly, 30/151 respondents in this study described moderate drinking as “not getting drunk.” Perhaps the biggest challenge with these terms is that they are very dependent on the individual. One person might concede to being drunk after...
four standard drinks, while another might honestly feel like they are not drunk after 14 standard drinks.

Ambiguities in the use of the term drunk driving would perhaps be less problematic if it were not for the widespread use of the term in research investigations and public health policy. A PubMed literature search on 2013 for “drunk driving” yielded 373 results, whereas a search for “drink driving” yielded 246 results. The relative prevalence of each term can vary substantially by country. After including the country name in the search, the ratio of “drunk driving” to “drink driving” was 196:25 for the United States, 4:26 for the United Kingdom, and 9:96 for Australia. The use of the term drunk driving is largely a problem stemming from the United States.

It is no coincidence that the terminology in Australia is more precise. Great efforts have been taken to change the culture surrounding drink driving. In Victoria, $23 million AUS was spent on television advertisements between 1989 and 1992, focusing on drink driving and speeding. In conjunction with random breath testing, this was very effective in reducing the prevalence of drink driving in Victoria. In 2008, police conducted more than 3 million random breath tests, with only 0.5% of drivers registering over the legal limit of 0.05g/dL. A strong and clear message was delivered to the Australian public and the message was not muddied by the use of sloppy terminology such as drunk driving.

While some might contend that this is merely semantics, the language we use can have a powerful influence on how the message is received. The use of a term as ambiguous and misleading as drunk driving can only serve to undermine any attempts to change the culture of drink driving.

Attention is increasingly devoted to combating drink driving around the world. The Bloomberg Philanthropies Global Road Safety Program, a 5-year project aimed at reducing the burden due to road traffic incidents in low- and middle-income countries, identifies drink driving as one of four target areas. It may be of even greater importance to avoid the use of the term drunk driving in these countries, where language barriers may further complicate the message that social awareness campaigns are attempting to convey.

This issue should not be sold short by talking about drunk driving. Instead, use of the broader, less confusing, yet still succinct drink driving should be adopted. We owe the general public a strong, clear and accurate message regarding the risks associated with drink driving.

References


