

Are we really turning the tide against irresponsible drinking?

Increasing alcohol consumption and the associated health, social and economic harms are key public health concerns. Recent evidence shows that workers in middle-class professional roles consume more alcohol than other groups within the workforce, yet little is known about their views of drinking.

Increasing alcohol intake and the associated health, social and economic harms are key public health concerns. While some research has investigated the relationships between job status and drinking; and between alcohol consumption, work-related stress and occupational role, people in higher socio-economic groups are generally under-represented in alcohol research.

Individuals living in households with an adult working in a managerial or professional role are the most likely to have consumed any alcohol in the previous week. These individuals are also more likely than those living in routine and manual households to have had an alcoholic drink on five or more days in the previous week. No research has yet examined how alcohol is viewed by this section of the population.

Public health policies tend to focus on young people, binge drinking and the socially visible consequences of problematic drinkers. This largely disregards the harmful health and social effects of high regular alcohol consumption. The UK Government's latest alcohol strategy acknowledges the health impact of alcohol use; however its focus remains "turn[ing] the tide against irresponsible drinking". In the UK there has been a shift away from drinking within leisure premises and an increase in home drinking, where the majority of drinking now takes place. Home drinking is generally portrayed as safe and responsible despite being typically uncontrolled and unregulated.

Higher levels of alcohol consumption have become normalized. Almost a quarter of the population report regularly drinking in excess of current guidance, an overwhelming majority of whom do not think they are causing any risk to their long-term health. Researchers from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in

Public Health, spoke to 49 people in five workplaces to examine the views of white collar workers in relation to four themes related to drinking: lifestyle behaviours, drinking in the home, variations in consumption through the week, and the effect of drinking on work.

This study aimed to develop an understanding of how public health alcohol messages were viewed, as well as exploring the role of alcohol within the lives of white collar workers.

Key findings

- Drinking was considered a socially acceptable form of relaxation or reward for fulfilling work and family commitments, and as a marker of the transition from adult responsibilities, to 'me time'.
- *I drink 1) because I've had a stressful day at work, 2) because I've had a stressful day at home.*
- Focus groups considered unacceptable or problematic use of alcohol to be associated with long-term, heavy and binge drinking. Perceptions of excessive alcohol intake were related to personal appearance or behaviour rather than the quantity or frequency of consumption.
- Alcohol consumption on nights during the working week was acceptable provided that work and other responsibilities were fulfilled. This was interpreted as essentially harm free, despite identifying consumption greater than currently recommended limits.
- Ability to function at work and act responsibly were considered indicators that drinking is within acceptable levels. The implication was that, as the members of the focus groups were able to maintain employment in skilled roles, they were *by definition* drinking in a way that was not hazardous or harmful.
- *People care about what they look like on the outside not the inside.... I don't think people care that much unless you start weeing blood or something.*

Policy relevance and implications

- The shift to home drinking has implications for the development of public health alcohol policy, particularly as focus group members considered themselves to be moderate drinkers.
- Convenience and affordability were factors underpinning the shift to home drinking, where consumption is largely unregulated. Proposals to curb availability of cheap alcohol may reduce such consumption.
- Current public health messages relating to alcohol have failed to engage this group, with confusion about guidelines for responsible drinking.
- As well as reviewing the guidance, the way messages are communicated to different at-risk segments of the population should be examined.
- The latest UK Alcohol Strategy has committed to increase the scope and funding for 'Drinkaware' to best direct interventions to specific target groups within the population. A campaign interweaving health messages with those around drink driving could resonate with this group for which other campaigns have failed to impact.

Public health messages on the risk of adverse health consequences had little impact on views of alcohol consumption or reported drinking.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Fuse researchers explored views of alcohol consumption and excess in five workplaces. Public health messages or the risk of adverse health consequences had little impact on views of drinking. Public health messages were seen as being of little relevance, but rather reinforced perceptions that their own alcohol use was controlled and acceptable.

Jonathan Ling, Karen Smith, Graeme Wilson, Lyn Brierley-Jones, Ann Crosland, Eileen Kaner & Catherine Haighton: The 'other' in patterns of drinking: A qualitative study of attitudes towards alcohol use among professional, managerial and clerical workers.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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