Commentary on Kuntsche et al. (2011): Mothers and bottles – the role of gender norms in shaping drinking

In their intriguing paper, Kuntsche and colleagues (1) outline some compelling hypotheses about the relationship between women’s drinking behaviors and their social roles. The paper starts with the supposition (supported by prior literature) that it is an individual’s social roles, rather than her genetic makeup, her demographic status, or even her environment that pushes her towards or pulls her away from alcohol use. It asks, ‘What aspects of a woman’s social identity incline her to drink?’

Looking beyond the individual level, the paper goes on to ask whether the place of Women (as a class) in any given society also influences the drinking behavior of women (as individuals) in that society. How do societal norms, beliefs and attitudes about gender and about ‘women’s place’ interact with the actual roles that women hold to influence whether and how much they drink?

One of the greatest strengths of this analysis is the authors’ ability to compare 16 established market economies in Europe and North America, which nonetheless exhibit some marked differences in gender patterns. With the exception of the U.S., most mothers aged 25–49 in these countries are partnered. Yet employment of mothers aged 25–49 in the GenACIS countries ranges from 46 percent in Germany to 82 percent in Sweden. Most significantly, the gender-income ratio spans a range from 0.46 in Austria to a high of 0.81 in Sweden, with most countries falling in the 60s to 70s.

Even before Kuntsche et al. undertake multi-level modeling, the GenACIS data hint that culture must be a powerful force in shaping drinking behaviors; for example, rates of abstention vary widely, from around 50 percent in the U.S. and Spain, to less than 10 percent in the Nordic countries (and an astonishing zero in the U.K.). Likewise, the mean quantity of alcohol consumed per drinking day ranges from a low of 11 grams (of pure ethanol) in France to a high of 50 grams in Canada. These striking differences in alcohol consumption across countries point to the fact that the meaning of alcohol, how it fits into the warp and weave of everyday life—in other words, culture—matters. Kuntsche et al. illuminate another corner of that black box of ‘culture,’ by providing persuasive evidence that societal gender norms may also powerfully influence levels of female drinking in any given society.

The authors are able to exploit the variation in their data along several key dimensions: what proportion of mothers aged 25–49 drink, how much they drink, and which social roles they inhabit. They find that among partnered women, ‘working mums’ are more likely to drink than stay-at-home ‘housewives.’ Moreover, the effect was greatest in countries with greater gender-income inequity—in other words, where the most traditional gender norms prevail. In countries where men’s and women’s incomes are more on par and where Kuntsche et al. suppose there is greater societal support for combining the roles of mother and paid worker, combining motherhood with employment yields what these authors call a ‘protective effect,’ inclining working mothers to lower levels of drinking.

Although Kuntsche et al. cannot provide direct evidence of an effect, the notion that women who deviate from societal expectations by working outside the home in countries with a more traditionally gendered division of labor (operationalized here as the gender-income ratio), pay a particularly high price, one that they respond to by drinking more, has a prima facie validity and, indeed, resonates with other findings about the peculiar difficulties of female identity in the modern era.

As the authors acknowledge, this study is only a first step in the direction of deepening our understanding of the societal predictors of individual drinking behavior. The twist here is that it is not only an individual woman’s social roles that matter; her propensity to drink is also powerfully shaped by the interaction between gendered patterns of employment and caretaking in society and social norms and expectations about care and work.

Contrary to historical fears that allowing women to step out and beyond the traditional roles of wife and mother might turn the ‘angels of the hearth’ into solute drunkards (with untoward consequences for individuals, families, households and society at large), this analysis suggests that expanding women’s social roles and supporting their ability to contribute to society in a range of productive and engaged roles—along with a corresponding sea change in gender norms—may in fact reduce women’s propensity to drink as a coping mechanism for the stresses of their multi-faceted lives. Rather than constraining men and women to rigid traditional gender roles, social norms that encourage and enable women (and men) to combine caretaking and paid labor in fluid forms may alleviate the individual impulse to drink. Women’s liberation and female empowerment, far from morally corrupting women and turning them towards ‘demon rum,’ rather may induce mothers to relinquish their bottles.

Declaration of interests

None
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ELIZABETH MITCHELL ARMSTRONG
Office of Population Research, 253 Wallace Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA.
E-mail: ema@princeton.edu

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