

Marital Status, Marital Transitions, and Alcohol Use: A Mixed-Methods Study



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Alcohol Consumption



- Heavy alcohol use is related to higher rates of morbidity and mortality, while modest alcohol use may be health-protective (Gunzerath, Faden, Zakhari, & Warren, 2004; Mokdad, Marks, Stroup, & Gerberdig, 2000; McGinnis & Foege, 1993)
- Men drink more than women on average
- Significant sociological and policy work to promote healthy levels of alcohol use (USDHHS, 2006)

Alcohol Use and Marriage



- Married men and women have lower rates of moderate, heavy, and problem drinking and other alcohol-related problems compared to their unmarried peers (Bachman et al., 1997; 2002; Chilcoat & Breslau, 1996; Curran, Muthen, & Harford, 1998; Temple, 1991).
- The transition from singlehood to a first marriage reduces overall alcohol use and binge drinking for both men and women (Bachman, 1997; 2002; Curran et al., 1998; Miller-Tutzauer et al., 1991; Temple, 1991).
- This relationship is stronger for men than women (Duncan et al., 1996; Power et al., 1999)

Alcohol Use and Marriage



- Previous research is limited in that it:
- Compares married to all “unmarried,” a heterogeneous group comprised of never married, divorced, & widowed
- Includes few longitudinal studies examine both marital status as well as transition into *and* out of marriage
- Includes few studies examine the mechanisms linking marital status, transitions, and alcohol use

Research Questions



- **RQ1:** Clarify population trends in how marital status and transitions relate to alcohol use
- **RQ2:** Examine the qualitative social conditions and constraints that underlie survey trends
- **RQ3:** Examine gender differences in these trends and processes

The Present Study



- RQ 1: Clarify population trends in how marital status and transitions relate to alcohol use
- *Wisconsin Longitudinal Study* (N = 5,305)
- WLS is a longitudinal random sample of men and women who graduate HS in Wisconsin.
 - Representative of American men and women who completed at least HS and are white.
- Analyze waves 1993 and 2004

The Present Study



- Four marital continuity and change categories:
 - **Continuously married** between 1993 and 2004
 - **Continuously unmarried** between 1993 and 2004
 - **Married in 1993, unmarried in 2004**
 - **Unmarried in 1993, married in 2004**

The Present Study



- Alcohol measure from WLS:
 - **Monthly number of alcoholic** drinks in the month prior to the interview
 - ✦ Coded 0 for persons with no alcohol consumption in the previous month and equals the number of drinks per month for persons who reported any alcohol use
 - ✦ Tobit regression models are used to predict **change** in the monthly number of drinks between 1993 and 2004

The Present Study



- RQ 2: Examines the social conditions and constraints that underlie survey trends
- Qualitative interview data from the *Relationships and Health Habits (RAHH)* and *Marital Quality Across the Life Course* studies (N = 120)
 - Data includes 120 in-depth interviews with married, divorced, widowed, and never married men and women
 - 79 currently married, 27 currently divorced, 10 never married, 4 currently widowed

Quantitative Findings



- **Change in the monthly number of drinks between 1993 and 2004**

Marital change & continuity 1993-2004	Women	Men
Continuously married	0.0	0.0
Continuously unmarried	-2.8*	+0.4
Married → unmarried	-3.5**	+7.8***
Unmarried → married	+2.7*	+0.3

p < .05. ***p < .01. ****p < .001.

Findings for Men



- **Survey findings suggest:**
- Men who experienced marital dissolution between 1993 and 2004 increased their alcohol consumption by almost **8 drinks** compared to continuously married men

Findings for Men



- **Qualitative findings suggest:**
- The transition *out of* marriage creates stress, which leads to drinking

Findings for Men



- Billy, divorced
- This last divorce really took its toll on me. After we broke up I didn't want to live anymore. I went down to a real low here. I actually went out and started using and abusing because when I was hurting from it. When I knew we weren't going to get back together, that was when I went back out. I just said, hey, what the hell. My life's over. I went back to drinking and drugs. It was just like the more I did it, the deeper I went to depression, stress. My problems would get bigger and worse.

Findings for Men



- **Qualitative findings suggest:**
- Selection of heavy drinkers into divorce

Findings for Men



- Duane, previously divorced, currently married:

It destroyed my marriage too because I got pretty big at it. That's when I made her leave me because it had started to take a toll on her. I wasn't going to change and I thought she deserved something a little better... It was me; I wasn't ready to change at that time. So I made her leave.

Findings for Men



- **Qualitative findings suggest:**
- Men are constrained in their drinking choices as a result of new husband “role” as well as contextual changes related to women’s lower level of drinking

Findings for Men



- Charlie, married:

[In] World War II I was more active in the drinking than I was any other time in my life. And my present wife is a non-drinker. It's very rare. She does not ever want to touch it and pretty much tells me the same thing. *[She doesn't want you to drink?]* No way. We've got a whole chest full of all kinds of alcoholic beverages but we never use them. Maybe on Christmas or a birthday, we might have a little wine but that's all.

Findings for Women



- Contrary to our findings for men, **survey analysis shows:**
- Women who remained continuously unmarried or experienced marital dissolution **decreased** their alcohol use compared to continuously married women
- In contrast, women who transitioned into marriage **increased** their monthly number of drinks by almost **3 drinks**

Findings for Women



- **Qualitative findings suggest:**
- Husbands introduce women to a higher levels of alcohol use.

Findings for Women



- Anna, married:

I was working full-time, coming home, taking care of kids. I remember my husband and I would sit on the couch and we would each have a drink. And that just became a habit. Or during the summers when we went camping and go to the lake and drink beer. I guess that would just be it, just kind of in the moment with him. But I never drank heavily on my own.

Findings for Women



- **Qualitative findings suggest:**
- The loss of a husband who drinks is related to divorced women's lower drinking levels

Findings for Women



- Audrey, divorced
- Once I got involved with my ex and started to take a decidedly hedonistic turn in my way of living my life... He drinks a lot and always has. He'll probably die of cirrhosis of the liver. So he really upped the ante on that and so I guess just to keep up I started drinking more and more. Drinking like four to five out of every seven days...It was very fun. I will give that jackass that, we had a lot of fun.

Findings for Women



- Kimberly, divorced
- And then when I got married, he was a major drinker and he liked to drink wine, and he would buy it by the case. We'd go to these wine tastings and you know, it was easier to join him than not. But I quit drinking when I left him because he hit me twice. I wouldn't tolerate it, and it was because of alcohol.

Conclusion



- Gendered dynamics of marital status appear to have significant and differential implications for alcohol use among men and women.
- Men's alcohol use is **tempered by being married** to women but **exacerbated by divorcing** women,
- Women's alcohol use is **promoted by marriage** to men and **declines** in marital **dissolution**.