



## Being old fashioned in a modern world: Gender role attitudes moderate the relation between role conflicts and alcohol use of parents



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Balancing contradictory demands of different social roles such as work and family can lead to role conflicts. However, whether such conflicts lead to detrimental alcohol use may depend on the individual's gender role attitudes (GRA). For example, considering family care taking as a female task, and breadwinning as a male task. This study investigates whether GRA moderates the relation between work-family conflicts (WFC) and alcohol use, namely usual quantity of alcohol consumed on a drinking day and annual frequency of alcohol use. **Methods:** Employed parents (163 mothers (mean age = 37.1, SD = 4.5)), 142 fathers (mean age = 40.5, SD = 4.6)) of young children were sampled in preschool classes and nurseries in French-speaking Switzerland. **Results:** The higher the level of WFC the higher the frequency of alcohol use in men and the higher usual quantity in women. These associations were not found for GRA. However, GRA moderated the relationship between WFC and alcohol use, i.e., increasing alcohol use with increasing WFC was exclusively found among parents with more traditional GRA.

**Conclusion:** Among employed parents of preschool children, traditional role distributions may impede flexible responses to varying job and family demands leading to higher alcohol use in both genders, i.e., men increasing their drinking occasions and women the amount per occasion. Promoting higher gender equity in the fulfilment of family demands and allowing greater flexibility in solving conflicts, could possibly help to prevent the detrimental alcohol use arising from work-family constraints and conflicts.

### 1. Introduction

Social roles structure the everyday life around recurrent role obligations (e.g., McCall and Simmons, 1996). However, combining contradictory demands of different social roles, such as work and family demands, may lead to role conflicts and subsequently to higher alcohol use (Roos et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2010; Wolff et al., 2013). However, an individual's likelihood to respond to stress with increased alcohol use depends on the presence of social and individual factors, as assumed in the stressor-vulnerability model (Armeli et al., 2000; Cooper et al., 1992). Thus, the individual's perception of how roles should differ between men and women may impact the link between role conflicts and alcohol use. The present study examines whether gender role attitudes (GRA) moderate the relation between work-family conflicts (WFC) and alcohol use.

GRA are defined as a judgment of how family and work roles differ, or should differ, between men and women (Harris and Firestone, 1998). In the context of holding and performing multiple social roles and how

this links to alcohol use, differences in GRA may play an essential role. More traditional GRA, i.e., household and childcare being female tasks, breadwinning and house maintenance as male tasks, may result in a more traditional distribution of family-related tasks between partners. Although a more traditional distribution of family-related tasks may be beneficial as both partners know their tasks and responsibilities, problems arise when obligations from different roles collide (Frone, 2000). There is evidence that the more WFC a person reports the higher their level of alcohol use (Roos, et al., 2006; Wang, et al., 2010; Wolff, et al., 2013). Thus, the link between the conflicts arising from incompatible social roles and alcohol use also likely depends on GRA.

Although men's contribution towards household tasks increased slightly over time (e.g., Crompton et al., 2005), women still tend to perform the majority (Eek and Axmon, 2015; Floderus et al., 2009). A stricter separation of role fulfillment between partners may allow less flexibility in the redistribution of family-related tasks when facing WFC, resulting in stress-induced higher alcohol use, whereas those with less traditional role distributions may find a better balance and drink less

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per occasion or less frequently when conflicts arise.

The present study tests the hypothesis that when WFC increase, holding traditional GRA is associated with a higher drinking quantity and frequency, whereas no such effect is found among those with less traditional roles due to their higher flexibility in shifting work and family demands within the couple when WFC occurs. As men and women likely differ in the level of GRA and WFC, the study will examine genders separately.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Study design

As part of a larger project using a within-family multi-informant approach, parents of children from 37 randomly selected preschool classes and seven nurseries in different areas of French-speaking Switzerland were asked to provide active consent for their child’s and their own participation. Parents were only approached if their child participated in the study. Both parents received a questionnaire individually, either by e-mail (containing a hyperlink to an online questionnaire) or by post (dispatched paper questionnaire and return envelope). Ethical approval was obtained from the cantons Vaud (Protocol 266/2012) and Geneva (Protocol 12–25).

### 2.2. Sample

Parents of 918 3-6-year olds were given a consent form, of which 319 (34.7%) returned signed. Among those, 18 children (5.6%) refused to participate in the study or were absent at data collection. Consequently, no parental questionnaire was sent to their parents. Among the remaining 301 children, 208 mothers (69.1%) and 155 fathers (51.5%) completed and returned the parental questionnaire. No individual data from parents who did not participate in the study were available, but their child’s data were available. Children of non-participating parents did not differ significantly from those participating regarding their age ( $t = -0.7, p > .05$ ) or gender ( $\chi^2_{(df=1)} = 0.2, p > .05$ ).

Information on WFC was only surveyed among those employed at the time of the survey. Unemployed cases or cases with missing data (4 fathers, 2.5%; 41 mothers, 19.7%), as well as those who did not answer questions on either WFC, the gender role attitudes scale, alcohol use, or age (4 mothers, 1.9%; 9 fathers, 5.8%) were excluded. Included parents did not differ significantly from those not included in the study regarding their age (fathers:  $t = -1.4, p > .05$ , mothers:  $t = -1.0, p > .05$ ) and educational level (fathers:  $\chi^2_{(df=1)} = 0.01, p > .05$ ; mothers:  $\chi^2_{(df=1)} = 3.6, p > .05$ ). The final sample comprised 163 mothers and 142 fathers.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Alcohol use

Two outcome measures were analyzed separately: (a) annual frequency of drinking comprising the number of drinking days within the past 12 months with the following answer categories: ‘never’ (coded as 0), ‘less than once a week’ (28), ‘once a week’ (52), ‘2-4 times a week’ (156), ‘5-6 times a week’ (286), ‘at least once per day’ (365); (b) the usual quantity in gram pure ethanol based on the number of standard drinks consumed on a drinking day with the following categories: ‘does not drink’ (0), ‘one drink’ (12 g), ‘two drinks’ (24 g), ‘three drinks’ (36 g), ‘four drinks’ (48 g), ‘five or six drinks’ (66 g), ‘seven to nine drinks’ (96 g), ‘ten drinks or more’ (120 g). Both measures were log-transformed to approximate a normal distribution and to reduce the impact of outliers (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001).

#### 2.3.2. Work-family-conflict (WFC)

For mothers and fathers separately, a mean score based on ten items

with a five-point Likert scale (0=strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree) was used (Netemeyer et al., 1996). All items were recoded so that high values signify a high level of conflict. Example items are: “Things I want to do at home do not get done because of the demands my job puts on me” or “My home life interferes with my responsibilities at work such as getting to work on time, accomplishing daily tasks, and working overtime.” The scale ranges from 0 to 40 and revealed an excellent internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha: fathers = 0.88, mothers = 0.89).

#### 2.3.3. Gender role attitudes (GRA)

GRA was measured using the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence and Helmreich, 1978), an instrument routinely used to measure adults’ endorsement of traditional gender roles. It includes five items with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Example items are “A husband should earn more money than his wife” or “A woman’s most important task in life should be taking care of her children.” Given the conservative formulation of the questions and the resulting skewness of the scale a dichotomous measure on GRA was used, and agreement with the statements of at least one item coded as a more traditional gender role attitude (1) vs. less traditional gender role attitude (0).

Age of the respondent and the level of employment, a trichotomous indicator including 50% (1), 50–79% (2),  $\geq 80\%$  (3), were included as a possible confounder in all analyses.

### 2.4. Analytic strategy

To test the moderation hypothesis, usual quantity and annual frequency were regressed on WFC, GRA and their interaction. Analyses were gender stratified and adjusted for the respondent’s age and employment level.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive results

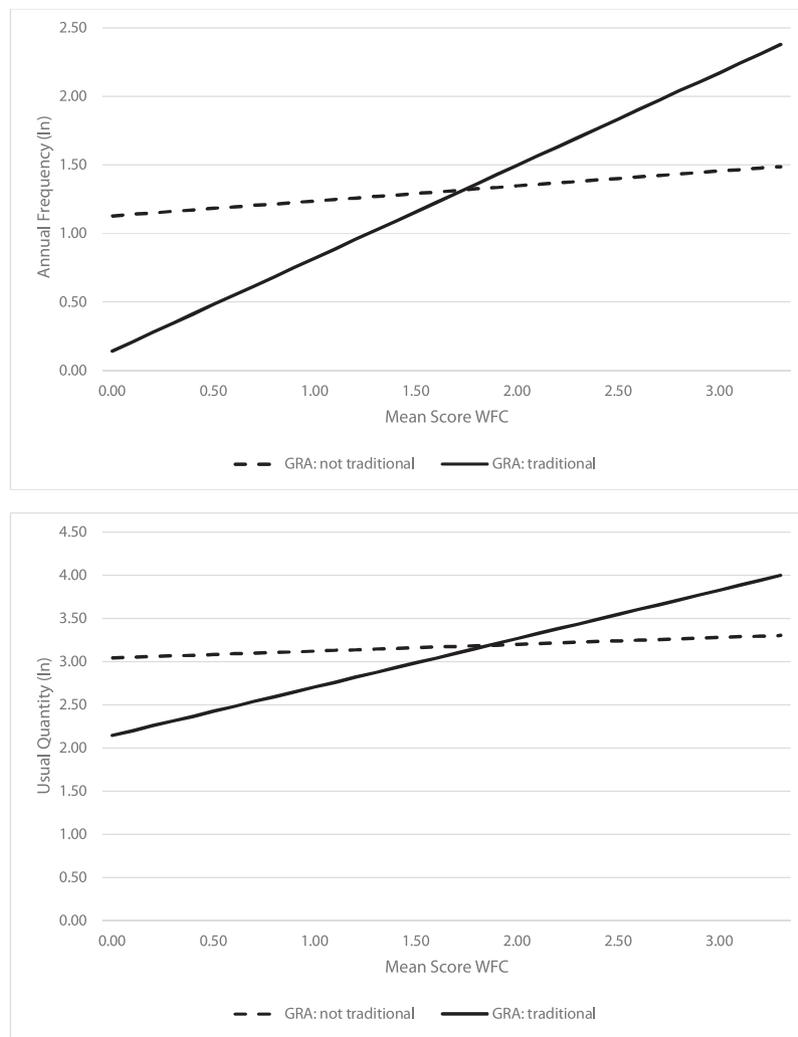
Descriptive comparisons reveal that fathers were older than mothers, more often employed at least at 80% and drank more frequently and higher usual amounts (Table 1). Women reported more traditional GRA (52.8% vs. 42.3%) while the level of WFC was comparable for both

**Table 1**

Sample description and Frequency and quantity of alcohol use regressed on Gender Role Attitudes (GRA), Work-Family Conflict (WFC) and their interaction; stratified by gender.

Sample description		Fathers	Mothers
Age	Mean (SD)	40.5 (4.6)	37.1 (4.5)
Employment level (80%)	%	92.2	21.5
GRA (traditional)	%	42.3	52.8
WFC	Mean (SD)	12.8 (7.4)	11.6 (7.7)
Annual frequency of alcohol use	Mean (SD)	148.3 (114.7)	79.1 (85.8)
Quantity per occasion	Mean (SD)	31.9 (20.6)	20.3 (13.7)
Regression analyses*			
Frequency	GRA	0.366*	-0.013
	WFC	0.374**	0.013
	Interaction	-0.370*	0.111
	WFC*GRA		
Quantity	GRA	0.273	0.376**
	WFC	0.217	0.359**
	Interaction	-0.213	-0.336*
	WFC*GRA		

Note. \*All analyses adjusted for age and level of employment of the respondent; shown are standardized regression coefficients (Beta); GRA: Gender Role attitudes; WFC: Work-Family Conflict; \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .



**Fig. 1.** Illustration of the interaction effects of WFC and GRA on annual frequency among fathers (upper graph) and usual quantity among mothers (lower graph).

genders. Additional analyses (to be obtained from the authors on request) revealed that alcohol use did not differ significantly between those with more or less traditional GRA. GRA correlates negatively with WFC, which is significant for fathers ( $r = -0.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not for mothers ( $r = -.11$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

### 3.2. Regression analyses

Without conflicts, traditional parents drank more than non-traditional parents (GRA main effect), but with increasing conflicts traditional parents' drinking increased (WFC main effect; Table 1). This was not the case among non-traditional parents as expressed by the negative effect of the interaction. Interestingly, this was the case for both genders but among fathers exclusively for annual frequency and among mothers exclusively for usual quantity (Table 1).

The graphs in Fig. 1 show the moderating effects of GRA on the relation between WFC and alcohol use. Only amongst respondents with a more traditional GRA was higher WFC associated with higher alcohol use.

## 4. Discussion

The present study revealed that in the absence of work-family conflicts (WFC) those with more traditional gender role attitudes (GRA) reported lower alcohol use than those with less traditional GRA. Previous studies found that individuals with traditional GRA also

reported a higher religiosity and more family centered lifestyles and values (e.g., Fischer and Anderson, 2012; Fortin, 2005; Kaufman, 2000). These factors may have contributed to the lower level of alcohol use found in this group in the absence of WFC.

However, parents with more traditional GRA either drank more, or more frequently, in the presence of WFC. For example, if the necessity of working overtime requires a redistribution of family duties or if family demands increase, e.g., due to a sick child, but parents are not able to redistribute the burden amongst each other, they tend to be under increased pressure and experience high stress levels. This can result in high alcohol use as assumed by the stressor-vulnerability model (Armeli et al., 2000; Cooper et al., 1992). Since this study did not address the reasons and motivations for alcohol use, future research should include drinking to cope (Cooper et al., 1992) as a possible mechanism explaining the link between traditional GRA, WFC and alcohol use.

Interestingly, GRA impacted both genders differently in respect to the alcohol measure, suggesting that men and women tend to differ in the way they consume alcohol to obtain relief and cope with stress. Among fathers, a significant moderating effect of GRA on the link between WFC and the frequency of alcohol use was found, whereas among mothers this effect occurred for usual quantity. As the descriptive results show, fathers already consumed three standard drinks on average when drinking. Increasing this quantity may lead to alcohol levels that tend to impair or interfere with their performance in both family and job demands and may increase the pressures from WFC even further. However, having an additional drinking event, e.g., after work, may be

an easier way to cope with the stress resulting from WFC. This may be less easy for mothers due to their higher share of child care and household duties (e.g., Eek and Axmon, 2015), particularly when having traditional GRA. Drinking less per occasion than men, as shown in the descriptive results, women may instead have another alcoholic beverage at one of their drinking occasions in reaction to conflicts.

As Switzerland has rather traditional GRA, one has to keep in mind when interpreting these results that the reported relationships may not be the case in countries with higher gender equity such as the Nordic countries. Another limitation is the rather low participation rate among parents who were informed about the study. The cross-sectional design also impedes investigation of causal effects. For example, it may be that those who drink little or no alcohol are less susceptible to the adverse effects of WFC and those using alcohol as a way to cope further exacerbate WFC.

## 5. Conclusions

The study revealed that, among employed parents of young children, traditional role attitudes seem to impede flexible responses to conflicting job and family demands. Resulting work-family conflicts may be difficult to solve, leading to more frequent alcohol use in fathers and higher usual amounts consumed in mothers. Promoting equal gender attitudes and alternative solutions for stress relief, such as active problem solving or relaxation techniques, may help to prevent high quantity and frequency drinking resulting from the combination of traditional GRA and WFC. Societal efforts, such as facilitating part-time work for fathers or paid paternal leave, can help to increase gender equity in general and facilitating the fulfilment of family demands in particular may allow a greater flexibility in reacting to work-family constraints and consequently relate to lower alcohol use in both genders.

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## Contributors

We ensure that both authors (SK, EK) take the responsibility for reported research, i.e., all authors have participated in the concept and design; analysis and interpretation of data; drafting or revising of the manuscript, and they have approved the manuscript as submitted

## Conflict of interest

Both authors (SK, EK) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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