

# **The Gender-Specific Influence of Work-Family Conflict on the Frequency of Alcohol Consumption**

## ***Introduction***

Due to a rise in labor market participation, especially of women, and increasing numbers of dual earner couples, more and more individuals manage multiple roles such as work and family. Maintaining a Work-Life-Balance becomes a challenge for many people and dealing with stress becomes daily routine. This may lead to an interrole conflict known as Work-Family Conflict (Greenhaus/Beutell 1985). Depending on the direction of the conflict this can be further divided into Work-to-Family Conflict (WTFC), when work interferes with family, and Family-to-Work Conflict (FTWC), when family interferes with work. The sources of the stress can stem from time pressures, psychological strain or unwanted behavior in one role (Greenhaus/Beutell 1985).

Work-Family Conflicts leads to increased levels of stress, which individuals can address through different coping mechanisms – one of them is the consumption of alcohol, the focus of this study. Studies show that alcohol consumption can have a negative impact on multiple health conditions, e.g., risk for cancer, accidents, higher blood pressure, certain diseases and to develop an alcohol use disorder, and ultimately results in a higher mortality risk (Corrao et al. 2004; Rehm et al. 2009; Rehm 2011; Roerecke/Rehm 2010; Tian et al. 2023). In regard to Work-Family Conflict, studies show that stress indeed impacts alcohol use. This is true for the frequency of drinking and the amount of drinks, but the effects are rather small (Frone 2000; Frone et al. 1996; Frone et al. 1993; 1997; Kuntsche/Kuntsche 2021a; Leineweber et al. 2013; Roos et al. 2006). Frone et al. (1993) also showed that individuals with Work-Family Conflict used alcohol to cope with stress. Interestingly, Kuntsche and Kuntsche (2021b) showed that only medium conflict increased alcohol consumption but not low and high conflict. Frone et al. (1997) even found that after four years WTFC was related to heavy drinking.

Looking more closely at the direction of conflict, studies find different patterns. Frone (2000) show that FTWC is more strongly linked to problem drinking and alcohol dependence than WTFC. Roos et al. (2006) find slightly stronger effects of WTFC on heavy drinking for women and for both sexes compared to FTWC. Frone et al. (1996; 1997) and Wang et al. (2010) only found effects of WTFC, but not of FWTC on heavy alcohol use and daily alcohol use.

In contrast to many other health behaviors, studies show that especially women with a high socio-economic background tend to consume more alcohol; for men, on the other hand, a low socio-economic status increases the risk (OECD 2021; 2015). This can be partly explained by the fact that more and more women are highly educated and are therefore more likely to work in high income jobs that are related to higher alcohol consumption (McKetta et al. 2021; Thompson/Pirmohamed 2021; Thørrisen et al. 2022) . Considering the role of employed women when examining the impact of Work-Family Conflict on alcohol consumption therefore seems crucial.

Regarding Work-Family Conflict, Kuntsche and Kuntsche (2021a) show that it impacts alcohol use and that this relation is mediated by coping motives among preschool mothers but not fathers. Roos

et al. (2006) also find the relationship between Work-Family Conflict and heavy drinking only for women. In contrast, the study of Leineweber et al. (2013) shows that Work-Family Conflict impacts problem drinking only among men.

However, the existing literature has some limitations: First, the majority of studies has analyzed the relationship between Work-Family Conflict and alcohol from a cross-sectional perspective; thus, unobserved heterogeneity is not accounted for. Second, most studies look at specific, non-representative groups, such as municipal employees or parents of preschool children. Furthermore, studies find mixed results regarding the direction of conflict. Thus, it is still unclear, how and through which pathways Work-Family Conflict affects alcohol consumption. In addition, most studies only look at heavy drinking. However, it would also be interesting to look at different patterns of alcohol consumption, for instance the mere frequency. Last, studies show that differences exist by gender, therefore we additionally study this relationship separately for men and women. In order to fill these research gaps, we analyze the relationship between Work-Family Conflict and alcohol use in Australia from a longitudinal perspective. Building on previous studies and their findings, we differentiate between WTFC and FTWC and by gender.

### ***Theory***

We propose two contrary mechanisms that might explain the relationship between Work-Family Conflict and alcohol use. An individual can have various reasons to drink alcohol, one can be to regulate emotions, another reason can be social motives.

First, individuals can react directly to stress by using coping mechanisms to deal with unwanted emotions. In case of this study, negative emotions are the focus and alcohol consumption is seen as a coping mechanism when stress increases. Following the *Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping* (Lazarus 1966; Lazarus/Folkman 1984), coping strategies include directly addressing the stressor or the regulation of emotions that are the byproduct of the stress. One way to deal with the stress is engaging in negative health behaviors, like alcohol use, to regulate negative emotions and be distracted from these emotions (Folkman/Moskowitz 2004). Affect Regulation Theory assumes that drinking is primarily motivated to release tension and regulate negative affect (Cox/Klinger 1988; Wills/Schiffman 1985). Therefore, an individual increases the frequency of drinking alcohol when stress in form of Work-Family Conflict increases (**H1**).

A contradictory hypothesis to this focuses on the use of alcohol for social motives. Here, an individual needs time to be social. According to *Conservation of Resources Theory* (Hobfoll 1989; Hobfoll et al. 2018), an individual seeks to gain or at least retain resources, like time. In the case of Work-Family Conflict, an individual might lose time for work or family. Due to the lack of time, there is also less time to have opportunities to drink alcohol, e.g. take part in social events. This is especially the case for parents that are the focus of this study (Claxton/Perry-Jenkins 2008; Roeters et al. 2016). Here, drinking alcohol is seen as something one does for enjoyment. The theory proposes that with increasing Work-Family Conflict the frequency of drinking alcohol decreases (**H2**).

Looking at gender, studies found that men's drinking motives relate to social activities, whereas women use alcohol more as a coping strategy (Fossos et al. 2011; Koordeman et al. 2011;

Kuntsche/Kuntsche 2021a; Thrul/Kuntsche 2015). Therefore, we assume that with increasing Work-Family Conflict men drink less often as they have no time to be social (**H3a**). The contrary is true for women: When Work-Family Conflict increases, women increase their alcohol use to deal with the stress (**H3b**).

### ***Data & Methods***

To study the relationship between Work-Family Conflict and alcohol use, this study is using the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data of a national representative sample of around 17,000 individuals. This annual survey, that started in 2001, collects data from households on all aspects of life (Watson/Wooden 2012). For this study, we include 18 waves starting from 2002 to 2021 and study this relationship from a longitudinal perspective. Work-Family Conflict was not surveyed in 2018 and 2020 and therefore, we had to exclude these two waves. Further, we only include parents who are currently employed.

Alcohol use is measured by asking about the frequency of drinking. We categorized this variable into 0 “No alcohol”, 1 “Rarely”, 2 “2 or 3 days per month”, 3 “1 or 2 days per week”, 4 “3 to 4 days per week”, 5 “5 or 6 days per week” and 6 “daily”.

For Work-Family Conflict, we used two items each for WTFC and FTWC, reflecting the same for each direction of conflict. The items for WTFC are: “Because of the requirements of my job, I miss out on home or family activities that I would prefer to participate in” and “Because of the requirements of my job, my family time is less enjoyable and more pressured”. For FTWC, they are: “Because of my family responsibilities, I have to turn down work activities or opportunities that I would prefer to take on” and “Because of my family responsibilities, the time I spend working is less enjoyable and more pressured”. Cronbach’s alpha for WTFC is 0.73 and for FTWC 0.60. All items range from 1 “Strongly disagree” to 7 “Strongly agree”, and the mean of the sum of the items is used to construct the scales.

As control variables we include age of the youngest child in the household, number of children in the household and household income. Our final sample consists of almost 7,000 respondents and almost 32,000 observations. We apply ordered logit regressions with fixed effects to study the impact of Work-to-Family and Family-to-Work Conflict on alcohol use. Further, we analyze this relationship separated by gender.

### ***Preliminary Findings***

Our bivariate, descriptive analysis shows that Work-to-Family and Family-to-Work Conflict are significantly correlated with the frequency of drinking. Interestingly, we observe different patterns for the two directions: An increase in WTFC is related with a higher frequency of drinking alcohol; for FTWC, we see the opposite. Further, the descriptive results show that gender is negatively correlated with alcohol consumption and WTFC, but positively with FTWC.

Looking at this in our multivariate models, we observe something different. Here, both directions of conflict are positively related to the frequency of drinking, indicating that with increasing conflict,

the frequency of drinking increases. Regarding the direction of conflict, the effects of FTWC on the frequency of drinking are stronger compared to WTFC.

Examining this by gender reveals that the effects are much stronger for women. Here, the effects for both directions are significant. Again, the effects of FTWC are stronger. In contrast, the effects of men are not significant. Although the effects point towards the same direction, they are much smaller. It seems that mainly women are increasing their frequency of drinking alcohol when Work-Family Conflict increases. This is especially true when family life interferes with work.

### ***Conclusion***

Our results highlight the importance of differentiating the direction of Work-Family Conflict. While for both directions of conflict it appears that alcohol consumption is used as a coping strategy, the pattern looks different when looking at this relationship by gender. We find only significant effects for women. In line with other studies, it seems that only women use alcohol to cope with increasing Work-Family Conflict. For men, no such relationship can be found. Indeed, it might be that men tend to drink for social motives. Thus, when conflict increases men have fewer opportunities to drink. Taken together, drinking might be a coping mechanisms when Work-Family Conflict increases, especially for FTWC and for women. Therefore, further research should study in more detail the role of coping motives and gender in regard to Work-Family Conflict, its different directions and alcohol.

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