

# Everything in moderation? A mixed methods study on perceptions of parents' drinking in the presence of children

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## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION** – Parents are often warned about the negative consequences of drinking alcohol in the presence of their children, while surveys indicate that children fairly often see their parents drink and also being drunk. We applied a mixed method approach to explore attitudes towards parents' drinking in the presence of their children, using (1) survey and (2) focus group data. In the analysis of the focus group data, we also addressed which consequences of parents' drinking the participants emphasised, and how they reasoned for their opinions. The results were merged in order to compare, contrast and synthesise the findings from both data sets. **METHODS** – The data stem from a web survey among 18–69-year-old Norwegians (Study 1, N=2171) and from focus group interviews with 15–16-year-olds and parents of teenagers (Study 2, 8 groups, N=42). **RESULTS** – In both data sets, drinking moderately in the presence of children was mostly accepted, but attitudes became more restrictive with an increased drinking frequency and with visible signs of intoxication. The results from Study 2 showed also that definitions of moderation varied and that the participants used contextual factors such as atmosphere and occasion to define when drinking was acceptable and when it was not. In reflections on the importance of moderation, they emphasised parental responsibility for the family as a unit and parents' immoderate drinking as posing a risk to children's safety. The participants also underlined the importance of parental drinking in the alcohol socialisation process. **CONCLUSION** – Parents' drinking in the presence of children was generally accepted as long as the drinking was moderate. The focus group data showed that definitions of moderation varied, and that social context also was used to define moderation. **KEYWORDS** – harm to others, drinking with children, attitudes, mixed methods

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## Introduction

Parents are warned about the possible negative consequences of drinking in the presence of their children, both by health authorities and interest organisations, and are advised to drink moderately when their children are present. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that between 50,000–150,000 children in Norway – that is, 5–14% – live with parents who are problem drinkers (Rossow, Moan & Natvig, 2009; Torvik & Rognum, 2011). Similar proportions have been reported in other countries, including the United Kingdom (Manning, Best, Faulkner & Titherington, 2009) and Finland (see Raitasalo, Holmila, & Mäkelä, 2011). In addition, school surveys among Norwegian adolescents indicate that they often see their parents drink alcohol, and a fairly high proportion (43–48 %) report that they have seen one or both parents drunk (Rossow et al., 2009; Storvoll & Pape, 2007).

Two studies using data from general population surveys have addressed the possible negative consequences for adolescents of seeing their parents intoxicated by alcohol (Rossow & Moan, 2012; Rossow et al., 2009). The likelihood of reporting problems such as violence, poor mental health, and suicide thoughts and attempts was greater among adolescents who reported frequently having seen their parents' drinking to intoxication. However, there were also adolescents who reported seeing their parents intoxicated once or a few times who experienced similar problems. These studies illustrate that the negative consequences experienced by adolescents can be ascribed a larger group of alcohol consumers than the small group of heavy drinkers. This study also high-

lights the fact that there is no clear distinction between parents who misuse alcohol and those who drink less heavily. This implies that it is important to know how “moderate alcohol use in the presence of children” is defined by the general population, by parents and by those who are exposed to parents' alcohol use. The definition of moderation may have implications for policy as well as for those exposed to parents' drinking.

It has been suggested that what is perceived as “normal” or acceptable use of alcohol must be the platform from which harmful use of alcohol is understood (Rose, 1992). Several studies of attitudes towards alcohol use in general have shown that what people define as normal or acceptable alcohol use may differ between social situations (Fjær, Pedersen, von Soest, & Gray, 2016) or between countries (Nordlund & Østhus, 2008) and may change over time (Härkönen & Mäkelä, 2010; Nordlund, 2008). However, few studies have researched what people perceive as normal and acceptable alcohol use in the presence of children. The two studies that we were able to identify both used survey data.

A study among university students in Norway and the UK showed that the acceptance of being drunk with children present was lower than for being drunk in the presence of family, relatives, friends or colleagues in both countries, and significantly lower in Norway than in the UK (Fjær et al., 2016). Raitasalo, Holmila, and Mäkelä (2011) found that 72% in a sample of adult Finns agreed with the statement “Alcohol should not be used at all in the presence of small children”, while 95% thought that “One should not get drunk in the presence of small children”. However,

nearly forty percent of the respondents (38%) agreed with the statement “If somebody in the company is sober and takes care of the children, one can get drunk”. Thus, the results revealed a discrepancy in attitudes. While nearly all respondents stated that being drunk in the presence of children was unacceptable, a large fraction thought it was acceptable under certain conditions.

Attitudes towards drinking in the presence of children can vary across subgroups of the population, for example across gender and age (Raitasalo et al., 2011), and they may also vary depending on whether it is the mother or father who is drinking. Tolerance for fathers’ drinking may be greater, since men in general consume more alcohol than women do (Wilsnack & Wilsnack, 1997; Østhus, Bye, & Storvoll, 2011). However, alcohol is more likely to facilitate aggressive behaviour among men than women (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004). Attitudes may also differ based on experience and involvement in the situation, for example if one is a parent or not. Finally, they may depend on which consequences of parents’ drinking are perceived and considered to be important. While survey studies measure evaluations of predefined consequences, other aspects can be equally important.

The complexity of evaluations of parents’ drinking with children present implies that there is a need for research that enables descriptions of people’s attitudes at a population level, under specific conditions. There is also a need for studies that explore which consequences people are concerned about, what they emphasise in their evaluations and how they justify their opinion. To our knowledge, no pre-

vious studies have combined survey data and qualitative focus group data to address parents’ drinking with children present.

#### *Aims of the study*

In this study, we aimed to examine perceptions of parents’ drinking in the presence of their children in a population sample and in a sample of parents and teenagers, and to identify when drinking in the presence of children was perceived as problematic and when it was accepted. We were also interested in the reasoning underlying these perceptions, and which positive and negative consequences of parents’ drinking parents and teenagers emphasised in reasoning for their opinions.

A mixed method approach applying survey data (Study 1) and data from focus group interviews (Study 2) was used to explore these issues. In Study 1, population data were analysed addressing attitudes towards parents’ drinking in the presence of children, how attitudes varied according to frequency of drinking and amount of alcohol consumed (visible signs of intoxication) and whether the attitudes differed with respect to mothers’ and fathers’ drinking in the presence of their children. Finally, we examined whether attitudes varied across age groups and gender. In Study 2, we analysed how parents and teenagers perceived parents’ drinking in the presence of children. In addition, we explored the reasoning underlying their opinions and which positive and negative consequences of parents’ drinking the participants emphasised. In the mixed methods analysis, we explored similarities and differences between the results from Study 1 and Study 2, and how the results from one study could extend upon the other.

## Methods

This study employed a convergent mixed method design (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Survey data (Study 1) and focus group interview data (Study 2) were collected and analysed separately, and the results were merged at the point of elevated analysis in the discussion.

### *Study 1: Web survey*

#### Participants and procedures

The web survey was conducted in Norway in 2013 and was commissioned by the Norwegian Institute for Alcohol and Drug Research (SIRUS) from TNS Gallup. A sample of 4000 persons aged 18–69 was drawn from an online panel comprising more than 50,000 people. The sample was stratified according to figures from Statistics Norway on gender, age (4 groups), geographic region (4 groups) and education (2 groups). Of the original sample, 2182 (55%) responded. Information about the web survey is also presented in a previous publication (Rise & Halkjelsvik, 2015).

A few persons (N=11), who reported that they were older than 69 years, were excluded from the analyses. Of the remaining sample (N=2171), 49.1% were women, and the average age was 43.78 years (SD = 15.48). Of the respondents, 30.2% reported having a higher educational level (college or university).

#### Measures

The survey study provides an overview of attitudes towards parents' drinking with children present at a population level by asking the respondents to evaluate nine situations where a parent was drinking in the presence of their 10-year-old child. The sample was randomly split in two subsam-

ples, one that was asked about a father who was drinking with his child present and one that was asked about a mother drinking with her child present. Within each subsample (different questionnaires), the statements reflected (a) various frequencies of drinking and (b) various amounts of alcohol consumed. See Table 1 for wording of the questionnaire statements. The response scales were: Completely unproblematic (coded 1), Quite unproblematic (2), Quite problematic (3) and Very problematic (4).

Based on the responses, each respondent was given a mean score ranging from 1–4. Cronbach's Alpha was 0.85 for both questions about fathers' and mothers' drinking, indicating a satisfactory level of internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978). The higher the mean score, the more problematic the respondents evaluated the parents' drinking to be in the presence of their child.

#### Analysis

About half of the respondents were asked about a father's drinking with his child present (N=1074), while the other half were asked about a mother's drinking with her child present (N=1097). The two subsamples were almost similarly composed according to gender ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.001$ , n.s.), age ( $t(2169) = -0.84$ , n.s.) and the proportion with a higher educational level ( $\chi^2(1) = 3.331$ , n.s.). First, we described the respondents' attitudes towards parents' drinking in the presence of their children. We described both the proportions that judged each drinking situation as unproblematic/problematic and presented mean scores for each statement. Second, we tested whether the attitudes varied according to the respondents' gender and age. The as-

sociations were examined using ANOVA. All analyses were conducted in SPSS version 22.

### *Study 2: Focus group interviews*

#### Participants and procedures

In 2014/15, we conducted interviews in schools in Oslo as follows: four focus group interviews with 10<sup>th</sup>-grade students (N = 24, 50% boys, aged 15–16 years) and four interviews with parents of students in grade 10 (N = 18, 39% men). This study is part of a larger project that addresses acceptability and perceived harm of various groups' drinking in different social situations. The situations included both adults' and teenagers' drinking, and parents' drinking with children present. We recruited parents and teenagers as participants to represent the parties involved in the different situations explored, both as drinkers and those exposed to others' drinking. A sample of younger children might have been more ideal to research perceptions of parents' drinking with children present, but teenagers are also exposed to and can be affected by parents' drinking (Rossow et al., 2009). We recruited students and parents from the same four schools, but did not aim to interview parent/child pairs. In the adult groups, the participants were chosen from among parents with children in grade 10. The participants in the adolescent groups were chosen by a combination of volunteering and suggestions from teachers, who were asked to recruit students who were talkative and interested in participating in a discussion group. The participating classes in each school received a reimbursement to use for social events like school excursions, etc.

#### Interview guide and stimuli material

A semi-structured interview guide was used to moderate the group discussion. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

We used photographs and stories of drinking situations as stimuli for the discussions. In this paper, we analyse the interpretation of two pictures and one story representing different situations where parents drink in the presence of their children. In the interviews, the stimulus material was used as externalised reference points for the researchers' and the interviewees' interpretations concerning the subject under study, with the aim of making the comparison of the interpretations easier (Törrönen, 2002).

The first picture was chosen to represent a moderate drinking situation (Picture 1), while the second was intended to give the participants an idea about party drinking (Picture 2). The pictures were chosen to present "clues" or microcosms (in which one's own drinking practices can be mirrored) of the phenomenon we aimed to explore. The story was chosen to represent a provocative drinking situation, involving more obvious risk of harm to the children involved (see Figure 1). The two pictures and the story were shown to the groups separately and in the same order as in Figure 1. The participants were first asked to describe the photo/story (what is going on in this picture?) and then to give their immediate response to and evaluation of the situation presented to them. They were also asked whether this was a familiar situation to them and what they believed would happen next. As a follow-up question, they were asked to specify when situ-

**Figure 1.** Pictures and story used as stimuli material in focus group interviews.



Picture 1. Moderate drinking situation.  
(Photo: NordicPhotos)



Picture 2. Party drinking. (Photo: Alamy)

**Story: Provocative drinking situation.**

A mother and father and their children aged 7 and 10 years are on holiday in the Canary Islands. They have planned to spend the whole day on the beach. Right now they are having a lunch break at the beach bar, and the parents have shared a bottle of wine. The children have finished their meal and want to go to the beach for a swim. Then the mother says "Shouldn't we order another bottle of wine, after all it is holiday" ...

ations they defined as positive could turn into something negative.

The focus group method is well-suited for analysing group negotiations through which collective understandings of specific phenomena develop and operate within a given cultural context (Kitzinger, 1994). Through social interaction, the participants can form collective conceptions and understandings of parents' drinking in the presence of children, drawing on their own experience and broader discourses and images circulated in the media or in health information. In this way, group interaction externalises how certain understandings attain shared recognition and are established as collective truths in the groups (Demant & Törrönen, 2011). In the focus groups, the participants largely agreed on the interpretation of the stimuli presented to them, but often disagreed on the evaluation. In the moderation of the groups, we aimed to follow up all state-

ments that opposed others or highlighted new perspectives. Our overall impression was that disagreements provided dynamics to the discussion and stimulated more elaborated reasoning for arguments, as the participants had to argue more in order to explain why they thought as they did.

Analysis

The analysis was performed systematically (Silverman, 2010), beginning with several rounds of transcript reading followed by thematic coding using the HyperResearch (HR 3.5.2) software for qualitative data analysis. Reports of coding frequency were used to get a first overview of the findings. The process of analysis continued with close reading of the thematic reports, aiming to synthesise the codes into overarching themes. We looked for agreement and disagreement within and between groups, and the language used to argue for the views stated. We looked also for how the

participants responded to others' views and analysed the dynamics of the group discussions (Kitzinger, 1994).

Citations are marked with the speaker's gender and with group number (S (students) 1–4), P (parents) 1–4).

### Mixed method analysis

The merged analysis was done by comparing, contrasting and synthesising the findings from Study 1 and Study 2 at the point of elevated analysis in the Discussion. We re-read the analyses of both studies, held them up against each other and looked for similarities and differences between the results (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The aim of this stage of the analysis was to examine how the survey data and the data from focus group interviews could complement each other, and to provide a broader understanding of the subject under study. For example, the concept of moderation was often used by the participants in the focus groups, which guided our conceptualisation of the large variation in the judgement of low-level versus frequent/heavy drinking found in the survey data as a norm of moderation. Given that the two studies were not designed for the purpose of mixed method analysis, a limitation of the combined analysis were the differences between the two studies. For example, the samples differed and the framing of the situations where parents drink with their child present were different.

## **Results**

### *Study 1*

#### Attitudes towards parents' drinking in the presence of their children

Table 1 shows the responses to each of the nine statements about parents' drinking in

the presence of their children. There was great variation in the judgement of the statements. Three of four answered that it was *completely unproblematic* for a father/mother to have a glass of wine a couple of times per year while his/her 10-year-old child is present. On the other hand, the great majority (95–96%) said that it was *very problematic* that a father/mother gets clearly intoxicated a couple of times per week while his/her 10-year-old child is present. Whereas the mean scores for the first statement was 1.31 (F, father)/1.33 (M, mother), the mean scores for the second statement were 3.94 (F)/3.94 (M). The mean scores for the other statements were somewhere in between. In general, the more frequently the parents were drinking in the presence of children, the more restrictive were the attitudes expressed. Moreover, the greater the amount of alcohol consumed in each drinking situation, the more restrictive the attitudes. There was little variation between the samples that were asked about fathers' or mothers' drinking in the presence of their children.

Table 2 shows how the attitudes towards parents' drinking in the presence of their children varied according to the respondents' gender and age. Females were somewhat more restrictive than males, both in the samples that were asked about mothers' (attitude scores were 2.98 among females and 2.80 among males) and fathers' drinking (with attitude scores of 2.93 among females and 2.75 among males). The age differences were less pronounced. However, there was a weak tendency indicating that the younger the respondents were, the more restrictive their attitudes were (e.g., the attitude score of fathers' drinking was 2.91 among those aged between 18–29

**Table 1.** Items measuring attitudes towards fathers (F, N=1072–1074) and mothers (M, N=1092–1096) drinking with children present.

|   | %                            |                         |                       |                      | Mean <sup>a</sup> (SD)  |
|---|------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
|   | Completely unproblematic F/M | Quite unproblematic F/M | Quite problematic F/M | Very problematic F/M |                         |
| <b>A father <sup>b</sup> drinks a glass of wine...</b>                |                              |                         |                       |                      |                         |
| ...a couple of times per year while his 10-year-old child is present  | 75.8/74.5                    | 18.8/19.9               | 3.9/3.2               | 1.5/2.4              | 1.31/1.33 (0.62)/(0.66) |
| ...a couple of times per month while his 10-year-old child is present | 60.7/56.4                    | 26.6/28.9               | 9.2/10.4              | 3.5/4.2              | 1.55/1.62 (0.80)/(0.83) |
| ...a couple of times per week while his 10-year-old child is present  | 29.3/24.2                    | 33.2/31.3               | 25.0/29.2             | 12.5/15.3            | 2.21/2.36 (1.00)/(1.01) |
| <b>A father gets slightly intoxicated<sup>c</sup>...</b>              |                              |                         |                       |                      |                         |
| ...a couple of times per year while his 10-year-old child is present  | 16.0/16.1                    | 36.2/34.2               | 29.0/28.9             | 18.8/20.8            | 2.51/2.54 (0.97)/(0.99) |
| ...a couple of times per month while his 10-year-old child is present | 5.5/5.2                      | 21.0/18.9               | 40.8/37.5             | 32.7/38.4            | 3.01/3.09 (0.87)/(0.88) |
| ...a couple of times per week while his 10-year-old child is present  | 1.5/1.2                      | 4.9/4.1                 | 28.1/24.1             | 65.5/70.6            | 3.58/3.64 (0.66)/(0.62) |
| <b>A father gets clearly intoxicated<sup>d</sup>...</b>               |                              |                         |                       |                      |                         |
| ...a couple of times per year while his 10-year-old child is present  | 1.6/1.3                      | 7.6/6.9                 | 22.1/21.4             | 68.7/70.4            | 3.58/3.61 (0.70)/(0.67) |
| ...a couple of times per month while his 10-year-old child is present | 0.3/0.7                      | 1.5/1.7                 | 13.8/10.6             | 84.4/86.9            | 3.82/3.84 (0.44)/(0.46) |
| ...a couple of times per week while his 10-year-old child is present  | 0.3/0.5                      | 0.5/0.8                 | 3.8/2.9               | 95.4/95.7            | 3.94/3.94 (0.28)/(0.33) |

Scale: 1–4, where 1 is completely unproblematic and 4 is very problematic.

These statements come from the questionnaire about a father's drinking with a child present. The statements about a mother's drinking with a child present were identical.

"Gets slightly intoxicated" was defined in the questionnaire as "gets more talkative and lively than he usually is".

"Gets clearly intoxicated" was defined in the questionnaire as "speaks unclearly and walks unsteadily".

years while it was 2.77 among those aged 60–69).

Overall, the survey data showed acceptance of parents' moderate drinking in the presence of children, while heavy and/or frequent drinking was not accepted.

### Study 2

As in the survey data, the overall impression from the analysis of the focus group data was that parents' drinking in the presence of children was seldom regarded as problematic in itself. The participants talked about moderation as a core value, but definitions of moderation varied, and



**Table 2.** Mean score on attitudes towards parents drinking with children present according to the respondents' age and gender (N = 2170).

|             | Fathers drinking |      |      |      | Mothers drinking |      |      |      |
|-------------|------------------|------|------|------|------------------|------|------|------|
|             | N                | %    | M    | SD   | N                | %    | M    | SD   |
| All         | 1074             | 100  | 2.83 | 0.50 | 1096             | 100  | 2.89 | 0.51 |
| Gender      | F = 35.89***     |      |      |      | F = 35.95***     |      |      |      |
| Male        | 547              | 50.9 | 2.75 | 0.52 | 558              | 50.9 | 2.80 | 0.54 |
| Female      | 527              | 49.1 | 2.93 | 0.46 | 539              | 49.1 | 2.98 | 0.45 |
| Age         | F = 3.35*        |      |      |      | F = 2.39*        |      |      |      |
| 18–29 years | 285              | 26.5 | 2.91 | 0.48 | 295              | 26.9 | 2.93 | 0.54 |
| 30–39 years | 151              | 14.1 | 2.85 | 0.46 | 135              | 12.3 | 2.94 | 0.51 |
| 40–49 years | 217              | 20.2 | 2.83 | 0.50 | 212              | 19.3 | 2.87 | 0.48 |
| 50–59 years | 232              | 21.6 | 2.78 | 0.51 | 225              | 20.5 | 2.81 | 0.50 |
| 60–69 years | 189              | 17.6 | 2.77 | 0.51 | 230              | 21.0 | 2.88 | 0.48 |

Note: Scale: 1–4, where 1 is completely unproblematic and 4 is very problematic  
\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.001.

the consequences of parents' drinking that parents and teenagers were concerned about were diverse.

#### A norm of moderation

In the focus group discussions, Picture 1 was interpreted as presenting a familiar image of a Friday night dinner. The associations were mostly positively loaded of a situation with a good atmosphere ("cosy" and "relaxed"), and most importantly, of a situation where adults' drinking was moderate:

I'm thinking that this represents no danger at all. When my parents drink wine at weekends sometimes, only with dinner. Really, I don't notice any difference. I don't care about it. They only do it to enjoy themselves. (Boy, S2)

Similarly, picture 2 was often interpreted as a nice family event or neighbourhood gathering, with a positive atmosphere ("friendly", "social" and "inclusive"). One of the participants in an adult group interpreted it as a microcosm of the "ideal" drinking situation that he would like to take part in:

I'm thinking incredibly nice. Both children and adults in different age groups are present. Like that lady in pink in the middle of the picture, she looks like a mature woman, at least. So it looks like a really nice social gathering where everyone is included, with a moderate intake of alcohol, but not in any way pietistic either. (Man, P1)

The participants emphasised the social context as important for their positive interpretations of the situations. The atmosphere, the social relations and the enjoyable character of the situations were identified as contributing to an impression of these as moderate drinking contexts. In all groups, the participants stated that the situations portrayed in Picture 1 and 2 would become problematic "if the drinking escalated". In general, evaluations grew somewhat more negative from the first to the second picture, and most when the provocative story was presented. But also in response to the story, it was the possible ordering of a second bottle of wine that provoked negative responses: "It's too

much” (Man, P3); “No! I’d be drunk. I don’t want to be drunk in front of my children” (Woman, P3). Again, it was not drinking in the presence of children *in itself* that was perceived as problematic. Moreover, the interviews revealed few differences in attitudes related to the gender of the parents in the picture. Some individuals did, however, express attitudes such as: “One would perhaps be more judgmental towards mothers than fathers of small children drinking” (Woman, P4).

Overall, both adults’ and teenagers’ attitudes towards parents’ drinking in the presence of children were accepting, as long as the drinking was moderate.

#### How was moderation defined?

While moderation was established as a norm of drinking in the presence of children across all discussions, the definition of moderation varied between groups and between discussions. First, moderation was related to *the amount of alcohol consumed*. The definition of a moderate amount of alcohol was diverse however, from one glass to one bottle or “how much one can take” (Man, P1). Second, obvious *intoxication* – defined as the point where children notice that their parents behave differently – was often determined as the limit between moderate and unacceptable drinking with children present:

The amount of alcohol makes all the difference, and if someone changes their personality as a result of drinking alcohol, then you should stay away from intoxicating substances completely, really. But if there had been another bottle there – one can wait with that, for another occasion. (Man, P2)

The demarcation of intoxication was not always absolute. Some talked about how getting “a little tipsy while on holiday once is OK, but not if it happens all the time” (Man, P2). More often, *frequency of drinking* was used to define moderation. Some of the participants defined drinking only at weekends or only in the evenings as opposed to during daytime as acceptable, while others disconnected their conception of moderation from such rules: “I can just as well have a drink on a Tuesday, but you can’t do that every Tuesday.” (Man, P1). Some distinguished between drinking with food as opposed to without, while others talked about beverage type: spirits were not regarded as being within the definition of moderation. Finally, moderation was described with reference to behaviour. Loud voices and aggression were clearly out of order.

Overall, the definition of moderation appeared wide, depending on factors such as the drinking context, frequency and amount of alcohol consumed, and possible effects of alcohol on behaviour.

#### Perceived consequences of parents’ drinking in the presence of children

When talking about the importance of moderation, the participants in the focus groups often exemplified their evaluations with stories of what they perceived as negative consequences of drinking too much in the presence of children. First of all, parents’ drinking was talked about as representing a *risk to children’s safety*. This theme appeared most of all in response to the holiday drinking story and most clearly in teenage groups. This excerpt shows the immediate response to the story in one group:

Boy 1: No. This is no-no. Because, first of all, they are with their children. Second, they are at the beach.

Girl 1: They already had one bottle of wine.

Boy 1: Yes, they already had one bottle of wine. Drinking more and getting drunk, and then bringing the children home, driving a car while you are drunk.

Girl 1: What if the children drown and get unconscious, and they can't help them, because they are drunk, like.

Boy 2: Poor children, they can't swim.

Boy 1: The story in itself is rather...

Girl 1: Tragic. (S2)

Also in response to Picture 2, the teenagers often expressed concern about small children's safety in a very explicit way. In addition to the potential scenarios of children getting lost or running into accidents, the teenagers talked about how the baby in the pram might be breastfed by a mother who had been drinking. As in the discussion cited above, the language used in these considerations was often strongly normatively loaded. In contrast, teenagers expressed less concern about older children, explaining that older children like themselves were capable of taking care of themselves.

Adults also emphasised how parents' immoderate drinking could represent a risk to small children's safety, but they focused more on the children's emotional experience, how children might feel unsafe or insecure if parents became intoxicated. When talking about older children, this perspective often took a somewhat different form, highlighting *parents' responsibility towards the family as a unit*. Drinking too much was positioned as a break with a kind of "contract" between

parents and children, as in: "One doesn't drink more wine, if one has made an agreement to do something together" (Woman, P3). This theme was most clearly present when they talked about the story, referring to the family holiday as a special time for the family to be together:

It's the family holiday. How do we create relations here? There is no relation building between them, it is one's own needs in mind all the time, not the children's needs. The children want to do something else. It's not OK." (Woman, P2)

In this discussion, the parental responsibility was phrased not only as directed towards the children, but towards the unity of the family and also towards the parents themselves.

In another group one of the participants described her impression of the Norwegian drinking culture: alcohol use is the norm to the extent that it is unthinkable for young people not to drink. She had decided to abstain from alcohol in recent years "in order to exercise her children's sense of independence" (Woman, P3). The other participants responded to her story by arguing that children being exposed to parents' moderate drinking could also have *positive* consequences:

I understand your opinion very well, but I believe that what we show by the way we use alcohol ourselves, it shows them that the use they are exposed to elsewhere is something very different. I mean, a glass of wine with a nice meal is something completely different than getting drunk. (Man, P3)

Seeing parents drinking moderately was positioned here as contributing to teaching children to drink in a less risky way. One of the other participants in the group explained how he wanted to teach his son to combine wine and food, arguing that he saw this as important knowledge to transfer on. But it was also, he added, a way to teach his son that alcohol was not necessarily something “strange, scary and forbidden” (Man, P3). Similar discussions came up in the other adult groups, and arguments against being very restrictive towards drinking in the presence of children were, in line with the discussion cited above, that children should not get the impression that drinking alcohol is only about getting drunk. Furthermore, it was not considered a constructive approach to parents’ role in alcohol socialisation to teach children “an abstinence that is not realistic” (Man, P2).

In sum, this study showed that while potential negative consequences were most often raised – such as putting children’s safety at risk or not taking responsibility for the unity of the family – the group discussions also emphasised some positive consequences.

## Discussion

The survey data and the data from the focus group interviews both showed that parents’ drinking in the presence of children was mostly perceived as unproblematic, as long as the amount of alcohol involved was small and the drinking did not occur frequently. A common finding in both data sets was that there was not a marked difference in the level of acceptance of mothers’ versus fathers’ drinking with their children present. Moreover, in both data sets we observed that attitudes

became more restrictive with an increased drinking frequency and with visible signs of intoxication. These attitudes indicate a norm of moderation: permissive towards drinking but restrictive towards drinking too much. In the focus group discussions, we observed that definitions varied of what was too much or too often. Moderation was also defined by context. Whether drinking in the presence of children was perceived as acceptable or not could depend also on the atmosphere of the situation, of who took part, and most of all, how they behaved. While teenagers emphasised risk to children’s safety as the most important argument for moderation, adults also talked about parents’ drinking as a break with parents’ responsibility towards the unity of the family. In the adult groups, exposure to parents’ moderate drinking was positioned both as a possible positive and a negative contribution to the alcohol socialisation process.

Our findings that people tolerate drinking in the presence of children as long as it is moderate correspond with the findings of Raitasalo et al. (2011). They also resonate with the findings by Fjær et al. (2016) that the acceptance is low of visible intoxication in situations where children are present. More than 9 out of 10 of the respondents in our survey considered parents’ drinking to intoxication with children present to be very problematic.

In another study from Finland based upon focus group data, Tigerstedt, Törönen, and Simonen (2010) described attitudes towards parents’ drinking in the presence of young children as a “grey zone” in Finnish culture. A previously restrictive norm climate seems to be changing towards more liberal ideas of alco-

hol use as a part of everyday life – and therefore not necessarily to be kept out of sight from children. In line with this, our findings of a high level of acceptance of drinking in the presence of children can be interpreted as an expression of cultural values related to the development towards a more “continental” drinking culture, including liberalisation of consumption and drinking as part of everyday life to a larger extent than before (Bye & Østhus, 2011). The distinct awareness of the potential harm to children from exposure to parents’ immoderate drinking in the participants’ responses indicate at the same time that also in Norwegian culture, attitudes towards parents’ drinking in the presence of children may be a grey zone in which restrictive opinions are an important part of the total picture.

An interesting finding from the focus group study was that the meaning given to the concept of moderation varied and that the social context was an important dimension in the participants’ definitions. A focus group study from Denmark (Grønkjær, Curtis, De Crespigny, & Delmar, 2013) exploring people’s attitudes towards drinking found in line with our results that the social context was an important criterion for defining whether a drinking situation was acceptable or not. “Cosy” and social gatherings were terms used to describe the main contexts for alcohol use, and a similar amount of alcohol could be perceived differently dependent on the situation in which it was consumed (Grønkjær et al., 2013).

In the context of parents’ drinking in the presence of children, one implication of defining moderation in this way is that situations that are defined as joyful, posi-

tive and thus moderate by adults are not necessarily experienced as such by children. Consistent with this reasoning, a Norwegian study based on data from the general population illustrated that there is no clear distinction between parents who are problem drinkers and consumers who are not (Rossow et al., 2009). While it was found that the likelihood of experiencing negative consequences due to parents’ drinking increased with an increased frequency of witnessing parents intoxicated, a negative impact from parents’ drinking was also found among those less frequently exposed. Thus, what is defined as a moderate alcohol consumption by parents may also have a negative impact on children (Rossow & Moan, 2012; Rossow et al., 2009). The advice about drinking moderately when children are present that is given to parents by health authorities and interest organisations should be developed with this complexity in mind.

A common finding in Study 1 and Study 2 was that there were no marked differences in attitudes depending on whether it was the mother or father who was drinking with children present. There was, however, a tendency in the survey data showing that women were more restrictive than men towards parents’ drinking in the presence of children. Raitasalo and co-workers (2011) made similar findings in their study. It could reflect a general tendency that women are more likely to worry compared with men (Robichaud, Dugas & Conway, 2003). Finally, men consume alcohol both more often and in larger amounts than women do (Wilsnack & Wilsnack, 1997; Østhus et al., 2011), and this may result in a greater tolerance of drinking among men than women.

Both studies showed a tendency of more restrictive attitudes among young participants. In the qualitative data, we observed that the teenagers expressed concern about the risk particularly to smaller children's safety in an explicit and normatively loaded way. One explanation of this finding may be that adolescents who have not yet started drinking themselves may "fear the unknown" and may thus be more restrictive towards drinking in general compared with adults. The lack of personal experience with the situations at hand could imply that they responded to the stimulus materials with more general conceptions of the harms of drinking, perhaps picked up from public debate or from school. Adults, on the other hand, have more experience with the subject in question than teenagers. Consequently, they related the situations in the stimulus materials more often to their own experiences and evaluations in similar situations, implying a more complex picture (Törrönen, 2002). Parents are responsible for a child's welfare and are expected to "do the right thing" as caretakers and role models for their children. Their responses may reflect these expectations, but their interpretations also related strongly to alcohol as a symbol of leisure, positive atmosphere and social gatherings. Overall, the finding that parents have a more nuanced view than teenagers of the potential consequences of drinking with children present may reflect what is found within risk perception research: that people who perceive the benefits of drinking as high also tend to perceive drinking as less harmful (Slovic, 2000).

#### *Methodological considerations and suggestions for future research*

Ours is one of few studies addressing attitudes towards parents' drinking in the presence of children, and extends previous research by applying a mixed method approach using both survey data and data from focus group interviews. However, some limitations warrant attention.

First, the survey and the focus group interviews were not designed as comparative studies from the start, indicating that there are several differences between the two studies. The samples differed and the framing of the situations where parents drink with their child present were different. For example, we limited the age of the child to 10 years in the survey, while in the focus group interviews the age of the children varied. Future research applying a mixed method approach would benefit from designing the quantitative and qualitative studies with more comparable measures.

Second, we know that persons who drink heavily are less likely to participate in surveys (see Johnson, 2014, for review). Thus, the attitudes may be "more politically correct" in this study than would be the case if the whole population of alcohol consumers were represented. Third, we examined whether the attitudes varied according to frequency of drinking, amount of alcohol consumed, and whether it was a mother or a father who drank alcohol in the presence of her/his child. It is reasonable to assume that attitudes may vary across other dimensions as well, such as the age of the child. Fourth, we addressed a limited set of correlates of attitudes. Future studies addressing this issue could for example examine whether attitudes differ according to own drinking habits

and among those who have children themselves and those who do not.

Fifth, the groups who participated in the focus group interviews were to some extent “natural groups” in that they existed without the intervention of the researcher. Both adolescents and parents were likely to know each other to some extent, even though these were all urban schools. Parents will perhaps present themselves as more responsible in a group of people they are likely to meet at the next parents’ meeting. The adolescents’ talk of how older children are not affected by parents’ drinking because they can take care of themselves may suggest that they want to demonstrate independence in front of their peers. Our general impression was, however, that most participants talked openly and did not hesitate to state opinions that opposed the others in the group.

## Conclusions

Parents’ drinking in the presence of children was generally accepted, as long as the drinking was moderate. The focus group data however showed that definitions of

moderation varied and that social context was also used to define moderation. The participants emphasised both positive and negative consequences of parents’ drinking in the presence of children: from risk to children’s safety to teaching children to drink in a moderate way. The merged analysis showed that the survey and the focus group data gave similar results and that the findings from one study could add to the understanding of findings from the other. For example, the focus group data expanded upon the survey results by showing how people gave meaning to the concept of moderation.

**Declaration of Interest** None

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