

LIFESTYLE INFLUENCES OF MILITARY PARTNERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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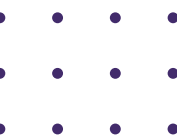
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Background

- UK research suggests that compared to similar 'civilian' women, UK female military partners endorse (Gribble et al, 2019):
 - Greater levels of hazardous alcohol consumption
 - Greater levels of binge-drinking – though drank less frequently
- Risks higher for those experiencing longer separations from their serving partner but other drivers unclear (Gribble et al, 2019)
- International literature shows links between military partners' alcohol use and partner mental health, personnel mental health, separation, combat & deployments
- Limited research on lifestyle behaviours of military partners



Aim & Methods

Aim: To explore experiences of UK military partners' alcohol use and to understand influences of drinking in this population

Online diaries

Weekly diaries
for 1 month

- Alcohol use
- Eating
- Exercise
- Vaping/ smoking
- Socialising

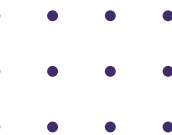
N=62

1-1 interviews

Telephone
interviews

- Alcohol use
- Lifestyle behaviours
- Personalised from diaries

N=21



Interview participants

24-46 yrs
(mean 34 yrs)

All white
women
partnered with
men

20 partners of
serving
personnel

13 Army, 5
RN/RM, 3 RAF

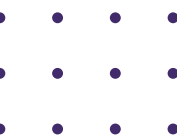
Most were
partners of
officers or
senior NCOs
(n=12)

Most had
children
(n=16)

Most had
experience of
military-related
separation
(n=17)



- 8 met criteria for risky drinking on AUDIT-C (>5)
 - 6 had scores indicating increased risks
 - 2 had scores indicating higher risks
 - 0 had scores indicating probable dependence



Perceptions of drinking

- **“I’m not a big drinker”**
“I saw a friend recently and I had a glass of wine or two but we’re not big drinkers I have to say.” (Vanessa, MU, no AUDIT-C risk, has children)
- **Parameters of acceptability**
“I generally don’t drink on a work night although I have been breaking that rule myself recently.” (Kayley, MU, AUDIT-C increased risk, no children)
- **Exceptionalism**
“There’s very few times when I drink alcohol and actually the diaries just happened because they happened to cover the time when we went on holiday... that has brought up the average over the week” (Poppy, no MU, no AUDIT-C risk, has children)

Social contexts – special occasions

- **Drinking at military events and on patch:**
“We had patch parties at everyone’s house... and get drunk. We used to help with each other’s children, which was a big patch spirit” (Claire, AUDIT increased risk, has children)
- **Reduced social opportunities**
“I think my friendship group is very small and then obviously financial restrictions. So the two and then obviously there’s childcare as well.” (Carrie, MU, no AUDIT-C risk, has children)
- **Dispersed social connections – reunions with friends & binge-drinking**
“It was all of a sudden I was carefree, I didn’t have to worry about anyone else, it was just me. And that was the whole premise for the weekend - it was a girls’ weekend, we were all drinking, that sort of thing.” (Lucy, MU, AUDIT-C increased risk, has children)

Social contexts – ‘drink-weekending’

- **Participants described drinking on Fridays when husbands were home**
“Because we don’t get a lot of time together it’s that chilling out time really that feels more social” (Joanna, AUDIT low risk, children)
- **Partners and their husbands both ‘off-duty’ – sharing the domestic load**
“You can enjoy a drink because you know you are not going to be sleeping on the toddler’s bedroom floor. So yes, it is a bit more about being back to being Natalie and Mark as opposed to just being mum and dad or like just friends.” (Natalie, MU, AUDIT-C no risk, children)
- **‘Looseness’ around amounts**

Drinking within the family context

- Couples' drinking can align, especially for women (Leonard, 2003; Erbes et al., 2012)

Syncing up

“He’ll the one that suggests it because... well for the past 7 years he’s always been surrounded, he’s always lived away from home pretty much. He’s always lived with a bunch of guys in a base and they’ve got nothing better to do [than drink]. So definitely way more of a drinking culture for him on a regular basis”

(Alison, MU, AUDIT-C inc. risk, children)

Seesawing

“He just used to disappear off and drink on his own in the garden. So it’s better now because I can spot it easier and I suppose back then when he was drinking if you said something to him he wouldn’t accept it because he didn’t have the clarity to accept it whereas he does now”

(Leanne, MU, AUDIT-C inc. risk, children)

Alcohol as a shortcut to relaxation

- **Alcohol used by participants to create positive feeling, pleasure, & enjoyment**
“I’m sitting there talking to somebody. And it’s having that, I don’t know it’s kind of relaxing because you are talking to somebody and then you’ve got just something that’s quite enjoyable.” (Debbie, MU, AUDIT-C inc. risk, children)
- **Relieving stress, boredom and loneliness**
“[I] just wanting to forget about [partner being away] and just to not have to think about things isn’t it? [Alcohol] takes the edge off I guess.” (Alison, MU, AUDIT-C inc. risk, children).

“On Monday night I found it so difficult to relax that I had another glass of wine to try and chill out.” (Kayley, MU, AUDIT-C inc. risk, no children)

“Full mum duty”

- Weekending can negatively affect partners’ wellbeing (Gribble et al 2022)

‘Dry’ duty during husband’s absence

“When I’m on my own like deployments... with the kids for long periods... I don’t drink at all really.” (Joanna, AUDIT low risk, children)

“I’ll have the odd drink if it’s in the house when I’m doing my dinner or something.. I don’t tend to drink. I’ve always got the kids so I have to be on high alert.” (Claire, MU, AUDIT-C inc. risk, children)

Stress-based drinking

“Just the stress of it. I would definitely have not drunk as much if I didn’t have to put up with everything that we ended up putting up with, with all these random deployments and never knowing where you are and having to do so much solo parenting and running the household alone... that definitely took a toll on my mental health which increased the drinking. ” (Alison, AUDIT inc. risk, children)

Eating

- More salient than drinking for many participants

“I binge eat. That’s my worst thing” (Zoe, MU, AUDIT-C higher risk, no children)

“I don't drink, I eat my feelings instead.” (Louise, diary participant, no AUDIT-C risk, children)

“If I’m stressed, I would always rather eat than drink thankfully.” (Vanessa, MU, no AUDIT-C risk, children)

Finding personhood via lifestyle behaviours

“I can control what I eat, I can control what I do, but I can’t control what’s going to happen in the next couple of months as far as where my husband is going to be or if he’s going to be able to help out” (Vanessa, AUDIT low risk, children)

“I like now my husband is home [drinking] is a lot less likely to happen, because he would ask me if I was OK... [now husband home] I am eating mindfully. I’m exercising fairly regularly. I have time to myself. I’m starting to flex that muscle of having more of a social life. If you asked me [about how much control I have] when he was away the answer would be absolutely not, no” (Alison, MU, AUDIT-C inc. risk, children)

Conclusions

- Alcohol not salient feature of military partner lifestyles even in situations of unrecognized risky drinking
- Time since original work – changing attitudes?
- Social desirability / safeguarding issues?
- Military partners experience challenges/constrictions that may influence their drinking and other lifestyle behaviours
 - Husband absenteeism & return
 - Relocation
 - Uncertainty
 - Husband's drinking
- Eating may be more important
- Benefits of considering the lifestyle as a whole & across the family

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Thank you

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