Reviewer's report

Title: Problem drinking and exceeding guidelines for 'sensible' alcohol consumption in men: associations with life course socioeconomic disadvantage in a population-based study

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Reviewer: Elizabeth Breeze

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The authors argue that adulthood socioeconomic circumstances are particularly associated with detrimental patterns of alcohol consumption and problem drinking but that there are childhood influences too.

The topic is important if it helps to guide interventions. The authors have the advantage of a data source that has information about the individuals from throughout their life course and detailed measures of alcohol consumption. There are many good points about the manuscript.

All the comments below are discretionary except for clarifying the dichotomies.

Three measures of alcohol behaviour are used: it would be interesting to know to what extent those qualifying on each indicator are the same or different people. Most of the parameters are strikingly similar but it seems that own social class was a stronger predictor, and housing tenure a weaker predictor of problem drinking than of the other indicators of adverse drinking behaviour. (Table 3). I wouldn’t want to read too much into this but wonder if it is something to do with the culture of what is felt to be problematic.

My main problem lies with the RII. I know that this is a measure that is accepted and it has the advantage of enabling comparison across different measures. The difficulty I have with it is that it assumes a linear gradient over the socioeconomic scale and compares the hypothetical people at the 0 and 100% points on the ranking – which means that the parameters tend to be more substantial than they are in a logistic regression that compares groups. I am no expert in this but I know that there is an alternative suggested – it seems more to affect the CI than the point estimate but still estimates f(0)/f(1) so does not get round my feeling that one is exaggerating the situation by using mythical ‘people’ at the ends of the scale. [Ref Biostatistics Advance Access published online on September 28, 2005 Biostatistics, doi:10.1093/biostatistics/kxj002 Relative index of inequality: definition, estimation and inference Jamie C. Sergeant and David Firth ] . I do not insist on a revision but would like to know if the linearity was explored.

Discussion

Although adult indicators of socioeconomic position attenuate childhood ones, the authors seem to be saying that the childhood ones work through the adult
ones, otherwise I presume there would be less emphasis on education. I would agree that this is likely.

Is there scope for reverse causation with respect to car ownership = were the rates of consumption so high that people could have been banned or discouraged from driving?

Policy implications
Education is presumably more modifiable for future generations than for existing adults so this is a long-term proposition Another point that in theory is amenable to intervention is employment status – was the employment history of many of these people unstable; might more stable employment have made the drink less attractive?

Clarification: where the cut-points were made to create dichotomies for the explanatory variables (page 8)

Discussion p10 last para. Minor point on terminology. Material indicators that were more predictive of heavy drinking – housing tenure was, housing density was not. Suggest replace “housing deprivation” in brackets by “housing tenure”

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that have no competing interests