

Exploring men's alcohol consumption in the context of becoming a father: A scoping review

Dr Elena Dimova, Postgraduate Researcher, Glasgow Caledonian University

**SHAAP/SARN/IAS Alcohol Occasionals Seminar
Thursday 25th February 2021, hosted on Zoom**

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems ([SHAAP](#)) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network ([SARN](#)) are proud to host the lunchtime *Alcohol Occasionals*, which showcase new and innovative research on alcohol use. The seminars are run in conjunction with the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh ([RCPE](#)). These events provide the chance for researchers, healthcare professionals, policy makers and members of the public to hear about alcohol-related topics and discuss and debate implications for policy and practice. This event was also run in conjunction with the Institute of Alcohol Studies ([IAS](#)).



The current theme is *alcohol and inequalities*. [Briefing papers](#) aim to capture the main discussion points and communicate these to a wider audience. SHAAP is responsible for the contents, which are our interpretation.

Introducing the seminar, Interim SHAAP Director Lindsay Paterson welcomed [Dr Elena Dimova](#) ([@ElenaDDimova](#)) on behalf of SHAAP, SARN and IAS. Dr Katherine Severi, CEO of IAS, provided background to the research, its funding and the work of the Alcohol & Families Alliance ([AFA](#)). Dr Elena

Dimova thanked SHAAP/SARN/IAS for the invitation to present, her co-researchers at Glasgow Caledonian University's [Substance Use research group](#) ([@SubMisuseGcu](#)), and the research funders (IAS, via the [Small Grants Scheme](#)).

Dimova first provided background information, explaining that on average [men drink more than women](#) (and suffer a [greater burden of disease](#) from alcohol). There are gendered explanations for this, including masculinity/machoism and the role of alcohol in male friendships – explored in depth by the [SHAAP/IAS Men and Alcohol](#) seminars. Interestingly, fatherhood featured less in *Men and Alcohol* compared with motherhood in the [SHAAP/IAS Women and Alcohol](#) seminars. Dimova highlighted evidence that parenthood may be a teachable moment for the adoption of health behaviours, although fathers have been under-represented in research. Many fathers continue to drink during and after pregnancy, which can increase risk of the pregnant partner drinking and negatively affect relationship quality. In young fathers, the masculine norm of 'toughness' has been shown to be related to unhealthy behaviours. Parents typically drink to relax but negotiate this with parental responsibilities. Dimova also highlighted the importance of 'involved fatherhood', which brings benefits to the child and both parents.



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Dimova described two key research gaps:

- i How men 'experience' alcohol consumption in the context of fatherhood
- ii Which interventions for reducing/stopping drinking are father-friendly

Dimova and colleagues' scoping review addressed these gaps and synthesised available evidence to explore fathers' experiences of alcohol consumption, key characteristics of existing interventions, and how best to engage fathers.

To ensure a rigorous methodology, a [six-stage framework](#) (based on the [Arksey and O'Malley framework](#)) was followed, including (optional) stakeholder review. Dimova described inclusion/exclusion criteria, with participants being expectant or new

fathers (up to two years postnatally) and studies being qualitative or interventional. The team searched four databases for studies up to November 2020, with independent screening of >3,300 titles/abstracts. This led to 41 full-texts being read for eligibility, with five peer-reviewed articles and one protocol being included in the review. Thus, the review draws only on a small number of studies.

Fathers' experiences

The three qualitative studies conducted in [Australia](#), [Canada](#) and the [Netherlands](#) explored experiences of both parents; father-specific data were limited (n=21). Motives for reducing drinking included: support for their partner, being a role model for their child, and 'provider' ideals (importance of providing both time and money to the family). Men were aware that alcohol can be harmful to an unborn baby but had limited knowledge of how much alcohol is needed to cause harm or how stage of pregnancy influences risk. Abstaining from alcohol was mainly seen as a mother's decision, rather than a mutual decision. The qualitative studies also revealed that fathers may find both pregnancy websites and parenting groups unsuitable.

Interventions

There was one randomised controlled trial (RCT) (n=348, USA), one intervention-development study (n=51, Australia), and a protocol for an RCT. Only the [RCT](#) assessed effectiveness of an intervention (couples-based, smoking cessation-focussed). Although this intervention did not target alcohol consumption, changes in alcohol consumption were measured by the researchers who found a reduction in binge drinking. The '[intervention-development](#)' [study](#) involved theory-informed (Motivational Interviewing and Stages of Change) text messages (x30) addressing alcohol-related harms, with messages presented from a child's voice or in the second-person. The [RCT protocol](#) was also for a text message-based intervention

([SMS4dads](#)), developed following [feasibility/acceptability](#) and [process evaluation](#) research. 25 of the 294 messages are on alcohol, with messages timed according to the baby's expected/actual birth date. Results are forthcoming.

Engaging with fathers

Included studies recruited men via: antenatal clinics and parenting classes/groups; 'gatekeepers', including health professionals and mothers; and social media. Data on effectiveness of these methods is limited, although the RCT suggests high participation is achievable.

Dimova then put these findings into the context of wider literature. Not setting a bad example or putting children in danger has featured in [previous research](#), similar to this review's finding of fathers wanting to act as role models. Previous research suggests that men may [feel out of place](#) at antenatal classes – this is important, because perceptions that interventions are mother-focussed [act as a barrier](#) to fathers participating. Regarding the evidence-base for interventions, research supports the potential of family-based interventions, text message interventions and the use of narratives to increase engagement. Research also suggests that it is feasible to recruit expectant and new fathers through antenatal clinics and pregnancy classes or via women as 'gatekeepers', although this may exclude, for example, separated fathers. Social media may also be useful for engagement, although this would not be suitable for fathers who lack web access.

Dimova summarised that the limited evidence available suggests that pregnancy is a good time to engage with new and expectant fathers, although there is a lack of father-friendly interventions. The experiences of fathers have also largely been neglected in alcohol research to date.

Implications for researchers include the need for more (ideally longitudinal) qualitative research with diverse subgroups of fathers, plus more research on appropriate father-

friendly interventions. Implications for healthcare professionals include that antenatal settings should be father-friendly; 'involved fatherhood' should be respected, with men not simply being seen as bystanders but recognised as important in their own right; and there should be recognition that the transition to fatherhood may lead to unhealthy behaviours, including alcohol consumption.

Dimova thanked the stakeholders before opening for discussion, which explored various issues, including: the 'digital divide' (although Dimova noted that the majority of disadvantaged men in Scotland in the [TRAM RCT](#) had access to mobile phones); the opportunity for employers to support fathers to reduce drinking; online self-help groups (and the need for research in this area); the mobile application [DadPad](#), developed with the NHS; and the [NCT](#) using fatherhood as a teachable moment.

Watch this seminar

[You can watch this seminar, and other recent webinars](#)



Forthcoming events

All 2021 *Alcohol Occasionals* are [available for booking](#)

The next will be on 30 March: *Alcohol-related violence and deprivation*, by Dr Carly Lightowlers and Lucy Bryant. [Book now](#)

SHAAP Blog

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Read the review

Read the full research report on the [IAS website](#)

