

How does alcohol facilitate happiness and manage unhappiness for midlife women in different social classes?

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Background: The COVID-19 pandemic unveiled the social class processes that structured women's happiness and offered opportunity to explore how drinking alcohol for happiness (rather than for unhappiness) during lockdowns fortifies affluent class privilege.

Method/Approach: Interviews with 40 women living in different social class positions during lockdown restrictions in South Australia (Feb-May 2021) were used to investigate women's alcohol consumption practices for manufacturing, maintaining or reflecting happiness.

Key Findings: Inequitable social class differences were observable in women's chances to be happy despite COVID-19. Vastly different and varied avenues for achieving happiness (despite the pandemic) outside of drinking alcohol, were possible for privileged women than for those in middle and working classes. This was exemplified in how the changes to the structure of the day that resulted from lockdown restrictions did not devastate or cause stress requiring alcohol to cope (as working class women reported) or need to be filtered using alcohol in order to balance emotions (as for middle class women) but rather provided an opportunity to celebrate the achievement of living a good life and feeling happiness. Affluent women's privilege is expressed through cultivating a sense of satisfaction in 'being happy' and using alcohol to celebrate despite living through lockdown restrictions.

Discussion and conclusion: Prevailing alcohol discourse places reductions within individual responsibility rather than addressing the social conditions that create a use-value for alcohol. This is problematic for women with less agency to control their chances of living a happy life and rely on alcohol to manage unhappiness.