



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

Elite Bridge: Players, Partnerships and Community

Punch S, Russell Z and Cairns B (2020) '(Per)forming identity in the mind-sport bridge: Self, partnership and community', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*
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Introduction

This practical summary of the paper '[\(Per\)forming identity in the mind-sport bridge: Self, partnership and community](https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690220959648)' is intended for the bridge community (players, teachers, organisers). The summary illustrates the ways in which academic research can be used to inform and promote bridge as a mindsport.

For bridge practitioners, many of the findings will be self-evident. The importance of partnership, for example, or the need to control one's emotions at the bridge table, are obvious, yet this is the first time that research has provided academic evidence for success factors at the highest level of the mindsport.

Feedback and comments on this summary are welcome. A summary of the theoretical aspects of the paper is also available. Please email feedback to: bamsa@stir.ac.uk

Summary

By analysing the social dynamics of tournament bridge, the authors use a sociological lens to explore the ways in which world class players develop different roles and identities: as individuals, partners, team members and participants in the wider bridge community. In a timely contribution to the ongoing debate about the definition of sport, the paper examines how winning partnerships evolve and the factors that lead to success as an elite player.

Data

Research into elite bridge players carried out by Professor Samantha Punch and the *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA) team at the University of Stirling is the first academic study of world class players. Drawing on 52 in-depth interviews with expert players from the USA and Europe, this paper puts elite bridge in the spotlight as a competitive mindsport played at the highest level.

Like other sports, bridge has an established international tournament circuit where the world's greatest players compete for national, international and world titles. Elite players

undergo intense training, and team captains, coaches, selectors and sponsors all play their part. Yet, despite this concentration of energy and effort at the highest level, elite bridge is largely unknown outside the circle of elite players and those aspiring to join the elite circle. The average club player, for example, is unlikely to know the names of national or international bridge champions or the names or dates of major tournaments.

In focusing on the little-known world of top-level bridge, the data provides evidence for trends in the habits and behaviour of world class players, and for the existence of an international community of elite players. This information is relevant not only to those with ambitions to join the upper echelons of the game, but to bridge teachers, club organisers and players of every level.

Findings

Developing an identity as a top bridge player involves intensive practice (often from an early age), technical training, intellectual skill and physical stamina. Elite bridge players require excellent mental ability but their performance and powers of concentration are also influenced by physical factors such as sleep, food, exercise and travel.

In the mindsport of bridge, being a good individual player is not enough to win medals. Success depends on partnership: communication, cooperation and accommodation between two people. Some partnerships last decades, others are shortlived. Some are between friends or life partners, others are determined by the selectors. Partnerships form and evolve at the bridge table and away from the table during preparation and post-match discussions. Social interaction and mutual understanding are at the heart of successful pairings. As in any team sport, it is impossible to ignore the relationships between players and the success or failure of a pair at the bridge table may relate to the way in which players cope with challenges together away from the table.

As well as the partnership aspect of the game, the mindsport bridge has a social, collective element. Bridge offers participants an identity and opportunities for personal connection. Players share a commitment and passion for the game, coming together within formal tournament settings and developing informal relationships with fellow participants. On a global level, elite players who represent their country are members of an international bridge community.

Applying the findings to practice

Putting an academic spotlight on the mindsport bridge: Until now, the sociology of bridge has been largely ignored by academics, sociologists and sport scientists. In this context, the University of Stirling's study of elite players is groundbreaking. The paper calls on a range of conceptual ideas around self, community and nation, and its findings are both practical and theoretical. The publication of this research in a high quality, peer-reviewed sport journal raises the profile of mindsport and the sociology of bridge as emerging academic fields.

Providing evidence for bridge as an elite sport: The paper demonstrates the similarities between elite bridge and other competitive sports. It illustrates the competitive world of international tournament bridge, where national teams compete on a world stage. It demonstrates the level of determination, preparation and skill of elite bridge players, which is equivalent to that of other sports people competing at a world level.

Stressing the value of partnership skills: The paper provides evidence of the importance of partnership in bridge. By learning to adapt to and to accommodate their partner, elite players build effective communication and cooperation. As a partnership mindsport, bridge encourages people to learn how to get the best out of themselves and their partners both at, and away from, the bridge table.

Showcasing role models: The bridge players quoted in the paper are all named. They talk honestly and openly about their level of work and commitment to the game, about the need for self-confidence and self-control, about their 'falls from grace'. Elite players are an inspiration for learners and developing players, as well as for the next generation of world champions.

Findings worthy of further research

Challenging existing definitions of sport: In view of debates about the definition of sport, the paper reinforces calls for a broader definition of sport that moves beyond the idea of sport as a purely physical domain. Just as physical sport requires mental agility, so does mindsport require physical fitness. Given the connections between mind and body that elite players of bridge describe, there is a clear case for a more inclusive approach to sporting activities.

Advocating greater investment in national teams: By casting a light on the inter-nation rivalry between national bridge teams, the research supports the argument that government and policymakers should be investing in national bridge teams to the same extent that they invest in other national sporting teams.

Providing social and educational opportunities for young people: The paper highlights the value players attach to the friendships and social connections that are formed within the wider bridge community, and stresses the role bridge plays in self-identity. The research strengthens the case for government and policymakers to support bridge teaching in schools not only because of the intellectual challenge, but also because of the opportunities it offers young people for social and emotional development.

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