

Benefits of Bridge: The Partnership Mindsport

Bridge is a popular card game played socially and competitively by millions of people throughout the world. Each game consists of four players divided into two pairs, or 'partnerships'. They compete against each other to win 'tricks' through cooperation, strategic thinking and logical deduction. Professor Samantha Punch at the University of Stirling leads 'Bridge: A MindSport for All'. This research-led project explores the benefits of bridge amongst the circuit of international players.

As in other sports, elite players dedicate significant time and effort to the game. While it is known that high-level tournaments differ considerably from recreational bridge played at local or club levels, the social dynamics of the top-level game are not well understood.

What are the motivations and social rewards that drive players to participate in international tournaments? In interviews with 52 elite players, a frequently reported benefit was the personal enrichment that results from the multi-faceted and challenging nature of the game. With a new problem to solve every eight minutes, players also noted the ever-evolving nature of the mindsport as being a specific 'thrill'.

Professor Punch and Dr Miriam Snellgrove found that the positive outcomes of playing bridge extend even further. The players described how their everyday interactions and life skills were improved and refined through the strategic interactions required to play well. Many of the interviewees talked about the

need to be able to communicate effectively with their partner and read the card play of opponents whilst managing their own game plan.

The findings show that preparation and practice are fundamental to gameplay in high-pressure, competitive environments. Steadiness and composure enable players to cultivate a mindset that can handle tough decisions and recover well from setbacks. Elite bridge can lead to assessing situations more effectively and improved real-time decision-making.

A defining characteristic of bridge is that it is always played in partnership. Professor Punch and colleague Dr Zoe Russell examined the complexity of emotional experience in elite-level bridge. Given the complex social and emotional interactions between each player and their partner, and between players and their opponents, bridge offers the opportunity to develop resilience and mental toughness.

The highs and lows of winning and losing present a complex scenario where emotions are shaped by the expectations of the self and others. The management of emotions occurs on an individual level for the players but also as part of the partnership. Elite players develop awareness of their own emotional reactions as well as understanding the emotions of others. This suggests that players can build their emotional intelligence through skills learnt at the bridge table.

From a practical perspective, mindsports offer an important opportunity for individuals to develop life skills. These are beneficial to business, family and social life, in areas such as strategic planning, flexibility in problem-solving, communication, empathy, emotional self-awareness, focus and concentration. The 'Bridge: A MindSport for All' project is continuing to explore how bridge can address societal challenges such as well-being, healthy ageing, inclusivity and social connection.

Summary of the papers 'Serious leisure experience in a dyadic pursuit: elite player motivations and participation in tournament bridge', *Leisure Studies*, doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2021.1942524, 'Playing Your Life: Developing Strategies and Managing Impressions in the Game of Bridge', doi.org/10.1177/1360780420973043, and 'Playing with Emotions: Emotional Complexity in the Social World of Elite Tournament Bridge', doi.org/10.1332/263169021X16420048324097

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Bridge: A MindSport For All
Connects People, Challenges Minds