



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

Elite Bridge: Players, Partnerships and Community

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Introduction

This is a summary of the theoretical aspects of the paper '['\(Per\)forming identity in the mind-sport bridge: Self, partnership and community'](https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690220959648)'. There has been little social research on bridge, especially of international tournaments and elite players. This paper contributes to the sociology of sports by introducing an understanding of how top-level partnerships form and develop over time within the mindsport bridge. The paper is about the process of becoming a top bridge player, which also involves developing skills to become an effective bridge partner.

A summary of the bridge-related aspects of the paper is available from *Bridge: A MindSport for All*. Feedback and comments on this summary are welcome. Please email feedback to: bamsa@stir.ac.uk.

Identity

The idea of identity has fascinated scientists and philosophers since Aristotle. As people mature, they accumulate numerous identities, each one deriving from a different aspect of life including nature and nurture, location and life chances. Every one of us has private identities and public identities, social identities and collective identities, but where do identities come from? How do they evolve?

For answers to some of these questions, researchers at the University of Stirling have used a range of different theoretical concepts and ideas to study the social interactions of elite bridge players. Among the theories applied are those of Erving Goffman, a Canadian-American sociologist who was fascinated by micro-social interactions and the strategies people learn and employ in their everyday lives.

Goffman was a meticulous observer of the mundane. In his view, everyday social behaviour, what he termed the 'interaction order', had profound implications for personal development and the formation of identity. In his studies of conversation, Goffman noted the ways in which people use communication to control or try to control the way they are perceived by others. In his analysis, he examined the theatre of conversation and the roles assumed by performer

and audience, and argued that identities are formed and honed through performance. He described the private domain 'backstage' where roles are rehearsed, the public arena 'frontstage' where the performance is delivered and the relationship between the two spheres.

Professor Samantha Punch of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Stirling is the project lead for *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA) who interviewed 52 world-class bridge players during major international tournaments. The analysis carried out by the BAMSA team found that the identities of elite bridge players include elements of the self, the partnership, the team/nation, and the wider community.

The article *(Per)forming identity in the mind-sport bridge: Self, partnership and community* explores the ways in which these different identities evolve both offstage and in the public eye. As in other sports, backstage settings include early life, training regimes and pre-match preparation. Performances happen on the sporting stage in view of other players at the bridge table and kibitzers (spectators).

Unique in mindsport, bridge combines individual performance with partnership, and considering the game from partner's point of view necessarily informs the social interactions between players. Players' friendships and 'marriages' (actual in some cases, metaphorical in others) necessarily affect performance at the bridge table. In the mindsport of bridge, players have both social relationships and playing relationships. They are constantly managing identities in a mixed way across formal and informal settings.

When competing at an international level, bridge players are influenced by the ideas of national identity. However, within the elite world of tournament bridge, the international dimension creates a sense of collective identity among players that transcends national boundaries. As a social world, the connections and interactions between players that arise through participation in the tournament bridge circuit create opportunities for friendships and a positive social identity to develop.

In summary, the paper illustrates how top players get the best out of themselves and their partner at the bridge table as well as during the preparations and reflections that take place before and after the game. It shows how elite players experience multiple layers of bridge identities: as individual bridge players who also perform as partners and team members, whilst participating in a community of bridge players from around the world.

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