



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

Elite Bridge Players: Skills and Strategies

Punch S, and Snellgrove, M (2020) 'Playing your Life: Developing Strategies and Managing Impressions in the Game of Bridge', *Sociological Research Online*
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Introduction

This is a practical summary of the paper 'Playing your Life: Developing Strategies and Managing Impressions in the Game of Bridge'. It is intended for players, teachers, organisers and policymakers. As well as having a practical application, this summary illustrates the ways in which academic research can be used to provide evidence for the skills required to play bridge at an elite level. Feedback and comments on this summary are welcome - please send to: bamsa@stir.ac.uk.

Summary

This academic paper focuses on the highest level of competitive bridge. It analyses the dynamics of the game and the skills that elite players need in order successfully to manage interactions at the bridge table.

By analysing the experiences of world class players, the paper demonstrates that bridge is a challenging, multi-faceted and fascinating game. The findings reveal that playing bridge at the highest level requires an ability to read people and scenarios strategically, to respond with discipline to changing and sometimes demoralising situations, and to nurture a trusting and supportively silent relationship (at the table) with one's partner. The research provides evidence that skills such as strategic planning, flexibility in problem-solving, concentration and focus can be developed at the bridge table. There is also some evidence that some elite players have applied these skills to other areas of their life.

The elite game of bridge requires an ability to read people and cards strategically, careful management of impressions and gameworthiness through preparation and planning, managing mistakes and supportive silence. Though these skills are learned during the course of everyday life, there is evidence that elite players test, practise and negotiate these interaction skills at the bridge table.

The findings are based on an analysis of transcripts of interviews with 52 elite bridge players mainly from the USA and UK carried out by Professor Samantha Punch and the Bridge: A MindSport for All (BAMSA) team at the University of Stirling.

Findings

The views and experiences of elite players, as revealed in the research data, demonstrate the extraordinary complexity of the mindsport bridge and the skills necessary to become a top player. The general consensus among the elite players was, for example, that certain skills are essential for tournament success and can be learned or enhanced through play.

Reading people and play strategically: By closely observing card play and body language, the best players learn to anticipate and often predict the cards their opponents hold and how they might play them. Thoughtful and logical analysis of situations at the table enables players not only to assess the best course of action to achieve their own objectives, but also to find ways to scupper their opponents' plans. Accurately reading a situation involves piecing together several pieces of information, in the same way that a detective follows a trail of clues to solve a mystery.

Responding with discipline: Bridge is a game of mistakes and learning from errors is an important part of becoming a better player. In addition to reading people strategically, successful players respond to events in a disciplined manner and manage the impressions they give off. They learn to anticipate possible reactions and problems that might occur and to prepare accordingly. If (and when) things go wrong, bridge is a game that requires supportive silence in the face of mistakes, and a calm demeanour in the face of difficulties.

Developing trusting relationships: Bridge involves playing in a partnership. Building a strong partnership takes time and effort. It requires empathy and understanding and an ability to support one's partner through mistakes made by both parties. Bridge teaches the value of loyalty, cooperation and mutually supportive relationships. Bridge is a game that requires an unspoken communication in which messages are conveyed through bids made and cards played according to agreed systems. Partnerships develop these methods of communication through practice, discussion and preparation. Practice, practice and more practice is a key element of becoming an elite player in order to avoid mistakes and engage in supportive silence.

Applying the findings to practice

As some of the interviewees pointed out, the skills that can be learned at the bridge table can be an advantage in other areas of business, personal and social life.

The educational potential of bridge: An ability to weigh up different options and to calculate risk and probability, to make logical assessments of a situation and to plan accordingly are aspects of playing bridge at the highest level. In addition to analytical thinking, elite players learn and practice interpersonal skills, resilience and emotional self-control. They put personal feelings aside in order to get the best for the partnership, and they keep calm in the face of setbacks (their own mistakes and their partner's). Bridge encourages concentration, requiring players to remain focused and not to let distractions affect one's play. That these skills can be learned and practised at the bridge table suggests the educational potential for teaching bridge in schools.

Key Quote

‘Elite bridge players are displaying the capacity to make crucial gameplay decisions based on incomplete information whilst judging their partner’s card play and opponents’ impressions correctly (and incorrectly). At the same time, they need to be able to control their irritation with their own failings or those of their partner so as not to give their opponents an advantage through a verbal outburst, whilst also changing game-plans based on the ever-evolving card game.

These skills arguably build resilience as players learn to engage with opponents and cope with losing or try to recover when game plans do not go well. Through partnership interaction, bridge players develop coping strategies as well as cultivate skills of empathy and cooperation.’ (Punch and Snellgrove, 2020: 16)

Findings worthy of further research

This paper focuses on the skill set of a typical elite bridge player. A further study of the experiences of players at different levels of tournament bridge might establish the extent to which these skills are common to other types of players.

The skills of observation, deduction and strategic planning have an application far beyond the bridge table. Further research into transferrable skills might cast light on the extent to which these skills can be transferred from the bridge table to everyday life.

This paper has touched on the skills required for bridge players competing at an elite level. Some of these skills are relevant to business, family and social life but further research is needed to see the ways in which bridge can enhance a variety of life skills.

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