

## Why are men more successful than women at Bridge?

Prof. Samantha Punch and Elizabeth Graham  
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling

s.v.punch@stir.ac.uk



1

## More men win at top level in bridge

- English Bridge: Spring 4s - 16/250
- Scottish Winter 4s - 2/50
- UK Gold Cup - 17/460
- US Vanderbilt Championship - 6/360
- US World Team Olympiad - 0/84

2

## Gender Inequalities and the Sociology of Bridge

Theme 1) *In what ways are men and women's bridge playing abilities perceived to be **innate** and/or a reflection of **environmental** factors?*

Theme 2) *Are men and women afforded the same **opportunities** to participate and progress in bridge?*

Theme 3) **Women's and open bridge:** opportunities/constraints

3

## Spot the difference!



"The subordination of one sex based on the assumed superiority of the other" (Kendall, 2014)

4

## Methodology

- 40 indepth interviews with elite players (UK and US)
  - 12 male / 12 female over 35
  - 8 male / 8 female under 35



5

## On-going Research

- A further 12 interviews with elite players
- Analysis of BridgeWinners threads on Sexism
- Email questions on gender and bridge

Other:

Dementia and Bridge  
(recent survey)



6

## Theme 1: Nature vs Nurture

### Single-minded/Less focused

8 Male/12 Female

*Logically you don't think there ought to be any difference between women and men because it's a mental sport, it's not anything that really relies on physicality, but I think men just are more single minded than women. I think men are more prepared to give everything up and try and become like a professional bridge player, whereas women are still better at having a balance of different things. (Katrina, over 35, UK)*

*Men aren't cleverer than women, they don't have a greater skill for the game of logics, or anything like that yet they are better at bridge. I really do believe that they can shut everything off and concentrate very deeply on one activity better than women. (Nicolas, under 35, UK)*

- Gender identities (Storkey, 2001)

7

## Women have wider responsibilities

11 male / 16 female

*She still worries about her kids, when she goes away she still has to make sure her kids are okay and if she was a man she would not have had those times when she went to tournaments having her kids with her. So she could have been the best maybe, who knows, because certainly it is a distraction so maybe she's taken 10 years off her bridge years. (Claire, under 35, US)*

*I can tell you that in my experience I was married, we had children, and he would go to work and all day he would focus specifically on his job. Whereas when I was working with our little kids I had to constantly be, is he being picked up here? Do I have to get school supplies on my way home? There were so many things going through my head that I did not have his ability, or luxury, to focus specifically on one thing all the time. (Lorna, over 35, US)*

- Childcare responsibilities (Rossi, 1984)

8

## Logic/Emotion

11 Male/12 Female

*On a general level, men tend to be more logical... most good bridge players go to uni and do maths or similar sort of mathematical things and guys tend to be better at that sort of subject than girls do. (Nadine, under 35, UK)*

*It's established that women have more of their brain wired for emotion generally than men do. (William, over 35, US)*

- Gendered emotions (Sargisson, 1996)

9

## More/less competitive

5 Male/ 5 Female

*Well, for one thing, men do a lot of competitive sports when they're growing up, so the idea of winning is very important to men psychologically. Because of that I think they're doing their best when they play bridge all the time. Women are more interested in playing nice – being seen as a friendly person – they're more social. (Scott, under 35, US)*

- Gender messages (Denny, 2011)

10

## Theme 2: Sexism in bridge

*Well there's sexism for sure. A lot of women bridge players can't even play with a guy because they assume they're sleeping together or something... it's sexist for sure! (Maxine, under 35, US)*

*If a woman did play as well as the men, they never get full respect. It's just an automatic thing. If a woman's on a team and if they win, they won in spite of the woman. And if they lose, it was because they had a woman on their team. It's just ridiculous. It's just like somebody sits down opposite a woman, he assumes that they're going to be the inferior player. (Richard, over 35, US)*

- Gendered capabilities (Ridgeway, 2009)

11

## Sexist behaviour

*One of the first Open European events I went to the men were just foul, and some of it I'm pretty sure was quite on purpose because if they intimidated the girl she wouldn't play very well and it was almost like low level bullying type behaviour that goes on... and the naff sexist jokes, and sexist remarks all the time. (Megan, over 35, UK)*

- Insulting, degrading or sexist attitudes about women (Markula, 2005)
- Justifying male superiority (Glick and Fiske, 2012)

12

### Examples from recent email questions

- Many male partners I've played with for a single tournament or two call me "sweetie" or "honey" when we're talking about hands in a way I find very condescending (example: "But he discarded a club, sweetie, so he'd never have another spade"). I can't imagine them using those terms when talking to someone other than a young female bridge player. On the same note, I've been asked to smile more when declaring by my partner since he didn't like to see me "frown".
- A lot of people try to pass me compliments at the bridge table. More often they're related to my appearance than the way I play the hand (this applies when I don't know the opponents). When they have anything to do with bridge they're normally also linked to my youth and appearance.

13

### Sexism impacts on opportunity

*I think it was, and is, a lot harder for top women players or pairs to get hired than it would be for men. We have to like practically grovel to get jobs. It's not viewed the same way. (Lorna, over 35, US)*

*Even if a woman is really good would a man hire her if she were equally good? Probably most men, no. (Craig, under 35, US)*

- More harassment when no gender policy (Gruber, 1998)

14

### Examples from recent email questions

- I started playing on the U21 team very young and was soon the only woman on the team. We were all pretty equal in playing strength when we were 14-18 years old. However, all my male team mates kept getting offers to play with really good players in our home country, to play in the highest division etc. I never got any such offers (and still very rarely do). It's like the top level of bridge players in our country think a female bridge player is automatically content once she has made the Women's team.
- After a day of playing is done, bridge players like to hang out at the bar to go over the hands of the tournament they just played. This is normally a very good chance to get to talk to expert players about their take on a certain line of play etc. It's been pointed out to me several times during such conversations that the only reason they would talk the hands over with me is because they'd like to sleep with me.

15

### Theme 3: Women's bridge

14 male / 13 female

*The facts clearly are they're not as good because if they were as good there wouldn't be any women's events. (Douglas, over 35, UK)*

*So one of the problems in the women's game is that they're ghettoised. They play against each other, so the best level you can get to is the level of the best women. And the level of the best women at the moment is not the level of the best men. And in fact I think we'd probably see more equalisation if we just had an open event, which women would be allowed to enter. (Ryan, over 35, UK)*

- Barriers in sport and governing bodies (Acosta and Carpenter, 1990)

16

### Positive impact of women's bridge

Male views (7)

- women would not win if they played against men
- allows women to be a 'big fish in a little pond'
- obtain better record as fewer women to compete against at top

Female views (14)

- safer option
- less pressured
- opportunity to play at international level

17

### So...

*It's just that in those events you have to qualify to represent your team, if you just had one competition where it was just men and women playing, there would be very few women being on the teams. So I think it is a good thing that women have their own platform. They have the possibility to play on that international level. (Andrea, over 35, US)*

*Because men are considered better bridge players than women are, there's a general perception when you play together with them many women feel the pressure and don't perform as well. (Andrea, over 35, US)*

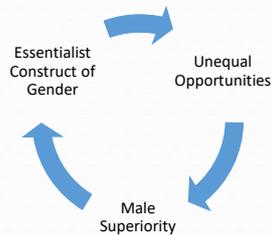
18

## Conclusions

- **Essentialist construct of gender** - masks diversity
- **Socially conditioned** - display and internalise typical masculine or feminine qualities
- **Everyday sexism (Bates, 2014)** - impacts on opportunities
- **Segregation of events** - extenuates differences and highlights male superiority
- **Unequal structures, ingrained discourses (Martell et al., 1996)**
  - inferior attitudes and treatment of women, discriminatory behaviours

19

## Reproducing Gender Inequalities in Bridge



### Cycle

- sets men & women apart
- produces inequalities and promotes male superiority
- reflects glass ceilings in other spheres

20

## Ways forward?

- *I think things are happening all the time as the crowd is getting younger and more observant to sexism in general. I do think it's going slower in the bridge world than in some other areas of society. I have several female friends from my early junior years who stopped playing after a few years when they grew tired of the environment.*
- *I believe in the long run that getting rid of women's events would be helpful for promoting equal bridge. It would however not be possible to end them right away as this would create isolation of so many female bridge players for a long time before something actually happened. I believe gradual change is the key. I don't think ending women's events would help all kinds of problems though, but it would help with the perception of female bridge players as being worse or not serious bridge players.*

21