



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

Engaging with the Bridge Community: Sexism in Bridge

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Summary

When academics engage in research activities they do so by negotiating the commitment they have to funders, to their institutions, broader discipline, and the pursuit of knowledge, as well as to those individuals, communities and organisations that they are researching. This balancing act permeates every stage of the research process and can be witnessed in almost all research team meetings yet, there is little published in relation to the conversations that take place between research teams. It is also important to consider how the researcher's position as an outsider or insider of the studied community may impact on the research process.

The paper offers insights into some of the exchanges that have taken place between two sociological researchers working on the development of the sociology of bridge (one a bridge player, the other, not). It can be challenging if the objectives of the research conflict with the desires of practitioner stakeholders. The authors found this to be the case when raising the issue of gender equality in bridge, and it is on this that they reflect.

In the bridge world, where both the top levels of administration and of the game tend to be dominated by men, there can be a lack of recognition of the structural barriers relating to gender participation. The limited visibility of women at the highest levels including the chief tournament directors and those on international executive committees can mean that gender issues are not high on the policy agenda. Several threads about sexism on the Bridge Winners blogsite prompted the authors to undertake a specific study exploring perceptions of sexism and bridge via an email survey of 151 tournament and club players of varying levels.

Findings

Although discussions surrounding sexism are often unwelcome, sexism in bridge offered a useful case study because it *does* provoke strong emotional responses from people. In terms of the methodology, having a research team containing a bridge player and a non-bridge player was an advantage. The insider researcher, 'the Bridge Player', is both a member of the group being studied *and* a researcher. This enabled a better understanding of the issues involved, but the Non-player as the outsider was at times able to see instances of bias that may have been taken-for-granted by the Bridge Player because such behaviour or ideas had become normalized.

One of the key considerations was to find the most appropriate way to proceed so the research is not merely dismissed as irrelevant. Some feel very threatened and defensive about such gender discussions. It is hoped that the research participants' suggestions for change will be implemented within the bridge community after reflecting on the research findings. The intention is that constructive feedback might lead to improvements that enhance everyone's experience of bridge.

- **Raising awareness:** One respondent said that it was vital to raise awareness of this issue in order to create a more comfortable and encouraging playing environment for young female players. Awareness-raising does not necessarily mean radical shifts but can be small moments of change. Even subtle changes in language or actions can have a positive influence on women's experiences.
- **Separate events:** The paper discusses how having separate women's events could be detrimental to equality. However, by merely stopping women's bridge, the gendered inequalities would not just disappear. It would possibly result in a generation of female players being 'sacrificed' in terms of their opportunities to play, particularly at elite levels.
- **Community reaction:** The email survey explored participants' views of the implications of conducting gender research within bridge. Reactions from the bridge community towards the research were not clear cut, with most responses highlighting both positive and negative consequences or being unclear about the implications. One respondent said that you have to be very careful not to be considered an 'uptight feminist' when raising awareness of sexism in bridge. Addressing specific episodes is easier.
- **Potential resentment:** Some players seemed resentful that such research was taking place as they perceived that it was only going to exacerbate any existing issue. The Bridge Player researcher describes how she's anticipating a backlash when the gender papers are published. The paper describes how women addressing sexism is viewed by some people as being a cover for not playing well enough. The paper explains how the range of negative responses are challenging to an inside researcher. In this kind of research, the messenger can become labelled as a 'trouble-maker', or there can be misunderstandings about the intentions of the research or fears about the implications of bringing certain behaviours and attitudes into the open. In this sense it is easier for the outsider who is more detached from these issues.
- **Supportive comments:** There were also supportive views, including one player who said that it would be a good idea to raise awareness of this topic so as to make it clear to some of the 'offending' male players that they need to consider how their attitudes towards women players are not consistent with modern attitudes in life.

The paper contains examples of a constant drip of gendered assumptions; such experiences can accumulate and be marginalising, however seemingly trivial in isolation.

Further research

The authors are keen for the gender research being carried out to make a positive difference towards greater inclusivity for all. However, consideration needs to be given to the potential to create a climate of fear or attract unwanted negative publicity to the game, which in turn could damage research relations with key stakeholders in the bridge world.

One solution has been to revise the sequencing of publications from the bridge research. The overall research covered many bridge topics besides gender inequalities, such as strategic interactions, emotions, identities and skill development. The authors decided to postpone the completion of the gender-related papers until other more neutral topics were written up. They are keen for the user community not to dismiss the bridge research by labelling it negatively or assuming that it will only be exploring contentious issues. Other topics examining the dynamics and interactions of the mindsport can help to set a more positive tone for developing the leisure field further.

Instead of making recommendations themselves, the researchers are working in partnership with stakeholders within the bridge community who are well placed to suggest relevant avenues for change. Whilst this may mean that change is gradual, as awareness becomes raised slowly, it is more likely to be effective as it embraces the reactions, resistance and challenges from within the bridge world.

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