



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

Leisure and Work: Professionals in Bridge

Russell, Z., Punch, S. and McIntosh, I. (2022) 'Blurring the Boundaries Between Leisure and Work: Professionals as Devotees in the Mind-Sport Bridge,' *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41978-021-00099-y>

Summary

Bridge has become increasingly professionalised in recent years, particularly at 'elite' level. Bridge has hitherto been understood in sociological research as a form of serious leisure. However, professionalisation has blurred the boundaries between leisure and work. The paper explores how professional bridge players understand the transition from playing bridge as a hobby to playing bridge for a job. Being a professional bridge player raises issues about moral evaluations of work, a work ethic and concerns over what a 'proper job' is. The paper views this through the perspective of 52 elite bridge players.

Playing bridge professionally is often experienced as being hugely positive, because of being paid to do something one is devoted to, but ambivalences and anxieties also emerge. There are positive and negative perceptions of the blurring of work-leisure boundaries.

Findings

The elite level of bridge is unique in comprising players who are full-time and part-time professionals, amateurs who are not paid to play, and sponsors who participate as players. Thus far, elite bridge has been explored as a form of serious leisure. The paper considers elite bridge as a form of 'devotee work'. The main difference between serious leisure and devotee work is that the latter is so attractive to those who engage in it, that work is essentially leisure and, unlike the former, workers are paid for their efforts.

The paper contains many quotes from professionals, amateurs and sponsors on various aspects of professionalism within bridge.

- **Bridge as work:** For many professional bridge players there is some ambivalence about whether they have a 'proper' job, in the traditional sense. The extent to which elite players are 'professional' is complex. One sponsor suggested that 'paid bridge' would be a better term, as there is no professional body to monitor professionals. When a paid bridge player does not perform as well as that person should, there is very little recourse.

Also, it is generally thought that bridge professionals have an additional responsibility to properly represent the game and set a high ethical example, and to present themselves well. Negative perceptions of bridge as a form of work relate partly to its unusual working patterns and it being a card game. Some may consider professional players as undisciplined, wasting their intelligence, and not making a useful contribution to society.

- **Earning a living doing something you love:** Only a few professionals mentioned earning a living as a reason why they play bridge. Instead, they talked about taking up bridge as a leisure pursuit and falling in love with the game. The blurring of leisure into work has allowed them to reject a 9-5 work routine and have opportunities to travel the world as part of the job. Many professionals felt that they would still play bridge regardless of being paid.
- **‘It’s difficult when your hobby becomes your work’:** There were some negative perceptions from players. Professionals described how it is difficult to cope with potential overload and staleness when something that is your hobby becomes your work as well, and how a certain amount of enjoyment of the game gets lost. Other negative aspects include the ‘away from the table’ activities required of a professional and the insecurity and precarious nature of employment.

Professional players feel pressure to manage and suppress emotions in order to obtain and retain their positions, and also to manage relationships with clients or prospective clients. Some elite amateur players prefer a more structured work life that provides security and routine, regardless of performance. Also, the lifestyle of full-time travelling professionals can affect outside responsibilities, e.g. having a family and a healthy marriage.

- **Blurring the boundaries between leisure and work:** There are few other settings in which the lines between leisure and work are so blurred in terms of the amateur/professional constitution of the elite playing community, with some adhering to ideas of professionalism and others engaging in an activity that is purely a hobby.

For some players, if bridge became a form of paid labour, this changes a player’s relationship to the game. Despite mostly positive feelings from those paid to play, others referred to the work as ‘prostituting’ one’s ability. Depending on the individual player, blurring the boundaries between work and leisure can make it easier or harder to find a work-life balance.

- **Liminality:** The paper provides an academic discussion of professional bridge as a liminal space that blends labour and leisure. When crossing the boundary from leisure to work, professional players can find themselves in an ambiguous ‘liminal’ position where they experience upsides and downsides of combining work and leisure.

The paper concludes that by engaging in devotee work, people can experience both positive and negative effects of the blurring of boundaries between work and play.

Further research

Whilst the paper does not specifically recommend avenues for future research in this area, it would be interesting to explore further the perspectives of bridge-playing sponsors (the professionals’ employers).

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