



# Bridge: A MindSport For All

## *Connects People, Challenges Minds*

### Emotions in Elite Level Bridge

Punch, S. and Russell, Z. (2022) 'Playing with Emotions: Emotional Complexity in the Social World of Elite Tournament Bridge', *Emotions and Society*.

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#### Summary

The world of elite level bridge is an emotionally charged setting, and top players use emotion management to improve performance. Using in-depth interviews with 52 elite players from the US and Europe, this paper describes the complexity of managing one's emotions at the elite level of the game.

Currently, knowledge of emotions in sport is predominantly focused on physical, rather than mental activities, but the field of sports psychology is becoming better known. Some research on emotions has been conducted in chess. However, chess is an individual game, whereas bridge is played in partnerships. This is the first academic paper on emotions and bridge.

Successful emotion management can foster positive relationships between bridge partners, but simultaneously players also regularly fail to manage their own emotions. This paper shows the transferable skills that bridge can offer in terms of learning to control one's emotions, which can be useful in many walks of life.

#### Findings

The paper discusses emotions in bridge from an academic viewpoint, and also analyses the views expressed by bridge players during their interviews. The interviewees were aged between 17 and 78, and had all represented their countries in international bridge. The sample includes amateurs, paid professionals and sponsors.

- **Playing with emotions:** Bridge is a game of mistakes, meaning that there are frequent emotionally charged moments and emotional struggles to overcome for individual bridge players and partnerships. The experience of emotion for elite bridge players ranges from extremes of excitement and joy to anger, frustration, disappointment and everything in between. The paper contains several quotes from players describing the highs and lows of winning and losing. The players also discussed how they deal with mistakes. Some players described both a sense of being more annoyed at their own mistakes than partner's, and feeling annoyed and frustrated if their partner did not admit to making mistakes. However, others felt higher levels of frustration when their partner was playing poorly.
- **Managing emotions:** Emotions are detrimental at the bridge table and need to be managed. Compared to physical sports, there is less opportunity while playing bridge to release

emotion. Players explained how being emotional may lead to avoidable mistakes, and how emotions can affect a partnership. The players described how they manage their own emotions to benefit their partner. Previous research over a number of sports has shown that age does not have a significant effect on emotions, but time within the sport does; more experience in a given sport enables players to be less emotional. Players over time learn how to read their partner's emotions in different situations. The paper also describes how, despite a clear logic for players seeking to manage their emotions at the bridge table, this is very challenging to do in practice. Many players identify managing emotion as one of their weaknesses. The paper contains several quotes from elite players describing specific circumstances where they get emotional.

- **Transferable skills:** The paper also considers how discussions away from the table, e.g. between partners or with a non-playing coach, can be beneficial. In particular, such discussions can encourage self-reflection and enhance the quality of social interactions between partners and team-mates. The complexity of emotional experience in bridge can lead to greater self-management and emotional control. Reciprocal emotion management can enable a positive social relationship to develop between partners as well as better outcomes in bridge and other areas of social life.

## Conclusions

The paper shows that for a mind-sport such as bridge, emotions are key before, during and after play. Players sometimes have to hide their emotions, or they have to release them. Bridge partnerships are an example of how social interactions between people are diverse and require different ways of managing emotions in practice – what works for one player does not necessarily work for another.

The paper shows that “while players agree that emotions are detrimental to bridge and thus try to manage them, this is difficult to achieve in practice”. Successfully managing emotions is a step to improving results, both individually and in partnership.

“Failing to manage emotions therefore suggests that the extent to which it is possible to instrumentalise one's emotions can be partial, despite the imperative to do so. This is especially the case in emotionally charged settings and, given the dyadic nature of this mind-sport, where one is continually in cooperation with a partner and in competition with others.” (p.15)

## Further Research

Future research could study how different cultural values (e.g. in Asia) might have an impact on emotion management. Bridge offers an interesting case study for research on emotions in society, e.g. with regard to class, gender and ageing.

The analysis in this paper of the individual and partnership dynamics of emotions in bridge would be further enhanced by attention to group dynamics and the interplay of national teams, which are an additional layer in international tournament bridge.

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