



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

Bridging Brains: Exploring Gendered Attitudes and Inequalities in a Mindsport

Punch, S., Snellgrove, M.L., Graham, E., McPherson, C. and Cleary, J. (2023) [Bridging Brains: Exploring Neurosexism and Gendered Stereotypes in a Mindsport](#), *Leisure/Loisir Journal*.

Summary

Within the worlds of leisure and sport, the different aptitudes of men and women are well documented. In elite sport, men are consistently presented as stronger, faster and more competitive than women. For most leisure activities, differences in physical attributes are not relevant. In mindsports such as bridge and chess, male domination is conventionally explained as being rooted in differences between male and female brains. In Western cultures, the male mind has been characterised by logic, rationality and objectivity whereas emotion has historically been associated with women. Aggressive mentalities are more likely to be emphasised in a boy's childhood rather than a girl's. As a result, men and women are socialised from an early age into culturally appropriate gendered behaviours.

This paper explores the key question: why men dominate elite-level bridge? It considers the ways in which gender disparity and inequality in bridge are understood, explained and reproduced. In bridge, men players strongly outperform women players worldwide. Elite events are stratified along gender lines, with separate open and women's events. This paper explores gendered assumptions which are used to explain why women are less successful in elite bridge compared with men. Drawing on neurosexist and behaviourist explanations, it uses data from in-depth interviews with 52 top players from the USA and Europe.

Findings

Early neuroscience research suggested that differences between male and female brains are both significant and biologically fixed, and this viewpoint is often taken-for-granted by the general public. However, more recent research has cast serious doubt on this belief, claiming it to be 'neurosexist' and leading to the perpetuation of gendered myths. A large-scale study of MRI scans found that less than 6% of brains could be clearly identified as belonging to a single sex, while the overwhelming majority were 'a patchwork quilt' of masculine and feminine features that varied significantly from person to person.

Contemporary neuroscience research acknowledges that the brain is dynamic, constantly adapting to social events and expectations. Neuroplasticity recognises that the brain is a deeply responsive organ where "experience wires the brain" (Feldman Barrett 2018, p.35). As a result, when there are claims about fixed, biological brain differences according to sex, it is argued that these are examples

of 'neurosexism' which perpetuate stereotypes and generalisations about men and women. Rippon defines neurosexism as "the practice of claiming that there are fixed differences between female and male brains, which can explain women's inferiority or unsuitability for certain roles" (2016, p.1).

The paper discusses neurosexism and behaviourist attitudes from an academic viewpoint. It also explores elite players' perceptions of, and explanations for, gender differences in bridge, based on their interviews. The interviewees were aged between 17 and 78, and had all represented their countries in international bridge. The paper contains many illustrative quotes from anonymised respondents.

- **Gendered Bridge Brains:** Players were first asked their general perceptions regarding gender and bridge. Many mentioned that there are few women playing at the highest levels of the mindsport. For some, that meant that men are better bridge players than women, while others were unsure of the reasons why. Some players attributed the difference in achievement to brain function, using similar neurosexist arguments to those mentioned earlier, e.g. male brains are superiorly wired for logic, mathematics and single-mindedness, whereas female brains are better suited to emotion, nurturing and multi-tasking.
- **Single-mindedness, Dedication and Competitiveness:** There were mixed views about the extent to which characteristics like single-mindedness, the ability to focus and concentrate, and competitiveness are innate and/or whether they are related to more social reasons, e.g. differences in the ways that boys and girls are raised from a young age.
- **Reproducing Gender Inequality:** The interviewees suggested that since bridge requires a degree of mental toughness, confidence and competitiveness, some women players may struggle. This may lead to women starting to believe men are better, further undermining their confidence. Gendered assumptions about women's potential as players may also result in prejudice, hindering women's opportunities to progress.
- **Challenging Gendered Stereotypes:** In the interviews, players' descriptions of specific women do not fit the earlier ideas of women being less competitive, logical or focused. Equally some elite women players shun ideas that they themselves are less competitive or more emotional. The discussions showed that men can express emotive behaviours or that they sometimes feel intimidated without this automatically equalling inferior skill at the bridge table, a privilege not currently afforded to women bridge players.
- **Neuroplasticity:** Many of the participants used outdated neuroscientific arguments about the gendered brain as a purely biological organ, fixed in its processes and isolated from the external world. More contemporary neuroscience has revealed the brain to be dynamic, constantly evolving and closely connected to cultural context – neuroplasticity. In general, the interviewees did not seem to be aware of such neuroplasticity debates. In contrast, there seemed to be a general acceptance that male players are inevitably 'better'.

Discussion

In the competitive environment of bridge, 'playing like a man' provides the most status. Therefore, in order to succeed at the top, women (as well as men) may inadvertently engage in casual sexism and discriminatory language regarding the aptitudes and abilities of other women players. This

dialogue can then become normalised ‘banter’ and part of the game. As a consequence, both women and men are less likely to respect or recognise the expertise of other top women bridge players, but turn instead to top men for coaching/advice. Women and men consistently prefer to play with male partners and team-mates, rather than with other women (see also [Rogers et al. 2022](#)).

Whilst not all the elite bridge players believed that brain wiring impacts on bridge success, both men and women referred to gendered assumptions regarding bridge practices. Some elite women also had internalised notions of inferiority, which are likely to impact on confidence and motivation. Neurosexist discourses, whether intentional or not, create social barriers that have negative consequences on participation and inclusion in bridge.

Conclusions

The participants provided both brain-related and behavioural explanations to explain the lack of female representation at elite level. The general lack of knowledge of contemporary neuroscience leads to potentially damaging and widespread beliefs that innate biological factors, rather than social ones, affect performance in bridge. Whilst such neurosexist notions may be inadvertent, they can have unintended consequences since they instil powerful ideas about what men and women can and cannot, and should and should not, be doing. In turn, this has serious implications for the sorts of opportunities open to women and men players. The paper suggests that men’s dominance in elite mindsport can be explained through historic and structural opportunities that privilege men rather than gendered brain differences.

The paper argues that gender stereotypes and neurosexism can actively reproduce inequality within the game to the detriment of women bridge players. For example, these stereotypes are unlikely to encourage younger women to dedicate the necessary time and effort to becoming an elite player. The future continuity of bridge relies on it being an inclusive and welcoming (as well as competitive and challenging) mindsport.

Possible solutions include a gender policy, awareness-raising and unconscious bias training.

The only theory I have is that every top man started in his teens or earlier and spent a lot of time playing cards and most girls don’t get to do that. It’s a question to which there is no clear answer. I don’t think the answer is that women are not as good because they are women. I just think that for some reason, women have not been able to rise to the very top level... There is discrimination. I think that the male view of how women play is overly negative.

See Infographic Poster on [Gendered Brains, Bridge and Neurosexism](#)

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