



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

Couples in Bridge

Punch S, and Snellgrove M. (2023) [Bridging Time: Negotiating Serious Leisure in Intimate Couple Relationships](#), *Annals of Leisure Research*.

Summary

Playing sport at elite level often demands compromises around family and friends and the time spent with them. Bridge players may frequently spend entire weekends/weeks away, especially when reaching elite levels. This paper explores how elite bridge players actively pursue intimate relationships with other bridge players as a way of managing family time within a high-pressured competitive environment.

The paper is based on in-depth interviews with 20 men and 18 women who have either been in, or are still in, an intimate couple relationship with a bridge player. The players discussed their experiences and dynamics of sharing their passion for bridge with their life partner. The majority of the interviewees play as professionals. Throughout the paper, the terms 'intimate partnerships' and 'partnerships' are used to distinguish between couples and bridge partnerships.

Findings

Many people in the bridge world form intimate partnerships with other bridge players. This does not mean that they necessarily partner each other at the table (though some do). The paper contains many illustrative quotes from (anonymised) respondents. Three key themes emerged: Fun, Fights and Failures.

- **Fun:** Both men and women thought that to play competitively and maintain an intimate relationship, players would ideally need to be in a relationship with another bridge player, as this aids mutual understanding. One player suggested that intimate partners needed to be 'mind mates' and this was only possible if both people played bridge. Players want to share their time and love of bridge with their life partner. Bridge, being a partnership game, makes this kind of double partnership uniquely possible.

'Marrying Out' can have an impact on the ability to have time away at long events, whereas players who 'marry in' share their passion in life with someone. However, whilst playing bridge with your other half is a way to manage the demands of bridge with relationship work, this 'fun' was not always sustainable and some players thought it was an 'awful idea' to play with your life partner.

- **Fights:** Mistakes at the table are a common and inevitable part of playing bridge, whoever your partner is. The ability to recover from a mistake is a key to successful bridge. Silence is typically the best approach, but many players find this difficult. Add to that mix an intimate

life-partner and what was an initially fun and enjoyable event can turn into fighting and acrimonious debates. If the game played was not a 'serious' game, mistakes might be laughed off; forgiven and forgotten. However, if the partnership was playing competitively, mistakes could lead to fights and friction both at the table and after the game.

Playing competitive bridge with your intimate life partner can be a huge amount of fun and a way to spend time together, but the friction and fights can cause the relationship to break down. Navigating between fun and fights is ongoing work and full of negotiations.

- **Failures:** Boundaries need to be maintained in partnerships generally and in intimate bridge playing partnerships more so, or you end up saying things you may later regret. A bad result is sometimes blamed on the weaker player, even when it was not their fault, as a means of taking out frustration. Among the interviewees in an intimate relationship with another player, the male is generally perceived to be the technically stronger player. This can lead to friction when this is not the case, with the woman becoming frustrated with her partner's attitude. The relationship may then break down or they might decide not to play together competitively anymore but with other people instead.

There can also be the domestic responsibilities of having a family and children. In this study, parenting and domestic responsibilities are typically still seen as the remit of the woman. If both parents are professional bridge players this can cause friction and strain.

Conclusions

Bridge is a time-consuming mindsport especially when played at international level. For women to successfully negotiate the time commitment and pressures of elite-level mindsport alongside family responsibilities, it is easier if they are in an intimate relationship with another bridge player. This shared love and fun does not necessarily extend to playing together. To manage the potential tensions, couples may decide to partner someone else rather than their intimate partner.

Mistakes at the table are more often seen as the province of female players who tend to be viewed as technically weaker than their male partners. Within our sample, most of the women who played with their intimate life partner had to be prepared to be criticised for making mistakes.

Further Research

The paper touches on the ways that the bridge partnership can mimic the romantic one and it would be interesting to explore this more in future research. For example, players initially tend to be pleasant in their communications with each other both at and away from the table. As the relationship endures (the honeymoon's over) then people can be more likely to criticise.

Future research would also be useful with a greater range of tournament and social players to explore whether non-elite couples face similar pleasures and pressures.

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