



Bridge: A MindSport For All  
*Connects People, Challenges Minds*

UNIVERSITY of  
**STIRLING**



# Neurosexism & Mindsport

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- 1 The Research  
Exploring gender and bridge
- 2 What bridge players said  
Players' opinions on why men are more successful in mindsport
- 3 Neurosexism & sexism  
Are women's only spaces a help and a hindrance?

# More men at top level in bridge

Four player partnership  
card game

World Team Olympiad - 0/84

US Vanderbilt Championship - 6/360

UK Gold Cup - 17/460



**Participation versus performance gap: e.g. 3/180 in European Championships**

# The Research

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## Indepth interviews

Top players: Europe & USA



## 52 elite bridge players

32 men and 20 women



## Analysis of data

Thematic analysis

# Gendered Brains

*'Men are from Mars, women are from Venus' (Gray, 2015)*

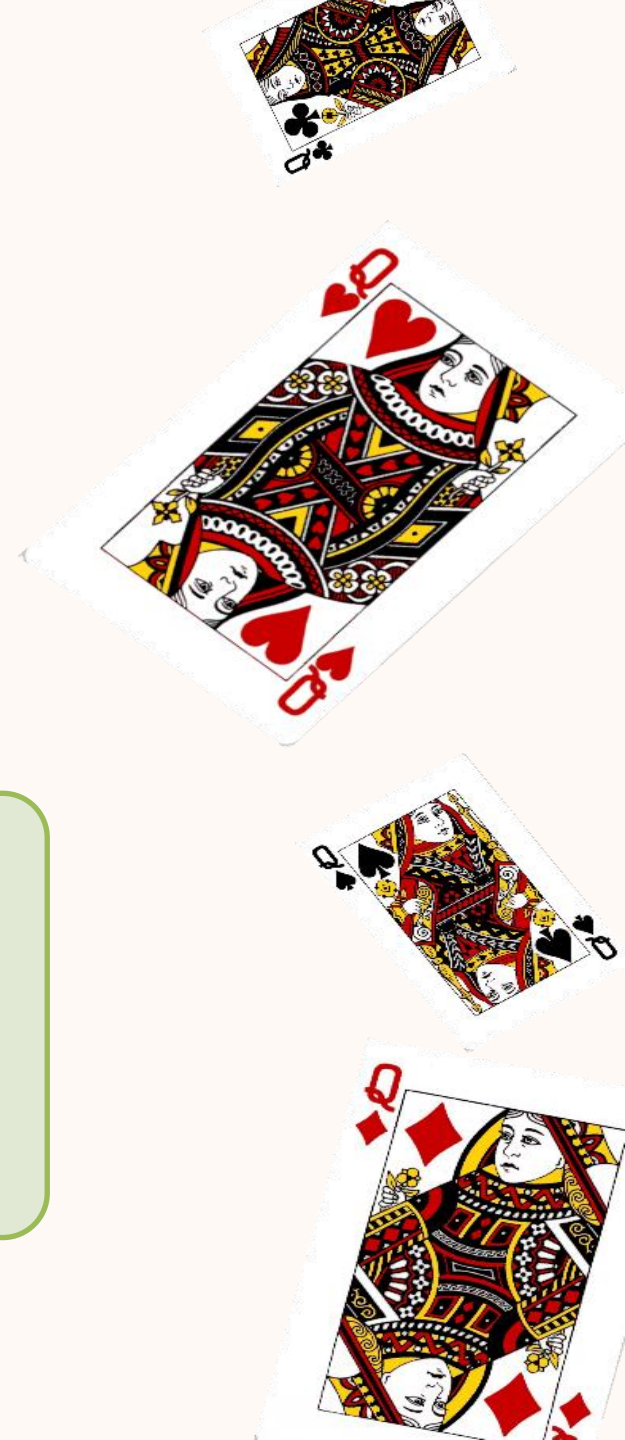
*Sex Differences in Brains: significant and biologically fixed*

## Critiques:

the extent and  
nature of human  
brain sex differences  
overstated

more convergence  
rather than  
divergence between  
brains

(e.g. Hamlin, 2014; Joel et al., 2015; Ritchie et al. 2017)



# Critiques of traditional neuroscience

Lack of evidence  
(Stafford 2013)

“gaps, assumptions, speculation, leaps of faith and bad methodologies” (Hill, 2010)

**Neuroplasticity:** ‘experience wires the brain’:

“

That means that some of your synapses literally come into existence because other people talked to you or treated you in a certain way. [...] As a consequence past experience helps determine your future experiences and perceptions.

(Feldman Barrett, 2018, p.34)



# Neurosexism

*'Neurosexism' is 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.*

(Rippon, 2016)

Gendered hierarchies  
of capability &  
incapability: appear  
'natural'

Fine (2013):  
'neurosexist'  
research perpetuates  
gender inequalities



**Bridging**

**Gender**

Attitudes &  
Inequalities

[Read more](#)

# Gendered bridge brains

I think it's inherent. I think it's a physical – and physical includes, you know, all parts of your mind – I think there's a brain cell in there which is better for bridge players to be men. (Grant)



*“ On a general level, men tend to be more logical... most good bridge players go to uni and do maths or similar sort of mathematical things and guys tend to be better at that sort of subject than girls do. (Nadine) ”*

*It's established that women have more of their brain wired for emotion generally than men do. (William)*





# Single-mindedness, dedication & competitiveness

“

I think that the male brain is built in a better way for bridge than women, like they're better at concentrating on one thing and like usually more competitive. (Hayley)

Men are better at bridge and a lot better at chess, and I genuinely think that men can concentrate – I really do believe that they can shut everything off and concentrate very deeply on one activity better than women (Nicolas)

“

As a very broad generalisation, girls are not encouraged to compete in the way that boys are, so they do not start. Do you play to actually crush the opposition with total focus and determination to win at all costs or do we not do that because we weren't doing that from a very early age?

(Patrick)



# Reproducing Gender Inequality

Because men are considered better bridge players than women are, there's a general perception when you play together with them many women feel the pressure and don't perform as well. (Andrea)

Women start believing men are better. (Rosemary)

“

I don't think there is anything biologically, but they are far less likely to start playing, far less encouraged, far less likely to get hired. Men might laugh at them. I don't experience sexism, but it seems like bridge is a sexist world. (Craig)



# ‘Playing like a Man’

I had to toughen up a lot because if you're going to play with and against the men, or you're going to try and beat the men then you have to be quite tough and aggressive both in your style of play, but also in your behaviour. (Megan)



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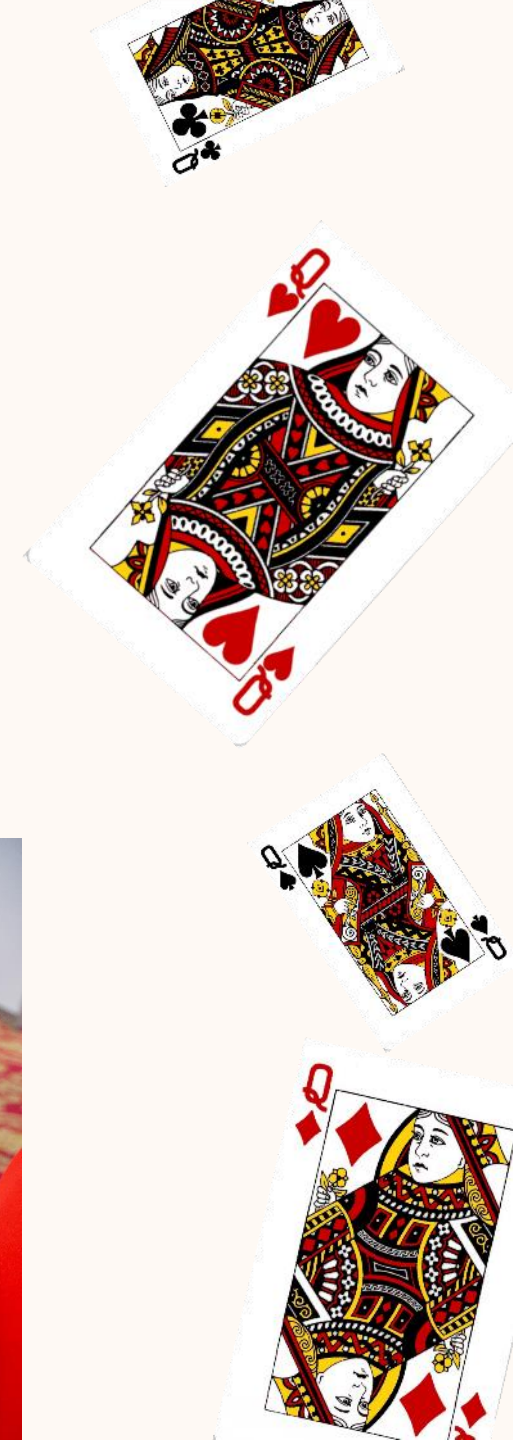
She has some of the best focus of any player I've ever played with. Probably all really good bridge players are really competitive and she just doesn't ever have a lapse in concentration and she has an unbelievably keen analytical mind. (Colin)



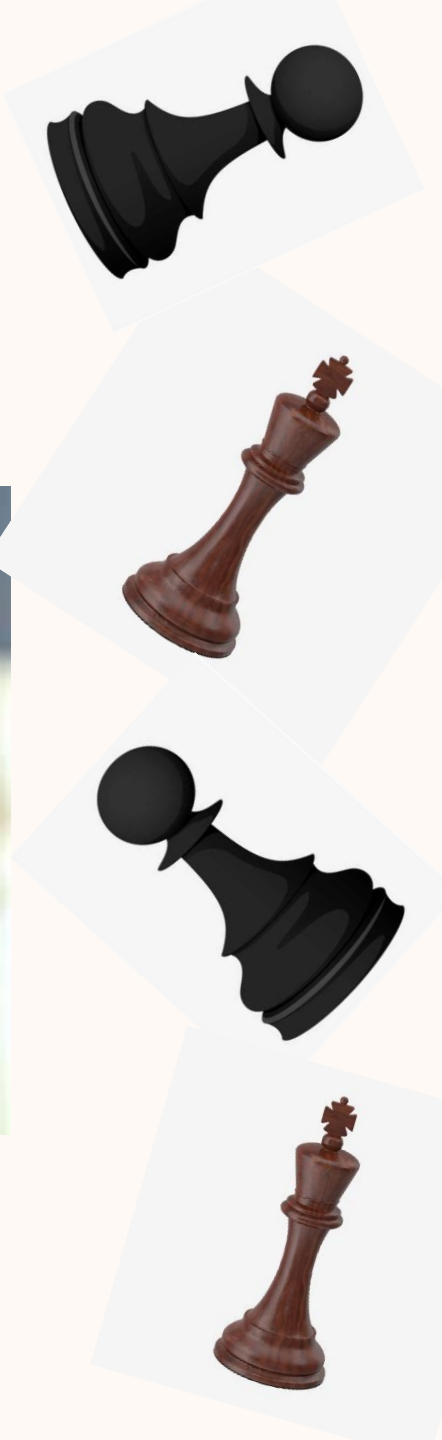
# “Men’s brains are more suited to bridge than women”

“

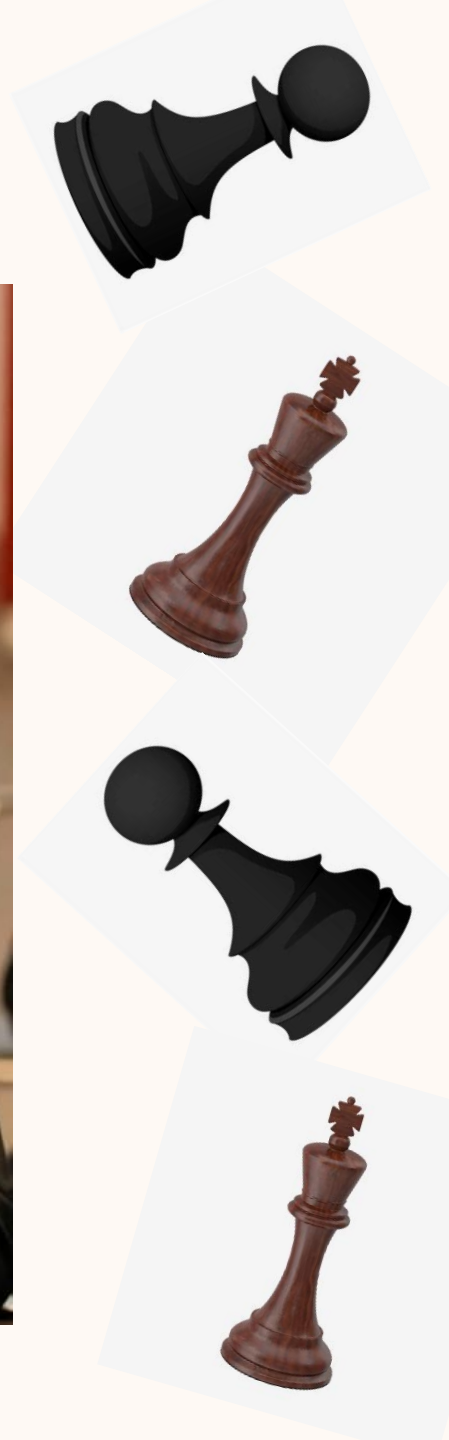
*Neuroplasticity: human brain is a deeply responsive organ, constantly restructuring and changing in reply to social events and expectations. (Doidge, 2007; Fu and Zuo, 2011)*



# Examples of Neurosexism in the Chess World



A great *female* chess player...



# Paradox: **The women-only game**

Exclusionary

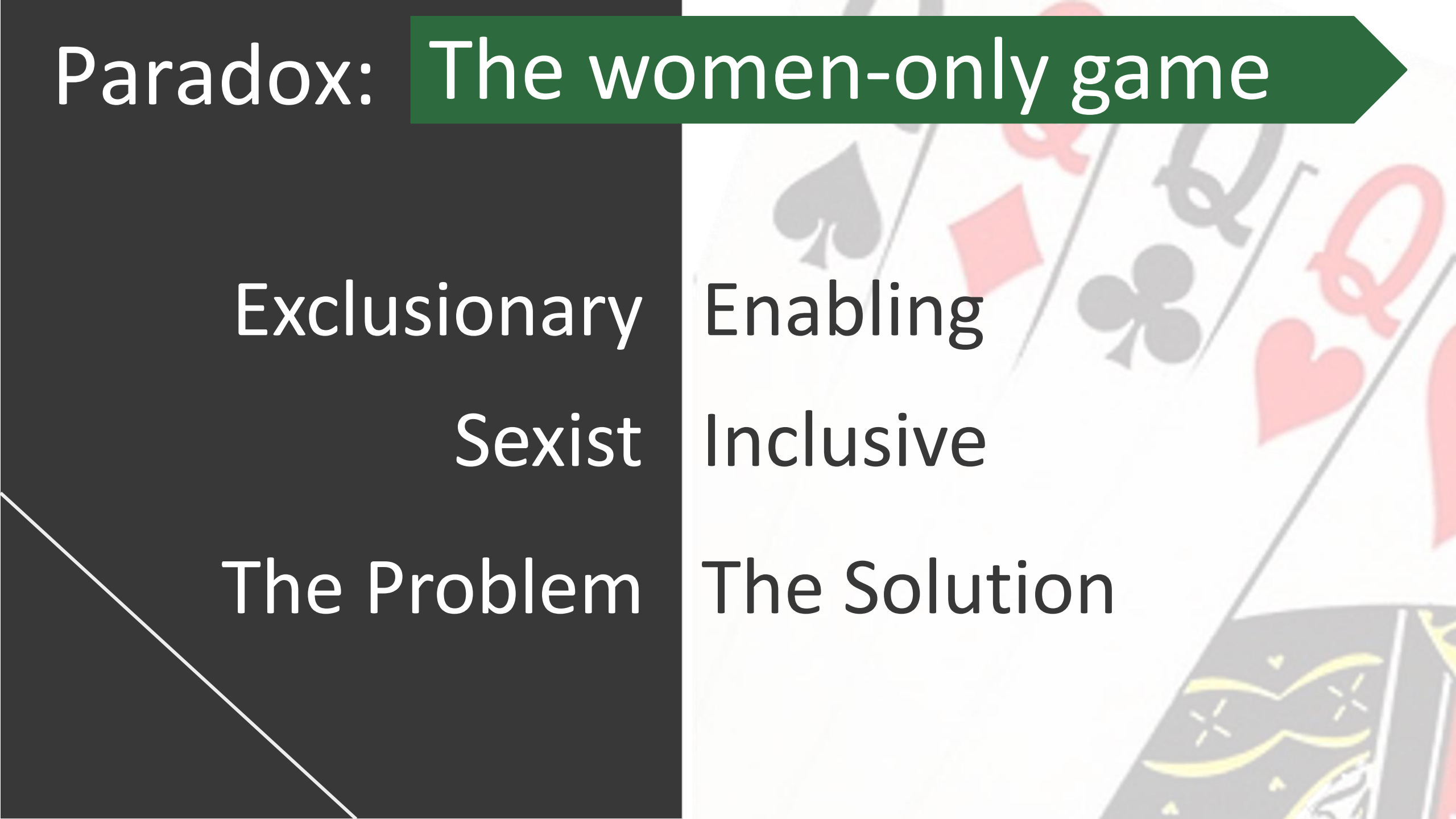
Enabling

Sexist

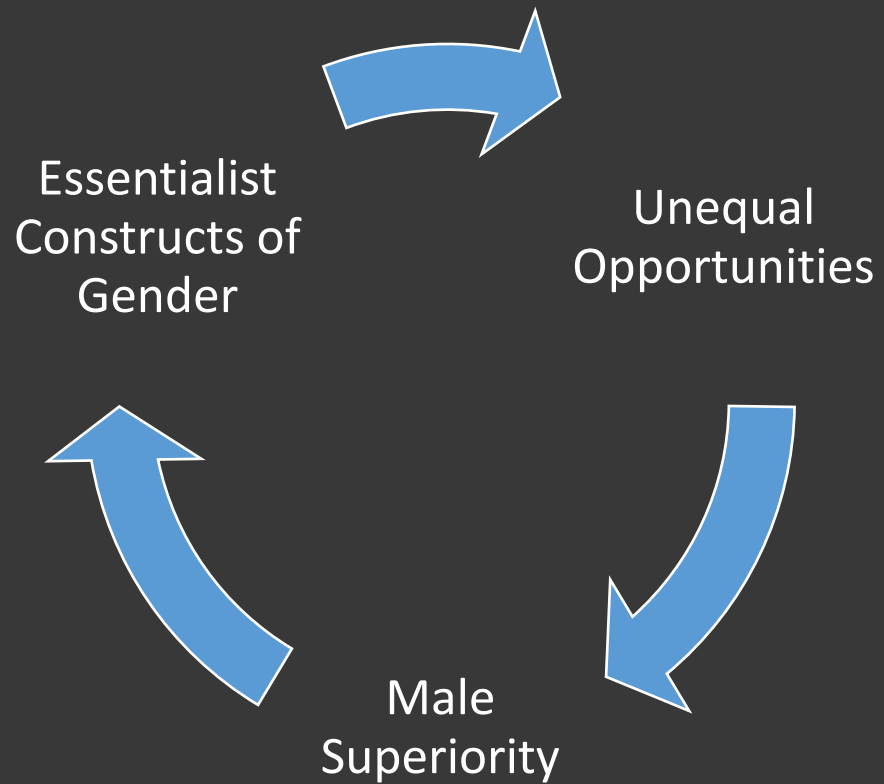
Inclusive

The Problem

The Solution



# Gendered inequalities



**Negative evaluations of women's abilities in sport has substantial consequences**

(Fink, 2016, p. 4)



# Gender Policy

## Forms of discrimination

- Discrimination may be direct or indirect and it may occur intentionally or unintentionally.
- Includes sexism & neurosexism.

## Breaches of the policy

- Relevant procedures for dealing with inappropriate behaviour



European Bridge League Women Committee

<https://sites.google.com/view/wbc-onlinetraining/policy/policy-goals>

# Bridge and Gender Papers

Punch, S., Snellgrove, M.L., Graham, L., McPherson, C. and Cleary, J. (2023) 'Bridging brains: exploring neurosexism and gendered stereotypes in a mindsport', *Leisure/Loisir*, 47:3, 459-485.

Rogers, A. Snellgrove, M.L. and Punch, S. (2022) Between Equality and Discrimination: The Paradox of the Women's Game in the Mindsport Bridge, *World Leisure Journal*, 64(4): 342-360.

Punch, S. and Rogers, A. (2022) 'Building, not Burning Bridges in Research: Insider/Outsider Dilemmas and Engaging with the Bridge Community,' *Journal of Leisure Research*, 53(2): 272-289.

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



<https://bridgemindsport.org/home/research/bridging-gender>

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