

Green baize gladiators

Bridge as a mindsport for all

Electronic sports, or esports, have evolved the concept of 'sport', especially around the mental acuity needed to play. Professor Samantha Punch at the University of Stirling, together with Dr David Scott at Abertay University, Scotland, see similarities in the card game bridge. They are helping establish a new academic subdiscipline – the sociology of mindsport. In the process, Punch and Scott have uncovered characteristics of the game bridge, including its intense physicality and team play, that have remained largely unnoticed. Their research also draws attention to bridge's status as a mindsport that anyone can play.

The explosion of electronic sports has changed our understanding of 'sport'. Like big-name footballers and cricketers, professional esports players have dedicated fans and attract six-figure sponsorships. Televised major esports events beamed from packed stadia enthrall millions of viewers. Players remain largely seated and physical exertion seems largely subdued, but study them carefully and you realise you don't have to swing a sword to be gladiatorial. Furthermore, esports have shown that to be highly competitive within a team requires razor-sharp focus for extended periods, activating and engaging multiple senses, understanding long-game strategy and short-game tactics, and an almost intuitive connection with the other players. With this in mind, a team of researchers is drawing attention to the rigours – and benefits – of another chair-based sport.

Dr Samantha Punch is Professor of Sociology in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Stirling in Scotland. Her research focuses on childhood, youth, and intergenerational relations. She brings to this research an unusual skillset – for over 20 years, she has played competitive bridge at national and international levels. Her insight and experience in this regard have been instrumental in developing a research project called 'Bridge: A MindSport for All', or BAMSA, and helping establish a new academic subdiscipline – the sociology of mindsport. But researching bridge is not about examining the chatter of little old ladies over sherry and a green baize table. Bridge's sedate image is deceptive; it's no coincidence that Agatha Christie, an avid bridge player herself, used it multiple times as a backdrop to murder. For Punch, though, it's a sport that should be played in schools.

DISTINCTIVE AND COMPLEX

Bridge is a distinctive and complex trick-taking card game – using a standard deck of 52 cards – that combines strategy, memory, and teamwork; the latter makes it somewhat unique. It is played by four players in two opposing partnerships. The game consists of bidding and playing the hand, and players engage in offensive and defensive play. The deep level of cooperation and communication required between partners to pull this off gives bridge its unique allure. While partners must work closely, direct communication or secret signals about their hands are prohibited. Instead, they communicate indirectly through their choices of bids and plays. One incorrect interpretation can turn a game and bring defeat to a partnership; it is psychological and emotional as well as technical.

This demand for intricate communication, strategic planning, and cooperation



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between partners, all within strict rules about sharing information, elevates bridge from a mere game of cards to a sophisticated mental exercise, combining logic, psychology, and teamwork. This combination is why, like chess and Go, bridge carries the mantle of a mindsport, and why Punch sees a space for it in schools.

In a recent article with Dr David Scott in *The Sociological Review*, Punch also draws attention to its physicality, a term characteristically associated with 'sport' but not with bridge. Scott is a Lecturer in Sport Development at Abertay University in Scotland. His research centres on the role of sport within peoples' everyday lives and the meanings they attach to it. In the article, the researchers draw on in-depth interviews in a BAMSA study of 52 elite-level bridge players with significant experience at international tournaments. What emerged has helped reframe the concept of 'physicality'.

BRIDGE'S DECEPTIVE PHYSICALITY

According to Punch and Scott, the 'physicality' that supposedly characterises an activity as a 'sport' traditionally follows notions of Cartesian duality – that the

mind and body are separate entities. Professional sports players would disagree and say that much of winning comes from combining body and mind. This monist approach (that the mind and body are inseparable) characterises how bridge players experience the game.

Firstly, bridge players need endurance and stamina – games require intense concentration and can last hours. Major bridge championships are played over 1-2 weeks, which are physically and emotionally exhausting for the participants. The psychology of competition means players require physical presence and poise to 'be in the game' and influence opponents. They continually employ subtle non-verbal communication with their partners, and their senses must be hyper-alert to what their opponents might be doing themselves. Nevertheless, communication at the bridge table cannot be hidden; bids and plays are made openly so that partner and opponents can try to figure out what's going on.

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presence as all noticeably 'felt' experiences. This intensity, especially at an elite level, requires discipline, and although the game is mainly mental, as in other forms of competition, general physical health and well-being can affect performance. It's why elite-level players increasingly follow strict regimes of exercise, diet and nutrition, and rest.

Unsurprisingly, confidence plays a crucial role in performance. However, confidence is not only linked to the players' physicality but, because of bridge's interactive and collaborative nature, it is also associated with how they relate to emotional experiences within social contexts. This social emotion of confidence is something Scott identified when studying participants on a sports-for-development course.

'If modern understandings of the mind and the body being reciprocally intertwined are increasingly accepted within wider society,' ask Punch and Scott, 'then why has this not been taken into consideration when it comes to social, cultural, and political understandings of mindsports such as bridge as being a sport or physical activity?' It is a good question, and for the two researchers committed to education, skills development, physical activity, health, and well-being, it is especially pertinent for schools. Indeed, BAMSA's next undertaking is a four-year international study of bridge, youth, and mind sport education.

THE ISSUE OF IDENTITY

When the first Olympic Esports Series was hosted by Singapore in June 2023, it sent a clear message that esports were





Bridge tournament playing area.

recognised sports. This was pivotal for professional esports players' identity. For Punch, the issue of identity is equally relevant for elite-level bridge players, as is their developing proper recognition as professionals.

By analysing the social dynamics of tournament bridge in the BAMSA study, Punch and her collaborator Dr Zoe Russell have shown how elite-level players develop their identities through both individual preparation and social interactions within the bridge community. Their study unveiled

that beyond the intensive practice, technical training, intellectual skill, and physical stamina that elite players need to maintain, there is a recursive and layered model of identities across self, partnership, and community. For example, players manage their 'frontstage' public personas during tournaments, demonstrating qualities like composure and strategic decision-making. In contrast, the 'backstage' private interactions allow for more personal and emotional expressions, contributing to developing a bridge player's identity. The interplay of identities highlights the unique partnership element of bridge as a contrast to other sports.

Punch's research has also shown how elite bridge players consider the values of courage, integrity, composure, and gameness as central to their identity, and how participation in international

tournaments fosters a collective identity. Still, when the cards are drawn, national identities rise to the fore. It is, indeed, Olympian in spirit.

AMBIVALENCES AND ANXIETIES

For many years, bridge has pushed to become an Olympic sport, championed by the World Bridge Federation, which the International Olympic Committee

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recognises. Punch has shown that its increasing professionalism may be a route to acceptance, but it is up against a bulwark of stereotypical public perceptions and the harsh realities for players shifting from a socially

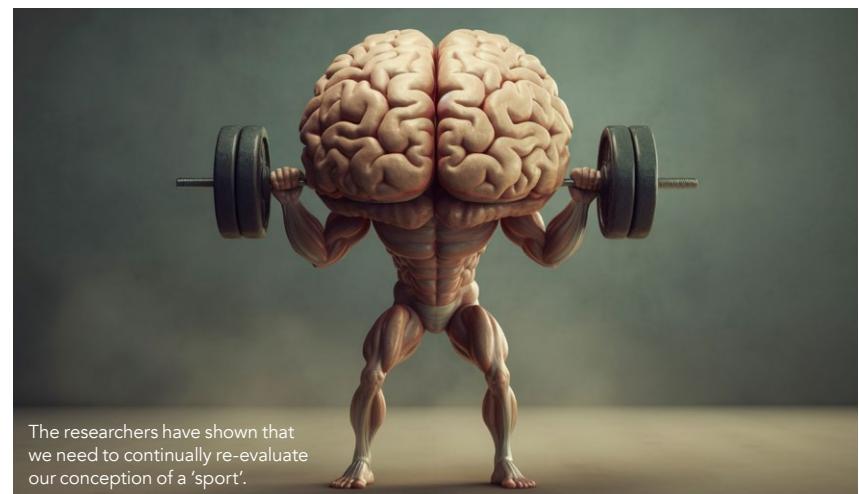
competitive endeavour to a professional sport. These realities blur boundaries and call for deep introspection.

Examining the lived experiences of the elite-level bridge players, Punch was able to learn how they made sense of the often-ongoing transition from playing bridge as a hobby to it being a career. The shared experience was that while the shift to being paid to do something they were devoted to was hugely positive, it was not without ambivalence and anxieties. In its course to professionalism, bridge is at something of an indeterminate status, where, according to Punch, while being a professional footballer may be an acceptable career choice, 'a professional bridge player raises issues about moral evaluations of work, a work ethic, and concerns over what a "proper job" is.'

One thing is clear, though: we should continually re-evaluate our conception of a 'sport' and the role of mindsports in education. Bridge is a highly inclusive,

competitive, strategic, and at times physically demanding sport that encourages cooperation and partnerships but can play out in a simple room with chairs and a table.

Plus, with esports players becoming heroes in their chairs and the drama and excitement bridge can offer, young people may think differently about what it means to be a gladiator. Ms Christie would surely approve.



The researchers have shown that we need to continually re-evaluate our conception of a 'sport'.

Behind the Research



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Research Objectives

BAMSA is an academic research project, working collaboratively with bridge organisations to transform the image of bridge, increase participation of all ages, and enhance the sustainability of the mindsport.

Detail

Bio

Samantha Punch is Professor of Sociology in the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling, Scotland. She leads Bridge: A MindSport for All (BAMSA) and is developing Mindsport Studies as an academic field. Her research on the card game bridge includes mindsport education, skills, well-being, emotions, gender, intergenerationality, and youth bridge.

David Scott is a Lecturer in Sport Development at Abertay University, Scotland. He teaches and researches in the area of sport and its relationship with wider society. This covers fields such as sociology, international development, leisure, education, physical activity and health, emotions, and monitoring and evaluation.

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Collaborators

BAMSA researchers Dr Zoe Russell and Dr Ian McIntosh.

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Personal Response

What is the most enduring misperception by non-players of bridge as a mindsport, and how do you counter that when explaining it to people?

Bridge has a stereotypical image of being a rather dull game only for older people. In response, I explain how the game is endlessly fascinating with a new bridge puzzle to solve every 7-8 minutes (the length of each bridge deal). It is enjoyed by players of all ages and levels. Young people love to compete in world youth championships. 'Junior' bridge extends up to 31 years with various age categories, including under 16s national teams.

Many people assume that, like other card games, success depends to a large extent on which cards you receive – that it is predominantly a game of luck. However, in both tournament and club bridge, the deals are computer-dealt, duplicated around the room so everyone plays the same bridge hands. Thus, at every level of the competitive game, luck is minimised as all players face the same bridge puzzles.

Another misperception is that it is extremely complicated and you have to be good at maths to play. At top levels, bridge can demand considerable skill and technique. Yet, it can also be played socially and enjoyed at various levels without needing to be so taxing. In fact, you only need to be able to count to 13. Contact your local bridge club and give it a go – or try the free 'Tricky Bridge' app! //