



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

**Bridge across the life course:
Young people's bridge journeys and transitions**

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Summary

This study investigates young people's engagement with bridge across the life course, focussing on youth transitions within the broader context of three major life stages: childhood, adulthood, and retirement. Drawing on interviews with forty young bridge players (aged 13-31) and eight bridge teachers in Scotland and England, the research reveals five types of progression within bridge journeys:

- From casual play to serious leisure
- From supervised to independent play
- From playing non-competitively to competing in local, regional, and national tournaments
- From playing with different partners to strategising with a regular partner
- From conscious thought to intuitive play

The findings show that young people's bridge journeys tend to follow a fluctuating pattern of engagement where players experience an early phase of active participation followed by disengagement in early adulthood and mid-life. This pattern stems from a tension between bridge and other significant commitments that also demand a significant time investment, notably work and family. Disengagement is also compounded, at times, by a lack of easily identifiable opportunities to play bridge that are both local and conveniently timed. Many young people maintain their identities as bridge players over time, evident in their efforts to continue playing despite obstacles and their intention to return to bridge later in life. They commonly re-engage with bridge after retirement, when there is more time for leisure and fewer obligations.

The synthesis of the interview responses suggests that bridge transitions may be best facilitated by strengthening social support networks. This includes the development of welcoming peer and intergenerational communities and ensuring that young players have access to mentors who can guide them through transitions. Providing play spaces and formats that accommodate changing needs is equally important. Concrete actions towards enabling smoother transitions include establishing more clubs in secondary schools and universities, alongside evening or weekend sessions aimed at players in their twenties and thirties. Further recommendations can be found at the end of this report.

Introduction

The game of contract bridge is a lifelong learning and generation-spanning pursuit, played by children as young as ten and by older enthusiasts. While existing research has attended reasonably well to the motivations and leisure patterns of older adult players, comparatively little is known about younger participants. This study addresses this gap in knowledge by mapping the transitional experiences of young bridge players during their formative years and into adulthood, tracing patterns of engagement and disengagement over time.

This line of inquiry is particularly timely given the changing landscape of leisure in the 21st century, amidst global demographic shifts and the rise of more digitised forms of leisure. The broader aims of this work are to understand how leisure fits into people's lives and how their participation in serious leisure pursuits like bridge is influenced by contextual factors. Central to the analysis are overlapping transitions and the intersection of broader life course transitions with transitions specific to bridge.

Three research questions guide the inquiry:

- How do young bridge players' journeys unfold across the life course?
- What kinds of critical junctures characterise their movements into, out of, or back into playing bridge?
- Which social, structural, and personal factors facilitate or constrain young bridge players' transitions?

Background

The role of leisure in everyday life

Leisure is a central feature of life, understood by scholars as a spectrum of organised activity across different life periods and shaped by individual and societal factors (Harahousou, 2006). Individual factors can be viewed as interpersonal and intrapersonal, the former dealing with the societal norms regarding participation in leisure (e.g. Kelly & Godbey, 1992) and the latter with individual resources that enable or constrain leisure activity (e.g. health, income). Societal factors refer to broader affordances such as the geographical accessibility and awareness of leisure activities.

For many of the theorists and prominent voices in leisure research, leisure has been historically defined in opposition to work, as an expression of free will and free choice. Yet others have criticised the liberal and capitalist framing of leisure as a consumer need or a commodity, offering alternative visions that examine the interplay between freedom and constraint (Spracklen, 2009). In Western philosophical thought, the role of leisure in life is tied not only to the pursuit of best utilising free time, but also to arguments regarding ethics and the structure of society. In the contemplations of Plato and Aristotle, leisure incorporated notions of virtue, betterment, purposeful action, and the pursuit of intellectual and moral development.

In modern thought, leisure is examined in more relational terms, as a vehicle for connection, fulfilment, and well-being (Mansfield, Daykin & Kay, 2020). It is also associated with different objectives and meanings depending on context (Watkins, 2000). Some of the most common meanings ascribed to leisure, as systematically categorised by Schulz and Watkins (2007), include passing time, exercising choice, escaping pressure, and achieving fulfilment, reflecting the multifaceted nature of leisure experiences. These meanings determine not only how leisure time is spent and the goals of leisure participation, but also whether people choose to participate in leisure at all. For example, Kassman and Kneck (2022) found that sports participation may not be prioritised when leisure time is associated with rest.

Leisure across the life course

Leisure is commonly associated with the pursuit of joy, connection, empowerment, and a meaningful engagement with life (Iwasaki, Messina & Hopper, 2017). Inherent to this pursuit is the orientation towards attaining and maintaining a kind of balance or homeostasis, where people seek both stability and change, structure and variety, and familiarity and novelty (Iso-Ahola, Jackson & Dunn, 1994).

As one enters and leaves different life stages and roles, leisure practices may change (Heintzman, 2022). Leisure activities start, cease, or are replaced with other leisure activities in accordance with the desire for stability and change, and in conjunction with unique circumstances and the negotiation of opportunities and constraints. Transitions are also constructed alongside developmental stages (from infant to older adult) and life roles (e.g. becoming a spouse or a parent). Three distinct life phases are broadly found within the life course and transitions literature: (1) childhood; (2) adulthood; (3) retirement.

- 1. Childhood.** In childhood, lifelong interests are established. This is particularly evident in sports, where early physical activity in childhood and youth predicts physical activity in adulthood (Hirvensalo & Lintunen, 2011). Children explore the social world as active players, learners, and social and emotional beings (Isaacs, 1929; Mills & Mills, 2000), and experience critical moments of choice and transfiguration referred to as ‘epiphanies’, ‘turning points’, or ‘fateful moments’ (Thomson et al, 2002). Their experiences of transition are culturally, generationally, and historically diverse (James & James, 2004), and manifest as both novelty and cultural reproduction (James, Jenks & Prout, 2012).
- 2. Adulthood.** In adulthood, the relationship with leisure often changes, owing to changing priorities and time commitments. There has been wide recognition in leisure studies that work and family roles constrain leisure participation. Parenthood, in particular, is a critical determinant of declining leisure time and may be delayed in favour of leisure activities (Becker & Lois, 2012). Longitudinal studies have shown that sports participation notably declines from ages 13 to 40 (Mathisen et al, 2023). However, there is variability across leisure categories and specialisms such as sport, tourism, cultural, and digital leisure, and different activities exhibit different engagement patterns over time. For instance, participation in physical sports and exercise continuously declines, whereas recreational driving dips after youth and rises again after the mid-40s (Osgood & Lee, 1993).
- 3. Retirement.** In later life, leisure is valued for its physical, social, and cognitive benefits and its role in supporting healthy ageing (Faber et al, 2001). With the changing cultural perceptions of old age, perceptions of leisure and ageing also change. On the one hand, challenges of social exclusion facing older people arise from the gradual erosion of social roles and identities characteristic of this life phase (Collins & Kay, 2003). On the other hand, Atchley’s identity continuity theory (1971) suggests that pre-retirement activities can be persevered by most into retirement. Rather than becoming fragmented at the point of retirement, leisure continues across the life span, albeit in a transformed capacity.

Methods

This analysis forms part of a larger study examining young people's engagement with bridge. The research employs a qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews to develop an understanding of bridge players' engagement with the mindsport across the life course.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their capacity to elicit accounts of leisure experiences in bridge that intersect with broader biographical trajectories. Following Goodson and colleagues (2016), life stories must be coupled with their conditions of social construction to provide meaningful insights. Consequently, the interviews explored several key domains, drawing on Atkinson's (1998) life story approach: cultural settings and traditions, social factors, education, work, historical events, retirement, inner life, and visions of the future.

The sample of interviewees comprised forty-eight participants, forty of whom were young bridge players, and eight of whom were bridge teachers. Twenty-three were younger players aged 13-21 and seventeen were young adults aged 22-31 (Table 1). The inclusion of bridge teachers' perspectives was considered essential for corroborating first-hand accounts and providing a contextual grounding, whilst also speaking to longitudinal trends and generational patterns.

Interviews were conducted in-person and remotely via videoconferencing platforms or telephone, with participants choosing their preferred communication mode. The typical duration of the interviews was between 45-60 minutes, allowing sufficient time for detailed exploration of autobiographical narratives. The interview schedule was designed to encourage reflection on bridge-specific transitions within the context of the broader life course, as well as factors that enable or constrain transitions.

The interview data were analysed thematically, focussing on how individual narratives reflect broader social and temporal contexts. The potential for researchers to 'colonise' memories was acknowledged (Gemignani, 2014), and the research team aimed to maintain reflexivity in the interpretation of participants' narratives whilst also allowing co-constructed meanings to emerge.

Table 1. Participants in the study

Interview data					
Participant	Location	Age, gender	Participant	Location	Designation
Donovan	England	13, M	Bruce	Scotland	Young person, 19, M
Liyana	England	15, F	Keith	England	Young person, 22, M
Craig	England	15, M	Darren	Scotland	Young person, 23, M
Francis	China	16, M	Hussain	England	Young person, 20, M
Dale	India	18, M	Terry	Scotland	Young person, 17, M
Ajay	USA	18, M	Alannah	Scotland	Young person, 15, F
Edwin	England	18, M	Charlotte	England	Young person, 16, F
Myles	England	18, M	Lauren	Scotland	Young person, 18, F
Shayla	USA	20, F	Cassie	England	Young person, 19, F
Keane	Scotland	20, M	Angela	Scotland	Young person, 21, F
Virginia	USA	20, F	Hugh	Scotland	Bridge teacher, M
Lucas	Sweden	21, M	Peter	Scotland	Bridge teacher, M
Kurtis	USA	21, M	Ruth	Scotland	Bridge teacher, F
Tasneem	USA	21, M	Bilal	England	Bridge teacher, M
Benjamin	USA	21, M	Hannah	England	Bridge teacher, F
Sadie	USA	22, F	Patricia	England	Bridge teacher, F
Abi	USA	23, F	Alan	Scotland	Bridge teacher, M
Harry	Scotland	23, M	Keira	Scotland	Bridge teacher, F
Macy	Norway	23, F	Total number of participants: 48 Number of young people who took part: 40 Number of bridge teachers who took part: 8		
Anthony	USA	24, M			
Rhiannon	USA	26, F			
Stuart	USA	26, M			
Freyja	USA	27, F			
Sean	Ireland	28, M			
Lenny	USA	28, M			
Jon	Ireland	29, M			
Cole	USA	30, M			
Catherine	England	31, F			
Damian	England	31, M			
Ben	Scotland	31, M			

Findings

Young people's introduction to bridge

Learning about bridge from family

Young people's first exposure to bridge typically occurs between the ages of 10 and 18, most commonly at ages 10-11 (equivalent to Primary 6 and Primary 7 in the UK), and age 18 upon entry to higher education. Some young bridge players initially learn in the first years of secondary school rather than the latter years of primary school. Age 10 is often considered to be the earliest viable starting point of engagement with bridge because *'if you try to teach people under around nine, it often can be quite challenging at times to maintain focus on cards for more than about an hour'* (Craig, 15, England). *'If you have a history with cards then it's probably fine at primary school'*, Donovan (13, England) said, explaining that his grandparents first taught him to play when he was seven or eight.

From age 10 onwards, the initiation into bridge-playing amongst young people emerges through a convergence of social exposure, individual interest, and timely opportunity. The findings point to a pattern of layered engagement with bridge where educational or family contexts generate awareness, and subsequent encouragement from others (whether family, teachers or peers) legitimises interest. The availability of accessible environments for learning and playing bridge is also crucial, transforming latent interests into active engagements. For instance, Ajay was encouraged by his dad to play bridge from the age of 10-11; however, it was seeing his brother play that truly inspired him to play:

I've learnt like, maybe eight or nine years ago in a bridge summer camp, because my dad wanted us to transition from chess to bridge. At the beginning, I was 10 or 11 so I didn't really care that much about bridge, I cared more about like playing cards with the people at the camp. But then when I saw my brother playing a game, it sort of inspired what could happen with me and I could connect with others and then I thought that was interesting. (Ajay, 18, USA)

The exposure to bridge within the family is a key determinant of awareness and interest, which involves an intergenerational transmission from parents and grandparents to young players. By becoming initiated into the established leisure practices of the family (Hodge et al, 2015), children are able to continue the card-playing tradition as adults. Within family units, bridge is seen as an adult game, almost as a rite of passage, and contrasted with other card games:

My grandpa taught me, we would play different board games, some games I don't know if they were real or they made them up. And then a lot of the time it was like, 'These are children's games, we're going to play bridge now'. (Shayla, 20, USA)

The interaction between child and adult bridge players during children's socialisation into bridge highlights the significance of generation as a key concept for analysing childhood. Children and adults occupy specific social positions defined in relation to each other (Alanen & Mayall, 2001), as a generation of bridge players passes down not only their knowledge of the rules of bridge, but also the meanings and practices they ascribe to bridge. This is seen here in the positioning of bridge as a game for adults that can be contrasted with children's games.

Learning about bridge from school

For some players, bridge-playing commences without any prior exposure through their families, thus indicating that the introduction to the mindsport bridge need not rely upon inherited cultural capital within the family unit (Bourdieu, 1986). This involves an introduction to bridge in educational settings (school, college or university) through educators, peers, and on occasion, coincidence:

I kind of got roped into it by an old friend. Because they would announce it on the announcements and then I just asked one day, 'What's bridge', and he was like 'Just come and find out' and I was like 'Okay'. ... I didn't even know what they were announcing. I was like 'are you guys building bridges there or something'? And that's literally what I thought. I was like okay, let's go and find out what they're doing over there. (Anthony, 24, USA)

The school environment facilitates bridge participation through multiple mechanisms, such as teacher-led initiatives and an awareness of peers playing bridge:

No one in my family plays, but I know a lot of people do have parents or grandparents that taught them. But I went to a Chinese school on Sundays or Saturdays and there was a class that was teaching people how to play bridge. I had never heard of the game before, but my mom had and she said, 'Oh, it's a really good game. You should learn it.' And then I was like, 'Okay, sure'. So then I went to the class and fell in love with the game. So I continued. (Virginia, 20, USA)

The university context functions as a particularly accessible setting, with summer camps, orientation week activities, and informal gatherings serving as low-stakes entry points for beginners:

I actually learnt the rules of bridge, the mechanics of bridge at a summer camp like 12 years ago. I was an undergraduate, I'd gone for this math conference camp. Some guys are like 'Have you ever played bridge?' and I was like 'No'. He was like 'Let me teach you, you've got to follow suit'. (Cole, 30, USA)

These accounts of learning about bridge within family and school settings underscore that word-of-mouth and social recommendation are precursors to participation. Indeed, social actors influenced all participants' intention to try out bridge to some extent. It is also necessary, however, for social recommendation to intersect with opportunity; for example, finding a local bridge club to play in after receiving social encouragement. If only social endorsement is present, this may not be sufficient to foster an engagement with bridge as serious leisure (notwithstanding the mediating influence of individual interest, proactivity, and agency).

The progression of young people's bridge journeys

From casual play to serious leisure

This research sought to understand how young people develop their identity as bridge players and the factors that contribute to their transformation from novice to committed players. The findings revealed that over time, bridge players invest more time and effort into playing bridge, combined with a greater immersion in competitive bridge and a focus on skill improvement. Both casual and competitive players referred to junctures along their transition pathways when they began to '*take bridge more seriously*', and in doing so, aligned bridge with the designation of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2020). For example, Macy (23, Norway) described a shift in her attitude to bridge, saying:

Something sparked in me and I started playing a lot and I started reading much more and just focusing more seriously on how to improve my game. (Macy, 23, Norway)

The perception of legitimate participation in bridge also appears to be associated with a commitment to regular play and a high standard of playing. Lucas (21, Sweden) drew attention to the distinction between '*bridge*' and '*real bridge*', saying:

I got picked up by a national team player from Sweden. And he was like, 'What are you doing? I will teach you to play real bridge'. (Lucas, 21, Sweden)

Whilst the commitment inherent in playing bridge as a serious leisure pursuit attracts players, it can also be seen as a barrier to participation, meaning that some of the players who try out bridge may not seek to attain full player status. In Rhiannon's (26, USA) words, some of the children '*just want to have fun*', while others are '*very self-motivated and serious about it*':

They like to write down all their scores and take notes, and then these are the kids who then want to join the online training programme and play bridge. They're always like, oh, 'let's play'. They're telling their friends, 'let's play on BBO together, let's play this robot tournament together'. (Rhiannon, 26, USA)

Craig (15, England), whose bridge partner stopped playing regularly, explained:

He just wasn't enjoying it when it began to get serious. So he joined bridge as a casual thing. And he still occasionally plays casually but he didn't like going to training and being told this is right, this is wrong, he didn't want to have to start memorising loads of bits. He's a good casual player, he enjoyed it, but once it got to be a lot of work, he just decided he was out. (Craig, 15, England)

Collectively, these accounts demonstrate that the transition to becoming a fully-fledged bridge player involves a deliberate commitment to investing time and effort into the mindsport, which is a form of serious leisure for both competitive and casual players (Stebbins, 2020; Punch, Russell & Graham, 2022). The interviewees identified specific progressions in their journeys, which they perceived as pivotal to the development of their bridge identities, as they became better thinkers, competitors, and bridge partners. With the progression of time, and by building upon their intentions to ‘take bridge more seriously’, they began to gain more experience and expertise whilst also advancing their standing in the bridge community.

From supervised to independent play

The transition from supervised learning to independent play emerged as a key transitional milestone. This entails playing with no help from tutors, and without a ‘safety net’ (Cassie, 19, England). Participants emphasised the importance of moving beyond formal instruction to playing in real-world settings, and combining playing with learning:

At the beginning it was a lot of learning 'cause we had to, well learn everything. Now it's a lot more of a balance of playing and learning as you go and picking things up as you go. (Lauren, 18, Scotland)

During independent play, young people noticed that they learnt new concepts, rules, and conventions from other players that they may not have otherwise learnt during their initial training:

When the four of us played on the same system, there was no need to alert anything, we all understood what we're getting at. It wasn't until I got to the club that I even heard that you have to do that, and the concept that the opposition would have a different system to you had never cropped up before! (Keith, 22, England)

From playing non-competitively to competing in local, regional, and national tournaments

For many participants, their first attendance at a tournament is a transformative experience that fundamentally alters their relationship with bridge. Kurtis (21, USA) articulated this by saying: *‘So, you know, at what point did I start to identify as a bridge player? And I would say that was from the Toronto Nationals. So that was a very, very important event to me.’* This was corroborated by Stuart (26, USA), who identified a broader pattern within the American bridge community:

My general feeling though is like most people, a lot of people, maybe not most, but a lot of people, when they go to their first nationals in America, that's when they really get hooked. Being in this bridge environment for 10 days with a decent amount of other young people, I've seen that create a lot of bridge players that actually want to keep playing bridge. (Stuart, 26, USA)

Young players' participation in tournaments typically signifies that they have shown great skill or promise, and that they have been encouraged or chosen to train to be in a junior team¹. This is a great source of excitement and achievement for the young players, which provides them with the opportunity to play with new opponents and in new environments:

Traveling with bridge, going to different countries and playing would be I think the biggest milestone because when I started off playing I don't think I ever would have thought about going abroad to play. (Cassie, 19, England)

By taking part in local tournaments or traveling overseas, players practise playing more seriously and competitively, and their self-concept as players evolves, validating their status as worthy competitors:

I get to represent the district, I get some money for this. You know, maybe I'm a decent bridge player after all. (Cole, 30, USA)

¹ The progression from local to regional and national tournaments is not always linear, as players sometimes bypass stages entirely. For instance, players may represent their country at youth team events and tournaments before having participated in regional or national competitions.

In addition, it is important to note that youth squad members benefit from organised training and, given the comparatively shallow player pool at junior level, may be selected for national youth teams (U16, U21, U26, U31) after only a year or two of competitive play. This is a unique circumstance that differs from the five to ten or more years of experience typically required for selection to adult national teams.

From playing with different partners to strategising with a regular partner

Another key progression experienced by young bridge players is the shift from being an individual bridge player to being part of a bridge partnership, which is predicated upon forming shared goals for learning, improving, and competing. Trust is a key element of successful partnerships, conceptualised as confidence in a partner's decisions and communication. For instance, Francis (16, USA) articulated that *'trust is very important in partnerships'*, saying that him and his partner *'need to be on the same page'* and that he must constantly evaluate whether his partner knows what he is communicating through the cards.

Keane (20, Scotland) further pointed out not only that *'you need to trust each other'*, but that you should also *'acknowledge first of all that you're both going to make mistakes'*, positioning forgiveness and encouragement as essential to the success of bridge partnerships. Jon (29, Ireland) shed further light on this, explaining that *'when someone makes a mistake, it doesn't mean they're stupid, it just means they made a mistake that one time'*.

The transition into set bridge partnerships thus necessitates the development of empathy, patience, and co-operation. The development of these skills and attitudes then leads to the formation of a shared consciousness within the partnership:

When you're playing well with your partner, there's something sort of religious about it, like, or like ethereal. ... I think that is one of the most exciting things in bridge because that's not just you having success or your partner having success. It's your partnership working together in harmony. And it is such a satisfying feeling, having your side collaborating so well together. (Freyja, 27, USA)

From conscious thought to intuitive play

Young players found that they experienced cognitive shifts within their bridge-playing, describing a heightened metacognitive awareness as a function of their increasing commitment to bridge as serious leisure. This signifies a learning progression where previously effortful cognitive processes become more automatic, and thought becomes more fluid and intuitive:

I play a card and I'm like that was not the right card to play. Like oh, like immediately, I can tell, right? I've become a lot better at, like, okay, I know the king is probably here. I know the jack and 10 are out, even if I weren't thinking about it. ... It's like, you know, the feeling when you're driving and you gain consciousness that you're driving. It's like that. (Tasneem, 21, USA)

The metaphor used by Tasneem, ‘gaining consciousness’ whilst playing, is a marker of conscious reflection upon previously unconscious processes. Players even reported dreaming about bridge:

When I go for a long bridge tournament, I play bridge hands in my sleep. And I have multiple dreams where I'm playing different hands. I'm playing them in different ways. And when I close my eyes, all I can see are suits and cards swimming around. (Dale, 18, India)

This suggests that transitions may be experienced as both practices and cognitions situated in specific contexts. The ways in which young people play bridge and relate to other bridge players changes; concurrently, their conceptual understanding of bridge also evolves.

Challenges to sustaining engagement

In addition to tracing the continuity of young people’s engagement with bridge over time, this study also sought to develop a better understanding of the structural and contextual factors that may disrupt their bridge journeys. It was observed that discontinuity in bridge-playing tends to occur during critical transitional stages, most often in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Although some players maintain a lifelong commitment to bridge and only take short breaks, others step away from the mindsport for more prolonged periods of time due to perceived challenges.

Three critical stages were discovered in relation to education and work, each of which holds the potential to disrupt players’ pathways, and which would benefit from more targeted support.

Childhood and youth: The transition between educational stages

Several participants mentioned ‘aging out’ of a primary school bridge club (or elementary and middle school in the USA) with no continuity into secondary and high school due to being unable to locate a bridge club within their new school or nearby schools. In Abi’s words (23, USA), she ‘aged out’ and ‘*didn’t really have time to keep going back to play*’. ‘*I was at a different school and a new grade*’, she said, explaining that ‘*it was just a little hard to try and keep the game up.*’ Overall, it was found that private schools are more likely to offer bridge tuition all through primary and secondary school (from pre-K to twelfth grade in the States). Young people were less likely to face transition junctures after educational stages when there was more comprehensive and continuous bridge tuition.

Teachers and school leavers also described the transition from the structured learning environments of primary and secondary school towards higher education as potentially challenging. They noted that bridge clubs are not commonly found in colleges and universities, and hence introduce competing opportunities and pressures:

I'm slightly worried for what they're going to do when they leave school and are they going to be able to keep playing and pick up at the University club? (Ruth, Bridge teacher, Scotland)

It would be very easy, you know, amongst everything else to lose track of wanting to be on a journey as many people do. For example, I know plenty of people who learn bridge at school and then they go off to University and it's not unreasonable to lose sight of bridge for a while because universities have other draws and appeals and pressures. (Bruce, 19, Scotland)

As the transitional milestones between educational stages introduce uncertainty regarding young bridge players' future directions, they necessitate a proactive approach to identifying appropriate pathways for continued play and learning.

Adulthood: Reduced leisure time and the daunting transition to club play

In the transition to adulthood, young people navigate different opportunities and challenges, as the regular time commitment of bridge begins to conflict with their availability. Work, marriage, and taking care of children causes players to reconsider their playing habits or precludes them from continuing to play to the extent or standard that they would have wished. Both male and female interviewees from previous generations identified marriage and children as factors shaping their bridge participation:

From the early 20s to early mid-30s I played reasonably seriously, and I guess I got gradually better and better ... But at the same time I had a job and I was married with children, whereas my bridge partner was not married and did not have children. Eventually, sort of early 30s, we came to a conversation along the lines of 'you know, for us to get better as a pair, we need to play more', and that was a commitment I couldn't make. (Bilal, Bridge teacher, England)

I think because of life circumstances you either learn bridge when you are at school or University ... Then life takes over, you get married, you have children, you have a mortgage, you know, you've got to nurse a baby and all that goes on. (Hannah, Bridge teacher, England)

Young people from current generations similarly experience periods of disengagement from bridge in adulthood. The most common reasons for this are work commitments and a lack of local players with whom they can play regularly. With regards to work, one young person said:

When you go into the world of work, then you just haven't got that time. Every day there will be late finishes; you won't be able to commit to bridge club sessions as often. ... I don't think that is because I wouldn't want to play. It's just that there are more obstacles in the way. You don't have workplace bridge clubs as you do school and University ones. (Hussain, 20, England)

The difficulty of maintaining a four-player friend group to play bridge with was also mentioned as a possible reason for disengagement:

My brother moved out and we didn't have four players, and then whenever he would come visit, I wouldn't be there. When there would be four players, we would just play one night, and then I don't know, there would be two months absence. (Alannah, 15, Scotland)

This is sometimes exacerbated by a lack of clubs local to players or a mismatch between the format of club games and young people's schedules, as explained by Cole (30, USA):

In a game for full master points, it's an open game with 18 boards. 18 boards is still going to take two to two and a half hours to play. And people might not have two or two and a half hours, or they're working until six o'clock and we'll have to eat dinner or you know, pick up their kids. There's all sorts of things. (Cole, 30, USA)

Cassie and Freyja also found it difficult to attend the daytime sessions at the local bridge club. Cassie was only able to attend once her local bridge club 'started offering free lessons on the weekend', and Freyja called for the introduction of more evening games:

I think people who have full-time jobs find it quite hard to fit bridge in. A lot of clubs do daytime sessions, and obviously that's quite difficult for people who work nine to five. They can't play in those. ... I would like to keep playing, but I think it's more of the logistics of it rather than the game itself. (Cassie, 19, England)

For anybody who is working, you need more evening games and weekend games because just having it at 10 am or 1 pm is only catering to the retired community. (Freyja, 27, USA)

In addition to the reduced leisure time in adulthood, bridge newcomers' transition into the club environment can also present challenges to their continued engagement with bridge. The club setting is associated with seriousness and competitiveness, often designated as a setting specifically for adults. For some players, this setting can be perceived as daunting because it represents a marked departure from learning bridge to playing bridge. For instance, Hannah explained that the transition to club play is regarded as intimidating and anxiety-provoking, partly due to the unfavourable perception of the club environment:

There is a big fallout usually between learning and getting into the club ... the people are very happy to come and learn how to play bridge but then they are very nervous about going into the club and it is because of the reputation that it can be competitive and aggressive. (Hannah, Bridge teacher, England)

Providing more insight on people's perceptions of club play, Bilal gave an example of a student who delayed their entry to the bridge club:

There is someone I'm teaching now who ought to be playing in the club ... But I can't persuade him to do it yet, you know, he's got everything he needs, it's almost like he wants to be perfect before he starts, which is a barrier he is never going to get over, so if he's not careful he will never start. (Bilal, Bridge teacher, England)

Furthermore, in Bruce (19, Scotland)'s own experience, when he was learning with a cohort of 10-12 people, he felt he '*had a reasonable grasp of the concepts and understood the material*'. In the transition to playing at a local club, however, he did not '*do very well*' which '*is to be expected*'. Cassie echoed Bruce's thoughts, characterising club play as being more demanding than her previous experiences:

I went and played in the gentler sessions first because it seemed safer. [Laughter] I was quite nervous playing in the session to start off with though, because it seemed like a really big step up. (Cassie, 19, England)

Reflecting on this, Edwin (18, England) recognised that '*there needs to be a transition from playing with children to playing with adults*'. In summary, although players exhibit some reservations about entering bridge clubs as newcomers, they ultimately see the transition into club play as a necessary step to continuing to learn and play bridge.

Retirement: A return to bridge as a lifelong serious leisure pursuit

Young people's and bridge teachers' interview accounts show that bridge is a lifelong pursuit that players often return to, even after taking a break of several months or years. For them, bridge is '*sort of a gradual thing that became more important*' (Cassie, 19, England) in their lives. Deliberating on the role of bridge over the life course, Patricia said:

It's always been there in the background of my life and I still feel it really now. I feel bridge for me is a journey. It's not something that you just learn and go away. It is something that's going to keep me warm in my old age. ... I'm just going to read more books and sit down and play bridge. And you know, it will continue to give me whatever I want from it. I will never stop learning, and you know, it's just always there in the background. (Patricia, Bridge teacher, England)

Whilst bridge teachers remarked on their life trajectories retrospectively, young people focussed on their predicted future in bridge. Despite anticipated challenges, many expressed an intention for lifelong engagement, returning to bridge when they retire:

I'm not even halfway to retirement but I am sure that when I'm struggling for things to do in my old age, bridge will be on the list of things I consider. (Lauren, 18, Scotland)

Re-engaging with bridge during retirement was indeed the pathway that Bilal took, returning to regular play in his mid-50s after disengaging at about 33-34. Hannah reinforced this, saying that people in their 40s and 50s are ideally positioned to return to bridge because they will have more spare time to do so:

It starts again when the children get older, perhaps mum is at home because she has given up her job or only works part-time or the kids go to University. So it is at that point that most people come in and that is a great time to learn, you know, end of the 40s into the 50s, that is a good time to learn. (Hannah, Bridge teacher, England)

However, not all returns are planned, and some are unexpected as prompted by favourable circumstances:

I was asked to play in a team, you know, a spot became available in the team. So I joined that team and bridge started to become a bigger part of my life and other things dropped off instead. (Bilal, Bridge teacher, England)

Later life and retirement are thus seen as life stages in which bridge can be played freely and without too many impediments. By contrast, the youth bridge landscape is more challenging to navigate, as competing obligations and time pressures are negotiated. There is a need to reframe bridge as a serious leisure activity that can be enjoyed alongside work and family responsibilities and not merely as a retirement privilege.

Social support as a protective factor against disengagement

The intention to persist with bridge or return to bridge after a period of disengagement appears to be owed, in significant part, to the social support provided by members of the bridge community. While the access to local bridge clubs is a fundamental prerequisite to play, players' embeddedness within supportive social networks is an equally important determinant of their progression across transitional stages. For instance, Anthony (24, USA) credits his mentors and former bridge teachers with enabling him to continue playing bridge:

They've worked hard to keep me involved, to keep me spun up so I could go and compete. The army just came between me and competing and that level of commitment, despite the fact that I was in high school and I was in sports and I was like no, I still want to play. And they worked around my schedule. (Anthony, 24, USA)

In contrast, Sadie (22, USA) attributes her departure from bridge, in part, to not being re-approached once she disengaged:

Me and my best friend, we actually left the public school district and went to another school district. So I think once we got older, figuring out life, like high school, it was hard to be engaged in bridge. So we did stray away from bridge.

I think one thing I would have wished is maybe they reached out more, like when we were older. Like make sure, like, we don't forget the bridge ... Like reached out more how they used to when we were at the school. But I know it's harder to do that when you have to focus on the kids that are already there.
(Sadie, 22, USA)

With regards to the transition into the club setting, the friendliness of a bridge club's members is thought to be an important enabler of successful transitions:

I could imagine some clubs, in some areas, it could be an intimidating situation. When I played in some competitions where it's been rapid or fast-paced or something like that I could be nervous, but the club I was in was very welcoming in terms of that, so I found it was quite an easy transition. ... The club were very supportive of it, which is probably the only reason I stayed. They were a club that was very used to having new members. (Keith, 22, England)

Bridge teachers also emphasise the importance of welcoming young players and matching them with more experienced players:

I do think it is very important that when people go from learning into playing in a club that there is somebody in the club who is responsible for them, and there on the end of the telephone line, and are there on the day giving them encouragement, you know, 'how did you get on, did you put this slam' and just generally being positive about it all. (Hannah, Bridge teacher, England)

Mentorship, in particular, results in an increased confidence and likelihood of continuing to play amongst the young players. In Hussain's (20, England) view, playing with one of the stronger members in the club 'took care of some of the worrying element to it'. Thus the social support of friends and mentors from the bridge community both enables smoother transitions into new settings and prevents transitions out of the mindsport. By leveraging their insider knowledge of different avenues for learning and playing bridge, established players help those navigating transitions to progress between stages or encourage re-engagement. The availability of easily accessible opportunities for playing bridge, at times and spaces convenient to the young cohort, nevertheless remains critical to preventing young people from disengaging, and on occasion paradoxically 'aging out' of bridge despite their youth.

Discussion

A key finding of this study, which has direct implications for the growth of youth bridge, is that the initiation of new players into the mindsport is dependent neither entirely on social exposure and recommendation, nor only on the availability of regular and local opportunities to play. The early cultivation of young people's interest in bridge is instead facilitated by a combination of these factors, where multiple conditions converge to elevate awareness into participation. Indeed, many of the lived examples given by the participants, although driven by a diversity of contextual experiences (e.g. James & James, 2004), contained elements of repeated exposure through structural and social factors. A critical mass of experiences was accumulated, inspiring them to begin playing bridge: Ajay (18, USA) was taught by family but felt compelled to play when he saw his brother playing; Virginia (20, USA) became aware of her school's bridge club but it was her mum's endorsement that prompted her to try it out; Cole (30, USA) encountered bridge at a math camp but it was a peer reaching out that drew him to bridge.

This study has also revealed that young people experience two main kinds of transitions: five progressions in how they relate to the mindsport and three broader life course transitions, in which they must overcome challenges to participation. The transition period from childhood to adulthood is when there is particular risk of discontinuity with the mindsport. As young people leave school and craft new identities as professionals, spouses, or parents, they must identify ways of negotiating time constraints to allow time for bridge. This task is complicated, at times, by a lack of widespread availability of evening or weekend bridge games. As a result, participation may be reduced or ceased, in line with previous work (Becker & Lois, 2012; Mathisen et al, 2023). The negotiation of time emerges as a key consideration in the lifelong pursuit of serious leisure, echoing findings on the negotiation of bridge time commitments in couple relationships (Punch & Snellgrove, 2024).

Furthermore, the present research shows that bridge is a valued lifelong pursuit to which players return in later life. This pattern of episodic engagement aligns with Atchley's (1971) identity continuity theory, which suggests that leisure practices persist across the lifespan with some discontinuity during middle adulthood. Unlike physical sports where participation declines due to the changing physical capabilities or shifting priorities associated with ageing (Osgood & Lee, 1993), bridge discontinuity stems primarily from structural challenges relating to education, work, and family. Disengagement is more commonly exacerbated by the absence of sufficient support to successfully navigate transitions than by a loss of interest or ability. The commitment inherent in serious leisure, whilst attractive to some young people, however, may simultaneously function as a barrier for others seeking more casual recreation. Novice players may disengage when bridge begins to 'get serious', meaning not only that a considerable time commitment is required, but also that the time spent learning and playing bridge increasingly involves learning and improving, which can be seen as cognitively demanding. This finding can be related to Schulz and Watkins' (2007) categorisation of leisure meanings. Since bridge carries serious leisure connotations, it may prove to be misaligned with leisure goals pertaining to 'passing time' or 'escaping

pressure'. The very qualities that render bridge intellectually satisfying for some players can also alienate other players whose expectations of leisure are more akin to relaxation.

Similar to Maclean et al's (2026) research of different kinds of bridge players, the bridge player base in this study was not homogenous: some were more regular players than others, and some were more social than competitive. Many young players across this typology, however, found bridge clubs to be daunting. Some viewed club play as potentially 'competitive and aggressive', reporting a reduced readiness to transition into club play. Yet others viewed club play as a natural next step, associating classroom settings with learning and bridge clubs with playing. To accommodate the full spectrum of young players' orientations towards bridge and reduce the risk of excluding more casual players, clubs should avoid becoming associated primarily with competitiveness.

A key protective factor against player drop-out, both during the transition to club play and other key transitions, is the social support provided by members of the bridge community. The contrast between Anthony (24, USA)'s experience of bridge teachers 'working around' his schedule and Sadie (22, USA)'s wish that her former bridge teachers had 'reached out more' when she was older illustrates how the presence or absence of social support determines whether young bridge players persist with the mindsport. Thus, established members of the bridge community who offer encouragement and practical support play a crucial role in shaping outcomes, drawing on their access to insider information and enthusiasm for the mindsport to assist newcomers and players undergoing transition.

A practical recommendation for bridge organisations seeking to support player transitions is that there should be a greater emphasis on developing readily accessible spaces for learning and play that bridge the gaps between childhood, adulthood, and retirement. There should also be ample social support during such transitions in the form of long-term mentorship or more targeted intervention, such as assigning temporary aides to leavers or newcomers who can help orient and support players. People who support transitions may include youth coordinators, intergenerational mentors, bridge teachers, and peers (e.g. via a buddy system).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of young people's transitions and progressions within the mindsport bridge, elucidating the role of serious leisure across the life course. A key insight advanced by this work is that in their engagement with bridge, players experience five different kinds of progressions and navigate unique opportunities and challenges encountered across three life stages (childhood, adulthood, retirement). These transitions prompt young people to renegotiate their relationship with bridge, often requiring not only adjustments to their habitual practices, but also greater proactivity in seeking out new spaces in which to play.

The commitment inherent in bridge as a serious leisure pursuit appeals to many young players, who intend to persist with the mindsport into old age and who identify strongly with bridge. Young people may also drop out, however, if the structural conditions are unfavourable or if they are not encouraged or supported by their bridge teachers, mentors, or clubs. In light of the existence of different kinds of bridge players (e.g. Maclean et al, 2026) confirmed by this study, it is essential to develop spaces and experiences that can accommodate both socially and competitively oriented players. By expanding the range of regionally and locally accessible opportunities for learning and playing, bridge organisations can better support players during transitions and ensure the continuity of their bridge journeys.

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Recommendations

1. Provide social support across educational stages and early adulthood

Young people are most at risk of disengaging from bridge during the youth transition from childhood to adulthood. A dedicated role could be created within bridge clubs or bridge organisations, taking responsibility for maintaining contact with young players facing transitions. Its remit could include checking in regularly, circulating information about forthcoming events and opportunities, and helping players identify partners or clubs suited to their changing circumstances.

Some support is also needed during the transition from primary to secondary school. Pupils who no longer have access to a school bridge club should be supported to identify alternatives or even start their own club. Bridge organisations may benefit from retaining contact details (with appropriate permission) and maintaining communication with young players.

2. Expand the range of times and formats of lessons, games, and tournaments

The evidence indicates that scheduling mismatches are a primary driver of disengagement, rather than a loss of interest in bridge per se. For bridge to become more accessible to players in their twenties and thirties who work full-time, evening and weekend sessions are essential.

It is important to acknowledge that not every club will have the volunteer capacity or player numbers to sustain new formats. Regional events at weekends may bring geographically dispersed young players together without placing unsustainable demands on small local clubs. At the local level, hourly drop-in opportunities or shorter or more informal sessions could lower the participation threshold for busy players.

3. Foster welcoming club communities

The social dimension of bridge is consistently identified as a motivator for participation and as a protective factor against disengagement. Club environments could welcome young people by matching them with experienced and supportive partners or mentors and maintaining a positive and encouraging tone during interactions.

The transition from a school or university bridge group to an adult bridge club is frequently experienced as daunting. Clubs and organisations can ease this through buddy systems, by pairing newcomers with welcoming and experienced members, and setting realistic expectations about club play.

4. Accommodate the full spectrum of player orientations

This research confirms that bridge attracts many different kinds of players. Bridge tuition and play should accommodate both more casual and more serious players whilst retaining the designation of bridge as serious leisure and signposting opportunities for progression.

Bridge players should not feel that bridge is too demanding of their time and cognitive investment, unless that is the specific goal of their participation, since it was seen that some players disengage if they perceive bridge to be 'too serious'. This is particularly important for players in their twenties and thirties, who may be casual players out of necessity. In recognition of the many kinds of transitions experienced by players, bridge organisations can help normalise more irregular play patterns, welcoming players returning after a break.

5. Support different progressions by providing tailored support

Young people commonly experience five kinds of progressions within their bridge journeys, which signify their growing interest and commitment to bridge as a form of serious leisure. Tailored strategies to support players through each progression could prove beneficial:

- (1) From casual play to serious leisure – recognise when players begin taking bridge more seriously and offer more challenging and stimulating forms of learning and play.
- (2) From supervised to independent play – highlight how independent play differs from supervised play, setting expectations around greater player autonomy.
- (3) From playing non-competitively to competing in local, regional, and national tournaments – help players identify tournaments appropriate to their current skill level and provide preparatory training.
- (4) From playing with different partners to strategising with a regular partner – help players find regular partners and teach them partnership etiquette and strategy.
- (5) From conscious thought to intuitive play – support learners with memory aids at initial stages of learning and allow for greater creativity and flexibility as more automatic and intuitive cognition develops.

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