

# Lessons Learned from Bridge Lessons: A Sociological Exploration of the new University of Stirling Bridge Club, Scotland

**Kevin Judge<sup>a</sup> and Samantha Punch<sup>b</sup>**

*<sup>a</sup>University of Stirling*

*kevin.judge@stir.ac.uk; s.v.punch@stir.ac.uk*

The introductory lessons at the new University of Stirling Bridge Club represented a unique moment to explore the expectations, experiences and interpretations of beginners to the game of bridge. Framed through the literature of ‘serious leisure’, recent research examines the motivations of elite players and the benefits of wellbeing associated with lifelong play. However, the experiences of new players and how communities of play emerge has been absent. The purpose of this research project is to explore the development of new players, while considering the dynamics of leisure, play and community. A qualitative approach was employed involving a mixed method of questionnaires and participant observation. While providing insight into perceptions of the game and attitudes before, during and after play, challenges and success were also demonstrated. These findings offer a constructive foundation for future improvements to the University of Stirling Club, as well as being of use to other university bridge clubs. In addition, the research provides an important step towards understanding the experiences of new players and how communities of play develop, thereby contributing to the new academic field of the sociology of bridge.

Keywords: Bridge, ageing, club, community, game, intergenerationality, leisure, mind sports, play

## **Introduction**

In October 2018, the University of Stirling Bridge Club was launched to students, staff and the local community, and took residence in the Postgraduate Zone within the campus library. To coincide with

the launch, members were offered ‘fast-track’ introductory lessons, spanning eight consecutive weeks, in the hope that conventions, rules and systems could be made quickly accessible to new players, and the game of bridge less opaque. Each two hour session began with 20 minutes ‘teaching’ and the rest of the time playing pre-dealt hands which illustrated the learning points. Being introduced to the basics of bridge over a short time period (compared with lessons spread over 1-2 years) was a challenge, but was supported afterwards by supervised play sessions with a ‘helper’ from the local bridge club at each table. Embarking on this journey, everyone became a student, receiving guidance, support and, even, weekly homework assignments, from a selection of the Scotland’s top bridge players. It is this remarkable set of unique circumstances that provides the backdrop for exploring the challenges, limitations and successes of a new Bridge club.

Experts have promoted Bridge as ‘the ultimate game’ (Mendelson 2008: 9), ‘the greatest card game of all’ (Brkljadic, Lucic & Sucic 2017) and, even, ‘the greatest source of enjoyment that four people can have with a pack of cards’ (World Bridge Federation 2019). Professional, academic and organisational perspectives share the view that this unique mind sport, one that consists of four players that are paired into bidding partnerships, represents “one of the world’s most widely played stimulating and challenging card games” (McDonnell, Punch & Small 2017: 3). From a historical perspective, Scott (1991: 18) provided invaluable insight through a narrative analysis of the decline of contract bridge across the 20<sup>th</sup> century, referring to the game as a ‘social grace’. For Scott (1991: 13), players of bridge represented ‘storytellers’, a label that reflected a historical moment characterised by the closeness of family and community, while the rise and fall of the card game symbolised a fracturing between generations. Indeed, in the context of the United States, Sanders (1986) observed that the 1960s rebellion and reluctance to follow parents ‘broke the chain’; a generation passed on bridge and the game, arguably, lost its soul (Mannheim 1952).

Current research has attempted to reinvigorate the link between leisure activities and wellbeing (Brkljadic, Sucic & Brdovcak 2017; Punch & Graham 2018), however, these findings have concentrated on elite players and serious leisure, respectively. Encapsulated as ‘unlike other mind sports, which are easy to learn but difficult to master, bridge is also difficult to learn’ (Brkljadic, Sucic & Brdovcak 2017), the aim of this research is to, therefore, explore the journey of being a new player, not an elite, as they experience the successes and failures of learning bridge.

## **Bridge as Leisure**

The aim of bridge is to deliver on the contract. Bidding establishes the contract and, between four players, the cards are evenly distributed to signify the start of 13 rounds of play. The highest card of a suit wins the trick, unless bidding has confirmed a more dominant suit, and the game progresses through rounds of defence and attack. Bridge is a mentally challenging game and, much like chess, go, and Mahjong (Chinese solitaire using tiles), it is commonly categorised as a mind sport. Further distinctions

arise from commercialisation, ensuring that a two-tier system has developed between high- and low-performance sports, the latter defined as ‘the everyday, accessible, lifelong recreational activities that comprise sport and cultural democracy’ (Lenskyi 214: 506). Therefore, bridge, and other mind sports, are ‘games that rely on a participant’s perception and cognitive skills as opposed to her/his physical strengths’ (Helsen et al. 2016: 214).

Within these experiences of ‘taking tricks’, it must be accepted that playing the card game of bridge gravitates towards the distinction of being ‘serious leisure’ (Stebbins 2007). This term attempts to differentiate those willing to construct a leisure ‘career’ from those with casual or temporal intentions (Stebbins 2007). The chosen leisure activity is more than a project, it is a time-consuming commitment, found within a continuum of leisure and play. Understandably, leisure studies challenge associations with ‘left over’ time or theories suggesting unproductive, work-free time due to the narrowness of these perspectives (Godbey 1994). To put in context, bridge is more commonly taught in 20 lessons over the course of one year (or, 40 lessons over 2 years). In terms of inexperienced players, this level of commitment and demand might be a source of discouragement. Therefore, an exploration into some of the key features of leisure will prove beneficial.

Leisure, for Godbey (1994), can be conceptualised from four contexts: time, activities, state of existence, or state of mind. The influence of these contexts can greatly impact upon highly individualistic pursuits of leisure. Indeed, the ambiguity of free time is a challenge to leisure studies, as it generally stems from the dominant influences of capitalism on broader society. Activity, it is suggested, is representative of “scholē” referring to ‘serious activity without pressure of necessity’ (Goodman 1965: 31), or ‘to increase voluntary participation in the life of the community after discharging professional, family, and social duties’ (Dumazedier 1960: 526). The spiritual celebration of place, or belonging, can be understood as a ‘state of existence’, while leisure as a ‘state of mind’ refers to a period of freedom experienced as ‘controlling events rather than being controlled by events’ (Godbey 1994: 5). These examples demonstrate some of the forms and perspectives associated with leisure choice which may prove challenging when establishing a new university bridge club.

Stebbins (2007: 5) defines ‘serious leisure’ as an activity that is ‘so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling’ that the focus becomes ‘on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience’. ‘Serious leisure’ is an indispensable concept when conducting a sociological exploration of the bridge community because it provides insights into the influences and impacts that can be experienced across the life course from a career in leisure (Stebbins 2007: 50). These experiences will be greatly shaped by social divisions, such as age, class and gender, and highlights the demand for an approach to recognise the fluidity that can be experienced through leisure; ‘a person’s life course subsumes multiple roles, which evolve, interweave, and are assumed or abandoned across the lifetime of a person’ (Stebbins 2007: 50).

Importantly, social divisions intersect in multiple ways and can impact on leisure application, causing further separation, due to time constraints and maintaining a level of commitment required for 'serious leisure' (Baldwin & Norris 1999). The multitude of leisure opportunities can be problematic for a new club, particularly when an activity is associated with 'serious' (Stebbins 2007). Treated as a mind sport, concerns may arise from becoming over-immersed at the exclusion of other activities, achieving a sense of enjoyment; and reenergising, matching community values and feeling in control of free time when an individual has finite opportunities to freedom. Shifting focus from 'serious leisure' and a career approach taken to gaming, the next section will outline the significance for communities of play.

### **Forging a Community of Play**

Historically, 'play' has represented voluntary behaviour; individuals choose to be transported from 'ordinary life' to trivial moments and rulebound spaces that are willingly segregated from broader society through the sharing of an experience or secret (Huizinga 1950). For Graefe and Parker (1987), play is an essential component for self-development in the four distinct categories of physical, cognitive, emotional and social. Looking beyond the strengthening of bones and muscles, the categories of cognitive, emotional and social suggest that play can enhance resourcefulness, self-confidence and self-worth, and empathy, respectively (Bull, Hoose & Weed 2003). Even within contemporary research, efforts are being made to illustrate the importance of mental health, social connections and wellbeing through play, with the benefits on healthy ageing and intergenerational interactions through bridge that can build networks and friendships (Punch & Graham 2018).

Concerning the fundamental importance of play, reinterpretations of Caillois (1961) classic text argue for greater awareness of the development inherent to activities. For Caillois (1961), play represented the freedom to unravel a mystery or secret and, while opportunities to socialise existed, issues concerning chance and impulsivity meant that humans could, respectively, be often passive participants or likened to animals. Freedom to play, for Caillois (1961), did not equate to an awareness of improvement and, therefore, little attention was given to the development of capacity during this process. However, Biesty (1987) contests that play is inherently developmental and demonstrates that play possesses capacity-enhancing qualities, not just an ends in itself. Addressing the limitations of Caillois (1961), Biesty (1987: 14) argues that play is 'a self-reflection that celebrates the profane condition of the self in development, stasis, and exhibit current capacities and failings.' The importance of play resonates with a beneficial othering, often shared, within a unique time and space. It could be argued then, that successes through play are implicit, rather than the explicit failures from the pressures associated with serious leisure. This is relevant because, as outlined earlier, learning bridge can be a long process, and one that is difficult to master (Brkljacic, Sucic & Brdovcak 2017). Such diverse definitions and interpretations mean there is no universal concept of play.

Bull, Hoose and Weed (2003) identify that the concentration on childhood has generated a misguided association with play; one that has denied alternative age groupings. Similarly, Critcher, Bramham and Tomlinson (1995: 61) suggest that adulthood becomes a milestone for 'learning to forsake play', with any lingering inclinations to be re-established as 'sports, hobbies, and leisure pursuits.' Such themes highlight impulses as barriers to play within adulthood, especially notions of enjoyment, spontaneity and fun that is commonly associated with play, and reinforces the use of 'leisure' during this age-related period of life (Bull, Hoose & Weed 2003). These perceptions are problematic, as to describe bridge solely as leisure, while overlooking the process of learning or playing the game, offers a limited view of the experience.

Categories can emerge even within play; influencing and shaping aspects of capacity and commitment. It may indicate not only the formation of an 'in-group', but a grouping stratified through capacity and experience. Addressing this issue of stratification, Fine (1983) offers that three distinct approaches may exist in the process of play within communities: persons, players, and characters. The transitions between these categories can be expressed as vague interest, development and involvement, respectively (Fine 1983). These interpretations illustrate tensions, specifically through age, concerning the fun and spontaneity of play against 'serious leisure'. Shaped by commitment and investment in an activity, these tensions may stem from the need for a reflexive approach to develop 'special skills, knowledge and experience' (Stebbins 1992: 3). In terms of the university bridge club, an awareness that members will have varying levels of experience of the game, especially when opened to the broader community and local clubs, and that they constitute a mixture of persons, players and characters may coexist (Fine 1983). In short, successful 'serious leisure' transforms the voluntary individual towards involuntary action. It is this transition towards tacit knowledge that can isolate or include players into collectives, and it is in this context that play may thrive, and communities can develop.

Community can be portrayed as a descriptive or value term. Firstly, it can be a network of individuals who share a common attachment to territory or interest. Secondly, it may emerge as a 'sense' of belonging or membership based on a shared activity and experienced as a connectedness 'through a shared understanding of the world' (Haywood 1994: 14). Building upon the previous section, communities at play represent the coalescing of concepts and ideas of individual development and mind-set, shaped by socio-economic restrictions, towards a shared moment. Amid the barriers to leisure and play, notably individualistic goals and personalised lifestyles that are negotiated through social divisions, is the challenge of coming together. Henricks (2015: 59) offers that *communitas*, or spirit, of play can be represented as 'to seek feelings of transcendence that expand and integrate the self ... where people seek to experience the re-creative or regenerative power of otherness.' Indeed, the concept is further offered as an experience of egalitarian support within a collective, and one adrift from dominant roles, rules and rituals of society (Turner 1969).

Communities of play are integrative; the development of 'we' emerges as 'events display cooperative or mutually supportive practices' (Henricks 2015: 60), and unpredictable, as emphasised through the

freedoms expressed by Beisty (1987) or the release, or loss, of control (Caillois 1961). The collective will also experience 'other-regulated', in that external forms and patterns will influence and encourage a continuation of play (Henricks 2015). Such forms and patterns can be interpreted as episodic, strengthened by the continuation of relatable segments in a shared experience that bridge provides between the stages of bidding and playing the contract. Therefore, success is found in the aggregated series of shared challenges, experienced by the individual through the collaboration, strength and support of the group. After presenting the research methods, this paper will explore the ways in which communities of play emerge in the context of a new university bridge club.

## **Methods**

A qualitative approach was employed for this unique research to develop an analysis of the interpretations and experiences of the new members. Key to this approach is provision for respondents, and researcher, to give detail, depth and meaning to their experiences in a specific social setting (Holliday 2002). Exploring perceptions of bridge and the experiences of those learning to play the card game incorporated the use of questionnaires and participant observation. All participants were informed about the research and consented to each stage of the process. In fact, club members were quite enthusiastic about volunteering for this project and keen to talk about findings and results from the researcher as the lessons progressed.

An initial set of questionnaires were distributed to a target sample at the beginning of the 'fast-track' introductory lessons, with 20 respondents (13 female & 7 male) accepting the invitation. Initial questions, centred on motivations, expectations and experiences of playing bridge, were designed to be closed and open; the former used to identify the groupings of age, gender, and affiliation with the university, while the latter ensured that participants could provide detailed answers.

Within this paper, participants are identified by reference to these categories. An abbreviation is used for male and female (M/F), followed by age groupings, with affiliation to the university expressed as 'public' referring to members drawn from the local community, 'staff' as employees of the University of Stirling, 'PGR' as postgraduate research student, 'PGT' as postgraduate students registered on taught courses, and 'yr4' referring to year of undergraduate study.

The advantages of using open questions on a target population of research participants ensured that deeper, personal answers could be offered. While an efficient and simplistic method for data collection, this method can result in ambiguous responses and stray from the question (Gilbert 2008).

In terms of ethnography, the status of the researcher (Kevin) was made known to all participants of the club. As an overt full member learning bridge for the first time the researcher was an active participant at the bridge table necessitating the use of jotted notes between games, with expanded fieldnotes developed after the lesson. Hammersley (1995) states that fieldnotes can be 'unstructured data' and

appear trivial observations, however, the chronological nature of these recordings mirrors the journey, and broader experiences, of the learners. Reflecting further on the process of data collection during this period of participant observation, the researcher experienced moments of full immersion in the group when all 20 to 30 members focused on the tutor's weekly lessons. The researcher quickly resurfaced when play began between three other players at the bridge table, the closeness influencing an alternative method of data collection, mental notes, to enable a more natural setting of play to be maintained.

In the final phase of data collection, a second set of questionnaires were employed, with nine respondents (7 females & 2 males), focusing on their experiences; how this either supported or differed from their expectations, how they interpreted positive or negative outcomes from sessions, and what message they would give to new players in a future cohort. A similar format of closed and open questions was utilised to triangulate experiences between researcher and the group members.

This research process facilitated the refinement of expectations, experiences, interpretations from a range of participants, with the methods contributing towards an organic sense that a timeline to this journey of learning had occurred. The organic timeline can be expressed as before (questionnaire 1), during (participant observation) and after (questionnaire 2) the Bridge Club lessons.

## **Before**

### Why had you chosen to start playing Bridge?

Identifying motivations for joining the new bridge club ensured that the researcher could contextualise where new members were ‘coming from’. Responses varied from a stimulus for cognitive development to an opportunity to have fun:

“keep the mind going” [M, over 50, PGT]

“keeping my brain active” [M, over 50, PGT]

“always wanted to find out about this card game, heard that it was much fun” [F, over 50, public]

“interesting, I think it will be fun and social” [F, over 30, staff]

New members appeared to want a challenge from the game but were also aware of the fun and social dimensions that play could provide. Expanding on the social dimension, respondents identified family and friends as motivation to play the game:

“My grandmother plays, and it would be nice to play with her, or talk to her about it” [F, 25-30, yr4]

“played it previously [with my dad] and always enjoyed it” [F, 21-24, yr4]

“my parents and many friends have played it and love it” [F, over 50, public]

Reinforcing notions of social connections (Punch & Graham 2018), these responses suggest bridge continues to resonate strongly with some families and close-knit groups (Scott 1991).

### What were your expectations of Bridge?

Potential drawbacks and benefits of bridge emerged in the themes of either being ‘hard’ or ‘fun’ were shared by all respondents. The sense of it being difficult it being viewed as a cognitive puzzle of language and mathematics. Drawbacks were perceived as:

“quite difficult to learn with a new terminology” [F, 21-24, yr4]

“you have to be good at numbers” [F, over 50, Public]

“too mathematical” [M, over 50, PGT]

These early expectations mythologise the game of bridge, because while it is “hard” [M, over 50, PGT], it is the challenge between developing capacity and complete failure that is overlooked. The benefits of bridge, and this challenge, are described as “difficult, mentally challenging and enjoyable” [F, Over 30, staff], or the hope that it would be “fun, improve memory, social and good for the brain” [F, over 50,

public]. Positive responses continued, as the most explicit confirmation of potential enjoyment came from across all age groups of participants:

“hoping it is fun” [M, under 18, public]

“might be fun as a game, might meet people” [F, over 50, public]

#### Did the experience match or differ from your expectations, and how?

Almost unanimously, all participants shared that they expected their initial experience of bridge would be somewhat ‘hard’. Participants accepted that bridge would be “a bit too hard to comprehend”, “complicated”, “confusing”, “[a] struggle”, “tricky”, and “very difficult”, similar to initial concerns of ‘serious bridge’ outlined by Stebbins (2007). Despite these barriers, and opportunities to fail, members expressed that they enjoyed the introductory lesson. Rather than failure, it is felt that there was an episodic closure to this initial session into bridge, with shared support, and potential integration, described through “good, clear instructions ... enjoying playing under helpful supervision” [F, over 50, public], with “the teachers being clear and patient” [F, 21-24, yr4), and with the reassurances that “people talk to you” [F, 21-24, yr4).

#### **During**

The observations of a new bridge player reveal more than the journey of the “completely useless” (van Maanen 2011), as it sheds light on the transitions experienced through play towards a collective. *Communitas*, the spirit of community, emerges in the passages that unfold, as the researcher’s journey details experiences of immersion and integration into the ‘otherness’ of bridge (Henricks 2015).

*“It has been explained that the lessons are far more advanced than those experienced at a local club. The agreement by the mentors is to package a crash course on bridge over an 8-week period. At this stage, terms and turns are spoken but the definitions are lost. It does feel overwhelming... I appreciate that we need to understand how to communicate, we need, in a coded format, to provide information to our partners.”*

[Fieldnotes, 30/10/2018]

Emphasis on ‘we’ highlights shared concerns with failing to communicate with our partners, in terms of cooperation and support (see also Henricks 2015). The following extract illustrates the initial impression that learning the game for the first time can seem like a sizeable challenge, particularly in the context of ‘fast track’ lessons:

*“Despite boards of cards being designed by the mentors, players only have sufficient language and vocabulary skills, at this moment, to complete the game... Bridge is a highly mathematical, coded language of resource management and distribution.”*

[Fieldnotes, 30/10/2018]

There is a loss of control experienced in the game, as the challenge of learning this ‘bridge language’ is compounded by the unpredictability of values during each of the 13 rounds of play:

*“During this process [play], players are continually converting the value of their cards into something more.”* [Fieldnotes, 06/11/2018]

Unpredictability manifests in these early stages of learning. An uncertainty coexists between individual and setting; the accepted loss of control within the game to be solved, as control appears frustratingly elusive during this segregated setting of play yet may support the circumstances for personal development (see also Beisty 1987). Interestingly, the researcher, as a new player, has developed notes comparable to the observations by other novice members; that it is ‘highly mathematical’ and a ‘coded language’. This growing consensus, at an initial phase of bridge playing, raises questions as to why new players might associate the game with learning a new language or heavily reliant on addition skills.

Failure is a deep-seated process within cognitive, emotional and social development; it is a shared experience that reinforces the difficulties of learning bridge.

*“The explicit honesty that some players show is unbelievably refreshing. For sure, it is an aggregate of individuals, but there are multiple levels of attachment and engagement exhibited from the chuckles of despair, admissions of blankness, and sheer humility in struggling with the game. The game, the rules, and the language, force all inexperienced learners towards a level platform. We intently watch our opponent, then partner, then opponent make their plays, and all utter the same precluding question, ‘Right, so what do I do?’”* [Fieldnotes, 06/11/2018]

The table is uniform in attempting to make meaning of the game. Conventionally opposed through partnerships, the game becomes intermittently postponed for everyone to engage in mutually supportive practices and cooperation to learn the game. Other delays can impact upon the episodic feature of community play and the essential dynamics of space and time. This is significant for the researcher to adapt note taking styles, as it is imperative to maintain a natural setting for data collection, and subsequent analysis. Adaptation means that space, time and episode do not unravel when the group continue to be supportive in the shared experience of weariness at the end of a long day of study or work for most of the participants:

*“We are mentally fatigued... and we are doing our best to concentrate on learning Bridge. Even the simple act of counting, Ace, King, Queen and Jack, is a chore... we are even open about how we cannot retain this simple act of addition!”* [Fieldnotes, 13/11/2018]

The following two passages articulate the self-development of the new members, making the transition towards players (Fine 1983). In playing bridge, capacities have been developed and failings put into perspective. Cognitive, emotional and social developments, through play, can be viewed as the

solidifying of a shared moment in play (Graefe & Parker 1987). A sense of support, control within reach, and even, perhaps, an unravelling of the mystery.

*“We finish our final round of homework, trying to put these words, and diagrams, of advice into context. All answers are tenuous, completely unsure if they are even remotely correct, but we should have more confidence. But, for the most part, we, the regulars, are impressed by our development. Slightly proud of our progress even. There are shared glances, raised eyebrows and the twitch of a smile as conventions and contracts are explained.”* [Fieldnotes, 27/11/2018]

Growth continues to build with potential integration into the bridge world experienced between the club and community.

*“The support provided by the latter members [from local community], in sharing their understanding and asking questions beyond the remit of the new members, was invaluable. Those experienced players prompted examples a little further than intended and pushed the boundaries of the lessons. Many of these voices came from the local community... These questions, the nudges and pushes contained within, reinforced our understanding that the boundaries of the lessons were only temporal; we were walking the course before running it.”* [Fieldnotes, 27/11/2018]

The local bridge community proved vital to the club success, contributing vocal support and guidance during supervised play. For new players, this involvement means the augmentation of the segregated play, impacting upon interpretations of episodic and other-regulated dynamics (Huizinga 1950), it is encouraging for greater development, and transitions, in the game of bridge (see also Henricks 2015).

## **After**

Some expressed initial concerns about bridge through a stereotypical lens of age, more specifically, a game for older people:

“probably a game for old ladies” [M, over 50, PGT]

“quite dull and difficult, the sort of game older people [would] play” [F, 21-24, yr4]

Reflecting on the issue of old age and older age, this statement demonstrates the pressures of stereotypical attitudes to the game, “I perceived bridge as an older person’s activity and pushed back on the opportunity to take the game up years ago” [F, over 50, public]. One of the successes of the club has been to expose new players to the game and change perceptions, for example, older aged groups playing the game might be better associated due to the longevity of a challenging leisure activity.

Participants were asked to reflect on their expectations of the game, and how these compared with the experience of playing through introductory lessons. For many new players, the journey through these bridge lessons were referred to as a ‘challenge’, however some progress had been achieved; “I certainly feel like I have moved passed the novice phase, but still a good bit away from intermediate level” [M, over 50, PGT]. Incremental progress was offered, combined with a broader appreciation for the many technical facets of bridge. The technical facets of bridge are further illustrated by: “it’s more mathematical and memory-requiring than I remembered” [M, over 50, PGT].

New members expressed additional efforts towards development, and arguably success, as part of the process, as demonstrated in “I needed to gain a better knowledge of the processes within bridge” [F, over 50, public]. Even the offering that “I looked up YouTube videos of bridge games and it seemed very complex and difficult” [F, 18-20, public] provides insight into perceptions of the game before, and beyond, the lessons. However, despite a ‘complex’ learning curve into the game of bridge, the social side of play offered an insight into a collective bound by interest, “it has been nice to belong to the club and have a laugh at the table with fellow novices and it is as complicated as I thought it would be” [F, over 30, PGR].

Overwhelmingly, it was the social aspect of bridge that respondents referred to in their reflections, “it has been much more fun than I expected it to be” [F, 21-24, yr4] and “bridge can be a much more social game than I expected” [F, 18-20, public]. The observations continued to identify social connections and engagement as the room was [‘both constituted by and constitutive of social relations, including relations of age and generation’ (Vanderbeck & Worth 2014: 2)]. This reflects on the image and assumptions of the game to positively underscore the intergenerational aspect that bridge offers for integration, rather than segregation (Vanderbeck & Worth 2014):

“I have really enjoyed the social aspect and being able to meet people of different ages and backgrounds” [F, 21-24, yr4]

“I didn’t expect people of all different ages to be interested in bridge” [F, 18-20, public]

The themes of being social and socialising continued into positive outcomes from bridge experiences. Bridge is viewed as a fun game and a pause from academic studies. These accounts suggest the importance of play in adult lives (Stebbins 1992; Bull, Hoose & Weed 2003). This can be explained as an opportunity for immediate and future benefits, especially personal wellbeing, “a break from study and learning and teaching, or should I say a completely different learning context to the rest of the day” [M, over 50, PGT], or, similarly, an “antidote to hard study” [M, over 50, PGT]. Future benefits resonate positively as learning the game is viewed as access to games, even clubs, beyond the introductory lessons:

“definitely a bonus to know how to play, if I am ever in a situation of being invited to again outside of university. Also making me tempted to join a local bridge club” [M, over 50, PGT]

“learning how to play will open new opportunities to join other groups in the future once I leave university” [F, 21-24, yr4]

Proving more than a mind sport, one narrowly focused on cognitive development (Helsen et al. 2016), it is an ‘other’ to daily life that recreates, refreshes and regenerates:

“reduces my stress levels as it is something completely different from studying with a completely different set of people” [F, 21-24, yr4]

“having something outside of work and PhD to focus on” [F, over 30, PGR]

A successful example of bridge ‘bridging the gap’ between club and family, in “being able to do this with my daughter” [F, over 30, PGR], emerged as an invaluable source of emotional support and personal wellbeing could be taken from the learning and playing of bridge (Bull, Hoose & Weed 2003; Rojek 2010). The transition within learner and player is reminiscent of earlier responses who had reflected on friends and family members who had played the game. Bridge, then, can represent longevity, it is an ‘ongoing experience’ (Lenskyi 2014). Further, it is an intergenerational vehicle for bonding and sharing (Vanderbeck & Worth 2014), for “socialising with people from different walks of life that you wouldn’t have much opportunity to meet otherwise” [F, over 30, staff].

Framing negative outcomes from this study becomes difficult through a success and failure dichotomy. All but three respondents stated that they felt no negative outcomes from playing bridge, however pace and intensity of bridge lessons was reported. This could represent respondents making a distinction between lessons and play. Further to this distinction, the response for more play with an alternative method of support delivery is a welcome contribution for the club to learn a lesson from its members, “having the Saturday afternoons to play with a different support was of enormous additional value” [M, over 50, PGT]. Players seemed to take personal responsibility, as more dispositional issues framed negative experiences which could be found in the failure to do bridge homework (for example, reading and revising teaching notes), remembering elementary things, and being tired at the time of the lessons. This could represent the importance of time consumption, and being involved with the game while away from the bridge table (Stebbins 2007). Interestingly, the observation of “more interaction with different tables” [F, over 30, PGR], signifies some disappointment that social engagement was perceived as too limited. This could be an improvement that the club easily addresses for future success.

Finally, players were provided the opportunity to give a short message to future players. Framed around “advice to potential bridge players” responses transmitted the paradox of play to varying degrees, in that they reaffirmed the challenges to learning bridge, but reinforced the positive social aspect of the game (see also Helsen et al. 2016; Lenskyi 2014). Responses shared the notion of further engagement with the game, beyond the setting of introductory lessons:

“find a group you can practice with outside of lessons” [F, 18-20, public]

“continue playing bridge” [F, 21-24, PGT]

“find somewhere that supports beginners or provides lessons” [F, over 30, staff]

The club has delivered on its aim of introducing new players to the game of bridge, and it has succeeded in developing a community of play. This can be seen by those hungry to transition deeper and further into the world of bridge. Bridge remains a complex card game, one that requires serious commitment and investment (Stebbins 2007), but in the process of learning it can be played, and the rewards are evident: “It’s a challenging game, addictive but great fun!” [F, over 50, public]

## **Conclusion**

This paper began by discussing leisure as a highly personalised way of living (Goodale & Godbey 1988), which offers opportunities for emotional and social developments to flourish (Rojek 2010). Bridge is ideally designed for such individual and social support because it is played as a partnership between four players. Therefore, ‘serious leisure’ represents a unique connection, between the private and the public, of a highly personalised lifestyle matched to a thick social world (Baldwin & Norris 1999). The journey of learning bridge by new players has been discussed through the individual and social pressures concerning leisure and play. This paper has used these concepts to explore the expectations, experiences and interpretations of bridge club members.

It is important to note that this learning experience occurred in the specific context of an innovative intergenerational university bridge club, which was open to all ages including staff, students and local community. The club trialled a new ‘fast track’ approach of eight weekly lessons followed by supervised play, thus the benefits of learning the basics over two months has to be weighed against the downsides of learning at an intense pace. Not only does the journey reflect development and transition, but it provides insight into community, and the growth of a collective from interest to belonging.

The paper has considered the ways that communities of play reinforce a version of separation that is supported through conformative behaviours (Henricks 2015), better understood as an immersion within a shared meaning by a social grouping (Huizinga 1950). Highly dependent upon context, communities offer a platform for participants to develop and share meanings, and play allows for the negotiations of how meanings can be formed. Those who teach bridge to new players or who supervise play sessions need to be mindful of the time taken to build up such meanings and learn the language of the bridge community. It should be noted that bridge clubs, particularly those at university with limited resources, may rely on local volunteers who are bridge players but not necessarily qualified or experienced bridge teachers. This paper has focused on new bridge players’ experiences of an intergenerational university club but future research could explore other bridge club contexts as well as the perspectives of bridge teachers.

Furthermore, as Godbey (1994) argues, social, psychological and political reasons can inhibit freedoms to leisure, as much as economic barriers. Such factors can pose a challenge to establishing a new bridge

club as well as sustaining an existing one. In the current study the views of the few who dropped out of lessons were not captured in the final questionnaire once the course was complete, hence limiting the exploration of the 'failures' of the club and fast track lessons. Fluctuating numbers are likely to occur for a range of reasons and further research is required to investigate declining numbers across a range of bridge club settings.

Nevertheless, in relation to the microcosm of the university setting, early data is encouraging. Perceptions have been altered and, regardless of age, gender or affiliation with the university, bridge represents a link to an elsewhere; distant from routine but offering an opportunity for closeness to a community. Bridge is a game of mistakes, with numerous opportunities to 'fail'. Nonetheless, each error can be redefined as a learning experience with gradual transitioning for players, even characters, to develop (Fine 1983). It could be argued that the club offered a valuable lesson in resilience, by embracing mistakes as part of the process of self-development, strengthening the bonds for better social and emotional management (Punch & Russell 2019). Bridge remains a complex game, however, the success of the club has enabled a new group of storytellers to develop (Scott 1991).

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support and generosity of English Bridge Education & Development (EBED), Scottish Bridge Union (SBU), Northern Ireland Bridge Union (NIBU), Irish Bridge Union (IBU), and Welsh Bridge Union (WBU), Dr Louise McCabe, Dr Caroline Small and Donna Wright.

## References

---

- Baldwin, C. & Norris, P. (1999) 'Exploring the Dimensions of Serious Leisure: Love me – love my dog!', *Urbana*, vol. 31, (1) pp. 1-17.
- Bietsy, P. (1987) 'Caillois Revisited: A Developmental Classification of Games', IN G.A. Fine. *Meaningful Play, Playful Meaning*, Illinois: Human Kinetics Publishers Inc. pp. 3-16.
- Brkljacic, T., Sucic, I. & Brdovcak, B. (2017) 'Serious Leisure Activities and Well-being of Senior Citizens: The Case of Contract Bridge.' *Andragogiczny*, 24: 157-174.
- Bull, C., Hoose, J. & Weed, M. (2003) *An Introduction to Leisure Studies*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Caillois, R. (1961) *Man, Play and Games*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Clarke, J. & Critcher, C. (1985) *The Devil Makes Work: Leisure in Capitalist Britain*. London: MacMillan.
- Critcher, C., Bramham, P. & Tomlinson, A. (1995) *Sociology of Leisure*. London: E & FN Spon.
- Dumazedier, J. (1960) 'Current Problems of the Sociology of Leisure.' *International Social Science Journal*, 12. pp. 522-31.
- Fine, G.A. (1983) *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gilbert, N. (2008) *Researching Social Life*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Godbey, G. (1994) *Leisure in Your Life*. Pennsylvania: Venture Publishing.
- Goodale, T. & Godbey, G. (1988) *The Evolution of Leisure*. Pennsylvania: Venture Publishing.
- Goodman, P. (1965) 'Leisure: Purposeful or Purposeless', IN P. Madow, ed. *Recreation in America*, New York: H.W. Wilson Company.
- Graefe, A. & Parker, S. (1987) *Recreation and Leisure: An Introductory Handbook*. Pennsylvania: Venture Publishing.
- Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (1995) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Routledge.
- Haywood, L. (1994) *Community Leisure and Recreation: Theory and Practice*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Helsen, W.L. et al (2016) 'Relative age effects in a cognitive task: A case study of youth chess', *High Ability Studies*, Vol 27 (2). pp. 211-221

- Henricks, T.S. (2015) *Play and the Human Condition*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Holliday, A. (2002) *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Huizinga, J. (1950) *Homo Ludens: A study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Kettering: Angelico Press.
- Lenskyj, H.J. (2015) 'Sport mega-events and leisure studies', *Leisure Studies*, Vol.34 (4), pp. 501-507.
- McDonnell, D., Punch, S. & Small, C. (2017) *Individual Wellbeing and Bridge: An Empirical Analysis*. Aylesbury: English Bridge Education & Development (EBED).
- Mannheim, K. (1952) *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Mendelson, P. (2008) *Bridge for Complete Beginners*. London: Robinson.
- Punch, S. and Graham, E. (2018) 'Elite Bridge Players' Motivations to Participate in the Mind Sport of Bridge', 2nd academic conference on *Recreational Activity and Bridge*, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Torun, Poland, 5 December 2018.
- Rojek, C. (2010) *The Labour of Leisure: The Culture of Free Time*. London: Sage Publications.
- Russell, Z. and Punch, S. (2019) 'Temperament is Everything: Bridge Partnerships, Emotions and Player Identities', *Leisure Studies Annual Conference*, Abertay, 9-11 July 2019.
- Sanders, T. (1986) Open letter to Bob Ewen: Blueprint update. *The Contract Bridge Bulletin*, pp. 111-112.
- Scott, D. (1991) 'A Narrative Analysis of a Declining Social World: The Case of Contract Bridge', *Play and Culture*, 4(1): 11-23.
- Stebbins, R. (1992) *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure*. Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Stebbins, R. (2007) *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Turner, V. (1969) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Van Maanen, J. (2011) *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vanderbeck, R.M. & Worth, N. (2014) *Intergenerational Space*. London: Routledge.
- Veblen, T. (1924) *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. London: Unwin.
- World Bridge Federation (2019) *What is Bridge?* <http://www.worldbridge.org/what-is-bridge/> [Accessed: 26 February 2019].