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Bridging the gaps

Diaries and digital card games during the COVID-19 pandemic

Miriam Snellgrove and Samantha Punch

6th September 2022

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic led to national lockdowns throughout 2020 and beyond, affecting all spheres of social, economic and political life. Hospitality, retail, cultural and leisure practices either stopped completely or were moved online. Digital spaces for socialising and exploring a range of leisure activities (from baking sourdough bread to following fitness guru Joe Wicks' online physical education classes) proliferated. Bridge, a four-player card game beloved of older generations of players, made the transition from face-to-face play to the world of digital play, managed by an array of dedicated teachers, players and national and international bridge organisations.

With the aim of capturing and documenting this shift to digital bridge, we launched the Bridging Covid [<https://bridgemindsport.org/home/research/bridging-covid/>] project in 2020. From April to November 2020, we collected over 300 diary accounts from more than 100 bridge players, teachers and organisers from 19 countries around the world. Our participants were given the freedom to submit diary accounts in whatever form they wanted. The majority of diary accounts submitted were textual, typed and in English; some included photos, and a few were handwritten.

Although it has been well documented that diary data is excellent for capturing people's everyday lived experiences, we wanted to acknowledge and take seriously the ways that such documents can also structure the fabric of social reality during a time of crisis and disruption as Plummer and Stanley have illustrated.

Alongside this, we employed scholar of social work Mona Livholts' ideas around situated writing in our analysis. As Livholts and Tamboukou notes, situated writing is a "methodological strategy that combines feminist theorising of situated knowledges and writing as a methodological tool". From this perspective, feminist theorising is not separate from the practice of writing and the demand to ask *who* writes, *how* they write, *when* they write (in what situations and contexts). Practically employing situated writing throughout the analysis and writing-up of the Bridging Covid project has meant paying attention to gaps, silences, repetitions and the often fragmentary nature of entries provided, while being sensitive to the broader social context in which the diaries were written.

We also situate ourselves very clearly in the analysis and do not claim to have a definitive reading of the diary entries, merely providing *a* way of understanding how diary writing was used by our participants to document the changes to a much-loved leisure activity during the pandemic.

Lockdown diaries

Below are three entries, shared in their unedited entirety, which we invite you to read as distinct individual accounts that reveal the situated biographical idiosyncrasies and everyday-ness of life during the spring lockdown of 2020 in Europe. Alongside this individual reading is the broader collective purpose of our research, which was to understand how the pandemic (and in particular lockdown) was affecting people's bridge-playing leisure habits.

The first two accounts are from a self-identified British man and a Scottish woman, both in their seventies, who wrote a series of diary entries for us between April and July 2020. The third account was a one-off diary entry sent to us in April 2020 by a Norwegian woman in her fifties. We follow these accounts with our own thoughts on applying situated writing to the analysis of these accounts, for, as Livholts reminds us, "neither the writer nor the reader comes to the page with nothing from nothing".

Account 1: May 2020

This diary was written by a Scottish female, 70+ years of age, and typed up in a Word document.

Bridge A MindSport for All

Thu 14/05/2020 01:07

Bridge to peace

Although most sports are suffering badly from lockdown, bridge and other so-called mind sports can give huge comfort to many in their own homes.

I'd always resisted online bridge as I enjoy the company of playing in a club. However, the online offering is available 24/7 and it's been amazing to play with other aficionados from all over the world. The chat facility means we can empathise: an Indian partner was also coming to terms with lockdown. Sadly, lack of equipment, know-how and confidence means not all players are able to benefit.

Lockdown is highlighting many examples of digital divides. It is particularly concerning that some children do not have full access to online education.

Margaret Frank

Account 2: May 2020

This diary was made by a British Male, 70+ years of age, who kept a record of their activities written in a spreadsheet.

Daily Diary

Date: 07/05/2020

Before 9am: Got up; Breakfast; Drove to Supermarket (Nancy, my daughter, does not drive)

0900 to 1000: Shopping for 2 friends (C19); Nancy did our own

1000 to 1100: Shopping for 2 friends (C19); Nancy did our own

1100 to 1200: Marked week 07 Homework - Distant learning - C19

1200 to 1300: Marked week 07 Homework - Distant learning - C19

1300 to 1400: Snack Lunch

1400 to 1500: Gardening

1500 to 1600: Gardening

1600 to 1700: Listened to Classic FM - OK - Nancy was out for afternoon

1700 to 1800: Listened to Classic FM - OK - Nancy was out for afternoon

1800 to 1900: Watered Garden

1900 to 2000: Dinner

2000 to 2100: Bridge on BBO with Phil, Betsy & Tim (learning seniors)

2100 to 2200: Bridge on BBO with Phil, Betsy & Tim (learning seniors)

2200 to 2300: Supper with Nancy and watched TV (catch up)

Before 11pm: And so to bed!

Account 3: April 2020

This diary was written by a Norwegian female, 50+ years of age, and sent by email.

Hi, i live alone and have experienced depression earlier during/after hollidays like Christmas and Easter. Now i have been home alone and only met two persons since 14. mars, and been out only for small hikes and shopping apart from that. But i have not felt as lonely! Our bridge society (aproximately like a county) NBF Troms og Ofoten has held normal Club nights for the «county» every day from Monday to Thursday and we have thus been able to play with and against our peers. That has been very nice and different from just playing «normally» on BBO or Funbridge as I have done alot earlier. Now we maintained contact with our club- peers.

If you have any further questions dont hesitate to ask. 😊

Bridge A MindSport for All
Thu 14/05/2020 01:07

Bridge to peace

Although most sports are suffering badly from lockdown, bridge and other so-called mind sports can give huge comfort to many in their own homes.

I'd always resisted online bridge as I enjoy the company of playing in a club. However, the online offering is available 24/7 and it's been amazing to play with other aficionados from all over the world. The chat facility means we can empathise: an Indian partner was also coming to terms with lockdown. Sadly, lack of equipment, know-how and confidence means not all players are able to benefit.

Lockdown is highlighting many examples of digital divides. It is particularly concerning that some children do not have full access to online education.

Margaret Frank

Account 1: Scottish, female, 70+ years of age, May 2020

Daily Diary		
Date:		07/05/2020
From	To	Occupied Time
	> 9am	Got up; Breakfast; Drove to Supermarket*
0900	1000	Shopping for 2 friends (C19); Nancy did our own
1000	1100	Shopping for 2 friends (C19); Nancy did our own
1100	1200	Marked week 07 Homework - Distant learning - C19
1200	1300	Marked week 07 Homework - Distant learning - C19
1300	1400	Snack Lunch
1400	1500	Gardening
1500	1600	Gardening
1600	1700	Listened to Classic FM - OK - Nancy was out for afternoon
1700	1800	Listened to Classic FM - OK - Nancy was out for afternoon
1800	1900	Watered Garden
1900	2000	Dinner
2000	2100	Bridge on BBO with Phil, Betsy & Tim (learning seniors)
2100	2200	Bridge on BBO with Phil, Betsy & Tim (learning seniors)
2200	2300	Supper with Nancy and watched TV (catch up)
>11pm		And so to bed!

Account 2: British, Male 70+ years of age, May 2020

Hi, i live alone and have experienced depression earlier during/after hollidays like Christmas and Easter. Now i have been home alone and only met two persons since 14. mars, and been out only for small hikes and shopping apart from that. But i have not felt as lonely! Our bridge society (aproximately like a county) NBF Troms og Ofoten has held normal Club nights for the «county» every day from Monday to Thursday and we have thus been able to play with and against our peers. That has been very nice and different from just playing «normally» on BBO or Funbridge as I have done alot earlier. Now we maintained contact with our club- peers. If you have any further questions dont hesitate to ask. 😊

Account 3: Norwegian, female, 50+ years of age, April 2020

Screenshots taken by Miriam Snellgrove showing the diaries in their original form.

Perhaps one of the first things that strikes the reader is the reference to bridge terminology and acronyms that can be confusing and alienating: “BBO/Funbridge/NBF/learning seniors” are phrases that speak to a knowledge not immediately accessible and obvious to all. The diarists already assume their accounts will be read by Samantha Punch, who is an experienced and well-known bridge player. This awareness of the research team’s expertise means that bridge knowledge is taken for granted from the outset of the diary writing and left unexplained. This gap/absence in the writing can be explained by the feminist theorist Donna Haraway who suggests that there are “specific ways of seeing” and that knowledge is always embodied and situated.

To embrace readerly solidarity and to aid clarification, we note that NBF refers to the Norwegian Bridge Federation, BBO/Funbridge are two online bridge platforms, and “learning seniors” refers to people over the age of 30 who are learning to play bridge.

This situated, embodied knowing is further evidenced by the inclusion of names, places and activities written about, but not clarified. This is particularly in evidence with the second account that refers to Nancy (the diarist’s daughter), homework/distant learning and listening to the UK radio station Classic FM. Such writing draws cultural links between author and reader, where the shared practices of shopping for food for vulnerable friends during the pandemic, gardening and listening to classical music are individually experienced, but collectively lived through and understood.

Another collective practice across all three accounts is the central role of digital bridge (and this was the case across the project as a whole). Account three points out that although the writer has not seen anybody for over five weeks (at the time of writing), she has not been “lonely” due to playing online bridge “Monday to Thursday”. Although recent research has pointed to a digital divide for people [https://ageing-better.org.uk/resources/covid-19-and-digital-divide-supporting-digital-inclusion-and-skills] aged 50 to 70, our Bridging Covid [https://bridgemindsport.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Policy-Briefing.pdf] data shows an older population largely embracing the move to digital bridge during lockdown as a key strategy for tackling enforced social isolation and the challenges of long-term health issues.

Of course it is also crucial to note that alongside bridge play and managing everyday life during the pandemic, our diarists also wrote to us. The three accounts presented here give a flavour of style, format, content and themes present throughout the larger data set as a whole. Employing situated writing as a conceptual and methodological lens for the project has been invaluable in guiding how we read, think and analyse the writing before us. Such an approach enables us to see how the personal and biographical are always implicated in broader social structures, practices and processes: in this case, the vital role of writing and leisure during a pandemic.

Authors' note

All names mentioned in the diary entries are pseudonyms provided by Miriam Snellgrove.

References and further reading

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About the authors

Miriam Snellgrove

Miriam Snellgrove is Lecturer in Research Methods at the University of Glasgow, and a sociologist interested in leisure, everyday life, feminist theories and qualitative research methods, particularly around diaries and writing. She has worked on a variety of research projects, most recently on the Bridge: A Mindsport for All (BAMSA) project based at the University of Stirling. Twitter: @baresociologist

Samantha Punch

Samantha Punch is Professor of Sociology in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Stirling and an international bridge player who has represented Scotland since 2008. Her research interests lie within the sociology of childhood and youth, and she is currently developing the sociology of mindsport as a new field of research. She leads the research project, Bridge: A MindSport for All (BAMSA), which explores the social interactions and dynamics of serious leisure, including emotions, identities and gendered inequalities. Twitter: @punch4s47 and @bridgemindsport

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