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# Bridging time: negotiating serious leisure in intimate couple relationships

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## ABSTRACT

Engaging in competitive leisure and sporting practices can cause relationship tension and stress. This paper explores negotiations of gendered time and serious leisure participation. Using the card game bridge, as a case study, it discusses the ways elite tournament players combine intimate relationships with a competitive mindsport. By having an intimate partner who also plays bridge, participants are able to manage playing competitively *and* the desire for a life-partner. Whilst offsetting some of the challenges of combining serious leisure with familial responsibilities, our data shows that intimate bridge partnerships move between fun, fights and failures at the table. Given that elite-level mindsport is dominated by men, women are consistently constructed as the weaker player in couple-dyads, despite this not always being the case. Based on qualitative interviews with elite bridge players, the paper speaks to the tensions of negotiating intimate relationships and serious leisure in a time-pressured and gendered world.

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## Introduction

Time in late modern societies is known as a precious and valuable commodity, something that can be bought, sold and is always in short supply. Our everyday lives are full of constant negotiations about time and, crucially, often not having enough of it (Wajcman 2016). To manage the multitude of time commitments in a life (and not just the essential eating, sleeping, working) there are a host of other time constraints around managing family and intimate partnerships, as well as engagement with different forms of leisure activities. Our lives are therefore temporally regulated through a series of everyday practices and negotiations (Zerubavel 1981) where compromises may need to be made in order to participate in serious leisure pursuits (Dashper, Abbott, and Wallace 2020).

It has long been recognized that playing sports at an elite level often demands compromises around family and friends and the time spent with them (Burlot, Richard, and Joncheray 2018; Dashper, Abbott, and Wallace 2020). Within Stebbins' (2020) serious

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leisure perspective, the partnership card game bridge can be categorized as a serious pursuit and as casual leisure (Scott and Godbey 1992). Elsewhere we have demonstrated that for elite-level bridge, both serious leisure amateurs and professional devotee workers come together within the same leisure space (Punch, Russell, and Graham 2022). The unique social world of elite bridge offers an interesting arena to shed light on dyadic participation in leisure, where couples negotiate time for their bridge and life partners. Recognizing the experiences of time as a scarce and valuable resource, this article explores how elite bridge players actively pursue intimate relationships with other bridge players as a way of managing intimate relationships within a high-pressured competitive environment.

The paper begins by outlining the game of bridge and the research study. It considers literature relating to gendered time and serious leisure, before discussing the sample and methods. It then unpacks how time is embedded in the playing of bridge and the importance of bridge partnerships in the sustaining and maintaining of intimate relationships.

## **Bridging time**

The game of bridge is a game governed by time. The playing of hands, competing in tournaments and working on bridge partnership all take a large amount of time. Time is present in a multitude of ways, most evident in the development of bridge partnerships. At the elite level, bridge is a complex game and those who play it often say that it will take a lifetime of playing to attempt to master the techniques, moves and counter-moves. Bridge is a four-player dyadic card game where all 52 cards in a deck are dealt. Each player receives 13 cards which are typically divided into suits (clubs, diamonds, hearts and spades) and in ascending order from the Ace (the strongest and highest card) to 2 the lowest card. Based on the 13 cards in a hand, players communicate the strength of their hand to their partner by using bidding cards. Several rounds of bidding ensue to determine which of the players from the two partnerships at the table will play that bridge deal (where all cards are played out by each player in turn). The other partnership 'defends' the hand, and tries to stop that player reaching their bidding target (see Punch and Snellgrove (2021) for more detail about the bridge process of bidding followed by play and defense).

Similar to chess (Fine 2019), playing bridge competitively demands increasing skill in reading the opponents, interacting with opponents at the table and planning strategically. However, unlike chess, bridge is a partnership game and much of the success of bridge play relies on how well a particular partnership can work together to thwart the gameplay of the opposing partnership (Punch and Snellgrove 2021). Bridge is a game of fixed duration with strict sequential structures of when each player can lay a card. For the purposes of this article what is crucial to know is that each bridge hand lasts about 7–8 minutes, thus decisions are made in real time and under some time pressure. A typical session of bridge usually consists of 24 hands, lasting approximately three hours.

At the competitive level, a bridge tournament would involve a minimum of two sessions lasting around eight hours with a break in between. Some are weekend tournaments of four or five sessions, and at the international level a championship may last up to two weeks taking place in different countries all over the world. Players know how much time they need to give up in order to play different events throughout the year. Elite

bridge then is a mindsport that (a) requires time and patience to learn, (b) requires a partner to spend time practising with before and after tournaments and (c) requires a substantial amount of leisure time to play various tournaments. Bridge players can often spend entire weekends/weeks away, especially when reaching elite levels. This places particular pressures on achieving an appropriate work-life balance (Shippen 2014; Dashper, Abbott, and Wallace 2020) which combines work, leisure and family commitments. At the elite level, bridge players tend to be predominantly white, well-educated and upper or middle class. Continents with the most bridge players are North America and Europe, with the largest bridge federations being the USA, France, the Netherlands, Australia and England. However, there are 101 countries who are members of the World Bridge Federation, and it is not a game that is exclusively played by more economically privileged players. Bridge is also growing in popularity in China and India.

Elite bridge includes professional and amateur players (Punch, Russell, and Cairns 2020). The distinction of professional and amateur does not necessarily refer to skill level, but whether players are making their livelihood through playing bridge for money, or whether players have another job that pays the bills where bridge is fitted in and around work/domestic life arrangements (the amateurs). Bridge professionals earn their living by being paid to play by wealthy sponsors who can afford to partner or play in a team with professionals. Sponsors tend to be those who have had successful careers in other fields, such as being a CEO of a large company. They use their financial success to pay professionals to play with them, which enables them to play at a higher level than if they partnered a peer. Professional players tend to be concentrated in certain locations which offer opportunities for playing with sponsors, such as London, New York and Florida. Bridge professionals have usually learnt to play from a young age, representing their country at the junior level and gradually moving from part-time paid games to securing more regular spots on well-paid teams (Punch 2021). By performing well in bridge competitions and increasing their reputation as an elite-level player, they can earn a full-time livelihood by combining paid opportunities across a range of local, regional, national and international tournaments.

The data presented here is part of a larger research project, *Bridging Minds*, based on 52 interviews with elite players, which explored player identities (Punch, Russell, and Cairns 2020), motivations (Punch, Russell, and Graham 2022), strategic interactions (Punch and Snellgrove 2021), professionalization (Russell, Punch, and McIntosh 2022) and gender inequalities (Punch et al. 2023; Rogers, Snellgrove and Punch 2022). This paper focuses on 38 of those interviews where players discuss their past and present lived experiences of playing bridge with their life partner. The aim is to explore intimate couples' shared experiences of participating in competitive serious leisure.

### **Exploring time**

Time has been a preoccupation and source of interest and frustration since humans started trying to map and understand the passing of seasons, the process of ageing and the development of mathematical laws. Glennie and Thrift (2009, 65–66) point out that there is no universally agreed history of time but that time 'stems from diverse practices' and that these cannot be 'unhinged' from the 'practices of everyday life' and the material artefacts we employ to help us tell the time. As a result, we live in a world of

multiple times that change not just when we move around the globe, but are learned and understood through the particular socio-cultural groups we belong to (Gurevitch 1964, 27). Recognizing the importance of such cultural practices led Bourdieu (1977, 1987) to articulate an account of time where bodily practices must and always do, unfold in time. Bourdieu argued that the construction of time must be understood around embodied and enacted practices (weeping at a funeral for example) and are not merely performative. It is only through these embodied, temporally located practices that we come to have an understanding of time. In this way, weeping at a funeral for example, is an embodied 'geometer' of practice. The body 'believes in what it plays out: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorise the past, it *enacts* the past, bringing it to life' (Bourdieu 1977, 73). The practice-based, embodied nature of time presented here is significant, as much academic scholarship on time can focus more on the rules and structures of sequential life (see Zerubavel 1981) to the exclusion of the enacted and embodied aspects of time in capitalist societies.

Wajcman (2016) suggests that our notions of time are increasingly determined by the capitalist societies we live in and that time is something in short supply. People no longer feel they have the time to participate and do the things that are important to them. The upshot of this means that people living within late capitalist societies are subject to 'time famine' (Robinson and Godbey 1997) and that 'more has to be done in less time' (Widerberg 2006, 114). In their study on volunteer tourism, Grabowski, Wearing, and Small (2015) show how 'time famine' is most clearly enacted when people move and work in different cultural spaces. Ideas around time being 'pressured' and 'linear' are more acutely in evidence in the global north, in contrast to countries in the global south where time may be experienced as 'slower' and more plentiful.

Alongside these geographical and cultural differences regarding time, feminist scholars also argue that experiences of 'time famine' are understood and embodied differently for women (Kristeva 1981; Davies 1994) due to their gender roles and domestic responsibilities. Women's time, for example, is connected to her specific culturally proscribed gender roles and often rubs up against wider cultural masculine norms of productivity and punctuality (Shaw 1994). Intimate relationships whilst bound by the experiences of time, are still riddled with inequalities and assumptions about who should do what and how that is rewarded (Jamieson 1998, 1999).

In particular, the domestic responsibilities facing women (raising children, cooking and cleaning) are not given the same amount of recognition as masculine time working away from the home and a work life dictated by scheduled clock time. This time famine is even more acute when it comes to women participating in sport and leisure activities where their participation is further limited by the timing of events, ability to access venues and broader patriarchal ideologies about 'appropriate' bodies and attire (Henderson, Hodges, and Kivel 2002; Henderson 2013; Tzu and Tsai 2011; Valtchanov and Parry 2017; Rogers, Snellgrove, and Punch 2022). However, the category 'woman' should not be seen as a universal and uniting one, as access to and participation in a range of leisure activities changes over time, place, ethnicity, class, health and sexuality to name a few (Brown et al. 2011; Foley 2005). Added to this mix is the level at which various sport and leisure activities can be pursued. The scholars discussed here understand time as embodied, enacted and bound by cultural and historical context. Furthermore, time is shaped by our gendered and classed positions (amongst others) particularly in

relation to participation and access to leisure activities and spaces and the role 'time famine' plays in people's everyday lives.

### **Serious leisure and time**

Scholars have highlighted how performing at an elite level in sport, continually works against other time obligations to family, self and others (Burlot, Richard, and Jonchery 2018; Toffoletti and Palmer 2019). They contend that in order to be successful in highly pressurized sporting environments, some aspect of an athlete's personal life is often sacrificed. Dashper, Abbott, and Wallace (2020, 304) extend this by suggesting that 'resource-hungry leisure' is further negotiated through gendered power relations and that this work is visible and invisible but primarily shouldered by women. Such ongoing emotion work was present in Thomas and Bailey's (2009) research on seafarers, where long periods of time away from the family and domestic space caused temporal dislocation and relationship difficulty when it came to reintegrating back into the 'ordered patterns' (Douglas 1975) of home.

McAnirlin and Maddox (2020) point out that women often engage in serious leisure activities in spaces largely constructed as male and so have to manage the male gaze, comments and attitudes that continually position their presence as 'not the norm'. As a result, Yoo, McIntosh, and Cockburn-Wootten (2016) suggest that a way to combine leisure and family commitments is to bring the two together as much as possible as this can go some way to offsetting these kinds of relationship challenges. In order to achieve this, however, the relationship demands a certain level of economic resources and similar leisure interests that remain stable over time. As Patterson and Carpenter (2003, 165) posit, older couples tend to favour familiar leisure pursuits over 'novel' ones and an agreed acceptance and recognition of the particular social roles each person enacts within the relationship leads to greater interpersonal and leisure satisfaction for both.

Darcy et al. (2019) explore casual engagement, serious leisure and professional engagement of creative artists with disability. Similar to Heuser's participants of lawn bowls (2005), they argue that they move between these categories of engagement which are 'by no means discrete or fixed' (Darcy et al. 2019, 519). Dionigi (2006) critiques notions of positive ageing and the promotion of competitive sport for adults in later life. Her serious leisure participants experience processes of resistance, negotiation and personal empowerment as they strive for meaningful career development over the life-course. Sport-as-leisure in later life has become a growing phenomenon over recent decades. Son and Dionigi (2020) indicate how sport-as-leisure provides social opportunities, social connectedness and social meaning to older adults' lives. It is also a space for being competitive. Similarly, Dionigi's research with older women athletes demonstrates how their engagement with sport is 'not only about pleasure and participation, but also serious competition' (2013, 172). Her findings simultaneously reinforce and challenge dominant discourses on gender, sport and ageing.

Heuser (2005) considers the personal meaning and value attached to the careers of women as they become hooked on bowls. She found that personal relationships, 'entanglements', could have two effects: bringing women into the sport or taking them away from serious play. Participation in serious leisure, whether lawn bowls, ballroom

dancing (Harman 2019) or bridge (Punch, Russell, and Graham 2022), offers self-satisfaction via 'challenges, strategy, competition and winning' (Heuser 2005, 57). The perseverance and practice to acquire knowledge and skills are time-consuming, yet durable and tangible benefits can be gained, enabling serious leisure participants to engage in meaningful leisure whilst also being part of a wider community (Stebbins 2020).

Alongside participation in serious leisure, is the added challenge of managing and maintaining an intimate relationship. Relationships in an everyday setting of work and family are known to be fraught (Jamieson 1998; Smart 2007); add a substantial amount of time away from home, plus a resource-intensive leisure activity, and maintaining an intimate relationship results in couples facing further challenges (Thomas and Bailey 2009; Dashper, Abbott, and Wallace 2020). Shaw's (1997) conceptualizing of family leisure as inherently contradictory is useful for understanding the ways that tensions are played out and negotiated when combining couple and leisure time. Similarly, Daly (2001) argues that whilst families value togetherness and can enjoy positive outcomes from sharing leisure activities, there is often a mismatch between the expectations and actual experience. Stebbins (2020) notes the lack of research on dyadic leisure, as well as the limited gender analysis of serious leisure participation.

Building on this, Harman (2019) discusses the pleasures and pressures which ballroom-dancing couples face when sharing their serious leisure pursuit. The shared pleasures include keeping fit through dancing, the sense of progression and moving forward, the adrenaline rush from a good performance, camaraderie with other dancers and the sense of belonging to the dancing community. Simultaneously, dancers described the wider pressures that they faced including the need to maintain their figure, the stress of performing and not making mistakes when competing, and having sufficient time to practice. Harman (2019) notes that whilst the intricate mix of pleasure and pressure can have wider impacts on family life, when couples share serious leisure together, family leisure can be a solution to the juggling of time between leisure and family. Our research offers an original contribution to these discussions by exploring the ways that couples engage in serious leisure together via the mindsport bridge.

## Methodology

This paper is one of several studies that form part of the *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA) project (see [www.bridgemindsport.org](http://www.bridgemindsport.org)). This body of work on bridge contributes to the growing sociology of mindsport. It offers new insights into academic knowledge relating to the development of Mindsport Studies which fits between, and overlaps with, Leisure Studies and Sports Studies. *Bridging Minds* is a qualitative sociological research project that explores the understudied social world of elite tournament bridge. The paper is based on interview data with 20 men and 18 women who have either been in, or are still in, an intimate couple relationship with a bridge player.

Qualitative insider interviewing (Kitchen 2019) enabled players to discuss their serious leisure experiences in dialogue with Samantha Punch, who has played international bridge for Scotland since 2008. As an elite player, Punch drew on her own lived experience to carry out insider research (see Punch, Russell, and Graham 2022). Her insider position offered several benefits which shaped the research design and data collection (Fleming 2018). In order to balance the closeness and familiarity of the researcher to



this social world, Miriam Snellgrove provided an outsider perspective. Their combined familiar/strange and insider/outsider positions enabled the challenges of insider research to be addressed (see Snellgrove and Punch 2022).

Participants were interviewed in-depth by Punch in quiet side rooms or hotels during national and international tournaments in the USA and Europe before or after bridge matches. The semi-structured interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, lasting on average two hours. They covered a range of bridge topics including partnership and team dynamics, motivations, learning and development, gender, professionalization and couples' bridge. This paper explores the perspectives of 38 interviewees (out of 52 participants in the *Bridging Minds* project) who discussed their experiences of the dynamics involved when sharing their passion for bridge and serious leisure with their life partner.

Analysis of the data was undertaken in two stages. Transcripts of the interviews were initially read through interpretively by Snellgrove and three key themes emerged in relation to the data on couples playing together: Fun, Fights and Failures. This interpretive reading (Mason 2018) enabled Snellgrove to situate the data presented by the participants as well as the interactive relationship between participants and Punch (who undertook the interviews). As Fontana and Frey (2003, 63) suggest, the interview has become 'a means of contemporary storytelling, where persons divulge life accounts in response to interview questions'. Snellgrove shared her interpretive reading of the transcripts with Punch which, due to Punch's personal involvement as a player in the world of competitive bridge, helped to further situate these themes within the wider context, personalities and challenges of the world of bridge.

Analysis therefore was iterative and reflexive (Berger 2015) between both authors with multiple readings and discussion occurring around the data. For example, issues relating to gendered play and women being positioned and positioning themselves as weaker players, can be initially read as confirming ideas around sexism in elite sport (Fink 2016) and everyday sexism in intimate couple relationships more generally (Morgan 1996; Gabb and Fink 2015). However, this initial reading is too simple and negates the complex manner in which participants were constantly negotiating their intimate relationships and partnerships in highly competitive and time-pressured environments. For example, sexist comments co-exist alongside ideas around skill at play (who is and isn't the better player) and alongside the jokes and arguments that occur in intimate couple relationships when playing an elite mindsport. Paying close attention to the ways in which these ruptures, disruptions, frustrations and inconsistencies are expressed enabled us to understand how gender is learned, embodied and enacted both at the bridge table and away from it (see also Punch et al. 2023). This paper shows the ways in which gendered intimacies are negotiated and enmeshed in the time and resource-hungry practice of serious leisure participation.

## Sample

Learning bridge and becoming an accomplished player involves commitment and investment of personal time (Punch and Snellgrove 2021). This is even more evident when players start to participate in national and international tournaments, representing their country for fame (but rarely fortune). For the wider *Bridging Minds* project, a



sample of elite bridge players was generated purposefully, comprising of 52 male and female players from the USA and Europe (mainly UK), aged between 17 and 78. These players include both professionals (who are paid) and amateurs (unpaid) who have played in high-level tournaments representing their country and have won major championships. This paper focuses on a small, diverse sample of players who are in, or who had been in, an intimate relationship with another bridge player. Out of the 20 elite men players in our sample, 17 play as professionals of which 13 are full-time and 4 part-time, in contrast to the 18 elite women players, where only 10 play as professionals: 3 are full-time and 7 part-time (see Table 1). Players were between 22 and 74 years old (women 22–69 years and men 23–74 years), with time playing bridge ranging from 10 to 60 years as most elite players learn the game as children (Punch 2021). Given that 11 players were under 30, that may partly explain why less than half the sample had children at the time.

It is acknowledged within the bridge community that becoming a full-time professional necessarily improves your gameplay whereas it is much harder for amateurs to be regarded as similarly skilled due to their time being divided between work and other commitments. The amount of time a person can dedicate to playing bridge, therefore, may reflect their skill level at the table. However, as a partnership game, a central element of good bridge play is being able to work effectively with your partner (see Punch and Russell 2022). This capacity to play well together is often discussed as being similar to a ‘good marriage’. Indeed, famous bridge partnerships are often discussed as the perfect marriage – long-lasting and successful. Partnerships can be same sex or opposite sex (to date there are no known gender non-binary players at the elite level). In theory, regardless of sex/gender, what matters from a bridge perspective is how well the partnership is able to communicate through bidding and defensive play at the table.

Given the length of time it takes to learn bridge and then move on to playing bridge at the elite level with all its attendant travel and competition demands, it is also the case that many people in the bridge world form intimate partnerships with other bridge players. This does not mean that they necessarily partner each other at the table (though some do), but rather, that as a couple they are then able to spend their evenings, weekends and holidays attending bridge events and playing competitively, rather than sitting and watching from the side-lines (as historically many bridge wives did and some continue to do).

Within our sample, 16 out of 18 women are in intimate relationships with another bridge player, of which 13 of those are at the elite level (see Table 1). This is not the case for our male sample, where 14 out of 20 have a current life partner who plays bridge but only six of those play at an elite level. This suggests that male players can play at an elite level and have a non-bridge playing or non-elite level intimate partner who will often accompany them to matches, observe their play and/or join in with the

**Table 1.** Characteristics of sample.

|              | Elite Player | Bridge Life Partner (with Elite) | Full-time Pro | Part-time Pro | Amateur   | USA       | UK        | Europe (not UK) | Have Children |
|--------------|--------------|----------------------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|---------------|
| <b>Women</b> | 18           | 16 (13)                          | 3             | 7             | 8         | 4         | 11        | 3               | 6             |
| <b>Men</b>   | 20           | 14 (6)                           | 13            | 4             | 3         | 10        | 10        | 0               | 10            |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>38</b>    | <b>30 (19)</b>                   | <b>16</b>     | <b>11</b>     | <b>11</b> | <b>14</b> | <b>21</b> | <b>3</b>        | <b>16</b>     |

celebratory dinners. As far as we know, the reverse scenario where a male intimate life partner accompanies his female partner to a tournament as a silent supportive observer does not currently exist in the competitive bridge world. However, it should also be noted that examples of wives who watch their husbands play tend to involve older players and are less common amongst younger generations. For younger couples who travel to tournaments together, both male and female partners of elite players are more likely to play in a side game, help with internet broadcasting of the match or take on an organizational role as non-playing captain, rather than passively observe their partner.

Throughout the paper pseudonyms are used. The term 'intimate partnerships' refers to people who play bridge and are in an intimate partnership with either their bridge partner or another bridge player. Intimate partnership does not assume the sexual orientation or marital status of the couples, though the majority of couples presented within our dataset are in heterosexual, monogamous, cohabiting relationships. The term 'partnerships' is used to denote those who play together but are not in an intimate relationship.

## Findings: fun, fights and failures

### *Bridging partnerships and fun*

Like many sports and mindsports played at an elite level, men dominate the highest levels of the field. In bridge, the top players tend to be men and at present there are only a handful of women that are widely regarded as playing at a competitive level similar to the world's best male players (Punch 2021). This gender discrepancy is well known within the bridge world, with attempts being made to support more women to play at the elite level (Rogers, Snellgrove, and Punch 2022). Within our sample both men and women expressed the opinion that to play competitively *and* maintain an intimate relationship, players would ideally need to be in a relationship with another bridge player, as Kyle explains:

Bridge is just, it's an all-consuming passion for some people ... it's just something that a non-bridge player, you can't have an intelligent conversation with them about. If your spouse works in an office, or as an accountant, is a doctor, you may not fully understand what they're doing, but you can have some sort of intelligent conversation. A non-bridge player just cannot contribute to a conversation about bridge. Then you've got the travel aspect. The fact that the spouse is away just so much of the time, whether it's weekends, which traditionally would be family time ... They're going away for one or two weeks to a big championship overseas and you're left at home on your own. I just don't see how a non-bridge player would cope with it. At least a bridge playing spouse who isn't a pro themselves can appreciate what you're doing and why you're doing it. So, the ideal is two pros living together because then they're both going away at different times, and they understand totally what it's about, rather than just partially.

Understanding the time demands but also the love and passion that bridge inspires in its elite players was further expressed by Andrea and Kirsty. For Kirsty dating someone who did not play bridge was not an option because she loved bridge so much and 'not being able to share such a big part of my life ... I would never see them and it would just be weird'. Andrea extended this by arguing that an intimate partner needed to be 'mind mates' and this was only possible if both people played bridge. What this demonstrates is the recognition and desire by elite players to share their time and love of bridge with their life

partner. Bridge, being a partnership game, makes this kind of double partnership, uniquely possible. It should also be noted that, given there are local and global bridge communities (see Punch, Russell, and Cairns 2020), bridge players often form relationships with other bridge players since those are the people they are meeting and spending time with.

However, despite knowing bridge and being aware of the time and travel demands of the elite bridge world, fights and misunderstanding can and do still occur. This is often around the management of the domestic sphere and who looks after any dependants of the partnership. Claire, reflecting about her parents, points out:

Whenever [Mum] would go and [Dad] would stay home with me and my sister, I could tell every time she would come back, they would get into a little quarrel ... because she would be exhausted and she would have to take up all the stuff. She always did the most with the kids ... but the times when she went away, he had to step it up and do more. And obviously he [Dad] wanted to be the one away playing.

On the one hand, Claire's mother as the better bridge player was away at tournaments and her father had to be responsible for the caring roles, yet when she returned the expectation was that she would resume full-time caring. Claire's mother was time stretched as she had to complete her caring responsibilities as well as her competitive bridge play. Many of the participants spoke about the need to be in an intimate relationship with a fellow bridge player if they were to be able to travel and attend competitive events, without the gendered expectation that they stay at home and care for the children (which a non-bridge playing partner might make). 'Marrying Out', as Hazel articulates, has had an impact on her ability to travel to play bridge competitively, though her husband 'let's me play four/five times a year away from him in tournaments where he has to look after the children'. In Hazel's eyes, this reduction in playing competitively has come with the benefit of being in a happier relationship than she was when in a relationship 'with other bridge players'. Being in an intimate bridge relationship then, is not necessarily the answer to solving the time problem of combining intimacy with competitive bridge play. However, for those bridge players who do 'marry in', the benefits of both people being in a partnership are manifold. Primarily this is around a shared time and game they love:

For us we like to play with each other, I enjoy playing with her because she's very funny and she does a lot for me. When we play some matches, it is relaxing and exciting. (Frank)

I enjoyed it when we were [playing and] it was not in a serious sense. When we were just going and playing bridge and it was something we both enjoyed. (Natasha)

Other players also spoke about how 'lucky' they were to be 'sharing your passion in life with someone' (Katrina). Although participants largely agree that playing bridge with your other half is a way to manage the demands of bridge with relationship work, there was also the recognition that this 'fun' was not always sustainable and that some players thought it was an 'awful idea' to play with your life partner.

### ***Bridging fights***

Mistakes at the table are a common and inevitable part of playing bridge, whoever your partner is. Making mistakes and recovering from them, is an area of ongoing development

and one that often entails exhaustive post-match analyses by players and spectators. Fighting with your partner at the table and expressing your frustration when mistakes are made is generally seen as a sign of weakness. A verbal outburst not only interrupts the partnership's concentration but may also damage the partnership's results by alerting the opposition to an error that they may have missed (which they can now take advantage of). Trying to maintain an unreadable expression and supportive silence during play has been articulated as the 'best way to play' (see Punch and Snellgrove 2021).

Despite knowing that mistakes happen at the table and that silence is the most strategic approach to successful play, many bridge players find these demands often impossible to maintain (Punch and Russell 2022). Given the length of time a bridge session lasts, tempers can become increasingly frayed. Add to that mix an intimate life-partner and what was an initially fun and enjoyable event sharing a love of bridge together, can turn into fighting and acrimonious debates. Within the data on couples playing together, the mistakes made at the table were often a trigger for the fights. They were largely articulated in relation to one partner being a weaker bridge player (in skill and technique) and so, more likely to make mistakes. In the majority of cases, the weaker player was the woman, as Jake explains:

It's difficult. On both sides ... I open 1 Heart and she bids 1 Notrump and we end up somewhere and the first thing she lays down in the dummy are six or seven spades to the KJ. I look up at her and say, 'I think I could train a monkey better than you' and she broke out crying and the ladies [opposing partnership] are patting her and saying 'poor dear'.

Frank extends this idea further by saying 'it is worse when she does something wrong because she feels bad and she thinks I am always terrorizing her blah, blah, but it is an exaggeration'. Katie went so far as to suggest that her life partner tries to avoid playing with her because they get into fights over their gameplay. Ryan seconded this point by stating that the only person he has 'seriously shouted at the table over periods of time ... was someone I was emotionally involved with'. At the competitive level, playing together can quite quickly move from being fun, to a point of gendered friction and frustration. This was given as a reason for not playing with one's spouse or life partner. If the game played was not a 'serious' game, mistakes could be laughed off; forgiven and forgotten. However, if the partnership in question were playing competitively together and mistakes were made, this could then lead to fights and friction both at the table and after the game.

Fights at the table are noticed by other bridge players who comment and then judge the gameplay, the relationship and the manners of the partner accordingly:

The problem is when you play in a relationship, everybody says it's bad, it's grim ... usually the man is a better player. And the woman accepts it but still they don't want to feel stupid, like [other things in life] one of you is better at something but the other doesn't want to be stupid and bridge shows the difference very well. (Frank)

X is really horrible to her. Because he is of some impression that he's better and guys often tend to be more arrogant than girls about their bridge. Technically [men are stronger], although some girls are. But I'm pretty sure her bridge is gonna get worse because she's playing with [him]. I think often couples get more frustrated with each other than you would with a normal partner, just because you have more, there's more feeling involved and you get more annoyed. (Nadine)

This inequality in technique, strategy and skill in bridge is a reason why some players are reluctant to play with their partner at competitive tournaments. As Craig notes, there are 'underlying subtexts' and too much 'relationship stuff... where you are the authority, [and] when it is your girlfriend, it is just bad'. Consequently, mistakes made at the table are never just about laying the wrong card but are intertwined with the actual and perceived skill level of the players involved. Wider life issues, such as an argument at home before playing bridge, may also influence the behaviour at the table. When mistakes are noticed, a player may experience discomfort as their shortcomings as a bridge player are revealed to other players and also to their intimate partner. This may cause a noticeable power differential in not only the playing of bridge but also the relationship, with one partner (usually the woman) being placed in an unequal and potentially inferior position. Even when a couple is more equal in skill level, analysis of the mistakes can result 'in serious discussion afterwards if something has come up that I totally disagree on. We are both pretty strong minded and maybe even stubborn at times' (Andrea).

However, for some couples any fights that occur at the table are 'very short-lived' and this, David suggests, is because 'you are going home together so it doesn't last long'. Playing competitive bridge with your intimate life partner can be a huge amount of fun and a way to spend time together, but it can also create friction and fights that over time may cause the relationship to breakdown. As one female player remarked: 'I've only dated people who play bridge and we've always broken up as soon as I've got better than them' or as Natasha says, 'it's a joint failure', for not only have you failed at bridge but you have also had a row with your intimate partner over the mistakes. Navigating between fun and fights is therefore ongoing work and full of negotiations.

### ***Bridging failures and negotiations***

The tension around mistakes at the table and perceptions of skill level are, as already mentioned, the initial rub around which verbal outbursts, fights and arguments can occur. This fighting can be loud and public in front of other bridge players or afterwards in the privacy of a hotel bedroom. Within our data sample, women were usually seen as the weaker players, however, their journey to becoming an elite player means that they have also played with other weaker male players, as Hazel illustrates:

I got terribly intolerant and impatient when I thought he was playing badly. So, we just used to row when we played. And then I went out with a professional bridge player and I'm afraid it was the other way round. He used to get very cross with me and I felt humiliated at the table, which again led to many rows. So, I have never had a really good experience of playing with a boyfriend.

Andrea suggests that 'the main ingredient of a good partnership is respect. As long as you respect your [bridge] partner I don't think there is a problem. I believe that many, many couples have a respect problem'. Respect is perhaps a fairly obvious component of a successful partnership, but Andrea means this not in an intimate, personal sense, but rather respect for your bridge partner as a player. Megan extends this by stating that boundaries need to be maintained in partnerships generally and in intimate bridge-playing partnerships more so, or you end up saying things you may later regret. What boundaries and respect have in common here, is the recognition that mistakes happen at the table,

and if this is not dwelt on too much, then bridge and intimate life can rub along fairly well. As Christine suggests: 'I know there are parts of the game that I am better than him but there are parts of the game that he is better, and I think in general he sees more than I do.' From this perspective what is important is recognizing that different skills are at play at the table and mistakes are rarely the fault of a single person.

Kirsty expands on this by saying, 'we are both very Zen about [mistakes]. I mean he invariably starts apologizing after we play together for all these things he's done wrong which I haven't even noticed because I'm not good enough to notice any of them'. This shows that whilst Kirsty articulates a skill deferential in their bridge playing, her partner has not gone out of his way to blame her for any mistakes but is rather pointing out where he went wrong in the game. Equally Steve and Frank suggest that being silent when their partner makes often very simple and obvious mistakes at the table is the best strategy for maintaining a harmonious intimate relationship (see also Punch and Snellgrove 2021). As David explains, effort should be made to postpone any recriminations or pointing out of mistakes until alone and private:

It is always best if I wait 'til after the game. That's my insistence is that she lets me go over the hands after the game. They have hand records and 'this is what you should have done here and this what you should have done there.' As long as she'll listen to that then I'm ok with [mistakes].

The majority of men within our sample thought they were the technically superior bridge player with only one participant thinking he was his partner's equal. As Katrina articulates, 'I really admire people that can play with their other half, I think it's really, really impressive, because it's hard. I think maybe if the guy is the better player, maybe, maybe then it works.' Consequently, many of the women spoke about playing elite-level bridge with someone other than their intimate life partner:

It's a bit like the work relationship, playing with somebody who is not your other half, there's always this knowledge that they can turn round and say, 'I'm not playing with you anymore'. Whereas your life partner can't do that very easily. So I know a lot of couples who don't play together, or very rarely play together and as I say, I think I play better with someone who I know I have to be nice to. (Angela)

As bridge is a game of mistakes, discussing mistakes at play is a fundamental part of the game at high levels. It also became clear from our data that mistakes were largely seen as the province of the weaker women players (even when this was not the case):

[It] was driving me mad towards the end when I was playing with him, 'cause at some point I just couldn't do it anymore and stopped playing with him, the fact that he wouldn't admit that I was better than him at bridge or listen to what I had to say. He would always argue with me ... [and would never say] I know you are better than me, what should I have done in this situation? (Christine)

Criticism in bridge can also be related to a bad result where either no mistake was made (just unlucky) or the critic made the real mistake but are blaming or taking their frustration out on their partner. These situations often occur when a partnership is uneven in terms of bridge skill, so the presumed mistake is blamed on the weaker player, even when it was not their fault. Errors that tend to cause most friction are those that occur during the

bidding or defense stages of the game (rather than the play of the hand which is carried out individually). Bidding and defense involve partnership communication and can lead to heated discussions, especially when an error by one partner leads the other player to make a mistake.

The negotiations that need to be undertaken by the women in our sample are around the desire to play bridge competitively and knowing that within the bridge world their best chance to do this can be to play with other (better) male players. However, even when their technique improves and they become better than their male partner, this introduces another layer of stress to their game and the relationship as their male partner is often unable to admit to mistakes made at the table (as in Christine's case above). The relationship may then break down or they decide not to play together competitively anymore but with other people instead.

Alongside these relationship and bridge play negotiations there are also the domestic responsibilities of having a family and children (see [Table 1](#)). The sample of this study tended to view parenting and domestic responsibilities as the woman's responsibility, even when both people are playing at an elite level. If both parents are professional bridge players this can cause friction and strain if they are both away from home at the same time particularly around managing any problems that arise at home whilst away. Kyle mentions that his wife 'gets fidgety much more quickly than I do at not seeing [their daughter]' and on one occasion booked himself into a different hotel room because his wife was talking to their daughter on the phone. This indicates how the man tends to be more able to switch off everyday life and concentrate on the mindsport (see also [Punch et al. 2023](#)).

## **Discussion: bridging time, gender and serious leisure**

This paper has demonstrated that intimate couples see their bridge playing as fun as well as an area for misunderstandings and fights. The findings show what [Shove et al. \(2009\)](#) refer to as ruptures and frictions in everyday life around time and domestic responsibilities, and they also disrupt an easy reading of gendered time. The management of domestic responsibilities does not easily mesh with the demands of playing competitive bridge. As [Yoo, McIntosh, and Cockburn-Wooten \(2016\)](#) and [Southerton \(2009, 58\)](#) have pointed out, people are increasingly anxious about the quality of time they spend together with tensions between work, home and leisure often involving constant negotiations. Playing bridge together arguably bypasses some of the need to negotiate intimate couple time together, by sharing time participating in a mindsport they both love and enjoy.

The interview data reveals that fights can happen over mistakes made at play (with the subtext of who is the better player and therefore has the authority to criticize and point out the mistakes) and are part of the practices and negotiations that intimate couples participate in and reproduce ([Bourdieu 1977](#); [Southerton 2009](#)). Both men and women talked about how intimate couple relationships cause people to be more vocal about mistakes at the table and also away from the table, more so than with a non-intimate bridge partner. As Peter said, 'a raised eyebrow can perhaps at times be enough' to inform their intimate partner that a mistake has been made. Similarly, [Shaw \(1997, 107\)](#) argued that the intensity of involvement:



... means that investment in such relationships is extremely high. As a result, the emotions associated with such relationships are intense, but may be either very positive or very negative, conflictual and distressing, or rewarding and satisfying.

Such intensity adds another layer of emotional stress and tension to gameplay as well as the various forms of repair work that are required after the game is over (and the necessary debrief done). Issues around skill level and who is the better partner, combined with long periods of intense competitive play, add to relationship stresses and strains where the initial idea of playing together for fun can be lost in blame and counter-blame (see also Harman 2019).

These fights at the table largely emerge through mistakes made during the course of a game. Though mistakes are common when playing bridge (Punch and Russell 2022), being in an intimate relationship with your bridge partner often causes verbal spats or acrimonious falling out to occur. To manage this, couples engage in acceptance of mistakes in a variety of ways. The interviews illustrated that mistakes at the table are more often seen as the province of female players who tend to be constructed as technically and analytically weaker than their male partners. Though this inequality is recognized, it is seen by many women as a necessary price to play at an elite level in a serious pursuit still largely dominated by male players. Time spent playing bridge (even if publicly reprimanded and belittled) is seen as time better spent than not playing at elite level at all.

Within our data sample, women are predominantly viewed as the players that make the most mistakes at the table. Though many of the women interviewed have played with male partners weaker than them in terms of technique and analysis – that was often whilst they were still learning. Our sample represents the elite level of bridge where women are competing often against and with male players who are more likely to have (a) had more time to practice and play (possibly years more, partly due to having children) and (b) are paid full-time professionals (see Table 1). This recognition of skill differential between players meant that within our sample, most of the women players who played with their intimate life partner had to be prepared to be criticized for making mistakes either at or away from the table.

Bridge can be a time-consuming mindsport especially when played at the international level. To enable women to play at an elite level, the majority of our sample are in a relationship with another bridge player (often, though not always, a man who is a better player than them). This shared love and fun does not necessarily extend to playing together as this may cause fights and frictions. The issue of intimate couple familiarity is significant, as harsh words exchanged between a couple at the bridge table are less likely to be replicated in non-intimate bridge partnerships. To manage the potential tensions, couples may decide to partner someone else rather than their intimate partner as this goes some way to managing the fights.

Negotiating time to play bridge and maintain a relationship and functioning family life is disproportionally carried out by the women within our sample. This is similar to the women lawn bowls players in Heuser's study (2005, 52) whose 'commitment varied as competing demands, both physical and social, vied for women's time and attention'. Furthermore, the temporal and caring structures do not suddenly vanish when both bridge-playing parents are in a different time zone (Shaw 1994; van Tienoven 2019) but rather continue to position the woman as the appropriate carer. In contrast, the negotiations

that the majority of the male participants highlighted was a recognition of mistakes made at the table and a willingness to learn from those mistakes, that they were equal to or better than their intimate partner (never weaker) and that switching off from domestic responsibilities (whether childcare arrangements or a terminally sick wife) was quite easily done when playing a high-stakes tournament. Overall then, negotiations within elite bridge reveal and expose the ways in which everyday gender inequalities are reinforced and reproduced. Elsewhere we have argued that gender stereotypes and neurosexist discourses can actively reproduce inequality within the game to the detriment of women bridge players (Punch et al. 2023). Whilst that paper explored some of the reasons why men dominate elite-level bridge, this paper is more focused on the gendered dynamics of couples combining leisure and family time, and how those dynamics are played out at the bridge table.

This paper has explored various gendered time negotiations, contributing to serious leisure research on the positive and negative impacts of couples doing leisure together. The interview data has shown that a woman playing bridge at an elite level can manage the competing demands of relationship, family, work and bridge play more effectively if she is with someone who understands the time demands and commitments of playing elite bridge. Women who have 'married out' of the bridge community tend to find it harder to compete in as many international-level tournaments compared with those with bridge spouses. Time as a practice, time as gendered and time as negotiated is in evidence in the everyday leisure lives of elite bridge players.

Calling on Bordieusian's (1977, 1987) notions of time as enacted and embodied practice, we have shown how elite bridge players move between fun, fights and negotiations when playing together at the table and in their intimate relationships away from the table. The practice of playing bridge with an intimate life partner is enacted both at the table and in the privacy of hotel rooms. The time couples spend sharing a leisure activity is highly valued yet fraught, where contradictory emotions and experiences co-exist (Shaw 1997). Our findings echo those of Harman (2019, 84–87) who studied married dancing couples. Co-habiting partners dancing in the ballroom (or playing at the bridge table) can enjoy doing something together and resolve the conflicting obligations of limited family leisure time. Yet simultaneously, frustrations and power negotiations frequently emerge.

Learning to play bridge and ascending to elite levels is time-consuming (as most elite sports are) and, as a mindsport and serious pursuit, bridge is no exception. Like other elite sports and serious leisure activities, bridge is gendered in that more men than women dominate the top echelons of the game. In order to maintain an intimate relationship and an acceptable work-life balance (Shippen 2014; Yoo, McIntosh, and Cockburn-Wooten 2016), our participants all spoke about the benefits of having a partner who played bridge. In this way, the time demands of travel and spending time away from home are more readily understood and supported. However, our study also showed that for women to combine family, relationship and serious leisure, the majority of female participants were in intimate relationships with other male participants of that serious pursuit. In contrast, many elite male bridge players often had an intimate relationship with a non-bridge player or a much weaker non-elite level player. This tended not to be a feasible option for women, if home, work and leisure were to be successfully combined. Nevertheless, playing bridge with an intimate life partner came with a number

of consequences from fights and friction at the table to potential relationship breakdown. When the shared leisure experience failed to meet expectations and resulted in disillusionment (Daly 2001), some participants played with a different bridge partner and not their intimate life partner to avoid the familiarity (and fights) that would otherwise occur.

One of the main areas of friction within an intimate bridge-playing partnership was in the perception (not always accurate) that women were likely to make more mistakes at the table and were weaker players. These mistakes were seen by male partners as a justification for the verbal outbursts at and away from the table. In order to manage these strains and challenges, women had to either accept their weaker player status or play with someone other than their intimate partner. These ongoing negotiations around gender, bridge and time tie into work by Dashper, Abbott, and Wallace (2020) and Foley (2005) that show how a resource-intensive leisure activity demands ongoing gendered negotiations. Furthermore, it is women who have to navigate their interest and love of competitive bridge with family and relationship time. In an increasingly time-pressured world, the women in our sample (though faced with gendered expectations around child-rearing and technical performance) are managing to carve a place out for themselves quite literally at the table. This echoes Dionigi's research with older women competing in sport who, on the one hand, resist 'traditional stereotypes tied to aging and gender' but, on other hand, 'are also involved in reinforcing, internalizing, or conforming to other dominant cultural values and ideologies often tied to youthfulness and/or competition' (2013, 168). Such gendered tensions are reflective of wider gendered norms within society, especially within elite sport (Burlot, Richard, and Joncheray 2018; Toffoletti and Palmer 2019) and serious leisure (McAnirlin and Maddox 2020). Bridge, as a partnership game, provides the opportunities for women and men to combine intimacy with competitive leisure in our increasingly time-fragmented and restricted world.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored gender, time and couple relationships in the context of mind-sport as serious leisure. Through the case study of bridge, the paper has argued that integrating intimacy with serious leisure, is a way of re-negotiating family time constraints. Such negotiations operate on a continuum between having fun at the bridge table, fighting at (and away from) the table and in some cases can be the cause of intimate couple breakdown. The paper has revealed that success at the bridge table and success in intimate relationships is often achieved through negotiated and continually worked on notions of time: time to play together, time to be together and time to analyse gameplay and sort out relationship tensions. Time is the essential ingredient required to manage elite bridge partnerships whilst sustaining intimate couple relationships. In particular, the paper has argued that for women to successfully negotiate the time commitment and pressures of elite-level mindsport alongside family responsibilities, it is easier if they are in an intimate relationship with another serious leisure participant who understands the dynamics of that elite social world.

Punch, Russell, and Graham (2022) have shown that for elite players, bridge is a central and important part of their life. This paper builds on this by illustrating the positive ways that couples can match their interests and share their experiences of serious leisure. Given the emotions involved in the elite-level bridge (see Punch and Russell 2022), our findings

demonstrate that disciplined silence and an acceptance of partner's mistakes can be the best way for couples to play together. The paper touches on the ways that the bridge partnership can mimic the romantic one and it would be interesting to explore this more in future research. For example, initially, both players tend to be careful and pleasant in their communications with each other both at and away from the table. As the relationship endures (the honeymoon's over) then people can be more likely to criticize. Further research could consider the extent to which the longevity of a non-couple bridge partnership results in behaviour at the bridge table being similar to that of people in a life partnership.

This paper has focused on a relatively small but diverse sample of elite-level players from the USA and Europe. Future research would be useful with a greater range of tournament and social players (Scott and Godbey 1992) to explore whether non-elite couples face similar pleasures and pressures (see also Harman 2019 on ballroom dancing partnerships). An investigation into other serious leisure pursuits where couples participate (and compete) together would also contribute to understandings of family leisure. In addition, it would be fruitful to conduct further research into gender inequalities and player demographics, particularly around the roles of child-care and parenting whilst playing an elite mindsport. We also recommend that another avenue for future research would be to compare the dynamics of couples playing together in open versus mixed-category events.

This paper speaks to intimacy and serious leisure literatures that engage with the time-related challenges facing intimate partnerships as well as shows how elite mindsports demand substantial time commitments from bridge players in general and intimate bridge partnerships specifically. The themes of fun, fights and failures are likely to be useful for exploring other serious leisure pursuits shared by couples. We have shown the ways that elite bridge players use their intimate relationships with other bridge players as a way to mitigate some of the time pressures present in those relationships. By playing bridge together, our participants demonstrate awareness of the need to spend time together but also express the ways in which this time together is often fragmented and problematic. Notions of gendered leisure time around 'success' at the bridge table emerge alongside ideas of emotional inequality and whose responsibility it is to manage mistakes at the table and the effects this has on the couple relationship. Overall, this paper has exposed the ongoing opportunities, tensions and negotiations present in playing bridge at an elite level in a time-pressured and gendered world.

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