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Building, not burning bridges in research: Insider/outsider dilemmas and engaging with the bridge community

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ABSTRACT

Researchers navigate a complex network of relationships, positions, and responsibilities that are determined by their discipline, funding bodies, and the research community they are studying. Tensions often emerge between and across each of these different spaces. This paper uses reflexive autobiographical writing to discuss some of the ongoing challenges faced with engaging a diverse group of stakeholders in relation to sociological research on the gender inequalities of bridge as a serious leisure activity. Drawing on the researchers' personal notes and exchanges during a project on sexism and the card game bridge, as well as the survey data from this project, this paper explores the ways that a combined team of insider/outsider researchers strive to balance the relationship and commitment they have to the pursuit of knowledge and the user community. Many projects face this balancing act which can permeate every stage of the research process and can be witnessed frequently in project meetings, yet there is still little published in relation to these conversations that take place between research team members.

Introduction: A balancing act

When academics engage in research activities they do so by negotiating the relationship and commitment they have to funders, to their institutions, the broader discipline, and the pursuit of knowledge, as well as to those individuals, communities and organizations that they are researching. Researcher positionality shifts and overlaps throughout the process and across different spaces. This balancing act permeates every stage of the research process and can be witnessed in almost all research team meetings yet, there is little published in relation to the conversations that take place between research teams. These usually hidden conversations are integral to determining the final presentation of the research and in turn the representations of the communities being studied. For example, in many cases, a research problem is first identified in accordance with the researcher's disciplinary interests. Once an idea is formulated funding is sought, and when funding is awarded there is a responsibility to have outcomes that address the

aims and objectives of the research. Tensions often emerge between and across each of these different spaces throughout the research process.

This paper offers insights into some of the exchanges that have taken place between two sociological researchers working on the development of the sociology of bridge (one a bridge player, the other, not), which is contributing to the emerging field of the sociology of mind-sport. A mind-sport is a game of skill that requires mental agility rather than physical ability, such as chess, checkers (draughts), go and mahjong. Similar to other leisure research, there has been an initial struggle for bridge to be taken seriously as an academic area of study (Anderson & Taylor, 2010; Breeze, 2013; Deem, 1999; Snellgrove, 2019). Shaw (2000) suggested that leisure researchers may need to broaden the focus of their work to consider the ways that leisure practice may contribute to (or challenge) aspects of social life such as sexism. By focusing on more challenging issues within the field, such work may have more "impact not only on the academic world, but also on the 'real world' in terms of the promotion of progressive social policy initiatives and positive social change" (Shaw, 2000, p. 150). However, this focus can be particularly challenging if it conflicts with the desires of practitioner stakeholders. We found this conflict to be the case when raising the issue of gender equality in bridge, and it is on this conflict that we reflect.

The context of this paper is therefore on one branch of our wider bridge research which is considered particularly sensitive by the user community: gender inequalities and sexism. We explore some of the ways that gender[1] issues create tensions and present challenges to research when balancing between potentially competing agendas—the discipline, versus various policy and practice stakeholders within the bridge community. In the bridge world, where both the top levels of administration and of the game tend to be dominated by men (Graham & Punch, 2016), there can be a lack of recognition of the structural barriers relating to gender inequalities. For example, gender is not explicitly mentioned in any bridge policy documents, and it was only in 2020, after several years of campaigning, that a tournament director, Nicole Cook, finally succeeded in gender neutral language being used in the new book of bridge laws. Previously, players or tournament directors were all referred to as "he," even when their role or the plural could be used instead.

The limited visibility of women at the highest levels of the bridge world including the chief tournament directors and those on international executive committees can mean that gender issues are not high on the policy agenda. Within leisure studies, Deem (1999) argued that gender research was marginalized, partly due to associated difficulties with funding and recognition. Whilst this has changed to some extent (see Johnson & Kivel, 2007; Henderson & Gibson, 2013; Parry, 2005; Parry & Fullagar, 2013; Yerkes et al., 2020), continuity remains surrounding the ways "gender inequalities" within leisure and sport can be perceived as contentious within academia and beyond.

Using a reflexive autobiographical approach to writing (Humphreys, 2005) has meant that we can identify, tease out, and be more transparent about the writing-up process in order to contribute to the production of outputs that are "meaningful, accessible, and evocative... grounded in personal experience" that can "sensitise readers" to the

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[1]Gender, in this research, has been described in binary form but we do recognize that gender is a spectrum and not limited to two distinct possibilities, and that understandings of gender will vary across cultures and times.

political, social and cultural aspects of the research process (Ellis et al., 2011, para 2). As Hamilton et al. (2008) highlight, situating the self in research is vital for not only transparency in the process, but to help "clarify questions" that might arise from readers who are unfamiliar with the research genre. What narrative writing allows is questioning of individual thoughts and emotions; relationships with the external environment, such as academia and the bridge community; and temporal dimensions of past, present and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In essence, we are exploring issues of personal importance within the explicitly acknowledged context of bridge (Holt, 2001).

Sociology of bridge: An emerging field

Bridge is a partnership card game, based on incomplete information where partners communicate first through a series of bids to let their partner know the strength potential of their hand and then through the play of the cards. Bridge is an ever-evolving problem-solving game, where players strive to read their opponents, place missing cards and use strategic planning to work out their line of play (Punch & Snellgrove, 2020). A sociological exploration of bridge involves the social and non-technical aspects of the card game as well as overlapping boundaries between leisure, sport and work. At elite levels there are different categories for national teams to compete: open, women, senior and junior bridge.

In general, there is limited literature regarding bridge as a leisure activity except for the work of David Scott in the 1990s (Scott, 1991; Scott & Godbey, 1992) and more recently within the discipline of psychology (Brkljačić et al., 2017). The sociology of bridge is a developing field and the emerging publications form the groundwork of future research and development in this area (Punch et al., 2020). It is therefore important to contextualize the work we do and be transparent about our decisions. A sociological understanding of bridge as a mind-sport and leisure activity provides a broad social lens to exploring a range of aspects regarding the characteristics and dynamics of the game.

Punch's first bridge project consisted of 52 in-depth interviews with elite players that examined several topics as well as gender and bridge. The latter included views of women's bridge and why at the top of the game men are more successful in terms of winning more prestigious events. One of Punch's future PhD students was looking for a topic for her Masters dissertation, so she carried out an analysis of the first 40 interviews (Graham & Punch, 2016). Shortly after this analysis, there were several threads about sexism on the Bridge Winners blogsite (Lall, 2016) which prompted the authors to undertake a specific study exploring perceptions of sexism and bridge via an email survey. This qualitative questionnaire was conducted with tournament and club players of varying levels. At the same time, other bridge work was being developed with a growing team of *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA) researchers at the University of Stirling (see bridgemindsport.org).

Scott and Godbey (1992) pointed out that the social world of bridge is broadly divided into serious players and social players. The former typically play in tournaments and serious bridge clubs where the aim is to play competitive bridge. In contrast, in social clubs the focus is on fun and sociability. Scott and Godbey (1992) argued "that

activity within the social bridge world is defined and given legitimacy by women, whereas activity within the serious bridge world is defined and given legitimacy by men" (1992, p. 63). The research currently being conducted by *Bridge: A MindSport for All* is with more serious tournament players rather than those who play socially.

Snellgrove and Punch (2021) reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of insider rapport-building alongside the challenges of being too close to the field of study. In contrast, the aim of this paper is to focus on negotiating the competing agendas of being committed to one's discipline on the one hand (such as by exploring sexism within bridge) and to the user community on the other (where some stakeholders may prefer a focus on the more positive benefits of playing bridge).

Gender and bridge

Gender stereotypes and narratives of womanhood are formed early and persist through the later years of academic, professional, and personal (home and leisure) life. They structure and influence men and women's worldviews in relation to academic and occupational fields and set broader expectations in relation to intelligence, abilities, behaviors and what is considered to be acceptable (Lindsey, 2016). Across the world, people learn various gendered narratives and ways of being and often act accordingly, unconscious that they are doing so. Over time, these prescribed gender roles based on biological sex become normalized, entwined in a cyclical ritual of performance and reinforcement. Similar discussions surrounding socially constructed gender roles, expectations and inequalities take place in education and politics, but also in the entertainment industry and sport (e.g., Kian, 2007; Trolan, 2013).

Despite increased attention on issues of gender inequalities and sexism around the world—and movements to address it (e.g., UN's HeForShe campaign; #MeToo; #TimesUp; the Argentinian and now broader Latin American movement of Ni Una Menos) equality for women is still not a reality. For example, it is still the case that women tend to outperform men in education in the earlier years (Parsons, 2016)—although at higher education levels attainment tends to be more neutral (Buchmann & Dalton, 2002)—yet these levels of achievement are not mirrored outside of academia. In the professional arena (including within academia itself) women continue to have lower wages, are employed in lower-skilled positions, occupy fewer leadership roles and have fewer opportunities for advancement (McNabb & Wass, 1997).

When women do occupy leadership roles, for example in the field of politics, they tend to be judged based on traditionally male characteristics, and thus women "feel compelled to cultivate a style that conveys strength in traditional male terms" (Campus, 2013, p. 225) in order to be taken seriously and improve their chances of success. Similarly, in sport, Knight and Giuliano (2003) highlight the tensions women experience between their prescribed societal role and their role as an athlete. Possession of perceived male characteristics such as risk-taking, aggression, strength and endurance are seen as attractive, and the core characteristics for the achievement of success.

Our research project builds upon previous work (Graham & Punch, 2016) exploring gender inequalities, sexism and bridge. The research received ethical approval from the Faculty Ethics Committee at the University of Stirling. Whilst this paper does not

discuss the research findings, it does draw on some of the data which refers directly to the research process. The project sought players' views and experiences via a qualitative email survey. It explored participants' knowledge of the term sexism, particularly in relation to its relevance for understanding interactions between men and women in the bridge world. They were asked if they had observed or been aware of forms of gender bias, or indeed if they had no such experiences. Early indications of resistance to the research topic had emerged in discussions on the online Bridge Winners forum, so we also asked what people might perceive as the consequences of such research for the bridge community.

The exploratory survey provided a space for players of all levels to voice their opinions as the first project had only focused on elite players' perspectives. Although discussions surrounding sexism are often unwelcome (e.g., considered as "political correctness gone mad" and making people "uncomfortable" (Savigny, 2020, p. 35), or appear to be confrontational (and indeed they are, and should be), sexism in bridge offered a useful case study because it *does* provoke strong emotional responses from people. Polarized reactions emerged in relation to the research as well as to the subject matter, revealing tensions on both micro and macro levels. The research sought a better understanding of the spectrum of views and our longer-term goal was to try to achieve greater inclusivity for women participating in the game.

We received over 150 responses from 84 male and 67 female bridge players from across the world. They varied in age (18–75 years) and experience, including club, tournament, international and professional players. Given the position of the Bridge Player in the bridge community and her knowledge of people within it, it was important that participants' responses could be separated from their personal details. This separation was not only to ensure anonymity and reduce the awkwardness that might arise in terms of personal relationships with the bridge community but to also elicit more in-depth stories of people's experiences. To address this concern, the Non-Bridge Player established a gender and bridge-related email address to which only she had access. As the surveys were received, the identity of the player was reduced to a code that would allow the visibility of only gender, level of player, age and location. Whilst a number of people did not oppose to the Bridge Player knowing their identity, there were others who preferred their response to remain anonymous. This anonymity was perhaps one of the key advantages of the insider-outsider research team dynamic, especially given the anticipation that there may be some resistance to what can be perceived as a rather uncomfortable topic.

Overall, despite the majority of responses identifying instances of gender bias or sexism in a number of practices related to initial involvement in bridge, time dedicated to the game, perceptions of abilities, and bias during game play, we also met *further* resistance to the research. It is from this point that we increasingly reflected on how the findings might be received not only by our discipline, but by the bridge community and potential funders. Initially, we had very different perspectives on this resistance, which can be related to our differential positions to the mind-sport: one of us is an "insider" and the other, an "outsider." The remainder of this paper explores not only these perspectives, but draws on the email-based research (categorized by gender and age) which evidences some of the resistance we have referred to.

We use Bridge Player (Punch) and Non-Player (Rogers) in order to differentiate between insider and outsider perspectives.

Increased transparency and reflexivity in academic research

This paper explores three dominant issues that emerged from our conversations during our research: (1) our responsibility to the discipline, (2) our obligations to the research community; and (3) how we negotiated the coming together of these when they were in conflict. We first discuss recent trends in relevant methodological literature before outlining the nature of the bridge context. Then we present our experiences of collaboration on this project across these two spaces as differentially located researchers—"the Bridge Player" and "the Non-Bridge Player." It is anticipated that an exploration of our positionality will not only be useful to other researchers with a similar team dynamic but will also go some way to highlighting the complexities, opportunities and constraints that exist in the writing up stages of many research projects.

Drawing on the methodological approach of autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and utilizing a reflexive, autobiographical and narrative writing style (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Humphreys, 2005), we brought together our interactions and discussions throughout the research process, drawing on conversations, emails and notes from meetings over two years of data generation across two studies regarding gender inequalities and bridge. These "texts" are what are used here as "fragmented prose" to serve as the "vehicles" for our reflexive autobiographic engagements in this paper (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739; Humphreys, 2005) to present the challenges and opportunities associated with our project as a research team whose members had differential positions to the subject.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). It is this approach we adopt to highlight our reflexivity as both an orientation to research and as a writing practice itself. We are able to bring to the fore the issues we have encountered in designing the research and in presenting the findings. As we initially witnessed a negative reaction from some potential participants to the subject of gender inequalities and sexism, our reflections began early. A self-reflexive autoethnographic approach to exploring our own texts therefore offered a way to investigate and explore ourselves as researchers in our broader contexts, with our biases and experiences in tow (Settelmaier & Taylor, 2002).

There has been a turn toward more transparency and reflexivity in academic research over recent decades (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Dupuis, 1999; Punch, 2012). Reflexivity encourages examination of different aspects of the research process: theoretical perspectives, disciplinary gaze, practical challenges and opportunities, positionality and subjectivity (Dean, 2017) in order to recognize the positionalities and roles of researchers and the choices they make during research (Becker, 1967). Maton (2003) points out that discussions on reflexivity tend to highlight:

> … that authors should explicitly position themselves in relation to their objects of study so that one may assess researchers' knowledge claims in terms of situated aspects of their social selves and reveal their (often hidden) doxic values and assumptions. (p. 54)

Personal reflections of this kind have emerged recently as some researchers have become comfortable with divulging and revealing feelings, thoughts, emotions and actions which may have impacted their knowledge claims or the process of constructing them as well as their relationships with the communities they study (see Kloß, 2017; Punch, 2012). Although Maton (2003) is cautious of the kind of reflexivity that is only of a personal nature, and by extension the more autoethnographic approach, the nature of this research—given the role of the Bridge Player—*is* personal. It sheds light on the relations between the researchers and the object of study (as insiders and outsiders), the researchers and the knowledge produced (in particular, the intellectual and disciplinary commitments), and relations between that knowledge and the object of study (the effects the knowledge may have on the bridge community). This collective and holistic approach is what Maton (2003) encourages researchers to embrace.

Whilst such transparency of the research process is welcomed, as noted there is still little engagement with the dialogue that occurs *between* research team members. Most of the examples above involve lone researchers, often reflecting on ethnographic field-work. Some notable exceptions include Hubbard et al. (2001) who discuss how emotions are played out and managed by the research team and Clingerman (2007) highlights the benefits of insider and outsider positions in relation to social characteristics of team research on migrant farmworkers. Thus, this paper contributes to the transparency of dialogue of team dynamics, positionality, and issues discussed within teams regarding engagement with the user community.

Positionality as sociologists and commitment to the discipline

Insider research takes place when the researcher is part of the population they are studying. This position can offer valuable insights and insider epistemology that most ethnographers would admire, yet Adler and Adler (1987) point out the possible conflict for such researchers because they play a dual role. The insider researcher, "the Bridge Player," is both a member of the group *and* a researcher. Insider research can result in feelings of loyalty to the group and even uneasiness during analysis that someone who is not a member of the group is unlikely to experience. The benefits, however, could be considered to outweigh the challenging emotions:

> I am concerned that our credibility as a research team could be threatened/challenged now we are turning to more contentious topics. But as researchers we have to tackle the thorny issues too. Addressing gender inequalities is ultimately going to be good for the game – making it a more inclusive environment but not everyone sees our endeavors like that. (Bridge Player)

Yet, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) highlight that there is an advantage to being an insider:

> Participants might be more willing to share their experiences because there is an assumption of understanding and an assumption of shared distinctiveness; it is as if they feel, 'You are one of us and it is us versus them (those on the outside who don't understand).' (p. 58)

Unaware of, and perhaps unencumbered by previous knowledge of group dynamics, the Non-player as the outsider was at times able to see instances of bias that may have

been taken-for-granted by the Bridge Player because such behavior or ideas had become normalized. At times an issue was seen by both the Bridge Player and the Non-player but the way it was understood was different or it was perceived with a different degree of intensity. The Non-player drew her insights into the research topic only from the survey responses, whereas the Player had conducted the interviews discussing gender issues in the first study.

> I am struggling to understand why some of the encounters that people are telling us about here have gone unchallenged … These are clear instances of gender bias but because you've [the Player] been immersed in it all for so long, I think you've either not noticed them or don't know how to challenge them … or is it that you don't want to isolate yourself? (Non-Player)

> For me it's more about finding the most appropriate way to proceed so the research is not merely dismissed as irrelevant. Some feel very threatened and defensive about such gender discussions. It is important we tread carefully so that we are listened to and don't just get people's backs up – not an easy tightrope to tread! (Bridge Player)

Thus, whilst there are advantages and disadvantages to both positions (see Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), the balance of insider/outsider has allowed us to review our research from our differential positions. Combining both of our backgrounds and research interests, there was a strong commitment to addressing situations where women may believe themselves to have been treated unfairly, perceived as inferior, or feel subjugated in some way. In contrast to what some participants in the research suggested, the stories and experiences shared with us are not fabricated, nor are they exaggerated. What we have done is create a specific space for those stories to be shared and therefore, asking specifically about their experiences can mean making people more conscious of something that was perhaps once unconscious due to taken-for-granted constructions of masculinity or femininity. A commitment to this space was our primary responsibility, with the possible outcome being that such research would illuminate some of the macro and micro aspects of the bridge world, exploring the extent to which men and women have equal access to it, and to succeed within it. As Ahmed (2017) points out, "those who are willing to hear will end up hearing more and more; you are providing a place to go" (p. 203).

Overall, our insider and outsider positions did not affect our commitment to the discipline as both are sociologists with a responsibility to addressing gender inequalities within the sociology of mind-sport. Nevertheless, the Bridge Player would experience first-hand the gendered assumptions being played out during bridge tournaments, and those experiences had become embedded in attitudes and behaviors that make up the social construction of the gendered bridge world. For example, given that women are perceived as weaker players and that the structural barriers constrain equality of opportunities (Graham & Punch, 2016), as a player, Punch had been surrounded by and affected by such barriers and unconscious bias. Whilst, on the one hand, that may make her more likely to undertake research to drive positive change, on the other hand, she had had to adapt in that world to survive as an international female player. Hence, the research conversations with both Graham and Rogers during studies one and two respectively were invaluable to tease out the possible blind spots that may have otherwise emerged. Elsewhere Snellgrove and Punch (forthcoming) explore in more detail the effects of seeing and not seeing when researching the familiar, this paper is more

concerned with the implications that process has for fulfilling a commitment to positive change within the user community as well as the advancement of knowledge on the sociology of bridge.

Insider and outsider commitment to the bridge community

In all research there is a commitment to the community being studied, and not only is this underlined in ethical guidelines, but also by the researcher's moral stance. Although the Non-player had never interacted with the bridge community, as in other research there is a consideration of how such work may be received and how to communicate results in a way that effectively engages those being studied whilst trying to avoid alienating them. To do so, participants must be able to identify themselves (in a general sense) in the research. This meant that although work on sexism does often elicit resistance, the Non-player knew that we must try to find a way to ensure that the space created by the survey was one of openness and, where there might be criticism or suggestions for change, that these were received as constructive feedback that overall might lead to enhancing everyone's experience of bridge.

> I've struggled with refusing to be silenced about gender bias that exists in any space (and that's what some people are trying to do with regards to their complaints about this research) because this silencing is often a result of the broader patriarchal structures, but I'm beginning to understand how difficult this is for you [the Player]. The bridge community doesn't make up an important part of my life, but for you it does. I've perhaps underestimated this difference in our positions. (Non-Player)

Such feelings were heightened for the Non-player after viewing the bridge documentary film "Double Dummy" (about a youth world championship) and, for the first time, gaining insight into the strong sense of community that exists among players. Whilst that did not alter the analysis, it helped to explain why there might be some resistance to our research beyond the Non-player's initial assumption that some people could not *see* instances of sexism where others believed it to be prevalent. Like much research, there is often the desire for some kind of change, and it is this fear of change within the community that has perhaps resulted in the resistance we witnessed. Yet, given that it has been identified that there are fewer younger people taking up bridge as a leisure activity (Scott, 1991), it is in the best interests of the bridge community to be aware of instances that might deter someone from taking part.

> I do think it is vital to raise awareness in order to create a more comfortable and encouraging playing environment for young female players. (Nº 33: Female Tournament, under 25)

Awareness-raising does not necessarily mean radical shifts but can be small moments of change. Even subtle changes in language or actions can have a positive influence on women's experiences.

Graham who conducted the first analysis of interview data is also a non-bridge player and her initial conclusion was that a potential solution would be to abolish the separate category of women's bridge because it is perceived as detrimental to equality. This view also emerged in the survey:

> Women's events, to me, only perpetuate the idea that women need their own category from which to be evaluated. Getting back to the self-fulfilling prophecy, because women have an event to play in catered to them, it must be assumed that they are not suited to playing in open events. This assumption leads to others viewing women as lesser players. It's a whole thing where women are viewed as weaker, subconsciously or consciously feel pressure or apprehension about that overarching opinion, and this pressure/apprehension and cognizance about that opinion leads them to underperform, affirming (likely falsely) that they are indeed lesser players. (Nᵒ 65: Male Professional, under 25)

Gender inequalities are embedded not just within leisure worlds but within a wider society where players encounter everyday sexism in a variety of contexts such as the workplace. Hence, recognition of the complexities of the nuanced ways that gender is socially constructed both within and outside of the leisure community needs to be taken into account (Henderson & Gibson, 2013). Furthermore, by merely stopping women's bridge, the gendered inequalities would not just disappear. It would possibly result in a generation of female players being "sacrificed" in terms of their opportunities to play, particularly at elite levels, because more gender neutral approaches and practices would take time to become gradually normalized. Thus, as one respondent suggested:

> … maybe the change needs to start with the junior international game then it can move upwards into the elite game with the wonderful next generations who are not sexist, racist or homophobic. (Nᵒ 52: Male Tournament, 35–54)

The thorny topic of women's bridge is also complex when considering wider gendered structures constraining work and family roles, and the impact these have on leisure activities. For many women, it remains a challenge trying to accommodate work, family and leisure life (Epstein & Kalleberg, 2006). The less fiercely competitive environment of women's bridge is more readily combined with work and family responsibilities, whereas for men it can be easier to find time to dedicate to serious leisure. It may seem a straightforward solution to abolish women's bridge as "the women's game is to blame" (Nᵒ 93: Male International, 25–34), but unless such a change is introduced gradually, such as by starting from junior level, many complications could follow, including many women stopping participating in national or international tournaments. Thus, an outsider Non-Bridge Player view could lead to unintended consequences that their positionality makes it hard for them to anticipate.

Community reactions to the research on gender and bridge

As the insider Bridge Player was aware of the contentious and complex nature of the topic, we incorporated a direct question into the email survey to explore participants' views of the implications of conducting such research. The mixed responses are grouped in Table 1. Reactions from the bridge community toward the research were not clear cut, with most responses (47% of men and 39% of women) highlighting both positive and negative consequences or being unclear about the implications. Whilst some respondents were pleased such research was being carried out, others were more negative:

> I think it is a non-issue. And it would be bad and undeserved publicity for the game as such. (Nᵒ 102: Female Tournament, 55+)

Table 1. What might be the consequences (positive or negative) of raising awareness or addressing sexism in Bridge?

	Male	Female
Positive	23% (18)	35% (21)
Negative	17% (13)	13% (8)
Both positive and negative	17% (13)	11% (7)
Unclear/No real answer	30% (23)	28% (17)
No issue/Doesn't exist	13% (10)	13% (8)
Total	100% (77)	100% (60)

> Like most people I don't appreciate being told I've caused offence when I wasn't aware I caused any. (N° 35: Male International, 55+)

The Bridge Player is even reluctant to mention to the bridge community that the research is using a feminist approach given the negative connotations of this label outside of academia (see Douglas, 2010), as this quote suggests:

> As a woman, you have to be very careful not to be considered an uptight feminist when raising awareness of sexism in bridge. Addressing specific episodes is easier, and handled better by those involved. (No 147: Female International, 35–54)

As an insider, the Bridge Player was made aware of personal responses to the study during bridge events. Some players seemed resentful that such research was taking place as they perceived that it was only going to exacerbate any existing issue. Some directly stated that they did not agree with what the Bridge Player was doing or she heard similar comments indirectly from others.

> When the gender papers are published I'm anticipating a backlash given some of the unpleasant discussions I've already faced at bridge events as well as on Facebook and Messenger. Those who critique the gender inequality issues can be loud, forceful and dismissive – making it hard for others who disagree to say what they think as they see others having their views ridiculed or trivialized. Sometimes I feel like a lone voice in a long uphill battle where the messenger is caught in the cross-fire. (Bridge Player)

The Bridge Player, who is a *female* member of the bridge community *and* a researcher, is thus part of the perceived "subordinate" group of players and some of the responses pointed to the tensions that this might create.

> Some of the reactions to the research have at times been personalized. I remember one guy just telling me directly that if I was a better player, I would not need to be making excuses by complaining about sexism. (Bridge Player)

Interestingly, such negative reactions targeted at the Bridge Player also emerged in the data: "Women should play better. Then in time men will notice" (N° 71: Female International, 35–54). To some extent there was a discourse of blaming women for the gender inequality they faced as well as accusations regarding the exaggeration of a small or non-existent issue.

One player, who heard about the research in his bridge club, wrote a formal complaint to the national bridge organization saying that Punch must be stopped as she is creating an issue where one does not exist. The range of negative responses are challenging to an inside researcher who has to negotiate their role and identity as both a researcher and as a member of the researched community. There was the risk that being labeled by some as an "uptight feminist," could impact negatively on the other bridge

projects and on the broader research agenda of establishing the sociology of mind-sport. Losing respect for the bridge research would be more damaging than the loss of reputation as an individual player. For the Non-Player though, the attitudes shown toward The Player and the research itself only provided further proof that there were indeed issues that needed to be addressed:

> There seems to be a lot of defensiveness from some members of the bridge community, and given that gender bias, or sexism, or any other discrimination would be something we, as sociologists, would challenge, we need to keep going! They are trying to silence these issues and suggest they don't exist. It's quite ironic, really. The comments made in the survey, plus the negativity towards the project, are both frustrating and sad, but provide further data. (Non-Player)

In this kind of research, the messenger can become labeled as a "trouble-maker," or there can be misunderstandings about the intentions of the research or fears about the implications of bringing certain behaviors and attitudes into the open (Deem, 1999). Some participants noted that gender issues were often not confronted in the bridge world: "sexist remarks are not called out as they should be which results in the continuation of the status quo" (N° 84: Male International, under 25). It can also create some risk for the insider-researcher in terms of losing some respect from the community they are studying or shutting doors in terms of future funding (Deem, 1999). In this sense it is easier for the outsider who is more detached from these issues. Several of the email responses indicated that "Recognition is the biggest issue. A significant number of males may not recognize the issue and there is a danger of alienation" (N° 20: Male International, 55+). The insider Bridge Player was concerned to ensure that negative impacts of the research were minimized for the user community where it was possible to do so. This does not mean avoiding writing about the topic (see also Shaw, 2000), but ensuring that contentious issues are carefully framed and taking into account prior warnings from inside the community regarding the most sensitive and problematic concerns.

Given that some of the strong negative responses aimed personally at the Bridge Player could at times have a demotivating effect, more positive reactions to the research from those in the bridge community helped to counteract these:

> I am very glad that you are addressing this. I hope that over time sexism in bridge, as in other areas of life, can be reduced. (N° 46: Male Tournament, 35–54)

As Table 1 indicated, the positive comments came from both male and female players across a range of ages. Many pointed out that the bridge community needs to be more aware of the potential for everyday sexism in bridge that is being addressed in other areas of society:

> A lot of people are unaware of what is going on and might behave differently if they were. (N° 39: Male Tournament, 55+)

> I don't think the consequences would be substantial, but it would still be a good idea to raise awareness of this topic so as to make it clear to some of the 'offending' male players that they need to consider how their attitudes towards women players are not consistent with modern attitudes in life. (N° 79: Male Tournament, 55+)

Punch also had some fruitful discussions with those who train tournament directors or coach junior players, who could foresee useful outcomes from the project. Similar comments emerged in the email responses:

> Men may consider their actions more carefully. The selectors may consider women when selecting teams. More female bridge directors may come forward and more female bridge players who play only at their home bridge club may consider playing in tournaments. (N° 101: Female Tournament, 55+)

When the researcher is both a full participant and an observer of the community they are researching, the process of generating and analyzing data can impact on their engagement with that community. The insider Bridge Player became increasingly aware throughout the fieldwork that there was a need to differentiate between the activist aspects of the research as striving for positive change and the need to survive as a player at the bridge table.

> When researching this topic, I do become more inclined to react when I see everyday sexism emerge at the bridge table. But it is not easy to call out situations without it having a negative impact on my game as such gendered encounters can be emotionally charged. For example, one time when I challenged a player about his intimidating behavior, things got out of hand, but the tournament director just shrugged his shoulders and walked off laughing. It is pretty hard for that subsequent frustration not to put a dent in my concentration. Then I get even more annoyed that I might have given them some undeserved IMPs [points] as I was momentarily distracted. As a bridge player it is better that I turn a blind eye to it but, as a sociologist, that doesn't feel right. (Bridge Player)

Furthermore, Punch also perceived it important not to alienate fellow players by directly or indirectly implying that they may contribute to the acceptance or normalization of sexism within the game. She has had to scrutinize the changing effect of the research on her as a player and attempt to devise strategies for compartmentalizing her player and researcher identities. Deem (1999) suggests this may be why gender issues have not always been confronted in leisure research:

> Some researchers may simply not wish to examine how gender might be relevant to their areas of interest because they do not wish to problematize their own gender identities or delve into their role in gender power relations. (p. 163)

By reflecting on the ambiguity and complexity of the situation, Punch is better prepared to recognize potentially tricky issues and try to put them to one side until after the game. This can be difficult particularly during competitive moments at the bridge table. It is also hard to ignore instances where she perceives that the negative behavior is more likely to be targeted at a female rather than a male player. It is not easy to disentangle when bullying treatment might be directed at any weaker player regardless of gender but, given that women are stereotypically assumed to be weaker bridge players, the gendered dimension is likely to be relevant.

As a result of doing the gender research, emboldened by both a disciplinary responsibility and continued reflexive conversations with the Non-Player, the Bridge Player felt a responsibility not to ignore sexist behavior or attitudes, so was more likely to comment on situations witnessed. However, this at times clearly appeared confrontational to others and could provoke a stronger response:

> I pointed out to my opponent that his questions at the end of the bridge deal concerning my approach to that hand could be directed to me rather than to my male partner. He

made a sarcastic comment about being accused of being a misogynist. For many male players it can seem a trivial complaint that female players find it frustrating to be treated as if they were invisible, often due to assumptions being made about their ability. The same thing happens when standing next to my male partner waiting for the scores after the game. Despite being a similar standard, he regularly gets asked bridge questions about how we did on certain deals but I'm just ignored. (Bridge Player)

When on the receiving end of a small but constant drip of gendered assumptions, such experiences can accumulate and be marginalizing, however seemingly trivial in isolation. A common response is that this drip is nothing to do with sexism or that:

… raising awareness would be counter-productive, leading to invalid claims in innocent circumstances. (Nº 3: Male Tournament, 55+)

People might see sexism where there is none. (Nº 72: Female International, 35–54)

Whilst many of the email responses comment that any gender inequalities in bridge do "not need to be addressed except as part of a more general societal problem" (Nº 4: Female International, 55+), others point out that it is potentially worse because other arenas of society are more actively addressing it.

Research implications: Making a difference

This paper has illustrated some of "the disorder and conflict involved in the process of doing qualitative research" (Dupuis, 1999, p. 47) which becomes intensified when researching a sensitive topic. Critically reflecting on the research process from an insider and outsider perspective has revealed the need to tread carefully when working toward a more inclusive environment for all players. The act of openly discussing gender inequalities can seem threatening to some and introducing gender policies may make people uneasy and unclear about implementing them. Thus, as researchers, we are aware of the potential to create a climate of fear or attracting unwanted negative publicity to the game, which in turn could damage research relations with key stakeholders in the bridge world. Nevertheless, we are keen for the research to make a positive difference toward greater inclusivity for all.

Overall there were diverse responses to the email survey: some people could not *see* instances of sexism where others believed it to be prevalent. Some players were keen to push for radical change (such as abolishing the women's game) whereas others were more in favor of raising awareness or taking small steps to implement change gradually. For sustainability of the game, some responses stressed the need for change in order to attract a younger generation who are less likely to tolerate more traditional and stereotypical attitudes or behavior that can be sexist to varying degrees. The ongoing reflexive discussions amongst the combined insider/outsider research team have led to three ways forward.

Our first solution has been to revise the sequencing of publications from the bridge research. The interviews with elite players covered many bridge topics besides gender inequalities, such as strategic interactions, emotions, identities and skill development. We decided to postpone the completion of the gender-related papers until other more neutral topics were written up. This paper has illustrated several reasons why we believed this decision to be necessarily linked to the anticipated reactions regarding the

contentious topic of sexism and bridge. We are keen for the user community not to dismiss the bridge research by labeling it negatively or assuming that it will only be exploring contentious issues. Other topics examining the dynamics and interactions of the mind-sport can help to set a more positive tone for developing the leisure field further. Our initial goal has been to encourage engagement and dialogue with the bridge community, whilst not hindering relations with funders and key stakeholders. Part of the challenge of establishing a new academic field of the sociology of mind-sport, is to build up a reputation for conducting research that may lead to positive impacts for the user community.

Given the competitive funding climate of academia we also need to be mindful that, in order to continue our research for a number of years, we must take account of the interests and objectives of the funding bodies involved whilst seeking to balance our commitments to both the discipline and the community. Although this exploratory sexism project was initially self-funded, it is part of the growing field of the sociology of bridge which includes various projects funded by the bridge community. For such research to have maximum impact, it needs to be perceived as relevant and engage with users. For stakeholder collaboration to be effective and feed into positive change, it has to build relations of trust and cooperation. Funding, as well as stakeholder relationships, may be compromised if we are not able to frame the research in such a way that men and women of all ages can meaningfully engage with it.

The second outcome of our insider/outsider discussions has been to produce this paper documenting the tensions that can arise when researching a contentious topic. The intention is to work collaboratively with bridge organizations to enhance participation and inclusivity within the game. As Hemingway and Parr (2000) point out:

> All research and practice contain value-based components. Rather than attempting to repress values, it is intellectually more honest to acknowledge their unavoidable presence openly in research and practice and to confront their implications. (p. 153)

By being transparent about the ambiguities and potential conflicts that this acknowledgment can create (Becker, 1967), we hope that the user community can embrace a more holistic perspective that recognizes both the gains of research as well as possible negative implications.

As sociologists, we are keen to explore all aspects of the game, including the darker sides, as the bridge community can reflect a micro version of wider society. Whilst our approach has been to publish the more neutral, positive characteristics of the mind-sport first, we are now addressing the more contentious areas. Our third solution for moving forward is to do this addressing in a way that is as sensitive as possible to the issues raised in this paper. Our aim now is to disseminate the gender findings from both studies in order to directly raise issues and discussions with key stakeholders in the bridge community. For example, we are presenting the findings on gender inequalities at workshops for tournament directors, at seminars aimed at bridge coaches and team captains, at bridge congresses for players and training sessions for junior squads.

By inviting discussion with diverse stakeholders within this leisure community and seeking their suggestions of appropriate ways forward, the solutions can be developed in collaboration. Instead of making recommendations ourselves, we are working in partnership with stakeholders who are well placed to suggest relevant avenues for change. Whilst this partnership may mean that change is gradual, as awareness becomes raised slowly, it

is more likely to be effective as it embraces the reactions, resistance and challenges from within the bridge world. Henderson and Gibson (2013) note when considering leisure, gender "can reproduce hegemony or lead to social change through resistance" (p. 129). Given the complexities involved and in order to have a positive impact, the topic needs to be addressed sensitively and with empathy (Dupuis, 1999). Hence, rather than devising gender policies that might end up being imposed, this more bottom-up way of working is likely to be less antagonistic and perceived as less threatening than more top-down approaches.

Furthermore, such dialogue and collaboration can feed into current and future research. We see the two exploratory studies of gender and bridge as the beginning of ongoing discussions with the bridge community regarding what should be done and what approach is most appropriate. During this process of sharing data and views, greater awareness will be raised in relation to gender issues and some small changes can be implemented without forcing the issue in a radical manner that may provoke a more negative or defensive reaction. Similar to the issue of women's bridge, there are no easy answers as the situation is complex and nuanced. Thus, it requires a sensitive and multi-faceted approach that embraces different perspectives, anticipates unintended consequences and works collaboratively with stakeholders in the user community.

In the current climate of decreased funding yet increased pressure to ensure academic research is impactful and relevant to wider society, the lessons we learned by critically reflecting on our insider/outsider roles and responsibilities to both sociology and the user community have wider applicability to other research fields. Regarding contentious topics, the most challenging questions can be directly incorporated as part of the research questions to be explored within the user community. As Becker (1967) pointed out, transparency of concerns and tensions faced from different positions is an important part of the research. We extend this transparency to argue that being clear about our personal and political positioning can enable fruitful dialogue between the research team as well as between the researchers and the researched. Such collaboration may lead to slower but more effective, sustainable, and less disruptive change.

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