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Published online: 06 Jul 2021.

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Serious leisure experience in a dyadic pursuit: elite player motivations and participation in tournament bridge

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ABSTRACT

International, elite level tournament bridge is a unique context for exploring the dynamics of serious leisure experience. This paper presents sociological research on participation and motivation in a dyadic serious pursuit, understood through the lens of the serious leisure perspective (SLP) and complementary approaches of social worlds and leisure experiences. Qualitative interviews with 52 elite bridge players from the USA and Europe, suggest that the rewards of winning, competition, thrill and flow are worthy of more consideration in the serious leisure perspective. Motivation and participation in elite bridge involve individual and interpersonal dynamics and agency whilst being shaped by wider structural constraints. The motivations of professionals and amateurs are contextually specific and shaped in relation to career contingencies and turning points. This elite social world illustrates that the serious pursuit category of the SLP can encompass both serious leisure amateurs and professional devotee workers. An exploration of the rewards, costs and constraints of elite bridge offers empirical insights that can inform a multi-paradigmatic approach to understanding complex leisure experience.

Introduction

This paper presents a sociological perspective on complex leisure experiences (Gallant et al. 2013; Veal, 2017) by exploring participation in the social world of elite bridge and the motivations of elite players. The serious leisure perspective (SLP) has evolved since 1973 (Stebbins, 2020) and developed into a comprehensive typology of leisure forms and activities, encompassing a range of interwoven concepts. Within the SLP elite bridge is a serious pursuit, but it encompasses both serious leisure and devotee work, challenging Stebbins (2020, p. 21) suggestion that these are separate types of leisure. The case study of elite bridge demonstrates that both amateurs and professionals can come together within the same leisure space, thus creating a combination of the SLP types: serious leisure and devotee work. As a card game that is always played in partnership, the unique social world of bridge adds to the limited empirical research on both dyadic leisure and devotee work (see Stebbins, 2020). We contribute to some of the weaker macro areas of the SLP by bringing to light some of the structural constraints that shape the possibilities for players' participation in elite bridge. Similar to Lee's (2020), recent work, the paper indicates the ways that a social world perspective (SWP) extends the social aspects of the 'unique ethos' (Stebbins, 2020) of serious pursuits by considering the differences and conflicts that participants face as well as their shared experiences.

Bridge is a partnership card game played globally, based on intellect as two pairs of partners compete against each other to win tricks.[1] The setting of elite bridge tournaments and the social

interaction within it are different from those of social or club bridge (Scott & Godbey, 1992). The social world of the elite bridge has not been studied in-depth and its dynamics (which are changing due to professionalisation) as a serious pursuit are not well understood. The lack of visibility of the elite-level bridge, and of the rewards gained by playing it consistently over time, reflects that 'the rewards of the serious pursuits remain outside the purview of the general public' (Stebbins, 2017, p. 77). There is a sense in which bridge is perceived as a game played only socially by older people (Scott, 1991a) with less awareness of the possibility for a high-level tournament bridge. Elite bridge is played simultaneously by amateurs as a form of serious leisure and by professionals as devotee work.

We explore the motivations of elite players dedicating significant time and effort to playing bridge and identify the constraints shaping the extent to which players can create and sustain a career in this serious pursuit. In so doing, we use bridge as a case to consider how the rewards and costs of the serious leisure perspective (SLP) (Stebbins, 2020) combine with a framing of leisure as a complex experience (Gallant et al., 2013) to understand the interplay of agency and structure in the leisure participation of elite players.

We begin by contextualising bridge in relation to typologies of social and serious players and the distinguishing qualities of the SLP. A qualitative methodology based on insider interviewing is outlined, before discussing the personal and social rewards, costs and constraints of the elite bridge. The concepts of career and commitment are framed through the SLP, whilst drawing further on the SWP and leisure experience theory. We summarise a model for understanding elite bridge, demonstrating why this case is useful for theorising serious leisure experience multi-paradigmatically.

Bridge in the serious leisure perspective

Until recently, the only social research of bridge was an ethnography of five bridge clubs in the 1990s from the perspective of recreation specialisation (Scott, 1991a, 1991b; Scott & Godbey, 1992, 1994). Scott and Godbey (1994) outlined four player types in bridge, varying by intensity of involvement, with tournament players the most specialised in their commitment to 'serious' bridge. At the time, it was argued that this reflects the dichotomy of serious and unserious leisure with the caveat that ideas of 'commitment' may simply be a matter of perspective. They contend that 'types of bridge players are not stages within a continuum of specialization but members of different social worlds' (ibid, p. 293). These two worlds consisted of social and tournament bridge players with almost no movement between them. Our paper introduces a new conceptual category, the social world of elite bridge, which represents the top level of Scott and Godbey (1994) tournament player category.

Elite bridge introduces an international dynamic to the study of competitive bridge. Tournaments remain the setting for elite players who constitute a community of individuals, partnerships and teams representing their countries and competing for championship titles. The elite level includes top amateurs (who have or have had other employment and are not paid to play) and professional players (paid to play on a full-time or part-time basis), alongside high-profile sponsors. Sponsors are wealthy individuals who pay professional players to partner them or play on their team. This is a distinctive social world where players with championship titles socialise and compete at multiple events in the year over many decades, many of whom are well-known to each other and to an international audience of bridge enthusiasts.

The elite category is where skill level in bridge is at its highest, and where the lines between leisure and work blur through the professionalisation of the bridge. Thus, elite bridge maps onto the fourth and fifth categories of the involvement scale: core devotee and devotee worker (Stebbins, 2020, p. 74). There has been no research of bridge at elite level beyond the work of the authors herein. It forms one strand of a larger project on the sociology of bridge encompassing all levels of play.

Recent research has, however, explored bridge players who would fall within the earlier categories of Stebbins (2020) involvement scale: neophyte, participant and moderate devotee. Neophytes and participants are more relevant to casual leisure and social bridge, although players can still be thought of as committed (Scott & Godbey, 1994). The link between bridge and well-being is discussed by Brkljačić et al. (2017a, p. 158), who found that for older populations 'bridge significantly improved quality of their lives' with a range of social and cognitive benefits (see also McDonnell et al., 2017). Brkljačić, et al. (2017b) compared participants' experiences of live and online bridge, revealing that face-to-face bridge was perceived as more challenging and demanding. Additionally, research of a university bridge club shows how neophyte social players emerge as 'communities of play' (Judge & Punch, 2019).

Our research so far with elite players has explored characteristics of bridge which relate to the distinguishing qualities of the SLP. According to Stebbins (2020, pp. 25–27), serious pursuits have six defining qualities: (1) the need to persevere to sustain fulfilment whilst meeting challenges; (2) the opportunity to follow a career shaped by special contingencies; (3) significant personal effort to use their acquired knowledge, training and/or skill; (4) durable benefits recognised as outcomes of the leisure activity; (5) a unique ethos and shared social world; and (6) a distinctive identity that emerges in relation to the serious leisure pursuit. Punch et al. (2020) used symbolic interactionism and dramaturgy to explore the formation and performance of player identities. This links to the fifth and sixth distinctive qualities of the SLP, where player identities unfold as layers across self, partnership and community within both front and backstage settings of the elite social world. The first, third and fourth distinguishing qualities are shown through the preparation, practice and skills of impression management and strategic interaction of elite-level play (Punch & Snellgrove, 2020). The analysis of the emotional complexity involved in elite bridge also demonstrates the first and third qualities of perseverance and effort as players find ways to manage emotions and engage in emotional labour in front and backstage social interaction (Punch & Russell, 2021).

The pursuit of bridge as a career, the second defining quality of serious pursuits, is examined by Russell et al. (forthcoming) who unpack the durable benefits of being a paid devotee worker, and the complexities of a professional leisure career in bridge. While, elite bridge involves the six qualities of the SLP, it has not been explicitly analysed in relation to the motivations, rewards and costs of elite players who encompass two types of the SLP: serious leisure amateurs and devotee workers. Focusing on the involvement of core devotees (amateurs) and devotee workers (professionals), the paper shows how both are part of the shared elite social world of bridge, whilst also revealing different costs and constraints regarding their pursuit of a serious leisure career (Stebbins, 2014).

This paper expands the discussion of the second (career) and fifth (social world) qualities of the SLP relating to players' motivations to play bridge. We do so by drawing on theories of leisure which complement the SLP, namely leisure as a complex experience (Gallant et al., 2013; Veal, 2017) and the SWP (Lee, 2020; Unruh, 1980). Gallant et al. (2013) and Veal (2017) critique leisure research dichotomies, with the former suggesting a re-envisioning of leisure as a complex experience situated within a socio-political context. Emphasising the social construction of experience, they reinforce a sociological approach to leisure as embedded in wider societal discourses, institutions and structures (Gallant et al., 2013). Hence, serious leisure as 'experience in social context [recognises] the complexities that together define serious leisure experiences', going beyond the study of individuals, to consider social ties and the collective (ibid, p. 101).

Unruh's (1980) work on the social worlds informed the 'unique ethos' as one of the distinguishing qualities of the SLP. The SWP explores 'how social organisation and process shape a leisure world and its members' experiences' (Lee, 2020, p. 77). Lee (2020) cites Scott and Godbey (1994) work as an example of the differentiation of social worlds between social and tournament bridge. Whilst Unruh emphasised the individual involvement and structural features of social worlds, Lee (2020) points out that most empirical examples relating to serious leisure tend to focus on the individual aspects and on shared experiences of social worlds. The social world concept is used in the SLP because to understand 'why people are attracted to, and continue with a serious pursuit, we

must also understand its social world' (Stebbins, 2018, p.ix). Greater attention to the SWP helps to move beyond sameness (Lee, 2020) and capture the social aspects of serious leisure and socio-cultural context, which is arguably often sidelined in the SLP focus on individuals. It offers a way to situate the elite bridge as a social world, understanding its dynamics in space and time as an international leisure activity.

As Scott and McMahan (2017, p. 569) point out, there is a problematic assumption that 'serious participants in any given leisure activity are seen as homogenous in their attitudes and behavior'. Thus, rather than contrasting elite/serious bridge with casual or social bridge as has been done in the past, we aim to bring to light the complex dynamics of the elite social world that shape commitment to forming a lifestyle with leisure activity at the core (Lee & Ewert, 2019). We examine motivations in elite level bridge and the wider contexts of players' careers and commitment to the dyadic pursuit, utilising the SLP, specifically the concepts of rewards, costs and the involvement scale (Stebbins, 2020). In addition, by drawing on notions of complex experience (Gallant et al., 2013; Veal, 2017) and the SWP (Lee, 2020; Unruh, 1980), greater attention is given to the interplay of agentic and structural dynamics that shape the careers of serious leisure amateurs and professional devotee workers of elite bridge.

Researching elite bridge

Using insider research methodology (see Taylor, 2011), this study was part of a broader project on the sociology of bridge, called *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (see www.bridgemindsport.org). Punch plays bridge for Scotland and designed the *Bridging Minds* research to explore bridge at national and international tournaments, where both amateurs and professionals compete at the top level of the game. Players are 'elite' because they have represented their country (at open, women, senior or junior level) and have earned a major national or international championship title.

As a partnership game, the bridge requires two players to co-operate to compete against another pair. Each dyad develops a unique 'system', which gives partnerships distinct styles depending on who they are playing with, and against. Teams in elite bridge are usually comprised of three partnerships: one pair 'sits out', resting, while two pairs compete. In most world and continental events, players are selected or win trials to represent their specific country, with eligibility based on residency or birth. In some high-level championships, teams can comprise various nationalities of players who are either employed by a sponsor or voluntarily play together. Elite level bridge is unique as a competitive partnership game where sponsors of teams can play by hiring professionals. As a professionalising social world, elite bridge is therefore an example of a pursuit where the lines between work and leisure are blurred and the implications of this are not well understood.

Qualitative insider interviewing (Kitchen, 2019) was used to research this world and allow players to narrate their social experiences in dialogue with Punch. Accessing an international sample of elite players for in-depth interviewing was possible due to her insider status. Interviews took place at tournaments in quiet settings before and after games were played. A semi-structured interview guide was developed using insider knowledge of elite bridge, designed to explore sociological themes and the dynamics of social interaction within bridge partnerships and teams at the elite level.

The sample, drawn from the world's top players and sponsors, was created purposefully and through convenience with players approached via email and in person. This would offer insight into bridge as a serious leisure and the motivations of players who have invested the most time and commitment to the game. The sample of 52 players, aged between 17 and 78, incorporated professional and amateur players of different nationality and gender, predominantly from the UK and USA. A few interviewees are included from non-UK European countries because they play top-level world-class bridge regularly in the USA, often as professional players. Given the shared level of understanding and commitment to the pursuit of bridge as a peer, the data gathered were rich in the

kinds of qualitative meaning and insight that may not have been possible with an outsider interviewer (Kitchen, 2019).

Thematic analysis of structured data codes was useful for exploration of the data. The process of thematic coding was grounded allowing for themes to emerge from structured documents of transcript data coded by interview topics. Following thematic analysis, the themes were sociologically and theoretically examined. This paper focuses on the findings related to player motivation and participation in elite bridge as a distinct leisure experience. In order to engage the bridge community with the research, from the outset players agreed for real names to be used and this met with University ethical approval. Full transcripts were available for viewing by players so that extracts they felt were too sensitive to appear with their real name could be anonymised.

Reflexivity is particularly important in insider research and one tool which can be used is for the researcher to be interviewed, allowing for an explicit narration of positionality and scrutiny of their subjectivity (Greene, 2014). As a methodological approach, insider research also has benefits for data analysis and interpretation, particularly given the complex and technical nature of understanding bridge gameplay scenarios. On the other hand, it is often necessary for researchers to find an appropriate distance from their subject matter, which characterises the co-authors as non-bridge player 'outsiders'. Thus, interpretation of data blended sociological and contextual knowledge, theory and practice as a method for understanding, and involved iterative processes of dialogue and reflexivity between the research team.

Motivations: personal and social rewards

Across the sample of elite players, regardless of age or gender, similar characterisations of bridge emerged which reveal why individuals play bridge and their perception of the rewards of playing, including both personal and social rewards (Stebbins, 2020, p. 28). In terms of personal rewards, personal enrichment and self-gratification emerge via the fulfilment gained from the multi-faceted and challenging nature of the game itself:

> It has many, many aspects and it's the fact that it has all these aspects that attracts me. When I started playing it was more the technical side . . . but there's the psychology, and the partnership relationship and so on. (John Matheson, Scotland)

> I just love it. It's just so much fun. It has so many different facets and it's not just one way of thinking, it's putting things together. To me it's a little bit like detective work. There are some clues out there, you don't know what they are and where they are, so you have to go and find them. Once you have found them you have to put them together like a puzzle and then draw the right conclusions so it's really multi-faceted. To me that's fascinating. (Sabine Auken, Germany)

Comparing bridge to other games such as chess, the former is perceived superior by Eric Rodwell (USA) because 'each hand is an individual event', and it combines 'uncertainty and probability' as well as an enjoyable 'social aspect'. Every bridge hand (lasting 7–8 minutes) provides an opportunity to do well and solve a particular puzzle, and offers creativity and variety, allowing players to express both individual and partnership playing styles. The players also derive rewards from the competitive nature of the game, whereby each session has approximately 24 opportunities to 'win' a particular bridge deal even if overall success in the event is not achieved. The rewards of self-actualisation and self-expression in terms of developing and displaying their skills also feed into the personal reward of self-image as they become well-known players at the top of the game (see also Punch, 2021).

Elite bridge players often describe themselves as extremely competitive and that they enjoy winning. Brkljačić et al. (2017b) assert that the pleasure found in competition is mostly, but not exclusively, linked to the possibility of winning. For example, 'you get good feelings from playing well but winning is what you care about' (Justin Lall, USA). Enjoyment and a desire to win come hand in hand in bridge insomuch that the players' passion for the game drives their motivation to

play well and strive to win. Interestingly, winning does not feature as one of the rewards in the SLP, although failure to win is included as a cost (Stebbins, 2020, p. 155). Interviews with elite players strongly suggest that winning and competition should be included as a reward of the SLP.

Elite players can still derive enjoyment if they lose, if they feel they have played to the best of their ability which gives a broader scope for achieving self-expression. Similarly, Crespi (1956, p.720) noted that skill players are:

> . . . attracted by the challenge of trying to win at cards through skilled performance. They seek to demonstrate their mastery of necessary skills, and if possible, their skill superiority. [. . .] They confine their playing to games such as bridge, which are intrinsically difficult enough to present a continuing challenge.

This raises an interesting point regarding the relationship between personal rewards and the durable benefits of the SLP, which Veal (2017, p. 217) claims are almost identical. Whilst Stebbins refers to the benefits as outcomes and the rewards as antecedent motivators, in practice these overlap. Rewards 'motivate the participant to stick with the pursuit in the hope of finding similar experiences again and again and because they demonstrate that diligence and commitment may pay off' (Ibid, p.29), but these leisure experiences are also outcomes (Veal, 2017). For example, players spoke of the challenge and ever-evolving nature of bridge as a specific 'thrill'; both a reward and an outcome of playing which contrasted to other aspects of life:

> It's so important to me. A life without bridge . . . if I try and imagine my life without bridge, I feel a sort of vacuum, a dullness. Bridge is a continual challenge. It's motivating, it gives me adrenaline. And without it I don't know what I'd do to fill that void. It's not that I don't love other aspects of my life, I love my children, I love my husband, I love my friends, I've got a very interesting job. But bridge gives me a very particular thrill. (Susannah Gross, England)

For Stebbins (2020), serious leisure thrills are different in quality from casual leisure thrills as they are related to the mastery of an activity and the idea of 'flow' (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The thrill and flow described through playing elite bridge are indicative of both rewards as well as durable benefits, and are worthy of more consideration in the SLP. The complexity of the game itself and its dyadic nature are key to how and when the flow can manifest. For example, in the act of 'performing a moderately challenging activity' (Stebbins, 2017, p. 71), elite bridge players are also engaged in complex social interaction with their partner and opponents. Such social interactions can range from pleasurable to highly stressful and tense. Each partnership is unique, and dyads are shaped by a range of factors such as emotion management, skill level, partnership hierarchy, playing styles and the chosen 'system'. Hence, interpersonal dynamics are fundamental to the manifestation of rewards in elite bridge.

Our findings illustrate the layer of partnership which fits between the individual and the group; an under-researched aspect of the SLP and is likely relevant to other activities that involve partnering. The personal rewards of self-actualisation, self-expression, self-image and self-gratification (Stebbins, 2020) vary markedly for different elite players over their careers and depending upon whom one is playing with. Thus, the self, invoked by ideas of personal gratification, self-image, self-actualisation, self-expression and self-gratification (ibid, p. 28) is fundamentally a social self where one's partner is central to the rewards one derives from participation. Hence, the dyad is integral to player motivations in this form of leisure (see Stebbins, 2020, p. 91).

In terms of Stebbins (2020, p. 28) specific list of personal rewards, arguably 1–5 (as above) are applicable to all elite players, whereas 6 (regeneration following work) is relevant only to elite amateurs, and 7 (financial return) only to professionals (discussed in Russell et al., forthcoming). The social nature of elite bridge at the international community scale is another motivator for elite players and links to the SLP social reward of social attraction (Stebbins, 2020, p. 28):

> Well, it's the social part. Bridge has taken me around the world and still takes me around the world. It opens doors for me that I otherwise would never have gone through and I'm meeting people that I otherwise would never have met, which I think is exciting. In Denmark sometimes, I play bridge with the husband of the queen and that's somebody you wouldn't usually meet. In China I've played with some of the top politicians and things

like that, I think that's exciting. You feel like you have friends all over the world and wherever you go you know somebody. (Sabine Auken, Germany)

Sabine's account conveys that a key source of personal enrichment derives from the ability to foster social connections globally. Participation brings players social rewards, namely in the form of 'social attraction' through associating with other participants of the pursuit (Stebbins, 2020, p. 28). Group accomplishment and contributing to maintaining the group are also applicable, evident in how players' identities and sense of self are rooted within teams, nations and the international playing community. However, the importance of social rewards varies among players, with some indicating a stronger sense of attachment to group/team identity or nationality than others (Punch et al., 2020). This reflects rewards more generally, where participants prioritise them differently, albeit with self-enrichment and self-gratification at the fore (Stebbins, 2020). The possibilities for group rewards are complicated by hierarchies within teams (including sponsorship and skill level) and competition between teams which can breed conflict, jealousy and dislike as much as solidarity and shared identity. For example:

> . . . the biggest thing with that team was to get them to speak to each other. And to listen to each other. It was almost impossible to do 'cause they were always yelling and screaming. (Eric Kokish, Canada)

Whilst there is an element of choice through voluntarily associating with fellow participants of the social world as a community, the team selection process and the element of sponsorship can mean playing with people one would prefer not to:

> You still might be on a team with people you don't like if you win the pairs trials. I would rather the best three pairs get together and if one of them doesn't like each other, they get the next best pair. That is going to be the best team. (Justin Lall, USA)

These aspects vary by geography, and many elite players have experience of playing in different national contexts as Jenny Wolpert (USA) describes:

> It's different to play from Europe than for the USA it's more . . . you're a team and it's always kind of the same team. There's not that many top players per se in Sweden so it's always the same players. So, even if you don't like everybody, you get used to each other. You respect everybody and there's no . . . when you have professionals it's so competitive and cutthroat and its different, so it's a nice experience playing for Sweden.

Social rewards are thus shaped by the wider cultural context of teams and their playing ethos alongside the specific dynamics of a team. This conveys how 'motivations are not innate but derive from interaction with other people and the act of serious leisure' (Shupe & Gagne, 2016, p. 108). In elite bridge, motivations are tied to the performance of a complex, social game with strong interpersonal dynamics, hierarchies and geographic variations that affect the manifestation of rewards.

Motivations: costs and constraints

Stebbins (2020, p. 30) conceptualises costs as motivators, given how participants are motivated to avoid them. They include notions of disappointment, dislikes and tensions associated with participation in serious leisure and are usually individual or interpersonal in nature (ibid). For elite bridge, a key cost is the experience of losing matches and feeling that one has not performed to the best of one's ability. This is especially prominent for narrow losses, which can be bitterly disappointing. This contrasts with the possibility of experiencing rewards such as flow from playing well, even if one does not win. The cost of losing varies for elite players and can change over time, for example, with disappointment lessening with repeated exposure:

> If you lose, you lose. You're not happy about it but I've never really been afraid of getting beaten. I guess because it's happened so often, I got desensitized to it. (Bob Hamman, USA)

The partnership element of bridge is also key to the costs of participation which are interpersonal in nature, for example, having to play with a partner that one does not necessarily want to play with as

mentioned above. Costs are not solely borne by individuals, nor can they be understood outwith social interaction (Stebbins, 2020, p. 64), such as the possible conflict and tensions within and between bridge partnerships. As a player describes of the latter:

> *I can think of so many crap boards [my partner] and I played, we played so bloody well up until the final and I really feel like that, those comments those [opponents] said to us really upset us. I just didn't want to play bridge again after that set. I said to [team captain] please sit me out because I can't be dealing with this crap.* (Anonymous)

Likewise, of the former, the costs can be felt strongly:

> *. . . when things go wrong you feel as if you've been betrayed, you feel as if you've been let down by somebody who is supposed to be on your side and that's not a pleasant thing for people to deal with in any walk of life. I mean, any sort of aspect of human co-operation. There's always this terrible, you know, you don't mind being stabbed in the back by the opponents, that's what they're supposed to do, but when it seems to me that you've been completely sabotaged by your own partner you feel horrible about it, and, naturally, you do things that give rise to, or give vent to those feelings, and those are completely counter-productive in bridge.* (David Burn, England)

The costs of participation in elite bridge include the intense interpersonal dynamics and difficulties that arise in partnership relations. Hence, the dyad, as well as being a positive motivator for participation in leisure (Stebbins, 2020, p. 90) is also a cost. The causes of tension and conflict are contextually specific, subjective and shaped by expectations that players have of themselves and their partner (Punch et al., 2020). However, common to many partnerships are specific forms of hierarchy which can emerge, related, for example, to gender and skill dynamics. In terms of the latter, the performance of skill and desire to prove oneself individually can be in tension with the idea of an equal co-operative partnership:

> *In the beginning it was all very macho, they had to prove who was right and show how strong they were and part of that involved showing how weak the other guy was. Which is so often the case if you just watch two people play bridge. Their interaction is so horrible. You wish you could just take a magic wand and turn them into nice people. And they're probably great people away from the table too, bridge just brings out the absolute worst in them.* (Eric Kokish, Canada)

Although hierarchical social interaction manifests for some players as a cost, in contrast, this is also accepted as useful for elite bridge, giving a clear context for understanding roles in the partnership:

> *I feel best in partnerships when there's a clear hierarchy, I don't like playing in a partnership where I don't know if I'm the big fish or the small fish or I think my partner doesn't know who the big fish and the small fish are.* (Sarah Bell, England)

Hence, whether a hierarchy of skills is experienced as a cost is contextually specific to each player and partnership.

The individual and interpersonal costs of participation must also be contextualised in relation to leisure constraints which are outwith the control of participants, as 'particular cultural and structural forces inhibiting leisure choice' (Stebbins, 2020, p. 67). Their importance is explained by Gallant et al. (2013, p. 100):

> *When we focus on serious leisure as an individual experience and hone in on serious leisure participants, we fail to take a broader view and consider that individuals need access to material goods, time and status to participate in serious leisure; in other words, the experience of serious leisure is inherently political.*

The problem of the inequitable nature of serious leisure participation includes the gendered nature of access to and quality of serious leisure experiences (see Dilley & Scraton, 2010; Raisborough, 2006). At the elite level, bridge gendered leisure constraints include the economic conditions of participation. For example, women are most likely to be paid to play in women's only events rather than in open national and international contexts and paid opportunities in the Open game have lesser financial returns:

. . . we have the fallback of making money playing the women's, but we turned down a big women's offer last year because we really wanted . . . we took a lot less to play Open. (Jill Levin, USA)

Playing in women-only tournaments is often perceived as a lower quality game (Punch, 2021), even characterised as having a 'stigma', which affects the perceived rewards and costs associated with participation. For example, Jenny Wolpert (USA) suggests that only the winning team are happy because 'everybody feels like they're supposed to win because women are weaker and it's not the Open.' For female players especially, decisions on where to play are shaped by financial circumstances, which can be either enabling or constraining. Elaborating on the decision to play Open rather than women's bridge, Jill Levin (USA) explained:

. . . my kids' college is paid for and I basically can afford to do that, when you're staring down a lifetime and needing to make money and get your children through college and everything, it's a much harder decision to do things like that.

One issue for the elite level bridge is partly that there are fewer elite female players, reflecting how 'participation in some serious leisure is constrained by the availability of co-participants' (Stebbins, 2020, p. 53). This can affect elite players more generally, who may struggle to find the right partner to play with whether due to geography, skill level, compatibility or otherwise.

Alongside material and status issues, women specifically can be more constrained in relation to time. Female players refer to the difficulties of participating in bridge tournaments alongside responsibilities as a parent:

When I'm playing, I'm playing, but the rest of the time . . . some of the pros here they play 20 weeks a year. I'm not doing that because I can't leave my kids for that many weeks so if you really want to be a top bridge player you have to put in a lot of weeks of work. (Jenny Wolpert, USA)

Parenthood does not affect both male and female players' ability to participate equally, as Jenny further explains in relation to her bridge playing male partner:

. . . if he got even an offer to play, he would just go and play because it's easy for me to be with the kids by myself, it's very hard for him.

Given a deeper engagement in serious leisure pursuits increases overall life satisfaction (Cheng et al., 2017), it is problematic that women are continually constrained from being able to pursue that deeper engagement where they have a desire to do so. Beyond issues of gender, our findings suggest specific structural constraints on participation in elite tournament bridge due to the geographical distribution of opportunities and income generating potential. This brings to the fore issues of career contingencies and commitment to participation in serious leisure pursuits.

Careers and commitment

In elite bridge, there are varying levels of commitment to participation, linked to differing motivations and life circumstances of amateurs and professionals. Stebbins (2020) argues that professionals are significantly more confident, persevering, committed and prepared than amateurs. This is reflected in the following comments from amateur elite players who are paid to play in some tournaments:

I think I get fed up with it when I play too much, I need a break between playing. I'm happy to play quite a lot but I do need breaks in between . . . I wouldn't leave it forever but there have been times when I have had three months off. (Tony Forrester, England)

I don't ever think about bridge when I am not playing bridge. It's a hobby. I don't think about interesting suit combinations or anything like that. (Ed Jones, England)

The elite players who do not necessarily see bridge as the most important aspect of their identity are the amateurs or part-time professionals who have other livelihoods beside the bridge. For example,

Jill Meyers (USA) who runs her own music business refers to a decrease in focus in terms of the overall perceptions of where bridge fits into one's life:

> *When I started to play bridge, it was like my entire universe. I loved it so much, it was my world. And now it's just a piece of my world.*

In contrast, Eric Rodwell (USA), a full-time professional, explains the place of bridge in life as central:

> *. . . it's my occupation, it's what I do for a living and it's definitely one of my strong passions so, it's right there in the front centre.*

The social world of elite bridge comprising full-time professionals and amateurs, all playing together at the top level in tournaments, thus conveys how within serious leisure, there can be a variety of experiences and degrees of personal and behavioural commitment (Lee & Scott, 2013). For Gallant et al. (2013, p. 104) viewing serious leisure through the lens of being 'committed', rather than the terminology of careers, allows for 'the possibility of interruptions due to personal circumstances shaped by social, political and economic contexts'. This was certainly the case with elite bridge players, where participation over the life course can be intermittently shaped by wider life circumstances:

> *That was the time I got hooked on playing bridge in bridge clubs. I would play it at home quite happily, but I could take it or leave it and I didn't play it all throughout my university career. It wasn't really until I started looking for something to fill my long evenings, I found that bridge was something that I enjoyed.* (Liz McGowan, Scotland)

Even for individual players within a particular moment in time, rather than over the course of years, the place of bridge in one's life can be complex, reflecting various perceptions of the importance of bridge:

> *Bridge is both extremely important and extremely and wonderfully unimportant. Look, it's unimportant, it's a game, yet of course it's important because I want to keep winning. I think that all the important things in life are the things that you inevitably feel ambivalent about. It's like your spouse – you can really hate your spouse or love your spouse, they can irritate the hell out of you, but you still stick around.* (Simon Gillis, England)

For elite bridge, it remains useful to retain the concept of career and to use notions of commitment as part of understanding the complexity of players' leisure experience. In particular, this captures the dynamics of both agency and the structure that shapes this participation.

Players' leisure careers in bridge are impacted by 'career contingencies which emanate from changes in leisure or work environments or personal circumstances' which can be positive or negative, but which are outwith the control of individuals (Stebbins, 2014, p. 38). For example, the ability to generate income through playing is shaped by the wider context of international bridge, which is geographically and institutionally diverse. In some countries bridge is more professionalised than others. Scandinavian players may, for instance, have to travel to the USA (or more recently to China) to play as paid professionals and within countries bridge can be isolated to specific areas, such as London in the UK. As Zia Mahmood (USA) illustrates:

> *I couldn't have progressed in bridge living in Pakistan or playing for Pakistan, it just, it wouldn't- I needed to, you know, go to England, go to America.*

Thus, players seeking opportunities to play international bridge as a serious pursuit can engage in a 'career turning point' (Stebbins, 2014, p. 35) by moving countries. Such turning points are key to their participation in top-level elite bridge, as they intensify their commitment by taking opportunities to play where the game is more developed and to play professionally. The shift from core devotee to devotee worker as one becomes a professional player highlights the idea of commitment as involving 'the development of obligations which makes cessation problematic' (Lee & Scott, 2013, p. 453). Thus, for professional players increasingly dependent on bridge as their main source of

income, this invokes a level of personal and behavioural commitment that would surpass an amateur elite player.

While playing full-time professionally certainly offers the time and space needed to acquire skills and knowledge, this does not necessarily mean professionals have more skills than amateurs. An amateur bridge player may spend significant effort reading about bridge and practicing to hone skills, while a professional can be hired to play with a less skilled partner and spend more time invested in client-relationships than developing knowledge and skill with a peer. An important conclusion to note is that the agency required to increase commitment is part of the navigation of structural career contingencies related to the wider environment of participation in a bridge partnership at elite level.

Discussion

As Stebbins (2018, p. 7) describes, 'the social worlds of the serious pursuits are complex phenomena'. Our findings relate to one distinct social world, the elite bridge, that offers insights for better understanding the complexity of leisure experience (Veal, 2017) including motivations, careers and commitment. Players' accounts give an insight into the rewards associated with elite bridge as a complex, multi-faceted game with a strong interpersonal and social element. We argue that winning and competition should be listed as a reward in the SLP and not just as a cost in terms of failing to win. Furthermore, we suggest that thrills and flows should be more fully integrated into the SLP. Such leisure experiences illustrate the blurred boundaries between rewards and durable benefits as they are motivators to continued participation as well as outcomes of engagement.

Elite players also reveal the presence of hierarchies that shape interpersonal relationships and influence whether motivations emerge as rewards or costs. These can be tied to the dynamics of competition and co-operation that are present at individual, interpersonal, team and community level in the elite bridge as well as the mix of amateurs and professionals, which adds to the complexity of this social world. Moreover, we can situate players' experiences within the wider structural constraints and hierarchical dynamics associated with bridge, for example, in how players must engage in career turning points to overcome the geographic constraints of playing at elite level. Expanding on this, other examples such as changing one's partner or getting hired as a professional are important turning points for elite players. These turning points are structurally shaped by positive and negative career contingencies, which are outwith players control, including the availability of participants (Stebbins, 2014) such as other elite players to partner with.

Nevertheless, our findings highlight the agency of players is a key aspect of their motivation to change the dynamics of their participation in bridge, such as increasing commitment through playing at the elite level. A career turning point (Stebbins, 2014) involves negotiating dyadic relationships with bridge partners, as well as emphasising the agency to navigate the structural constraints and contingencies where there is a desire to do so. However, this is dependent on where elite bridge fits into one's life and the wider social context in which elite bridge can be played which differs for each player and their partner as well as changes over time. There is a lack of homogeneity in elite bridge as a serious pursuit, reinforcing that:

> ... while it is possible to classify participants according to varying levels or types of skill, experience and commitment, and place them at a point on a continuum, how they get to that point, and where they proceed from there, if anywhere, is likely to vary across individuals, activities and contexts. (Veal, 2017, p. 15)

What we can show, however, is movement and differentiation between the devotee categories of the involvement scale, namely in relation to amateurs and professionals in elite bridge. Our findings reveal that even within one specialised serious social world there are nested layers of involvement and commitment, which are not fully understood when leisure theorists emphasise a broader continuum from casual to serious. In serious elite bridge, which is a very small category of tournament bridge, amateurs and professionals have formed as nested social worlds. Each group

take elite bridge seriously but in different ways and with different motivations, careers and levels of commitment. Importantly, professionalisation is not linear, meaning that top amateurs will not necessarily become professionals, despite all players having reached the highest level of the tournament bridge as shown in Figure 1.

Stebbins (2020) suggests that professionals are significantly more confident, persevering, committed and prepared than amateurs. It is difficult to assess this for the case of elite bridge, where professionalisation has been increasing in recent decades. However, our findings support the idea that professional players have bridge as central in their lives. They commit to and persevere in their role and have the confidence of intense periods of practice and play compared to amateurs. On the other hand, there are well-established amateur players who may be more skilled than many professionals and for whom their commitment to the pursuit includes actively resisting professionalisation, which is viewed as incompatible with what they value from participation in bridge as a leisure activity. This is an example of how leisure worlds can be subdivided around ideological differences, with some participants pursuing hard-core leisure as a more 'authentic' form of play (Scott & McMahan, 2017). Russell et al. (forthcoming) explore further the contested nature of professional bridge as devotee work.

Stebbins (2020) contends that the level of involvement in a pursuit can peak at any point within the scale, and the exploration of elite bridge shows that this relates both to the agency of players and wider structural constraints. The agentic aspect reflects that seriousness can be viewed as a continuum allowing for a more open and flexible leisure experience perspective (Veal, 2017). The overlap of serious leisure amateurs and devotee workers challenges the SLP forms of leisure (Stebbins, 2020, p. 21) by highlighting its failure to capture that a serious pursuit (elite bridge) can be played by amateurs and professionals. Whilst the dynamics within both forms may be similar (see Shen & Yarnal, 2010), they also illustrate the diversity and complexity of leisure experience (Veal, 2017). Furthermore, with rewards in bridge, the enjoyment derived from the nature of the game and its social features are similar for new players (Judge & Punch, 2019) albeit experienced with much less intensity. Scott and Godbey (1992, 1994) showed that social players can be 'highly
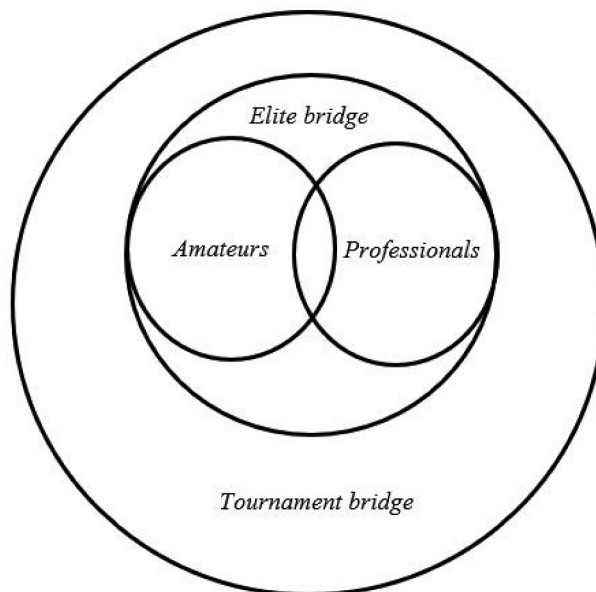

Figure 1. Nested social world.

committed', perceiving their participation with seriousness, whilst eschewing the more serious players.

Elements of the SLP, namely the rewards, costs and careers concepts remain productive in the analysis of serious leisure as we have shown. Nevertheless, their use can be enhanced by applying concepts of social worlds and leisure experience in a fluid and interactionist way. Drawing on complementary theory (Veal, 2017) enabled us to capture some of the varied and changing elements of a distinct social world. The model presented and our findings begin to address weaker elements of the SLP, namely, macro-level constraints and dyad leisure forms (Stebbins, 2020). The social world of elite bridge and player motivations must be understood through agency-structure dynamics, in the context of varying levels of commitment during a player's career influenced by constraints and turning points related to gender, time and geographic variation. The diversity among participants, with career progression and personal and behavioural commitments shaped by socio-political context, indicates the complexity of serious leisure experience.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the motivations associated with elite bridge, as a dyadic card game, comprising amateur and professional players in international top-level tournaments. We have shown the importance of the interpersonal and partnership dynamics of this dyadic leisure pursuit, which shape the rewards and costs for players and bring to the fore the presence of conflict and hierarchy. This paper contributes to Gallant et al.'s (2013, p. 101) the observation that serious leisure has 'benefits for the collective' as well as for individuals which have been underplayed in the SLP. For elite bridge, the importance of social ties relates to the interpersonal dyadic relations of bridge partnerships as well as the collective bridge community, rather than for 'society more generally' (ibid). Across the individual, interpersonal and community layers of the social world of elite bridge, we find that motivations must be understood in relation to both agency and structure, evident in the empirical finding of specific gendered constraints and the agency of players in navigating these. Further research into the gendered dynamics of elite bridge would be useful to better contextualise these findings and to highlight the challenges associated with creating more inclusive leisure experiences. Any future study of dyad leisure forms would benefit from a more explicit consideration of power relations between participants.

By focusing on the elite level of the partnership card game, the paper suggests that leisure experiences of winning, competition, thrill and flow should be incorporated more directly into the rewards outlined in the SLP. Building on Veal's (2017) observation, we also note that the difference between rewards and durable benefits is not clear when exploring motivations for participating in a serious pursuit. We have pointed to the differentiation within the elite bridge community of professional and amateur players, which can be conceptualised in a model as nested social worlds, reiterating that participants within serious pursuits, even within one narrow community are not homogenous. We have illustrated that there can be movement between the categories of amateur and professional, which are not necessarily separate forms of the SLP. The findings show that professional players of a serious leisure pursuit, such as bridge or poker, should be included in the SLP list of devotee work (Stebbins, 2020, p. 21). For many players, a career turning point involves taking advantage of opportunities to increase personal and behavioural commitments at the elite level. However, in contrast, some prefer not to move from core devotee into devotee work; a greater exploration of the recent professionalisation of bridge would be fruitful.

This paper has presented an analysis of complex serious leisure experience (Gallant et al., 2013), capturing the dynamics of a distinctive social world across individual, interpersonal and community levels. We have demonstrated empirically the importance of a multi-paradigmatic approach, drawing together the SLP with leisure experience theory and the social world perspective. Integrating these theories to produce a complementary conceptual framework for analysing elite bridge, was essential to fully grapple with the nuances of both agency and structure in a distinct, but

differentiated social world. Our specific application of the theory reflects the broader idea of adopting 'multi-paradigmatic co-operation' as a key way forward for researching leisure experience (Veal, 2017). By blending these different conceptual approaches, we used the empirical study of elite bridge to theorise participation in a serious pursuit and player motivations and experience as products of agentic and structural dynamics. Together, these inform a sociological perspective on the complex experience of serious leisure and devotee work as simultaneously individual, inter-personal and collective.

Note

1. The dynamics of the game are fully explained in Punch and Snellgrove (2020).

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