

The physicality of mindsports through elite bridge players' sensorial experiences: Presence, confidence and bodies

The Sociological Review

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/00380261231155326

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Abstract

The classification of mindsports such as the card game of bridge within sport and society continues to be keenly debated. The concept of 'physicality' is often cited as being a prerequisite for an activity to be classed as a 'sport', a characteristic typically seen as lacking in mindsports. However, by drawing upon monist conceptualisations of the mind, body and world being intertwined, it is possible to problematise such arguments by highlighting the interconnected sensations experienced when participating in bridge. This article explores such a notion through phenomenologically-inspired analysis of 52 interviews with elite-level bridge players. The findings detail the importance players placed upon aspects of kinaesthesia, physical presence within the competitive environment, and the role of other social actors within their own understandings of their competition experience. These sensorial, emotional and embodied accounts of elite-level bridge shed light on the physical negotiations and socio-cultural influences involved in mindsport, which allude to a greater degree of 'physicality' than has previously been discussed.

Keywords

confidence, embodiment, mindsport, physicality, sociology of the senses

Introduction

Bridge is internationally recognised as one of the most popular card games in existence, with it being classed as a 'mindsport' due to the high levels of 'thought, stamina, emotional investment, and practice' (Kobiela, 2018, p. 289) involved. However, bridge

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and other mindsports such as chess and esports are typically characterised by the lack of physiological effort needed when playing them. The legitimisation of mindsports as ‘sports’ has been questioned when compared with traditional sports that involve more obvious notions of physicality (e.g. Kobiela, 2018; Parry, 2018). More recently, debate around definitions of ‘physical activity’ have moved beyond focusing purely on bodily movement towards greater contextual influences on individuals, such as the ‘rhythmic flows’ of the context (Phoenix & Bell, 2019) and the inherent cerebral, social, situated and political aspects involved (Piggin, 2020). The updated definition of physical activity proposed by Piggin (2020) invites further scrutiny upon notions of physical activity to provoke debates as to how physical activity and sport is taught, recognised, and politicised in modern society. As such, a more critical comparison between mindsports and more traditional forms of sports is timely, given the previous criticisms which discredit them as a form of sport or physical activity due to a lack of ‘physicality’ (Parry, 2018).

Distinguishing ‘physicality’ as being separate from the ‘mind’ indicates an adoption of the Cartesian dualism of ‘mind’ and ‘body’ being split entities when it comes to sport. This argument forefronts the Western conceptualisation of a mind–body dualism, which inevitably leads to the privileging of one half over the other (Pang, 2021). If modern understandings of the mind and the body being reciprocally intertwined are increasingly accepted within wider society, then why has this not been taken into consideration when it comes to social, cultural and political understandings of mindsports such as bridge as being a sport or physical activity?

This question pertains to issues which have been broached within more traditionally understood arenas of sport through the exploration of sociological and embodied experiences of participation. Such investigations have utilised a sensorial sociological phenomenological perspective to highlight the various socio-cultural and physical-cultural aspects involved in ‘doing’ sport. These studies have emphasised the importance of haptic encounters (i.e. the ‘touch’ and ‘feel’), for example within running and scuba diving (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011). The emergent focus upon the sensorial and emotional aspects of sporting engagement is also of interest. By drawing greater attention to the role of the senses, the burgeoning literature has theorised the importance of dimensions such as heat (McNarry et al., 2021), bodily attention and awareness (Hjortborg & Ravn, 2020), and kinaesthesia (Throsby, 2013). Each of these contribute to the socially mediated and culturally embedded understanding of embodied experiences within sports. Similarly, greater attention upon the sociologically informed emotional dimension of sport has explored the socially situated and embodied nature of emotions in sport (Scott, 2020; Tamminen & Bennett, 2017). While these investigations to date have understandably focused on more physically exerting forms of sport that involve ‘intense embodied experiences’ (Allen-Collinson & Owton, 2015), there has yet to be an exploration of these experiences within less physically exerting sporting contexts, such as in tournament bridge.

This article applies a sensory sociological lens to the non-physiologically intensive sporting context of bridge, to investigate the embodied experiences of elite players within their specific socio-cultural and physical-cultural environment. We do this by first introducing bridge and the current understandings of embodiment in mindsports. This is followed by outlining the theoretical perspective of sociological phenomenology and the

analytical possibilities of sensory sociology, which are used to discuss the findings from a qualitative sociological study of international tournament bridge. Finally, we discuss the implications of focusing on the body in bridge players' training, repercussions for mindsports practitioners, and the evolving understanding of how sports and physical activity are understood in society.

The playing of bridge

Bridge is a trick-taking cooperative card game, which involves two sets of partners competing against one another. The general gameplay of bridge involves a series of 'bids' at the start of a hand, with partners exchanging information with each other about the relative strength of their cards through a coded system. The partnership aspect of bridge means that play is dependent upon the ability of individuals to interact, both verbally and non-verbally, with their playing partner, which provides a fascinating element to mind-sport gameplay (Punch et al., 2022). Gendered expectations relating to wider society as well as mindsport partnerships emerge at the bridge table but are explored elsewhere (Punch et al., 2023; Rogers et al., 2022). A unique feature of bridge is how players do not have access to the full picture whilst playing as it is a game of incomplete information. Players' judgements are made within the context of possible bluffs, deceptions, revelations and misleads (Punch & Snellgrove, 2021), meaning players must engage with what Goffman would deem the 'information game' (1959).

Given the importance placed upon 'reading' the actions of others during play, it could be argued that the physical movements involved in bridge have perhaps been overlooked. For instance, the performing of particular body language while at the table is particularly crucial when trying to manage emotions and stay focused (Punch & Russell, 2022). Bodily movements may also inadvertently indicate the strength of a hand to a partner or competitor, which has led to controversy and a physical screen being inserted above and below the table during elite level competitions to act as a barrier between playing partners. These considerations lead us to question the embodied experience of playing bridge. It cannot be simply reduced to either its physical or intellectual components, in the same way that other mindsports such as esports (Ekdahl & Ravn, 2019, 2022) cannot either. It is therefore pertinent to consider the ways in which the playing of bridge is more than just an intellectual pursuit by exploring the sensuous, emotional and lived experiences of players to understand how playing bridge can be embodied.

'Bringing the sweat' into bridge

When considering bridge as a practice it is important to remember that those who play bridge do so within a wider personal, social and cultural context of their everyday lives. Bridge can be understood as a particular social practice which shapes, and is shaped by, individuals' everyday socio-cultural processes. The blurring of boundaries between the personal and the competitive worlds of bridge have been investigated (e.g. Punch & Rogers, 2022; Russell et al., 2022; Scott, 1991). However, there has been a lack of acknowledgement regarding the sensorial and emotional aspects of participating, despite these investments being fundamental elements of our everyday interactions within the

social world (Classen, 1997). An approach that could help to rectify this oversight is that of ‘sociological phenomenology’ (Allen-Collinson, 2009), which is rooted within phenomenological understandings of the body and the world. It takes a phenomenologically inspired view of sociological concerns, which is particularly apt for this study considering its previous utilisation in exploring issues of embodiment, such as the senses, and emotions in everyday life and socio-cultural contexts (e.g. Allen-Collinson & Owton, 2015; Liu, 2022; Scott, 2020).

While phenomenological philosophy itself has various schools of thought which intertwine and overlap one another, sociological phenomenology has its roots within the writings of Schütz. Schütz (1967) posited the ‘lifeworld’ as a way to understand individuals’ everyday interactions with various social and cultural structures. In more recent applications to sport studies, sociological phenomenology has drawn predominantly from the existential-phenomenological writings of Merleau-Ponty (1969, 2002). This is due to the forefronting of the body as a means of perceiving the world that we inhabit in an active sense. The body is described as ‘lived’, which alludes to the ever-changing fluidity of the mind–body–world relationship. As such, the individual is constantly influenced by, and reciprocally influences, the world we engage and interact with. Merleau-Ponty describes this as our ‘being-in-the-world’ (2002), which he developed later as ‘flesh-of-the-world’ (1969) to emphasise the elemental and corporeal sense of an individual’s relationship with the world. By employing a sociological phenomenological perspective, we aim to ‘bring the sweat back in’ (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2009) to sports studies within the relatively under-explored world of bridge through a focus on individuals’ embodied senses and emotions.

Phenomenological enquiry into the body being the site of subjective and objective experience has been broached within the sport and physical activity literature using work such as Leder (1990). He discussed how the body ‘dis-appears’ during everyday moments when it does not require our immediate attention, meaning that our body can recede into the background of our perception. However, during instances of bodily harm, such as illness or injury, Leder (1990) contends that the body comes to the forefront of our consciousness due to the disruption this causes within the mind–body–world chiasm. The body demands immediate attention because of this disruption and thus ‘dys-appears’. Further phenomenological enquiry has sought to expand upon Leder’s (1990) arguments. For instance, Legrand and Ravn (2009) interrogate bodily self-consciousness and self-perception as being simultaneously physical and subjective. They propose a form of ‘embodied reflection’ which encapsulates the intertwining of the body-as-object (i.e. the body being an object of perception) and the body-as-subject (i.e. the body incorporating pre-reflective experiences). This has been applied to individuals’ experiences of bodily movements that ‘feel right’ to explore what this encompasses (e.g. within golf [Ravn & Christensen, 2014] and tai chi [Hjortborg & Ravn, 2020]). Furthermore, Sheets-Johnstone (2011) expounds a movement-focused phenomenology which critiques Merleau-Ponty’s ‘lived body’ as being a static body. Instead, Sheets-Johnstone (2011) argues that it is not just through our bodies which we experience life, but it is through our *moving* bodies within which our perceptions and interactions with the world take place. Two concepts used by Sheets-Johnstone (2011) are particularly pertinent to the explorations of embodi-

ment within the current study: the ‘tactile-kinaesthetic/kinetic dynamic’ and the ‘emotion–motion’ dynamic.

The two dynamics proposed by Sheets-Johnstone (2011) allude to intercorporeality and emotions. Intercorporeality builds upon the notion of ‘intersubjectivity’, which refers to the reciprocal awareness of agreement and disagreement between people. ‘Intercorporeality’ expresses how these understandings are rooted within the body, as it provides a visible medium (both to ourselves and others) through which interactions are understood, meanings are mutually sculpted, and responses are performed (Csordas, 2008). Thus, interactions between people can often be understood as involving a ‘physical hinge’ between them, whether explicitly or implicitly, as our experience of the lived body and embodiment is always done in relation to an ‘other’ (Weiss, 1999). Intercorporeality may prove a useful conceptual tool in exploring the ‘tactile-kinaesthetic/kinetic’ dynamic, which considers how the moving body is always in contact with something (Sheets-Johnstone, 2010). Intercorporeality also enables the ‘physical hinges’ of interaction between bridge players to be explored, both within and between partnerships and teams during tournament bridge, similar to that in esports (Ekdahl & Ravn, 2022).

The ‘emotion–motion’ dynamic proposed by Sheets-Johnstone (2011) highlights that it is important not to overlook the role emotions play in experiences of embodiment. Emotions are an integral part of both everyday life and sporting experiences (Scott, 2021). It has been argued that ‘the emotive qualities of sport are tied to sensory experiences’ (Groth & Krahn, 2017, p. 5). Explorations into emotional experiences in sport from a sociological perspective have been limited to date (Scott, 2021; Tamminen & Bennett, 2017), although Scott’s (2020) discussion of confidence provides a useful analytical tool to expand these explorations. By drawing from sociological phenomenology, the social emotion of confidence was identified as being experienced and utilised by participants on a sport-for-development course in two key ways. Firstly, ‘confidence as a frame’, which refers to the individual interpretation and meaning-making processes of emotional experiences within a given social context; and secondly, ‘confidence through the body’, which relates to the embodied feeling of comfort within a particular social environment (Scott, 2020). These two framings of confidence are used in this article to connect the sensorial and emotional aspects of embodiment in bridge. By drawing upon these phenomenologically-inspired understandings of being and doing, this article critically explores the embodied experiences of elite-level bridge players while competing.

The sociology of bridge project

This article was born out of the wider research project *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA; 2020), which aims to interrogate the sociological world of bridge. The sociology of bridge project stemmed from Punch’s prolonged engagement with the competitive bridge community by playing international, national and local tournaments for over 20 years. While not specifically ethnomethodological in nature, there are certain parallels which can be drawn between Punch’s experiences in the field and the research conditions necessary to enable context-sensitive sensorial explications of the research phenomena (Allen-Collinson et al., 2021; Groth & Krahn, 2017). By ‘doing’ and

co-producing the activities of bridge alongside the participants, Punch is privileged in being attuned to the sensitivities experienced and detailed by the participants throughout their interviews. Her co-presence with participants in the world of bridge has aided comprehension in what are often complex, multifaceted and messy recollections of highly personalised experiences, thereby fulfilling Garfinkel's (2002, p. 175) 'unique adequacy requirement' of being a competent proponent within the activity and field being researched.

As an insider researcher, Punch's lived experiences were captured in a transparent way by being interviewed about her own elite-level bridge play by an independent researcher. By being interviewed early on in the project, Punch's subjective experiences allowed for greater dialogue between insider and outsider researchers on the BAMSA team, blending emic insider and etic outsider positionality. Punch's interview was mostly used for reflecting on the challenges relating to insider research (for a more detailed discussion see Russell et al., 2022; Snellgrove & Punch, 2022). As Fleming (2018) argues, scrutiny of one's positionality in relation to the researched community facilitates awareness of the potential tensions in the dual roles of being an insider and a researcher (see also Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

Data were collected via 52 in-depth semi-structured interviews with elite-level tournament bridge players, who were approached through purposive and convenience sampling through Punch's engagement in the bridge world. All the interviews took place in English and in locations of the participant's choice while in attendance at high-profile bridge tournaments, including the North American Bridge Championships, the European Bridge Championships and the World Bridge Series. All participants were based in the USA, the UK or Europe, within an age range of 17 to 78 years, of which 20 self-identified as female and 32 as male. Each interview was audio recorded to allow for subsequent written transcription and lasted for an average of two hours. Various pre-planned themes such as the 'place of bridge in life' and 'partnership dynamics' were used as starting points for more conversational dialogue between the researcher and participant. This approach enabled discussions to cover a wider range of issues at the participant's choosing, including 'friendships and bridge' and 'team spirit'.

Ethical approval was gained through Punch's host institution, with participants consenting to the use of their real names to allow the wider bridge community to make the discussions relevant for their own purposes. All participants were provided with the option to review their interview transcripts and select any passages they wished to remain anonymous or not be used for privacy reasons. The data were originally sorted in accordance with the semi-structured interview framework into coded sections relating to participation, motivations, partnerships, team dynamics, strategy, table interactions, player development and careers. This allowed for more focused analysis to take place within and between sections of the data, which drew upon a general coding strategy resembling aspects of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Original codes were generated, compared and contrasted to enable larger descriptive themes to be constructed (Elliot, 2018). Initial codes were derived from the interview data such as 'emotions', 'preparations' and 'struggles'. To mitigate some of the pitfalls of familiarity, Scott as the outsider researcher conducted the first analysis of these codes. Interpretation was further developed in dialogue with Punch, drawing on her lived experience and situated knowledge of

‘the nuances of the context of the research’ (Fleming, 2018, p. 315). Thus, analysis built on the benefits of the ‘pre-understandings’ that an insider researcher has of the topic (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007) combined with critical analysis from the outsider researcher, who applied a sensory sociological lens drawn upon the theoretical works discussed earlier to inform their construction of themes from the data. Such analysis resulted in two key themes being formed: *presence and ‘being there’* and *the presence of ‘others’*, both of which are discussed in greater detail below.

The physicality of elite bridge players

The playing of tournament bridge entails various encounters which individuals needed to negotiate, many of which involved embodied experiences. Some of these were more externally apparent, such as the body language expressed during play. Other features discussed were somewhat more surprising, including the speed at which players play and the energy and fatigue experienced throughout a competition. The data indicated numerous aspects of embodiment experienced during tournament bridge, which included haptic, emotional, sensorial, atmospheric, and even cosmic sensations. While it is not feasible here to cover all of these aspects in depth, it is possible to discuss the various ways in which they interlaced at times and influenced individuals’ bridge experiences, both in relation to their playing abilities and their role within the particular social-cultural environment of a tournament. While the second theme focuses more firmly on the partnership aspect (Punch et al., 2021), the first theme discusses individuals’ experiences of bridge relating more to their own personal embodiment during competitions.

Presence and ‘being there’

Each player’s experience of competing at major tournaments and being involved in the bridge community varied in the idiosyncratic manner expected of such a personalised experience. However, generalities were identified regarding the role of players attending tournaments, the ways in which ‘competing’ is embodied, and how listening to their body (Ravn & Christensen, 2014) influenced their performance. One such commonality was the importance players placed upon the need to be physically prepared to compete, which encompassed aspects such as scheduling travel, arranging childcare, navigating working hours, planning for different time zones, and sometimes ‘warming up’ for a competition by playing practice matches:

Something like the Spring Fours¹ starts on a Friday evening and I would have been at work that morning. It’s well known that my husband also works full-time and I will play badly on a Friday evening. We just hope we’re seeded high enough that we can cope with losing a lot of Imps² on a Friday evening and get them back. So being tired, being mentally tired as well as physically tired. Just mid-week even, I play worse than I do at weekends. (Frances Hinden, England)

M: When I was playing a lot when I played bridge, I was too tired to. . . I was more tired than I should be. I think that sometimes that would have affected my level on the day but in general I think it just reduced my ability to learn.

I: Explain that?

M: That I'd sort of land up playing bridge a bit on auto pilot because I didn't have the energy to think properly, and I was capable of thinking properly when I knew I had to. (Mike Bell, England)

Each individual had their own version of what 'preparing well' for a tournament looked and felt like, which echoes the rituals and routines observed by athletes from a variety of different sports (Bonk & Tamminen, 2022). Explanations of preparation plans had a strong focus not just on the physical aspect of 'getting to' the competition venue, but also individuals' sense of comfort, ease and sharpness while playing. Frances alludes to the difficulty of balancing these challenges within her and her partner's working lives and the fatigue they both experience. Both Frances and Mike did not differentiate their 'physical' preparations from their 'mental' preparations, but instead discussed the two as being interconnected. Mike even warned of the dangers of playing 'too much bridge' in preparation for tournament bridge, as he found it stymied his creativity and 'energy' within the competitive environment. While this has a different physiological dimension in comparison to playing 'too much esports' due to the eye soreness generated from the 'blue light' of screens (DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al., 2019), there are parallels to be drawn with chess where players try to keep their 'brain alert' to enable it to work at 'warp speed' (Fine, 2014, p. 327). This is because of the reliance upon strategy, planning and cognitive recall placed on elite-level players in both chess and bridge, which Frances and Mike intimately connect to their feelings of tiredness.

Sleep was also generally noted as being a vital component of preparation, which again is highly relatable to athletes from other sports (Juliff et al., 2015). Many bridge players discussed the importance of diet, exercise and sleeping aids as being connected to preparing well for competing, as well as being necessary for maintaining their performance throughout long matches and tournaments:

I think I was pre-diabetic about 4 or 5 years ago, I did something to sort it out and then relapsed and got full on diabetes, but since I've been taking the medicine actually my sleeping. . . It took me a while to get my sugar level to the correct level and it made me realise that for years I'd been playing, probably not quite at my best because I wasn't sleeping properly. I didn't realise. . . all the sugar sort of fizzing around inside you actually prevents you from sleeping properly. There was one episode where I was incredibly tired and it was partially physical fitness. We were staying somewhere in Lille, literally a 40 minute walk away from the venue and I kept trying to get taxis. People were stealing the taxis, so I ended up just walking and I was actually at one of my heaviest weights at the time, but we were only a team of 5 so we had to play all boards. And I was literally running on fumes and I covered something³ on the last board when we were 2 up which I shouldn't have covered and we lost by 2 or 8.⁴ (Jason Hackett, England)

The importance of eating the right kinds of foods before a match has been discussed by top chess players: 'It is not only heads and hearts that matter, stomachs and intestines do as well' (Fine, 2014, p. 332). Bridge players, like chess players, can take food to the table to help boost their energy and focus during a long match. However, as Jason

indicated, too much sugar is not good for either short-term concentration or long-term health, which influences quality of both sleep and performance. The physical actions of preparation, travel and getting ready for a bridge tournament had a significant bearing on individuals' readiness to perform. The sensation of 'feeling' fit to play bridge was deemed to be necessary for them to play well. Jason relayed the challenges faced when these physical preparations do not fall into place, with the combination of dietary, nutritional and temporal factors misaligning to form bodily 'dys-appearance' (Leder, 1990), leading to a perceived shortfall in performance at the table. The feelings of fitness, readiness and performance were engendered through an interlacing of both physical and mental aspects of preparation for bridge players, which was discussed further by Samantha:

At long bridge events it's very hard to get a decent sleep and that's why normally for a really important event I would take a day or two off work before it starts. So I can start to unwind and just get time to read the system, and just time to sort of stock up a bit on sleep, knowing that I'm not going to get much during the event. It doesn't worry me that I don't really sleep during the event because I know the adrenaline will kick in and that will keep me fine. But you don't want to be starting an event really tired otherwise you are going to struggle during it [. . .] Because I think that's the thing with bridge, it's the discipline, not just at the table or being focused and concentrating and taking your time and checking things, but it's being disciplined before the game, making sure you're not tired, you've had enough sleep, you're not drinking too much, all of those kinds of things. (Samantha Punch, Scotland)

Discipline, adrenaline and energy are elucidated by Samantha as being important characteristics of her own performance, all of which are dependent upon the physical preparations she is able to control within her own social context. These preparations enable her to feel 'switched on' and 'lucid' while competing at the table, while allowing 'adrenaline' to be produced to stimulate 'concentration' and 'focus', which are seen as vital components of high-level bridge performance. Being able to stimulate such concentration and focus appeared to be dependent on being able to 'completely relax' in between competition times, which is something that most interviewees both recognised as being important and struggled to achieve for themselves. However, many players did detail various physical indicators that they seek to enable them to feel ready to play a tournament:

I think you should be a little bit nervous. Not too nervous. You should, when you're sort of going into the set, you should be a little bit nervous and thinking you really need to get it right. Then once you're sat down and you've started playing, you need the nerves to disappear. But the best matches are the ones that are really sweaty and you win when you become the underdog. (Brian Senior, England)

These depictions of how these bridge players set themselves up for competitive action contained an element of 'kinaesthesia', or sensing through felt bodily movements (Potter, 2008). Using 'kinaesthesia' rather than 'proprioception' deliberately ascribes more personal meaning. They are not *just* movements enacted through nerve impulses to result in an action, but are movements steeped in intentionality towards encouraging a competitive performance at the bridge table through each individual's bespoke method. As

argued by Sheets-Johnstone (2018), the kinaesthetic sense is often overlooked, particularly at adult or elite levels, due to the mundanity involved in such developed actions. However, the players above detailed specific kinaesthetic experiences they were conscious of in relation to their need to ‘feel’ ready to perform, whether it was the reduction of ‘sugar fizzing around’ Jason’s body, Samantha readying the body for the experience of adrenaline, or Brian embracing the ‘sweatiness’ of competition. Thus, these individuals attempted to regain control of their ‘dys-eased’ body parts (Leder, 1990) to instead invoke feelings of ‘confidence through the body’ (Scott, 2020) within the context of a tournament. In contrast, other players found it more difficult to regain bodily ‘disappearance’ (Leder, 1990) and struggled for their own ‘confidence through the body’ (Scott, 2020):

I think of it like a tennis player, sometimes the tennis ball looks like a football, it looks huge and you’re just going to hit it clean. Another day it looks like it’s this tiny little golf ball and, you know, that’s how I find bridge sometimes. I go through periods, it doesn’t have to be a day, but I certainly go through. . . like at the moment I feel like I’m struggling. I feel like I played poorly at the weekend and I just feel a little bit out of form. I feel like every time I have a guess to make, I’m going to get it wrong and there are other times when it feels the complete reverse. Confidence in bridge is a difficult thing. It can knock it out of you really quickly, and you can gain it quickly as well [. . .] It just drains. . . you think, how could I do something so stupid, how could I? Surely I know better than that. (Simon Cope, England)

You’re thinking not about the bridge you’re playing, you’re thinking about the occasion and your head gets muddled up and you don’t play as well. . . I remember the first time I played in the Macallan⁵ so it didn’t help that I couldn’t stand playing in these penguin suits, it’s not my thing at all in hot rooms and everything. But also you know some of the real top names in world bridge and what have you, and you’re playing against them. . . you get nervous about it. (Jason Hackett, England)

The environmental pressures of the competition clearly affected these players’ confidence, in both a physical and relational sense. As Scott (2020) discusses, feelings of confidence are often ‘framed’ in relation to the social space they encounter and their interpretation of how confident they ‘should’ feel within a given situation. In the examples above, the players’ confidence did not correspond to the feelings of confidence they perceived they ought to have, thereby invoking anxiety, nerves and discomfort. The influence of the tournament environment on players’ levels of confidence and bodily discomfort also involved an embodiment of the atmosphere for some:

I: Would you go early even if it wasn’t in Bali, would you still go out three days early?

M: Maybe one less. It’s just to get acclimatised, the air, the feel, just oriented. (Michael Rosenberg, USA)

Well, I think I’ll feel nervous, I think I’ll feel some nerves. I am really happy it’s in Bali – I’ve never been there before, but I do like the beach and I like good weather and I don’t really feel nervous if I’m around good weather and the beach. (John Kranyak, USA)

The role of air, temperature and the atmosphere on Michael and John's senses was influential upon performance and bodily dis/comfort, as has been discussed previously in relation to cross-country running (e.g. Allen-Collinson & Jackman, 2022). While discussions of the atmosphere of venues were not highly prevalent, they were part of accounts on the importance of feeling comfortable within the competition space. Getting to know the venue and understanding their body within this location was necessary for players to feel able to compete at their highest level. It allowed their 'frame of confidence' (Scott, 2020) to cohere to their own physical sensations of confidence and enabled them to learn how to move their body through and within this tactile environment. As 'confidence through the body' (Scott, 2020) implies, bridge players' performance levels are incumbent upon their physical navigation of the self-world chiasm that the tournament presents them with. Their ability to master their bodily sensations and movements within the competitive environment is a crucial factor in how they play their game. Such an emphasis on the tactile-kinaesthetic/kinetic body dynamic (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011) considers the qualitative sensations and somatics associated with movements in relation to the physical spaces. Confidence through the body (Scott, 2020) can also help to understand players' sense of comfort within the playing environment. Both of these concepts help to portray an embodied playing of bridge which has not previously been considered.

The physical presence of competing and the individual's understanding of their bodily senses can be seen as essential components of bridge, and significantly influences their ability to perform within a tournament setting. This draws greater attention to the importance of bodily attention during the skilled movement practices (Hjortborg & Ravn, 2020; Ravn & Christensen, 2014) of bridge. These preparations and performances are not just 'physical' in the way that sporting 'exclusivists' (Kobiela, 2018, p. 280) might conceive, as they do not entail 'only' compartmentalised actions of the body, but in fact involve intertwined physical, mental and situational actions involving the *lived* body (Merleau-Ponty, 1969). Each individual's experience of the tournament bridge context was dependent upon various bodily influences including diet, sleep, travel, atmosphere, all of which influenced their level of physical dis/comfort in the competitive context, or 'confidence through the body' (Scott, 2020). However, this sense of confidence was not just restricted to their own actions, but was also dependent upon social 'others'.

The presence of 'others'

As noted by Punch and colleagues, 'social interaction is at the heart of the mind-sport bridge' (2021, p. 818). How individuals interact with 'others' in the world of bridge – both as part of a cooperative partnership and when in opposition to another partnership – is an inescapable component of their own performance. The interviews frequently made reference to the challenges and opportunities involved in playing competitively with another player. These discussions went beyond just talk of in-game tactics and systems to be employed, instead covering the need to understand and negotiate their partner's physical performances in order to know how to adjust their own game, or vice versa, as well as the opposition:

Controlling the body language is difficult. Particularly a sensitive soul who is a bit insecure about their own performance will pick up body language even when it isn't there. They think, oh I'm not sure whether I did that right and they look up at me and I'm not smiling, and so they think, oh bugger. And the body language thing is difficult because, particularly in events where a lot of the opposition are quite unreliable as well, you're often sitting there wondering what an earth is going on and trying to work it out in your head. And you look quite serious and you sort of raise an eyebrow or shake your head slightly and your partner always thinks it's about their performance, when actually, as often as not, it's about what on earth was left hand opponent doing? [. . .] If a part of your energy is being diverted to trying to behave appropriately to your partner, then there's less energy left for the actual bridge. (Brian Senior, England)

When he plays cards, even though there are screens sometimes you can tell how annoyed he is! [Laughter] He plays his cards – he can flick a card out, it's like a bullet almost and whacks it down! It makes a real crack so I can tell even when there are screens that he's annoyed. But again it's kind of reading people, because I know that if I engage with him or try to say – it would just escalate so it's easier just to let him have his five minutes of fury and move on. (Ciara Burns, Northern Ireland)

Here, Liu's (2022) combining of Merleau-Ponty's intersubjectivity (2002) with Sheets-Johnstone's (2010) tactile-kinaesthetic understanding of movement is particularly useful to consider in relation to intercorporeality and bridge. While Liu (2022) discusses these in relation to an activity which requires synchronised movements within a team in waka ama paddling, the notion of a 'sensed' and coordinated embodied performance also applies to a bridge partnership. As discussed by Ciara and Brian, these performances included a range of actions: how cards were being laid down, facial expressions, body language and audible noises. Additionally, they entailed a diversity of emotions, intersubjective reflections and intercorporeal judgements about both themselves and other actors within the field of play. In essence, 'intercorporeal attunement' (Liu, 2022) is necessary to perform as an effective partnership in bridge. This skill of being able to sense their partner's dis/comfort through their actions was also elucidated upon by many participants, such as Andrew:

I would always ask my partner at the start of the next day, 'How did you sleep?' That is not – I mean, it is partly being polite and making conversation, but it's not really. I need to know how he has slept, because if he's slept badly, I know that I'm going to have to play differently, whereas if he has slept well, I know to expect a different game [. . .] Actually, if I've had a bad night's sleep, I want my partner to know I've had a bad night's sleep so that my partner will, you know, make allowances. (Andrew Robson, England)

Embodiment is continuously influenced by 'others' within our social context (Weiss, 1999). As a partnership mindsport, there is an emphasis on social interaction in bridge. It is therefore unsurprising that intercorporeality formed a strong element of the playing experience. The need to be attuned to their partner's physical state was often linked to being key to a successful partnership. This goes beyond just empathy for how their partners were feeling, with a deeper reading and understanding of the 'other' being deemed necessary to perform. Therefore, it can be said that the body of each bridge player is the

‘hinge of intercorporeal reciprocity’ (Csordas, 2008, p. 114) in a partnership. Each individual’s ‘confidence through the body’ (Scott, 2020) is continuously shaped by and shaping their partner’s ‘confidence through the body’ (Scott, 2020), with a mutual intentionality towards performing well in the competitive environment. In understanding the body as ‘lived’ and being the root of an individual’s perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1969), the ‘reading of body language’, both of their partners and of the opposition, might instead be reframed as an attempt to understand and even *feel* the ‘confidence through the body’ (Scott, 2020) of the social ‘other’. Such a reframing centres the importance of the body and kinaesthesia experienced during competitive gameplay within the mindsport of bridge.

The perception of others’ embodied experiences and its effect on the individual’s own feeling of comfort was emphasised further when participants discussed some of their irritations and disruptions when playing:

I: What’s most likely to irritate you at the table and how do you deal with that?

J: Extreme slowness. No choice. (Jill Levin, USA)

It used to be something that really annoyed me a lot, and it still does a little bit, but not as much anymore. It’s when people don’t sit still. They have to move around all the time or play with their pen or whatever, I don’t like that at all, it really gets in the way of my concentration [. . .] and chewing gum, I mean, it was utterly disgusting. I really also hate it when people eat at the table and then everything drips from them, they take the cards, that’s just so disgusting. That’s not civilised behaviour as far as I’m concerned. (Sabine Auken, Germany)

These examples demonstrate how the presence of others and their bodily movements while playing have a clear impact on the individual’s own bodily comfort and performance. This occurs in many ways, including the temporal corporeity of an opponent or partner playing their turn, or via everyday actions at the table which are not directly related to ‘playing’ bridge (e.g. eating or drinking). The emotion–motion dynamic (Sheets-Johnstone, 2010) of ‘being moved and moving’ is apparent within Sabine and Jill’s descriptions. The ‘moving’ element is the moving of others and affects how Sabine and Jill are ‘moved’, which alludes to an emotional element of the ‘intercorporeal hinge’ (Csordas, 2008) existing. As Merleau-Ponty (2002) notes, embodied experiences are not restricted to the individual but enable connections to be made with the social world. This was apparent through the numerous comments bridge players made about concentration, speed of play and confidence in direct relation to the perceived ability of other players. There were many occasions when individuals explicitly ranked themselves as being either better or worse than another player in a ‘matter of fact’ manner, rather than as an opinion to be contested:

My own game is definitely better when I’m playing with somebody at my own standard or less good. I feel much more confident at the table. So it definitely detracts from my game at times because there’s a number of times, like, because this weekend I’m playing with somebody who is quite simply world class [. . .] and I do lose confidence because every mistake is noted. He

may not say anything, but it is noted. Playing with people who are less good or as good, I do have a certain confidence and my game improves. (Simon Gillis, England)

The ‘knowing’ of one’s ability within a partnership, and indeed the elite-level community of bridge, did not owe to an explicit ranking system. Instead, such ‘knowing’ was seemingly a tacit element of being part of the ‘community of practice’ of bridge, based upon the lived experiences of competing within the bridge community over a prolonged period of time. In Simon’s case, his understanding of how he ranked in comparison to his partner heightened his awareness of his embodied ‘frame’ of confidence (Scott, 2020). The judgement he felt from his partner when making a mistake was not indicated through an external cue, but instead was felt kinaesthetically by Simon. His comfort within the context of tournament bridge was not only affected by the competitive environment within which he was playing, but it also depended upon his socially-culturally-contextually informed perception of his ability in relation to the ‘others’ who were also physically present. While Simon appeared to be seeking ‘intercorporeal attunement’ (Liu, 2022) with his playing partner, there are also instances in bridge where the individual’s dynamically attuned body was used to gain a competitive advantage:

Being unreadable is really good too, having like this poker face sort of and there’s a lot of psychology in my opinion that goes into bridge. And doing it right is hard because there’s basic psychology where you can. . . you’ll do something and someone is supposed to read into it something you want them to read into it. You want them to read something into what you’re doing and there are certain people that can do that better [. . .] You’re a little fidgety, that’s another thing. If you’re fidgety it definitely adds an element of distraction to your opponents and if you’re good enough they won’t say anything to you. (Zach Grossack, USA)

Rather than attempting to seek ‘intercorporeal attunement’ (Liu, 2022), as was the case with Simon and his partner, here Zach seems to indicate that he is attempting to create ‘intercorporeal disruption’ with his opponent instead. This highlights how the physical actions of ‘others’ alters individuals’ ‘frame of confidence’ (Scott, 2020). It can even be used as a strategic weapon in competition to corrupt an individual’s judgement of their confidence through an intercorporeal disruption of their emotion–motion dynamic (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011). This is both similar to, and directly contrasts, the ‘action of inaction’ involved in elite chess, whereby the intense lack of movement leads players to notice minute physical details about their opponents, such as judging agitation from the breathing movements of their chest (Fine, 2014). The open nature of each individual’s ability within the elite bridge community brings with it an embodied ranking system shaped by their community of practice which provides individuals with both an implicit and explicit point of reference as to how confident they *should* feel when playing with a particular partner or against a certain opponent. The context of tournament bridge then presents a competitive and social environment which goes beyond employing a ‘social gaze’ upon participants into an embodied understanding of the sensorial and emotional negotiations between the bridge player and those ‘others’ present. How an individual performs, or feels able to perform, to their best level at the table is significantly affected by their own sense of comfort within the environment, or ‘confidence through the body’

(Scott, 2020), as well as by the intercorporeal manifestations of confidence of both themselves and others present, or ‘confidence as a frame’ (Scott, 2020).

Conclusion

This article contributes to the wider literatures on the embodied, sensorial nature of sport and leisure. Applying a sociological phenomenological lens to the experiences of elite-level bridge players has enabled us to explore the socio-cultural and physical-cultural context of a competitive mindsport. This has led to an exploration of the embodied experiences of elite tournament bridge players, encompassing the sensorial and emotional aspects of competing. We have challenged exclusionary classifications of sport which rely on the Cartesian dualism of separating ‘mind’ from ‘body’, and instead discussed how a monist understanding of mind–body–world interconnectivity can reshape understandings of the body’s relationship with sport (Pang, 2021). Inspired by Liu’s (2022) theoretical crafting, this article utilised a combination of phenomenologically inspired theoretical literature such as Merleau-Ponty’s (1969) ‘lived body’, Sheets-Johnstone’s ‘moving body’ (2011, 2018), Weiss’s (1999) ‘intercorporeality’ and Scott’s (2020) ‘confidence as a frame’ and ‘confidence through the body’ to offer fresh insights into elite bridge players’ embodied experiences while competing.

We have shed light on the negotiations of the physical sensations of travel, time, temperature, teammates and tactility, as well as various other socio-cultural influences, and their impacts upon players’ perceptions of their performances. Scott’s (2020) conceptions of confidence provide an additional theoretical layer to understanding the intercorporeal relationship within and between playing partnerships. They show how important it is to not just have a dynamically attuned body to the context, but also kinaesthetic awareness of others such as a partner and the opposition when feeling how to play a given situation. These embodied accounts of bridge contribute to a burgeoning literature which applies sociological phenomenological theory to sporting environments, as well as an embodied perspective to the sociology of mindsport (Punch et al., 2021).

This article challenges the current reliance of mind–body distinctiveness in the categorisation of sport and physical activity. Such a distinction is concerning, as has been discussed in more health-related contexts (Phoenix & Bell, 2019; Piggin, 2020), because it can lead to more inclusive activities being excluded from policy, funding and promotion within the general population. Therefore, if our understanding of ‘physicality’ is more inclusive of the mind–body nexus, then we argue that the ‘physicality’ of mindsports such as bridge has also been misunderstood. This article has demonstrated that elite-level bridge engages interconnected bodily and emotional sensations, indicating a greater physicality in mindsports than has previously been acknowledged. There is a need to consider further how monist understandings of sport might allow for greater inclusion of mindsports such as bridge, chess (Fine, 2014) and esports (Ekdahl & Ravn, 2019, 2022) within mainstream sporting and physical activity recognition.

There are also more theoretical concerns which might be pursued further. For instance, the intercorporeal aspect of playing bridge enabled a new dimension of understanding the embodiment of mindsports, which contributes to the exploration started by Ekdahl and Ravn in esports (2019, 2022). The carnal and sensorial aspects of sport and physical

activity would benefit from wider consideration in the sociology of sport, including from an intersectional perspective. This would allow the lived experiences of sport, mind-sport, physical activity and health to speak to a wider cross-section of society.

Acknowledgements

We greatly appreciate the participation of elite players who generously gave their time to be interviewed during international tournaments. We thank Mark Brownlie, Catriona Galbraith and Jenny Galbraith for their contribution towards the sorting and preliminary coding of the elite interview data.

Funding

We thank the players, bridge clubs and organisations who have donated to *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA) via crowdfunding (see www.bridgemindsport.org).

Notes

1. The Spring Foursomes is a high quality knock-out team event which takes place in England over the May bank holiday each year.
2. Imps are the points scored when winning individual bridge hands. The team with the most total Imps wins.
3. ‘Covering’ refers to when a high value card, like a Queen, is ‘covered’ by a higher value card, such as a King. This is done to create a winning position for your partnership. However, there are times when the correct technique is not to cover a high card as it will not promote a winning card for your side, and only the opponent gains.
4. Losing a match by fewer than 10 points (‘Imps’) is considered a close and often painful loss, as there would be many bridge hands which could have swung the match the other way.
5. A prestigious invitational bridge event where players dressed up for the occasion. It was sponsored by Macallan whisky but no longer takes place.

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