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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Playing with emotions: emotional complexity in the social world of elite tournament bridge

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The concept of emotional complexity is vital to theorising emotions in late modernity. Building from decades of ‘emotion management’ research, it captures how emotions are increasingly an object for individual self-management and reflection. Using Goffman’s dramaturgy as a framing for emotions research in sport and leisure, this article contributes to understanding emotional complexity in practice using the dyadic pursuit of the mind-sport bridge as a case study. The elite social world of bridge is an emotionally charged setting, where top players use emotion management to improve performance over many decades. Through in-depth qualitative interviewing with 52 elite players from the US and Europe, the article outlines contextually specific experiences and performances of emotion. Players engage in processes of reflexive and instrumental self-other relations, which change over time as part of the experience of emotional complexity. Successful emotion management can foster positive relationships between bridge partners, but simultaneously players also regularly fail to manage their own emotions. This suggests that emotions are only ever partially instrumentalised, especially in emotionally complex contexts.

**Key words** bridge • emotional complexity • emotion management • Goffman • leisure • mind-sport

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## Introduction

Understanding the complexity of human emotion is a vital task for sociology, and interest in the topic spans the last four decades (Bericat, 2016). A number of approaches

and theories of emotion have been outlined (Stets and Turner, 2014). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, emotions are ‘complex and experienced as process – continually fluctuating and changing’ (Ellis, 1991: 33) and, although physiological and psychological, are nonetheless a product of social interaction in specific cultural contexts. Barbalet (2019a: 142) draws attention to the complex processes by which ‘the emotional experience of individuals becomes increasingly manifest as an object for self-management or self-control’ in post-modern society. Emotion management, conceptualised through Hochschild’s (1979; 1983) work, denotes how emotions are shaped in line with culturally appropriate ‘feeling rules’. This has been a key framing for sociological research across a variety of occupational settings (Lively and Weed, 2014). More broadly, the theorisation of emotions in society increasingly draws attention to ideas of ‘emotional complexity’, which is outlined as a major theme of late modernity (Patulny and Olson, 2019). Emotional complexity conveys the non-dualistic nature of emotions as complex phenomena; it reflects the critique of, and effort to move beyond, the separation of mind and body, and the dualism of emotion and reason/rationality, which was a prominent feature of modernity (Patulny and Olson, 2019). In late modernity, under neoliberalism, there is a dominance of ego-emotions which results in forms of self-reflection linked to one’s consciousness of emotional reactions to their own emotions (Barbalet, 2019b). Hence, there is ‘a sense of both emotional complexity and [...] emotion management, that persons have proprietorial and instrumental relations with their own emotions’ (Barbalet, 2019b: xxiii).

In this article, we explore these ideas in practice through the case study of bridge, a partnership mind-sport. It is played internationally and constitutes a distinct social world and institutional context at elite level. This is a fruitful case for examining emotional complexity and emotion management because of the dynamics of social interaction involved. For example, elite bridge blurs the boundaries between work and leisure (Russell et al, 2021) as both professionals and amateurs compete together. Elite bridge partnerships are social relationships (comprising family, spouses and friends) and client-professional relationships (being paid by a sponsor to play in a team or partnership). Player identities are complex (Punch et al, 2020) and game dynamics involve strategic interaction and impression management as partnerships cooperate to win against their opponents (Punch and Snellgrove, 2020).

While there have been studies of emotions and emotion management in other sporting contexts (Snyder, 1990; Way, 2013; Maclean, 2021), and in occupational settings (Lively 2000; Bolton, 2001; Lopez 2006; Chiang et al, 2021), thus far no studies have explored the social world of bridge through the conceptual lens of emotional complexity. Many studies of physical sports focus predominantly on the emotions-performance relationship (Campo et al, 2018; 2019; Deck et al, 2021) and, while contributing to the fields of sports psychology, are less concerned with theorising emotions sociologically. We begin by outlining our interpretative theoretical approach to emotions, contextualised by literature on emotional complexity in late modernity and the sociology of emotion management. We draw in particular from Goffman’s dramaturgy, which recognises the interconnection of emotion, identity and social interaction and complements later conceptualisations of the reflexive and individualised emotions of late modernity. Next, we discuss the qualitative methodology where insider interviewing generated rich data on elite players’ emotional experiences. The article presents the findings on the different ways emotional complexity manifests across frontstage and backstage bridge settings.

The findings add new knowledge to our understanding of emotions by demonstrating how emotional complexity operates in practice within a specific social world. The social world of elite mind-sport shows the non-dualistic nature of emotional complexity as players engage in contextually specific performances of emotion, including emotional labour, dependent on understandings of self and other which are reflexive and change over time. Moreover, we suggest that emotional complexity does not always entail the successful management of emotion, because in an emotionally charged context, players struggle to instrumentalise their emotions, despite believing this to be central to succeeding in bridge and fostering positive relationships with one's partner.

## Emotional complexity in social interaction

As [Bericat \(2016: 493\)](#) suggests, 'the apparent simplicity of human emotions hides abundant complexities, problems and paradoxes'. From an interpretative sociological approach, emotions are 'inherently social and only have meaning when designated with labels provided by culture' ([Turner, 2009: 341](#)). As culturally delineated types of feelings or affects ([Thoits, 1989](#)), they are also relational ([Burkitt, 2014](#)), characterised by expression and experience, with the self the central reference on which emotions turn ([Bericat, 2016](#)). Recent theorisations of emotion highlight the distinctiveness of emotion formations in an individuated late modernity wherein there is marked narrowing of the range of emotions alongside a sense in which emotion management involves self-conscious and instrumental relations with one's own emotions ([Barbalet, 2019a](#)). Emotion management relates to how people pursue strategies for managing emotions in different situations according to what is judged appropriate and broader 'feeling rules' ([Hochschild, 1979; 1983](#)). It aims to bring 'non-normative feelings and expressions back in line with culturally agreed-upon emotion norms' ([Lively and Weed, 2014: 202](#)). An important critique, though, challenges the core idea that performing emotion management and emotional labour creates alienation and an 'inauthentic' self ([Hochschild, 1983](#)). [Lopez's \(2006\)](#) work (for example, in care settings), emphasises the need for a distinction between emotional labour and organised emotional care. The latter captures how organisations can create the conditions for developing positive caring relationships. Hence emotional labour is not inherently problematic in all settings and can produce diverse outcomes.

More recently, [DiCicco-Bloom and DiCicco-Bloom \(2019\)](#) analyse settings beyond the social interaction where emotional labour is primarily performed, exploring organisational spaces in which individuals can reflect on their emotion management. Where opportunities to discuss experiences are denied, this can constitute secondary emotional labour, as individuals are forced to repress emotions from a difficult situation with a client in their subsequent interactions with colleagues ([DiCicco-Bloom and DiCicco-Bloom, 2019](#)). Given that these analyses focus on emotional labour as a feature of worker-client relationships, it would be useful to explore new contexts through a lens of emotional complexity, which moves beyond the dichotomising of emotional labour and management as either alienating or a form of organised emotional care ([Lopez, 2006](#)). Emotional complexity as a both/and approach, for example, is evident in [Bolton's \(2001\)](#) analysis of the emotional complexity involved in caring professionals' work, showing how nurses juggle different emotional demands, while presenting an acceptable face. A broader approach to emotion management aims to understand

the different contexts ‘in which individuals seek to transform their selves and others’ (de Courville Nicol, 2011: 143) and the idea of emotional complexity conveys the multiplicity of identity. The latter is usefully explained by Goffman’s (1959) theory of dramaturgy through concepts such as the presentation of self and the metaphors of frontstage and backstage.

Here, we see that emotion management is intimately connected to impression management (Feinstein and Switat, 2019). Emotions are ‘meaningful object[s] to be interpreted, controlled, used or managed by social actors, who are engaged in understanding themselves and managing others’ impressions of them’ (Thoits, 1989: 331). Thus, expectations and understandings of self that people hold are relevant to any situation (Hochschild, 1979; 1983). Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective suggests in any given social situation, depending on how one perceives their position in it, a huge variety of emotional performances can occur (Zurcher, 1982).

### *Emotions in sport and leisure*

While sociologists have explored emotion in everyday settings that reproduce social life, more understanding of ‘emotionally charged moments’ is needed (Ng and Kidder, 2010). Emotionally charged moments are abundant in the worlds of sport and leisure. For example, in Maclean’s (2021) study of karate, the sport can be used by some participants to overcome ‘emotional trials’ by releasing negative emotions. This can be explained in reference to Elias’s (2000) theory of emotions in sport and leisure; the sporting arena represents a space in which emotions can be dramatised (Thing, 2016). Here, participants are permitted to ‘act out’, and thus from a figurational perspective, sport has a societal value and function of discharging emotions (Elias and Dunning, 1986). However, emotion management remains central as part of ‘a controlled decontrolling of emotions’ (Thing, 2016, emphasis added). In sport and leisure, emotion management is related to the performance of professional sporting identities and there are both positive and negative implications for participants as they seek to align emotions with the socially constructed norms of their sport (Snyder, 1990).

Emotions and sports performance has been explored for individuals, dyads (Deck et al, 2021) and within teams (see Tamminen and Crocker, 2013; Way, 2013; Campo et al, 2017; 2018; 2019). These studies collectively point to the importance of social identities and social context in shaping emotions and reflect the need to move beyond individualistic approaches to emotions. It is shown, for example, that perceptions of self as an individual or a team member, have consequences for emotions. Campo et al, (2018) argue that athletes experience multiple, overlapping aspects of identity, which aligns with Punch et al’s (2020) discussion of bridge players’ identities being (per)formed across self, partnership, team and community. Tamminen and Crocker (2013) call for future research on ‘relational perspectives of emotion within teams’ and ‘approaches focusing on the experience and meaning of emotions within teams’. In doubles racquet sports an athlete’s emotions may change based on how their partner is playing (Deck et al, 2021). An important influencing factor on emotions is the number of years an athlete has been in the sport. They propose that a qualitative approach to dyads would be useful to gain insight into emotions in partnerships and how perceptions of emotion are helpful or harmful according to the different stages in a competition.

Similarly, in serious leisure, Stebbins (2020) has called for more attention to dyads. He argues positive emotion is tied to long-term personal development, and the

performance of skill and knowledge, whereas negative emotions are linked to a failed performance of skill (Stebbins, 2014). There are short-term negative emotions such as fear, embarrassment or anger, and longer-term negative emotions such as jealousy at others' success (Stebbins, 2014). He suggests pursuits are likely to be abandoned where negative emotions outweigh positive ones and, for quality leisure experiences, participants should anticipate and avoid negative emotions (Stebbins, 2014). This highlights an important relationship between emotion management and meaningful opportunities for self-development, including the acquisition and performance of skill. However, dualistic ways of conceptualising emotions are too simplistic to capture complexity and contextual specificity. Indeed, Maclean's (2021) study of karate shows how leisure operates as a space for engaging in emotional reflexivity as individuals strive to cope with 'emotional trials', with implications for how this activity affects capacity for emotion management.

Thus, the management of emotions is contextually dependent and requires attention to processes of social interaction in specific sport settings. Applying dramaturgy in sporting contexts illustrates how emotion performance is enacted by individuals in terms of their understandings of 'appropriate emotional behaviours in a particular situation' (Zurcher, 1982: 2). It also reinforces the need to examine the settings in which sport takes place, and the processes of emotional display therein which are central to the construction of a person's experience (Zurcher, 1982). For example, there are differences in the frontstage and backstage performance of emotions, which can be guided by a coach, and socially influenced expectations of emotions before, during and after games. Gallmeier's (1987) analysis of emotions in professional hockey demonstrated this by suggesting that hockey was only 10 per cent physical, and 90 per cent mental.

Currently, knowledge of emotions in sport and leisure is predominantly focused on physical, rather than mental activities. Kobiela (2018) suggests that mind-sports ought to be given greater attention and, if they are to be taken seriously, both by academics and within society at large, it is important that their characteristics are understood. We explore the case of elite bridge, which offers many emotionally charged moments for participants competing in the social world of international tournaments. Emotions have not been studied in this mind-sport, which is played socially and professionally by 'tens of millions of people throughout the world' and is argued to be the most popular card game (World Bridge Federation, n.d.). Emotions research has been conducted of the mind-sport chess (Guntz et al, 2018), which involves 'emotion work' (Fine, 2015). In chess, the emotions of each game shape future games, and players manage their emotional displays in relation to social conventions and norms (Fine, 2015). However, chess, like many other sports and leisure pursuits, is focused on individuals. Bridge in contrast, is played in partnership, rooted in complex social and emotional interactions between self and partner, and partnership and opponents. This includes a differentiation at the elite level between amateurs and professionals, which is best understood through a lens of 'complex leisure experience' (Punch et al, 2021). Thus, as a complex dyadic pursuit (Punch et al, 2021), bridge is particularly interesting to explore sociologically (DiCicco-Bloom and Gibson, 2010) from a dramaturgical perspective on emotional complexity and specific strategies of emotion management.

## Methodology

### *Understanding elite tournament bridge*

Bridge requires cooperation, strategic thinking and memory ability, as two sets of partners compete against each other. Bridge can be played socially or as a more specialised form of recreation in clubs or tournaments (Scott and Godbey, 1994). For serious tournament players, the aim is to improve skill (Scott, 1991), and to reach elite level requires long-term commitment. The elite level is increasingly professionalising, and the playing community is comprised of players with differing motivations for participation (Russell et al, 2021). Players can earn a living from bridge; however, there are no specific occupational standards that formalise the conduct expected of professional versus amateur players. There are guidelines with regard to 'ethical' behaviour; however, the performance and management of emotion is largely dictated by the informal norms of the elite-playing community. We explore this in practice, and the nature of bridge as a 'game of mistakes' means there are frequent emotionally charged moments and emotional struggles to overcome for individual bridge players and partnerships.

Bridge encounters produce winners and losers; at elite level this is intensified, set in a competitive international environment. From a dramaturgical perspective, emotional expression is 'socially influenced within the immediate situation of groups of people who have assembled in accordance with institutional patterns' (Zurcher, 1982: 3). Elite bridge players assemble in the settings of regional, national and international tournaments where partnerships and teams compete over days and weeks while connecting socially. Moreover, Goffman (1959) draws attention to the spaces beyond the immediacy of any social encounter (for example, at the bridge table). Thus, 'frontstage' and 'backstage' offer a way to conceptualise emotional experience in bridge beyond the social interactions of the gameplay. This captures the broader social world of elite bridge, of spaces where players come together to compete and socialise and non-players observe and support players. Players and partnerships are scrutinised by team-mates, coaches, spectators and opponents, and by players themselves during post-match discussion. Some bridge hands are remembered for decades.

Bridge involves bidding and card-play with the aim of securing a certain number of 'tricks'. Tricks are won by playing a higher card of that suit until all 13 cards of each player are played out. Each deal lasts only seven to eight minutes so there is time pressure to decide the best strategy. Partners communicate through playing certain cards and each partnership has a bidding 'system'<sup>1</sup> and their own approach. Players interpret the meaning of their partner's and opponents' cards, assessing possible lines of action and anticipating many moves ahead. Players are skilled in different aspects of the game, individually and as partnerships.

Bridge is game of incomplete information, requiring fast-paced decision making. The possibility of error or making the wrong decision in gameplay is high. An intense level of concentration is needed to avoid errors that could cause the partnership or team to lose, and which could affect tournament outcomes and even career opportunities and relationships thereafter. Failing to perform well could mean losing one's place on the national team, losing a paying client/sponsor, or causing conflict in the bridge partnership that may be difficult to repair. High stakes for elite players indicates the importance of emotion management and emotional labour, which are crucial in the social interactions between players and overall bridge performance.



### *Methods: inside the bridge social world*

A sample of elite bridge players was generated purposefully, consisting of 52 US and European (mainly UK) male and female players aged between 17 and 78. These players all represented their countries in international bridge, and many have won major championships. Interviews took place alongside tournaments in a quiet setting, lasting approximately two hours. The sample includes amateurs, paid professionals and sponsors. The research explored elite players' experiences through in-depth, semi-structured interviews combined with Punch's contextual knowledge as a bridge player. Situational knowledge of bridge, including players' social relationships, helped to overcome the more individualistic orientations of interviewing, which is a useful method for generating data about identities and emotional experiences (Lamont and Swidler, 2014) that are not always visible in behaviour (Pugh, 2013). The subjective lived experience of emotions can also be accessed through introspection, a sociological method for exploring 'the complex, ambiguous and processual nature of emotional experience' (Ellis, 1991) used in dialogue with others. Reflection on one's emotions always necessarily entails understanding the wider collective social processes and structures that shape how emotions are to be interpreted individually (Ellis, 1991).

The interviews covered themes related to players' experiences at the bridge table and beyond, including gameplay details, social relationships and emotional experiences over time. While Punch's tacit knowledge was valuable for analysis, insider research can result in being too close to obtain critical distance. Russell, a non-bridge player brought an outsider perspective to analysis, adopting an interpretative sociological approach. This blended emic insider positionality (well suited to developing theory from the ground up) with etic outsider positionality of applying theory to qualitative data. Transcripts were analysed thematically, using NVivo to generate codes and themes through node creation. Themes were generated inductively from the data, summarised and compared across the player categories of age and gender which are relevant to the categorisation of international events (where there are women-only and open tournaments, and players are 'junior' until they are over 31). This article focuses on the findings regarding emotions, where elite bridge offers a new understanding of emotion management in the context of emotional complexity.

## **Findings**

### *Playing with emotions*

Understanding the complexity of emotions in elite bridge, and the 'self-conscious' and 'instrumental' relationship that players have with emotion, first requires an explanation of how it feels to play with emotions. A variety of emotions are experienced prior to, during and following bridge matches, which are fundamentally shaped by context and social interaction. The experience of emotion for elite bridge players ranges from extremes of excitement and joy to anger, frustration, disappointment and everything in between (see also Brkljačić et al, 2017). However, there is a strong tendency towards dualistic experiences of emotion, given the repeated occurrence of winning and losing. For example, players describe the highs and lows of winning and losing as follows:

‘Winning is the best feeling ever and you get really elated, and it’s just awesome. But it doesn’t last as long as the effects of losing, so that’s the downside of losing is that I feel so crap for such a long time after.’ (Fiona Brown, 34, England)

‘Losing for me is always painful if I play badly.’ (Zia Mahmood, 73, USA)

‘We’d lost by four and I just felt like the world had come to an end. I mean, I was in tears, basically, after that, and that’s a hard emotional high and low to take. You’re feeling so good about things ... you’ve been winning and suddenly just bang! That was probably the worst feeling that I’ve ever had in bridge.’ (Simon Cope, 37, England)

Beyond the simplicity of winning feeling good and losing feeling bad, is a more complex picture of emotions being shaped by expectations of self and others in specific contexts. Hence playing badly and losing or losing narrowly feels worse than if a player feels they played well and still lost. This is shaped by the skill level of a partnership, for example, when one is playing with a perceived weaker player, their emotional response to losing is lessened as this is expected. Regarding losing, players expressed more generally the idea that “sometimes you lose and there’s nothing you could have done – you just shrug” (Frances Hinden, 45, England). This was linked to the ways in which repeated exposure to losing changes one’s emotional response to it:

‘I’m not really afraid of losing. 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 desensitised to it.’ (Bob Hamman, 78, USA)

On the other hand, players reinforce the fact that over long, competitive tournaments they need a certain level of emotional tension to perform well:

‘I think pressure and being amped up is good. I think we lost the moment. I think we were ready for this to end, I don’t know, we forgot what we were doing. I would say our team energy was way higher when we were playing the Americans who we wanted to beat really badly. It is weird. We weren’t tired, we weren’t nervous, we were almost desensitised, we were numb to what was happening. It had just been going on for so long.’ (Justin Lall, 33, USA)

Tony Forrester (66, England) agreed: “You’ve got to have that edge-of-seat feeling when you are playing” and be a “little bit nervous”. Nerves and confidence are closely linked to how players’ emotions around winning and losing manifest over time, and again these are shaped by expectations of self and others. As [Scott \(2020: 387\)](#) explains, confidence is ‘relational, dependent on the social gaze of the other’:

‘Before, I never had that anxiety because people didn’t think I had the potential to do well.’ (Anam Tebha, 28, USA)

‘When I play with him, I’m much more nervous. I’m triple checking everything ... I do play a lot more slowly with him than I do with



somewhere that's a simpler game and playing with a weaker partner.' (Mike Bell, 35, England)

Mistakes are a regular occurrence in bridge, and winning games can depend on limiting mistakes and dealing with them when they do occur. Mistakes represent one of the most significant emotionally charged moments and emotional struggles for players:

'The strongest emotion if at the table and I make a terrible mistake, it's a very strong feeling of humiliation ... and other people's mistakes can create an extreme sense of anger.' (Simon Gillis, 64, England)

'I get more upset by defensive mistakes because that's the partnership bit and somehow or other I've let my partner down ... so I think I probably find them more upsetting.' (Liz McGowan, 75, Scotland)

Emotional responses to mistakes in the game, depend on whether players feel they are culpable. Some players described both the sense of being more annoyed at their own mistakes than their partners', and feeling annoyed and frustrated if their partner did not *admit* to making mistakes. However, others echo the findings of [Deck et al \(2021\)](#), where athletes in doubles racquets felt higher levels of anger when their partner was playing poorly. Similarly, [Campo et al's \(2012\)](#) review found athletes' negative emotions tend to arise more commonly as a response to others' performance compared with their own. In the mind-sport bridge, some players appear to be more negatively influenced by their own errors, while others seem to be more affected by the performance of their partner. Given the time pressure in bridge, mistakes are inevitable and crucial to game outcomes, thereby provoking emotional reactions whether perpetrated by the player or their partner.

Thus, playing with emotions in bridge can mean experiencing emotions in dualistic ways tied to winning and losing, but additionally, in other parts of the game, encountering more 'complex' emotions of late modernity such as shame, guilt and ambivalence ([Patulny and Olson, 2019](#)). The latter are linked to players' expectations of themselves, their partnerships and how others perceive them in specific contexts. Thus, bridge emotions are 'enacted by individuals in terms of their understanding of appropriate emotional behaviours in a particular situation' and 'co-produced' as part of the presentation of self and structured events over time ([Maguire, 2011](#): 916). Bridge players can also experience emotions similar to physical team sports, where complex emotional experiences relate to the multiplicity of identity ([Campo et al, 2018](#)). One can experience pleasant and unpleasant emotions simultaneously related to social identity (for example, team or partnership performance) and personal identity (individual expectations of self).

### *Managing emotions*

Players of competitive sports are required to maintain composure in a controlled way ([Peterson, 2015](#)). However, bridge is similar to chess, where, unlike physical sports, there are fewer opportunities for 'acting out' ([Fine, 2015](#)). Our findings show all players engaging in emotion management, rooted in a common perception

that emotions are detrimental at the bridge table and should be strategically managed to improve outcomes. Players explain that being emotional detracts from concentrating on the bridge hand, and momentary lack of focus may lead to avoidable mistakes:

‘Emotions at the bridge table are bad, period – especially negative ones. Negative emotions are real killers.’ (Jeff Meckstroth, 64, USA)

‘Concentration is more difficult if you allow yourself to get emotional. So, if you’re cross with partner, it may be you who makes the next mistake.’ (Brian Senior, 67, England)

As Susanna Gross (51, England) puts it, to be emotional “is clearly detrimental”, because “it’s just diverting your energy from the task at hand”. Hence, players self-consciously try to instrumentalise their emotions, to achieve better outcomes. This is key to partnership dynamics and players’ ideas about what makes a good bridge partner:

‘A good temperament is someone who is a good partner – so they are pleasant, they don’t pull faces, they are easy to play with, sympathetic.’ (David Gold, 41, England)

‘Temperament is everything. You really just have to be encouraging and keep a positive attitude. You can’t get too emotional. You’ve got to be supportive of your partner.’ (Jeff Meckstroth, 64, USA)

A central part of emotion management in bridge is managing emotion in partnership. This means being attuned to the emotions one is giving off at the table, including via facial expressions and body language, as well as more active efforts to avoid emotional outbursts:

‘[My partner] doesn’t care if I look grumpy, but if you’re playing with weaker players and you’re sitting ... sometimes when you focus it looks like you’re upset, but I focus really hard on not trying to look unhappy when I play.’ (Jenny Wolpert, 34, USA)

This indicates how players manage their own emotions to benefit their partner, which is common in team sports where prosocial actions require ‘taking into consideration the needs of others and accommodating others’ needs by adjusting or altering one’s own behaviours’ (Tamminen and Crocker, 2013: 743). However, ‘the complexity of interpersonal regulation’ means that players may be trying to ‘regulate their own and others’ emotions without fully appreciating the emotional state of their teammate’ (Campo et al, 2017: 387). Over time, players learn how their own and their partners’ emotions are tied to specific actions and try to minimise situations of conflict:

‘When we first started, I used to answer back or make critical stuff about her play and bidding as well, and she just would absolutely erupt, and I don’t

really like conflict and certainly not that much conflict so I would just button it.’ (Heather Dhondy, 54, England)

Punch and Snellgrove (2020) suggest players of elite bridge engage in ‘supportive silence’ for the benefit of both themselves and their partner. This simultaneous managing of self and of others’ emotions in this context creates positive outcomes for bridge partnerships, fostering relationships of solidarity. This contrasts with the kinds of hierarchical reciprocal emotion management described elsewhere (Thoits, 1996; Lively, 2000). From a sports perspective, ‘helping behaviours’ such as those described earlier can also be based on ‘egoistic motives’, which correspond to individual’s goals and values, reflecting ‘ambivalence’ in sporting contexts (Campo et al, 2017).

Being sympathetic and encouraging towards one’s partner can require emotional labour, especially if mistakes have been made and tensions are high. Emotional labour produces a range of outcomes for those engaged in it, from being rewarding to causing burnout (DiCicco-Bloom and DiCicco-Bloom, 2019). For elite bridge players, emotional labour could involve surface or deep acting within the partnership social interactions, to either repress the experienced feelings in favour of those that are expected in the interaction, or to try to actually experience the emotions that are expected (DiCicco-Bloom and DiCicco-Bloom, 2019). Surface acting is likely in the social interactions of the bridge match where it is vital to manage the dynamics with one’s partner in the moment, whereas deep acting characterises the longer-term management of the bridge partnership. The longer-term management of emotion was apparent in how players described changes they experienced over time:

‘When I was young, I was pretty crazy, I was pretty emotional – especially I was very aggressive to my partner. I was pretty antagonistic as a boy, grew up, notice how people reacted, came to rubber bridge and [it taught] me a lot because I very quickly realised that if you want your partner to play well with you, you have to just be nicer. I just made myself think about it. It just kind of processed and once I accepted it, I think it more naturally happened.’ (Artur Malinowski, 57, England)

Time is a newer direction in emotion management research (Lively and Weed, 2014), and Artur’s explanation also relates to Deck et al’s (2021) research of emotions in partnership. They found that while age did not have a significant effect, time within the sport did; more experience in a given sport makes players less reactive to different situations, including their emotional response to a partner’s poor performance. Thus, players over time learn how to read their partner’s emotions in different situations, showing how emotion and reflexive processes are integral to one another (Burkitt, 2012; 2014) through ‘interpretation of others’ emotions as well as one’s own’ (Holmes, 2010: 149). Elite players are engaging continually over time in repeated acts of performing reflexive role taking and empathetic emotions (Thoits, 1989). Despite a clear logic for players seeking to manage their own and their partners’ emotions for mutual benefit, this is very challenging to do in practice:

‘I understand you shouldn’t say it, it is better not to, but whatever, he is a big boy. He can handle it, I didn’t cross the line. You have to give your partner leeway, in the heat of the moment. If you have made a mistake and they make one comment, you give them that. You don’t reply, you don’t get mad about it, you respect that they didn’t say more. That is just how it is – there is no one, except for Bob, I have seen no one that says nothing, ever. It is an emotional game.’ (Justin Lall, 33, USA)

Susanna Gross (51, England) agreed, saying “I don’t think I have ever come across a pro who doesn’t pull faces and moan and groan at their partners. They often don’t show very good self-control.” Hence, players commonly fail to manage their emotions at the bridge table, despite recognising it would be beneficial for them and their partner to do so. In a variety of situations, players may be unable to contain emotions; they may have an outburst, throw their cards across the room, or shout at their partner. Many players identify managing emotion as one of their game weaknesses. Hence, while the instrumental management of emotions is considered a key theme of post-modernity, in practice this is partial in the emotionally charged setting of competitive bridge, where attempts to manage emotions regularly fail. The extent to which players can self-consciously control emotions in practice is limited, invoking Hoschild’s (1979: 561) definition of emotion work as ‘the act of trying [regardless of outcome] which may or may not be successful [where] failed acts of management still indicate what ideal formulations guide the effort, and on that account are no less interesting than emotion management that works.’ The failure to manage emotions is perceived by some players to be related to the ways in which competitive bridge can expose negative traits. This contrasts with the ways in which leisure offers positive emotional experiences and opportunities for reflection and self-development (Stebbins, 2014; MacLean, 2021). For example, players said:

‘If you’re used to yelling or getting upset, then you’re definitely not going to stop yelling when you get to the table. You’re not all of a sudden going to be a calm and composed person. So yeah, I think bridge brings out the worst in you, obviously. So, if you only have a little bit in you, if you get to the bridge table it’s going to come out.’ (Jenny Wolpert, 34, USA)

Marion Michielson (35, Netherlands) agreed that when competing “if you really care it’s very hard to control your emotions ... people are not trying to be awful and crazy, and say bad things”.

Whether emotion management has been successful, or whether players have failed to manage emotions during bridge table interactions, the ‘backstage’ becomes a crucial space to engage in emotional reflexivity. For DiCicco-Bloom and DiCicco-Bloom (2019), the value of a space to reflect on and discuss emotional labour is vital to prevent forms of ‘secondary emotional labour’. For example, if a healthcare professional had to suppress emotions during an interaction with a patient, being able to talk through the emotions with colleagues afterwards is beneficial. In bridge, the role of the non-playing coach at tournaments can offer space for players to process emotion:

‘I feel that part of my role is to be a kind of sounding board for the players. It is a pressure situation; these things are difficult to play in. They are pressure

cookers. You lose all sense of time, 'cause every day is the same as every other day. Whether it's the weekend or whether it's ten o'clock at night or ten o'clock in the morning. And people get wound up and I feel that you can't really blow off steam at the captain. You can't really, you know, go and walk round the walls at the captain, 'cause then the captain has a view as to whether or not you're able to play or not. So the coach should be there as somebody you can talk to about something. You can complain about [your] partner or you can have a conversation, a rational conversation if you want, about what you want to – about this, that and the other. And you might talk to them as a partnership. And some coaches I know don't do that. And some coaches won't do that and don't feel it's part of their roles. But I do feel it's part of my role; whether or not it's of any value is a different matter.' (Alan Mould, 62, England)

Thus, in backstage settings players can perform and process emotion in ways different from that of the bridge table. Alongside the coaches, in a post-match backstage setting, players talked about the importance of discussion and reflection on the performance with their partner. This is a key space in which elite bridge partnership identities are formed over time (Punch et al, 2020) and a crucial part of the complexity of emotion management. Backstage interactions between partners can revitalise difficult emotions from the table resulting in further conflict; partnerships are likely to break down over time if there is no way to reconcile differences. Alternatively, players might work through difficulties together, apologise for and learn from mistakes, both technical and in how they managed their emotions. Again, this is not always easy in practice, and some players either cannot, or choose not to, engage in backstage partnership reflections.

## Discussion

Our findings highlight the importance of understanding in practice the dynamics of emotional complexity. Elite bridge players' experiences of emotion in a mind-sport reflects how in late modernity, 'emotions are related to personal identity and individual satisfactions' or 'ego emotions' (Barbalet, 2019b: xxi). Following from this, self-reflection is linked to one's consciousness of emotional reactions to their own emotions (Barbalet, 2019b). Elite bridge players' accounts represent their conscious reflections on the emotional experiences of winning and losing, of nerves and confidence, of mistakes and of partnership dynamics. They suggest that emotions experienced are at times dualistic in nature, coalescing around 'highs and lows' but also complex, dependent on specific contexts as well as changing over time. Hence, in this way, it is not possible, or indeed desirable, to offer a definitive formation of emotion management in elite bridge.

In the emotional labour and emotion management literature, there has tended to be a focus on conceptualising how certain kinds of relationships constitute a specific formation of emotion within a specific setting. Examples of this include how employees in an organisation are subjected to alienating forms of emotional labour and emotion management (Hochschild, 1983), how athletes' emotional expression conforms to the norms of their sports (Snyder, 1990), or how care workers engage in positive forms of emotional care work (Lopez, 2006). For elite bridge, it is more

fruitful to adopt a 'both/and' perspective, which acknowledges the possibility for all these dynamics to occur simultaneously in one social world, and as such is recognised in the concept of emotional complexity. Bolton (2001: 97) for instance captures this in her description of being 'able to present a variety of faces according to entirely different motivations [...] performing according to different sets of feeling rules [as part of] multi-situated systems of activity (Goffman, 1961)'.

Our findings show that emotional complexity can and should take account of the failure to manage emotions, which has been recognised as important in terms of 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979). Players can and do fail to manage their emotions as they attempt to negotiate the frontstage and backstage settings of bridge. Hence, the instrumentalisation of emotion, considered central to post-modern society, is partial. In certain emotionally charged moments, or when facing particular emotional challenges, players are conscious of the need to manage emotions that are deemed detrimental, but in practice they struggle to do so.

What is particularly unique about these dynamics of emotional complexity in bridge in practice, is that unlike many other settings discussed in emotion management literature, emotions are always performed, managed and reflected on in partnership. As a dyadic pursuit that is under-explored in leisure studies more generally (Stebbins, 2020), elite bridge requires players to consciously manage their emotions for the benefit of their partners. This includes encounters at the bridge table and beyond, where different forms of emotional labour may be required as part of immediate emotion management, and longer-term partnership relations. The frontstage during a tournament involves reactions under time pressure as part of a competitive, tense environment. In contrast, the backstage setting allows for the processing of emotional experiences over time and in dialogue with one's partner or coach. Overall, partnership interactions are shaped by how players wish to be perceived by their partner, reflecting how we 'interpret the social situation as to how we understand the response of others with whom we are emotionally engaged (because their view of us matters)' (Burkitt, 2012: 466). This suggests elite players may be able to develop emotional intelligence and the skills of care for the self and care for the other (Rojek, 2010) through their participation in bridge. While this requires further research, we can argue that alongside current understandings of reciprocal emotion management as part of hierarchical relations – for example, reproducing status inequality (Lively, 2000) – there are prosocial and caring forms of reciprocal emotion management. Furthermore, while in some contexts emotion management and emotional labour lead to alienation and an 'inauthentic' self (Hochschild, 1983), in bridge, managing emotions reciprocally, in partnership, can create mutual benefits for players who want both to succeed in their bridge performance and minimise conflict in their partnership.

Whether emotional interactions are motivating and beneficial or draining and dysfunctional, is related to whether they are more role-prescribed and standardised or autonomous and customised (Grandey and Diamond, 2010). Bridge again is somewhere in between these polarised positions, given the blurred lines between work and leisure. Within bridge partnerships, there are simultaneously distinct roles and standardisation (such as the use of a 'system'), but also many opportunities for creative play, and achieving 'flow' (Russell et al, 2021). This is a microcosm of the wider bridge community, which prescribes the role of players in accordance with 'feeling rules' and ethical behaviour, while simultaneously allowing for autonomous displays or outbursts of emotion as a feature of 'character'.



Future research of emotional complexity could introduce a structural layer since we have focused on micro-level individual and partnership emotion management of elite bridge. For example, an exploration of bridge teams, including national teams, and the dynamics of international tournaments could be a fruitful context to study group emotions linked to existing literature about emotions in teams. Alongside studies in sports, organisational research is also relevant. [Chiang et al \(2021\)](#) show how leaders can create climates of emotional suppression which induces team emotional exhaustion and negatively affects performance. Leaders should offer time and space for subordinates to 'release their emotions'; however, the authors reflect on how cultural values in Japan have an impact on emotion suppression and suggest contrasting this with Western cultures [Chiang et al \(2021\)](#). [Feinstein and Switat \(2019\)](#) demonstrate that emotion management is influenced by subjective identity among minority ethnic groups in ethnically mixed workplaces. Hence, future work might use bridge for cross-country analysis to explore the ways in which emotions are shaped by wider structural norms and sociocultural processes. While we have been unable to consider this here, we show that the international mind-sport bridge offers an interesting case study for research on emotions in society. We see further scope to use bridge to consider other sociological concepts and theories: for instance, with regard to class and emotional capital, the gendered nature of emotion, and ageing.

## **Conclusion**

This article brings the study of emotions into the social world of elite bridge, which has rarely been explored academically. In its combination of work and leisure, elite-level bridge is a novel space to consider emotional complexity in practice, which hitherto has been discussed in occupational and physical sports settings. The article has emphasised the complexities of emotional experience for elite bridge players, across frontstage and backstage settings that are rooted in processes of self-reflection and social interaction, which are contextually specific and can change over time. Emotional experience is continually being made an object for self-management and control in post-modern society ([Barbalet, 2019a](#)) and bridge is no exception. However, bridge is also similar to other sport and leisure pursuits, which are considered to offer space for a controlled 'decontrolling' of emotion within a wider societal context where extreme emotional displays are less frequent ([Elias, 2000](#)). Emotional outbursts in bridge are increasingly less acceptable as the professionalisation of the sport and concern with ethics increases. Yet our findings show that while players agree that emotions are detrimental to bridge and thus try to manage them, this is difficult to achieve in practice. Failing to manage emotions therefore suggests that the extent to which it is possible to instrumentalise one's emotions can be partial, despite the imperative to do so. This is especially the case in emotionally charged settings and, given the dyadic nature of this mind-sport, where one is continually in cooperation with a partner and in competition with others.

Through players' accounts of emotion management, we showed that there are ongoing forms of reciprocal emotion management, which unlike hierarchical forms, enable a positive social relationship between partners and better outcomes in bridge. This is not to suggest that within bridge there are no hierarchical dynamics, but to resist the overarching narrative in emotions management literature: that engaging in emotional labour creates an inauthentic self. Instead, bridge players perform multiple

selves in multiple contexts and voluntarily engage in emotion management as a way of improving their outcomes as a player and striving to be a good partner. Our analysis of the individual and partnership dynamics of emotions in bridge would be further enhanced by attention to group dynamics and the interplay of national teams, which are an additional layer in international tournament bridge. In this article, by creating dialogue across work and leisure settings, we sought to contribute to a nuanced sociological theorising of emotions, understood through emotional complexity and the practices of performing and managing emotions in late modernity.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Elite partnerships' system notes can comprise just several pages up to hundreds of pages. A summary is available for other partnerships to view in advance so competitors know their opponents' approach.

### Dedication

This article is dedicated to the late Justin Lall, one of the best at getting the best out of his partner/teammates.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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