

Individual Wellbeing and Bridge: An Empirical Analysis

Diarmuid McDonnell, Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Stirling

There is a growing research interest in the game of bridge, in particular its role in delaying the onset and reducing the severity of dementia. At the top level, bridge can be a professional card game played full-time by experts who are sponsored to play in teams. It is a mind sport that, even at amateur level, requires much work in terms of developing bridge partnerships and strategies. Funded by English Bridge Education and Development (EBED), Professor Samantha Punch and Diarmuid McDonnell from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Stirling, and EBED trustee Dr Caroline Small conducted research into the link between playing bridge and subjective measures of quality of life. This exploratory study contributes to the evidence base on the benefits of playing bridge by answering the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of bridge players and their playing habits?
2. Is there an association between playing bridge and measures of individual wellbeing?

To investigate the association between playing bridge and various indicators of wellbeing, an online questionnaire was developed to capture demographic, social, subjective wellbeing, and bridge playing characteristics of individuals. Over 7000 individuals from the UK and internationally responded to the survey during the summer of 2016, with the vast majority of these individuals being bridge players in either England or Scotland.

Bridge: Characteristics of Players and Playing Habits

94 percent of individuals that play bridge have regular playing partners, with the mean and median number of partners being 3 and 2 respectively; quite a number of people (16%) have had the same partner for over 30 years. On average, individuals play bridge 10 times in a typical month; however this excludes sessions played online (via Bridge Base Online for example) and so the actual number of sessions is likely higher. Bridge also appears to be a persistent feature of people's lives, with many respondents indicating they have been playing for decades; even those that take a break for a number of years find their way back to the game. Family members and face-to-face lessons play a crucial role in individual's learning of the game, with books and online resources playing a minor role. Finally, a majority of respondents indicated that playing bridge brought benefits to them personally in the form of the game having a competitive element, facilitating socialising with friends, and – most commonly – being mentally stimulating and deriving enjoyment from the activity; this is the case for all ages in our sample.

Playing Bridge and Individual Wellbeing

Using our quality of life measures, it appears that individuals in the sample are optimistic about their future and the opportunities available to them, satisfied with the way their lives

have turned out, sociable, unencumbered by money concerns and feel they are in control of their own lives. On the other hand, a large minority of respondents reported they at least sometimes feel that their age and health prevents them from pursuing activities. Using a linear regression model to predict an individual's wellbeing, we discovered that playing bridge has a positive effect, though the effect is not as strong when we only include respondents aged 50 and older. For those that play bridge, the specifics of their playing habits – such as the number of regular partners or years spent playing the game – are not associated with higher levels of wellbeing.

Conclusion

Bridge players report high levels of subjective wellbeing, revealing they are optimistic about their future and the opportunities available to them, satisfied with the way their lives have turned out, sociable, unencumbered by money concerns and in control of their own lives. However, the results of our study are not conclusive and the question remains: does bridge have a positive effect or are healthier, happier individuals more likely to play bridge? What is clear is the need for unambiguous research designs to test the effect of playing bridge on a chosen measure of wellbeing. Experimental or quasi-experimental approaches could isolate the specific effect of playing bridge, eliminating confounding factors that are almost certainly a feature of our study.

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The full report is available at www.ebedcio.org.uk/files/docs/research/individual-wellbeing-and-bridge-an-empirical-analysis.pdf