The Problematic Nature of Participation in Contract Bridge: A Qualitative Study of Group-Related Constraints

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Abstract Using data collected from a year-long qualitative study, this article explores the nature of group-related constraints within the social world of contract bridge. Constraints are initially discussed in terms of diminished popularity of bridge in the United States among younger generations. Next, interpersonal constraints that are linked to group processes within bridge groups are explored. These processes are described in terms of their controlling influence on individual involvement. Finally, a discussion of how constraints arise as a result of individual differences among group members is presented.

Keywords Leisure constraints, group-related constraints, social world of bridge, naturalistic inquiry

In recent years, researchers have increasingly become interested in leisure constraints. Research in this area has typically centered on nonparticipants. Three lines of inquiry are evident. First, investigators have examined factors impeding participation in desired leisure activities (Jackson, 1983, 1990; Jackson & Searle, 1985; Searle & Jackson, 1985). Second, researchers have focused on why people cease participating in former activities (Boothby, Tungatt, & Townsend, 1981). Finally, factors that constrain leisure involvement in general have been examined (Henderson, Stalnaker, & Taylor, 1988; McGuire, 1984). In addition to explaining nonparticipation, the concept of constraint has also been broadened to include such phenomena as constraints to leisure satisfaction and enjoyment of current activities (Francken & van Raaij, 1981; Witt & Goodale, 1981).

Regardless of the choice of criterion variables, the unit of analysis in leisure constraints research has been the individual. Little is known about how constraints are experienced and dealt with at the group level. Crawford and Godbey (1987) noted that an individually oriented approach to the study of constraints was originally due to increased interest during the 1960s in the needs of people with disabilities. Three factors operating today impede a group-centered approach to studying leisure constraints. First, contemporary investigators are defining leisure in psychological terms. By defining leisure as a state of mind or experience, it logically follows that the individual is of more interest than the group. This leads to a second reason: The study of leisure is becoming dominated by a social-psychological framework that is more psychological than sociological. A psychological social psychology grounds the analysis of leisure in terms of
how social factors influence individual experiences and behaviors. As noted by Taylor and Johnson (1986), "most propositions in this literature concern internal psychological dynamics—beliefs, attitudes, behavioral intentions and the like" (p. 181). Finally, leisure constraints research (as with leisure research in general) is guided by what Blumer (1969) referred to as variable analysis: Aspects of leisure involvement and leisure experiences are reduced (operationalized) to facilitate the testing of relationships among variables by using statistical procedures. What is usually omitted from such analyses is an explanation of the intervening process of interpretation between the independent variable(s) and the dependent variable.

In contrast to previous studies, this article examines the nature of group-related constraints within the social world of contract bridge. Contract bridge, or simply bridge, is a generic term that is descriptive of a distinct class of four-person, partnership card games including rubber bridge, duplicate bridge, and party bridge. This study frames individual and group activity in terms of existing bridge groups and the broader social world of bridge. An analysis of group-related constraints provides in-depth understanding of constraints within a specific leisure social world, insight into the interpersonal contexts surrounding leisure constraints, understanding of how people individually and collectively deal with constraints, and an alternative research approach (qualitative rather quantitative) to the analysis of leisure constraints.

Related Literature

Three lines of inquiry are relevant for a study of group-related constraints. First, there is literature dealing with leisure constraints. Of particular relevance is a model of constraints to family leisure developed by Crawford and Godbey (1987). Second, literature pertaining to symbolic interactionism provides theoretical insight into how people actively deal with constraints. Finally, literature on social worlds provides a context for understanding activity-specific constraints.

Leisure Constraints

Crawford and Godbey's (1987) model of barriers to family leisure appears to be the first systematic effort at outlining constraints to group leisure. Crawford and Godbey differentiated among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural barriers.

Intrapersonal barriers were described by Crawford and Godbey (1987) as "individual psychological states or attributes which interact with leisure preferences" (p. 122). A similar concept—antecedent constraints—has been proposed by Henderson et al. (1988). Intrapersonal (or antecedent) constraints exist when individuals, as a result of personality needs, prior socialization, abilities, and perceived reference group attitudes, fail to develop leisure preferences. That is, these factors predispose people to define leisure objects (activities, locales, or services) as appropriate or inappropriate, interesting or uninteresting, available or unavailable, knowledgeable or ignorant, and so on. If a definition results in an unfavorable attitude, an intrapersonal or antecedent constraint is said to be present. For example, Henderson et al. (1988) found that women with stereotypic feminine personalities cited more reasons for not participating in leisure activities than women with stereotypic masculine personalities. A stereotypic feminine personality is interpreted as an antecedent (intrapersonal) constraint because it prevents women from
developing the interests, the skills, and the confidence to participate in a range of leisure activities.

Interpersonal constraints are those that arise out of social interaction or relationships among people within social contexts. Because so much attention has been devoted to the individual, there has been little direct empirical investigation of how interpersonal constraints operate in leisure contexts (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Jackson, 1988). Indirect evidence for the presence of interpersonal constraints is reported in participant observation studies of a friendly poker game (Zurcher, 1970) and a rough working-class pub (Smith, 1985). In both studies, entry into the group was reported to be a function of the visitor first being accepted by regular group members.

The most commonly investigated and documented category of constraints (Jackson, 1990) is structural barriers: constraints that intervene between leisure preferences and participation. Examples include financial resources, availability of opportunities, work, family and domestic commitments, health, and transportation. Research has indicated that some structural constraints appear to cut across a range of leisure activities and populations. In particular, people consistently report lack of time as a major barrier to leisure participation. Although the presence of time constraints has been shown to be curvilinear across life cycle stages (Buchanan & Allen, 1985), it remains one of the most often cited factors for not participating in leisure activities for virtually all categories of people. Some structural constraints, however, appear to be activity-specific. Jackson (1983) found that overcrowding was an important factor in constraining participation in racquetball and golf, whereas overcrowding was relatively unimportant in constraining participation in self-propelled outdoor recreation or in creative activities.

The categories of constraints given in the preceding paragraphs were used as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1969) in exploring the nature of group-related constraints in the social world of contract bridge. That is, they provided "a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (p. 148). Before proceeding, it should be noted that Crawford and Godbey (1987) envisioned intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints as possibly being interrelated and working simultaneously. Furthermore, Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey (1991) have argued that these constraints operate in a hierarchical or sequential fashion. Their position is that constraints must be successfully negotiated at each level if participation is to occur. I consider these ideas in this article.

**Behavior as a Formative Process**

A central assumption within symbolic interactionism is that behavior is not merely a result of structural or psychological factors but a formative process in which people actively go about meeting the conditions of their lives (Blumer, 1969). An examination of social life from this perspective shifts analysis from testing relationships among variables to an analysis of how behavior is accomplished. Symbolic interactionism has direct implications for examining leisure constraints, as leisure involvement is poised between constraints, on the one hand, and voluntary action, on the other (Samdahl, 1988; Scott & Godbey, 1990). Leisure constraints, then, are forces within people's lives that must be successfully negotiated if leisure involvement is to occur. This conception of constraints contrasts with those that conceive constraints as insurmountable. Although constraints may indeed result in nonparticipation, for example, this may be only one of many outcomes that are possible (cf. Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Jackson, 1988). People may, instead, modify their behavior to maintain a pattern of sustained involvement. Hence,
leisure constraints are best conceived as those intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints that people recognize as potentially limiting their leisure behavior.

Although they do not use symbolic interactionism as a theoretical model, a few studies show how leisure involvement might be analyzed in these terms. Nicholson (1985) has noted that activity adoption among women involved in an exercise program is most likely to occur when opportunity, knowledge, favorable milieu, and receptiveness are present. These conditions were not in themselves causal but incorporated as factors within the decision-making process. Wearing (1990) showed how mothers of first babies actively go about making personal space for themselves. Using qualitative data procured from middle- and working-class mothers in Australia, a number of strategies were identified: organizing daily duties efficiently, not doing housework, enlisting the cooperation of husbands or other significant others, and getting together with other mothers as a means of providing joint care of children.

**Bridge Groups as Local Social Worlds**

A social world has been described as an amorphous unit of social organization in which members coalesce on the basis of shared interests (Unruh, 1980). An analysis of a social world is generally processual with attention being focused on its history and where it appears to be going, mechanisms that create stability and change, and the changing nature of involvement (Strauss, 1978). Furthermore, linkages within the social world need to be addressed (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). For example, activity observed within a single bridge club may be related to what is going on in other bridge clubs and the broader social world of bridge.

An analysis of leisure constraints is enhanced by conceiving group activity as occurring within the context of an identifiable social world. It is possible to see how constraints arise and are dealt with in the context of its members' real-life experiences. Furthermore, there may be constraints that reflect the social world's unique history. The identification and explanation of how such constraints are experienced by social world members can only occur by conducting an in-depth analysis of social world activity. In this article, the focus of analysis is on constraints as they are experienced at the group level. Special attention is also devoted to how such constraints are related to trends occurring within the broader social world.

**Purpose and Rationale for the Study**

This article seeks to describe problems attending participation in a group leisure activity. These problems may constrain both involvement and enjoyment. Rather than focusing simply on nonparticipants (as has been typical in much previous leisure constraints research), I show how participants and would-be participants within the bridge world individually and collectively address group-related constraints. I draw on data generated from a naturalistic mode of inquiry (participant observation and in-depth interviewing).

How can leisure studies benefit from a naturalistic inquiry of group-related constraints? First, little is known about group-related constraints. Naturalistic inquiry provides an important exploratory function in elucidating the nature of such constraints. Second, a naturalistic study provides insight into how leisure constraints are actively dealt with by the people confronting them. Naturalistic inquiry provides the tools neces-
sary for showing how participation in bridge games is accomplished or stymied. Finally, naturalistic inquiry provides in-depth understanding of how leisure constraints arise out of social interaction—a matter that has been alluded to (Crawford & Godbey, 1987) yet empirically ignored.

Procedures

Overview

The study occurred in two phases. First, I sought to become acquainted with the social world of bridge by participating in bridge clubs. In the second phase, I adopted a more focused approach in the form of in-depth interviewing. During both phases of the study, data were also collected from written material, including bridge magazines, books, and NETNEWS (an international electronic bulletin board available through mainframe computers).

Choice of Field Role

To accommodate a mixed form of data collection, a participant-as-observer field role was used (Gold, 1969). The field role provided a means of acquiring firsthand data on group activities, while allowing group members to be aware of my research interests. This strategy made it possible to develop an intimate understanding of the people, activities, and meaning of bridge activity and the means of establishing trusting relationships with players, thereby providing a basis for using the more formal interviewing techniques later (Douglass, 1976).

Setting

Most of the data collection occurred in an eastern town I call Glenn Valley. The town’s population is composed of approximately 50,000 people, a large number being transient university students. The study was conducted in this locality because the research design required participation in groups over time. Bridge was chosen over other activities because an initial investigation determined that there were numerous bridge clubs in Glenn Valley that were willing to allow me to become a member.

Sampling

Bridge clubs were chosen by means of a reputational sampling technique (Burgess, 1984). Individuals known to be bridge players were contacted and asked whether they felt their groups would be willing to allow me to observe them for research purposes. These players then referred me to other bridge players in the area. I then queried these new contacts as to whether they and their groups might allow me to observe them.

Eventually four bridge clubs were identified that would allow me to become a participant. Conversations with local players revealed that these clubs were typical of bridge clubs not observed in Glenn Valley and other communities. The four groups were observed from April 1989 through October 1989. The clubs varied in size and frequency of meeting. Two of the bridge groups were composed of approximately 9–12 women each. A third group was composed of six married couples. These three clubs generally
met no more than once a month. The fourth group was composed of over 50 men and women, although at any given meeting there were rarely more than 40 present. Unlike the other three groups, this one was sanctioned by the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL), the ruling bridge body in the United States. The club met every Wednesday night. During the course of research, it was discovered that the majority of the players at the ACBL club also played Mondays nights in another ACBL-sanctioned game. Participant observation of that club revealed findings similar to those from the Wednesday night games. During participant observation, 30 games were observed. Most of these games were sponsored by the two ACBL-sanctioned clubs.

For purposes of interviewing, 38 players were sampled, using tenets of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Informants were purposely chosen as they were believed to help in the generation of new insights. There was an effort to collect data from a range of informants from different clubs, known to be different in terms of age, gender, skill, and length of membership in the club. The sample included a mix of novices, intermediate players, and advanced players; young, middle-aged, and older people; newcomers and long-standing members; men and women; students and nonstudents; and American and foreign-born players. Although more ACBL players were interviewed than were in the other three groups, the proportion of players interviewed in each club was roughly similar.

**Collection of Data**

During participant observation, I participated as either a *kibitzer* (native term meaning *observer*) or as a novice player. I watched and played with bridge players in their homes and local clubs and engaged them in informal conversations at restaurants and bars, in automobiles, and on the telephone. I usually arrived a little early at each meeting, which provided an opportunity to observe the range of activities from beginning to end. To maintain an unobtrusive posture, I did not take notes in the presence of players. There were instances, however, where it was possible to jot down quick notes. At the ACBL games, for example, players kept score on private score cards. It was possible to use these score cards to make brief field notes. For the most part, however, field notes were written following the encounter.

In the second phase, I conducted in-depth interviews with members of local clubs. Although interviews were taped and guided by an interview agenda, they were conducted as if they were conversations; questions were purposely open-ended, allowing informants to talk about their bridge involvement using their own terms (Burgess, 1984). Given that data collection and data analysis often occurred simultaneously, each interview was necessarily conducted in a slightly different manner. Insights or statements provided by one informant were checked out in interviews with other informants. Similarly, the interview had to be flexible enough to accommodate the specialized knowledge of informants. For example, newcomers to a club were questioned at length concerning their entry into the group because their memories were relatively fresh in these matters.

Depending on the length of time devoted to one topic or another, there was a tendency to adjust the amount of time devoted to other matters. However, every effort was made to acquire information about the informant's personal history in bridge, frequency of participation, ACBL involvement, commitment to studying the game, friendship patterns within the groups, activity and setting preferences, reasons for playing bridge, and understanding of various technical terms.
These forms of data collection were augmented with accounts from public forums, including NETNEWS, letters to the editor in a bridge magazine called The Contract Bridge Bulletin, and books written by bridge players (e.g., Sontag, 1977). Data from these sources served as an important check on the types of information collected locally and provided insight into how localized events were related to the broader social world of bridge.

Treatment and Analysis of Data

Observations were classified into categories (classes of observed phenomena) on an ongoing basis. This process parallels the generation of grounded concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Categories created as regularities within the bridge world were noted. During participant observation, for example, regularities were noted in terms of time, space, actors, objects, activity, acts, goals, and feelings (Spradley, 1980). As categories were generated, they served as a basis for subsequent data collection and analysis. Categories relevant for this article include reasons for missing a game, reasons for playing or not playing with a particular person or group, reasons for dissolving a partnership, reasons for withdrawing from a club, and death of bridge.

Interrelationships among categories were developed with the discovery of an integrating theme (Spradley, 1980). The theme relevant to this article is problems associated with group leisure. This theme emerged when three observations were made. First, bridge clubs did not always meet as regularly as players originally suggested. Second, players made a point of noting to me that I was a relatively young bridge player. Finally, the scheduling of games was accomplished through effort and commitment. Emerging categories helped to shed light on the interrelatedness of these observations.

Data analysis was accomplished by a dual process of subjective interpretation and visual inspection of field notes and transcribed interviews. The process was greatly facilitated by immersion in the lives of the bridge players (Spradley, 1980). Sustained involvement (this includes all forms of data collection and not just participant observation) over a 1-year period provided a context for intimate understanding of group life and the meaning of bridge from the point of view of the people under investigation (Blumer, 1969).

Quality of Data

Observations seen or heard frequently were judged to be reliable (Becker, 1958). Reliability was also strengthened by discussing findings with key informants on an ongoing basis (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Longevity in the field and interviews with a range of informants provided a basis for establishing interval validity (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Triangulation of data was employed by using multiple methods in the examination of the same phenomenon (Denzin, 1970). In particular, data collected from public forums provided evidence that findings collected in Glenn Valley are probably generalizable to localities elsewhere.

Findings

The presentation of group-related constraints in the bridge world is hierarchical in that constraints are discussed in terms of breadth of impact. At the broadest level, I show that
the diminished popularity of bridge in the United States has created a number of interpersonal and structural constraints. Next, I present a description of how interpersonal constraints are linked to group processes within bridge groups. Finally, I present how constraints arise from the interaction between individual characteristics and participation in bridge groups.

**Aging Complexion of the Bridge-Playing Population**

Events within Glenn Valley and other localities cannot be understood apart from an emerging trend throughout the U.S. bridge world: The popularity of contract bridge in the United States has declined precipitously since the 1950s. There were approximately 32 million bridge-playing Americans in 1957, compared with only 11 million in 1986 (cf. Scott, 1991). The biggest factor that accounts for the decline of bridge is the absence of younger people taking up the game. The game is played today primarily by older people who learned the game when they were young. A study sponsored by the ACBL revealed that 20% of ACBL members and 40% of non-ACBL bridge players were under the age of 45 in 1986 (Contemporary Marketing Research Inc., 1986). Among all U.S. citizens, however, the same figure for 1986 was 69% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1988).

In a related paper, Scott (1991) has reported that the decreased popularity of bridge among younger generations in the United States parallels the increasing commodification of leisure activity following World War II. With increased emphasis on self-fulfillment and self-gratification, the decline of bridge is related to younger generations’ ability to afford and experiment with a multitude of leisure styles. Relatedly, bridge is antithetical to younger generations’ desire to experience as much as they are able in the shortest amount of time possible.

From the point of view of both bridge players and would-be bridge players, the absence of younger people adopting the game and the resultant aging complexion of the bridge-playing population are problematic in that they potentially constrain involvement. As I show, the “age problem” constrains participation at different, albeit interrelated, levels.

**Constraint 1: Bridge as an Age-Inappropriate Leisure Activity.** In light of younger people not adopting the game, bridge has become increasingly regarded as age-inappropriate among younger people. Scott (1991) has reported that college students today believe bridge is a game played by older people, not by people their age. Hence, although sociocultural factors have made bridge unattractive among younger generations, today the age complexion of the bridge-playing population further exacerbates this perception. The age-inappropriate nature of bridge is experienced intrapersonally as young people lack skills requisite for playing the game or the inclination to develop them.

**Constraint 2: Diminished Opportunity for the Young.** Diminished interest in bridge among younger people affects opportunities for young, would-be participants. This may be viewed as an interaction between the intrapersonal constraints of one group and the structural constraints of another. Younger people who show an interest in bridge are stymied because their peers express little interest in learning and playing the game. Evidence for this was revealed in a statement posted by a young person on NETNEWS in January 1990:
In high school, I became interested in bridge. At a school assembly I asked for students who were interested in learning or playing. I got a zero response. . . . I tried again [in college]. I asked . . . anybody I ever had occasion to talk to. I still could not find 3 people . . . who were interested. I learned to play bridge in July of 1987. The last time I played was August 1987. I just can’t find the people.

This statement reveals the importance of establishing connections that facilitate participation in bridge. Given the absence of younger people adopting the game, the ability of young people to establish such connections is tenuous.

There is evidence that the game has fallen on hard times on college campuses. An ACBL-sanctioned college club in Glenn Valley once consisted of 27 tables. Today, the game runs approximately 8 tables, although, ironically, most of the players are older adults. Of the students who do play, the majority are foreign-born. This pattern of decline is not unique, as reflected in a statement made by a NETNEWS discussant: “Bridge here . . . is dying a slow, painful death. The college club is typically four people getting together to play a couple of rubbers [rubbers are won by winning two out of three games], while a retired Director talks incessantly about the ‘good old days before TV started taking over.”

Constraint 3: Diminished Group Membership. The age problem has also resulted in diminished membership within existing bridge groups: Without younger people learning the game there is a smaller pool of potential players from which extant groups may draw in the event of a departed player. This has resulted in some clubs not meeting regularly because of the players’ inability to locate substitute players in the case of an absent member. In extreme cases, diminished membership results in group disbandment, thus further reducing players’ opportunities.

Older players are acutely aware of the skewed age distribution within the bridge world and recognize it as a viable threat to both the game and their clubs. A 69-year-old male resident of Glenn Valley described the situation as follows: “This is the great curse plaguing bridge. Folks are dying and there is no influx of young people. . . . The old Wednesday night game used to be so certain. We always had 10, 11, 12 tables. Last Wednesday night we had 6½. It’s more or less due to age.”

The case of a Glenn Valley women’s bridge club is also informative. When the club was first organized in the early 1950s, it was not uncommon for there to be five tables of bridge. Over the years, the number has dwindled to as low as two. A 73-year-old, long-standing member said that the decline is directly attributable to the aging complexion of the group. Ironically, the club may have created the conditions for its own demise by moving the game to daytime. The same player noted that the move may have made the game inaccessible to women who work during the day (cf. Scott, 1991, p. 17).

These two clubs have not disbanded, yet some people in Glenn Valley did report that they had been in clubs that did. (Problems associated with group disbandment are discussed further in the next section.) Concomitantly, other players noted that their involvement was constrained because of the death of bridge clubs in town. This problem may be more a function of people lacking connections for regular involvement, which is compounded when groups are not actively looking to recruit new members, a point I discuss shortly. In Glenn Valley, as well as in other communities, the problem is mitigated by “welcome clubs” that provide newcomers with information concerning the presence of
bridge groups. In these cases, welcome clubs actually serve as facilitators, whereby bridge clubs are formed around people who share this leisure interest.

Constraint 4: The Speed-up of Recreation Specialization. Reduced opportunities associated with the age problem also help to explain why some bridge players adjust their orientations to the game to participate more frequently. This phenomenon is described here as the speed-up of recreation specialization (Bryan, 1979). A few players in Glenn Valley stated that they had played social bridge but began playing serious bridge (games sanctioned by the ACBL) because of unsuccessful attempts to locate other social players with whom to play. These players survived the transition from social player to serious player by taking on the perspective of the latter—they not only became students of the game, they actually developed a strong aversion for playing in social games.

The experiences of Rita and Jack, aged 41 and 39 respectively, are illustrative (all names used are pseudonyms). Rita pointed out that they both enjoyed playing bridge, but for years their involvement was constrained because they did not know other couples who played. "We had played a little bridge socially and we had liked it, but we didn't know many couples who played... Every time we met somebody new we would ask, 'Oh, do you play bridge?' And they would always say, 'No.' So we had always been frustrated." Three years ago, the Glenn Valley Bridge Club was established, which offered a number of games for novices in Glenn Valley. As noted by Rita, this caught their attention: "Then one day on Channel 33, there it was: This little ad for a novice duplicate bridge club. Ahh! It's true. And we showed up for the first game... and the rest is history." Since then, Rita and Jack have begun playing regularly at another ACBL-sponsored bridge club, the Jackson Bridge Club (JBC), which is regarded as the most competitive and serious in town. Rita has become particularly enthusiastic, and she now eschews social bridge: "Social bridge is where you spend more time talking about friends, neighbors, the food, your kids, anything, than you do playing bridge. It takes about an hour an 15 minutes to play a hand. [Laugh.] I hate it."

Interestingly, for people like Rita the nature of constraints changed over time. Rita originally lacked opportunities (a structural constraint) to play social bridge. Having circumvented this constraint by moving to a more specialized (serious) level of play, she now has an aversion for playing social bridge (an intrapersonal constraint).

Group Processes and Interpersonal Constraints

This section highlights constraints stemming from the operation of group processes within bridge clubs. These constraints are interpersonal in that aspects of group dynamics may make participation problematic. The fact that bridge requires joint coordination of activity underscores an important difference between solo leisure and group leisure: Sustained involvement is highly dependent on other people's actions. I show how activities within bridge groups exert a controlling influence on the frequency of play. These activities may be related to the age problem, although they are treated here as analytically distinct.

Constraint 5: Gatekeeping Mechanisms. People may be familiar with others who are involved in bridge, but participation may be constrained because they are unable to penetrate existing bridge clubs. Indeed, people may possess the motivation, the permission of significant others, and the resources to play, yet involvement is curtailed because either existing bridge clubs are unable to accommodate new players or newcomers are
judged to be unacceptable by group members. Hence, bridge clubs, regardless of members’ intent, serve as gatekeepers, monitoring who plays and who does not play.

Two findings from the bridge scene in Glenn Valley show how clubs serve as gatekeepers. First, sustained involvement is facilitated by playing in clubs that meet at recurring intervals. People outside these groups play irregularly. Social players may belong to as many as three or four social bridge clubs that meet biweekly or monthly. Serious players try to develop partnerships with others as a means of playing regularly at ACBL-sanctioned clubs. In both cases, stable patterns of involvement occur by developing a schedule of games. Second, established bridge clubs or partnerships vary in terms of their ability to accommodate new players. Gatekeeping mechanisms in bridge clubs, then, are enacted through recruitment processes.

Entry into social clubs in Glenn Valley occurs by special invitation granted by the club as a whole. Once accepted, the newcomer is accorded the status of full member and ensured a full schedule of games each time the group meets. The newcomer is almost always known, having played with the group as a substitute at one time or another. Being a substitute is pivotal in becoming a regular member. The substitute role provides members the opportunity to evaluate the player as a potential regular. Criteria relevant for becoming a member include the ability to get along with members, the ability to host games, and skill at bridge. A favorable evaluation does not automatically lead to entry, however, because clubs generally have a set number of players. Only when a member withdraws permanently from the bridge club are substitutes considered for full membership. It is then that group members collectively discuss who should be invited to join the club as a regular member. In clubs with slow turnover, entry into the club may take years.

Membership in serious bridge clubs is a more nebulous and problematic status than it is in social bridge clubs. The experience of the JBC is illustrative. As noted earlier, the JBC is considered the most competitive and serious bridge club in Glenn Valley. Though the club is an open game (anybody may play there), partners are not automatically provided as they are in social clubs; players are required to locate their own partners for each game. To develop a regular schedule of games, many people try to fill dates, or slots, with regular partners. A slot is a term used by JBC players to refer to specific nights of the month in which bridge games can be scheduled (e.g., the first Wednesday of the month, the second Wednesday of the month, and so on). Players at the JBC have variable success at filling slots. Newcomers, for example, may initially find it difficult because regulars already have all their slots filled. As players develop openings they may issue an invitation to the newcomer for a regular game. Others may be unable to fill slots because they are regarded by regulars as unacceptable partners. This fact reveals a problematic aspect of participating in an open game: There is a nonreciprocal facet to partnership relationships that makes sustained involvement dependent on others.

Developing slots is facilitated by being judged an acceptable partner. Players at the JBC used two criteria in evaluating whether a person was an acceptable partner. First, players were evaluated in terms of their bridge skills. A number of JBC players said they would not develop partnerships with people who were regarded as weak players. A longstanding regular at the JBC commented about a player who withdrew from the club because he was unable to fill slots:

There was a guy I used to play with but I cancelled him because he kept making the same mistakes. He wasn’t learning at all. After a while, nobody
would play with him. This is a guy that is as nice and genuine as can be. However, everybody stopped playing with him because he was always making mistakes. Ultimately he stopped playing at the JBC because he couldn’t get a partner.

Second, players are evaluated in terms of their “bridge personalities”—that is, their consistent behavior at the bridge table. Players labeled as abusive are considered undesirable partners, as reflected in the following comment:

[Recently] I played with Clifford for the first, the last, and the only time. I came home in tears and I told Leo it was like having a root canal. He was absolutely vicious. We had never played together before and I had always liked Clifford. . . . He called and asked me to play and I said “sure” because I figured he would be a perfect gentleman for one night. Generally, a person is abusive in an established partnership, [not] in a casual partnership. But Clifford? As long as things were going fine, he was all smiles. But when bad things started happening, he was ready!

Players at the JBC lacking on either count were found to have a limited pool of potential partners, and they were highly reliant on the few people who were willing to play with them.

Constraint 6: Scheduling Problems. Group activity is dependent on the ability of bridge players to jointly coordinate individual schedules. As noted, this is facilitated by the organization of bridge clubs that meet at regular intervals. The organization of such groups allows members to know ahead of time when and where a group meeting is to be held, and adjustments in schedules can be made accordingly.

Even when members of bridge clubs develop a schedule of games, outside interests frequently impinge on individuals’ time, resulting in their missing games. Time commitments were cited by many players as preventing them from participating in regularly scheduled games. Significant here is how time commitments experienced by the individual make participation problematic for the group—a point almost always overlooked in leisure constraints research. This is a case in which structural constraints experienced at the individual level are experienced interpersonally at the group level. For purposes of conceptual clarity, scheduling problems exist when a bridge group does not meet at a regularly scheduled time because of time commitments experienced by individual members. Scheduling problems are discussed here in terms of their impact on social bridge clubs.

Depending on the number of members, the club may or may not cancel a game when members know they are going to be absent. If a decision is made to meet, substitute players are generally recruited to take the place of absent members. Although time-consuming, this was observed to be the preferred tactic. Scheduling problems, however, prevent some clubs from meeting. The case of the Daytime Bridge Club, a nine-member women’s club in Glenn Valley, is illustrative. Members say they meet every other Friday to play bridge and disband for the summer months. In reality, a month or more may pass before enough of the women are available for a game to be scheduled. Even then, it is not uncommon for the hostess to struggle to fill two tables. The inability of club members to meet at regular intervals is not unique to the Daytime Bridge Club. Conversations with Glenn Valley informants revealed that scheduling problems, at one time or
another, prevented a number of social bridge clubs from meeting at regular intervals. Travel, work, volunteer activity, illness, and family commitments prevented individuals from attending games, thus resulting in group disruption.

**Constraint 7: Group Disbandment.** As noted, regular bridge involvement is constrained when clubs disband. A number of factors were cited as contributing to group disbandment: death or terminal illness among members, married couples splitting up, player departure as a result of outside interests, conflicting relationships among members, and failure to locate new members. Group disbandment may be more of a problem for social clubs than for serious clubs because of the nature of interpersonal relationships attending group participation. Social bridge clubs are formed around close, personal ties, and the recruitment of new members is based primarily on perceived social compatibility. A Glenn Valley widow said she and her husband played bridge regularly with another married couple until her husband died. Recruiting a new player made little sense given the nature of the interpersonal relationships among the original foursome (cf. Denzin, 1984). Group disbandment seems less apt to occur in serious clubs because recruitment is based more on shared interest in bridge than on interpersonal compatibility. Hence, players are generally willing to forgo individual differences as criteria for membership.

**Irreconcilable Differences Among Individuals**

In this final section, the focus is on how bridge players experience constraints from the interaction of individual characteristics and group participation. Until now, constraints have been discussed in terms of barriers to participation. Here, greater attention is devoted to how constraints to enjoyment arise from perceived individual differences among group members. It is also shown that such differences may create enough tension that individuals withdraw from the group or dissolve established partnerships.

**Constraint 8: Differences in Ability.** Sometimes bridge players perceive that they are either underskilled or overskilled relative to group members. Disparate ability constrains maximum enjoyment, so there is a tendency for players to seek out groups or partners that are similarly skilled. In a few cases, bridge players want to improve their ability, and there is a move to play with better players. This behavior is illustrated in the account of a professional bridge player:

> After several years it was clear . . . that I would have to go elsewhere if I was to continue to improve. There simply were not enough seasoned, championship players at Becker's, and to become as good as the great ones it was necessary to play against them and with them. (Sontag, 1977, p. 106)

**Constraint 9: Differences in Activity Orientation.** Differences also exist among bridge players in regard to activity legitimacy. These differences are explained in terms of players' orientations and preferences that are game-related. Space prohibits a complete discussion of such differences. However, they appear to be linked to whether players prefer playing social or serious bridge. Simply stated, social players emphasize the sociability underlying group meetings, whereas serious players emphasize the action of the game itself. Enjoyment is constrained when people play with others who define the game in conflicting terms. The comment of a serious player in Glenn Valley is
illuminating: "If you are playing social bridge in the normal sense, you're not playing bridge at all; people are getting together and playing cards. I can't stand that. When I play, I want to think about what's going on." The statement of a social player is equally revealing:

These people have all these conventions and they sit down and tell you all about them; and you better not say "the moon is shining." Now that's serious bridge, not social bridge. Life is too short for that kind of bridge. I like to play a nice hand of bridge, but I see no reason to be so straitlaced that you can't be nice.

Constraint 10: Idiosyncratic Differences. Finally, differences exist among players that are idiosyncratic in nature. Differences may be independent of group culture, as reflected by differences in beliefs and values. A woman withdrew from a Glenn Valley bridge club because she held a different position on abortion from other group members. Attitude toward smoking is another case in point. Smoking is a volatile issue within the bridge world today, and many clubs and tournaments are increasingly developing regulations that limit or ban smoking at bridge tables. Although many have applauded this movement, some are openly critical and have withdrawn from clubs in which they have been long-standing players.

Conclusions

Unlike solo leisure, involvement in a group leisure activity requires that players be simultaneously present in time and space. This necessity creates potential problems for participants and would-be participants. In contrast to previous research, I have examined the nature of group-related constraints within the social world of contract bridge. An effort was made to discuss findings in terms of structural, intrapersonal, and interpersonal constraints (Crawford & Godbey, 1987).

The data yielded three levels of leisure constraints. First, it was shown that diminishing interest in bridge among younger generations has led to constraints. Second, constraints were explained in terms of how they were linked to group processes. Finally, constraints were identified that arise from individual differences among group members.

A major conclusion stemming from the study is that constraints are frequently interrelated. For example, intrapersonal constraints on the part of young people (i.e., an aversion to playing bridge) create structural constraints for others by limiting opportunities. Similarly, time commitments (a structural constraint) experienced by the individual may result in scheduling problems for groups members as a whole (an interpersonal constraint). These findings suggest that an understanding of how leisure constraints arise cannot occur apart from in-depth understanding of the interconnectedness of human activity. Analytically, this is a formidable task in light of current paradigmatic thinking in leisure studies. At the beginning of this article, I suggested that leisure research is dominated by a social-psychological framework that is more psychological than sociological. What is removed from such a framework is the study of individuals mutually influencing one another in group contexts. What is needed, perhaps, is a social psychology that is more sociological than psychological.

A second major conclusion stemming from this study is that constraints are not in
themselves insurmountable. Although group participation, by its very nature, is problematic, bridge players were observed individually and jointly developing strategies to overcome group-related encumbrances. Although these strategies often failed, they were sometimes successful. The act of filling slots is an example of two people jointly helping one another establish a schedule of games. Some social players made the transition to serious bridge because they were unable to penetrate existing social bridge clubs. Future research on leisure constraints should attempt to explain how activities within the particular social world under investigation both encourage and constrain participation.

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References


