

# A Narrative Analysis of a Declining Social World: The Case of Contract Bridge

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The popularity of contract bridge in the United States has waxed and waned in its 75-year history. The decline of contract bridge is largely the result of the absence of younger people's adopting the game. This paper seeks to answer two questions. First, what was it about contract bridge that resulted in its becoming something of a national pastime? Second, what factors account for the decline of bridge among younger generations? Answers to these questions are first provided in the form of narrative accounts from bridge players. In this paper, bridge players are treated as storytellers replete with personal explanations for the rise and fall of bridge. Stories relevant to the decline of bridge are then examined in light of three different theories of contemporary leisure.

In the relatively short history of contract bridge, September 29, 1958 stood out as a red-letter day among bridge playing enthusiasts. On this day, Charles Goren, bridge's number one citizen at the time, appeared on the cover of *Life Magazine* as the "King of Aces." The appearance of Goren on the cover of this well-known national news magazine<sup>1</sup> was symbolic of the vast popularity contract bridge possessed in the United States in the postwar era. Indeed, the number of U.S. bridge players in 1957 was estimated by *Life Magazine* to be 32 million (Smith, 1957). The same year, Charles Goren (1957) estimated that there were 50 million bridge players in North America. Regardless of estimates, contract bridge appears to have been at its peak of popularity during the 1950s. The game was a favorite among notables, such as President Dwight D. Eisenhower, while in the White House was purported to have had a regular bridge game scheduled Saturday nights (Olsen, 1960).

Today, the exact number of bridge players in the United States is unknown although a recent marketing study sponsored by the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL), the ruling bridge body in North America, estimated that the

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were 11 million (Contemporary Marketing Research Inc., 1986). If we take the figures at face value, what accounts for this precipitous decline in the bridge playing population? The answer is very simple: Those born during and after the baby boom neither learned nor took up the game of bridge. Today, bridge is primarily played by older Americans who learned the game when they were young.

A comparison of ACBL data and United States census data reveals that the bridge playing population in the United States is much older than the United States population as a whole. In 1986, approximately 30% of ACBL members were over the age of 65; 25% of non-ACBL bridge players were over 65 (Contemporary Marketing Research Inc., 1986). In that same year however, among all United States citizens, only 12% were 65 years or older (United States Bureau of the Census, 1988). The average age of ACBL members has also increased sharply over the years. In 1975, less than 20% of ACBL members were over the age of 65; in 1986 the figure was 30%.

What factors accounted for the vast popularity of contract bridge in the United States? Why has bridge ceased to be a popular leisure activity among young people in this country? There is no definitive work that has systematically answered these two questions. However, because the aging problem within the bridge world is seriously regarded among devotees, there is a great deal of discussion as to how this problem came to be. As a point of departure, bridge players are treated in this paper as a group of storytellers replete with personal explanations as to why bridge was popular and why it has fallen on bad times. These explanations, or stories, are treated seriously as they provide narrative data explaining the rise and fall of bridge. Later in the paper, these stories are evaluated in light of sociological explanations of social change.

Data was collected from a number of sources. First, 38 bridge players were interviewed in an eastern college town fictitiously named Glenn Valley. Aspects of the aging problem were discussed with many of these informants. Data was also collected from extensive examination of letters to the editor in a bridge publication called *The Contract Bridge Bulletin*. Letters from 1978 to 1990 were examined for their content. NETNEWS, an electronic bulletin board available via main frame computers, was a third source of data. People from the United States, England, West Germany, and the Netherlands were routinely sending messages pertaining to bridge on NETNEWS. Once a message was posted, other users of NETNEWS reacted to it. Hence, NETNEWS provided users a forum for discussing bridge on a daily basis. From November 30, 1989 to April 3, 1990, 515 distinct bridge messages on NETNEWS were examined and cataloged. During a 2-week period, 20 different messages were posted that dealt directly with the aging problem. Finally, an examination of various books and magazine articles provided data, particularly in regard to the growth of contract bridge.

### *Evolution of Contract Bridge*

Contract bridge, as it is played today, traces its roots to an English card game called whist. Two basic features of the game are relevant for this discussion. First, whist is a partnership game that involves two sets of partners facing each other at a table. Second, a standard deck of 52 cards is dealt out, 13 to a player, with the last card being turned over. This last card constitutes the trump

suit. In time, whist was superseded in its popularity by bridge whist. A few innovations were added to the game. These include the introduction of play at notrump, the exposure of the dummy hand, and the selection of the trump suit (this right was accorded to the dealer or his or her partner). The popularity of bridge whist dropped off with the rise of auction bridge in the early 20th century. The distinctive feature of auction bridge was the introduction of the auction where players competed for the right to name the trump suit. Auction bridge was something of a rage throughout North America and Europe in the mid-to-late 1920s when contract bridge was beginning to take form.

Harold S. Vanderbilt is frequently cited by bridge historians (cf. Mackey, 1964) for adding some minor, albeit significant, modifications to the scoring of auction bridge and a French variant of auction bridge called *plafond*. According to accounts made by Vanderbilt and others, he introduced these modifications to some auction-bridge-playing friends on board a ship traveling from Los Angeles to Havana in 1925. This game, as we know it today, was contract bridge.

The new scoring system eliminated an element of luck in the auction bridge game by increasing the stakes associated with bidding and making high level contracts. The history of contract bridge is short enough to appreciate the effect this innovation had among auction bridge enthusiasts. In the late 1920s, the status of the game was yet undetermined. Indeed, some bridge writers felt the card game was too difficult for the average citizen to understand. For example, this sentiment was voiced in the second edition of *The Bridge World* in 1929 by a bridge expert writing under the name of No Bid:

We do not hesitate to say that after fifteen years in crystallizing and stabilizing Auction Bridge, in building up a beautiful card game that gives an ordinary player some chance, a fair player a good chance, and a well-trained player an excellent chance, it is an ungracious task to try to build up another game on the same lines that eliminate from any chance of success all but expert players. (p. 41)

The writer went on to predict that contract bridge was a passing craze and that it would soon pass away:

Unrest is the genius of Americans, and it is not unlikely that there are many lambs willing to be led to the slaughter; indeed, who may dare to prophesy their number? And, yet, the crazes we have seen—maj jong, roller skating, etc., outside of cards, nullos, royals, etc., novelties in the card game (never accepted by The Whist Club of N.Y.) were ephemeral, and we are prepared to see the same fate overtake Contract. (p. 41)

Yet, contract bridge did flourish, completely usurping auction bridge as a legitimate card game.<sup>2</sup> In Glenn Valley, for example, the game of auction bridge is probably dead. I failed to locate a single person who currently plays or knows of someone else who plays auction bridge.

### *The Growth of Contract Bridge*

Bridge players, whether they know it or not, constitute a group of storytellers. Several of their stories are presented as a means of understanding why contract bridge developed the popularity it did in the United States. The most

frequently cited of these stories pertains to the economic conditions surrounding the first half of the century. A number of players suggested that the 1930s made bridge, as with other card games, an inexpensive form of entertainment that could be enjoyed in the home. This point is underscored in comments made in a letter to the editor of *The Contract Bridge Bulletin*: “The answer to why bridge enjoyed great popularity during the 1930s is easy. For those too young to know, we were enjoying the Great Depression and there was little money for entertainment. Bridge was fun and cost nothing. Bridge is still fun and costs little” (Harding, 1987, p. 4).

Glenn Valley informants said that bridge continued to be a popular form of entertainment following the Great Depression and World War II, particularly among young couples who lacked financial resources to pursue commercialized leisure activities outside the home. A comment by a 67-year-old Glenn Valley player is typical: “It was an activity that couples could participate in together for an evening. You didn’t have to pay a half a buck to go to the movies. A little pretzels and beer made for an enjoyable evening’s activity.” This theme was echoed in a story provided by a 60-year-old Glenn Valley player:

When we first married we didn’t have any money. And one of the things you did was have people in to play bridge. First you visited and served coffee and little snacks. We couldn’t ever afford to serve any kind of booze or beer. You served iced tea or kool aid or something like that. And then at the end of the evening you served some refreshment—something you baked. And that was the evening’s entertainment because you didn’t have money to go out on.

Relatedly, bridge players noted that leisure opportunities during the 1930s were centered around the home and limited in scope. Hence, the rise of contract bridge is explained in terms of the absence of competing interests: “During those times social activity centered around the family and neighborhood, and that’s where people learned to play bridge. There was very little outside competition for their leisure time—no television, modern mobility, video games or the smorgasbord of choices we have today” (Sanders, 1986, p. 14).

Some bridge players explained that the growth of contract bridge was due to the popularity of card playing in general. The theme of the story is that contract bridge, once introduced, quickly became viewed as the Cadillac of card games. Novelist W. Somerset Maugham, for example, said, “Bridge is the most entertaining and intelligent card game the wit of man has so far devised” (*Time Magazine*, 1958, p. 57). Storytellers noted that contract bridge took the nation by storm because people were already well versed in a myriad of other card games:

Back in the Thirties, Culbertson convinced the world that contract bridge was the ultimate card game. This worked because everybody played cards of some sort. Culbertson not only attracted a lot of card players to bridge, he also attracted the best. The people who won at other games soon became the winners at bridge. (Gellman, 1987, p. 8)

Bridge players point out that the media bombarded the public with news of big-time contract bridge matches, and this made bridge a fashionable leisure

activity among upper and middle class people in the United States. As testimony, players point to the well-publicized match between Ely Culbertson and Sidney Lenz from December 1931 to January 1932. The match, which has been described as the bridge battle of the century, was covered by major newspapers across the country. The *New York Times* went as far as to describe the match as “the sporting event of the year” (Mackey, 1964). In his autobiography, Culbertson (1940) recounted the publicity surrounding the match:

The match made not only bridge but journalistic history. Usually a news story lives but one day, and it is a good story if it trails into the next day; it is a big story if it lives a week. Our story lived for six weeks, surviving the break for the Christmas holidays. More words were printed on this match than on the Lindbergh flight or on any murder case except the Halls-Mills trial. Some two million words—the equivalent of twenty-five large books—appeared in the newspapers alone. (p. 601)

It has been noted that the celebrity status conferred upon Culbertson and later on Goren rivaled Hollywood stars (Petersen, 1989). The growth of contract bridge, then, is interpreted as a nation following in the paths of its beloved stars.

Players reported that popular bridge personalities, such as Culbertson and Goren, not only made the game attractive but their systems, which were well documented in their books and in newspaper and magazine columns, also made the game understandable even to the average card player. Goren is believed to have been particularly influential in teaching Americans the rudiments of the game. Bridge historian Rex Mackey (1964) described the impact of Goren’s writing: “From the day he [Goren] published his *Point Count Bidding* a great deal of pure fantasy departed from the game. Among average players meticulously counting their points the days of the two, or even the three, thousand penalties were gone for ever” (p. 145). Goren’s system was simple enough to allow players of different backgrounds to effectively communicate with one another at the bridge table. Quoting a Philadelphia bridge teacher, *Time Magazine* (Staff, 1958) reported: “Charlie Goren has given bridge what it needs most: an outstanding authority, so that a bridge player from Pennsylvania can sit into a game in California and be right at home” (pp. 56-57). This idea was voiced more recently by a writer in *The Contract Bridge Bulletin*: “When . . . players sit down and say, ‘We are playing Goren’ . . . everybody understands what they mean and there is no further discussion when you change partners. This leads to a good and relaxing time for all” (Hazen, 1988, pp. 5-6). The bridge playing population in the United States was estimated to have increased from 22 million to 35 million between 1940 and 1958, an increase often attributed to the influence of Charles Goren (Staff, 1958).

### ***The Decline of Contract Bridge***

It is difficult to estimate exactly when bridge began to lose its appeal in the United States but conversations with Glenn Valley informants and an examination of other sources (cf. Sanders, 1986) suggest that the trend began in the 1960s. This decline is largely a result of younger generations’ not taking up the game. Several narrative accounts are presented that help explain why this happened.

The most frequently cited reason why bridge is not popular among younger generations is that they were exposed to alternative forms of entertainment previously unavailable or unaffordable. In particular, television, electronic equipment, computers, and automobiles are cited as principle competitors for young people's time in the United States. The following comment by a discussant on NETNEWS is typical: "My own pet theory for the decline is that the same people who would most enjoy bridge will often also be interested in an activity that wasn't anywhere as available a couple of decades ago: using computers. And we all know how addictive that can be" (February 8, 1990).

A variant of the theme is expressed as follows: Younger generations have a proclivity for activities that allow for instant gratification. This orientation is thought to be antithetical to learning bridge, a game that players regard as requiring patience and perseverance. A 65-year-old Glenn Valley bridge teacher provided this insight: "Some people, particularly [those] who have never played cards, sit down and think after ten lessons they are going to be bridge players. Well, that is an impossibility. You can learn the basics, but in no way, after ten lessons, are you a bridge player." One writer in *The Contract Bridge Bulletin* suggested that an orientation favoring instant gratification is nurtured by public school systems:

Public schools in this country do not encourage any activity which necessitates a slow, grinding approach to a long-range goal. Instant gratification and quick reward are the tools used to condition our young people. Spending a year or two getting one's brains beat out by better players in order to become competitive makes no sense to a youngster who is accustomed to a happy face on any paper which has his name in the correct corner. (Earl, 1986, pp. 6, 8)

Many players explain the unpopularity of bridge, and cards in general, among younger people in terms of lifestyle changes associated with the fitness boom. In general, the younger generation is perceived by bridge players as being physically active and enlightened in regard to health dangers, particularly smoking. The following statement by a Glenn Valley informant underscores how changes in lifestyle have affected card playing:

My father used to say that when he was young, they would eat in the house and go to the toilet outside. Now they go to the toilet inside and eat outside. Well, what has happened? People used to do a lot of manual labor and play cards for mental exercise. Now people work mentally and they want to do physical exercise for relaxation.

Bridge players recognize they can do little to change the sedentary image of the game,<sup>3</sup> although there is a great deal of talk in the bridge world concerning the negative impact of smoking. Many players believe that young people are not going to join bridge clubs where smoking is sanctioned. The following comment by a proponent of this attitude is typical: "The entry level . . . for new players . . . is at local and sectional tournaments, and none of these kids would be caught dead in the smoky environments provided for such events" (Teukolsky, 1986, p. 111).

The absence of media attention is sometimes cited as a factor contributing to the decline of bridge. In years past, newspapers provided detailed coverage

of bridge matches. This was seen as one reason why bridge flourished in the first half of the century. Bridge did enjoy some television coverage in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. Charles Goren, for example, hosted a nationally televised show that ran successfully until 1964. In the last 25 years, however, media coverage of bridge has been generally limited to regular bridge columns in syndicated newspapers. Rarely are tournaments covered by newspapers, and regular television coverage of bridge matches in the United States is virtually nonexistent.<sup>4</sup> The absence of media coverage and its perceived effect on the popularity of the game is articulated by two writers in *The Contract Bridge Bulletin*:

Bridge has never been successfully televised. In today's society, this is a tremendous disadvantage. Television has brought prominence and huge financial purses to such pastimes as tennis, golf and bowling. In contrast, bridge is still pleading for space in newspapers to report the results of major tournaments. . . . Until and unless some way can be found to make bridge more amenable to media coverage, its popularity will continue to suffer. (Ewen, 1986, p. 137)

A true chicken-and-egg problem, as the media will print/broadcast only what they perceive to be of interest to the public. If bridge gains in popularity, the media will lend a snowball effect by increasing our exposure, but no amount of effort will sustain media interest if they believe their readers/viewers are apathetic. (Brady, 1986, p. 101)

A few bridge players recognize that the changing role of women in the United States may have resulted in decreased popularity of bridge among young females.<sup>5</sup> Conversations with female informants in Glenn Valley revealed that many women's bridge clubs have historically met during the day. Understandably, many of these clubs have included either women not employed outside the home or retired women. These clubs are in jeopardy in light of the increasing involvement of women in work outside the home. Increased participation in the labor force means limited participation in daytime leisure activities. In one Glenn Valley women's bridge club, for example, the group has declined from five tables to two tables in its 35-year history. The club, which historically met in the evening, moved the game to daytime in order to accommodate the desires of its older members. As noted by a long-standing member, this move may have made the game inaccessible to women who work outside the home: "I think [the group will die]. The problem in trying to get members is that these old ladies like to meet in the afternoon. Your young ladies can't come because they are working and they have kids. This is a big problem with all these groups that meet in the afternoon."

Two popular explanations for nonparticipation among younger people are evident among people who play exclusively in ACBL sponsored games. First, young people are believed to avoid ACBL sponsored games because of the presence of elements considered unfriendly. Participant observation of bridge clubs provided evidence that the ACBL games are more serious than games organized outside the auspices of the ACBL. A serious mode of participation is evident in ACBL games, for example, in the relative absence of socializing during the game, a strong adherence to rules and ethical protocol, the organization of partnerships that transcend friendship ties, and open criticism between partners and

opponents. This mode of behavior is sometimes interpreted as unfriendly to both outsiders and insiders of such clubs. The following statement by a young, international student in Glenn Valley is typical:

It rubs me the wrong way for people who are really good players to compete as if it is the world championship. Sometimes they are very rude and condescending to the other players. . . . I feel that if good players love the game so much, they should behave in such a way that newcomers are encouraged to come to play the game. As it is they are scaring them away.

Second, a belief exists that young people are discouraged from playing in ACBL games because of bridge politics. The message behind this story is that the rank and file (i.e., older members) within the ACBL want to put restrictions on bidding techniques that deviate sharply from the techniques advocated by Charles Goren in previous decades. Given this political environment, young people, who are presumably less apt to follow Goren's methods, are thought to be creatively restricted. The story logically concludes that young people will avoid any game in which they are unable to freely express themselves. A discussant on NETNEWS communicated, "If you are young (or old) and innovative—forget it. Innovations in bidding and signalling are quickly restricted or banned. This is to appease the majority of ACBL members whose attitude seems to be 'If it wasn't invented by Goren, then I won't play against it'" (January 26, 1990).

Unfortunately, these two stories explain why younger generations of Americans do not play tournament bridge rather than bridge in general. The storytellers ignore the fact that the vast majority of bridge players play outside the auspices of the ACBL.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the question of what is wrong with bridge is answered only in terms of what is wrong with *tournament* bridge.

### *The Future of Bridge*

In the following open letter published in *The Contract Bridge Bulletin*, ACBL president Tom Sanders (1986) explained the decline of bridge in terms of general social unrest in the 1960s:

The most severe damage occurred in the Sixties. Until then bridge was almost a social grace—a must for college students to learn. The hippie generation, the Vietnam era, changed all that. If you'll recall, their philosophy was "whatever the parents did was square," so they did just the opposite. Unfortunately for us, many of the parents played bridge. The chain was broken. A generation was skipped, and bridge has virtually been extinct on the campus ever since. The pool of new players eager to join the ranks of organized bridge has dried up. (p. 14)

Although this story constitutes a legitimate explanation for the decline of bridge,<sup>7</sup> it also signals a deeper and more significant message: Younger generations of Americans may regard bridge as a game that is inappropriate for them because they perceive it as one that is played by older people. Even those young people who are bridge players tend to regard themselves as anomalies: "I went to a bridge club tonight and there were 11 people there besides myself. I was the



youngest person there (I'm 20); at least 7 people there were old enough to be my grandparents. Hmm'' (NETNEWS, February 1, 1990).

To further explore this idea, a sample of young people (undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory sociology class at a nearby university) were asked to anonymously write brief statements concerning their perceptions of bridge players. Because I had not discussed my interest in bridge with the students prior to this time, the data generated from this task were felt to be valid. Of the 61 students who provided written statements, 39 suggested that bridge was a game played by older people. The following comments by four students are typical of this point of view:

Bridge players are usually from the older generation. It's not a very common game [among people] from the baby boom generation [or younger]. Most bridge players I know live in a retirement community in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

I do not know much about bridge except that my mother plays a lot. Some perceptions of the game I have are that it's played mostly by older people, especially grandparents and parents.

At the top of my head, bridge players represent the older population. Old, with nothing much to do. I can't really picture a group of young people playing though. Who do I know that plays bridge? My grandmother—who keeps harping on the value of being a bridge major in college!

What first comes to mind is the older generation. My grandmother always asks me, "Don't you kids ever play bridge?" To me it was a game for older people. My grandmother used to get together with her friends. . . . I mostly picture little blue haired ladies playing.

In many leisure activities, particularly sport activities, disengagement occurs in later life because older people feel that the activity is no longer appropriate for them (Godbey, 1985). In the case of bridge, the opposite appears to be at work: Young people feel that bridge is a game that is inappropriate for them. Without visible role models, younger generations are likely to continue regarding bridge as an older player's game.

Some bridge players are optimistic the game will survive but will survive primarily among the elderly. This, however, may be only a short-term trend. Although there is evidence that leisure involvement is equally divided between those activities begun in childhood and adulthood (Kelly, 1974), this is not the case in regard to bridge. Bridge players have historically learned to play the game when they were young. According to ACBL data, 74% of ACBL members and 50% of non-ACBL bridge players took up the game over 20 years ago (Contemporary Marketing Research Inc., 1986). As bridge players become older and die, there will be increasingly fewer teachers in the future to pass on the game. Hence, the viability of the game in the United States appears suspect.

### *Discussion*

I have sought to provide stories that explain the growth and decline of contract bridge in the United States. One question remains: How valid are the

various stories? As symptoms of social change, the explanations are remarkably accurate. Yet, they lack substantive insight into the underlying causes of social change in the last 60 years. This final section will examine the decline of bridge in light of three different theories of contemporary leisure.

### *Leisure as Goods Intensive Behavior*

The first of these theories is outlined in Linder's (1970) book, *The Harried Leisure Class*. Linder's basic premise was that time in Western societies has become a scarce commodity of which people cannot have enough. Linder assumed that a scarcity of time is a product of our rational and productive style of work: the greater the yield in work, the greater the yield people seek during nonwork time. One way of maximizing yield during nonwork time is through what Linder described as "accelerated consumption" or "goods intensive" behavior—the tendency to devote smaller units of time to any given consumption item or leisure activity. This type of behavior is reflected in simultaneous consumption (the tendency to consume more than one product or engage in more than one activity within a given time unit) and successive consumption (the tendency to shorten the amount of time allocated to any given product or activity). In general, Linder predicted that leisure activities that lend themselves to goods intensive behavior would wax and that leisure activities that did not lend themselves to such behavior would wane.

Linder's (1970) ideas give credence to at least two stories. One story explained that television, electronic equipment, computers, and automobiles effectively usurped younger generations participation in bridge. A related story suggested that younger Americans preferred activities that allowed for instant gratification. In the language of Linder, people use television, electronic equipment, and so on because these commodities lend themselves to goods intensive behavior. At least two features of bridge make the game unamenable to goods intensive behavior: The game requires little in the form of equipment, and the game requires players to concentrate their attention for extended periods of time. Bridge, then, may appear inefficient and unproductive to a time-conscious generation of Americans. Activities that facilitate goods intensive behavior are predictably preferred over those activities that do not.

### *An Emphasis on the Self*

The work of Yankelovich, Skelly, and White (1982) constitutes a second set of ideas for understanding the decline of bridge. These writers suggested that a basic shift in values in the United States occurred following World War II. Prior to the war, they noted a shared set of values that were part of the Protestant work ethic. Manifestations of this ethic include a desire for upward mobility, hard work, self-sacrifice, and a delay of gratification. Yankelovich et al. suggested that following the war a new generation of Americans emerged in which a "psychology of affluence" prevailed. Although this value system did not completely replace the Protestant work ethic, there was an increasing emphasis on self-fulfillment and self-gratification. In terms of leisure, the new values were reflected in owning and using material goods during leisure time, in a commitment to personal time, in a desire to experience different activities and life-styles, and in a growing attention to health and physical appearance.

A number of stories corroborate ideas proposed by Yankelovich et al. (1982). One of these explained the decline of bridge in terms of the fitness boom. Another story suggested that the changing role of women has resulted in younger generations of women turning their attention to other activities. These two stories converge in one important way: People act in ways that bring about self-fulfillment. Put differently, people are increasingly demanding the freedom to express themselves as individuals. For example, women are experimenting with new roles as is reflected in their increased participation in sports and careers that have historically been the domain of males. The influence on bridge, then, may be an indirect one. As women have taken on these new roles, they have faced similar, if not greater, time pressure as their male counterparts. Consequently, their participation in bridge (and other leisure) activity has become constrained.

### *The Commodification and Deskilling of Leisure*

Finally, Butsch's (1984) case study of the model airplane hobby and industry also potentially sheds light into why bridge has declined. Butsch documented that the history of the hobby is one of increasing commodification of materials and technology. In effect, an industry took over the means of production from the hobbyists themselves and "ultimately led to the hobby industry's domination and determination of the shape of the hobby" (p. 231). A major result of this movement has been the "deskilling" among hobbyists over time. Although this study dealt with a single leisure social world, the work is significant in illustrating how capitalism influences the nature of leisure participation. As corporate interests wield increasing control and manipulation of individual leisure behavior, people become consumers of leisure experiences and objects. Given the priority of business concerns, leisure styles will be promoted that produce maximum profit.

This provides a context for understanding why the media has ceased to be a viable source of publicity within the bridge world, assuming that the media is a tool used by capitalist interests to shape and mold public tastes in regard to leisure behavior. In general, capitalist interests will promote those leisure activities or objects that can be bought and sold and that require little skill on the part of the consumer. Bridge does not fair well on either count. The game is not commodity intensive (it can be played virtually anywhere, and it requires little in terms of specialized equipment), and it does require a time commitment. The decline of bridge, then, can be explained in terms of market interests: Capitalists have stopped promoting the game (via the media) because it promises little economic return. Consequently, younger generations have stopped playing bridge because the game has ceased to be in the public limelight.

### *Conclusions*

What factors contributed to the growth and decline of contract bridge in the United States? The rise and fall of the game appears to be related to economic conditions before and after World War II. Prior to the war, citizens were relatively limited in their ability to pursue leisure activities outside the home. Concomitantly, leisure activity before the war was not commodity intensive. Hence, contract bridge flourished, in part, given the absence of competing interests.

This, however, is only part of the story. Bridge players were already well versed in a myriad of card games; contract bridge came to be seen as the most challenging and sophisticated type of card game. The interest in bridge was facilitated by media attention and teachers who were able to simplify the game.

Following the war, a boom in economy resulted in expanded leisure opportunities inside and outside the home. Manifestations of this change include the commodification of leisure activity and an increased emphasis on self-fulfillment and self-gratification. Bridge's decline, then, is related to younger generations' ability to afford and experiment with a multitude of leisure styles. At a deeper level, bridge is antithetical to younger generations' desire to experience as much as they are able in the shortest amount of time possible. This movement has been fueled by a capitalist economy that has sought to mobilize younger generations as consumers of leisure experiences and objects.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Goren's fame was reflected in many ways. He was a regular columnist for *Sports Illustrated*. He also appeared on national television as a bridge analyst. Goren's fame also extended to sales. According to editors of *The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge* (Francis & Truscott, 1984), it was estimated that in a single year, 1963, Goren sold 8 million books and his bridge columns were read by 34 million people.

<sup>2</sup>Two events in late 1929 symbolized the simultaneous decline and rise of auction and contract bridge. In October, the *Auction Bridge Magazine* published its last issue, having gone bankrupt. The very next month, Ely Culbertson published the first issue of *The Bridge World*, the first "publication devoted primarily to *Contract* and *Auction Bridge*" (italics added; Staff, 1929, p. 5). *The Bridge World* is still published today, constituting the "oldest *continuously* published magazine dealing with contract bridge" (Francis & Truscott, 1984, p. 44).

<sup>3</sup>A number of bridge players suggest that the opposite may be true—namely, that youth today are probably more sedentary in their free-time activities than previous generations of youth. For example, youth are frequently thought to occupy themselves in sedentary activities such as computers and video games.

<sup>4</sup>Editors of *The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge* (Francis & Truscott, 1984) identified many television shows in North America and Europe that were devoted to bridge. The last show in the U.S. to be mentioned was a public television series that aired in 1974 called "Play Bridge with the Experts."

<sup>5</sup>According to ACBL data, 60% of its members are women (Contemporary Marketing Research Inc., 1986). The ACBL study fails to report the proportion of bridge-playing women who are not ACBL members. The figure is probably much higher. In Glenn Valley, women were far more likely to play bridge than men. Hence, although the majority of ACBL members are women, it may be overrepresented, relatively speaking, by men.

<sup>6</sup>According to ACBL data, of the 11 million bridge players in the United States in 1986, only 1.6% were members of the ACBL (Contemporary Marketing Research Inc., 1986).

<sup>7</sup>The explanation of social unrest was an uncommon explanation for the decline of bridge in the United States; the version written by Sanders (1986) was the only statement found that included this particular theme.