An Analysis of Adult Play Groups: Social Versus Serious Participation in Contract Bridge

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Abstract Missing from the study of leisure behavior is a research tradition expressly devoted to the study of adult play groups. This article presents a social world perspective for analyzing such groups and frames the analysis of play groups in terms of both individual interactants and the broader social world in which the groups are a part. The social world perspective provided the basis for exploring the nature of adult participation within a distinct social world—contract bridge. Results from a yearlong study of bridge groups in a town fictitiously named Glenn Valley revealed that bridge players used the terms social and serious as frames of reference in defining what constitutes legitimate bridge activity and in determining people with whom it is acceptable to play bridge. The use of these terms was pervasive enough to support the conclusion that the bridge scene in Glenn Valley is segmented into two distinct components: one composed largely of social groups and the other of serious groups. Social and serious groups are shown in this paper to differ in terms of recruitment processes, primary group functions, types of games played, social world linkages, physical settings and management of club activities, sequencing of bridge activity, topics of conversation, stakes, formation of partnerships, characteristics of club members, impersonal relationships, and types of substitutes. Sources for activity legitimacy within both worlds are explained in terms of their intersections with gender roles.

Keywords adult play groups, social leisure, social world of bridge, symbolic interaction

Leisure researchers have traditionally focused on individual patterns of behavior rather than group patterns. As Meyersohn (1969) observed, using random samples in leisure research means that "the connectedness of humans is carefully sampled out" (p. 55). The study of recurring groups of adults involved in common leisure activity is surprisingly scant, particularly in light of Cheek and Burch’s (1976) assertion that leisure is, fundamentally, a group phenomenon. Researchers have documented the importance of social groups in the leisure styles of people, but such studies are framed in terms of the

This paper was originally written while the first author was a visiting assistant professor at the University of Illinois.
individual rather than the group. For example, most leisure activity is pursued in the company of friends or family (Field, 1976). Furthermore, the enjoyment people accrue from leisure experiences tends to be enhanced by the presence of others (Lundberg, Komarovsky, & McNerny, 1934; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Relatedly, people who feel positive about their patterns of social leisure also feel satisfied with their leisure in general (Crandall, 1979). Social groups with whom people interact in leisure contexts (e.g., family/or friends) also influence individual patterns and styles of involvement (Burch, 1959; Field & O’Leary, 1973; Field, 1976; Kelly, 1974; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1975).

Still, what is missing from a sociology of leisure is a research tradition expressly devoted to the study of adult play groups. Also missing is a theoretical perspective for the analysis of such groups. In this paper, we present a theoretical perspective—a social world perspective—for analyzing adult play groups. Using the social world perspective, we then present findings from a yearlong study of contract bridge (see also Scott, 1991a, 1991b). Findings from this article provide insight into the primary source of differentiation (segmentation) within the bridge world, the ways differentiation is reflected in patterns of activity within bridge groups, and its relationship to players’ participation in other social worlds.

What kinds of information may be gleaned by framing the analysis in terms of the group rather than the individual? First, a study of adult play groups provides a foundation for understanding the processes by which people coalesce in pursuing joint leisure activity. We agree with Glancey (1990) who stated that leisure researchers and practitioners have given little credit to people in their ability to “organize themselves to play in freely chosen pursuits” (p. 349). Second, a study of play groups furthers our understanding of the social basis for intragroup solidarity. Some researchers (e.g., Cheek & Burch, 1976; Kelly, 1983) have argued that leisure is largely organized around people interacting with others as a result of mutual tastes and out of a sense of belonging. The study of contract bridge provides insight into the community-building potential of leisure activity.

Adult play groups are defined in this study as groups of adults, united around a primary activity, who meet at regular intervals to participate together in that activity. Though members may have ties to one another through other activities, the play group is assumed to be an integral agent in connecting individuals to one another.

A Theoretical Perspective for the Analysis of Adult Play Groups

The theoretical perspective taken in this study is grounded in symbolic interactionism. As noted by Fine and Kleinman (1979), this perspective “emphasizes the importance of face-to-face interaction in the generation and activation of cultural elements” (p. 8). Interactionists seek to explain patterns of group activity (i.e., cultural elements and group processes) in terms of processes of joint interaction (Blumer, 1969) and mutual adjustment to a given set of circumstances (Cohen, 1955). Analyses are generally focused around individual members’ unique history together. Interactionists emphasize the specialized knowledge and patterns of activity that develop as a result of sustained interaction over time. This point is made explicit in Field’s (1976) depiction of kinship and friendship groups:

Interestingly, kinship and friendship imply the existence of extensive knowledge, which is not readily available to others in the same place. . . . This
knowledge sets each group apart from all others. Each forms its own social world in a way uniquely influenced by previous interactive experience. (pp. 19–20)

Ethnographic accounts provide insight into the development of such regularities. For example, a recurring card group was shown to have well-established rules that guided the choices of acceptable games, betting limits, the intrusion of outsiders, and the scheduling of games (Zurcher, 1970). Similarly, a recreational softball team was seen to evolve a distinct subsystem of leadership roles, which were organized for the attainment of a variety of goals (Glancy, 1986).

It would be misleading, however, to view play groups in completely localized terms, as this would encourage an analytic scheme that glosses over the interconnections members have with other play groups and spheres of interest (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). A group’s culture, for example, is not merely invented but negotiated out of what individuals bring to the group from other groups and situations. Group practices are subject to change as members bring new experiences to the group. Hence, interactionists have pointed out that local groups should also be examined in terms of their linkages to broader and more inclusive social world systems. This approach—the approach pursued in this study—seeks to explain patterns of group activity in terms of members’ history together and in terms of factors transcending the immediate group. To further understanding of the social world perspective, various dimensions of social worlds and some implications for research are suggested.

Social Worlds Are Culture Areas

Following Shibutani (1955), a social world is defined as a culture area in which people and organizations orient their behavior in some identifiable way. Social worlds may form around any number of substantive areas (Strauss, 1978), including higher education, religion, child rearing, auto racing, quilting, bird-watching, and so on. This conception of a social world parallels one proposed by Unruh (1979), who described social worlds as distinct spheres of interest: “A social world must be seen as an internally recognizable constellation of actors, organizations, events, and practices that have coalesced into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement” (p. 115). Each social world, then, is a unique scheme of life in which members share in a special set of meanings (Shibutani, 1955) and in which various cultural elements—activities and events (Spradley, 1980), conventions and practices (Hall, 1987), and specialized knowledge, technology, and language (Pearson, 1981)—are created and made meaningful by social world members and serve to set the social world apart from other social worlds.

Participation Is Marked Off by Communication Channels

Social world perspectives arise and are enacted through effective communication (Shibutani, 1955). More simply, the generation, sharing, and dissemination of social world knowledge are dependent on common communication channels that are limited by neither social positions nor territorial boundaries. In general, participation in social world activity may occur through face-to-face interaction, acquaintance networks (Granovetter, 1973), or mediated sources, such as books, newspapers, television, radio, trade journals, and magazines (Fine & Kleinman, 1979; Unruh, 1980).
Size of Social Worlds

Social worlds tend to be highly amorphous in nature; they vary in size, shape, amount of face-to-face interaction among members, permeability of boundaries, stability over time, and degree of formal organization (Strauss, 1978). Hence, it is convenient to specify the level in which social world analysis is to proceed. Following Unruh (1980), social worlds can be studied as either dispersed, regional, or local phenomena. Dispersed social worlds "incorporate actors, organizations, events, and practices from many regions or even nations" (Unruh, 1980, p. 289). Examples of this approach are reflected in investigations of camping (Burch, 1965), rugby football (Sheard & Dunning, 1973), motorcross racing (Martin & Berry, 1979), and pool hustling (Polsky, 1967). Regional social worlds are generally "composed of actors, organizations, events, and practices situated within a certain geographical region" (Unruh, 1980, p. 288). Cresssey's (1969) depiction of Chicago based taxi-dance halls, Douglass, Rasmussen, and Fianagan's (1977) treatment of Southern California nude beaches, and Glancy's (1988, 1990) investigation of auctions exemplify studies of regional social worlds. Finally, local social worlds are "those congeries of actors, organizations, events, and practices which are densely situated in geographical space and relatively small in terms of the social world component probably involved" (Unruh, 1980, p. 286). Research focusing on local social worlds includes Glancy's (1986) study of a recreational softball team, Jacobs's (1979) analysis of a karate dojo, Levy's (1989) treatment of a local marina, Smith's (1985) investigation of a "rough" working-class pub, and Zurcher's (1970) examination of a "friendly" poker game.

Differentiation Within the Social World

A basic feature of social worlds is that they tend to be differentiated into smaller, more specialized subworlds. This is particularly true for social worlds that are dispersed or regional in nature. Kling and Gerson (1978) noted that subworlds tend "to develop specialized concerns and interests within the larger community of common activities, which act to differentiate some members of the world from others" (p. 26). The process by which differentiation occurs within a social world is referred to as segmentation (Kling & Gerson, 1978; Mains, 1982; Strauss, 1978, 1984). Strauss (1984) noted that segmentation may arise when spatial and topographical distinctions exist; when social world members use objects in different ways; when technology evolves; when participants are divided in terms of ideology; when social worlds intersect with other social worlds; or when recruitment results in new types of members. Strauss pointed out that for a distinct subworld to develop, "there has to emerge a collective definition that certain activities are preeminently worth doing and 'we' are doing them" (p. 128). While such an ideology need not be elaborate or explicit, Strauss added that "core activities are believed to be legitimate: fun or appropriate, aesthetically right, morally right, leading to truth" (p. 128).

Participation in Social World Activity Is Partial

People generally participate in many social worlds within their particular life spaces. The same person, for example, may participate, albeit at various levels of commitment, in the social worlds of leisure studies, manhood, parenthood, religion, basketball, and recovery from alcoholism. Given the amorphous character of social worlds, members
cannot reasonably be expected to be involved in all aspects of social world activity (Unruh, 1980). Participation, then, in any given social world tends to be limited to various segments. This is not to say that participation is necessarily confined to a discreet unit within the social world system. Participants within the social world of basketball, for example, may play pickup and organized basketball in different settings and with different groups; they may also follow college and professional basketball as spectators and through the media.

**Participation in Social World Activity Provides a Frame of Reference**

Members within any given social world possess orientations that serve as frames of reference in evaluating the gamut of social world activity around them. These orientations also have implications for the organization of group activity. Following Bryan (1979), these orientations reflect knowledge, activity and setting preferences, attitudes toward consumption and competition, the relationship of social world activity to the rest of one’s life, and so on. Social world orientations are fashioned by one’s cumulative experiences inside and outside the particular social world. Fine and Kleinman (1979) noted that one’s social world orientation may be a function of the extent to which the individual participates in groups with vertical or horizontal linkages. Vertical linkages exist through affiliation with nonlocal organizations, whereas horizontal linkages exist through “affiliations with other local organizations on the same level” (p. 14). According to Fine and Kleinman, people who participate in groups with constricted extraorganizational linkages tend to possess a social world perspective that is local and provincial. Conversely, participation in groups with extensive vertical and horizontal social world linkages tends to encourage a cosmopolitan social world perspective (Merton, 1957).

**Implications for Research**

An adult play group was defined as a group of individuals, coalesced around a primary activity, who meet at regular intervals to participate together in that activity. The discussion of social worlds provides a base and some direction for empirical analysis of play groups. On the one hand, play groups may be examined as local social worlds. Group patterns tend to be situationally relevant and collectively meaningful and to provide a frame of reference for guiding behavior and distinguishing members from nonmembers (Cohen, 1955; Fine, 1987; Maines, 1982; Shibutani, 1955). Participants within the play group are likely to view their way of doing things as an extension of their particular history together—a reflection of their respective orientations (Sherif, Harvey, White, Wood, & Sherif, 1961). On the other hand, local social worlds may also be examined as part of regional or more dispersed social world systems. From this perspective, activity at the local level is inexorably linked to what is going on elsewhere and to perspectives that members bring from participation in other social worlds.

The social world perspective provides a unique opportunity to examine interrelationships among groups that theoretically comprise a given social world system. A number of research questions are relevant. What are the various segments within a given dispersed or regional social world? How is segmentation related to patterns of activity within various play groups? On what basis do play groups form? What is the basis of activity legitimacy in different play groups? These questions guided a yearlong study of bridge groups in an eastern town fictitiously named Glenn Valley.
Purpose of Study.

This study was designed to answer three interrelated questions. First, what is the primary source of differentiation within the social world of contract bridge? Second, how is differentiation reflected in patterns of activity within bridge groups? Finally, what are the sources of activity legitimacy in different bridge groups?

Methodology

Overview

This yearlong study of contract bridge groups was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, an effort was made to become acquainted with the social world of bridge by becoming a participant in bridge clubs. In the second phase, in-depth interviews were conducted. During both phases, data were collected from key informants and 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). This field role provided a means of acquiring original data on group activities, while allowing group members to be aware of the investigator's research interest. This made it possible to develop an intimate understanding of the people, activities, and meanings of bridge activity, and supplied the means of establishing trusting relationships with players, thereby providing a basis for employing the more formal interviewing techniques (Douglass, 1976).

Setting

Data collection occurred in an eastern town fictitiously named 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 design of the study required participation in groups over time. Contract bridge was chosen over other activities because an initial investigation determined that there were numerous bridge clubs in Glenn Valley, thus providing an opportunity to examine processes of segmentation and differentiation among play groups.

Sampling of Bridge Groups

Bridge clubs were chosen using a reputational or snowball sampling technique (Burgess, 1984). Individuals known to be bridge players were contacted and asked whether they felt their groups would be willing to allow the researcher to become a "member" for research purposes. At this time, general purposes of the study were explained to these contacts. Some of these people then referred the researcher to other bridge players in the area. These new contacts were then queried as to whether they and their groups might allow the researcher to participate with and observe them.

The researcher joined four bridge clubs as a participant observer. Conversations with players revealed that these clubs were representative of bridge clubs in the region.
The four groups were observed from April 1989 through October 1989. The clubs varied in size and frequency of meeting. For purpose of discussion, the four groups were named (fictitiously) the University Women's (UW) Bridge Club, the Daytime Bridge Club, the Couples Bridge Club, and the Jackson Bridge Club (JBC). In May 1989, participant observation commenced with a fifth club, the College Bridge Club. As noted later, the College Bridge Club was composed largely of players who played regularly at the Jackson Bridge Club.

The University Women's Bridge Club was composed of 11 women who ranged in age from 65 to 84. Eight of the women were widows; the other three had never married. Approximately half of the women had been playing in the club since its formation in the mid-1950s. At the time of the UW Bridge Club's formation, most of the women were in either their late thirties or early forties. Except for the winter months, the group met once a month to play bridge.

The Daytime Bridge Club consisted of nine women. Two of the women had been with the group since its beginning in 1973. Another woman joined the group in 1974. The other women had joined since. All of the women were married, except for one widow. Most of the women were in their later forties and fifties. The club "officially" met every other week during the nonsummer months to play bridge. However, participant observation and conversations with members revealed that a month might pass before enough of the women were available for a game to be scheduled.

The Couples Club was formed in 1977 as a result of relationships engendered through the Glenn Valley Welcome Club but became separate when it began recruiting members outside of the Welcome Club. The club consisted of six married couples, or 12 players. On a typical outing, there were two or three tables. The club met almost every month, though there were instances in which a game was not held because not enough of the couples could be present. Three couples had been with the club since its formation. A year after its formation, a couple was recruited to replace one that moved away. The other two couples had been regular members for seven years. During the data collection period, one player died. The deceased player's spouse continued to play in the group by bringing along a partner of her choice. All of the players were either in their fifties or sixties.

The Jackson Bridge Club was one of three bridge games in Glenn Valley sanctioned by the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL). It has been under the auspices of the ACBL since 1948. The JBC commonly ran 9 or 10 tables of bridge, though the number was observed to be as low as 6 and as high as 14. The game was held every Wednesday night. Approximately 50 people played at least once a month at the JBC. About three quarters of them played weekly. Among regulars, approximately 14 had been playing at the JBC for more than 20 years, 8 had played between 10 and 20 years, 10 had played between 3 and 9 years, and 7 had played less than 3 years. In addition, nine regulars were Life Masters. (To become a Life Master a player must earn 300 master points of different colors in ACBL sanctioned games.) The age complexion of JBC players was highly skewed. At any given game, approximately 20% of players were 70 years or older, 35% were in the sixties, 20% were in their fifties, 15% were in their forties, 5% were in their thirties, and 5% were in their twenties. The oldest regular in the group was 96 years old, and the youngest was a 23-year-old graduate student at the university. Men and women were represented in approximately equal numbers.

It was observed that the majority of the players at the JBC also played Monday nights in another ACBL sanctioned game—the College Bridge Club. The club played Monday nights at the student union of the university. Participant observation of the College Bridge Club revealed almost total overlap with JBC players and patterns of activity.
Sampling of Bridge Players

For purposes of interviewing, bridge players were sampled using the tenets of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling entails purposely sampling informants based on their supposed ability to facilitate the generation and elaboration of relevant categories. Every effort was made to collect data from a range of informants who were from different clubs and were known to differ in terms of age, gender, skill, and length of membership. The sample included a mix of novices, intermediate players, and advanced players; young, middle-aged, and older people; newcomers and longstanding members; men and women, students and nonstudents; and American and foreign-born players. Although more ACBL players were interviewed compared with players in the other three groups, the proportion of players interviewed in each club was roughly similar. Data collection also included participant observation, in-depth interviewing, the use of key informants, and various written documents.

Data Collection

Participant Observation. The participant-as-observer field role involved playing the role of kibitzer (native term meaning observer) and, sometimes, the role of novice player. At the onset of the study, the researcher explained to members that he was primarily interested in observing, rather than playing with them. He was nevertheless often asked to play. Because of his limited experience as a player, this role was taken only if it was necessary to fill a table. As he became more experienced at the game, the researcher became more confident and was open to participation as a player. As a player, every effort was made to be a “polite player.” This entailed displaying sportsmanship, a willingness to forgive mistakes, and a sense of humor. Participant observation involved more than observing and playing bridge; it involved engaging players in informal conversations before, after, and during breaks in the game. Such conversations also occurred in restaurants, bars, automobiles, and on the telephone.

In all, 30 bridge encounters were observed. Encounter is used here to refer to the sum total of all club activity from the time players arrived until the time they went home. Game refers only to the period of time in which players actually played bridge. More than half of the 30 encounters included games sponsored by the JBC or the College Bridge Club. The researcher usually arrived a little early at each encounter, thus providing an opportunity to observe the range of activities from beginning to end. Arriving early and leaving late also facilitated casual conversation with players.

The researcher sought to emulate members’ behavior as a means of blending in. In a sense, the researcher became “other directed” in that he engaged in conversations and consumed refreshments when appropriate. To maintain an unobtrusive posture, notes were not taken in the presence of players. In some instances, however, it was possible to jot down quick notes in the bathroom. For the most part, however, field notes were written following the encounter.

Participant observation in UW and Daytime Bridge clubs was initially awkward because the groups were composed entirely of women, the former being composed of elderly women. During the first few encounters, however, the researcher and group members discovered they had much in common, so their differences were quickly forgotten.
In-depth Interviewing. In the second phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with members of local clubs. Interviews generally lasted between one and two hours. 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 verified in interviews with other informants. Similarly, the interviews had to be flexible enough to accommodate the specialized knowledge of informants. 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, an 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.

Key Informants. Throughout both phases of the research, the researcher relied on three long-standing players from the two ACBL clubs to serve as key informants (cf., Whyte, 1955). These people provided invaluable interpretation of the meanings of various activities and incidents within the bridge clubs. Key informants were chosen from these clubs and not the others because of their relatively large size. In addition, playing techniques in the ACBL clubs were found to be more complex than in other clubs. All three informants spent considerable time on the telephone with the researcher, providing him with answers to vexing questions concerning bidding, protocol, and other group-related matters. They also provided a basis for confirming observations.

Written Documents. Other sources of data were used as they became known. For example, written accounts in letters to the editor in the bridge magazine The Contract Bridge Bulletin were read. Magazines and books were also read for their content. One particularly rich source of data was NETNEWS, an electronic bulletin board. It was discovered that people throughout the world were routinely sending messages that pertained to bridge on NETNEWS. Once a message was posted, other bridge players reacted to it. So NETNEWS provided users a forum for discussing bridge on a daily basis. Data from these sources augmented and supported data collected using participant observation and in-depth interviewing.

Treatment and Analysis of Data

Data analysis entailed discovering categories of action and the integration of these categories by means of a dominant theme (cf., Spradley, 1980). Categories refer simply to classes of phenomena observed within a social world. Categories were created and refined at all stages of data collection. Categories were created as a means of noting regularities apparent within the bridge world (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Regularities observed included time, space, actors, objects, activities, acts, goals, and feelings (Spradley, 1980). A number of related categories were found relevant for this paper. Among others, these included topics discussed during the bridge encounters, activities engaged in during encounters, reasons for playing with a bridge club, stages in becoming a regular, types of bridge games, and reasons for getting upset with other players.
These and other categories were subsequently transformed as a central theme was discovered.

The development of categories was accomplished by a dual process of subjective interpretation and content analysis of field notes and transcribed interviews. This process is akin to the constant comparison method as described by Taylor and Bogdan (1984): "By continually comparing specific incidents in the data, the researcher refines these concepts, identifies their properties, explores their relationships to one another, and integrates them into a coherent theory" (p. 126). This process was greatly facilitated by immersion in the lives of the bridge players. Sustained participation provided a context for understanding group life and the meaning of bridge from the point of view of the people under investigation (Blumer, 1969).

During the first few months of research it was not clear how the data would be organized for purposes of analysis and presentation. The researcher was comfortable with learning about bridge groups and bridge players from the point of view of the people under investigation. As a result of sustained immersion in the life of different bridge clubs, a dominant theme became apparent: Bridge players purposely participated in some bridge groups over other bridge groups. The basis for self-selection was the perceived serious versus social nature of group activity. This distinction between social bridge and serious bridge served as a principal dichotomy in differentiating patterns of bridge activity. Moreover, interrelationships among categories were identified with the discovery of this theme (Spradley, 1980). Interrelationships among categories are illustrated in the form of a typology of bridge groups.

Results

The presentation of results is divided into three sections. First, the central source of differentiation within the social world of bridge in Glenn Valley is identified: the perceived social versus serious nature of group activity. Second, the way differentiation relates to patterns of activity within serious and social bridge clubs is described. The final section provides explanations for sources of activity legitimacy within the subworlds of social bridge and serious bridge by considering the intersecting role of gender within each subworld.

Differentiation of Bridge Clubs: Social Versus Serious Bridge

Although participate observation was pursued regularly in five bridge clubs, conversations with bridge players revealed that there were dozens of other bridge clubs in Glenn Valley. A number of players observed in the five clubs said they also participated in other clubs, either as regular members or substitute players. Moreover, although overlapping participation was observed between only the JBC and the College Club, many members of the five clubs said they were acquainted with members of other clubs through participation in bridge groups that were not observed.

It was infeasible to determine the exact number of bridge clubs in Glenn Valley, yet it was possible to ascertain some information about these clubs, including the distribution of men and women, the types of games played, and the times the groups met. The majority of bridge clubs in Glenn Valley were composed exclusively of women who met either once a month or twice a month on weekdays. These groups generally played one of two styles of contract bridge: rubber bridge or party bridge. The second largest group of bridge clubs were those that included husbands and wives. These "couples
clubs” typically played once a month on either Friday or Saturday night and generally played party bridge or a style of bridge called duplicate bridge. Groups composed exclusively of men were quite rare. It appears that only two bridge clubs in Glenn Valley were composed entirely of men. (The two groups, each consisting of only four men [one man participated in both] met in the evening once a month to play rubber bridge.) Three bridge clubs in Glenn Valley were sanctioned by the ACBL. These included the JBC, the College Club, and the Glenn Valley Bridge Club. The JBC and the College Club played duplicate bridge. Each club, as noted above, met weekly. The Glenn Valley Bridge Club sponsored games (primarily duplicate) every day of the week except Saturday. Glenn Valley Bridge Club games were held both in the daytime and the evening. Games sponsored by the three ACBL clubs had approximately equal numbers of men and women.

The above characteristics provide some insight into basic differences among bridge groups, yet they do not further our understanding of underlying patterns of segmentation within the Glenn Valley bridge scene. To do so, it was necessary to discover the meanings of bridge among area players and examine how these meanings were related to patterns of behavior in the various bridge clubs. As it turned out, this was easy because players were relatively candid about what they believed constituted “authentic” bridge. Early in the course of research, players in Glenn Valley were heard defining both themselves and the bridge groups in which they participated in terms of one of two labels: social and serious. Players were frequently heard saying, “I don’t play social bridge” or “I don’t play serious bridge.” Similarly, players identified their respective clubs as either a “social bridge club” or a “serious bridge club.” This dichotomy was so pervasive that it was concluded that bridge players in Glenn Valley were divided into two distinct subgroups: one composed largely of social players and the other of serious players. While there was some overlap between the two subworlds, they generally consisted of different people who shared distinct ideas as to what constituted legitimate activity. As noted in the next section, these definitions are intimately linked to patterns of behavior within bridge clubs.

Patterns of Activity Within Social and Serious Bridge Clubs

The presence of two distinct subworlds of bridge players is reflected in strikingly different patterns of activity within two types of bridge clubs: social bridge clubs and serious bridge clubs. The two types of bridge clubs serve as ideal types, thus providing a foundation for contrasting group phenomena, and a framework for the development of generalizations. While the types are abstractions from the empirical world, the terms social bridge club and serious bridge club are native terms and are used by players as frames of reference for distinguishing a club’s personality relative to others. Hence, the two types are logically consistent with the vocabularies of bridge players. A number of characteristics differentiate social bridge clubs from serious bridge clubs. These characteristics are summarized in the form of a typology in Table 1.

Recruitment and Becoming a Member: Entry into social clubs occurs by special invitation granted by the club as a whole. Potential members (e.g., substitute players) are evaluated primarily in terms of their interpersonal skills and ability to host games and secondarily in terms of their bridge skills. If accepted, newcomers are accorded the status of full members and, regardless of their bridge skills, ensured of a schedule of games whenever the group meets. Membership status tends to be more nebulous in the serious club. In principle, anybody can play in serious club games because they are open
to the public. Partners, however, are not automatically provided as they are in social clubs. Players are responsible for locating partners for a given game. Becoming a regular at the club is a function of the individual’s ability to fill slots. Slots, another native term, refers to specific days or nights of the month that bridge games can be scheduled. Filling slots is accomplished by establishing regular partnerships with the same people over time. In general, bridge skill was observed to be the key factor in a player’s ability to fill slots. Some were unsuccessful at filling slots, and their activity patterns were erratic. A case in point was Richard (pseudonyms are used throughout), a 73-year-old retiree in Glenn Valley regarded by regulars at the JBC and College Club as “hopeless.” Not only was the player considered weak by these clubs’ standards, but he made little effort to upgrade his skills and failed to learn and abide by matters of protocol and ethics. Richard commented about his situation: “I haven’t been playing much recently, because I don’t have good partners—I haven’t had any partners.”

**Primary Function.** The primary function of social bridge groups is to provide members a vehicle to encourage sociability and strengthen interpersonal ties. Although the game may be an activity that members enjoy (some said it was a favorite leisure activity) and
groups were clearly oriented to maintaining a relaxed and harmonious atmosphere. Observations of social clubs resulted in virtually no incidents of players openly criticizing one another for poor playing. Players in social clubs stated that such behavior undermined friendly relations among members and thus had no place. These ideas are evident in a statement by Gwendolyn, a 73 year-old, longtime member of the University Women’s bridge club: “Here we play socially. This game gives us a chance to see one another. It provides a way of catching up with what one another is doing.” In contrast, the primary function of serious bridge clubs is to provide players an opportunity to play high quality bridge, testing their skills against like-minded players. A few Glenn Valley players explained that they played bridge at the JBC and not elsewhere because of the quality of competition. Fran, a 32-year-old player in Glenn Valley stated, “The JBC is the best game in town.” This emphasis on the quality of play was observed to be at the expense of friendly relations. Participant observation at the JBC revealed that there was little conversation among players once the game began. Moreover, in many instances partners and opponents openly argued over a bid, play, or ruling.

*Types of Games Played.* Social bridge groups generally play either party bridge or rubber bridge, whereas serious clubs almost always play duplicate bridge. The choice of games is intimately linked to the primary function of the club. Luck is recognized to be a big factor in determining winners and losers in rubber and party bridge games because players with the “best” cards typically win. The element of luck is greatly reduced in duplicate bridge because performance is dependent on how well a pair play the same cards relative to other pairs. Serious bridge groups prefer the controlled conditions of duplicate bridge under which players can compete and test their skills. The qualities of duplicate bridge lead many players to note that the game is the highest form of competition among all card games. A few social bridge clubs play duplicate bridge, but these “social” duplicate clubs are not as common as party or rubber bridge clubs because duplicate bridge tends to promote a more competitive orientation to the game.

*Social World Linkages.* Social bridge clubs are linked horizontally rather than vertically to the broader social world of bridge. Social clubs lack vertical linkages because they are outside the auspices of the ACBL. The absence of such linkages is reflected by “localized” patterns of activity, thus reflecting members’ unique history together. Also, members use relatively unsophisticated bidding and card-playing techniques. For example, members of social groups within Glenn Valley used bidding techniques advanced by Charles Goren 50 years ago—techniques that are used sparingly in advanced play today. Horizontal linkages occur through multiple group membership and may serve as catalysts for change in social group activity over time. The Daytime Bridge Club, for example, was observed switching over to an ACBL procedure at the prompting of a member who had recently learned the technique at the Glenn Valley Bridge Club.

Serious bridge clubs operate under the auspices of the ACBL. Because of this vertical linkage, the serious bridge club is obliged to follow principles set down by the ACBL. These include matters pertaining to rules, the awarding of master points, and the scheduling of games. Moreover, many players keep abreast of current developments in the bridge world at large. Many players at the JBC were observed traveling to out-of-town bridge tournaments, reading bridge magazines and books, and engaging in postmortems (see section on topics of conversation). These behaviors resulted in an ongoing infusion of new bidding and carding techniques within the club.
Physical Setting and Management of Club Activity. Social bridge games are usually played in club members' homes on a biweekly or monthly basis. Management of club activity tends to be diffused, as members, on a rotating basis, host games. This entails making sure enough players are present, recruiting substitutes, serving refreshments, and providing playing cards and other equipment. Serious bridge clubs play in neutral settings on a weekly basis. The facility may house other activities, or it may accommodate bridge only. Although management of club activity may be carried out by one or more persons, the majority of players are typically not involved in such activities. People who manage ACBL games are sanctioned by the organization to do so. Those directors (native term) also serve as liaisons between the ACBL and the club. Directors are responsible for handling and distributing equipment, seating and determining the rotation of pairs, keeping games moving in a timely fashion, resolving infractions as necessary, and determining winners and recording master point awards. Glenn Valley directors also performed such duties as locating partners for players when needed and purchasing and serving refreshments.

Adherence to Rules. Players adhere to rules rather loosely within social bridge clubs. This reflects a casual orientation among players but is also indicative of a general ignorance of such matters. When infractions occur, players seek to collectively make rulings that, in their best judgments, seem appropriate under the circumstances. In serious bridge clubs, on the other hand, rules, particularly those pertaining to ethical play, are well-known and strictly adhered to by regulars. The presence of these rules attests to the intellectual sanctity accorded to the game by such players. The comment of a 63-year-old ACBL player illustrates how this orientation relates to an aversion for playing in social bridge clubs: "Their bridge is usually so bad. They do a lot of unethical things." In a more practical sense, the accentuation of protocol and ethical play provides a controlled environment that allows players to more effectively differentiate skill from luck.

Sequencing of Bridge Activity. Within both social and serious bridge clubs, players engage in a number of activities that are not directly related to playing the game, including eating, drinking alcohol, listening to music, expressing affection for one another, and engaging in nonrelevant conversation. Although these ancillary activities are present in both social and serious clubs, the timing of such activities differs markedly. Activity within social bridge clubs tends to be integrated, with game and nongame related behavior occurring simultaneously. It was not uncommon, for example, to observe players in Glenn Valley social clubs engaging in nonrelevant conversation before, during, and following a hand. In contrast, activity within serious bridge club is demarcated. When the bridge game begins, nongame related behavior typically ceases. Parenthetically, this appears to be one reason why serious bridge clubs are regarded by social bridge players as unfriendly.

Topics of Conversation. Topics of conversation during bridge encounters can be classified into one of three categories: (1) nonrelevant conversation, (2) relevant conversation, and (3) byproduct conversation. Nonrelevant conversation includes topics of conversation outside the bridge game, such as discussions about friends, a player's clothing, and so on. Relevant conversation includes those bits of dialogue that are inexorably linked to the play of the game, such as the actual bidding, requests from others concerning how to bid a hand, and calling the director for a ruling. Byproduct conversation is
Serious Versus Social Adult Play Groups

Serious adult play groups are described here as conversation generated as a result of bridge play, although the discussion is not essential to the bidding, playing, or scoring of the hand. Examples include arguments about partnership understandings, discussions that reorient partnership strategy, and stories recounting "famous" bridge incidents. Each category of conversation was heard in both social and serious bridge clubs in Glenn Valley, although the sophistication of relevant conversation was far superior in serious clubs in Glenn Valley, although the sophistication of relevant conversation was far superior in serious clubs, because many players devoted long hours to developing a mastery of bidding systems. Nonrelevant conversation was heard more often in social groups, whereas by product conversation was much more characteristic of serious clubs. Players in serious clubs were more openly critical of mistakes and more likely than players in social clubs to engage in postmortems, a bridge-world term referring to discussing hands following the completion of play.

Stakes. Although awards are part of both the social and serious bridge club experience, the importance assigned to them was found to be greater in serious clubs than in social clubs. In most social bridge clubs, prizes are awarded to the player or pair with the highest overall score and to the player or pair with the lowest overall score (a "booby prize"). These prizes tend to be either small cash awards (e.g., $1.25 for the overall winner) or small material awards (e.g., a deck of cards). Regardless of the type or amount of reward, they are generally incidental and not regarded as significant stakes within social clubs. In serious bridge groups, awards take the form of master points. Depending on the number of tables, several pairs may earn master points. For example, in a 10-table duplicate game, it is not uncommon for four pairs of east-west players and four pairs of north-south players to earn master points. Master points are significant stakes, because they serve as validation of skill. Moreover, the accumulation of master points over time may result in players earning the distinction of Life Master, a much esteemed honor within the bridge world.

Formation of Partnerships. The formation of partnerships within social clubs usually occurs at the onset of play by a process of random assignment. Moreover, through a rotation scheme players will partner a number of other players during the game. In the language of Merton (1957), a manifest function of random assignment and rotating partnerships is to encourage sociability; a latent function is to reduce tension by diffusing responsibility for poor performance. Partnership formations within serious clubs are nonrandom and are generally established before players arrive at the game. A pair competes as a unit for the duration of the game. A partnership may become regularized when a pair agrees to play together at recurring intervals. This tends to provide players a greater degree of control within the game, because a pair can develop understandings and agreements over time. However, nonrandom partnerships appear to be more volatile than random partnerships, because it is more difficult to rationalize poor results on the basis of bad luck and other external factors. This helps to explain why partnership arguments were relatively common at the JBC and College Club and nonexistent within the social clubs observed.

Types of Substitutes. In both social and serious clubs, outside interests impinge on players' time, resulting in their missing games. Clubs cope with player cancellations by locating substitutes. Substitutes are of two types: (1) member substitutes, and (2) partner substitutes. Member substitutes are players recruited by a club to take the place of a
missing member. Member substitutes were typical of social clubs in Glean Valley, because there were a predetermined number of tables and partnerships were organized on a random basis. When a member substitute could not be located, the game was canceled altogether or moved to an alternative time or the number of tables or rotation was adjusted (e.g., a three-table game was reduced to two tables). Partner substitutes are characteristic of serious clubs (although some social clubs have set partnerships for scheduled games), because the number of tables is not predetermined and partnerships are organized on the basis of nonrandom assignment. If a player's partner cancels a given game, he or she must locate a substitute partner in order to play. A player's inability to locate a substitute partner does not result in the alteration of club activity, because ACBL games are open and the number of tables is never predetermined. Players without partners were sometimes observed coming to the game anyway with the hope of locating another player who lacked a partner.

Characteristics of Club Members. Players within social and serous bridge clubs vary in the relevance (cf., Goffman, 1961) ascribed to individual differences transcending the bridge encounter. Generally speaking, differences among players in serious clubs are deemed irrelevant for the duration of the encounter. In Glenn Valley, there was far greater diversity among player attributes in serious clubs than there was in social bridge clubs. It was not uncommon to see men and women of different ages and ethnicities playing together as either partners or opponents. Aspects of a player's identity were often learned after participating in the club for several sessions. Moreover, players' attitudes toward political and social issues were ordinarily not discussed. This point echoes Bryan's (1979) description of angling specialists: "Ties are formed which transcend traditional occupational and class barriers to mold these fishermen into a true leisure social world" (p. 41). In contrast, players within social bridge clubs were rather homogeneous in regard to their ascribed statuses (gender, race, ethnicity, and age) and achieved statuses (educational attainment, occupation, and position in the community). Players also appeared to share similar attitudes toward political and social issues. A player in the University Women's Club was observed quitting the group because she held a different attitude from other members on the issue of abortion. Hence, characteristics of players outside the encounter were treated as relevant, as they reminded players of who was (and who was not) allowed to play.

Interpersonal Relationships. On the basis of the previous discussion, it is not surprising that there are differences between social and serious bridge clubs in regard to the nature of interpersonal relationships among members. Social bridge clubs tend to be composed of people who regard one another as friends. These friendship ties extend beyond the bridge encounter, as group members interact with one another in situations other than bridge. Relationships among players in the Couple's Club is illustrative. Members of the club said that they routinely interact with one another in settings other than bridge. A few of the nonworking women play together in other women's bridge clubs. Some of the men see one another in fraternal organizations that meet weekly, and they also belong to a group that meets monthly to play poker. Two couples played golf and rubber bridge together regularly until one of the members died. Couples in the group also participate together in tailgate parties at football games and in special events in the lives of other members, such as weddings, graduations, and funerals. In contrast, although friendship ties are evident within serious bridge clubs, they apparently are not as common as they are in social clubs. Even within established partnerships, it was evident that some play-
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Players regard friendship as incidental and not a necessary component to having an enjoyable bridge experience. Hence, players relate to others primarily as bridge acquaintances. This term underscores the fact that bridge activity is the conjoining factor underlying relationships among players.

Summary. Strikingly different patterns of activity are evident within social and serious bridge clubs. A social bridge club includes friends or family members who meet at regular intervals to play bridge. Club members are oriented primarily to sociability and the strengthening of interpersonal ties. The club is relatively cut off from the parent bridge world and borrows little from the bridge world at large. Consequently, patterns of activity are primarily an extension of members' history together. A serious bridge club, on the other hand, includes acquaintances or strangers who meet at regular intervals to play bridge at an advanced level. The strengthening of interpersonal ties is incidental to the primary function. Serious bridge clubs are inextricably linked to the broader social world of bridge through sanctioning by the ACBL. This means that changes within the parent social world tend to reverberate and find expression within the serious club.

Sources of Activity Legitimacy

In Glenn Valley two distinct subworlds of bridge persist to serve two different functions: establishing and maintaining friendships, and playing competitive bridge. The question remains, however, as to who has power within each subworld to determine which behaviors are legitimate or authentic (Strauss, 1982). Broadly speaking, it appears that activity within the social bridge world is defined and given legitimacy by women, whereas activity within the serious bridge world is defined and given legitimacy by men. Indeed, gender is implied by the typology of bridge clubs. Social bridge encounters are home centered, oriented to interaction, flexible in terms of rules, and organized around friendship ties—characteristics that are generally associated with women's leisure (Gilligan, 1982). Conversely, serious bridge encounters include elements that are associated with men's leisure: Games are held outside the home, oriented to playing rather than talking, strict in terms of rules, and organized around acquaintance networks.

Most social clubs in Glenn Valley were dominated by women. Groups composed entirely of women were sometimes described by members as playing "women's bridge." Men involved in social bridge clubs were almost exclusively involved in couples' clubs. Moreover, there was an underlying belief that men playing in these clubs were downsizing their competitive urges to play socially. Serious clubs in Glenn Valley were composed of approximately equal numbers of men and women. Linkages with the ACBL, the playing of duplicate bridge, and the strict adherence to a set of rules made participation in these clubs a competitive experience. Hence, women (and men) were expected to keep socializing to a minimum and to focus their attention on the game as an end rather than a means. In sum, even though significant numbers of men may be observed playing in social bridge clubs and women seen playing in serious bridge clubs, the "atmosphere" within each type of club reflects the experience of one gender or the other.

Conclusions

Following the symbolic interactionist framework, it was proposed that play groups should be conceived and analyzed as local social worlds that are linked to broader,
more conclusive social world systems. Social worlds were described as culture areas in which participants coalesce around at least one primary activity. Participation in social world activity is based on access to common communication channels that cut across territorial boundaries and social positions. Social worlds vary in size; regional or dispersed social worlds are frequently seen to be differentiated into smaller subworlds. People generally participate in many social worlds in their lives, so participation in any one social world is partial. Finally, participation in a social world provides a frame of reference for evaluating the range of social world activity with which one becomes familiar.

The social world perspective provides two interrelated avenues for examining adult play groups. First, a local social world play group may be examined in terms of its members' unique history together. Second, play groups may be analyzed as part of regional or more dispersed social world systems. Practices and events within the play group are not studied simply in isolation, but against a backdrop of practices and events in the broader social world and in intersecting social worlds in which group members participate. To discover these relationships it is necessary to examine the linkages that connect the play to other groups and other social worlds.

Using the social world perspective, the basis for segmentation in the social world of bridge and the way this segmentation was related to patterns of activity within bridge groups were described. Players differentiated between social bridge clubs and serious bridge clubs and used the terms social and serious to define orientations to bridge. This led to the conclusion that the social world of bridge in Glenn Valley, and probably in the United States in general, is composed of two distinct subworlds, one a world of social bridge and the other a world of serious bridge. This distinction provided an analytical lever whereby patterns of group activity could be described. In general, social and serious clubs were found to differ in terms of primary function, recruitment of group members, characteristics of club members, formation of partnerships, types of substitutes, and the nature of interpersonal relationships among members. They also differed in regard to types of games played, linkages with the broader social world of bridge, management of club activities and physical settings, adherence to rules, the importance of stakes, and the sequencing of group activities and topics of conversation. In addition, the subworld of social bridge tends to reflect the female experience while the subworld of serious bridge reflects that of the male experience.

The presence of two distinct bridge worlds highlights an important facet of social worlds—"the inevitable differentiation into subworlds" (Strauss, 1984, p. 124). That the two subworlds are segmented along the lines of gender identification suggests that group (and individual) differences in the bridge world are better represented as a dichotomy than as a continuum (cf., Bryan, 1979). Groups are composed of players who are self-defining in regard to their orientations; by implication, participation in one subworld implies a rejection of the other. Remaining unanswered questions may stimulate future research. These questions are framed generically so as to be applicable to leisure social worlds in general. Are leisure social worlds generally segmented along the lines of gender identification? If so, what accounts for women playing in serious play groups and men playing in social groups? How are people socialized into playing in one subworld versus the other?

As a means of differentiating between social and serious patterns of activity within bridge clubs, a typology of bridge clubs was presented. Although the typology is grounded in research on bridge groups, it may be general enough to serve as an aid in exploring group differences in other leisure social worlds. Future research will necessar-
ily modify the typology with the implication that a general, more inclusive typology of play groups may be developed.

Participation in play groups provides a basis for identification and social solidarity (Check & Burch, 1976; Kelly, 1983). This study lends insight into the social bases for these phenomena. Both serious and social bridge clubs consist of people who share mutual tastes and beliefs about what constitutes legitimate bridge activity.

It is important to note, however, that the basis for identification and social solidarity in any given play group is prone to change over time. Although it has long been a social psychological fact that group members act together in the formation of a common set of norms or attitudes (Sherif, et al., 1961), groups are not closed systems, impervious to outside influence. Members of play groups participate in other groups and other social worlds; involvement in these contexts is likely to expose individuals to new ways of participating in and thinking about group activity. Furthermore, new people are frequently recruited to groups, and these people bring new ideas of their own. Future research needs to address the changing nature of group participation over time.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank John R. Kelly and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Notes

1. Duplicate, rubber, and party bridge are all variants of contract bridge and in each the game is bid and played basically the same way. Differences exist, however, in terms of scoring. Duplicate bridge involves more than one foursome playing the same hand. Hands are dealt and kept in their original forms by placement in duplicate boards. Scores for a hand are compared across all groups, and each plays the same cards. In rubber and party bridge, hands are not replayed by other fouromes. A pair’s score for any given hand is determined by how well they play their cards for that hand.

References


