

Table talk

How older women play their cards



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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background and Research Design	3
Research findings	4
The importance of playing bridge	4
Playing a hand	4
Children.....	5
Young married women	5
Playing bridge at work.....	5
Playing bridge when retired	5
Playing bridge after a divorce.....	6
Playing bridge after sport.....	6
Playing bridge	6
Taking bridge lessons	6
Dealing the cards	6
Bridge circles	6
Playing bridge with family.....	7
Playing bridge in clubs	7
Playing on computers.....	7
Playing bridge to stay well	8
Social interaction	8
Maintaining friendships	9
Table talk.....	9
Keep active.....	10
Stimulation	10
Dealing with confusion	11
Interesting and fun	11
Playing to win.....	11



Look forward	11
Playing away from home	12
Stress free entertaining	12
Playing the wrong card.....	12
Fall outs at bridge table.....	12
Shuffling the pack	13
Memory.....	13
Eye-sight	13
Hearing	13
Comfortable chairs.....	13
Glare.....	13
Accessibility due to decreased mobility	13
Transport issues.....	13
Residing in nursing home	14
Caring rights and responsibilities.....	14
Booking bridge games in advance	14
Keeping up with friends who do not play bridge	15
Conclusion	15
Diamond Wedding: it's turned up trumps.....	16
Interview Schedule.....	17



Introduction

1

My mother loves to play bridge. For her, bridge is not just a game of cards. Playing a regular game of bridge enhances her physical, mental, and social well-being.

The importance of bridge in my mother's life provided the impetus to undertake a small research project about older women who play bridge. Ten women who regularly play bridge were interviewed. They were asked why they played bridge and what bridge meant to them.

The bridge table provided a wonderful opportunity to talk with older women about issues that were important to them. In particular, the interviews provided insight about how playing bridge helped older women to stay well.

"It is not just about bridge, it is about keeping happy and healthy. We often say that we are lucky to have bridge."

While telling their stories about playing bridge, women spoke about the cards that life has dealt them, and how they played their cards. Women spoke with candour about friendship, family life, 'the modern world', and their hopes for the future. It was not all good news – some women spoke about experiencing the death of a child or their experiences of depression.

Women who participated in this study described their participation in a range of activities (Table 1). For many women, bridge was described as "one of the things" that helps to keep them well. However, most women described bridge as "very important in their lives". Some described it as one of the most important things in their lives.

"Rubber bridge is not just a game of bridge. It is about being with friendly people. Some women I have known for 50 years. I enjoy my day even if I get terrible cards. Without bridge, I don't know what I'd do."

"It is not just about bridge, it is about keeping happy and healthy. We often say that we are lucky to have bridge."

"Rubber bridge is not just a game of bridge. It is about being with friendly people. Some women I have known for 50 years. I enjoy my day even if I get terrible cards. Without bridge, I don't know what I'd do."

One of the main findings from this research is the importance women placed on keeping their bridge appointments. Bridge games were often booked well in advance. Most women referred to their commitment not to "let three other people down". This 'social commitment' to playing bridge was considered different to their commitment to keep many of their other activities, such as those activities listed in Table 1 (Page 2). For example, women described it easier to cancel attending a music concert or going for a walk than to cancel a game of bridge.

"It keeps me entertained and that keeps you well. We often laugh."

Playing bridge with friends was described as enjoyable, fun and intellectually challenging. For some, regular bridge games also provided a structure by having an appointment to keep. Having an enjoyable, intellectually challenging activity with friends enhanced women's quality of life, and helped them to stay well.

"It keeps me entertained and that keeps you well. We often laugh."



Women described being engaged in many meaningful activities, such as those listed in Table 1.

Table 1: A list of activities regularly undertaken by participants

Gardening	Time with family (children and grand children)
Reading	Professional activities
Shopping	Music concerts
Walking	Traveling
Live theatre	Visiting art galleries
Craft (e.g. knitting)	Maintaining good diet
Writing	Volunteering
Reading	Exercising
Movies	Talking on phone
Club membership*	

* Women talked about their involvement in various clubs. Table 2 lists a wide range of clubs, and the way the club was described.

Table 2: A list of clubs

Club	Description
Book group	"Our book CAE group has been going for 44 years. There are 12 people in the group, with six or seven being the original members. Age 91 down to mid 70s. Until last year, we met at night, but now driving at night is difficult. So we meet in the afternoon with a packet of biscuits. We really discuss the book. We also discuss other things, but not each others lives. We know about each others lives after that long. Some of us go walking together".
Film Club	"A group of us go to a film once a month. We have dinner afterwards. I recently saw a film with older actress who was wonderful. She hasn't lost it, though some do".
Walking group	"About 6 of us have just started a walking group. Some are from the reading group. I have never walked for the sake of walking, I found that boring".
School Leavers' club	"I meet regularly with a group of girls I went to school and/or university with. We meet once a month for lunch. We have been going to each other's houses for many years, but now one is very disabled. She is on a walking frame, and it is a great problem for her to get into a restaurant. It is hard to find one that is suitable. So we often now go to her house and take our sandwiches. Someone makes a cake, and someone brings a bottle of champagne."
Lyceum club	"I do many different things with Lyceum club, but I don't play bridge there. I started with poetry circle, then writers' circle. I try to go to the Lyceum club's travel and round table."
Tennis club	"My tennis group does not play tennis any more, but we meet and have lunch. We go to different places."
Professional groups	"I still stay in touch with soroptimists (a worldwide organisation for women in management and professions, working through service projects to advance human rights and the status of women). But they have their meetings at night, so I don't attend. Instead, I am a friend. We have a lunch once per month with other retired members (and some current members who are able to come)... Also I have my personal friends from the soroptimists – one is in Ballarat, one in Geelong and three in Melbourne, so we meet halfway in Bacchus Marsh or Werribee."



Background and Research Design

2

There is much to learn from older Australians who enjoy healthy and productive lives. However, until recently, research on ageing focused primarily on medical concerns such as osteoporosis, arthritis, incontinence, dementia, Alzheimer’s disease and injury. This medical research focused on illness rather than wellness.

In 2002, the research focus changed. Ageing Well, Ageing Productively became a National Research Priority. As a result of this new policy, ‘Ageing Well’ research centres and foundations were established to promote and maintain the health of older Australians.

A multi-nation study of adult well being is currently investigating factors that contribute to ageing well. The Global Ageing Research Network (2004) uses five ‘determinants’ to measure ageing well. These determinants are:

- Physical health and functioning
- Mental efficacy
- Social resources
- Material security
- Life activity

The current project explores the role that bridge plays in the lives of older women. It is hypothesised that playing bridge helps older women to maintain:

- Mental health, including memory
- Friendships and a sense of community (social resources)
- Physical health
- Active lives.

In short, it is hypothesised that playing bridge helps older women to stay well.

A small advisory group of older women was formed. The advisory group helped to develop an interview schedule with open-ended questions (Appendix 1).

Ten older women in South Eastern Melbourne were invited to participate in the project. Their ages ranged from 79-87 (Table 3). The mean age was 83.6. Six women lived alone, and four women lived with their husbands. Of the women who lived alone, four women were widows, one woman was divorced, and one woman had never married.

All participants spoke English as their first language. However, women said that many people for whom English is not their first language play bridge.

“There are a lot of non English speaking people who play bridge”.

The interviews took place in private homes and were no longer than one hour. With the consent of participants, all interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed. The data was managed using a software package designed for qualitative research (NVivo). The data was thematically coded into major categories.

Table 3 provides a descriptive profile of women’s ages, education and work history.

Table 3: Participants’ age, education and employment

Participant	Age	Education	Work history
1	87	Nursing	Director of Nursing
2	86	Medicine	GP
3	80	Bachelor Science	Lab Assistant (during war)
4	85	Nursing	Family Planning
5	85	Bachelor Science	CSIRO
6	81	High School	Lab Assistant (during war)
7	85	Secretarial College	Secretary
8	84	Bachelor Arts	Teacher
9	79	Medicine	Anaesthetist
10	84	Correspondence	Writer and Librarian



3

Research findings

Throughout the findings section, women talk for themselves, and demonstrate many ways that bridge helps them to stay well.

The importance of playing bridge

Women were asked what playing bridge means to them. Although all women described family as the most important thing in their lives, women also described bridge as “*very important*” in their lives.

“Obviously family is more important than bridge. But playing bridge is very important in my life.”

Some women continued their professional activities. For these women, family and professional activities were considered more important than bridge.

“Bridge is not by any means the most important thing. Family and professional things would still be more important.”

Some women described the importance of filling their days with an enjoyable activity. One woman said that she would be “*a little bit at sea without bridge*.”

“It is very important. If I didn’t have bridge, I would have three spare days a week and not know what to do. It fills in my day and I enjoy it.”

One woman was temporarily unable to play bridge due to a recent accident. She described how important bridge was in her life, particularly as a way to see her friends.

“I don’t know what I would have done without bridge. Bridge kept me close to my friends. It gave me something to do, something to look forward to. Now I may need to get into other things like reading which I have always loved. But I would miss seeing my friends at the bridge table.”

Other women also described the social aspect of bridge as very important.

“Playing bridge means that I am seeing people and thinking a bit more than I would be if just reading and knitting.”

In addition to the social aspects, bridge was described as “*healthy*”.

“It is very important because it keeps me in touch with people. It helps me to focus and I am sure that it helps my memory. And it is probably good for my health to get out and about.”

Getting people “*out and about*” was considered to be extremely important, particularly for women who lived alone.

“If my husband died before I did, I would want to make sure that I kept on playing bridge. It gets you out of the house. I would read a lot more, but I read alone at home. It is important to see people.”

Some women described bridge as providing a structure to their lives.

“Bridge is a focus that I work my life around.”

Playing a hand

Most women described playing card games throughout their lives. However, when they were young, they were more likely to play games such as five hundred or solo, not bridge.

“As a young girl, I always played cards of some sort during holidays. I played solo and five hundred before bridge.”

Women learnt to play bridge at different stages of their lives (Table 4). Only one woman learnt to play as a child (aged 10), another learnt to play when she was 17. The remainder learnt to play bridge when they were adults. However, most agreed that it was best to start playing when young.

“If you get an opportunity to learn earlier, it would be better.”

However, starting bridge young did not provide a guarantee of being a good bridge player when older.

“Although I started young, it doesn’t necessarily mean that I am very good. But I enjoy it. I played a bit at university. But when I got married and had small children I did not play. I started playing regularly again when I was about 40, when the kids were a bit older. We got into fours.”



Table 4: Length of time playing bridge

Participant	Age started playing	Length of time playing (years)
1	63	24
2	60	26
3	17	63
4	65	20
5	50	35
6	39	42
7	50	35
8	10	74
9	20	59
10	30	54

Women started playing bridge when they were:

- Children
- Young married women
- At work
- Retired
- After divorce
- Unable to continue to play sport

Children

Two women described learning bridge when they were young – before they were 20 years old. Both were taught how to play by other members of their family, either aunts or parents.

“My mother played bridge. She thought it was a useful thing to do in life.”

However, one woman described her parents’ enthusiasm for bridge as initially discouraging her from learning bridge.

“My mother and father played a lot of bridge. They often discussed it at the dinner table. Because of this, I always said that I would never play bridge.”

Women who began playing bridge as children described most of their early games as being played only with their family. When they were children, a social game of cards was more likely to be solo than bridge. Hence, playing bridge was considered a ‘family activity’.

“When I was growing up, people did not play bridge. They played solo. However, my cousins and I played bridge, so I kept my hand in.”

Young married women

For those who learnt to play bridge as newly married women, their mother-in-laws played a role in family bridge games. One woman described her mother-in-law’s enthusiasm for bridge as providing the incentive to learn bridge. Another woman described her mother in

law’s educational role in her regular Sunday night family bridge game.

“My mother-in-law used to tell our children what to do. The youngest started learning at about eight.”

Some married women learnt bridge later, when their children were at school.

“I started playing golf and bridge around the same time – when kids started school.”

Playing bridge was described as a meaningful activity. Women also described enjoying being with other adult women.

Playing bridge at work

Some woman played bridge while they were at work. One woman played during her lunch hour at the laboratory during the war, while another played when a resident doctor.

“When I was a resident doctor, a group played bridge. One day, they needed someone to fill in, so they asked me to play. I had never played before. I did something terrible, though I have forgotten exactly what it was. I decided to learn the rules then. So when I learnt the rules, I got really in to it.”

Playing bridge when retired

After retiring from work, women described having more time on their hands. They were encouraged to play bridge by their friends and siblings who played bridge regularly.

“When I stopped teaching at 60, I found everyone was playing bridge. So I learnt.”

Women who had not played bridge before were able to learn.

“I had always played cards (solo, 500), but I never had the time to learn bridge. About three years after I retired, I learnt.”

Those who played bridge before retirement were able to play bridge more often after retiring from work. Playing bridge more often helped these women to improve the standard of their bridge.

“When busy with work, I could only play with family on a Sunday night. Now that I am retired, I am playing regularly. Playing bridge regularly has made me a much better bridge player.”

Some women improved their bridge skills after retirement by joining the Lyceum Club’s bridge circle.

“I joined the Lyceum Club and I was asked to play. It all stemmed from meeting women at Lyceum club, then we organised fours at our homes.”

One woman refreshed her bridge skills after her husband retired so that they could play bridge together.



Together, they found an alternative meaningful activity.

"When my husband retired, I thought we had better do things together. So I took some bridge lessons. My husband and I were then able to play at night together. It was important for us both."

Playing bridge after a divorce

One woman described learning bridge after separating from her husband. Her neighbour encouraged her to play bridge. Playing bridge became a meaningful and enjoyable activity.

"When I divorced, and the boys reached an age when they started leaving home, my next door neighbour said that I should take up bridge. He started me off. He is a very good bridge player and he thought it would be very good for me. He was right."

Playing bridge after sport

After many years playing sport regularly, one woman transferred her sporting energies into playing bridge. In this case, playing bridge provided the social interaction that she had previously obtained from her sporting clubs.

"I played golf and tennis every week until I was 80. When I had to give them up, I became more involved with playing bridge. Now I like to have at least one game of bridge every week."

Playing bridge

Women described playing two types of bridge: duplicate and rubber bridge. Women described duplicate bridge as more competitive than rubber bridge. As such, women played mostly rubber bridge during social bridge games and played duplicate bridge at clubs.

"I play different types, both rubber and duplicate. It depends what the others want to play. I rather like rubber bridge. For me, playing bridge is a social activity. I play social bridge. I don't have the competitive spirit that some have."

Rubber bridge was described as *"more relaxing"* and *"less competitive"* than duplicate bridge. However, women described new bridge players as more likely to play duplicate bridge.

"Nowadays, beginners learn duplicate, not rubber. Unfortunately the majority of people playing bridge today play duplicate which is far more competitive and not quite as sociable. Women playing duplicate often criticise each other."

Some woman described not liking the competitiveness of duplicate bridge.

"Duplicate bridge is very competitive. People become different people at the card table when playing duplicate

bridge. I have seen people cheat. My first love is rubber bridge, which I find more relaxing and friendly."

Other women enjoyed the challenge of duplicate bridge.

"I play duplicate once a month at Alexander Club which I enjoy greatly. I enjoy the challenge. I am not on the whole competitive, but I do enjoy that little bit of a challenge. I think I like to be mentally challenged."

Taking bridge lessons

Some women described having *"card sense"* that lessened their need for bridge lessons. Others described taking bridge lessons to learn the basics of bridge and meet new people with whom to play.

"A friend and I went to the English speaking union and learnt bridge there. We met a lot of nice people doing the same class and started playing with them socially. My friend and I still play together. The others were a bit older and they have stopped playing or died."

One woman described taking lessons so that she and her husband could play together. However, she did not enjoy the lessons.

"The teacher was good, but I did not enjoy taking lessons. I knew the basics so instead of ten lessons, I had eight."

One woman continues to take bridge lessons. She describes continuing to learn new things about playing bridge.

"I still take bridge lessons. They are good fun. They teach you various things, different bidding forms, different ways to play. Klinger comes to Melbourne every now and then, and the lessons are very enjoyable. You can get into a rut with the way you are playing. It is a mistake to say 'I don't want to learn anything new, I am happy with the way it is.' The lessons make you think – which is possibly good for you, I don't know."

Dealing the cards

Women described playing games of bridge socially with friends and family, in clubs and on the computer. They described their experiences of playing bridge in these different forums.

Bridge circles

All women described playing social bridge. Some women said that they only played social bridge. Others played both social and club bridge. Social bridge was described as less formal than bridge that is played in a club.

"Social bridge means that we chat."

Women described a variety of fours that made up their 'bridge circle'.

"I have about ten different fours. They are all different – some are for the standard of the bridge, others are more for the friendship and conversation."



Woman described having different expectations from their various fours. Sometimes, the disparity of standard was not only evident between fours but also within a four.

"People play bridge at all sorts of standards. Some are very good, some not so good, and some are getting worse as they age. There are often disparities in standards at the table."

Many women described the ease in which they joined with others to play a game of bridge. Often the four began by filling in for others. Some women described an ever increasing bridge circle.

"When a friend is sick, you may fill in for them and people will ask how they are. This is how we get so many fours. When the person comes back to the four, we often organise another four with the three who have continued in her absence. I have an ever increasing circle. I tell myself that I must not make any new fours."

One woman enjoyed finding younger women to join her bridge circle.

"If you find someone in their 70s, you think it is good because they will last us out."

Women also described losing people from their bridge circle.

"A lot of the people that I started playing bridge with are no longer here. You remember the ones who have died when you play with people who played with them too."

Playing bridge with family

Women who were married described playing bridge with their husbands.

"Playing bridge with my husband is a lovely thing to do, particularly as we both get older."

One woman described her family – herself, husband, mother-in-law and children – playing a regular (and competitive) game of bridge.

"Every Sunday night, we had two tables: five children, my husband and I and my mother-in-law. In my case, family bridge is the most competitive bridge that I play."

Several women described teaching their children to play bridge. However, one woman described not teaching her children to play bridge.

"I did not teach my children to play bridge. They are all boys. It is a bit different with boys."

One woman described playing regularly with her adult daughter.

"I play with my daughter once a month. Old friends of mine make up the four. My daughter is a very good player – she plays duplicate bridge. But she also loves playing with us."

Another woman described her daughters as not yet having time to play bridge.

"My daughters have both said that they will join the Lyceum Club and play bridge when they are old and retired. They would like to learn earlier, but they are so busy. Women today are always working. They both work and have children."

Playing bridge in clubs

Four women were members of the Lyceum Club, two women were members of Alexander Club, and one woman had been a member of the Kew Club. Until recently, one woman also played bridge at Royal South Yarra Tennis Club.

"I used to play regularly at the local tennis club. I used to just walk there, but not anymore. I am no longer able to get myself to and from the club. The hill is too steep. And my walking frame would run away from me."

Women described their experience of playing bridge at a club as generally more serious than social bridge.

"Those who take the game more seriously are the ones who play at clubs."

Some women described playing club bridge as reminding them of their competitive spirit.

"I play duplicate bridge at the Alexander Club once a month. I didn't think that I would enjoy duplicate, but I do. I found that I still have a bit of a competitive spirit. You really have to call your hand at duplicate. With rubber, you play to the score a bit."

However, not all club bridge was described as competitive.

"At the Lyceum club, the Monday bridge is not competitive. It is much more social. The Friday bridge is a bit more competitive. Friday is duplicate bridge...However, after the Friday game, a lot of people stop for lunch. I usually have something else on, but I am going to join them this Friday."

Women who did not like playing competitive bridge were still able to enjoy playing bridge in a club. Women described playing in a club with a regular partner.

"I value the companionship and the friendship of playing bridge. I don't like playing competitive bridge in a bridge club, and I don't like playing with people that I don't know. I can't be bothered playing with people I don't like and don't want to know. So when I play once a month at the Alexander Club, I go with the same person each time. She is a very old friend."

One woman played in a team, not a club.

"I played in a team that started in 1920, not in a club. It is a round robin, tournament."

Playing on computers

One woman played bridge on the computer.

"I play on the computer. I tried the internet once, but when I joined the table, everyone else walked out. I haven't tried it again. I have a bridge program called



"Bridge Baron". My husband also plays. He plays the same number game to see if he can do better than me. There is an element of competitiveness there."

Another woman did not enjoy playing bridge by herself on the computer. She preferred playing bridge with people.

"My son gave me an old computer to play bridge on, but it is no fun playing by myself. It is much more fun playing with people. I'd rather read my book than play on the computer."

Some women described themselves as computer illiterate. This computer illiteracy was a problem for some women.

"I used to think I would get by without a computer, but I am finding it harder and harder. I must pull myself together and learn to use it more."

Some women described difficulties finding time to learn how to use the computer.

"It is one of those things that I have always been going to do."

Others described it difficult to remember the computer's operating instructions.

"The trouble is our memories are not that good. If you are not using the computer all the time, every day, you forget. It is the same with the video. I need to have the instructions all written down because I don't use it very often and I go back to square one each time. Or you press the wrong button."

Some women described themselves as "too old to learn". However, they described their frustrations of not being able to access the internet.

"I think I am too old to learn. On the radio now they always give out web addresses. It is frustrating. I've often thought I should learn, but I do not get around to it. To send emails would be wonderful."

Others found ways to access information from the internet without learning to use the computer.

"I haven't got a computer, but my daughter has one. If I want something that I have heard about, she gets it for me."

One woman said she did not want to use the computer.

"I can't image reading a book on the computer. You can't cuddle up to a computer."

Playing bridge to stay well

Women described a number of different ways in which bridge enabled them to stay well. These different ways are discussed under the following headings:

- Social interaction
- Maintaining friendships
- Staying active
- Stimulation
- Dealing with confusion
- Bridge is fun
- Competitiveness
- Conversations at the bridge table
- Playing away from home
- Stress free entertaining
- Social contact

Social interaction

Women described the importance of bridge in maintaining social interaction. Playing bridge was a way to see friends, both old and new. Women described large circles of friends in their bridge circles.

"I see a lot of different people – I play with at least 20 different people."

Women described the similarities between playing bridge and participating in other groups (e.g. sports clubs, book clubs and walking groups) as "company and entertainment." However, women described preferring bridge to other games such as scrabble or solo.

"With scrabble, I would see people. But I prefer to play bridge. I have always enjoyed playing cards of some sort. However, I became very bored with solo. If you don't have the cards, solo is too predictable. Whereas bridge, though there is luck, there is also a lot of skill. Even with bad cards, you can enjoy the game."

Women who played tennis and golf describe a similar social network to bridge. However, women described continuing to play bridge after they ceased their sporting activities.

"Tennis and golf were good for seeing people, and the exercise, of course. I miss playing very much. I now watch tennis and golf on TV. I am glad that I still have bridge so that I can see people."

Playing bridge was described as especially important when people were unable to continue playing sport or became incapacitated in some way.

"I think the social contact is enormously important for older people particularly if they are incapacitated in any way."



To acknowledge the social importance of playing bridge, a group of women continue to play bridge at the home of a woman who is visually impaired. Although the woman with the visual impairment does not participate in playing bridge, she enjoys being present while the others play

"A friend who can't see still keeps in touch with her bridge friends. It's not the bridge per say, it's the company. We have a lot of chatter over lunch."

Maintaining friendships

Old friends

All women described bridge as a wonderful way to keep in touch with old friends.

"Playing bridge, I get to see a lot of friends that I have known for a long time. Some I met through playing bridge, but others I've known a long time, before I started playing bridge."

Women described playing bridge as a preferable way to see their old friends rather than meeting them in a coffee shop.

"It makes me see my friends. I'm not a great one for going out for a cup of coffee. When we play, we plan two games ahead so if someone gets sick and we lose one game, we still keep it going."

One woman compared seeing her 'bridge friends' and her friends from her previous association with sporting clubs.

"If you play golf, or tennis, as I did, and that falls apart when you get older, bridge is a way of seeing your friends. If you have a regular bridge game, you keep it going. With other friends from golf or tennis clubs, you may have lunch once a year. It is not much to fill up your diary. If you get into a bridge group, especially one that you like, you tend to book once a month or even once a fortnight. You get to see your friends regularly."

One of the inevitable issues for older women is the death of friends.

"We used to play with two couples, but both husbands have died. I still play with the widows because we want to keep in touch. The women want to continue playing because it takes them out of the house, it is a social thing and it keeps their brain ticking."

New friends

Women described bridge as a way to make new connections and new friends.

"Playing bridge has enabled me to make friends with people I have would not have met had I not played bridge."

One woman found the social connections and interactions very important after retirement.

"Bridge was a way for me to make friends. I didn't know anyone in the bridge club when I first went along."

One of the benefits of making new friends was going to new places. New places often involved new gardens.

"With bridge, I meet new friends and go to new places. I enjoy seeing other people's gardens. You look at other people's gardens and think 'that looks nice' and you go home with a cutting."

One woman described the importance of bringing her bridge friends' into her own garden.

"Most of my garden is grown from my bridge friends. I walk around my garden naming my plants with the names of my bridge friends."

One woman described losing close friends as the motivation to meet new people with whom to play bridge.

"Over the last few years, I have met several new people with whom I now play bridge. Unfortunately my closest friends have all died or they have moved to the country. So I needed to meet new people to play with."

Re-connecting with friends

Two women described re-connecting with childhood friends at the bridge table.

"Some of my bridge fours are with old school friends who I didn't see for years. We have found that we play bridge and got in touch again. That is very nice."

Table talk

In addition to seeing friends, a game of bridge provides an opportunity to catch up on each other's news.

"We chat a bit, though not while we are actually playing. In between, while someone is dealing, quite a bit of chit chat goes on, and at afternoon tea. We talk about all sorts of things. We catch up on mutual friends who may be in hospital. We even discuss politics sometimes. It is nice to hear others point of view. I don't agree with everyone, but it is nice to hear their views. We try not to just talk about what our children are all doing. A lot of the bridge players do not have husbands, so we don't talk too much about husbands."

Some women described "too much chat" at the bridge table. This chatter made it difficult to concentrate on the cards, particular if the chatter continues after the hand is dealt, or if the person who is 'dummy' continues to chat while the hand is being played.

"Some people chat too much between hands. Some keep talking during the hand which I don't like. It gets a bit exhausting and it is hard to concentrate."



The bridge table was described as a wonderful place to network for tradesmen and other handy hints.

"Bridge is wonderful source of information if you want to find a gardener or painter, or if something is broken and you need to know where to take it. Someone in the four nearly always knows. This networking is quite important."

The bridge table also served as a type of bush telegraph, keeping people up-to-date with news, both good and bad.

"You hear when people are in hospital, and you can then phone or visit them."

Taboo topics at the table

For some women there were no taboo topics at the bridge table. Like all social situations, women picked topics depending on their company.

"No taboo topics. You know if people are going to be upset by a certain topic and you avoid that."

For some, topics such as politics and religion were described as 'off limits'. Women described keeping the harmony at the table by avoiding contentious issues.

"People do not declare whether they are hard right, but you can possibly ascertain it. We keep the harmony around the table. No disagreements."

The topic of feminism was also described as 'off limits'. Despite the level of education and professional backgrounds of participants, no one described themselves as a "feminist".

"I don't think there are many feminists in our bridge circle. I am not conscious of feminism at the bridge table."

Keep active

Women described how playing a game of bridge kept them active, engaged and stimulated. However, one woman questioned the physical benefits of playing bridge.

"I don't suppose it has any real impact on my physical well being because I sit down to play."

Most women described their commitment to keep their bridge appointments as keeping them active. Even if they were not feeling like making the effort to go out, they would go to their games.

"I make an effort to go out because I would be letting three other people down if I decided not to go. It would take something special, an illness in family or some major event, to cancel a game. This commitment helps keep me well."

This commitment to play bridge was very important for one woman when she was caring for her husband.

"When my husband was sick, I often felt like saying "my husband is not well today, so I won't go". But if I don't go, they need to find someone to take my place. You feel

you have to go because you said that you would go. That sense of obligation was very important when my husband was sick. It got me out of the house. I could then come home with chit chat."

However, there were occasions when women needed to cancel a game of bridge.

"But if I had an important engagement, or anyone was sick in the family I would cancel."

In contrast, one woman described her bridge commitments as flexible.

"We book a long way ahead, so the bridge games are very flexible. It is fairly well understood that bridge comes second. If you go on a holiday or get asked to a really nice party - an eightieth birthday party or a grandchild's graduation - on a day that you have a game of bridge booked, you can change your game. It depends on the party."

Stimulation

Some women described playing bridge as keeping older people mentally active.

"Bridge is a wonderful thing when you get older. There is no doubt it keeps me mentally active. You have to remember things."

Although women described memory as important in playing bridge, they made it clear that memory was not just about remembering cards – it was also wonderful for concentration and focus. However, some women expressed doubt that playing bridge helped to keep their mind working.

"They say that it helps your memory, but I don't know whether it really does or not."

One woman said that her doctor encouraged her to keep playing bridge. Her doctor believes that playing bridge is good for her memory.

"My doctor says "for goodness sake, don't stop playing bridge". He thinks it helps to keep my mind working. My doctor encourages me to keep playing and making the effort to remember."

The concentration required to play bridge allowed some women to forget about other things in their lives that may have been troubling them. They described bridge as "taking their mind off things". In particular, they described needing to remain alert so as not to let their partner down.

"You have to remember that you have a partner with whom you have to work with and not let them down. You have to remain sharp enough for that."

One woman acknowledged that bridge was only one of the many ways that she kept her mind active.

"Every time I play I enjoy the game, no matter if I have good or bad cards, it doesn't matter. I feel better for



going out and having that stimulation. But I get a lot of other stimulation too. I don't rely only on bridge for mental stimulation."

The many other ways that women "keep their minds going" is evident in the list of activities undertaken (Table 1).

Dealing with confusion

Several women told positive stories about playing bridge with women who were experiencing some form of dementia such as Alzheimers.

"I know people with Alzheimers who are still able to play a good game of bridge. They may not remember where they live but they can still play a hand of bridge. Their bridge is spot on. A woman I played with last week at the club played a perfect game, yet she did not know where she lived or even who her husband was."

Some women suggest that playing bridge becomes 'embodied knowledge'. This suggests that playing bridge may help people with Alzheimers to remain active and involved.

"I've seen women who are unable to cope with conversation, but they can still play bridge. It seems that once bridge is in your brain, it stays there. Also, bridge is intuitive. If you have been doing it a long time, some of your intuition comes into play."

Playing cards with another person with dementia required additional organisation. But once the woman with dementia was at the bridge table, they were described as playing her cards "as usual".

"A lass in her 70s would put the game in her diary, but we would phone her the day before just to remind her. She still forgot to come to games. However, when she did play, her bridge was as it always was. I knew a couple of women like that."

Data suggests that general memory problems in daily life may not always be a problem for women playing bridge. They may forget people's names, but they can still remember the cards.

"I have trouble remembering names. I have no trouble playing cards, though sometimes I may need reminding what is trumps. This is because I loose my concentration when someone starts talking."

One woman told a joke about two friends who had played bridge together for many years.

"Two older women have played bridge together forty years. Naturally, they have gotten to know each other very well. One day, during a game of bridge, one woman suddenly looks up at the other and says "I realise that we have known each other for many years, but for the life of me, I just can't remember your name...would you please tell me your name again dear?" There was

deadly silence for a couple of minutes, and then the other woman responds, "How soon do you need to know?""

Interesting and fun

Women described the game of bridge as interesting and challenging.

"I enjoy the challenge of the bridge. With bridge, every hand is different and I enjoy trying to make contract. It is the intellectual challenge."

Although women described playing the cards as interesting, one woman described the conversation among players as also interesting.

"It is always interesting, both the cards and the conversation. I still love the game."

Several women described playing bridge as "fun". It is also fun to spend time with friends.

"I play bridge because it is fun and I enjoy it very much."

One woman described bridge as becoming more enjoyable when her skills and knowledge of the game improved.

"As I got better, I became more interested and the game became more enjoyable."

Playing to win

Women described the competitiveness that is inherent in a game of bridge, particularly duplicate bridge. Some women enjoyed the competitiveness of a game of bridge. Other women treated bridge purely as a game of pleasure.

"I treat it as a game of pleasure. I am not a fierce bridge player at all. I don't like it to be too competitive."

Either way, women described "winning a rubber" as adding to the enjoyment of playing bridge. However, no-one described playing bridge to win money.

"You certainly don't play bridge for the money. We play for 5 cents per 100 points. So you get 50 cents if you are lucky. I have heard of people losing \$2."

Women described men as much more competitive. However, women were also described as competitive, sometimes "too competitive".

"You can meet women who are so competitive. It puts you off when they ask you "why did you do that". I feel like saying "oh for heavens sake, I've forgotten!"

Look forward

Women described looking forward to their bridge games.

"I always look forward to a game of bridge. I see different people. I go home to my husband and he asks if there is any news."



Playing away from home

Women described bridge as taking them out of the house. They described the importance of “going out”. Some women described being house bound except for bridge.

“You can’t stay home all the time. I like going out and seeing people. Some days, I love to be at home. But I would not want to stay home seven days a week. My husband would not want me to stay home all the time.”

Getting out of the house was extremely important, especially when women were caring for husbands at home.

“I had quite a long time when my first husband was ill at home. A game of bridge got me out of the house. Getting out of the house was a godsend. I could then come home with chit chat from around the place. News from outside was important for both of us.”

Bridge was also important for women whose husbands were being cared for in a nursing home.

“I certainly did not play as much, but I could visit him in the morning, then have a game soon after lunch and visit again at 3-4pm. He was happy for me to play a bit of bridge too.”

Stress free entertaining

Women described how bridge parties had replaced resplendent dinner parties.

“When you are younger, you have whopping great dinner parties which are a huge effort. With bridge, we mostly bring our own sandwiches and then have tea or coffee. So you are seeing your friends without the stress of “how am I going to prepare a meal?” With bridge parties, you don’t have all that bother.”

Playing the wrong card

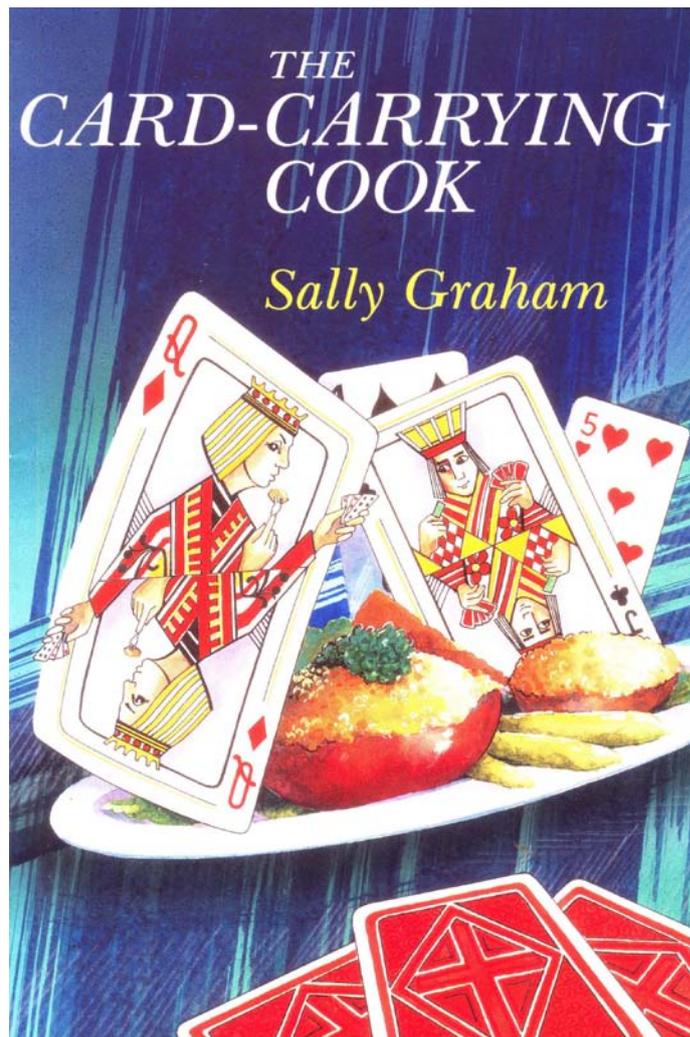
Some women described going home after a game of bridge and thinking over the game, particularly what card they should have played. Other women described not thinking too much about the game, even if they had played the wrong card.

“I never think over the bridge game at night. I know some people do, after they have done something wrong. But I’m afraid I don’t. I try to do the best that I can.”

Women described themselves and others as “forgiving” when mistakes are made during a game of social bridge.

“If one player is not as good, it doesn’t matter. It happens often nowadays because many are losing their sight and mistake hearts and diamonds. We all understand. I would not stop playing with someone just because they started making mistakes. I think you put up with their mistakes if they are friends.”

Figure 1: A cookbook for card players



Women described needing to wear glasses and hearing aids to assist them to play bridge. One woman described a funny instance of a game of bridge with a woman who needed to wear both glasses and a hearing aid – she forgot both. Another woman described a four of bridge with a woman who could not see well, and another woman who had a hearing impairment. They developed strategies to help both women.

“I had one four where one could not see well and one was very deaf. So for the benefit of the one who could not hear well, we would write down our bids on a small card in the middle of the table. But the one who could not see needed the bids called.”

Fall outs at bridge table

Woman described seeing “bad behaviour” when mistakes were made at the bridge table.

“Some people get very, very annoyed when they think their partner is playing badly. They say that the worse behaviour of a person comes out at the bridge table. And



it does. I know a women who makes exasperated noises when her partner makes a mistake."

Women said that they prefer not to play with people who get annoyed at the table.

"If I feel people are going to be critical, I would be on edge. I would not want to play with them."

Women described how one player's attitude can ruin an entire game. They described choosing not to play with women who play in an aggressive manner.

"I choose not to play with women who get upset or play aggressively. If I've had an experience like that with someone, well that's it. I choose not to play with them again."

However, one woman described being tolerant of people who play using different "bridge etiquette".

"There are people who I play with who do not have the same background. We try to be tolerant."

Some women described witnessing people falling out over a game of bridge. These fall outs were said to occur when players are "very keen" or when the correct bridge etiquette was not followed.

"I have heard about others who have fallen out at the bridge table. Some people are very keen and they are critical of others who make mistakes. It is a bit of personality, but mainly it is about following the correct procedures. There is 'bridge etiquette'."

Women described the importance of choosing with whom they played bridge.

"I choose not to play with the type of person who behaves badly at the bridge table."

Fall outs were said to occur more often in clubs rather than at social bridge.

"You see squabbles in clubs. The teams are competitive."

Social fall outs were said to be mostly between husbands and wives.

"I have only seen fall outs between husbands and wives. Sometimes it can be quite difficult."

Shuffling the pack

Women described several factors that made it more difficult for them to play bridge. These included:

- Memory
- Eye-sight
- Hearing
- Mobility
- Comfortable chairs
- Glare
- Transport to games
- Residing in hostel or nursing home
- Caring responsibilities

Memory

Some women described their decreased short term memory as interfering with their bridge.

"I've always enjoyed cards, though I am not as good as I once was. My memory is not as good."

Eye-sight

Several women described their eyesight as a problem.

"I will probably need to use the big faced cards."

However, women described a reluctance to use the big faced cards.

"People do not seem to like big faced cards. I don't know why not. They seem a very sensible idea but I find very few people who like them."

Hearing

Although some women described hearing difficulties, they said that they managed to hear bids (and conversations) at the bridge table.

"I notice that my hearing is not as good as it was. But I have no trouble at the bridge table. I rarely miss or mistake a bid."

Comfortable chairs

Some woman described the importance of sitting at the bridge table in a comfortable chair.

"Sometimes chairs make it difficult. I need to ask for a cushion to place behind my back."

Glare

Woman described the importance of positioning the bridge table away from the glare.

"A lot of people find it difficult to face the light because of the glare."

Accessibility due to decreased mobility

Access to other people's homes was an issue for women, particularly those using walking frames or in a wheelchair.

"My home is no longer accessible for many women, particularly those in wheelchairs or walking frames."

However, one woman described the benefits of stairs for those who were mobile.

"I think the stairs are good for me. I think if you stop using stairs, you soon find you can not get up them. Lots of people I know, as soon as they stop doing something, they can't do it."

Transport issues

Most women continued to drive a car, though most only drove during day light hours.



"I used to play in women fours at night. But as I got older, I don't like to drive at night. On the whole, I don't have any night bridge at the moment."

Some women had been told to limit their driving by their doctors.

"The doctor says 'short distances, locally, daylight'."

Others were taken off the road by their children.

"The family, my children, will not let me drive at night."

One woman described her view of taking a driving test.

"This year, upon my own volition, I felt duty bound to make sure my eyesight was adequate for driving. This confused the traffic people, because older people are normally referred by police. They said I was still capable to drive, though not at night and to restrict to my local area and places that I know well."

Women described a form of car pooling, in which women would drive other women to bridge.

"If someone is not able to drive, or prefers not to drive, someone in bridge four will pick them up."

Women did not describe using public transport to travel to bridge games. However, women described their general experience of using public transport.

"It was easier with conductors – they used to help me to get a seat. Now we depend on people's courtesy to stand up for elderly people. I have seen other older people fall, some rather nasty falls. I can't complain for myself. I travel outside peak hours, and can get a seat without having to ask someone to stand up. I usually ask the person sitting next to me to validate my ticket on my behalf. I have never had any trouble. I think there is a lot of good will in the community."

Residing in nursing home

Women described taking the bridge games to people who resided in hostels or nursing homes, or who were temporarily admitted to hospital.

"We play with someone who is in a hostel, and she loves her bridge and she can't get out, so we go there. I've also played bridge with women when they were in hospital."

Caring rights and responsibilities

Some women had caring responsibilities that impacted on their ability to play bridge.

"If a family member becomes sick, that is a priority. On Monday, I have to drive my husband to an appointment and have to cancel my bridge. Some of the bridge players are carers. It is whether this role as carer impacts on their ability to play bridge. One woman at the club had to stop for a long time because of her husband."

Women said that stopping bridge may make it difficult to start playing bridge again.

"If someone stops playing bridge just for a while, it may be OK. But if too long, I don't think they would go back to it."

Booking bridge games in advance

Women described booking their bridge games months in advance.

"It is very difficult to get four people together on the same day unless you do. So normally, we play today and book both the next and the next time – two ahead. Because next time one person may not be able to come."

Women indicated that playing bridge takes up a lot of time. For some women, this was a good thing – playing bridge fills the days with an interesting and fun activity. However, others described bridge as taking up "too much time". They described bridge as "interfering with other engagements". Most women described the ideal as playing bridge twice a week. Most women played bridge about twice per week (Table 4).

Table 4: Number of bridge games played during week

Participant	Number of games per week
1	2-3
2	1-2
3	2-4
4	0*
5	0-3
6	3
7	1-2
8	2-4
9	2
10	2

*Participant 4 was currently unable to play bridge due to a recent accident.

One woman described finding it difficult to "cut back" the number of games she played each week.

"There are some things at home that I should be doing. So I've been trying to cut it down to playing two games per week. But it is very difficult. We book our games so far in advance."

In one case, the frequency of bridge games decreased when friends died.

"After retirement, I played nearly every day. Of those people I played with, 17 have died. I have lost some old friends. Now I play once or twice a week."

In other cases, the frequency of bridge games was seasonal.



"It varies. Over winter, a lot of people go north, so there is a reduction. And then they all come back and I play three times a week, or even four times sometimes which I really don't want. Twice a week is ideal. That is plenty."

Diaries

All women in this study kept a diary. Women described bridge players as being unable to live without a diary.

"I don't know if all older women keep diaries but bridge players can't live without them. I write everything in it, not just bridge. I buy my next year's diary in October."

Booking games in advance was considered essential. However, bridge arrangements sometimes clashed with other more spontaneous social activities.

"I have some friends who do not play bridge. They tend to get a bit huffy if I can't do stuff with them because I have a bridge game booked in advance."

Keeping up with friends who do not play bridge

Women described a range of activities that they undertook with their friends who do not play bridge. These activities include cinema, lunch, and walks. However, women described seeing their other friends much less than their bridge friends.

"I don't see my other friends nearly so much, which is a pity. I see them occasionally at lunch or go to the pictures, talk on the phone. But my bridge friends I see regularly. I keep in touch with my bridge friends much more."

Some women described most of their "going out" was to play bridge.

"Mostly, my "going out" is "going out to bridge". Occasionally, I go out to lunch. My children always come over for dinner when they are in town. One good friend is very good at keeping in touch. She comes to see me, or we go to a movie. I'm not good at going out to lunch, though I do it sometimes."

Women also described doing things other than playing bridge with their 'bridge friends'.

"Last weekend, I arranged for 3 bridge friends to come to my beach house to play bridge. At the last minute, one went to hospital. The others came anyway. We went to movies, had a dinner party and went to visit an historic house and garden. So you can do other things together."

One woman said that all her friends played bridge.

"I can't think of people now who don't play bridge."

Another woman described feeling sorry for her friends who do not play bridge.

"I'm sorry that they don't play bridge because I think it would help them a lot."

Conclusion

Older women benefit from playing bridge. Playing bridge was described as enjoyable, fun and intellectually challenging. Playing bridge also brought friends together to share so much more than a game of cards.

Older women described diaries filled with bridge games. Bridge games were often booked in advance, sometimes months in advance. Women described looking forward to their games of bridge. Although some women experienced difficulties with eye-sight, hearing or memory, they described no difficulties playing a game of bridge.

The women in this study recommend bridge for other friends who have not yet caught the 'bridge bug'. Rather than meet friends irregularly for lunch or a movie, playing bridge provides the opportunity to see friends regularly.

Most importantly, this small study demonstrates that one is never too old to play, and enjoy, a game of bridge. This enjoyment of bridge is reflected in the concluding poem written by Patricia Hocking, in honour of her diamond wedding anniversary.



Diamond Wedding: it's turned up trumps

*For 12 November, 2002
I'll not make you suffer
a long dissertation
instead I shall offer
a short recitation.
Some say monogamy
is not wedded bliss,
it must spell monotony
but that I dismiss.
It turns up trumps,
which today are diamonds,
so if down in the dumps
we've this to remind us.
A winter afternoon
in warm saloon,
Bridge table sets the scene
and eager to begin.
We cut, we deal
we bid, and now the real
work begins
and, for our sins
we lose all thought
of time, it means nought
as, absorbed we play
to win, or lose, we pay
no heed, just enjoy
what skill we can employ.*

*Conversations first discuss
to obviate a fuss.
If partner trumps your trick
though you feel quite sick
not a word, not a glance
discipline, don't look askance!
Several levels of this game,
for it's not quite the same
when 'duplicate' the play,
to initiate's dismay!
When scoring is 'chicago'
and 'rubber's' not the go
when 'vulnerable' is arbitrary
a risk is then obligatory.*

*When doubling is a danger
most troubling to a stranger
as above the line the score
can astronomically soar!
Fortunes won or lost
But, don't count the cost.
What better way to spend
a wintry day? If you end
up in the doghouse –
(your partner's such a louse)
let's play again tomorrow
no need to drown your sorrow
the cards will turn again
and we'll win!*

*SO –
Now, upon reflection
I make the observation
luck also plays a part
in the marriage mart,
and win or lose in life
partnership, not strife
clearly is the name
of the game!*

©Patricia Hocking ❖



Interview Schedule

A1

1. Describe how you came to play bridge?
2. How old were you when you started playing?
3. Describe why you continue to play bridge?
4. How does playing bridge help to keep you well?
5. What other things help to keep you well? What other activities do you continue to enjoy?
 - a. How do these things keep you well?
6. Describe your experiences of playing bridge
 - a. In a club
 - b. Socially
 - c. With family
 - d. On the computer/internet
7. What are the good things about playing bridge?
8. What are the not so good things about playing bridge?
9. How often do you play? When do you play? With whom do you play?
 - a. Has this changed over the years?
10. Are there any things that make playing bridge difficult for you?
11. Do you have any suggestions for ways to overcome these difficulties (e.g. big print cards)?
12. How do you integrate playing bridge with other things that are important in your life?
13. What role does bridge play in developing and maintaining friendships?
 - a. Have you had any 'fall outs' over the bridge table?
14. What types of things do you discuss during your breaks from the bridge table (e.g. afternoon tea)? Do you discuss contemporary issues that are important to you?
 - a. Are there any taboo topics? If so, what?
15. What types of things do you do with your friends who do not play bridge?
16. What does bridge mean to you?
17. How important is bridge in your life?
18. What other things are important?

