

Category:	Research
Source:	Games and Economic Behavior (Elsevier)
Last updated:	2026.01.28
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Card Games and Economic Behavior

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DOI: [10.1016/j.geb.2014.08.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geb.2014.08.003)

Research Question

Are different game experiences associated with significant differences in behavior? More specifically, are expert bridge players — due to their habit of playing with partners and seldom for money — more likely to adopt cooperative behavior than expert poker players?

Key Highlights

- Are different game experiences associated with differences in experimental behavior?
- Are bridge players more likely to adopt cooperative behavior than poker players?
- Bridge players make more polarized choices in trust games
- Bridge players choose the maximum trustor contribution significantly more often
- Findings are similar across incentivized and non-incentivized experiments

Abstract

The researchers wondered whether different game experiences are associated with significant differences in experimental behavior and, more specifically, whether expert bridge players, due to their habit of playing with partners and seldom for money, are more likely to adopt cooperative behavior than expert poker players.

Evidence from trust games shows that bridge players make more polarized choices and choose the maximum

trustor contribution significantly more often. The findings are similar across incentivized and non-incentivized experiments and thereby support the hypothesis that behavior in simulated experiments resembles that in experiments with monetary payoffs.

The Study

The research included:

- An online simulated experiment (OSE) without monetary payoffs: 1,414 bridge players and 836 poker players
- A monetary payoff experiment (MPE): 150 bridge players and 150 poker players

The study was conducted in cooperation with the Italian Bridge Federation and Snai S.p.a., Italy's leading betting agency.

Key Findings

Bridge Players Are More Cooperative

Bridge players contribute significantly more than poker players as trustors in both experiments. This is mainly accounted for by an 11% higher share of players sending all of their game endowment in the online simulated experiment and an 8% higher share in the monetary payoff experiment.

Experience Matters

In the incentivized experiment, where researchers could control for years of experience, any additional year of bridge practice is associated with a significantly higher probability of maximum trustor contribution.

Not Explained by Other Factors

The superior giving of bridge players does not seem to be motivated by risk aversion, pure altruism or inequity aversion — factors which were controlled for through side experiments.

Context

The research references Akerlof and Shiller (2010), who argued that traders' problematic financial practices leading to the global crisis may partly reflect changes in leisure activities — notably the decline of cooperative games like bridge and the rise of individualistic games like poker.

The paper also notes that influential figures like Warren Buffett and Bill Gates have advocated for bridge qualities and financed programs to introduce bridge in schools, convinced that the skills developed in bridge transfer to other areas of life.

Read the Full Paper

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