

Scrabble experts know many words, not meaning

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By Alison McCook

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Although Scrabble experts know reams of words not often used in daily conversation, don't ask them to use any of those lesser-known terms in a sentence, researchers cautioned Saturday.

Studies of the abilities of Scrabble experts revealed that while all players practice for the game by memorizing lists of all legal three- and four-letter words catalogued in the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary, higher-ranked players did only slightly better on tests of word meaning than lower-ranked players.

This finding suggests that in Scrabble, it is the letters of the word, and not its meaning, that counts, study author Dr. Diane F. Halpern of Claremont McKenna College in California told Reuters Health.

Scrabble experts "certainly are much less concerned by the meaning," she said.

However, higher-ranked players completed tests of visual-spatial skills much faster than lower-ranked players, indicating that this skill helps distinguish the best from the rest, she noted.

Visual-spatial skills are an important component of Scrabble, Halpern added. Professional games are timed, she said, and during an opponent's turn, players need to excel at rapidly manipulating objects in their minds, such as when they imagine different letter combinations from the letters they hold, or inspect the board from upside down.

But to Scrabble aficionados who struggle with those skills, take heart: the kings and queens of the Scrabble world were not necessarily pros from the start, Halpern noted.

Although higher-ranked players did not report practicing any longer than lower-ranked players, Halpern said that both groups may have started with equal visual-spatial ability.

Just because higher-ranked players were better at visual-spatial skills "doesn't mean they were naturally born this way," she said.

Halpern and her colleagues investigated what distinguishes the best players in Scrabble from others by pulling out higher- and lower-ranked attendees of the 2002 National Scrabble Championship held in San Diego, and testing their skills in other areas.

The study included 11 women and 15 men from different national ranks. All were "serious, professional Scrabble players," Halpern said.

The participants came from all walks of life, she said. Most practiced many hours each week, but held day jobs ranging from postal worker, librarian, lawyer, nurse and Wal-Mart associate.

"It is a very, very diverse group," Halpern noted.

She and her colleague Jonathan Wai presented their findings during the Western Psychological Association meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia.

During paper-folding tests, designed to measure visual-spatial skills, the researchers found that higher-ranked players showed a much quicker reaction time to the tests than players of a lower

rank.

However, higher-ranked players performed only slightly better on vocabulary tests than others, and all ranks showed no differences in education, age, or years spent practicing the game.

Higher-ranked players were also no more likely to report that Scrabble strongly interferes with their work than other players.

