Does Golf = White? Perceptions of the Prototypical Golfer

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Abstract

In drawing from prototype theory, the purpose of this study was to examine the degree to which people equate golfing with Whiteness. The authors also investigated the potential moderating effects of social dominance orientation. Pilot work helped to identify the characteristics people associate with golfers. In the primary study, participants (\(N = 217\) college students) rated how golfers in general and members of different racial groups personified these characteristics. Results indicate that golf was most closely associated with perceptions of Whites, and this association was significantly stronger than the corresponding relationships between golf and perceptions of Asians, Hispanics, and African Americans. Finally, social dominance orientation was positively associated with perceptions that golf was for Whites. Implications for theory and practice are addressed.

Key words: equate golfing, whiteness, golfers, college students

Introduction

Race and racism have played a critical role in all elements of American society since its founding (Feagin, 2006; Zinn, 2003), affecting everything from people’s work, to where they live, to their life chances. Sport and physical activity participation is no exception, as race is associated with the opportunities people have to be active and the likelihood they will participate in different activities (Greendorfer, 1994). Sports that have low costs of participation, such as basketball or soccer, generally have a large percentage of racial minority participants—a pattern that is likely a function of the limited discretionary income that minorities have to spend on leisure activities (Hibbler & Shinew, 2002). Sports with high costs of participation, such as golf, hockey, and baseball, have a larger percentage of White participants than minorities. Considering that, as of 2002, African Americans and Hispanics were more likely to live in poverty than Whites or Asians, it is no wonder that sports costing high amounts of money to play are underrepresented by these groups (Cunningham, 2011).

Eitzen and Sage (2009) discuss the idea that culture plays a part in sport participation among races. What a culture deems acceptable or popular will likely influence members of that culture’s participation rates in certain sports. To emphasize this point, Ogden and Hilt (2003) state that basketball has become the main sport in African American culture. They claim that African American youth are more likely to gravitate towards basketball because the culture values it above other sports. In further support of this position, African Americans report perceiving themselves as being most competent in basketball, relative to other sports, while Whites show greater perceived competency in golf and baseball than do African Americans (Harrison, Lee & Belcher, 1999). Racial differences are even present in the stereotypes people have for themselves and their
physical activity expertise (Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999).
Collectively, this work shows that a myriad of factors, including discretionary income, stereotypes, and culture, all affect the physical activities in which people from different races participate. In this study, we seek to extend this research by considering the stereotypes people hold about golfers and who participates in that sport. This is an important consideration because the racial stereotypes people hold about sport participants shape a sport’s culture, including prevailing ideas about who should and should not engage in those activities (see also Eitzen & Sage, 2009). Thus, if people believe golf is best suited for one racial group (e.g., Whites) relative to others, these perceptions are likely to shape the golf culture and the access people have to that sport. In examining these perceptions, we also investigate the role of personal characteristics, namely one’s social dominance orientation. Inclusion of this potentially important between-person factor can help explain variance in the associations people make between golf and race. In the following space, we offer an overview of our theoretical framework and present specific hypotheses.

Theoretical Framework
Race and Golf
Racial stereotypes can also influence participation in golf: the context of the current paper. Historically, minorities have been under-represented in American golf. Even with the great success shared by several minorities in the game (e.g., Lee Trevino, Tiger Woods, and Chi Chi Rodriguez), minority participation rates are low. A study by the National Golf Foundation (2010) revealed that minority golfers composed 21% of the total golfers from 2007 to 2009. This number is under-representative of the U.S. minority population (33%; US Census Bureau). There are many possible explanations for this ranging from cost to discrimination. Each is significant to the explanation of this reality.

The game of golf has a history of discrimination against minorities. From the exclusive practices of private country clubs to the high costs associated with playing the game, the realm of golf favors White male participation. Despite the availability of public courses, which are open to any paying customer, Mitchelson and Lazaro (2004) state that many public courses give the impression that they are intended to be private and exclusive. Many public courses have dress code requirements. These requirements can include, but are not limited to, collared shirt, slacks, no t-shirts, and no denim pants. For an individual who has limited discretionary income, this can be a problem. Not only does the person have to pay money to play golf, but he or she also has to make sure to dress a certain way just to have access to the game. Green fees, money paid by a golfer to play at a public course, average $46 per round at American public golf courses (National Golf Foundation, 2009). This cost can be prohibitive for low-income individuals. Minorities, excluding Asians, are much more likely to live in poverty than Asians and Whites (Cunningham, 2011). With median incomes of $29,423 and $33,676, African Americans and Hispanics have considerably less expendable income than their Asian and White counterparts (Cunningham, 2011). This helps to explain why minority participation in sports with low costs of participation is high. To support this idea, Yaparak and Unlu (2010) state that “wealthy people have lifestyles that routinely include participation in golf, tennis, skiing, sailing, and other sports that are self-funded and played at exclusive clubs and resorts” (p. 365).

Private country clubs present another avenue of discrimination in golf. Davidson (1979) states that membership to private clubs has nothing to do with golfing ability, and social considerations are the determining factor. In a typical private club setting, new members are invited by old members. Membership initiation fees can be quite expensive, and additional monthly fees also increase the cost of membership. This high cost is not easily attainable to lower socioeconomic status individuals. This fact coupled with the stereotype that golf is a “rich White man’s game” can potentially cause minorities to feel that golf is not an appropriate sport for them to participate in. Ryan (1997) further illustrates this exclusive social space by stating, “For the most part, the country club was created by wealthy, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) between 1880 and 1930, when economic, racial, cultural and ethnic lines divided the United States into ‘us’ and ‘them’” (p. 495).

Prototype Theory
Prototype theory (Rosch, 1975) might help explain the dynamics between golf and race. According to Rosch (1975), category words (e.g., furniture) bring to mind lists of features that are relevant to the category. In the case of furniture, the features might include: wood, seating, storage capacity, legs, arms, and so on. A chair or sofa, for example, is often considered to be the best example of furniture because it contains the characteristics associated with furniture. Similarly, football is considered to be a good example of sport because it contains many of the features commonly associated with the concept of sport (Rosch, 1975). Furthermore, while there may be several examples of a category (e.g., several versions of the color red), a color’s membership into the red category is dependent upon its similarity to a prototypical red, and its subsequent dissimilarity from other
prototypes (e.g., prototypical blue; Berlin & Kay, 1969). Whenever there is a clear cut best example of a category, that example is the prototype. These prototypes of categories are also dependent upon cultural and historical context. While there very well may be clear examples of prototypes in the North American English context (e.g., North American football as an example of sport), it would be faulty to state that the same prototype would apply to a Latin speaking country with a different set of cultural experiences or practices (e.g., football/soccer as a best example of sport). As such, as Murphy and Medin (1985) state, a category is useful to its users to the extent that it provides a relevant example in wider scenarios or deeply held beliefs.

As previously illustrated, there is reason to believe that golf and Whiteness are associated with one another. Thus, from a prototype theory perspective, people might closely associate the characteristics of golf with those of a White person in general. On the other hand, because such linkages are not present for other racial groups, at least within the US context, the associations of golf and other racial groups, in general, are unlikely to be present. In drawing from these arguments, we hypothesized:

- The characteristics people associate with golf will be positively associated with the characteristics people associate with Whites, in general.
- The positive association between the characteristics of golf and those of Whites, in general, will be significantly stronger than the association between the characteristics of golf and African Americans (H2a), Asians (H2b), and Hispanics (H2c).

Social Dominance Orientation

Social dominance orientation (SDO) can provide insight as to why an individual would view golf as appropriate for certain races and inappropriate for others. According to Heaven and Quintin (2003), SDO represents an individual’s tendency to prefer hierarchical social structures over more egalitarian ones. Sidanius, Pratto, and Mitchell (1994) describe SDO as “the basic desire to have one’s own primary in-group be considered better than, superior to, and dominant over relevant out-groups” (p. 153). The authors further state that SDO also affects the behaviors of in-group members against out-group members. These behaviors can include, among others, negative stereotyping, active discrimination, and willingness to use violence against out-group members.

Utilizing this construct, an individual who views one race as inferior would likely deem sports that are considered upper class, prestigious, and refined to be appropriate for certain races and inappropriate for others. SDO also helps to explain the reasoning behind the exclusivity of private country clubs, which are mainly comprised of wealthy White Americans. Since membership to most private clubs is by invitation only, members of the club will likely invite those who are similar to themselves, thus promoting their dominance and power over out-groups. Where a people group views itself in the societal hierarchy could influence its choice of sport participation. Thus, we predicted:

- Social dominance orientation will be positively correlated with the association people make between golf and Whites, in general.

Materials and Methods

Pilot Testing

We first conducted a pilot study to determine the characteristics people associate with golf. We collected data from 40 undergraduates students enrolled at a large public university in the Southwest United States, asking them to list what they felt were the characteristics of the general golfer. The results of these responses were tallied and the seven most commonly occurring characteristics were utilized for the questionnaire (see Appendix A).

Participants

The participants of this study were comprised of female (n = 102) and male (n = 115) students enrolled in physical activity classes at a large public university in the Southwest United States. The demographics of the participants are as follows: 9 were African Americans, 16 were Asians, 24 were Hispanics, 4 were Native Americans, 142 were Whites, 19 reported themselves as a race other than what was listed on the questionnaire, and 3 did not report their race; 67 of the participants were in their first year of college, 54 were sophomores, 30 were juniors, 64 were seniors, and 1 was a Graduate student. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 32 years of age, and the median and mean were both 20 years old. Most of the participants (n = 151) reported never playing golf, 30 reported rarely or sometimes playing golf, 31 reported playing golf often, and several did not report how often they play golf.

Measures

The participants completed a questionnaire in which they provided demographic information and responded to items about the characteristics of the general golfer, the characteristics of people from different racial groups, in general, and their SDO.

Characteristics. In drawing from the results of our pilot work, we asked participants, “To what degree does the general golfer exhibit the following characteristics?” The items included “skillfulness,” “mental strength,” “persistence,” ability to
concentrate,” “upper class,” “etiquette,” and “refined,” and participants responded on a Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). The scale had an acceptable reliability (α= 84), and we took the mean for the final score. We repeated this process for each of the four racial groups included in the study, asking participants, “To what degree do (Racial Group) generally exhibit the following characteristics?” Participants rated each group on the same seven items included for golfers in general, and the Likert-type scale was also the same. The reliability for each group was generally acceptable: African Americans (α= 90), Asian (α= 67), Hispanics (α= 88), and Whites (α= 90). We recognize the score for Asians is slightly lower than the traditional cutoff (.70), and we address this in the limitations section.

**Association with Golf.** We also asked participants, “How closely do you associate the following groups with people who play golf?” Participants rated African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and Whites using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

**Social Dominance Orientation.** Finally, we measured SDO using Pratto et al.’s (1994) 8-item scale. Sample items include “I think it is probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and others are at the bottom” and “I think no one group should dominate in society” (reverse scored). Items were anchored by a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability was acceptable (α= 82), and we took the mean as the final score for the variable.

**Procedure**

Five physical activity classes from a large university in the United States were selected based on availability and willingness of the instructor. The instructor’s permission was obtained before distributing the surveys to the students. The students were handed a questionnaire packet containing a cover letter and the questionnaire, and asked to voluntarily take part in the study. Participation took approximately 10 minutes, and all data were dealt with in a confidential manner, as no identifying information was included.

**Results**

The first hypothesis predicted that the characteristics people associate with golf would be associated with the characteristics they associate with Whites, in general. We computed bivariate correlations to examine this relationship, with results presented in Table 1. Results offer strong support for Hypothesis 1, as the association between golf and Whites in general was positive and significant, r = .50, p < .001.

**Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Bivariate Correlations, and Reliability**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. General Golfer</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. African Americans</td>
<td>.23**</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Asians</td>
<td>.36** .37** ---</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Hispanics</td>
<td>.29** .69** .37** ---</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Whites</td>
<td>.50** .36** .50** .49** ---</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. African Americans &amp; Golf</td>
<td>.09 .32** .17* .10 .06 ---</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Asians &amp; Golf</td>
<td>.07 .27** .20** .23** .08 .40** ---</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Hispanics &amp; Golf</td>
<td>.03 .33** .07 .34** .06 .38** .44** ---</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Whites &amp; Golf</td>
<td>.22** .09 .34** .08 .29** .09 .11 .08 ---</td>
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<td>10. SDO</td>
<td>.09 .11 -.03 .21** -.16* -.18** -.18** -.12 ---</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach’s Alpha</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.90</td>
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*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

With our second hypothesis, we predicted that the association between golf and Whites in general would be stronger than golf and other racial groups in general. We computed bivariate correlations for each association and then statistically compared the strength of association following Bruning and Kintz’s (1997) guidelines. The correlations are found in Table 1. The magnitude of the association between golf and Whites was significantly stronger than it was for Golf and Hispanics (t=3.49; p<.001), golf and African Americans (t=3.99, p<.001), and golf and Asians (t=2.29; p=.05). There were no differences in strength of association between Asians and Hispanics (t=1.06, p=.05), Asians and African Americans (t=1.86; p=.05) or Hispanics and African Americans (t=1.1, p=.05).
Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and t-scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t(df)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>29.43 (210)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pair 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>23.90 (210)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Americans</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pair 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>23.47 (210)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asians</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>1.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pair 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>-6.36 (210)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Americans</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>1.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pair 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>-7.64 (210)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asians</td>
<td>3.47</td>
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<td>-83 (210)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asians</td>
<td>3.47</td>
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* p<0.001

We also examine this hypothesis through our second set of questions, in which participants rated how closely they associated golf with different races. As seen in Table 1, Whites and golf had the highest mean score. We ran paired sample t-tests to examine if the mean scores differed based on race, and the results are presented in Table 2. All but the difference between African Americans and Asians was statistically significant. Individuals associate golf slightly more with for Asians than African Americans, and with African Americans than Hispanics. Finally, participants most closely associated golf with Whites, more so than for all other races. This pattern is consistent with Hypothesis 2.

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Finally, we predicted that social dominance orientation would be positively associated with the association people make between golf and Whites. As seen in Table 1, this hypothesis was not supported, as social dominance and the linkage between golf and Whites in general was not significant (r= 0.12). Interestingly, though, SDO did hold a negative correlation with the association people make between golf and Hispanics (r= -0.18; p<0.01), African Americans (r= -0.16; p<0.05), and Asians (r= -0.18; p<0.01).

Discussion

In drawing from prototype theory (Rosch, 1975), the purpose of this study was to examine people’s perceptions of golf and race and the connections thereof. Results support the notion that some sports are racially appropriate (see also Harrison & Belcher, 2006), as participants more closely associated golf with Whites than they did with other races. This pattern emerged in both approaches used: (a) when we asked participants to rate the characteristics of golf and different races in general and then computed the correlations among those ratings; and (b) when we asked participants to make explicit ratings about which racial group they associated with golf. Finally, SDO influenced these relationships, as the higher the social dominance orientation, the less likely participants were to associate golf with racial minority groups. In the following space, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the research, allude to potential limitations, and highlight future research directions.

Contributions and Implications

This research contributes to prototype theory (Rosch, 1975) by demonstrating that prototypes appear to be existent in the sporting realm (i.e., Whites as the prototypical golfer in this case). Considering that the majority of the participants in this research do not regularly play golf, their concept of the prototypical golfer likely stems from the overarching stereotypes and presentation of the game. As a result, this research also contributes to the powerful role of stereotypes in the sociological construction of race-neutral entities (i.e., golf clubs, golf balls, golf courses, etc.) into racially-charged institutions, which can largely influence who do and do not participate in certain activities (e.g., racial minorities in golf).

From a practitioner perspective, the results of this research are important as they demonstrate that despite the great success of racial minorities (e.g.,
Tiger Woods) in golf at the highest level, the game is still largely viewed as a White sport. As such, golf-specific organizations, such as the PGA of America which states that more needs to be done to make the game more inclusive for women and minorities (PGA, 2013), should make more of a concerted effort to change the perception of the game. As demonstrated by Apostolis and Giles (2011), Golf Digest (the top consumed golf magazine) continues to, “construct golf as a sanctuary for white, wealthy heterosexual masculinity” (p.235). As such, specific marketing campaigns aimed at changing the stereotypes associated with the game and highlighting influential minorities who are avid golfers (e.g., Jerry Rice and Michael Jordan within the African American community) should be developed and implemented. Furthermore, it would be beneficial for racial minorities to have greater representation as managers and practitioners (e.g., head pros, golf instructors, opinion leaders, etc.) within the golf industry. Such representation could have a positive impact on changing the way the game is viewed, as racial minorities could be seen as knowledge holders and experts in the game.

Limitations and Future Research
There were several limitations to this study. While the participants of this study were willing volunteers and their identities kept anonymous, they could have also responded in socially desirable manners. Method variance is also a concern, as all items were collected on a single questionnaire. Furthermore, since the reliability for Asians (α = 67) was slightly lower than the traditionally acceptable cutoff, caution should be used when interpreting the results with respect to Asians. Finally, many of the participants reported that they never or rarely played golf. As such, their knowledge of the characteristics of golf could be limited, and their responses also affected. This would, however, also point to the prevalence of cultural norms and stereotypes in shaping their responses.

Future research should continue to look into the role stereotypes play on the perceived appropriateness of sports for different races. Research has shown the positive and negative effects stereotypes can have on sport performance and self-perception (Beilock et al., 2003; Stone et al., 1999; Harrison et al., 1999). It would be interesting to see the effect that positive and negative stereotypes have on non-participants’ perception of appropriateness of sports for different races. Also, the perception of golf by racial minorities who do participate in golf should also be examined in detail, as they could have key insights into how the perception of golf could be changed (e.g., through marketing campaigns, diversity initiatives, etc.) by these underrepresented groups in the game.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest

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accessibility to golf. Southeastern Geographer, 44(1), 48-73.