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Socio-cultural Thursday, June 2, 2016 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2016-010 8:55 AM (Forum West 2)

Founded in 1916, the PGA of America is, according to its own literature, “the largest working sports organization in the world, comprised of more than 27,000 dedicated men and women promoting the game of golf to everyone, everywhere” (pga.com, 2013, para 1). The PGA of America is the governing body that certifies professional golfers as leaders in teaching and growing the game of golf within the United States. There are currently three routes to becoming a PGA Class-A teaching professional. In the proposed presentation I focus on ten future professionals who were attending a Professional Golf Management Program at a large Southeastern University to receive their PGA Class-A certification. Informed by two years of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I interrogate how the socializing, and organizational experiences of the individuals influenced the development of their social identity and self-presentation.

Review of Literature

The proposed presentation is guided by three strains of theory, socialization, social identity, and self-presentation. I will briefly discuss each prior to discussing the guiding methodology of the project.

The process of becoming interested in sport has been explained using socialization theory (Kenyon & McPherson, 1973), in which scholars postulated that the process of socialization includes the “assimilation and development of skills, knowledge, values, dispositions and self-perceptions necessary to perform in society” (Kolbe & James, 2000, p. 3). Socialization is a dynamic process whereby individuals learn to interact with others and become “participants in their society” (Kenyon & McPherson, 1973, p. 303). Translating the general definition of socialization to the world of sport, the process of sport socialization includes developing the skills, knowledge, values, dispositions and self-perceptions necessary to perform in sport-related societal interactions. Scholars have noted that individuals become interested in sport due to the influence of a number of different social groupings, including: family, peer groups, school, community social systems, and coaches (James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000; McPherson, 1976).

Occurring alongside the process of socialization is the development of particular identity characteristics, traits, and preferences. The proposed presentation is guided by social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The primary tenet of social identity theory is that individuals will develop a portion of the self-concept as a result of the groups that they perceive a sense of belonging with. Resulting from this psychological connection individuals will develop distinctiveness by favoring the ingroup and disfavoring the outgroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Building from the work of scholars such as Hogg and Abrams (1988), Tajfel and Turner (1979) and Hogg, Terry, and White (1995), I discuss the social identity characteristics of the PGM students at various stages of the PGM program.

In the proposed presentation I also discuss how the specific self-presentation of individuals looking toward a career as a PGA golf professional was crafted as they moved from interest in the PGM program toward program completion. Guided by the dramaturgical model espoused by Goffman (1959), I utilize the two-component model of Leary and Kowalski (1990) looking specifically at the motivation of individuals to self-present, and how they construct their self-presentations. For, as Leary would have it, “Self-presentation (or impression management) refers to the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people” (Leary, 1996, p. 15).

Method

In this project I employed a qualitative methodology comprised of multiple methods. In order to develop a deep understanding of the organization and the people within the PGM program I spent two years as a participant observant. Informed by the organizational ethnographic techniques utilized by Goodall (1989), I spent two years with the PGM program in the classroom, on the driving range, and at national trade shows. The ethnographic phase
of the research project allowed for the development of a rich description of the organization and its members (Weick, 2007).

Resulting from the relationships I cultivated during participant observation I conducted interviews (n=10) with student members of the PGM program. Utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), I interviewed students at three different stages of the PGM program. The participants ranged in age from 18-24 years of age and were predominantly Caucasian. Guided by the theories discussed above, my questioning focused on developing an understanding of: 1) how the participants developed their interest in golf and golf as a future career; 2) how sport participation and participation in the PGM program informed the development of their social identities; and 3) how they have crafted their self-presentation to show group affiliation with the PGM program, and the PGA of America.

Results and Discussion

The participants had a very similar trajectory through the development of their sporting interest. All of the participants came from middle to upper class backgrounds, and were encouraged to participate in sport at a young age through familial influence. Notably, the majority of participants were encouraged to participate by parents who were not skilled golf participants. The source encouragement for the participants shifted over time from family to peers and coaches, which is in line with the findings of Greendorfer (2002). Of note, the majority of the PGM participants were not elite level players, and therefore did not foresee a future as a collegiate or professional golfer.

The majority of participants formed in-group associations with the PGM program prior to beginning the PGM program. As a result of the in-group associations, the participants were able to accrue social capital amongst their high school friend groups, and later amongst their collegiate friend groups. The PGM in-group was the prominent social group for the majority of participants, while also allowing for a larger in-group association with other PGM participants nationwide. The in-group association with the PGA also formed prior to beginning the PGM program for the majority of participants. This association with the PGA drove participants to consider and implement specific elements of their self-presentation.

The PGM students tended to craft a specific self-presentation. In addition to golf specific apparel choices, students were motivated to craft a self-presentation based on the values of the PGA. Though the majority of the participants crafted a self-presentation in agreement with their PGM and PGA in-group memberships, perhaps the most telling and organizationally informative results came from the students who questioned whether their in-group memberships would encourage others to participate in the sport of golf—a major directive of the PGA—and if their expected self-presentation represented the old guard of PGA professionals.

Through the proposed project I heed the call of Oja, Bass, and Gordon (2015) to investigate the identification of sport industry employees with sport organizations. I also aim to extend their work to look at a unique group who will hold future middle management positions in the sport industry, outside the scope of professional or collegiate sport teams. Organizational as well as theoretical implications will be discussed.

References


James, J. D. (2001). The role of cognitive development and socialization in the initial development of team loyalty. Leisure Sciences, 23(4), 233-262.


