

Kaepernick's Kneel: A Misinterpretation of a Movement

Picture two-hundred people piled into a high-school gymnasium, eager for the first serve of the men's volleyball sectional championship. Besides the shuffling as they rise to their feet and remove their hats, there's nothing but silence. I stand on the court, looking up at their faces, trying to ignore the butterflies churning inside me. I take a deep breath as I look to my brother, standing beside his teammates on the end line. His quick glance to me gives the support I need to begin. As the first few words push their way out, they find their meaning and I immediately relax. The butterflies disappear, my muscles loosen, and the crowd fades. It's just me and the national anthem. Before I know it, the crowd reappears, bursting into overwhelming applause – clapping, screaming and cheering. Their reaction: overwhelming. My performance has come and gone – the championship begins.

I am most proud of singing the national anthem. It gave me the opportunity to share my musical gift, building my confidence along the way. I performed the national anthem for over thirty athletic events. I sang for a men's regional hockey game, a women's regional volleyball game, three men's regional volleyball games and for women's basketball and men's football games. Every time I sang the national anthem, I felt full. It became an important song to me and a reminder of principal memories. As an influential song to me and many others, it was absurd that athletes abused its sanctity. As I watched the football games every Sunday afternoon, each new protest during the singing of the national anthem set off a rage within me. I never imagined that the national anthem could be used as a protest symbol. I immediately reacted negatively to the protests which would quickly become known as the "Take a Knee" movement¹.

As the coverage of the protests spread around on the news, I decided I needed more information. After further research into the protests, I realized what they actually represented. I also realized that there is a copious amount of misinterpretation. Colin Kaepernick, the primary protest leader, kneels for the lives which have been oppressed by racial inequality and police brutality; Kaepernick kneels for change. Through my own misunderstanding of the movement, I began to see how others have been clouded with the same confusion before witnessing the cause behind the movement. Throughout my exploration, I discovered the overwhelmingly unfavorable feedback regarding the protests. Although the protests promote sweeping positive social change. As a result of the multitude of individual protests, the word “movement” is commonly used as a reference to Kaepernick’s actions. Those actions became known as a movement because a National Football League (NFL) quarterback brought massive groups of people together on an issue and inspired others to join the cause. The “Take a Knee” movement is named rightfully so.

Background

The “Take a Knee” movement began with Colin Kaepernick, a former quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers. During a few pre-season games in August of 2016, Kaepernick chose to sit on the bench during the national anthem instead of stand with his hand over his heart. Many fans and media outlets did not notice his absence during the pre-game ritual. It was not until the 2016 football season began that the quarterback transitioned his protest to kneeling on the sideline (Mindock). Many people misunderstand how Kaepernick did not explicitly state his reasons for protesting until questioned in interviews after he began kneeling. The protest remained virtually silent, with no explanation and no precise meaning until Kaepernick stated that the action of

kneeling signaled an end to racial inequality and police brutality in our country. Now, the “Take a Knee” movement represents something more than just a symbolic pose.

Colin Kaepernick did not explicitly title his actions as a “movement.” To him, kneeling is his fundamental right to protest for a belief. The protest became a true movement¹ because of one reason: virality (Coombs et al. 53-54). The protest spread rapidly throughout the National Football League (NFL) and then to other professional sports. In addition to kneeling, the protests were expressed through the raising of fists which (a salute for Black Power) and the linking of arms while standing. For example, the Kansas City cornerback, Marcus Peters, raised his fist. Four Miami Dolphins players took a knee. Megan Rapinoe, a U.S. Women’s Soccer player, also took a knee. Stephen Curry and Kevin Durant of the Golden Warriors (NBA) also expressed support for the movement. Despite this virality, many coaches disciplined their players for supporting the movement. Some coaches even reprimanded the players by decreasing their playing time (53-54). The few individual protests among the professional football players at the beginning of September spread across the country, eventually becoming a movement.

Although the National Football League demonstrated support for the “Take a Knee” movement, the protests actually are widely misinterpreted in our society. Through the evaluation of the movement, we can discover how Colin Kaepernick’s actions started a discussion about racial inequality and demanded an end to police brutality. The misunderstandings surrounding this movement can be broken down through the history of kneeling, the media’s influence with the movement’s progression, and how the movement is more important than singularly kneeling.

History of Kneeling

One extensive issue with the movement being misinterpreted is the action of kneeling itself as a form of protest. The movement was publicized as a negative demonstration that shows disrespect to the national anthem – this belief is the public’s first misinterpretation. The current President, Donald Trump, was the first person to label the “Take a Knee” protest as being disrespectful. Trump took his interpretation of the movement to his Twitter account when he stated, “Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he's fired. He's fired'” (qtd. in Mindock). Trump inserted his opinion into the public’s mind and people began to agree with him because of his status in society (instead of knowing the cause behind the protests). Though symbolic kneeling has now received some backlash, it is essential to look at the history of the symbol and where it has been used off the athletic fields.

Published in *The Washington Post*, Luke Bretherton’s article, “Taking a knee has always been a sign of reverence, not disrespect,” asserts that the legitimate purpose of kneeling since contemporary media reactions have purposed it otherwise. In other words, Bretherton explains that kneeling is a sign of respect and veneration. Most commonly used in religious ceremonies and rituals, this symbol can show that something is beyond “human self.” Kneeling expresses devotion in many situations. In American history, kneeling was used in a sincere fashion. For example, an engagement begins from someone getting down on one knee. Kneeling in our contemporary society is a sign of admiration and respect (Bretherton). Turning the focus back to the protests, Bretherton states that “The posture of the players is an act of faithfulness. It is a sign of supplication, a plea for a new and deeper relationship...one built on mutual respect and recognition of the dignity and worth of black lives.” In other words, the athletes’ protests have

shown their investment for a new relationship with one another and with a society free of racial injustice and inequality.

There have been other forms of protests, specifically the symbol of raising fists in a salute to Black Power. During the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games, two African American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, staged a protest during the national anthem (see Figure 1). They did not “Take a Knee” but rather used a symbol of unity in order to display a silent protest which is now being used more than 50 years later (Brown). The two raised their fists in a salute to Black Power. Smith and Carlos planned their protest during the medal ceremony after winning



gold and bronze medals. They “took off their shoes in a protest of poverty, wore beads to protest African American lynching and lowered their heads... raised their fists.” This became one of “the most iconic sports images of the 20th century” (Brown). This was one example in history that was displayed across multiple news sources and demonstrated how athletes have utilized their platforms before Colin Kaepernick was even born. Kaepernick was not the first to make this kind of statement, nor will he be the last.

Figure 1. Pictured are Peter Norman (left), Tommie Smith (middle), and John Carlos (right) at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico participating in a protest after the 200m race.

Maham Abedi's article reports how Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated the widely used symbol during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. In March of 1965, a large group of activists attempted to march from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery, Alabama to acquire the right to vote for African Americans. While kneeling, King led a massive group in prayer along with many civil rights activists. (see Figure 2).

These men and women knelt in prayer after more than two hundred and fifty people were arrested for marching without a permit. Rinaldo Walcott, the director of the Women and Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto, add to Abedi's article with this strong statement: "The kneel has been a kneel about articulating the promise and desire of freedom from oppression" (qtd. in Abedi). These athletes show their discontent over the continuous mistreatment and brutality of the African American race. King demonstrated kneeling as a prayer for the lives of African Americans. Today, we are still battling for freedom and justice for those who have been oppressed, and Colin Kaepernick uses kneeling just as Martin Luther King, Jr.



did in 1965.

Figure 2. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. kneels with a group in prayer prior to going to jail in Selma, Alabama. These photos were taken outside the Dallas County Alabama Courthouse in Selma, Alabama (Abedi).

The photos of King kneeling spread and gave a new power to the protests since he was an influential figure; and Colin Kaepernick used the same symbol. Dr. King's use of this symbol in history provides support for Kaepernick's validity of kneeling as well. King created change for others and inspired the current population with his words and symbols. Bernice King, MLK's daughter, joined in support of the "Take a Knee" movement after seeing the interpretation given by Trump. She was the first individual who unearthed these significant photos to exemplify the true meaning of kneeling (Rhoden). Athletes kneel during the national anthem as a statement for change. The history of kneeling is crucial to understanding how the movement is being misinterpreted. Besides the historical aspect, the media influence and published reactions of the protests have played a pivotal role in the misinterpretation of the "Take a Knee" movement.

Media Influence and Reactions

When Colin Kaepernick first knelt during the national anthem, media² outlets took full advantage of the potential headline. Little did they know that one small news story would become something much bigger in the coming months. The media's influence and portrayal of the reactions to the movement also are widely misunderstood. Overall, the much of news regarding the protests were negative and talked of "disrespect" of the national anthem. This widespread negativity took over the media, but the public was exposed to only one side of debate. There was barely any coverage of *what* the movement was about or *why* these football players were kneeling in the first place. The news did not consider the actual issue and focused solely on the kneeling. Posing the actions of these players as disrespectful did not give the public

a fair chance to form their own opinion. Many jumped to the conclusion that the protests were disrespectful before seeing the reasons behind them. Though a select few journalists were not as critical of Kaepernick as others, many supporters would still find a way to “reframe” the discussion around his actions rather than the purpose of the protests (Coombs et al. 54-55). Overall, the media deflected readers away from the true message of the movement.

In her magazine article, “Look Deeper Before Becoming Offended by NFL Protests,” Sue Fox suggests that the general population think more deeply about the meaning and purpose of anthem protests. Many people, when seeing the NFL players kneel, immediately think they can “read their minds” and know that they are purposefully disrespecting the national anthem. Sue Fox encourages readers to find out more before immediately jumping to conclusions over these protests. Having a published headline similar to this one could promote individuals to go further in a quest to better understand what the movement is really about.

The *Journal of Deviant Behavior* published Jonathan Intravia’s article in which he emphasizes the acceptance of the national anthem protests among young adults. Intravia conducted a survey among young adults about their views of what Colin Kaepernick and many other NFL players were doing during the national anthem. Many respondents supported anthem related protests and believe the players involved should not be disciplined by the NFL or by team owners. Many within the survey expressed acceptance and a willingness to participate in an anthem protest if given the opportunity (3). The view of a younger generation is important to be included in the media, though it is very underreported.

Part of what many popular news sources did to influence readers was break down the protests into individual actions, rather than attributing them to the movement. Instead of giving

credit to those participating and publishing how many players were involved at the height of the movement, the media treated them as isolated and singular. Many news channels disconnected the action of kneeling from the message it embodies. It was rarely called a movement, but rather “The NFL Protests” to create more division between each individual player.

Along with separating the protests, journalists included sources that involve the “shut up and play” view. These are groups of people who believe that athletes should not express their views, personal or political, within sporting events (Coombs et al. 54-55). This view arose more than one time in sporting events. For example, when Tim Tebow played for the Denver Broncos, every time he threw a touchdown, he would kneel in prayer in the end zone. Tebow also wrote “John 3:16” on his face paint. Many people reacted very negatively to Tebow’s openly religious views, mocked him, and said “quit the dramatics.” Spectators would prefer that sports and politics/religion be completely separate from their Sunday afternoon traditions.

On multiple occasions, Colin Kaepernick defended his reasons for kneeling. He did not aim to start a movement, but instead he aimed to express his freedom to speak out against injustice. The media turned Kaepernick’s demonstration around to focus on “his identity, his method, and his safety. While Kaepernick made efforts to frame discussions about his protest in terms of the movement and issue, others kept bringing it back to him as an athlete and a man” (55-56). Many commentators attacked Kaepernick as a person and tried to weaken his credibility and overall message. The media took up “deflection and distraction,” which Danielle S. Coombs and Cheryl A. Lambert extensively discuss in their media-frame analysis of Colin Kaepernick, a source which uses media reactions to impose reputations on a subject. Particularly, the authors discuss in this journal article:

Although Kaepernick's protest generated media attention, part of that coverage deflected the reader away from issues of police brutality. What began as a gesture to protest police brutality and social injustice had careened into a national debate on everything but that. This frame often included discussion of what it means to be a patriot and, more specifically, considerations of Kaepernick's patriotism. This debate was pushed to the forefront, while police brutality—the stated reason for Kaepernick's protest—was an afterthought or forgotten entirely.

Popular media sources repeatedly published reactions from the protest that were negative and distorted from the message of the movement. This distortion caused the public to create complexity, confusion, and hostile connotations when discussing the protests. The media was able to do this by deflecting from the message, focusing on Kaepernick himself, and attributing the protests as individual actions rather than a movement. Once readers realize how extensive this movement has become, they can begin to see the true purpose and how it is more than symbolism.

More Than Kneeling: The Cause

The most important factor about the "Take a Knee" movement is that, in addition to the influence of the media and the misunderstood history, it is *more* than kneeling. The movement is beyond a conversation about patriotism, disrespect, or athletes merely being entertainers. The cause of the movement is surrounded by racism and the misuse of police power. Historically, African Americans have generally been victims of police brutality by white officers, as well as racial profiling. Colin Kaepernick noticed these events have continued happening and decided to

kneel to raise awareness about the issue. Kaepernick decided to take a stand for what he believed in – racial inequality and police brutality need to end (see Figure 3).

Maurice I. Crawford, in his book *Colin Kaepernick: How Taking a Political Stand Has Cost Him Millions and His Job in the NFL*, implies there are consequences of Kaepernick’s actions from his anthem protest: he lost his position in the National Football League.

Kaepernick’s sacrifice plays a significant role in the movement. In this book, Crawford states, “It’s not about disrespecting the flag or the American national anthem. It’s about the injustices in America against people of color. America has a historical problem, and that problem is racism.” This quote exemplifies the issue at hand and the cause for which Colin Kaepernick kneels.

Colin Kaepernick risked his professional career over the expression of his beliefs. He received backlash and a somewhat tarnished reputation from establishing and supporting this movement. Kaepernick is labeled a “troublemaker” in the National Football League and is



“considered [to be] toxic to front office decision-makers” (Coombs et al. 55). Many athletes who participated risked losing advantageous sponsors or even their spot on the team. For example, Brandon Marshall, a Denver Broncos linebacker, lost two sponsorships over kneeling during the national anthem (55).

Figure 3. Eric Reid (left) and Colin Kaepernick (right) kneel during the national anthem before a regular season game against the Seattle Seahawks (Gajewski).

Colin Kaepernick, as many have seen, does not play for the San Francisco 49ers anymore; he opted out of his contract with the team and became a free agent. John Lynch, the coach of the 49ers, confirmed that the quarterback was going to be released from his contract anyway, even if had he not opted out (Wagoner). Colin Kaepernick risked his career and eventually conceded his platform on the sideline to pursue his cause off the field. The former quarterback remains active on social media and the movement's interests as a speaker with AthleteSpeakers (Gajewski).

Kaepernick was questioned often after his first few appearances kneeling. In a press conference he said, "I am not going to stand up to show pride...for a country that oppresses black people, and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football. There are bodies in the street. People [are] getting paid leave and getting away with murder" (qtd. in Mindock). In this excerpt, Kaepernick addresses the various circumstances where African American have been killed by police officers. Names like Treyvon Martin, Alton Sterling, Keith Lamont Scott, Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, and Tamir Rice are among the unarmed who have lost their lives at the hands of police officers. Many officers were not indicted or placed on leave, as Kaepernick mentioned. Most recently Stephon Clark, an unarmed African American male, was fatally shot eight times, primarily in the back, while in his grandmother's backyard. This issue is more than kneeling on a football field. There is a cause that these NFL players stand behind. They stand for the lives lost at the hands of those who are supposed to be protecting us. Whether these NFL players express their views by kneeling, raising a fist, or linking their arms together, they stand united.

The Other Side: Military Disrespect

Many people assert that the entire “Take a Knee” movement is very disrespectful to our country’s military. Since the media focused on the disrespectful aspect of the protests, many readers focus on that aspect more than other reasons. People of the military have sacrificed their lives for U.S. citizens to remain free; many would suggest that the national anthem represents the freedom our military fought to protect. Many interpret the national anthem as being representative of the military, rather than the Constitution. Their stance is that without the military’s sacrifice, these professional athletes would not have the opportunity to play football had the military not fought for their freedom. There are many other ways in which the players could have expressed their views rather than kneeling. Those who reside on the anti-kneeling side also believe the athletes’ strong social media presence could have reached people with words rather than making a spectacle of their sport. This side also claims that the players never clarified or explained why they were kneeling when the protests first began. Those reasons made many spectators jump to the conclusion that the players were disrespecting the military.

Conversely, Brian MacQuarrie’s work, “Military Veterans are divided over NFL protests,” describes the view of some veterans on the NFL protest through multiple personal accounts. MacQuarrie quotes Jack Downing, president of Soldier On, a nonprofit organization that helps homeless veterans. Downing states, “We have a few guys who...don’t like it. [Those] who served in Vietnam, a lot of them came back and nobody said thank you. They weren’t accepted, and they see this as another form of rejection” (qtd. in MacQuarrie). To put it another way, many Vietnam veterans feel that the national anthem protests are another way America did not accept them after they have returned from the war.

Although I acknowledge that some military veterans find the protests to be disrespectful, there is an overwhelming majority of veterans who support the “Take a Knee” movement. In fact, servicemen and women consistently support the movement and express their agreement with the cause; moreover, much of the misinterpretation of the movement comes from the idea that the movement is *about* the military. The movement is not about the military at all. Many may believe that the national anthem represents the military; however, many veterans argue otherwise.

The military believes that the flag and anthem represent the freedom which the military fought to protect. Again, *freedom* is what the national anthem represents. The military volunteer themselves in sacrifice for our country, though in a sovereign nation they do it for the freedom of others. Colin Kaepernick chose to kneel during the national anthem because he believes that there are individuals who do not have the same freedom as others in the United States. The movement is about freedom, not the military. The national anthem is a perfect symbol to use in order to protest for freedom. The media took the opportunity to pose the protests as disrespectful to the work that the military has done for our country. Although I completely agree that we as a nation should value the military, collectively they have nothing to do with the movement.

Repeatedly, the American public has been led to believe the military is being disrespected during the national anthem protests, but this is just another misinterpretation of the movement. Brian MacQuarrie adds weight to the argument about misinterpretation through his evaluation of the military viewpoint. He presents many testimonies of how the military support the current movement. One of these testimonies includes Coleman Nee’s, a Marine Corps veteran. Nee states, regarding the First Amendment, “When you sign up to serve your country, you take an

oath to support and defend the Constitution. When people exercise their constitutional rights, controversial or unpopular as they may be, you have to take some comfort in the fact that people are able to do it. Mission accomplished” (qtd. in MacQuarrie). MacQuarrie includes this powerful response because to Coleman Nee, kneeling is the protected right of expression. However, many express that the players should “shut up and play,” as previously mentioned. In his book about Kaepernick, Michael Crawford writes, “[Kaepernick’s] stand is within his rights as a United States citizen. Freedom of Speech is a right to every citizen.” As the Constitution proclaims, we as United States citizens have freedom of speech and protest for which these are *unalienable rights*. Colin Kaepernick and many other athletes (more than two hundred NFL players) express the constitutional rights endowed to them.

When first hearing about the “Take a Knee” movement, we conform to the majority opinion rather than go against the grain, researching more about the topic. Donald Trump labeled this movement as disrespectful and his reaction grabbed the nation’s attention, including many of those who voted for him. Those people immediately agreed with Trump due to his position and sway with the public. This positionality was also true for NFL owners and many celebrities. The more the movement was contorted, the greater the population was led to believe it was disrespectful. Public opinion became increasingly negative and misinterpretations took over the media headlines.

The “Take a Knee” movement began with Colin Kaepernick seated on the bench where soon he began protesting by kneeling. I asked myself why kneeling? Why did Kaepernick not remain seated? What caused this transition? Colin Kaepernick even explains at one point in why he transitioned into kneeling. He did so because of Green Beret and former NFL kicker, Nate

Boyer (Coombs et al. 56). As a passionate patriot, Boyer urged Kaepernick to make a statement with his platform, and not just sit passively. Boyer told Kaepernick that by kneeling he would show *more* respect for the military; kneeling is a much more “iconic” and memorable pose (Mindock). As a veteran, Nate Boyer was instrumental in transforming Kaepernick’s actions. The creation of the misinterpreted symbol actually came from a military veteran himself and the media still tries to pose the symbol as being disrespectful. Boyer was responsible for how Kaepernick’s protests became known as the “Take a Knee” movement. Other veterans even broadcast that there is just as much respect in kneeling as there is in standing for the national anthem (MacQuarrie). Overall, military veterans have expressed overwhelming support for the “Take a Knee” movement, contrary to many who believe it has been disrespectful.

So What?

Every single time I perform the national anthem, I focus on the lyrics I am singing. Those lyrics are dear to me and to many others in the United States. As I deliver the sacred song to people who may be oblivious to the current societal issues that may not directly affect them, I have realized this: the words of the anthem are not truthful. The words in the national anthem include – “the land of the free.” Yet, there are citizens who are not free in the United States – citizens who are not treated as equals; citizens who are not given a fair chance. It is important to understand how the movement has been misinterpreted so we can change the overall connotation and support its efforts. The “Take a Knee” movement started a conversation about racial injustice, racial inequality, and police brutality within our society. More people besides athletes have shown support for the movement and the causes it represents. Not only have Colin Kaepernick’s actions influenced the entire National Football League, but the protests spread to

other professional sports including the National Basketball Association (NBA) and Major League Soccer (MLS). Trickle all the way down to collegiate sports and many high school sports, “taking a knee” has become a national phenomenon. It is essential that we continue to support the equality of race, gender, and class along with an end to police brutality. It is not until these issues are addressed that Kaepernick can finally stand, hand over his heart, for our national anthem.

Notes

1. “Social movement are forms of collective action that emerge in response to situations of inequality, oppression, and/or unmet social, political, or cultural demands...they are dynamic...they are contingent things, which grow or shrink in response to factors that enable or constrain them...growing systematically in strength and impact over time and in others fluctuating in response to internal dynamics and external pressures. Social movement politics are formed from the premise that the world is socially constructed and that it is both possible and necessary to change it to achieve a movement’s vision of a just society and of power relations within it” (Harcourt).
2. Media is being used here as a general term to suggest a vast coverage of the protest on a national scale. Kaepernick’s actions have spread globally and been covered by a multitude of outlets. Using the word media is to generally speak about its coverage. To define media specifically: media is new reports, news coverage, popular article sources, magazine articles, social media profiles, and television channels (such as ESPN, FOX, ABC, NBC). This media is portrayed on a local level (around San Francisco) and national (across the United States). This movement also is expressed on social media accounts like Twitter and Facebook. New coverage suggests stories published on CNN, Fox News, Global News, and numerous city publications (like *The Boston Globe* and the *Baltimore Sun*).

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