



‘Taking the knee’ against racism is not working and much more is needed to be done to reduce racism in society

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Abstract

Taking the knee has now become a popular tool in society to attempt to combat racism. Yet, despite the widespread uptake of this among many people across the world, racism is continuing to occur at an alarming rate. This study attempts to examine and analyze the many reasons for this, looking at the evidence of racism in societies, movements and initiatives currently in place to fight racism, how to keep movements alive, and what more could be done to combat racism. Reform to the criminal justice system, including better educating police officers, and educating society better on a whole about racism would be a much more effective way to combat racism than a token gesture like taking the knee.

Keywords: racism, racial discrimination, taking the knee

Introduction

First and foremost, racism can be defined as prejudice and discrimination against a person or people majorly on the basis of their association to a specific marginalized community. Watts (1996) ^[17] adds that in some continents such as Europe and North America, racism implies the unequal treatment between the majority and minority groups, in that, the majority (whites) are considered superior and privileged while the minority (colored) individuals are inferior and disadvantaged. Historically, African Americans have endured racial discrimination in both informal and formal setting through laws and regulations that validate overt racism such as exclusion, segregation and slavery (which has long been banned). According to United Nations (2001) ^[14], racism and racial discrimination are social problems that affect people not only in the west but also in the world as a whole. Similarly, Federal Bureau of Investigation, (2007) further acknowledges that in the past years, racial minorities in America, such as blacks, Asians and Hispanics have been the target of racial violence and discrimination in the workforce either directly or indirectly.

Evidence of Racism

Evidence of racism includes making jokes, hurtful comments, insults and harassment (both physically and verbally) that target a certain ethnic group. For instance, racial stereotyping of the Latinos where they are portrayed as crafty criminals who do not like work has contributed to discrimination by means of excessive police harassment of the Latinos. Moreover, racism can also be observed when a particular group is affected by the disservices such as inequalities in access to opportunities and basic needs like housing, education and employment, resulting from the policies and rules put in place to govern an institution. For example, (UNDESA, 2004) ^[15] observed that in the job market, unqualified migrant employees usually occupy the lowest positions in the workplace where they receive low wages and

work under harsh conditions. While narrating the pain caused by racism, Derrick Bell described black people as the “magical faces at the bottom of the society’s well”. According to social hierarchy, on the basis of race, white people are at the top while black people remain at the bottom even when the poorest whites are only a few levels above. White privilege due to unconscious/implicit bias can lead to racial discrimination. Unconscious bias can be defined as unfairness that leads to one group of people benefiting while the other punished. McIntosh (1989) ^[8] describes white privilege as an invisible package of advantages that white people do not deserve and are ‘unaware’ exists but can exploit any day. These privileges could be in the form of white people getting more callbacks for interviews during hiring process, compared to blacks. He continues to say that being white brings with it legal, social and economic advantages. More scenarios have been witnessed where people are automatically disqualified, fired or not given a promotion they deserve at work, denied loans by the bank and denied housing in certain neighborhoods based on their race. Albeit such discriminations are illegal, they are usually subtle and occur informally, hence not easily discovered. According to H. Shellae Versay, a critical health researcher and professor of psychology at Fordham University, the health program- Affordable Care Act was opposed by a great number of white people because they were convinced that despite gaining from it, the program would benefit people of color as well. There has been reports about racial discrimination in the criminal justice system in the form of excessive use of force by officers fueled by prejudice and racism. A survey done among officers in Los Angeles Police Department in 1991 found that a number of LAPD officers used excessive force in minority communities because they were racially biased. Witnesses also testified about LAPD officers harassing and restraining African American and Latino men who vaguely resembled the suspects. Furthermore, the police seem to target

neighborhoods with high crime rates where a large number of minorities reside. Douglas Smith (1986)^[11] went on to say that police decisions were influenced by the conditions of a particular neighborhood and that they, without a doubt, would use excessive force against suspects when making arrests in a minority community. A record of the New York State Judicial Commission on Minorities (1991)^[5], found evidence of inequality, injustice and different treatment on the basis of race in the courtroom. It discovered that many minorities and minority defenders were disregarded by court officers, with their cases taking only five minutes or less in court and the minorities given “basement justice” if any. Moreover, studies have revealed that sports have also been racialized due to the fact that most players are black while the spectators, coaches and the management are white, therefore football being a white-dominated area can result in unfair policing since the people influencing almost all the decisions made in sports are white.

Movements Currently in Place to Fight Racism

Researches have revealed that due to the rise in racism cases over the past years, the fight against racism have become the headline in newspapers and every social media outlet. To this end, antiracist social movements like the hashtag #Black Lives Matter emerged in 2013 as a response to police brutality and hate crimes against black people following George Zimmerman’s exoneration after being involved in shooting that resulted in the death of 17-year old African American Trayvon Martin in 2012. This movement gained more international awareness in 2020 in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer who caused an international uproar after a video recording of the ordeal went viral. As a result, protests across the United States started, with millions of protestors demanding amendments in the judicial system. Additionally, some athletes like Muhammad Ali started a movement to protest against systemic racism by throwing his gold medal into Ohio River after he returned home from the 1960 Summer Olympics. This action is said to have been triggered by the discrimination he faced back in his hometown when a white-owned restaurant refused to serve him because of his skin color. Another athlete by the name Naomi Osaka in 2020 boycotted the semi-final match and walked in the court wearing masks with the names of black American victims of racism written on them to protest against the shooting of a black man, Jacob Blake by the Wisconsin police officer. “Taking a knee” was another antiracist social movement that was demonstrated by athletes Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid in 2016 to condemn racial inequalities and police acts of violence against black people when they decided to kneel instead of stand, as the norm before the start of the pre-season game. As a result, other National Football League players began “taking the knee” before their games and continued even after Kaepernick lost his job. Kilgore (2017)^[6], argued that actions demonstrated by Kaepernick eventually led to his dismissal from the NFL and consequently losing his endorsements which he (Kaepernick) confirmed during an interview (Wyche 2016)^[19]. Moreover, former US President, Donald Trump, calling anyone who participated in “taking a knee” “son of a bitch” prompted the rest of the NFL players to join the movement as they felt that Trump had directly assaulted their brothers. In other words, Trump unknowingly brought more players together leading to anti-racism protests across the globe

such as in Canada where during an anti-racism protest in Ottawa, the Prime Minister Justin Trudeau demonstrated his support to the movement by taking a knee alongside the crowd for a few minutes in honor of George Floyd. However, not everyone embraced the movement and while some saw this as an act of heroism, others felt that the players were being disrespectful and unpatriotic and in response to the players kneeling down, a good number of the audience booed. Sorek and White (2016)^[13] discovered that while white football viewers had positive representation of national pride, black audience associated the sport with black resistance and this was the reason for the mixed reactions when Kaepernick decided to take a knee. Furthermore, Wickersham and Van Natta (2017)^[18] stated that during the players-owners meeting in the year that followed, an executive member, Bob McNair mentioned how they couldn’t let prisoners to run the prison, referring to the NFL players’ protests. Additionally, other athletes argued that taking a knee before matches was not contributing towards change against racial inequality and therefore did not see the need to continue with the protest. Players like Wilfried Zaha stated that taking a knee in itself is not enough to fight racism and that kneeling down is degrading and making them appear secluded, while another player claimed that they were being used as puppets. In addition to this, Les Ferdinand, the QPR director of football mentioned that the “#takingaknee” had become just another desirable hashtag after the message it was supposed to relay got lost midway. Many others seemed to be in agreement with the above opinions with striker, Ivan Toney expressing that there’s no change because the management is not doing anything to support the protests. During an interview with Sky Sports, BBL’s Pharroh Gordon explained that he stopped taking a knee because kneeling alone was not important enough to influence people to fight against racial injustice. He also pointed out that they needed to take real actions after creating awareness on the racial issues, otherwise it will just remain a gesture. On the same note, a professor at the University of Toronto’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education argued that if the protestors were serious about the taking a knee, they would have tangible measures to support their claim. Countries like Japan also went against the protest and have since banned “taking the knee.” Inside stadiums, platforms and at ceremonies. This was in compliance with the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) rule 50 that prohibit any kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda in locations where Olympics are held. Besides, a survey conducted among the players in Tokyo also revealed that 2/3 of the athletes felt that the Olympic podium is not the appropriate place to air their concerns and interrupt their games.

Initiatives to Combat Racism

The war against racism did not just begin today. During jury selection in the 1880s, the court in West Virginia abolished the law limiting jury service to white men only. Although this decision did not prove to be effective because African Americans were rarely selected despite being qualified under this rule, it was one step forward. Walker et al. (2000)^[16] reported that, in the mid-1930s, the court further prohibited the court system from writing the names of potential white and black jurors on different colored cards to minimize racial discrimination during juror selection. For example, white names were written on white cards while black names on yellow cards. On the same note, after the

civil war, the Bill of Rights was revised to allow equal protection to all races and outlaw slavery. Even though cases of discrimination still continued in the form of physical violence against African American people, such changes in the court system pulled people in the right direction in the fight against racism. Since then, organizations and individuals have come up with several initiatives to help combat racism. For instance, Non-Governmental Organizations are committed to support anti-racism movements in the hope of reducing racism and promoting human rights education, based on their vast experiences on regional, national and international borders. Movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Campaign against Racism and Fascism (CARF) aims to address the aftermath of racial inequality on the victims, why racism is a vice and therefore should be frowned upon and to convey messages on the need to change the criminal justice system while also promoting human rights education. Apart from the anti-racism movements, these organizations are creating awareness about racism and its effects on individuals and the broader community. Studies have revealed that the first step to combat racism involves creating awareness about the existing issue in order to reach as many people as possible. This has been achieved through advertisements on televisions, radios, posters, newspapers, billboards and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The purpose of these broad advertising initiatives is to communicate the injustices occurring as a result of racial discrimination, educate about different cultures and the need to respect each and every one and provide information about the plans in place to help eradicate racism. Additionally, catch-phrases such as “Speak Out! Against Racism” and “See the Person Not the Color” are being used in TV ads, posters and during campaigns to make the message clear and comprehensible. On top of that, there is Love Music Hate Racism campaign (Unite Against Fascism) initiative that have embraced artists from diverse cultural backgrounds in order to expose their audience to multicultural society at which they get to socialize, form relationships and accept one another’s ethnic differences. As a result, there is mutual trust and respect among different groups within the society. The Canadian Mosaic Cultural Festival and the British Love Music Hate Racism concerts are also some examples of events that promotes intercultural interactions. By the same token, Anti-racism magazine known as the Campaign against Racism and Fascism (CARF) provides the platform that reveals the anti-deportation initiatives whose goal is to protect victims of violence who are migrants, provide a follow up with the victims and provide access to justice for the victims. To aid in the fight against racial discrimination, the Government of Japan adopted the Hate Speech Elimination Act in their legislature. Schools in Japan have also taken the responsibility to educate students about the race relations in America today through the American slavery history and apply it to their daily lives. Using America’s racist history makes the students understand and value the anti-racist movements happening today since political demonstrations seldom exists and there is no BLM division in Japan. After analyzing the BLM protests, Sawyer and Gampa (2018)^[9] came to the conclusion that integrating such movements into the curriculum can be useful in encouraging fairness while at the same time reducing prejudice among individuals despite your ethnic background. Additionally, Coulmas (2007)^[2] expresses that in the recent years, with the population decline, dependency

on immigrants in Japan have increased considerably and lessons learnt from the America’s racist history can be applied to peacefully integrate non- Japanese residents in to the community. When it comes to employment, The Racial Discrimination Act in Australia has ensured that no one is wrongfully terminated from a job or denied employed based on race, and that the minorities must constitute a certain percentage in senior positions. While such initiatives reduce racial discrimination in the professional environment by protecting the minorities, covert racism that goes on behind closed doors, for example, when a colleague makes a racist comment in form of a joke, are difficult to catch because the Human Rights law also protects freedom of speech.

How do You Keep a Movement Alive?

For any intervention to be successful, the organizers must be ready to commit to it and monitor it closely and regularly to discern where changes need to be made and improve on them accordingly. For example, they need discern why the methods employed did not work and what needs to be done to make it effective.

What I Would Do

Although the above initiatives have helped to a certain degree, there’s still need to come up with more actions to ensure that racism is eradicated or at least reduced. The first step towards eradicating racism would be to change the criminal justice system. Reports of discrimination towards black people by the police have mostly been the topic whenever racism is involved. The harassment and murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police officer is one example where the police abused his authority to make discriminatory decision. This incidence thus, calls for the criminal practitioners which includes the police, judges, prosecutors and other state actors to respect and protect the human rights of particularly minority groups. By the same token, there should be a reform in the police department in which the root cause of police brutality is addressed, violence against the minority is investigated and the perpetrators sentenced and rehabilitated as in the case of Derek Chauvin. In addition to that, the decision makers at the top including the office of the prosecutor should be held accountable because, before the police decide to act a certain way, they must get approval from their superiors. Therefore, the Independent Oversight Authorities must be transparent to ensure justice is served when needed. Moreover, a three-strike legislation should be developed to deal with officers whom too many complaints regarding misconduct have been filed against, hence, they can be identified and penalized in order to protect the minorities from such prejudiced officers. Reports have deduced that lack of knowledge about the cultures of the minority communities, unfamiliarity and language barrier are some of the aspects that contribute to race-based harassment from the law enforcement. As a result, police working among people they have never socially interacted with can lead to misunderstandings based on stereotypes, for instance, the police might perceive the manner in which African Americans talk to be disrespectful and threatening, thus prompting them to use excessive force on them. In order to deal with such cases, the police working in these areas needs to be oriented to the norms, values, languages and traditions of other cultures during police training programs so that they can be culturally competent. This will greatly improve the relationship between the police and the

community, therefore, instead of seeing each other as a threat, they will be able to communicate their intentions clearer. Additionally, conducting psychological screening on the officers before sending them off to a minority neighborhood would ensure that the officers act professionally, thus reducing the prevalence of police brutality and creating a better police-community relations. On top of that, policing that is well informed about other cultures can be effective in making unbiased decisions on the street. A report from a policing study in St. Petersburg, Florida discovered that police showed less contempt towards minorities compared to whites and the authors concluded that this was because the police chief forbade the officers from abusing their power. Apart from that, there should be laws and policies that issue legal punishment to individuals who are defiant, in order to change the habits and the way people perceive societal norms. By making such non-compliant behaviors an offense, it sends a message that such behaviors are in violation of the law and anyone caught committing these acts will be severely punished. Whereas it may not change one's beliefs that justify such behaviors, the policy will instill fear in people making it difficult to be involved in such crimes. Secondly, we need to empower communities and individuals to take action to prevent and reduce racism. This can be achieved through community-based initiatives which focuses on the ways to stop racism within the community. For instance, teaching people of all ages to show a little compassion and acceptance towards immigrants would significantly reduce race-related violence that occur between citizens and non-citizens, especially during times of economic hardship where citizens feel that immigrants are taking all their jobs. In addition, eradicating false cultural beliefs and stereotypes by educating the mass about diverse cultures and issues surrounding race would also reduce ethnic tensions among people from different backgrounds. While this is a great proposition, it will take time to be effective because people's beliefs, values and identity are always deep-rooted that there's little room for compromise and eliminating prejudices and bias call for longer-term inventions. Thirdly, we need to promote and implement practice initiatives that will contribute to the prevention, reduction and elimination of racism such as global networking and international exchange among youth to strengthen intercultural respect and awareness. Fourthly, antiracism training, such as an undoing racism workshop which is both intellectually and emotionally intense could be a great technique in unlearning prejudices and biases since they are often done in an informal setting where participants are more open and truthful. The participants can examine how implicit bias shapes institutions, what we can learn from history and ramifications of racial identity. To unlearn racism, we must look into our racial identity, be mindful of our biases and actually care about the repercussions these biases have on the minorities in order to be inclined to take the steps necessary to get rid of such biases. For that reason, creating an environment where there are interactions between different cultures can increase racial injustice awareness and ultimately change people's preconceived ideas about the minorities. For a positive social transformation, education alone is simply not enough as people need to feel inspired and have the desire to critically think about their biases and how they have been socialized and conditioned to view racism as a normal occurrence. This inspiration is the driving force behind unlearning racism, feeling empathy and breaking the cycle of

white supremacy. Fifthly, Faith-based organizations can significantly change people's mindset. As most religions speak about treating one another equally and with respect, such organizations can exploit this belief and teach people that racism is morally wrong. They can also use this platform to allow interaction of people with different worldviews in order to develop good relations and build trust among themselves. Lastly, managers and supervisors should be equipped with knowledge about other cultures and issues surrounding race so that any minority working with or under them are accorded the same treatment as the other employees. Nevertheless, as stated by Donovan and Vlasis (2006)^[3], for these initiatives to work, any single initiative that suggests the use of racial stereotypes and negative images about a certain ethnicity should be avoided because the audience may misinterpret the message and view it as offensive and therefore may end up encouraging the negative stereotypes in their effort to counter it, hence not achieving their objective. On top of that, we need to be patient to find a system that accommodate every member of a group.

Conclusion

To conclude, most of us has witnessed, heard, read or unfortunately experienced the brunt of racism at some point. While the perpetrators may not be aware of the emotional and/or physical damage caused by their actions, the victims tend to suffer serious consequences such as low self-esteem, lack of confidence, becoming anti-social and in the case of George Floyd and many others, death. Eventually, racism hurts each and every one of us and unless we take firm action individually and collectively and condemn this heinous act whenever we see it, this generation and the generation to come will continue to live in fear and suffer in the hands of racism. Therefore, it is imperative that we take personal responsibility besides the aforementioned initiatives and also forge personal relations between different groups to assist in eliminating some stereotypes and deep-rooted beliefs in society to make people see the world through a different lens.

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