Perceptions of US Military Minority Members of National Anthem Protests

Sarah Tackett, University of Kansas
Dominique Kropp, University of Kansas
Jordan Bass (Advisor), University of Kansas

Socio-Cultural - Diversity (Professional Sport)  Saturday, June 1, 2019
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  1:05 PM
Abstract 2019-383  Room: Napoleon D1

For over two years, athletes, particularly in the sport of American football, have protested during the national anthem at sporting events by kneeling and/or raising their fists during the song. Supporters of the protests suggest their actions have nothing to do with the disrespect of the American flag or the United States military but align with issues facing African-American members of society, including police brutality (Armour, 2017). In contrast, opponents find the protests to be disrespectful toward both nationalistic symbols such as the flag as well as members of the military - past and present (Agiesta, 2017).

The goal of this research was to explore perceptions of this protest beyond the popular opinions and news sources readily available. The broad research question asked is: How do members of the United States military feel about the protests of social injustice during the national anthem? This study was guided by rational choice theory, in which an explanation for social phenomena is offered via elementary individual actions composing such phenomena (Elster, 1986). Rational choice theory can be highlighted through methodological individualism, in which the development of social institutions and social change are explained via actions and interactions of individuals (Elster, 1989).

In a qualitative examination of members of the United States military, participants were asked a series of questions about their opinions on matters surrounding the protests during the national anthem of sporting events. The first four questions pertained to demographics, including: branch, job, race and ethnicity. Following those, two questions were presented regarding participants’ opinions of current protests. Questions addressed topics of: systemic racism and police brutality, protests involving symbols of nationalism, protesting effect on respect for their service, and participants’ perceptions of significant issues in our country that may pertain to the current protests. For this presentation, we focused on the responses from racial minorities, particularly due to the dual perspective of these participants as both minorities and military members.

Results indicated that, like many in the population, the opinions at large, vary broadly. We found support of peaceful protesting along with mentions of the history and context of the issues being protested as well as reasons for perceived disrespect. Additionally, concerns for the issues of police brutality and racism were also expressed. Finally, every respondent described multiple actions that are considered more disrespectful than the protests during the national anthem.

In all, implications of this study will include a continuation of exploration into sport as a catalyst for social change, an academic exploration of the highly-publicized national anthem protests, and voice given to the opinions of minoritized members of the United States military.