

Jason Collins and the role of identity

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Last week, 12-year NBA veteran Jason Collins announced in a first-person article in *Sports Illustrated* that he was gay—becoming the league's first openly gay player. Carole Bell is an assistant professor of communication studies in the College of Arts, Media and Design whose research looks at the relationship between nontraditional news sources like entertainment media and public opinion and sociopolitical attitudes. Here, Northeastern University news office asked Bell to analyze the impact of Collins' announcement in a variety of ways.

Collins' announcement began "I'm a 34-year-old NBA center. I'm black. And I'm gay." How does Collins' identifying statement factor into how the news has been received?

The concept of identity is a significant element in Collins' story. At the moment of coming out, the speaker gets to frame his own image, publicly declaring the elements that he considers essential to his sense of self. For Collins, that meant saying, "I'm a 34-year-old NBA center. I'm black. And I'm gay." Similarly, when former New Jersey governor Jim McGreevey came out, he said, "I am a gay American." Though the two men came out under vastly different circumstances, they chose to frame their identity in similar ways by placing their sexuality in context with the other primary aspects of their identity. McGreevey's statement, which sounded awkward to some, emphasized his Americanness above all. Collins highlights his status as a [professional athlete](#) first, then his blackness and, finally, his identification as a gay man.

Collins' declaration affirms the compatibility of these aspects of his identity: elite athlete, black and gay. It also asserts all three are important and can harmoniously coexist. Perhaps for this reason, gay black men in particular publicly celebrated Collins' statement and framed it in relation to its significance for black youth. On Salon.com, Rob Smith disclosed that when he first heard an NBA player had come out his reaction was very personal: "I wanted Jason Collins to be black, because I knew what it would mean to black gay youth in this country... I wanted Jason Collins to be black because I know exactly what it's like to be a gay teenager with dark brown skin who comes out but cannot find anyone gay who looks like you on television. Or in magazines." On BuzzFeed.com, Saeed Jones simply wrote, "Black gay kids need heroes too."

This idea of Collins as a role model and public figure is very important. The late gay activist and San Francisco city councilman Harvey Milk championed the importance of coming out to both the straight and the gay communities. For gay youth, coming out was important because, as Milk said, it provides hope. It shows a young gay man who may be worried about social isolation and the impact that their sexuality will have on their lives to see that they can be successful, full members of their communities. This act is also important for its potential impact on straight people. Beyond acting as a role model for gay youth, Collins serves as another public figure that Americans—specifically young men and male sports fans in this case—can identify and connect with. Research shows that people who can name at least one family member, friend or coworker who is gay are much more likely to have positive thoughts and feelings toward gay men and lesbians and support gay rights. For those who believe they don't know anyone who is gay, a public figure can act as a stand in. The effect is not as great but it is meaningful.

How did making his announcement as a first-person essay in Sports Illustrated allow Collins to shape the media narrative that unfolded?

Writing the essay in Sports Illustrated allowed Collins to speak directly to the public without a filter or intermediary. In doing so, Collins was able to effectively frame this very personal story himself, disclosing as much or as little detail he wanted, highlighting some aspects of his story and downplaying others. By writing in the first person, he could also exercise greater message control by planning and thinking in advance about what he wanted to say. He was not responding to someone else's questions and his words weren't reduced to a sound bite.

Collins is the first male pro athlete in the four major

American sports to come out. How does that fit into the nation's evolving public and political acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Americans?

Coming out is an important and still courageous act, even in 2013. It serves multiple purposes and carries multiple meanings. Since Collins is the first male athlete to come out while still active in one of the four major professional sports leagues, the revelation is historic in a material way.

It's also meaningful because he is breaking new cultural ground. Athletes are icons in American popular culture and help to uphold traditional ideals of masculinity. Their bodies and images sell cars, clothes, and lifestyles. Collins' coming out counters the dominant schema that sets those icons of masculinity apart from the image many Americans have of gay men. For someone so stereotypically masculine and athletic to be gay is instrumental. It helps to redefine in some symbolic way what it means to be gay in America. And, in doing so, it also extends the mainstreaming of homosexuality and gay rights.

At the same time, Collins' story is really a continuation of existing social trends. It is one additional data point—though an important one—in a story about gay rights in America that was already very much in progress and rapidly evolving. His story was made possible in part by several other momentous acts that preceded it, and by rather dramatic shifts in public opinion over the past 20 years. Harvey Milk laid the groundwork for Martina Navratilova who enabled Jason Collins, who will in turn inspire many others. By his own account, Collins notes that he was motivated in part by the Supreme Court hearing two major cases involving same-sex marriage. Earlier this year, President Obama's endorsement of marriage equality in the State of the Union Address was another historic moment and brought that discourse into the mainstream

even further.

Provided by Northeastern University

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