

Yes, but relationships *form* us

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Matt Yglesias on [the role Sen. Portman's gay son played in changing his dad's mind on same-sex marriage](#):

If Portman can turn around on one issue once he realizes how it touches his family personally, shouldn't he take some time to think about how he might feel about other issues that *don't* happen to touch him personally? Obviously the answers to complicated public policy questions don't just directly fall out of the emotion of compassion... The great challenge for a senator isn't to go to Washington and represent the problems of his own family. It's to try to obtain the intellectual and moral perspective necessary to represent the problems of the people who *don't* have direct access to the corridors of power.

Anne Thériault on [Steubenville](#):

You need to stop using the “wives, sisters, daughters” argument....

*Imagine if she was your sister, or your daughter, or your wife. Imagine how badly you would feel if this happened to a woman that you cared about.*

Framing the issue this way for rape apologists can seem useful. I totally get that. It feels like you're humanizing the victim and making the event more relatable, more sympathetic to the person you're arguing with.

You know what, though? Saying these things is not helpful; in fact, it's not even helping to humanize the victim. What you are actually doing is perpetuating rape culture by advancing the idea that a woman is only valuable in so much as she is loved or valued by a man.

Yglesias is right that public policy must deal with the broad abstractions of the common good, not just with issues that affect lawmakers personally. And Thériault is certainly right that a woman's value, dignity and rights are not contingent on who cares about her personally.

Still, both posts seem too dismissive of the role personal relationships play in our formation, our view of the world, our very personhood. In its best form, doesn't the "wives, sisters, daughters" argument use comparison to *highlight* the intrinsic value of each person? I.e., *it's self-evident that your own loved ones are valuable, and not just valuable to you. So how are they any different from a woman you don't know?* (Also: men aren't the only ones who have wives, sisters and daughters.) And sure, Sen. Portman could "think about how he might feel about" poverty or racism or gun violence, but what will this accomplish? How we feel about things is formed by relationships, not (or at least not just) arguments.

So while I share Yglesias's frustration with lawmakers' limited moral imagination, asking them to think about it more doesn't seem like much of a way forward. To get them to think about it more, we need to take steps toward a Senate that isn't dominated by wealthy white guys—we need senators who actually live and work in less of a relational bubble, not just go through the intellectual exercise of stepping out of it. And while Thériault's right about the intrinsic value of each person, how do people grow to understand this deeply—to be deeply committed to it, not just to assent to the idea—outside personal relationship?