Mattering to Others: Implications for the Counseling Relationship

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Although first conceived in the 1980s, mattering to others has only recently earned well-deserved attention in social science research and literature. Subsequently, it seems that mattering may serve as a powerful dynamic in strengthening counseling relationships. This article reviews the empirical validation study of mattering recently conducted by G. C. Elliott, S. Kao, and A. M. Grant (2004), which was published in the journal Self and Identity. Implications for counselors, the counseling relationship, and counseling research are considered.

“To be of importance to others is to be alive”

Mattering to others, the fundamental need that individuals have to feel important and significant to others, has recently resurfaced in the social sciences literature. Sociologists, psychologists, and a few counselors have led the recent surge in the study of to whom and to what degree individuals perceive that they matter. Sociologists Elliott, Kao, and Grant (2004) recently published a comprehensive empirical validation study of mattering in which they conceptualized and tested their triadic ideology of mattering to others: awareness, importance, and reliance. The current article provides a review of the Elliott et al. article and presents implications for counselors, for the counseling relationship, and for future counseling research. Although the significance of the counseling relationship is well known, counselors’ knowledge, understanding, and implementation of mattering as a method for strengthening the counseling relationship has not yet been presented in counseling. Therefore, the consideration of mattering as influential to counseling is timely.

Mattering Conceptualized

In the early 1980s, Morris Rosenberg (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) first conceptualized mattering as an integral component of individuals’ self-concepts; he hypothesized that all individuals experience varying perceptions of general mattering (mattering in a broad sense to society) and of interpersonal mattering (mattering to specific other people). Since that time, mattering has remained inherent in social psychology; however, years passed with little empirical research furthering Rosenberg’s initial suggestions. Within the past 5 years, social scientists have furthered the worthy study of this powerful experience. Elliott et al. (2004) defined mattering as the perception, to some degree, that we, as human beings, believe we are important and significant to the world around us and to others in our lives. They suggested that mattering to others is actually essential to our sense of self (all human beings want to matter to others) and to society (as an element of social bonding).

Elliott et al. (2004) emphasized Rosenberg’s initial point: To fully comprehend mattering, there must be a focus on the individual’s perceived sense of mattering as considered separately from the actions of others toward that individual. In other words, despite objective indicators (that others explicitly display) that we matter, if we do not intrapersonally recognize and believe that we matter, we will not actually experience mattering to others. Therefore, this process begins with external, interpersonal dynamics but ultimately affects the internal sense of self and self-concept. The antithesis of mattering brings about the detrimental perception of not mattering, or believing we are insignificant and unimportant to others. Elliott et al. suggested that the thought of not mattering to others in our lives is likely one of the most frightening perceptions we could ever have. If others do not pay attention to us, listen to us, and do not believe we are significant, we must find or create ways in which to cope with the realization that we do not matter.

The experience of not mattering to others allows for a deeper understanding of just how important mattering to others may be. Elliott et al. (2004) purported that because
all people want to matter, the sobering experience of feeling irrelevant to others may lead some individuals to do almost anything in order to matter. Individuals who are ignored and perceive that they do not matter may “act out” in socially undesirable ways to gain others’ attention—whether the attention is positive or negative is of no concern (Elliott et al., 2004), they simply want to matter. Elliott et al.’s article facilitated the evolution of the conceptualization of mattering with the inspection of perceptions of mattering compared with other psychosocial constructs. Their work elaborated conceptually and operationally on the original idea of mattering to others by exposing new ideas of interpersonal mattering.

Deconstructing Mattering

Although mattering to others may vary in degree and form, Elliott et al. (2004) distinguished two idiographic categories of mattering: (a) being the focus of attention of others and (b) relationship mattering. Attention mattering is a cognitive perception of mattering to others; we matter if others simply recognize us and acknowledge that we exist. We perceive that we matter when others pay attention to us, and if we do not receive their attention, we may feel ignored (Elliott et al., 2004). To lack in the form of attention mattering may have some of the most detrimental effects on our self-esteem and self-concept. As previously mentioned, if individuals are ignored, they may attempt to receive negative attention rather than receive no attention at all.

Relationship mattering implies a relationship between an individual and the persons to whom he or she wants to matter (Elliott et al., 2004). However, this form of mattering is further deconstructed by Elliott et al. as they describe the bidirectionality of relationships. Relationship mattering may take two forms: importance and reliance. Regarding the importance form of mattering, Elliott et al. purported that we matter to others if others are interested in us and concerned about us. Because caring relationships are bidirectional, the “flow” of mattering in the relationship is from others to us. Others are able to show us that they care and are interested in our lives. Furthermore, Elliott et al. explained that we know we are important if we are someone else’s ego extension; if others are proud of our accomplishments or ashamed of our mishaps, we can be certain that we matter to them.

The second form of relationship mattering involves others’ reliance on us. We matter to others if they depend on us for their needs or wants just as children depend on their parents for their basic needs. The flow of mattering in the relationship is the inverse of that described for the importance form of mattering: It is from us to others (Elliott et al., 2004). Because the people in our lives choose us to depend and rely on, we are ensured that we matter to them and can offer them something that others cannot. Elliott et al. cautioned that it is important to be cognizant that not all people who give us attention or rely on us are doing so because we matter to them. They suggested that genuine mattering to others is evident when others pay attention to us, care about us, and rely on us because they are relating to us as an end in itself versus relating to us in order to gain something for themselves.

Investigating the Mattering Ideology

Elliott et al. (2004) are among the first social scientists to design and execute a comprehensive empirical validation study of mattering to others. They presented a triadic ideology of mattering to others: attention, importance, and reliance. These researchers focused on content, internal, and external discriminant validity when creating an instrument to test their mattering ideology. Through expert feedback, confirmatory factor analysis, and pilot testing of their measure, they produced a 24-item instrument that assesses the three distinct forms of mattering.

Of utmost importance to the empirical validation of mattering as a distinct construct was Elliott et al.’s (2004) selection of five additional constructs from social psychology that they believed could be theoretically related to mattering. These constructs were self-consciousness, self-monitoring, self-esteem, alienation (measured as meaningfulness and normlessness), and perceived social support. They defined self-consciousness as the chronic tendency to be the object of one’s own attention. Self-monitoring is the extent to which individuals observe, regulate, and control the self-representations they put forth in everyday social interactions. Elliott et al. used a two-factor model of self-monitoring: public performance and other-directedness. Self-esteem is the evaluation of one’s personal characteristics and attributes. Alienation was defined as meaningfulness (the sense that there are no rules for life so that outcomes of interactions with others are unpredictable) and normlessness (one’s belief that social norms are ineffective, so socially disapproved behaviors are necessary for success). Perceived social support was conceptualized as the experiences that others provide us with resources that we need to aid us in our lives. The authors’ purpose was to determine whether any of the items they designed to assess mattering would also reflect any of the other five social psychology constructs.

The results of Elliott et al.’s (2004) study revealed that mattering to others was positively related to an individual’s self-esteem and perceived social support, negatively related to self-consciousness and both forms of alienation, and positively related to the public performance factor of self-monitoring. When investigating the relationships among the purported forms of mattering, Elliott et al. found that the strongest relationship was between awareness and importance, followed by the relationship between importance and reliance. Despite relationships between the forms of mattering, the findings illustrate that the three
Mattering: Implications for Counselors and Clients

This article has provided an overview of Elliott et al.’s (2004) conceptualization and empirical validation of the mattering construct; however, as the attention on mattering in the social sciences grows, it is important for counselors to recognize the possibilities of its use in counseling. Whereas the Elliott et al. article solely focused on the measurement and validation of mattering, the practice implications of this phenomenological experience for the counseling profession appear substantial. Amundson (1993) suggested that the need to matter was critical for clients. Professional counselors can capitalize on the universal need for mattering by gaining an understanding of the experience and using mattering as a method for strengthening the counseling relationship. The following section illustrates how mattering to others is significant to counselors and clients and how it can be used to strengthen the counseling relationship.

Researchers posit that all individuals want to believe that they matter to others. The feeling of being needed, of being significant to others, of mattering, gives meaning to individuals’ lives (Amundson, 1993; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Because all individuals need others to pay attention to them, take interest in them, and consider them important (Rosenberg, 1985), it is not surprising that counselors and clients in counseling relationships want to experience mattering.

By definition, counselors are altruistic helpers—givers who receive fulfillment and meaning through the therapeutic work they perform with clients (Amundson, 1993). Counselors, like others in the helping professions, specifically want to make a difference in others’ lives. Through the counseling they do and the relationships they form, counselors want to matter to their clients. Counselors are informed daily of their mattering to clients if their clients are accountable to them and committed to growth, change, and the counseling relationship. It has been suggested that when individuals are not able to experience meaningful connections with others in their personal and professional lives, they may become despondent and lose hope (Fox, 1994). On the other hand, when counselors perceive that they matter to the individuals they are helping, their sense of mattering will bring greater meaning to their professional lives and their desire to help will likely increase (Amundson, 1993).

Just as counselors want to experience a sense of mattering to their clients, most clients need and want to matter to their counselors as well as to others. Through mattering to others, individuals meet their basic needs for relationships; for those who experience “non-mattering,” the thought of no longer being needed is shocking (Amundson, 1993, p. 147). It is interesting that numerous clients enter counseling with feelings of hopelessness and helplessness; they can feel as if they are invisible in their lives and matter to no one. Schlossberg (1989) suggested that without the perception that they matter, it is easy for individuals to feel “lost.” It is thought that individuals may have a greater sense of well-being and feel more successful in their lives if they perceive that people value them and that they matter (Marshall, 2001; Rosenberg, 1985). Individuals who perceive they matter to others are more likely to have a higher self-esteem and overall well-being than those who do not have this perception (Dixon Rayle & Myers, 2004; Elliott et al., 2004).

Similarly, clients who perceive that their counselors care for them, that they are important, and that they matter may have greater investment in the counseling process. Clients who believe they matter to their counselors are likely to be more productive in counseling, show efficacious outcomes, and have a greater sense of trust in their counselors compared with those who do not have this belief. Aligned with Elliott et al.’s (2004) forms of mattering (attention, importance, and reliance), professional counselors are in opportune positions (a) to attend to clients, (b) to demonstrate how important clients are to them and to the counseling process, and (c) to illustrate to clients that they rely on them for successful counseling goals and outcomes. Because of the bidirectionality of the counseling relationship, both counselors and clients can experience the positive consequences of the flow of mattering between them. This flow of mattering can be optimized by the counselor in numerous ways in order to strengthen the counseling relationship.

Mattering: Strength in the Counseling Relationship

Mattering to others has been found to be related to individuals’ higher levels of self-concept and self-significance and higher levels of wellness, psychosocial well-being, social support, and job satisfaction (Connolly & Myers, 2002; Dixon Rayle & Chung, in press; Elliott et al., 2004; Marshall, 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). The absence of mattering is also related to higher levels of depression, academic stress, and job-related stress (Dixon Rayle, 2006; Dixon Rayle & Chung, in press; Schieman & Taylor, 2001). This empirical evidence supports the idea that mattering to others directly affects individuals’ professional and personal lives and relationships. More specifically, perceived mattering in relationships may lead to greater happiness and life satisfaction; those who perceive they do not matter may experience greater depression and loneliness.

The counseling relationship represents one of the most intimate and significant relationships individuals have. If trust and genuineness exist within the counseling relation-
ship, the depth of factual information and emotional intensity shared is abundant. Hall (2004) suggested that “People are fundamentally motivated by, and develop in the context of emotionally significant relationships” (p. 68). The counseling relationship illustrates such a significant interaction wherein mattering acts as a powerful dynamic. When clients and counselors perceive they matter in the counseling relationship, the shared relationship can act as a powerful force of change. In addition, counselors are in the unique position of modeling the facilitation of mattering for clients with the hope that clients will apply it in other relationships.

Counselors are encouraged to keep themselves informed about the growing knowledge concerning the mattering phenomenon, sharpen their understanding of mattering, and use mattering as a method for strengthening the counseling relationship. Counselors can use both verbal and nonverbal methods to express how clients matter. Early in counseling sessions, counselors can verbally express how much clients matter in the process and how their attendance and commitment to counseling strengthens the relationship and the likelihood of success. Also, counselors can explore with clients how they matter to the coconstruction of counseling as it progresses in order to meet their personal, social, and cultural needs in counseling.

Counselors are encouraged to verbally remind clients on a regular basis of how they matter to them. In addition, when clients miss sessions, counselors should follow up to let clients know they were missed. These follow-ups show clients they are important and that they are relied on for counseling success. As clients are given these responsibilities in the counseling relationship, it is likely that they will begin to feel accountable to themselves, to their counselor, and to their counseling process—they will matter.

Counselors are trained to actively listen and to demonstrate verbal empathy and compassion by reflecting a client’s concerns and emotions. Counselors’ use of empathic eye contact and nonverbal gestures allows clients to perceive their importance to their counselors. In addition, the counseling relationship contains a sense of “being” that illustrates patience from counselors. This sense of being and patience may allow clients to perceive that they matter to counselors and to the relationship. Finally, some counselors feel comfortable initiating ethical touch in counseling, which serves as an explicit indicator that clients matter to their counselors. Through intentional demonstrations of attention, importance, and reliance (Elliott et al., 2004), counselors can facilitate clients’ feelings of mattering, thus strengthening the counseling relationship.

With the inclusion of mattering as a successful method for strengthening counseling relationships, the need arises to include exploration of this interaction in counselor training. Counselor educators should expose counselors-in-training to the mattering experience so students can consider ways in which they can implement it in their own lives and in counseling relationships. To experience significance and mattering in our own lives is to realize the power of facilitating others’ sense of mattering. Finally, as the body of literature focusing on mattering increases, the counseling profession is charged with exploring this construct with diverse populations across the life span.

The Future of Mattering Research

Elliott et al. (2004) presented a comprehensive validity study that places mattering to others “on the map” for future research efforts. The mattering research movement in the social work, sociology, and psychology fields leads the social sciences in investigating this component of the human experience. Mattering to others is a powerful dynamic between counselors and clients and provides strength to the counseling relationship. However, there have been but few efforts in the counseling profession to explore the mattering experience of individuals who may present as clients in counseling. Some of the mattering research that has surfaced in the counseling literature has included investigations with various populations such as adolescents, minority and nonminority persons, persons in business, college undergraduates, adult college students, school counselors, medical residents and their spouses, and military trainees (Connolly & Myers, 2002; Dixon Rayle, 2006; Dixon Rayle & Chung, in press; Dixon Rayle & Myers, 2004; Marshall, 2004; Myers & Bechtel, 2004; Powers, Myers, Tingle, & Powers, 2004).

The paucity of mattering research in the counseling literature allows for a future rich in prospects for investigations regarding mattering. Future studies with individuals across the entire life span would aid in understanding the fluidity and changing nature of mattering to others as persons age. Variations in mattering that are influenced by gender and age likely affect mattering as a method in counseling. In addition, studies focusing on individuals from diverse racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and family structures would shed light on populations that may experience varying degrees of mattering. Additional validation studies would further the understanding of the mattering experience as it relates to counseling. Indeed, any future research will aid in counselors’ knowledge and understanding of mattering to others and allow for the creation of mattering interventions for use in counseling. In turn, outcome research should be conducted to evaluate clients’ subjective experiences of mattering to their counselors and in counseling relationships.

Summary

The evolving nature of the counseling profession allows for the investigation of lesser known social psychological constructs such as mattering to others. This powerful experience is needed by all people, including clients and counselors, and thus has promising prospects for strengthening counseling relationships. The future of mattering in the counseling profession includes exciting research possibilities and efficacious practice implications and will allow for counselors to have yet
another method for helping clients to find and to make meaning in their lives. It seems certain that in counseling, mattering matters.

References


