ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mattering at the Intersection of Psychology, Philosophy, and Politics

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Highlights

- Reviews the construct of mattering.
- Discusses mattering in the context of contemporary political debates.
- Relates mattering to existing constructs within community psychology.

Abstract Mattering is an ideal state of affairs consisting of two complementary psychological experiences: feeling valued and adding value. Human beings can feel valued by, and add value to, self, others, work, and community. To make sure that the need for mattering is fulfilled, we must balance feeling valued with adding value. Moreover, we must balance adding value to self with adding value to others. Unfortunately, the dominant neoliberal philosophy does not support the values required to ensure the experience of mattering. Whereas a healthy and fair society would require equilibrium among values for personal, relational, and collective well-being, the dominant philosophy in many parts of the world favors personal at the expense of relational and collective values. Neoliberal economic and social policies have resulted in diminished sense of mattering for millions of people. Some people respond to cultural pressures to achieve higher status by becoming depressive or aggressive. Some marginalized groups, in turn, support xenophobic, nationalistic, and populist policies in an effort to regain a sense of mattering. To make sure that everyone matters, we must align the psychology, philosophy, and politics of mattering. The political struggle for a just and equitable distribution of mattering takes place in social movements and the policy arena. The perils and promises of these efforts are considered.

Introduction

One thing I observed living in various continents is that many different, even contradictory behaviors, have common origins: the need to belong and the need to matter (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Flett, 2018; Sarason, 1988). In some places, it is easier to feel like you matter and you belong than in others. When I was a professor at Vanderbilt University, I had a friend who used to say that Nashville is a place that makes you feel *more* welcome than you really are. Here in Miami, I have another friend who claims that Miami is a city that makes you feel *less* welcome than you really are. Appearances can be deceiving, but you know when you are welcome and when you feel like you matter.

Mattering, the experience that you are valued and that you can add value, is highly relatable across geographic and cultural boundaries (Goldstein, 2015; Prilleltensky, 2014). Yet, despite being highly sought after, and much needed for thriving, mattering is not evenly distributed across populations. Some have too much of it, while other have too little. I discuss in this paper mattering at the intersection of psychology, philosophy, and politics, with the aim of making mattering accessible, in the right dosage, to everyone. I will make the point that too little or too much mattering can result in deleterious personal and communal consequences.

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In the right amount, however, mattering can contribute to personal and collective flourishing.

My argument consists of three parts. In the first part, I make the case that mattering is a fundamental psychological need. Failure to meet that need results in significant suffering to the person, and potential damage to the people and communities surrounding that individual. The second part of my argument contends that for mattering to materialize, certain moral values must be present. I will postulate that for mattering to emerge, in the right proportion, societies must achieve an equilibrium among values for personal, relational, and communal well-being. One of the reasons mattering is either lacking or excessive in some societies is because they fail to recognize the importance of relational values and bridging social capital (Putnam, 2001). While much is made of tensions between liberal and collectivist values (Mulhall & Swift, 1996), few societies pay much attention at all to the need to build bridges across groups, making some people feel like they do not matter (Dorling, 2017; Payne, 2017; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018). With some clarity regarding the psychological nature of mattering, and the types of values required for its growth, I will address the political uses and abuses of mattering, and the struggle to meet this need for the population.

In short, I would like to suggest that mattering is a psychological need, the result of certain configurations of values, and the subject of political contestation. Moreover, I would like to show the tension among psychological, philosophical, and political perspectives on mattering, and suggest ways of aligning these approaches to promote mattering for all.

The Psychology of Mattering

Mattering as a Need

Mattering consists of *feeling valued* and *adding value* (Prilleltensky, 2014, 2016). When we feel valued, we are appreciated, respected, and recognized. When we add value, we are able to make a contribution or make a difference. These concepts are well-known in community psychology. Feeling valued incorporates respect for diversity, the need to belong, inclusion, and fairness. Adding value consists of empowerment, autonomy, a sense of control over our lives, mastery, self-efficacy, and self-determination. There is a lot of literature in community psychology documenting the need for sense of community, diversity, inclusion, control, self-efficacy, and empowerment in order to experience wellness (Christens, 2019; Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002; Mannarini, Talo, Mezzi, & Procentese, 2018; Nelson, Kloos, & Ornelas, 2014; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Thomas & Zuckerman, 2018).

According to Rosenberg, mattering is an "individual's feeling that he or she counts, makes a difference" (Rosenberg, 1985, p. 215). In line with Rosenberg's work, Elliot, Kao, and Grant (2004) claim that mattering consists of three key factors: awareness, importance, and reliance. The first two factors reflect feeling valued, while the third one is part of adding value. A number of mattering measures refer to components of mattering as feeling important to others, feeling cared for, and being trusted to help others or to perform a task. In all cases, the items measuring mattering fall into one of the two categories of either feeling valued or adding value (DeForge & Barclay, 1997; Dixon Rayle, 2006; France & Finney, 2009; Jung & Heppner, 2017; Marcus, 1991; Yaden, Reece, Kellerman, Seligman, & Baumeister, 2019). This observation is corroborated by the recent review of mattering conducted by Flett (2018) and by studies of mattering at work (Dutton, Debebe, & Wrzesniewski, 2016; Schwartz, 2015). Taken as a whole, measures of mattering, as well as definitions and theoretical conceptualizations, point to the fact that mattering consists of two essential parts: feeling valued and adding value.

The two components of mattering represent fundamental human needs (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). In explaining psychological sense of community, Sarason argued that all of us "yearn to be part of a larger network of relationships that would give greater expression to our needs for intimacy, diversity, usefulness, and belongingness" (Sarason, 1988, p. 3). In these four words—intimacy, diversity, usefulness, and belongingness—Sarason captured the universal need for mattering. Sarason's words are echoed in a recent paper by Walton and Wilson in *Psychological Review:* "People want to feel connected to others: to be accepted and included, to be valued members of social groups, and to contribute positively to the lives of others" (Walton & Wilson, 2018, p. 624). In *The Psychology of Citizenship and Civic Engagement*, Pancer (2015) noted that "making a difference" was one of the most common motivations shared by volunteers and activists in hundreds of interviews that his research team conducted. Indeed, his book is full of references to that refrain. In short, there is plenty of evidence that feeling valued and adding value are preeminent human needs and motivations.

The need to feel valued derives from three motives: *survival*, *social*, and *existential*. As we shall see next, the attachment of a newborn to his caregivers is very much a survival need. Without the love and care of her parents, a baby cannot survive. The social need is expressed in the desire to belong to a group and to derive relational value from associations with friends and family. Finally, the

existential motive operates through dignity and fairness. These three sets of motives are separate but complementary.

Early in life, survival needs are met by caregivers. The quality of attachment to caregivers is highly influential in multiple life outcomes. Depending on parental emotional availability, children develop secure, avoidant, or anxious attachment styles that are going to have a lasting impact throughout their life (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Meeting the need for secure attachment is a keystone for healthy development. As Shaver and Mikulincer note, a secure attachment is "a felt sense, rooted in one's history of close relationship, that the world is generally safe, other people are generally helpful when called on, and I, as a unique individual, am valuable and lovable, thanks to being valued and loved by others" (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012, p. 291). They go on to claim that attachment security "provides a psychological foundation for easing existential anxieties and constructing an authentic sense of continuity, coherence, meaning, connectedness, and autonomy" (2012, p. 291).

The consequences of insecure attachments are grave. As Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) observe elsewhere, "insecurely attached people harbor serious doubts about their self-worth and self-efficacy. They lean toward hopeless and helpless patterns…. are susceptible to rejection, criticism, and disapproval; and suffer from self-criticism and destructive perfectionism" (p. 370). Needless to say, attachment matters for mattering.

Studying attachment in adults, Robles and Kane (2014) found that various forms of insecure attachment result in problems related to stress, excessive cortisol release, sleep problems, and even skin repair and eating disorders. People with avoidant attachment style are more prone to experience arthritis and a host of chronic pain issues. Those with anxious attachment style had higher prevalence of stroke, heart attack, high blood pressure, ulcers, and headaches.

These unhealthy outcomes derive primarily from early relationships that failed to provide the infant with a secure base, a healthy self-image, and a loving relationship. Extreme deprivation and neglect result in failure to thrive, and even death. As John Bowlby claimed, attachment is a survival need (1969, 1973). Most children who experience insecure attachments survive physically but they suffer psychologically. Without a secure attachment children do not feel valued, and without feeling valued their sense of mattering is shaky at best.

If the first reason for needing to feel valued concerns survival motives, the second one pertains to social drives. The need to belong is a fundamental pillar of mattering. In a landmark paper, psychologists Baumeister and Leary (1995) called the need to belong and the desire for interpersonal attachments a "fundamental human motivation." They suggest that "belongingness can be almost as compelling a need as food" (p. 498).

If secure attachment to a parent accounts for the need for survival early in life, affiliation to a collective guarantees protection against enemies, scarcity, and natural disasters. However, belongingness is not just a protective mechanism, it is also a means of flourishing (Fowers, 2017). People form bonds for defensive as well as growth and fulfillment aims. There seems to be a natural inclination to seek memberships in collectives. Indeed, people are willing to invest considerable time and effort in forming and nurturing social bonds.

Just as belonging is a powerful tonic for well-being, exclusion is toxic for health. As Baumeister and Leary observed, "being accepted, included, or welcomed leads to a variety of positive emotions (e.g., happiness, elation, contentment, and calm), whereas being rejected, excluded, or ignored leads to potent negative feelings (e.g., anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy, and loneliness" (1995, p. 508).

The negative consequences of exclusion and loneliness extend to the physical realm; so much so that mortality rates are higher for divorced, single, or widowed individuals. Fatal heart attacks are more common among lonely people, as are tuberculosis and cancer. Loneliness has also been associated with lower levels of immunity, such as natural killer cells, and higher levels of stress hormones like cortisol. It is also highly correlated with depression, unhappiness, and ill health. Among the elderly, isolation is related to higher mortality rates and increased risk for cognitive decline and heart attacks (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Perissinotto, Stijacic, & Covinsky, 2012; Pinker, 2014). In the UK, loneliness has become such a problem that the government has recently appointed a new minister to deal with the issue (Yeginsu, 2018).

The need to survive, and the desire to belong, constitutes the first two pillars of feeling valued. The third one entails existential concerns related to dignity. Dignity is the backbone of mattering. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines dignity as "the quality or state of being worthy, honored, or esteemed." The feelings of being recognized, acknowledged, included, and respected for who we are or what we know provide us with dignity. They make us feel human.

To feel worthy, we have to feel that we are equal to others, and that we deserve to be treated with respect. We have to experience fairness in relationships, at work, and in society. We cannot experience dignity without fairness (Gollwitzer & van Prooijen, 2016; Miller, 2001; Payne, 2017).

We seem to be wired for fairness. As human beings we are hypersensitive to fairness transgressions. So much so that lack of fairness and rejection register in the brain

as physical pain. But the opposite is also true. As social neuropsychologist Lieberman (2013) notes, fairness feels like chocolate in the brain. We seek fairness and pursue dignity. We know right away when someone makes us feel valued and when someone is dismissive. We have highly developed radars for dignity.

From children's exclamations "it's not fair" on the playground, to feeling dissed by somebody at work, evidence of our sensitivity to injustice is everywhere. The psychological wound inflicted in unfair treatment is very painful. We feel deprived of our humanity when we are dismissed, ignored, or devalued (Miller, 2001; Sun, 2013).

Researchers from Europe and the United States show that insults to our dignity come in different ways, from pity, to invisibility, bullying, and upward social comparisons. Any insinuation that we are less than other people ignites circuits of frustration and anger. These assaults need not be intentional but they are hurtful nonetheless (Riva & Eck, 2016; Williams, Forgas, & von Hippel, 2005).

Constant exposure to social inequality, in a culture that extols material success, is a serious threat to dignity (Payne, 2017). It is a reminder that other people are worth more than me. These upward social comparisons, research shows, are especially pernicious for poor people. They are always primed to think that they do not measure up because they do not have the education, language, houses, cars, watches, clothes, or gadgets other people have. The social cues are everywhere, from TV commercials to social media.

To matter, it is not enough to feel appreciated and recognized. Being valued is a necessary but insufficient condition for mattering. To feel fully human, and to matter, we need skills and opportunities to add value, to make a contribution, to ourselves and others. Having a voice is crucial in judging the fairness of a situation (Gollwitzer & van Prooijen, 2016). It is also essential in adding value. It is part of being noticed. We cannot add value without voice and visibility. We need to be present, physically and psychologically.

Needless to say, our opportunities are influenced by the environment we live in. Some social ecologies are more supportive than others, but the aspiration to add value remains, regardless of the particular context (Biglan, 2015).

The needs to make a difference, to master the environment, and to express ourselves, are well ingrained in all of us (Ryan & Deci, 2017). We yearn to be in control of our destiny and to learn new skills. This is obvious in child development. Babies relish the opportunity to feed themselves, while toddlers marvel at the art of walking. The glee of conquering challenges is for all to see. As we grow, we continue the search for new skills, and paths to potentiate our talents. Most of all, we want to make a difference, in our lives, and the lives of others.

Three well-established psychological theories attest to the universal need to add value: self-determination, self-efficacy, and meaning in life. These three drivers can be applied to a variety of domains, from relationship-building to sports, from learning a new language to performance at work. All reflect something fundamental about human beings: Our motivation to be engaged, express ourselves, manifest our agency, have a purpose, and find meaning in life. When these needs are thwarted, we matter less.

According to Ryan and Deci (2017), the psychologists who developed self-determination theory, we thrive when we experience autonomy, competence, and high-quality relationships. The satisfaction of these needs predicts wellness and vitality. Autonomy refers to the ability to behave according to our values and interests. When we experience autonomy, we pursue a course of action that is determined by us, free from psychological or physical coercion. We lead a life that we believe is worth living, and not the life that someone or something imposed on us. We feel that we matter when we experience autonomy over our decisions and actions.

Competence is a manifestation of our need to master the environment and feel effective. Without competence, we cannot make a difference. To function productively in the world, we need to know how to perform certain actions that are grounded in knowledge. But to operate effectively, we need more than formal education, we need to know how to manage ourselves and how to manage other people. Although these are called soft skills, I can hardly think of more sturdy skills than knowing how deal with self and others.

To matter, we have to feel competent in some areas of life. None of us are experts at everything, but all of us must feel good at something. This something can be parenting, soccer, teaching, carpentry, or surgery. The area of expertise can be as varied as human predilections, but to matter we must feel that we are making a contribution in some area of life: at home, at work, or in the community.

The third pillar of self-determination theory is relatedness, which speaks to the need to establish meaningful and supportive social connections. Without them we feel lonely, we do not belong, and we do not matter. An obsessive focus on the self, at the expense of prosocial behaviors, typically derives from efforts to compensate for earlier deprivations. Environments that thwart our needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness lead to dysfunction. Materialism and status-seeking behaviors reflect insecurities based on early experiences of rejection or neglect (Gonick & Kasser, 2018; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018). Anti-social behaviors usually emanate from controlling and cold environments, while perfectionistic

tendencies are efforts to get love through displays of competence (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Healthy environments are those that support personal choice and autonomy, encourage skill acquisition, and show love and affection. Unhealthy settings exact unrealistic demands, pose overly challenging tasks, and fail to provide warmth and affection. Growing up in healthy environments facilitates thriving and flourishing. Growing up in unhealthy ones predisposes people to negative outcomes such as obsessive pathologies, self-preoccupation, depression, conduct disorders, impulsivity, and in certain cases eating disorders and paranoid personalities (Biglan, 2015). The impact of context cannot be overstated, for it can lead to pathological efforts to matter, or internalization of messages that we will never matter (Riva & Eck, 2016; Williams et al., 2005).

Self-efficacy is the belief that we can take action to achieve certain outcomes (Bandura, 1995, 2001). Self-efficacy is essential to adding value to our lives and improving the well-being of others. Without the belief that we can make a difference, we cannot get out of bed, finish a degree, polish our resume, go for a jog, or eat more vegetables.

The belief in our ability to achieve goals makes us resilient in the face of adversity. We are better able to cope with stress and vulnerabilities. When applied to health habits such as physical activity and proper nutrition, self-efficacy predicts longer, healthier, and happier lives (Gancarczyk, Czekierda, & Luszczynska, 2014; Maddux, 2000). Like autonomy, competence, and relatedness, self-efficacy can be nurtured or impeded by more or less favorable environments (Bandura, 1995, 2001).

Mattering and adding value are also central to the experience of meaning in life (Costin & Vignoles, 2019; Heintzelman & King, 2014). Autonomy, competence, and self-efficacy can be applied to many pursuits that provide us with a sense of meaning. The need for self-determination requires self-efficacy. Needs require competencies, and competencies lead to activities that produce meaning. Meaning comes in many forms and is derived from many sources. Most thinkers agree that having a purpose is a human need and that it provides a sense of meaning (Esfahani Smith, 2017; Frankl, 2002; Markman, Proulx, & Lindberg, 2013; Steger, 2012a). The purpose can relate to personal, interpersonal, or social aspirations. Raising a family, finishing a degree, following a tradition, and acting according to one's values are examples of personal goals. Showing caring and compassion are instances of relational pursuits. Fighting injustice and discrimination combine passion with purpose. Meaning is derived from actions, in the pursuit of goals, based on justifiable values. If excellence is a value, we shall strive to do our work with distinction. If fairness guides our lives, we shall fight injustice at home, work, and the community.

In *Meanings of Life*, psychologist Roy Baumeister (1991) claims that we derive meaning from a sense of purpose, self-worth, a value-system, and efficacy. These elements are synergic. Purpose provides a direction, values justify our actions, and efficacy makes it all happen. Self-worth has dual roles. It generates action and, in turn, benefits from action. Feeling valued motivates us to engage in even more prosocial behavior, which is going to reward us with satisfaction and recognition.

The role of efficacy and control cannot be underestimated. Exercising control is at the heart of adding value. We add value by exerting control over our actions and the environment. Victor Frankl (2002) could not direct the course of events in the concentration camp, but he could control his reactions to it. Mandela (2013) was in jail for nearly three decades, but within the confines of his cell he could control his behavior, establish an exercise regimen, and maintain mental sharpness. Both men were guided by a dream of liberation. In the direst of circumstances, they regulated their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, as much as humanly possible. This sense of control was vital for survival.

Very few achieve greatness the way Frankl or Mandela did, but most of us are engaged in meaningful activities nonetheless. We experience meaning when we focus on our work, teach our children values, or support our friends. Indeed, many people experience meaning, and the more they enjoy it, the better off they are. People who report having a sense of meaning in life claim that life has significance, that their lives make sense, and that they have a clear purpose. Those who report a high sense of meaning are usually happier, have more life satisfaction, are more engaged at work, and have a sense of control over their lives. In contrast, those who report little meaning in life experience more negative affect, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and workaholism (Markman et al., 2013; Steger, 2012a, 2012b). Victor Frankl credits his own survival in concentration camps to his sense of meaning (Frankl, 2002).

In summary, we can see that the two components of mattering reflect fundamental human needs. Feeling valued encompasses such needs as secure attachment, belongingness, dignity, and respect. Adding value, in turn, reflects the needs for self-determination, self-efficacy, and meaning.

Conceptual Framework

The first thing to note about the mattering wheel represented in Figure 1 is that mattering is at the very center, supported by two experiences: *feeling valued* and *adding value*. By feeling valued, we mean feeling worthy, acknowledged, and appreciated. By adding value, we
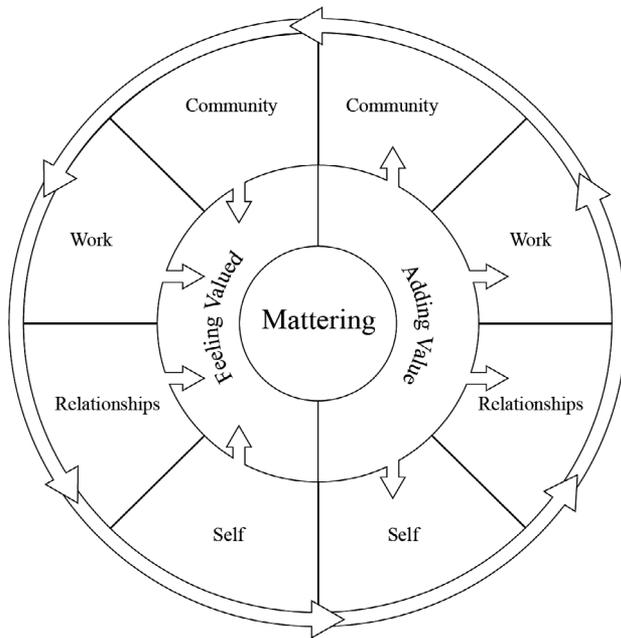
Fig. 1 The mattering wheel: A conceptual framework

mean making a meaningful contribution, to yourself and others.

The second important feature of the wheel is that it contains eight sectors. The left-hand side has four sources of *feeling valued;* the right-hand side four beneficiaries of *adding value*. The four sources of feeling valued are self, relationships, work, and community. Naturally, they are all fluid and related. Experiences at work impact our self-esteem and nurture our aspirations (Dutton et al., 2016; Worline & Dutton, 2017). When Joseph Molesley, a foot-man in the memorable *Downton Abbey* series exclaimed "imagine, Molesley, valet to the Earl of Grantham!" he was relishing the thought of a promotion, and the prospect of higher status. We regard ourselves as more or less competent depending on the feedback we receive from our boss and colleagues. Molesley judged his worth based on the position he occupied on the hierarchy at the castle. He is not atypical.

But mattering is not just about feeling valued. We have a profound need to make a difference in the world. Unless you are pathologically self-centered, or highly influenced by the dominant *Me Culture,* you will feel a need to connect with others and make a difference in their lives. We want to add value to ourselves, others, work, and community.

Muhammad Yunus went to Vanderbilt University, my former school, to get a Ph.D. in economics. Yunus is a rock star at Vanderbilt, and every time he returns to campus it's a big celebration. I was still working there during one of his visits. Yunus became famous because he helped the poor in his native Bangladesh. He spent a lot

of time with farmers, especially women, in rural areas. He wanted to understand their plight. Despite hard labor and long hours, most farmers were exceedingly poor. Once he understood that they were poor because they were indebted to loan sharks, he went on to create the Grameen Bank, which provided loans with decent interest rates. His work lifted millions of people out of poverty, and he went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Yunus added value to his community and his country. He did so with ingenuity and tenacity (Yunus, 2007).

Like Yunus, most of us want to make a difference. Connecting with loved ones and with a higher cause makes us feel alive. To fulfill this need and aspiration, we need to nurture self-efficacy, or the belief that we can make a difference in the world. Self, relationships, work, and community are arenas of mattering. We add value to ourselves and others through *acts of wellness* and *acts of fairness* (Prilleltensky, 2012).

We should point out that the *work* segment in the mattering wheel, a big source as well as a beneficiary of mattering, *does not refer only to paid employment, but to your main occupation*. Many people work but they do not receive financial compensation. You may be a stay-at-home parent, full-time student, or volunteer at a local hospital. For our purposes, these activities constitute your work. In short, mattering refers to paid or unpaid work, either at home or at outside. If you invest a lot of time in parenting, studying, or working at the office, what happens while you are engaged in these endeavors has a lot to do with mattering (Prilleltensky, 2016; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006).

Something else to note about the wheel: *all eight components are important and require attention*. Exactly how much attention depends on stage of life. But in principle, we should devote some time and effort to all of them (Prilleltensky et al., 2015).

We should aim to achieve two types of balance in mattering. *The first balancing act is between feeling valued and adding value*. The two must be present to experience mattering. A life of complete sacrifice without any appreciation is unsustainable and frustrating for most of us. Our ultra-social nature requires connection and a degree of affirmation. By the same token, a life of complete self-absorption is isolating at best, and harmful at worst. You just have to witness the narcissism epidemic to realize that feeling valued, without adding value to others, is a dangerous path for individuals and societies (Twenge & Campbell, 2013). This is why there cannot be individual or collective mattering without balancing the need to feel valued with the moral imperative to add value, and not just to the self, but to others. This is why mattering cannot be devoid of values and responsibility.

The second balance required in the mattering wheel *is among the four sources of feeling valued, on one hand; and among the four sources of adding value, on the other*. This means that we should feel valued by, and add value to, self and others. In this context, by "others" I mean people in close relationships, at work, and in the community. Maintaining equilibrium among the four sources of mattering is important because we cannot rely just on one. Other people may show care and affection toward us, but nothing matters unless we care for ourselves as well. On the other side of the wheel, adding value only to yourself will lead to selfishness.

The mattering wheel is a prescription for personal meaning and social harmony at the same time. By balancing attention between self and others, we maintain a dual focus on feeling good and doing good on one hand, and between rights and responsibilities on the other.

This brings us to a few assumptions about this wheel that are worth mentioning. The first one is that *human beings have a limited amount of psychological energy* to devote to any of the eight parts. We have a certain amount of psychological energy to be invested in various aspects of mattering, and if we invest all of it in one bucket, there will be none left for others. We must pay attention to ourselves, others, work, and community (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013).

The second assumption is that *the eight sectors are interconnected*. Too much investment in any one might detract from others. Workaholics provide a very good example. If you ignore your own needs because you are always adding value to your work, what you will get is not mattering, but stress, burnout, and possibly a heart attack. If you invest all your mental energy in adding value only to yourself, and ignore the well-being of others, do not expect much caring in return.

We aim to have a virtuous cycle where the benefits of feeling valued will lead to adding value. When others make you feel like you matter, you are more likely to have confidence to play an active role in their lives. The more assets you bring to your community, the more likely you are to receive positive feedback, engendering a positive feedback loop. Psychologists Jennifer Crocker, Amy Canevello, and Ashley Brown, recently put it this way: "giving increases social integration and connection, which bolsters the sense that one is valued by and valuable to others….Giving support increases people's sense that they have value to and can make a difference for others…leading to a sense of belonging and connectedness" (2017, pp. 303–304).

But *vicious cycles are also possible*. Growing up under conditions of neglect, where your worth is questioned, will likely result in timidity and self-doubt. Such characteristics do not bode well for making a contribution to anybody. What's more, they can lead to disease, dysfunction, and early death (Biglan, 2015).

Dynamics and consequences

Hitherto, experiences of *feeling valued* and *adding value* have been studied in isolation, but in fact, they are two sides of the same coin. You may feel valued, but if you do not have opportunities or skills to make a meaningful contribution, to yourself or others, your life is incomplete. The same goes for adding value. You may be able to help yourself or others, but in the absence of feeling valued, something important is missing. This is why I bring together these two symbiotic components of mattering.

Feeling valued and *adding value* are not only complementary needs, but highly interdependent. Marginalization and exclusion engender frustration, alienation, and even aggression, which make it very hard to gain positive regard. Appreciation, on the other hand, leads to self-confidence, mastery, and the desire to make a difference. This, in turn, will make you feel valued.

Experiences of exclusion hurt because they threaten your sense of mattering; if they happen often enough, research shows, they shatter your psychological and physical well-being. Indeed, the experience of exclusion has been linked to serious consequences, ranging from stress and depression to suicide to mass killings (Bernstein, 2016; Elliot, 2009; Flett, 2018; Riva & Eck, 2016; Williams et al., 2005). In some instances, as in the case of Christian Picciolini (2015), who became a skinhead to find acceptance, marginalization leads to extremist groups. There, they experience a sense of belonging.

It is not surprising that mattering to one's family would protect us from risks and threats. In one of the most comprehensive studies on mattering, Gregory Elliot (2009), a social psychologist at Brown University, examined the relationship between mattering to one's family in adolescence and two types of problems: anti-social and self-destructive behaviors. The study, which included over 2000 teenagers, confirmed the fundamental importance of mattering, and the risks associated with its absence.

Elliot defines mattering as the perception that "we are a significant part of the world around us" (2009, p. 2). As noted earlier, for him, mattering consists of awareness, importance, and reliance. Awareness implies that others notice our presence and that we are not invisible. Importance refers to the fact that we are the object of someone's caring and concern. They worry about us when we are down, and celebrate with us when we are up. We are part of their lives. Reliance, in turn, means that other people have faith in us and come to us for help when required. We feel needed and valued because we have something meaningful to offer. Awareness and importance fit very

well with the aspect of mattering I call feeling valued. Reliance, in turn, parallels the notion of adding value. In this case, adding value to others.

Confirming Elliot's predictions, lack of mattering in one's family resulted in both anti-social and self-destructive behaviors. With regard to the former, he argues that teens will do anything to feel like they matter, including dysfunctional acts of defiance. Faced with indifference and disregard from their own families, teens "force mattering by acting in outrageous and often undesirable ways" (p. 119). The findings showed that as a sense of mattering in the family decreased, violence against others, vandalism, truancy, theft, and carrying weapons increased sharply. According to Elliot, it is better to get negative attention than no attention at all. His results, as well as analyses of school shootings, prove the point (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003).

But lack of mattering can also result in self-destructive behavior. In the same study, Elliot found that adolescents who matter to their families were far less likely to binge drink, use illicit drugs, and plan or attempt suicide. Clearly, mattering is a protective mechanism, and not just in childhood and adolescence. Its protective qualities persist throughout the lifecycle.

Feeling valued as a child is one of the best predictors of health and wellness as an adult. Feeling neglected, in contrast, is one of the best predictors of disease and dysfunction. The extent of the connection between abuse and family problems in childhood, and disease in adulthood, was confirmed in a landmark study in the mid-nineties.

The Center for Disease Control partnered with Kaiser Permanente in San Diego to examine the relationship of health risk behaviors and disease in adults to exposure to abuse and family dysfunction in childhood. Over 9,500 people participated in the study (Felitti et al., 1998). Participants were asked about early experiences of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. They were also asked about violence against their mother in the home, and living with people who were substance abusers, mentally ill, suicidal, or were ever imprisoned. All these conditions were termed exposure to adverse childhood experiences.

The results showed that, compared with people who had no exposure to adverse experiences, people who were exposed to four or more adverse experiences had a 4- to 12-fold increase in risk of drug abuse, depression, suicide, and alcoholism. Moreover, they also had a 2- to 4-fold increase in smoking, self-reported poor health, and sexually transmitted diseases. Finally, they had a 1.4 to 1.6 increase in severe obesity.

In general, the study showed that the more adverse childhood experiences people had to endure, the higher their risk for heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, liver disease, and skeletal fractures. These are all leading causes of death. Needless to say, when you are preoccupied with alcoholism, and afflicted with serious diseases, you have less bandwidth to contribute to others and to yourself. This study provides strong evidence that feeling devalued, a clear result of abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction, is predictive of limitations in our ability to add value. Depression and suicidal ideation, experienced by many participants who were exposed to neglect, are the opposite of self-love and the antithesis to adding value. Alcoholism is so all consuming that it limits how much people can contribute to others. In fact, alcoholics exact an incredible toll on their families.

While this study focused on childhood and family environment, the negative consequences of feeling devalued are also very much part of the workplace and life in the community. Field studies and laboratory experiments show that when adults are excluded from a group they also respond with anxiety, anger, and even aggression. Their self-esteem goes down, and they are hesitant to get involved due to fear of rejection (Bernstein, 2016; Leary, 2005; Riva & Eck, 2016; Williams et al., 2005). The less you get involved, the fewer the opportunities to add value and to get recognition in return. This is why throughout the lifecycle it is crucial to help others feel valued.

In contrast to experiences of exclusion, mattering feels very good. So much so that our health and happiness go up every time we experience these positive emotions. In fact, we live longer and feel more fulfilled when we experience them regularly (Flett, 2018). We get a sense of meaning, importance, and satisfaction in knowing that our actions make a difference in somebody's life. As leading social motivation, researchers put it,

> Giving can create a warm glow of happiness, boost self-esteem, increase self-efficacy, and reduce symptoms of depression. It predicts improvements in physical health and even predicts how long people live. It can strengthen social relationships, creating and strengthening social bonds and fostering the sense that one can make a valuable contribution to others.
>
> (Crocker, Canevello, & Brown, 2017, pp. 315–316)

When it comes to the workplace, workers' perceptions of mattering are important for productivity, engagement, and overall well-being (Dutton et al., 2016; Jung & Heppner, 2017; Shuck & Reio, 2014; Worline & Dutton, 2017). Organizational cultures that make employees feel valued and enable them to make meaningful contributions enhance worker well-being and productivity (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Grawitch & Ballard, 2016; Nelson, 2016; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

In the last five decades since Sarason conceptualized a psychological sense of community, scores of studies have

documented the beneficial effects of feeling needed, useful, and loved by family and friends. Among the positive correlates of sense of community and social support, we find psychological well-being, physical well-being, resilience, resistance to disease, longevity, vitality, and happiness (Fisher et al., 2002; Hystad & Carpiano, 2009; Lombard & Brown, 2014; Painter, 2013; Pinker, 2014). Following Sarason's work, McMillan and Chavis (1986) formulated a clear theory of psychological sense of community consisting of four components: membership, influence, integration, and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Their definition states that "sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). Once they proposed this model, it was not long before other community psychologists tested the impact of sense of community on well-being.

In one of the first studies to explore that connection in community psychology, Davidson and Cotter (1991) conducted interviews in South Carolina and Alabama with three samples consisting of 151, 399, and 442 people, respectively. They used a survey of sense of community consisting of items such as "I feel like I belong here" (tapping into feeling valued) and "I feel I can contribute to city politics if I want to" (tapping into adding value). They also measured the well-being of participants by asking them about their levels of happiness, worrying, and coping. Davidson and Cotter report that across all three samples a significant and positive relationship between sense of community and subjective well-being was found. Since this study was published in 1991, multiple others have confirmed the positive association between high sense of community and various forms of happiness and health. Pancer (2015), for example, reviewed a number of studies in which participation in community affairs affected not only health but also longevity. In a number of investigations, those who were actively involved in the community lived longer than those who volunteered infrequently or not at all. Participants in these studies felt like they mattered, and this feeling enhanced their well-being.

This was precisely the conclusion that Piliavin and Siegl (2007) arrived at in their research on the benefits of volunteering in the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study. According to the researchers, mattering mediates the connection between volunteering and well-being. They discovered this through the use of longitudinal data. The study started in 1957, when a third of all graduating seniors in high school in Wisconsin, 10,317 in total were surveyed. Participants were interviewed again in 1975, 1992, and 2004. The results showed not only that volunteering predicted well-being and self-reported physical health, but that the effects were influenced by the feeling of mattering. The authors hypothesized that "well-being should result from volunteering by making people feel that they matter in the world" (p. 453). This was precisely what they found. They concluded that "volunteering increases psychological well-being in part because it leads people to feel that they have an important role in society and that their existence is important" (p. 460). In short, feeling valued and adding value are the secret sauce of volunteering. This is what increases physical and psychological well-being (Crocker et al., 2017).

In a comprehensive review of mattering in the community, Flett (2018) documents the positive effects of feeling like you matter, and the negative consequences of feeling like you do not. His review focuses on two populations, people with disabilities and adolescents. The first group was shown to experience significant challenges in achieving a sense of mattering. This is not surprising, given that many persons with disabilities face social and environmental barriers to participation.

For teens, a sense of mattering in the community is crucial for healthy development. The more teens feel like they matter, the better their academic records and engagement in school, the higher their levels of participation in community events, and the lower the risk of suicide. Conversely, the lower the sense of mattering, the higher the risk of delinquency and suicidal ideation. Flett (2018) confirmed earlier findings by Elliot (2009).

When people in a community feel that they matter and that they are valued, they are likely to experience self-compassion, autonomy, mastery, positive relations, overall and physical well-being, self-acceptance, and many other important positive benefits (Flett, 2018). But when mattering is blocked, we end up with all kinds of problems. For example, depression affects 322 million people around the world (World Health Organization, 2017). Globally, 85 percent of workers are either not engaged or actively disengaged at work (Gallup, 2017). Around the world, extreme ideologies are on the rise, posing a serious threat to liberal democracies (Harari, 2018).

What do depression, disengagement, and social disintegration have in common? They all result from lack of mattering. When we feel devalued, there are real psychological, organizational, and political consequences. Some consequences are internal—we get depressed, but some are external—we become aggressive. In James, 1890 William James said that "if every person we met cut us dead, and acted as if we were non-existent things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would before long well up in us" (pp. 293–294).

The people who most often feel invisible in society are people living in poverty. Linda Tirado, who recently published a memoir about living on minimum-wage in

America, said this: "The problem I have isn't just being undervalued—it's that it feels as though people go out of their way to make sure you know how useless you are" (Tirado, 2014, p. 26).

As a society, devaluing one another enhances conflict. Sometimes conflict can lead to a struggle for more freedom, as in the case of the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements. But sometimes it can lead to less freedom, as in the case of xenophobic movements (Fukuyama, 2018; Harari, 2018). In addition, there is another set of forces making it harder for us to matter to one another. Narcissism has reached epidemic proportions in recent decades (Twenge & Campbell, 2013). Inequality has also reached unprecedented levels (Payne, 2017; Sheskin, 2018). And despite the mounting evidence concerning global warming, we continue to ignore its consequences (IPCC, 2018). We live in a period of huge ecological entitlement.

What do narcissism, inequality, and ecological entitlement have in common? They reflect the belief that some lives are worth more than others. Some people feel overvalued—that it is okay to take up more resources, regardless of the impact on others.

At the University of Miami, we are invested in creating a culture of mattering. We define a culture of mattering as a culture where all of us feel valued and have an opportunity to add value. In a study, we conducted with approximately 4,700 faculty and staff we discovered that a sense of mattering predicts engagement and inclusiveness, which, together, predict six different domains of well-being. Inclusiveness predicted community, physical, social, purpose, and overall well-being. Engagement, in turn, predicted perceptions of overall, purpose, and financial well-being (Prilleltensky, 2019).

In contrast to the positive outcomes associated with mattering, when the need to feel valued is thwarted, we develop one of two types of problems: We feel either invisible or entitled (Riva & Eck, 2016; Williams et al., 2005; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018). When the need to add value is frustrated, we develop either helplessness or ruthlessness (Mikulincer, 1994; Williams, 2007). As we shall see next, the need to matter is affected by regnant social philosophies. Some societies make it easier on their people to feel like they matter because they promote values of equality and fairness.

The Philosophy of Mattering

Mattering as a Value

A value is a principle that guides us toward desirable and morally justifiable outcomes (Prilleltensky, 1997). In community psychology, for example, we believe in the value of empowerment because it leads toward the desirable outcome of people exerting control over their lives. We also believe in the value of social justice because it leads toward the equitable distribution of benefits and burdens in society. Along the same lines, I claim that mattering is a value because it leads toward feeling valued, respected, and recognized, because it enables us to exert control over our lives, help others, build community, and create a livable world. This bifocal approach to mattering, feeling valued and adding value, is supported by philosophical analyses of mattering (Goldstein, 2015; O'Brien, 1996). Philosopher Rebecca Goldstein (2015), for instance, claims that mattering consists of recognition (feeling valued) and achievement (adding value).

For mattering to work as a value in community psychology, there must be a balance between adding value to ourselves and adding value to others and the community. Otherwise, we end up with a culture of narcissism and entitlement, which is actually very prevalent today.

In community psychology, Bob Newbrough (1995) advocated for a balance among the values of liberty, fraternity, and equality. He called it the Third Position, going beyond the previous two positions of community and freedom. I later expanded his notion to propose that the values of the French Revolution are very well aligned with the aspirations of community psychology: Building a society where values for personal, relational, and communal well-being are in a state of equilibrium (Prilleltensky, 2001). If we focus exclusively on values for personal well-being, such as self-determination, we ignore collective values such as fairness. If we focus only on relational values such as participation, we ignore structures of inequality that lead to exclusion in the first place. We must create societies where there is an equilibrium among values for personal, relational, and collective well-being.

The genius of the French revolution was to offer values that bridge between personal and communal good. Liberty, equality, and fraternity, correspond, respectively, to personal, communal, and relational values. Liberty is analogous to autonomy and self-determination. Equality speaks to the need to foster a community where everyone has the same worth. Fraternity is the bridging value. If we care about each other, and we care about the community as a whole, we should uphold relational values like fraternity, solidarity, and belonging. Healthy societies pay attention to all of them. Equality without liberty robs people of their unique identity, whereas liberty without equality sends the message that certain groups are not as valued as others. Fraternity, in turn, reminds us to create bonds of solidarity and mutual help. There is no belonging without fraternity. Whereas freedom and equality may be regarded as human rights, fraternity represents human connection. Rights, without bonds of warmth and

affection, create walls. Fraternity, instead, creates bridges. The mattering wheel functions at its best when we pay attention to the triad: liberty, equality, and fraternity.

When individuals and corporations are not subjected to any kind of limits, they can engage in selfish, destructive behavior (Reich, 2018). This tendency is exacerbated when fraternity is absent. The erosion of social capital and neighborhoods accounts, in part, for the polarization between values of freedom and principles of justice (Putnam, 2001). One political camp focuses on justice, while the other concentrates on personal liberty. To reconcile the two tendencies, we need more dialogue, which, in itself, is a way of adding value to ourselves and society.

The benefit of introducing mattering as a key value in community psychology is that it embodies the balance required between self and others, feeling valued and adding value, and rights and responsibilities. Moreover, it incorporates relational values such as making people feel valued. Mattering is a unifying value since it builds upon personal values such as self-determination, communal values in making a contribution to others, and relational values such as caring and making other people feel respected and worthy. In addition, like the values of empowerment and inclusion, mattering is grounded in empirical evidence that such experience is beneficial to the individual and the community as a whole.

The value of mattering avoids the dichotomies often reported between diversity and sense of community (Neal, 2017) since it is constituted to acknowledge the importance of both. Feeling valued, regardless of unique demographic and identity markers, is a pillar of mattering. Building community, in light of these diversities, is very much part of mattering as well.

Neoliberal ideologies, which are *de facto* the dominant ideologies of most Western nations, privilege personal well-being at the expense of relational and communal well-being (Giridharadas, 2018; Lowery, 2018). It is all about the individual, personal freedom, entrepreneurship, personal responsibility, and bootstrapping. These are the values of capitalism.

Competing Social Philosophies

The dominant social philosophy of mattering in many Western nations is the *Me Culture* (Davis, 2015; Giridharadas, 2018; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018). In the current *Me Culture,* many people espouse a narrative that says: "I have the right to feel valued by others so that I may experience wellness." This is a limiting view of mattering that is very prevalent. In the *We Culture* I propose, the narrative is different: "We all have the right *and* responsibility to feel valued *and* add value, to self *and* others, so that we may all

experience wellness *and* fairness." I argue that the dominant *me* discourse is 100% right about 50% of the problem. We must balance the current focus on rights *with* responsibilities, the current emphasis on feeling valued *with* adding value, the betterment of self *with* betterment of others, and the pursuit of wellness *with* the pursuit of fairness.

Whereas the philosophy of mattering would prescribe a balance between rights and responsibilities, feeling valued and adding value, to self and others, we live in a culture where only half of the mattering equation is promoted, the half that exalts the self. Indeed, there is a lot of evidence that many Western societies are becoming more and more narcissistic. Psychologists Twenge and Campbell (2013) have conducted extensive research on narcissism; a problem that has been on the rise for the last four decades, with steep increases in the last fifteen years. A conservative estimate by these authors is that 1 out of 4 adults will experience clinical symptoms of Narcissistic Personality Disorder by age 65.

In contrast to *Me Cultures, We Cultures* seek a balance among the three types of values: personal well-being or liberty, relational well-being or fraternity, and communal well-being or equality (Dorling, 2017; Partanen, 2016). *We Cultures* limit personal liberties in order to foster equality, and usually do this through democratic and participatory processes that foster solidarity and relational well-being. It is hard to reconcile personal and communal well-being without relational values of participation and procedural justice. As people in the disability community say, "nothing about us without us."

We Cultures invest more in communities through redistribution of wealth and opportunities. When societies achieve a better balance among the three types of values, we see more life satisfaction and better health and psychosocial outcomes (Dorling, 2017; Marmot, 2015; Partanen, 2016)

In a study community psychologist Salvatore Di Martino and I have conducted, we discovered that countries where there is more social justice, there are higher levels of life satisfaction (Di Martino & Prilleltensky, unpublished data). This may not come as a surprise to community psychologists, but it is nice to have robust empirical evidence of a cross-national study. We used the Social Justice Index developed by the Bertelsmann-Stiftung Institute in Germany. The index includes measures of poverty prevention, access to education, labor market inclusion, social cohesion, lack of discrimination, health, and intergenerational justice. Not surprisingly, the study found that countries with higher levels of social justice reported higher levels of life satisfaction. The Nordic countries lead the pack, with the United States, Australia, South Korea, and Spain in the middle. Turkey is at the bottom of both scales, satisfaction, and social justice.

Our work is in line with the studies conducted by Wilkinson and Pickett (2018; see also Pickett & Wilkinson, 2010), in which they explored how health and social problems vary across levels of income inequality. Their studies found that more economic egalitarian countries report higher levels of life expectancy, math, literacy, trust, and social mobility, and lower levels of infant mortality, homicides, imprisonment, teenage births, obesity, and mental illness.

In contrast, inequality of worth can be created by a number of social identifiers: money, race, class, education, disability, gender orientation, beauty, language, or ethnic origin. The ones with more money, beauty, education, or privilege possess more social status (Payne, 2017). Low social status causes stress, and stress leads to poor quality of life. In a series of groundbreaking epidemiological studies, Wilkinson and Pickett have shown the deleterious impact of inequality at the state, national, and international levels. They offer compelling evidence that status differences are not only injurious to those at the bottom, but to everyone. They review, for instance, responses to the following question: *Some people look down on me because of my job situation or income*. In a sample of over 35,000 people across 31 countries, researchers found that status anxiety increased as income decreased. This was true for all countries surveyed. Not surprisingly, those at the top of the social hierarchy worried less about social status than those at the bottom. However, status anxiety was more elevated across all income levels in more unequal countries. In other words, big income differences create more status anxiety for everyone in unequal societies. In the sample of 31 countries, social anxiety was highest in unequal countries like Portugal and Poland, and lowest in more equal countries like Denmark, Sweden, and Norway (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018).

It is not just social anxiety that increases with inequality, but rates of mental illness as well. The data presented by them show that in more equal countries, like Japan and Germany, fewer than 1 in 10 people had experienced any type of mental illness the year before. In Australia and the UK, the rate was more than 1 in 5, and in the US more than 1 in 4. Looking at income differences within the UK, men at the bottom quintile of income were 35 times more likely to experience depression than people at the top. Comparing 45 states within the United States, those with relative low-income inequality, such as Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, had about a third the rate of depression experienced in high inequality states such as Alabama and Mississippi. In an international study, rates of schizophrenia were much higher in unequal countries. Based on the UNICEF index, the United States, the most unequal of rich countries, has the lowest levels of child well-being. Japan and Norway, among the most equal, have the highest.

In summary, there is empirical and philosophical grounding for claiming that mattering is an important value to the field of community psychology. The amount of attention given to this value differs across social philosophies. Societies that embrace neoliberalism are bound to create vast inequalities and support mattering only for the privileged. Communities and nations that embrace a *We Culture*, as opposed to a *Me Culture*, have a better chance of making mattering accessible and available to the population as a whole.

The Politics of Mattering

The Power to Matter

The third leg of this three-legged stool is politics. Politics is the use of power to accomplish goals. Mattering is both *psychological* and *political*. It is psychological because it affects our behaviors, emotions, and thoughts; it is about *what we do, how we feel,* and *what we think*. But mattering is also political. It is political because it entails *power dynamics* capable of thwarting your sense of mattering, at home, at work, or the community (Han, 2017; Prilleltensky, 2008).

To cope with power imbalance, and achieve an even distribution of mattering, we must seek an equilibrium between freedom and fairness, between our own well-being and the well-being of others. Cultures that extol personal importance above all else lead to obsessive self-preoccupation. Paradoxically, this incessant interest in oneself results in meaninglessness and pathological attempts to gain praise and recognition. In the end, there is suffering for the self-obsessed, and agony for everyone else. Compulsive preoccupation with one's status, prestige, and looks results in alienation from others and the eventual destruction of mattering for everyone concerned (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018). This is why I propose a shift from a *Me Culture* to a *We Culture*.

Creating a *We Culture* requires paying attention to psychological and political factors. This is because psychological and political forces affect us throughout the lifespan, from birth to old age. When children feel neglected, they develop emotional problems that prevent them from adding value (Biglan, 2015). When adults feel devalued, they respond mostly in one of two ways: depression or aggression (Williams et al., 2005). While some overcome adverse conditions in healthy ways, many become despondent, and others become entitled, with an insatiable need for attention. These reactions might be

considered psychological problems. But when certain groups feel marginalized due to the color of their skin, gender, sexual preferences, socioeconomic status, age, or disability, it is not just a psychological, but a social problem as well. In the recent elections, many regarded white working class males as the most forgotten group. This was the group that got Trump elected (Fukuyama, 2018; Moghaddam, 2019).

Uses and Abuses of Mattering

There are several ways through which mattering is ironically used and abused to perpetuate injustice. The first way through which mattering is used and abused to protect the status quo is through the *politics of resentment*. This is how Francis Fukuyama described it in his 2018 book *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*:

> In a wide variety of cases, a political leader has mobilized followers around the perception that the group's dignity has been affronted, disparaged, or otherwise disregarded. This resentment engenders demands for public recognition of the dignity of the group in question. A humiliated group seeking restitution of its dignity carries far more emotional weight than people simply pursuing their economic advantage.
>
> (p. 196)

Groups that feel marginalized through inequality, such as many Trump supporters, are made to feel strong, important, and that they matter by vilifying other groups. Members of marginalized groups feel that their dignity is regained when they feel superior to other groups. They are led to believe that they will matter more if they support nationalistic and xenophobic policies, even as they suffer from economic and social policies that their leaders promote (Moghaddam, 2019).

The two most recent examples of nationalistic surge were the election of Donald Trump and Brexit. But global instances abound: The National Front in France, the Alternative for Germany, the Freedom Party in Austria, and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands. When it comes to populist leaders, Putin in Russia, Erdoğan in Turkey, Orbán in Hungary, Duterte in the Philippines, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil join Trump in the league of nationalists. Fukuyama makes it clear that in all these cases, the leaders fomented politics of resentment by telling followers that their dignity has been trampled upon by foreigners, minorities, or other countries. What all these illustrations demonstrate is that feeling devalued can lead to deleterious consequences for society as a whole, especially when resentment is fueled for political purposes.

Throughout history, we have seen how masses can be manipulated into acquiescence and hatred (Moghaddam, 2019). When inequality of means meets inequality of respect, we end up with a volatile situation.

The second use and abuse of mattering is through the *politics of deflection*. This has taken many forms over the years, from blaming the victim to invocations that "it's all in your head" (Han, 2017; Prilleltensky, 1994). If you do not feel like you matter, pull yourself up by your bootstraps. A recent review of the politics of deflection was conducted by Anand Giridharadas (2018) in his new book *Winners take all: The elite charade of changing the world*. The author claims that many so-called thought leaders embrace the politics of deflection. He argues that

> If you want to be a thought leader and not dismissed as a critic, your job is to help the public see problems as personal and individual dramas rather than collective and systemic ones. It is a question of focus. It is possible to look at a street corner in Baltimore and zoom in on low-hanging pants as the problem. It is possible to zoom out and see the problem as overpolicing and a lack of opportunity in the inner city. It is possible to zoom out further and see the problem as the latest chapter in a centuries-long story of the social control of African Americans.
>
> (p. 97)

Contrary to the feminist motto that the personal is political, now the political is personal. Psychologists, especially positive psychologists, must be very careful not to be complicit in the move to interiorize well-being. As Davis has recently put it in his book *The happiness industry:* "The risk is that this science ends up blaming individuals for their own misery, and ignores the context that has contributed to it" (2015, pp. 5–6).

In her book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation,* Keeanaga-Yamatha Taylor (2016) argues that blaming the victim has been a favorite strategy of elites over centuries. As Taylor points out, "explanations for Black inequality that blame people for their own oppression transforms material causes into subjective causes. The problem is not racial discrimination in the workplace or residential segregation: it is Black irresponsibility, erroneous social mores, and general bad behavior" (2016, p. 24). That is how society quiets its conscience when four million Black children live in poverty, close to a quarter of a million of Black people lost homes in the foreclosure crisis and about a million Black people are in jail (Alexander, 2012; Looman & Carl, 2015; Powell, 2012).

The next abuse of mattering to cement the status quo comes in the form of *entrepreneurship*, the main mantra of neoliberalism (Armstrong, 2004; Giridharadas, 2018;

Han, 2017). If you do not feel like you matter, invent something, become an entrepreneur, create a new technology, start a business, and trust that the market will solve all social problems. In some circles, it is called "conscious capitalism"—the belief that personal motivation and a kinder approach to workers will eliminate the need for unions and policy changes (Mackey & Sisodia, 2014). Conscious capitalism has all the allure of wellness and none of the elements of fairness.

Finally, there is new scholarship on the *politics of opportunity hoarding,* which is efforts by upper middle class families to prepare their kids for college and career success by crowding out kids from less privileged backgrounds (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Reeves, 2017; Reich, 2018). An obscene illustration of this took place recently with celebrities engaging in criminal activity to get their kids into ivy leagues colleges (Medina, 2019). These families will exploit their privilege to make sure that their kids matter more than the rest in the race to higher social status.

The Struggle to Matter

As Frederick Douglass famously argued in a speech in 1857, "Power concedes nothing without a demand" (Douglass, 1857). On the same occasion, he claimed that "if there is no struggle, there is no progress." Douglass was addressing the issue of Black liberation, but his words are as fresh today as they were over a century and a half ago.

Every major accomplishment for human liberation in recent memory—the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Civil Rights Legislation, gay marriage, women's suffrage, and the end of Apartheid—has been achieved through struggle. All over the world people struggle to regain their personal and collective sense of mattering. People want to feel valued and add value. There are six contemporary efforts worth mentioning.

Three black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opel Tometi, started the *Black Lives Matter* movement in 2013. It started with a post by Alicia Garza after the acquittal of George Zimmerman over the death of Trayvon Martin. Garza wrote: "I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter….Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter." (Cobb, 2016; Garza, 2014; Lowery, 2017).

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement gathered exponential momentum in Ferguson after the killing of another unarmed black man, Michael Brown, by white police officer Darren Wilson, on August 9th, 2014. On November 22, 2014, just two day before a grand jury decided not to prosecute Wilson, two police officers were dispatched in Cleveland to investigate a possible shooting situation. The person alleged to be shooting was a child, Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old black boy, using a toy gun.

The police officers had not been told that this may be a child, and the officers believed that they were responding to an active shooting scenario. As they arrived on the scene, Tamir was still pretending to shoot with his toy gun. The officers killed him. Unfortunately, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice were not the only black youth who died since the creation of BLM (Cobb, 2016; Garza, 2014; Lowery, 2017).

In an interview in 2018, Garza said that the BLM movement grew out of the realization that black people were looking to channel their frustration into something useful that could transform, as she put it, "our conditions, and change the way things are" (Sheppard, 2018). Garza and her colleagues chose a path that involves wellness with fairness. They are trying to build a *We Community*. Although it is still early in the life of the movement, the signs are that attention to good processes is coupled with a focus on outcomes. The mattering of the process and the mattering of the outcomes seem to be balanced. This balance cannot always be taken for granted.

Despite its momentum, *Occupy* disappointed many who saw an opportunity to build coalitions to create a power base. There was so much emphasis on participatory processes that few outcomes were ever achieved. On its face, participatory democracy is a good thing. Participation is about voice and choice, the royal path to mattering. But the process was all about the process, and not about outcomes. Many activists were disillusioned with the inward gaze of *Occupy*. In the end, the wellness of the process took precedence over the fairness of the outcomes (Smucker, 2017).

The right to be heard, an unquestionable part of mattering, can be taken to extremes. *Occupy* was an extreme case of people wanting to feel valued for their opinions. This was done to such an extent that little or no attention was paid to the demands and strategies that come with the responsibility to add value, not just to the participants, but to all members of society, and especially the folks who are marginalized. The wellness of the process took precedence over the fairness of the outcomes.

Faith in Action (https://faithinaction.org/)*,* formerly *PICO,* the *Pacific Institute of Community Organizations,* consists of 44 affiliated federations and 8 statewide networks operating in 150 cities in 17 states. This is a community-organizing network that brings citizens together to demand social cures and not just mind cures.

Faith in Action is very successful in engaging its members and volunteers. More than a million families and one thousand congregations participate in action-oriented campaigns. They work to hold corporations accountable, increase voter turnout, eliminate racial and economic discrimination, and pass legislation to improve affordable housing, education, health care, and the criminal justice system.

The list of its accomplishments is impressive. Among others, it led a $190 million public bond initiative for school infrastructure in California, prompted Minneapolis to stop school suspensions for non-aggressive behavior, and secured $9 million for the treatment and prevention of substance abuse.

Faith in Action (2019) believes that "everyone belongs and that our fates are bound up with one another's" (https://faithinaction.org/). It balances a good interpersonal process with a focus on tangible gains (Speer, 2008). It balances feeling valued with adding value, and adding value to self with adding value to the community.

An important lesson from *Occupy* was the inability to compromise and find common ground. In an effort to overcome this shortcoming, a group of activists, scientists, writers, and artists got together in Toronto in 2015 to devise a common platform for transformative change. Mindful of the sectarian trap, participants spent considerable time creating a joint vision of a better and greener Canada (Klein, 2017). That was the birth of the *Leap Manifesto*—a transformative platform. Subtitled "*A Call for a Canada Based on Caring for the Earth and One Another,*" the manifesto demands social, economic, and environmental justice as preconditions to improve the wellness of all Canadians, including marginalized communities such as indigenous peoples.

The visions articulated in the manifesto and in *Faith in Action* are clearly aligned with a *We Culture*. They balance rights with responsibilities, to present and future generations; emphasize the need to care for one another and renounce parochial interests for the common good; and they put fairness on par with wellness.

When it comes to economic justice, several movements, including *Black Lives Matter* and the *Leap Manifesto*, want to build on an experiment in Manitoba, Kenya, Uganda, India, and other parts of the world where universal basic income, or UBI, is guaranteed. This cash transfer program revolutionizes social policy by giving people the power to decide what to do with the help, as opposed to acquiesce to government dictates or the policies of not-for-profit organizations. It is a very empowering policy approach that grants people the dignity to decide what to do with the help. It trusts that people know best how to invest resources. Recent analysis of UBI shows that it is financially viable and socially beneficial. The health of all family members improves, and contrary to initial skepticism, people do not stop working. People have more mental space to plan for the future and invest in their kids (Lowery, 2018). With the advent of automation, UBI may become a necessity not just for poor communities, but for many societies. When people are freed of daily hassles and the traps of poverty, they are more creative and innovative. UBI is a policy that grants people a sense of mattering. It is a bold proposal, one that can inspire action for transformative change.

With the tremendous rise in inequality in the last two decades, status differences have been exacerbated. As Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett observe, "greater inequality makes money more important as a key to status and a way of expressing your 'worth'.... the larger the disparities in income, the bigger the differences in lifestyles which express class position, and the more invidious and conspicuous inferior status feels" (2018, p. 23). People with low economic status suffer not just from material deprivation, but from worth deprivation as well. The authors offer compelling evidence that social democratic policies that foster equality make people feel that they matter. Their conclusions are supported by other authors who provide evidence for the salutary effects of policies of equality and justice. In *The equality effect,* Dorling (2017) shows that

Living with more equality makes you resistant to treating others as inferiors or superiors and so creates increased respect all around. It is hard to explain just how strong this effect is to someone who has not lived in a place or time of greater equality. Growing up under a regime of high inequality can make many feel that they themselves are worthless.

(p. 22)

Partanen (2016), in turn, demonstrates the benefits of Scandinavian policies that guarantee high-quality public education, parental leave, high-quality day care, unemployment insurance, and universal health insurance. The result is less stress, less crime, more well-being, and universal access to mattering experiences. Embracing more social democratic policies like the Nordic countries will prevent a great deal of problems associated with lack of mattering. As Susan Fiske (2011), the psychologist from Princeton claims,

Unfairness distresses some of us because inequality is not just about income—or at least its effects are not. It is about damage to well-being, to feelings of control, self-esteem, belonging, trusting, and understanding. For any of these fundamental needs, inequality catalyzes insecurity, which we know motivates comparison.....comparison can generate resentment and anger about unfairness if the inequality is illegitimate....comparison up underlies envy, and comparison down underlies scorn, dividing us from each other.

(p. 164)

The outcome of these inequalities and comparisons is that all of us, collectively, matter less. For all of us to matter more, we must pay attention to the uses and abuses

of mattering, and we must support movements that give equal attention to feeling heard and taking action. In the end, these movements should push for universal supports such as universal health care and UBI.

Conclusion

Mattering is a fundamental human need that can be nurtured or obstructed by diverse social philosophies and political games. Mattering exists in the microcosm of relationships and work, but also in the macrocosm of social policies. Countries that promote economic fairness and equality achieve much better results in physical health, mental health, trust, education, safety, social mobility, and life expectancy. Similarly, people in countries that promote fair policies in health, education, labor market inclusion, and welfare in general report higher levels of life satisfaction. Fairness makes people feel like they matter not just as family members or colleagues, but also as citizens.

The mattering wheel can serve as a guide for action through promotion and prevention. The experience of mattering promotes health and happiness, but it also prevents personal *devaluation*, relational *disconnection*, work *disengagement*, and community *disintegration*. These four problems define the crisis of our time; the crisis of not mattering, or mattering only to ourselves. *Devaluation, disconnection, disengagement,* and *disintegration* of the social fabric—the four Ds—can be seen everywhere, and their consequences are devastating, for individuals and the community as a whole. Too little personal worth results in the high prevalence of depression we are currently witnessing around the world. Too much personal worth results in the narcissism epidemic that has been well documented. Disconnection is seen in high levels of isolation, loneliness, relational breakdowns, and extramarital affairs. Declining social capital and increasing inequality and segregation point to community disintegration. The four Ds stem from deficits or distortions of mattering. Countries, communities, and corporations that take mattering seriously are healthier and happier. We ignore mattering at our own peril.

If we want everyone to matter, we must foster a *We Culture* and must reject politics that use and abuse mattering through deflection, resentment, entrepreneurship, and opportunity hoarding. Moreover, we should embrace movements that seek to balance feeling valued with adding value to self and the community. We must balance rights with responsibilities and wellness with fairness.

Without fairness, there is a limit to how much wellness we can promote in individuals, organizations, and societies. Women, African Americans, people with disabilities, and many other minorities cannot flourish unless they experience fair treatment at school, work, and the community at large. To fully matter, we must combine fitness with fairness. Yes, we must develop skills, work hard, cultivate grit, and resilience, but in the absence of fair opportunities, minorities will face significant challenges when it comes to mattering.

The conceptualization of mattering presented here includes adding value to "others." It is important to note that "others" should not be restricted to other living human beings. In my view, we should add value to future generations, the planet, and other species as well.

Globally, we face a serious mattering deficit. To face this challenge, we must foster mattering at home, in the workplace, in the community, and in social policies. We can fight depression and disengagement by making other people feel valued and helping them add value. We can build a society where equality and fairness replace nationalism and narcissism. By showing that we care about other people, other species, the planet, and future generations, we will hopefully find a sense of meaning and mattering in our own lives.

Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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