



The role of mattering as an overlooked key challenge in retirement planning and adjustment

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ABSTRACT

In an aging society, making a successful transition from work to retirement and achieving good quality of retirement adjustment become major concerns for individuals, organizations, and governments. This paper focuses on the particular role of mattering (i.e., individuals' perceptions that they make a difference in the world) as a critical self-concept dimension that may mediate the impact of social interactions on retirement process at two distinct phases. We conducted two studies using time lagged design (with one-year time interval) among older workers 55 years or older ($N = 161$; Study 1) and retirees ($N = 186$; Study 2). Study 1 found that mattering mediated the effects of social support at work on life satisfaction but not retirement planning. Study 2 found that mattering mediated the effects of general social support on positive affect but not life satisfaction. Contrary to our expectation, mattering also did not mediate effects of caregiving activities. Overall, our results suggest that mattering represents a critical mechanism that explains some of the positive associations between social support and retirement adjustment quality.

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The first meaning in my life is, above all, social relationships. It goes into hobbies, music, photography, travelling—into everywhere. [...] As long as people need to see my pictures, this is the engine. When people tell me that they like my pictures, it enhances my personal worth. I think to myself: “Well, I am still useful”, because I can please people with my work. (Male retiree, 69 years old, photographer).

Due to the aging of the Western population, the integration of seniors into society and work has been considered one of the major challenges of the 21st century (Shultz & Adams, 2007). As numerous workers are now considered older workers (i.e., aged above 40 according to the US Age Discrimination in Employment Act), organizations face the challenge of developing these workers. While career development is often seen as a way of self-realization, relational theory of working (Blustein, 2011) has challenged this idea. This theory places relationships at the core of working life, focusing on how working (e.g., career exploration and career decision-making) is shaped by relational experiences, and vice versa. In particular, this theory considers relationships as providers of meaning, mattering, and dignity, which is consistent with Savickas's (2005) proposal that careers are about mattering. As retirement puts into question work-related resources, including relationships at and outside of work, the subjective

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perception that one makes a difference in the world (i.e., that one matters; Elliott, Kao, & Grant, 2004) can be threatened. Indeed, more than thirty years ago, Rosenberg and McCullough (1981, p. 179) pointed out that the “problem of retirement is that one no longer matters; others no longer depend upon [retirees]. The reward of retirement [may] be the punishment of not mattering.” Therefore, while preparing for and adjusting to the new role as retiree, older workers need to face the question of how to still feel that one is useful—that one still matters.

Whereas some research has shed light on the positive role of mattering to others as a way of dealing with stressors during the transition to college (Rayle & Chung, 2007), few authors have linked mattering to retirement issues (e.g., Fazio, 2010; Schlossberg, 1989). Also, to our knowledge, no empirical research has been conducted on the role of mattering regarding the general process of retirement. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that mattering should be a critical variable when considering the self-concept in late adulthood, because of a lack or diminution of role occupancy (e.g., paid work), increasing health problems with age, and the devaluation of older adults in Western societies in general (Fazio, 2007). For instance, a qualitative research on the metaphors of retirement reported that some retirees were in search to find a “sense of being useful members of society” (Sargent, Bataille, Vough, & Lee, 2011, p. 320). However, the potentially critical role of mattering at different phases of the retirement process (shortly before and after retirement) remains unexplored.

Our aim in this paper is to contribute to answering Wang, Henkens, and van Solinge's (2011) call for research that would recognize the impact of self-concept in improving predictions of retirement adjustment and planning. While different predictors of retirement adjustment have been identified in the previous literature (e.g., individual and organizational; Wong & Earl, 2009), this paper focuses on social interactions and resources. We specifically argue that mattering represents a positive self-concept dimension through which received and provided support contribute to increased well-being and better retirement planning in the retirement process. We conducted two studies using time lagged design (with one-year time interval) to collect data from older workers and retirees. Study 1 explored the relationship between social support at work, mattering, and life satisfaction and retirement planning among older workers. Study 2 extended this investigation to retirees and examined mattering as a mediator that linked effects of general social support and caregiving activities to life satisfaction and positive affect. The contribution of this paper thus lies in applying and empirically testing insights from the mattering literature (e.g., Jung, 2015) and the retirement process literature (e.g., Wang & Shi, 2014). As such, this paper expands current knowledge on the impact of social interactions on the process of retirement and provides a richer and deeper view on how social interactions (benefitting from and giving to others), may contribute to the retirement process.

1. Mattering and social interactions

Mattering implies that people are not only connected to others, but that they feel that they are important to others. We herein conceptualize mattering in the broader sense of a person's perceived social contribution, in contrast to interpersonal mattering which refers to mattering to specific individuals (Jung, 2015). Different from self-esteem and mastery, mattering explicitly refers to the self-concept within the relational context (Jung, 2015) and thus represents the interactional aspect of one's self-concept, that is, the part of the self that is developed in interaction with others (Flum, 2015; Schultheiss, 2007). According to Schultheiss (2007), mattering provides a sense of social meaning (i.e., one's meaning to others) and relatedness (i.e., the degree to which one matters in the interpersonal world). To contrast, lacking a subjective feeling of mattering may be associated with feelings of being invisible, peripheral to one's social context, not recognized, and not validated (Flum, 2015; Schultheiss, 2007). Consequently, mattering is hypothesized to contribute to subjective well-being across various life stages (Fazio, 2010; Pearlin & LeBlanc, 2001). In fact, Marshall (2001) and Fazio (2010) have argued that the perception of mattering to others constitutes an important aspect of the self-concept, which refers to the totality of an individual's feelings and thoughts toward him- or herself as an object of reflection (Owens, Robinson, & Smith-Lovin, 2010).

In their resource-based dynamic model of retirement adjustment, Wang et al. (2011) described social resources as one of the important factors that contribute to subjective well-being at retirement; including retirees' marital status, spouse's working status, marital quality, the social relationships derived from postretirement volunteer work and bridge employment (Wang et al., 2011), and social network and social support (Wang & Shi, 2014). While social resources were found to represent an important factor related to well-being in old age (Dumitrache, Windle, & Herrera, 2015), few studies have been conducted to examine the impact of social interactions in terms of received and provided support on the general process of retirement (e.g., Chen & Feeley, 2014). Such sparse research is surprising given the widely recognized positive influence of social support on emotional, social, and physical well-being across the lifespan (Harel, Shechtman, & Cutrona, 2011) and its identification as a predictor of successful aging (Tovel & Carmel, 2014). In this paper, we argue that social support at work and social support in general might contribute to a feeling of mattering (e.g., Marshall, 2001; Schultheiss, 2007). First, Rohall (2003) suggested that social interactions provide feedback to the individual about his or her contribution to a group. Moreover, believing that others care about us, our goals and futures, was found to increase feelings of mattering (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981), while lack of social support may impede the perception that one matters (Rayle & Chung, 2007).

Second, as social support in the work context provides assistance, advice and potential friendships at work (Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007), we argue that these may in turn increase a feeling of mattering. For instance, receiving fruitful feedback from one's supervisor or coworkers on a specific task may foster these three aspects of mattering. This is also in line with the relational theory of working (Blustein, 2011), according to which mattering represents a way of learning about one's efforts and accomplishments, in this case in the work context. As such, we propose:

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