Perceived mattering to parents and friends for university students: A longitudinal study[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

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A multiple indicators multilevel (MIML) latent growth model was used to examine university students' ($N = 484$) perceived mattering to mother, father, and friends over a three year period. The model was used to examine whether repeated measurements of perceived mattering remained invariant across time for all three referents, what the developmental trajectories looked like, and if the growth trajectories varied between gender groups and living arrangements. Temporal measurement invariance held for all three referents. Growth trajectories showed a significant declining slope for perceived mattering to mother only. Women perceived themselves as mattering to parents and friends more than men. Living arrangements were associated with mattering to friends but not mattering to parents.

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A fundamental condition of identity is continuity or persistence (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Erikson, 1968; James, 1910). Self-continuity is how individuals recognize or know themselves day after day. This idea of continuity is that, despite change, the numerous episodes of a life are understood as belonging to the same person. Without self-continuity, there is a lack of a sense of meaning and purpose that may result in actions such as suicide (Chandler et al., 2003). The maintenance of self-continuity is important under conditions of rapid change such as the transition to adulthood.

Self-continuity is supported by repeated recognition from others (Erikson, 1968; James, 1890). Repeated recognition from others helps individuals construe themselves as continuous–despite change. This process of social recognition appears to be taken-for-granted in adult identity research because it receives very little attention. A small area of social psychological (and related disciplines) research that addresses perceptions of recognition from others is the topic of mattering to others (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Elliott, Colangelo, & Gelles, 2005; Mak & Marshall, 2004; Marshall, 2001; Marshall & Lambert, 2006; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989; Taylor & Turner, 2001). Perceived mattering is the psychological tendency to perceive the self as significant to others (Marshall, 2001). Despite the theoretical importance of mattering to others over time (Erikson, 1968; James, 1890; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981), a systematic archival search reveals no studies using repeated assessments. To fill this gap, this investigation uses a repeated measures design to examine patterns of perceptions of mattering during the transition to adulthood.

Mattering is postulated to be a relational component of identity (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Elliott, 2009; Marshall, 2001; Rosenberg, 1985), which emerges from eye to eye validation from specific others (Josselson, 1994). This validation from

specific others may orient individuals to their social location and foster a sense of certainty about their identity (Marshall, 2001). As a relational dimension of identity, mattering is distinct from concepts associated with relationships such as closeness or intimacy. The latter terms are associated with qualities of personal relationships. Mattering, however, is individuals' self-construal of their significance or import to specific others (Marshall, 2001; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) as well as social institutions (Elliott, 2009; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Mattering may emerge from close, intimate relationships (Mak & Marshall, 2004) but it may also emerge for other reasons such as being relied upon (Elliott, Kao, & Grant, 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

Mattering can be construed as global significance to others (Elliott et al., 2004; Marshall & Lambert, 2006; Schieman & Taylor, 2001) or oriented towards specific other people such as parents or romantic partners (Mak & Marshall, 2004; Marshall, 2001; Marshall & Lambert, 2006; Pearlin & LeBlanc, 2001; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). This latter conceptualization of mattering is used in this study with assessments of three different referents: mother, father, and friends.

Perceived mattering develops in the context of interactions with specific others, who, in this study are parents and friends. The development and maintenance of mattering to specific others is outlined in a model proposed by (Mak & Marshall, 2004; Marshall, 2001). The model describes perceptions of mattering as emerging from individuals' interpretation of the quantity and quality of attention from specific others. Over time, individuals are more likely to attend to social information that confirms self-perceptions of mattering. This is similar to Swann, Stein-Seroussi and Giesler's (1992) process of self-verification. Self-verification is the tendency to seek information that confirms current evaluations of the self.

Perceptions of mattering are also shaped by comparisons with other persons, objects, norms, and past experiences (Marshall, 2001). Mak and Marshall (2004) found young adults report higher levels of perceived mattering to their romantic partner when attention from their partner is greater than attention from others such as friends. Additionally, parents reported their perceptions of mattering were shaped by comparing attention from their children with the attention paid to other adults or peers, comparing their experiences with normative conventions of parenting, and comparing amounts of attention received in the past with present circumstances (Marshall & Lambert, 2006). Thus, various reflexive comparisons influence individuals' assessments of mattering to specific other people.

The model proposed by Marshall (2001) is helpful for understanding the potential for varying patterns of perceived mattering over time. Changes in attention received from others or reflexive comparisons hold the potential for change. However, very little is known about the stability of perceived mattering. The majority of extant studies use cross-sectional designs (e.g., Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007; Elliott et al., 2005; Mak & Marshall, 2004; Marshall, 2001, 2004; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schieman & Taylor, 2001). One study by Taylor and Turner (2001) used a longitudinal design. However, this survey of mattering and depression only examined whether a change in mattering (over a two-year period) predicted a change in depression. Change or stability in mattering was not examined. One retrospective account of parents' perceptions of mattering points to perceptions of malleability due to children's development (Marshall & Lambert, 2006) but such changes require empirical testing. This investigation is concerned with young adults' patterns of perceived mattering over a three year period.

The young adults involved in this study were in their first three years of an undergraduate degree at a Canadian university. This is a key period to assess perceptions of mattering. Role changes, such as entry into a new educational institution or workplace, can elicit feelings of marginality and not mattering (Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007; Schlossberg, 1989). This sense of not mattering much in new environments likely emerges for a couple of reasons. First, individuals are unsure of their social roles in the institution and may therefore feel marginal to everyday activities until their roles are established (Schlossberg, 1989). Second, mattering is built, in part, upon repeated interactions with others. These repeated interactions are necessary for relationship partners begin to recognize each other and feel a sense of significance (Mak & Marshall, 2004). In new settings, people need time to interact and establish a history of interactions that will, in turn, contribute to establishment of a sense of mattering. This longitudinal investigation permits an assessment of students' perceived mattering during their entry into a new educational institution and a period of settling into the university.

Beyond the institutional change of entering university, it is not clear whether mattering changes during adolescence and young adulthood. Although Marshall's (2001) theoretical framework implies that change is possible, age-related differences in mattering to family in a large scale study of 11–18 year olds are small (Elliott, 2009). These age-related differences are useful for understanding whether there is potential for change across time. Seemingly, it is possible that although young adults in this study may perceive some marginality and low mattering as they enter university, there is likelihood that changes in mattering to mother and father will be minimal.

Studying a construct, such as mattering, over time poses an interesting problem. Prior research has found, with age, individuals sometimes attribute different meanings to items (Meredith & Horn, 2001). The same problem could emerge in the study of mattering. That is, it is possible that perceived mattering to parents or friends does not mean the same at age 18 as it does at age 21. If the meaning of items changes with age, it is difficult to examine patterns across time. Therefore, before examining patterns of perceived mattering over time, a test of measurement invariance is warranted. The need to examine measurement invariance is particularly important given the changing life circumstances of the young adult sample.

Mattering to parents and friends is examined in this study because parents and friends are generally among the most salient relationships during the transition to adulthood (Collins & Madsen, 2006; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Parents often provide social (Aquilino, 1997; Aquilino & Supple, 1991; Collins & Laursen, 2004; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000) and financial support (Schoeni & Ross, 2005; Semyonov & Lewin-Epstein, 2001) to their young adult children. However, the frequency of contact with parents can change if young adults move into university residential living. This change in residence during the school