

# What Does It Mean to Matter?

## Introduction: A Thought Experiment

Imagine for a moment that you are in a world in which you pass by others unnoticed. You cannot capture anyone's attention and are ignored by all around you. No one takes an interest in your activities, shares your joys, or comforts you in your sorrows. People in a quandary do not seek advice or emotional support from you, nor does anyone care about your opinions. In short, you are virtually invisible. You make a difference in no one's life. You feel alone in the company of your family, in your workplace, and in your community.

Now, shrug off this dreadful image. Return to your world and recognize with great relief that you are indeed connected to people in a meaningful way. Others are usually aware of your presence and notice when you come or go. They recognize you in social gatherings. Your successes are a source of pride to many of them. They are willing to listen to your problems. They may even feel close enough to you to criticize you for your own good. You recall that others have turned to you when they were in need and trusted you with things that are important to them. You *do* make a difference in the world around you. Put succinctly, you *matter*.

## Defining Mattering: What It Is

*Cellophane,  
Mister Cellophane  
Shoulda been my name.  
Mister Cellophane.  
'Cause you can look right through me,  
Walk right by me,  
And never know I'm there . . .*  
*Chicago: The Musical*

Because the notion of “mattering” can have a wide range of connotations, it is important to define the term carefully. In an earlier work I define “mattering” as “the perception that, to some degree and in any of a variety of ways, we are a significant part of the world around us” (Elliott, Kao, & Grant, 2004: 339). One can matter to specific others (a friend, a lover, a teacher), social institutions (such as the family or a business firm), one’s community as a whole, or even society at large. This web of meaningful associations plays a vital role in our understanding of who we are.

First conceptualized by the sociologist Morris Rosenberg (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981), mattering is an important aspect of the protective power of social connection. To matter to others enables a person to avoid behavior that would threaten the negotiation of a personally and socially rewarding path through the life course. When we matter, we know that any anti-social or self-destructive behavior would be a disappointment to the people or institutions to which we are connected; there is a bond of nurturance and approval that would be jeopardized by such acts.

On the other hand, those who believe that they do not matter recognize that they are isolated from the people and institutions who help give their lives meaning in a complex and often confusing society. Failing to matter, especially to the significant others and organizations in a person’s life, is experienced as a profound rejection of the self in its entirety. Such a terrifying realization can hardly be borne. It feels shameful, for if one has nothing to capture another’s attention, nothing worth investing in, or nothing to offer, it is prima facie evidence that one is a socially worthless person. To be wholly without merit is perhaps the most painful social image in a society that

rewards the ability to distinguish oneself from the ordinary on the basis of personal development.

In this dire strait, people will do almost anything to rid themselves of the status of a “non-person.” In some cases, the usual inhibitions against anti-social behavior are overcome by the need to matter at any cost. It is better to matter negatively, to be the focus of anger and opprobrium, than not to matter at all. Alternatively, self-destructive behaviors are not so threatening for a person who does not matter. What is the loss to the world or to the individual if a nonentity disappears forever?

An example from a popular film may make the point. George Bailey (James Stewart), the lead character in Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life*, actually had the opportunity to discover how much he mattered to his family, friends, and the whole town of Bedford Falls, because he managed the town’s Savings and Loan Institution. Discouraged by his failure to live out his dreams, George attempts suicide but is saved by an angel named Clarence. Unable to convince George that he has played a significant part in the world around him, Clarence arranges for George to experience Bedford Falls (now called Potterstown, after the mean, avaricious banker who wanted to take over the town) as it would have been if he had never been born. The stark contrast between the productive, happy Bedford Falls and the miserable, dark Potterstown soon makes clear to George how much he has mattered to everyone.

Occasional doubts about mattering are common in everyday personal experience. Many people experience dark times in which they wonder whether others know or care that they exist. After serious introspection or a check of their relationships to the people and institutions in their lives, they find that they are, indeed, significant, even if only in some small way, to the world around them. The anxiety passes.

I focus, in contrast, on the possibility that some people may *chronically* question their social significance, whereas others may be relatively free of such distressing suspicions. In constructing the theory of mattering, I begin with an axiom common to the two paradigms I use to elaborate the theory: One must learn how to be a human being.

In this view, very little of human nature is innate. To be sure, all human beings are born with impulses, embedded in our genetic and biological make-up. These impulses supply the energy for human activity, and they can be quite powerful. But the energy from such

impulses is diffuse and undirected. If that were all there was to human beings, life would be chaotic, indeed.

Building a self is a social process that begins at birth and continues throughout the life course. It is predicated upon the development of cognitive capacities, a development that is determined both by genetic make-up and the socialization provided to us by those around us. The kind of self that one constructs is a product of everyday experiences as a person matures.

Sociologists call the process of learning how to be human “socialization.” The teachers in the socialization process are the significant others in a person’s life, beginning with parents and other family members, continuing with friends, other peers, and teachers, and extending throughout the life course to include lovers, neighbors, employers, and even one’s own children. We never stop learning more about who we are.

As cognitive capacities develop, the structure of the self becomes an increasingly complex and sophisticated construct, arranged in a way that is significant and meaningful to a person. There are individual differences in the complexity and sophistication of the self-concept, based on cognitive development and socialization experiences, but each of us has developed a unique and reasonably coherent understanding of who we are.

One of the most important things we learn is the extent to which we matter to other people, social institutions (such as the family), our community, and even society as a whole. People come to differ in the extent to which they believe they matter because of their different experiences of the socialization process that prepares them to be functioning members of society. How people are treated by another, especially someone who looms large in their lives, will teach them whether or not they matter in this world. Most will learn that they are significant to their significant others, at least to some degree. A notable minority will not. In short, I am interested in mattering as a continuum of the self along which people vary. It is our placement on this dimension that will strongly influence how we orient to ourselves and others and how we engage with the world around us.

Further, it is the *subjective* sense of mattering that is critical in my account. As the sociologist W. I. Thomas (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572) asserted long ago: “If [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” There may be many objective

indicators that a person is significant to others, but if that person does not understand this to be so, it is effectively not so. For example, parents may point to all the material goods they have lavished on their children as evidence that their children really matter to them. The children, in turn, may sense that these things are a poor substitute for the lost time that their parents could have spent with them. Those who intend to communicate mattering and those on the receiving end of the communication may have different notions of what truly signals mattering to another. But the impact on a person's behavior will come from mattering as it is *perceived* by the person and not by some "objective" criteria.

## Forms of Mattering

### *Awareness*

*Dear Abby:*

*I have a problem that may not seem like a big deal to most people, but it really bothers me.*

*I meet people, and the next time I see them, they do not remember having met me. While I can't always remember the name of a new acquaintance, I can at least remember having met the person.*

*Abby, it's a blow to my ego when someone has no recollection of having met me. I admit that I am on the shy and quiet side; perhaps that is why I am not remembered.*

*Is there anything I can do to make a lasting impression?*

Abigail Van Buren, Mr. Forgettable

Mattering can take several forms. The first involves being the focus of others' attention. Such awareness is purely cognitive: We matter in the merest sense if others realize that we exist. Recognizable to others as an individual, a person who matters is distinguishable from the masses that populate the surroundings. If others greet us whenever we walk into a crowded room, we know that others are mindful of us, and we have reaffirmed the fact that we matter. In contrast, if we fail to attract the attention of others when we are in their presence, we may literally feel like a nonentity. Unacknowledged by anyone around us, we may feel that people are looking right through us, which strongly suggests that we do not matter.

*Importance*

*I'll find somebody new,  
And, baby, we'll say we're through,  
And you won't matter anymore.*

Paul Anka, (I guess) it doesn't matter anymore

Two other forms of mattering are more complex, in that they imply a relationship between the person and the others to whom one matters. With importance, we feel that we matter to others if we are the object of their concern. They may provide us with emotional support, inconvenience themselves to see that our needs are met, or take pride in our achievements. The fact that people invest time and energy in us in order to promote our welfare suggests that we are a significant part of their world. For example, the teacher who tutors a student after classes are done for the day is communicating that the student is important to the teacher. Instead of going home to throw off the demands of the job, the teacher is spending precious time on the student. It is unlikely that the message will be lost on the youth, even if it is not articulated explicitly. In contrast, if people continually do not care what happens to us or will not bother to help us, we realize how unimportant we are to others.

*Reliance*

*“That job did wonders for her. I think about that every time I hear somebody say there’s such a thing as ‘natural adjusted rate inflation-unemployment,’ or ‘structural unemployment.’ That there’s always gonna be five or six percent of the work force with no jobs. Nothin’ the government can do about it. It’s something that can’t be helped. Well bullshit; that’s what I say. ‘Find something the poor bastards can do.’ Government has got to deal with it. That’s what the government’s for. It’s a moral obligation, and I mean that. It’s not just havin’ no money that drags people down; it’s feelin’ like they don’t matter, don’t count any more. They lost the parts they had to play.”*

George V. Higgins, *A change of gravity*

Finally, mattering to other people can take the form of their reliance on us. We matter to others if they look to us for the satisfaction of

their needs or desires. The joy that engulfs us upon being told that our lover needs us is due to the realization that we matter to him or her. Another poignant example of reliant mattering is the link between parent and child. The knowledge that the child will not survive without the care of the parents is a clear signal to the parents that they matter.

Reliance can be onerous. To have another depend on us in critical ways may become a burden, in that the other's needs may too often have to take precedence over our own. An emotional attachment to the other may help compensate for the efforts expended as a consequence of reliance, but even so, this form of mattering may prove exhausting. The ambivalence sometimes found in this form of mattering can be difficult for a person to resolve. The father who works two jobs so that his children can attend college may resent the need to do so, but perhaps the resentment is mitigated by the knowledge that his children need him.

Once again, popular culture can make the point very effectively. In the film *About Schmidt*, Warren Schmidt (Jack Nicholson), learns to his dismay how little he meant to his firm once he retired – and even before. As he prepares for his retirement, Schmidt meticulously catalogues and boxes all his files, along with helpful hints for his successor. A few days later, he impulsively revisits the firm, only to find his presence most unwelcome. Upon leaving, he happens to pass by the disposal center for the business. There, stacked and never opened, he sees the boxes of his files. (When I first presented a paper on mattering at a colloquium sponsored by my own Department of Sociology, a colleague who had recently ended his tenure came to me after the talk and said to me, “Do you want to know what it means not to matter? Just retire.”)

In both relationship forms of mattering, it is the element of choice that is crucial. To realize that one has been singled out from all the people who might have benefited from others' investment or who could provide what the others seek is to know that one matters. Indeed, although being uniquely qualified to receive or give resources is prima facie evidence that one matters, the fact that one has been chosen from a pool of people may indicate an even stronger degree of mattering. If no one else is around, so that another's attention must be focused on me or nothing at all; if there are no others in whom a benefactor can invest time and resources; if I am the only person who could provide for another's need, then I cannot be confident that

I matter as deeply as I might like. It is possible that someone is turning to me simply because there is no one else. But when there are many who could fill the bill and the person notices *me*, is concerned for *me*, or asks *me* for help, I can be more certain that there is something about me that sets me apart from all the others. I can be more confident that I really do matter.

## **Distinguishing Mattering: What It Is Not**

Social psychologists have posited many elements of the self-concept, and to introduce mattering as a new dimension requires that it be conceptually distinguished from those already recognized. Mattering may have a superficial similarity to other dimensions, and because elements of the self-concept can have a wide range of connotations in the public parlance, it is especially important to define mattering, in part, by pointing out its differences from other notions. I focus on four existing constructs, each well established in social-psychological theory and empirical research: perceived social support, self-esteem, self-monitoring, and self-consciousness. All of these constructs are associated with mattering, but I will argue (and point to evidence) that they are conceptually distinct from mattering. The following explication is taken from my initial analysis of mattering (Elliott, Kao, & Grant, 2004).

### **Perceived Social Support**

Perceived social support is the sense that others provide the resources (material, psychological, and emotional) that help one carry on. Although perceived social support should be positively associated with mattering (especially importance), the two are distinguishable concepts. Perceived social support is generally defined as the extent to which one expects that others will provide for a person's specific needs (such as emotional support during a trying time or financial assistance when things are bad economically). In contrast, importance is considered to be a more general awareness, involving a continual interest in one's welfare by others, beyond the provision of specific forms of support. We can be aware that others invest in us even when specific needs are not at issue: The friendly card that arrives in the mail for no specific reason reminds us that we matter.



In addition, importance implies that others are investing in us because they are sincerely interested in furthering our welfare. However, not all social support arises from altruism; occasionally, there is an ulterior motive that is hidden during the interaction. Suspicion of bad faith is not likely to lead to an attribution that one matters to another. If we are merely useful to another person, a means to an end, we are more likely to resent the other as a manipulator than value him or her as a source of mattering.

## Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is the global evaluation of one's own personal characteristics; it is the extent to which a person considers him- or herself a worthwhile person (Rosenberg, 1979). Those with low self-esteem believe that they are seriously deficient in important ways. They find little in themselves to be proud of and lack self-respect. They have difficulty acknowledging any positive understandings of themselves, because of the need to maintain a consistent understanding of who they are; the few positive aspects are overwhelmed by the many negative aspects. As a consequence, the person experiences continual self-rejection.

The social psychologist Roy Baumeister (1993) has more to say about the nature of low self-esteem. As he eloquently argues:

People with low self-esteem lack a clear, consistent, unified understanding of who they are, which leaves them at the mercy of events and changing situations and which makes it difficult for them to manage their affairs optimally. They favor self-protection over self-enhancement . . . even if this strategy means giving up some opportunities for success and prestige (Baumeister, 1993, p. 217).

People with low self-esteem would like to think better of themselves. However, they are inhibited in doing so by an anxiety arising from their recognition that they lack the personal resources to back up their behaviors. The risk of discovering that they are as worthless as they fear they might be prevents them from taking the risks necessary to establish a self-concept that deserves approbation.

In contrast, high self-esteem people consider themselves persons of value. They respect themselves because they find that, overall, their good points outweigh their bad points. It is important to note that

high self-esteem does not imply a feeling of superiority or arrogance. The person enjoying high self-esteem realizes that there is always room for improvement in the self-concept. It is more that the central elements of the self are valued positively enough that they can feel good about themselves. A person with realistic high self-esteem feels “good enough.”

There are important distinctions between mattering and self-esteem. In its essence, mattering is a purely cognitive process, an attribution of one’s connection to the social order. To be sure, the inference about whether one matters does not occur in a vacuum. The social and structural contexts of people’s existence will play a large role in their understanding of their social significance. To know that I matter means that others take note of me and relate to me in ways that evince my connection to them, but there is no immediate evaluation of the self involved in this awareness.

In contrast, assessing one’s self-esteem entails both cognitive and affective processes. In our society, we are taught to evaluate what we know about ourselves, to be satisfied with physical, social, and moral aspects of the self that are deemed positive and to react with regret, guilt, or shame when undesirable aspects of the self come to light. However, self-esteem can entail a focus on the self independent of one’s relations with others. There are many contributors to a person’s self-evaluation, and mattering is one of them.

Indeed, I will argue below that attributions about mattering comprise a fundamentally important foundation for inferences about self-worth. But mattering is not, in itself, a judgment about one’s worthiness as a human being. Once the cognitive appraisal of the extent to which one matters is finished, the emotional appraisal of one’s self-worth will soon follow. Self-evaluation is a consequence of mattering, not a part of it. Conceptually, they are distinguishable.

## Self-Monitoring

According to the social psychologist Mark Snyder (1974, 1987), self-monitoring refers to the extent to which people observe and regulate the self-presentations that they proffer in everyday social interactions. The sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) argues that everyone engages in impression management, orchestrating their behavior in major or minor ways to achieve the goals they seek in a given encounter with others. The concept of self-monitoring carries this understanding

further and asserts that people differ in the ways that they present themselves. For example, high self-monitors look to their immediate environment (including the behavior of others) for cues that will signal conduct appropriate to goal attainment; in contrast, low self-monitors prefer to look within themselves for guidelines of appropriateness (Elliott, 1979).

The strategies and tactics of self-presentation are different from the concerns of mattering. Impression management is an attempt to influence the definition of the situation in an interaction and see to it that others behave in ways that facilitate the self-monitor's goals. As a consequence, the other is largely an object, an audience for whom the impression is managed in order to attain a goal. On the other hand, as an issue involving relationships, mattering is a question of making a difference to individuals, groups, or institutions. Although self-monitoring may be involved in a person's attempt to matter, it is not itself mattering.

### Self-Consciousness

Self-consciousness is the chronic tendency to be the object of one's own attention. The psychologist Alan Fenigstein (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) identifies two general forms of self-consciousness: *private* (the cognitive awareness of one's own personal characteristics) and *public* (the awareness that one is a stimulus for the behavior of others).

Neither form of self-consciousness replicates the notion of mattering. Private self-consciousness is a dispositional tendency to examine the self. It can include an excessive focus on one's physical characteristics (the teenager's obsession with the blemishes from acne), cognitive characteristics (the continual awareness of one's thought processes or attitudes), and affective characteristics (a keen awareness of one's emotions in any circumstance). Although private self-consciousness can affect one's behavior, it does not involve determining one's relationships to others, even at the basic level called for in mattering.

In a different vein, public self-consciousness concerns the realization that others are using our presence and behavior to help determine their actions in the encounter. Once again, the issue is of the self as an object (this time the issue is of others' scrutiny and not one's own) rather than the self in a potential relationship with others. Public

self-consciousness can dispose people to be acutely aware of the impressions they give off to others and encourage them to manage these impressions with great care. One can be publicly self-conscious in the presence of those to whom one does not matter, and people need not necessarily be more or less publicly self-conscious among those to whom they do matter.

Although conceptually distinct from mattering, the above notions need not be independent of it. There are good reasons to expect that mattering is positively associated with each of these constructs. For example, mattering to another should be associated with high levels of self-esteem. If people consider me a significant part in their lives, it must be because I am someone worth attending to; they would not invest their resources in me or seek my advice if I were a deficient person. The fact that I matter to them suggests, to the contrary, that I am worthy of their attention, resources, and requests. Therefore, beliefs that one matters to others can induce higher levels of self-esteem. Indeed, earlier research efforts I have conducted demonstrate a positive link (of varying degrees) between one's placement on the continuum of mattering, on the one hand, and perceived social support, self-esteem, self-consciousness, and self-monitoring, on the other (Elliott, Kao, & Grant, 2004).

Further, statistical analysis reported therein also demonstrate that the items I have constructed to measure mattering exhibit strong *construct* and *discriminant validity* (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994); that is, they are excellent measures of the concept of mattering, and they do not reflect any of the aforementioned constructs. From these results, we can be confident that mattering, as conceptualized and as actually measured, is a distinct part of our self-understanding.

Of course, other constructs could also be identified. Establishing discriminant validity is an ongoing process. As mattering becomes more integrated into the social-psychological study of the self, it will be necessary and possible to enlarge the range of concepts to which mattering is linked but from which it can be distinguished in a theoretically meaningful way.

## **A Similar Construct**

Research in social psychology has occasionally focused on concepts that appear to be similar to mattering. For example, in addition to his work

on self-esteem, Roy Baumeister, with Mark Leary (1995), investigated a concept that appears to be quite close to mattering: the need to belong. They posit that “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quality of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). The need to belong is so general that it can be satisfied by connections to *any* person or group. Belonging is characterized by frequent personal contacts with a person or group and the construction of a strong bond between the self and the other.

There are certainly similarities between the need to belong and mattering. For example, both concepts are characterized by *satiation*. Satiation has to do with the number of people to whom one is connected. With each concept, a few relationships will suffice; forming additional connections to others will likely result in diminishing returns. As Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 520) note, “Having two as opposed to no close relationships may make a world of difference to the person’s health and happiness; having eight as opposed to six may have very little consequence.” The same is true for mattering. A person does not need to matter to everyone, just to those who are significant in that person’s everyday life.

In addition, *substitution* is possible for both the need to belong and mattering. With the need to belong, one might lose an attachment to a particular group but replace it with another satisfactory group. Young people graduating from middle school to high school may lose their “citizenship” in the former but will suffer no undue anxiety if they can secure a sense of belonging in the latter. Similarly, students leaving high school for college may find that they no longer matter to the friends they have left behind, and this might initially lead to some regret. However, once they realize that classmates at college have become aware of them, invest in them, and rely on them, a sense of mattering will be restored. The loss of mattering to former friends may be mourned, but their new friendships ensure that they still make a difference in the lives of others.

Still, there are ways in which the two concepts are different. First, as argued by Baumeister and Leary (1995), the need to belong fosters and requires a psychological attachment to a person or group. Although this can be true for mattering relationships (consider the need to matter to one’s family), it is not necessary. A student may matter to a teacher without forming an emotional bond to that teacher. (In the television series *The Wonder Years*, Kevin, the young

adolescent who is the focus of the dramas, finds himself disappointed by a teacher he respects. Confronting the teacher, Kevin remonstrates, "I thought you were my friend!" The teacher replies, gently but firmly, "No, Kevin, not your friend; your teacher.") There is a difference between bonding and caring, and only the latter is necessary to signal mattering.

Further, the need to belong can impel a person to initiate the attachment process and work to cement those that take root. In contrast, a sense of mattering is induced in an individual by the attentions, inputs, or needs of others. It generally cannot be forced by the person with a need to matter. Indeed, as I shall point out later, "forced" mattering, in which a person behaves (often outrageously) in order to secure attention, usually arouses negative reactions in others, something not likely to satisfy a need to belong.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) also theorize that the need to belong requires frequent personal contacts or interactions. Their argument suggests that a sense of belonging is a rather fragile awareness that requires continual and clear reaffirmation. On the other hand, reaffirmations of mattering need not be so personal or frequent. For example, contacts by a manager with employees in a firm may not be personal and involve no face-to-face interactions, yet managers can instill a sense of mattering in the employees. Once mattering is established, it is not likely to be questioned, unless circumstances suggest otherwise. Most of us realize that we continue to matter to significant others, even in the absence of continual contact. Fleeting anxiety about making a difference can quickly pass upon reflection about one's history of mattering.

Finally, mattering and the need to belong can be distinguished by the range of behaviors employed to satisfy their demands. In establishing a sense of belonging, most people would avoid socially undesirable behaviors. Untoward actions are not likely to attract a person to others. They would more likely evoke rejection and ostracism rather than an invitation to join the group.

This may not be so with regard to mattering. It is certainly the case that the best experience of mattering comes from being noticed, supported, and relied upon for socially desirable behaviors. But, as I will argue in Chapter 2, the need to matter is so powerful that people will even resort to disapproved actions to call attention to themselves. In the panic and desperation that comes with the failure to matter, they would rather be negatively known than not known at all.

## Mattering and the Self as Entity

As I have conceptualized it, mattering is a dimension of the self-concept. The self-concept is an organized representation of the self stored in the mind. Rosenberg (1979, p. 7) defines the self-concept as “the totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to [the] self as an object.” Put simply, the self-concept is a cognitive construction based on an interpretation of the elements of the self. (See Baumeister, 1998, for an extensive discussion of the self and its status as an entity.)

Thinking about the self as an entity reflects a particular perspective on human beings that is derived from Cognitive Social Psychology, one of several paradigms, or scientific perspectives, that inform our understanding of people and their social experiences. (See Isen & Hastorf, 1982, for a thorough discussion of the paradigm.) Its basic assumption is that human beings are rational creatures who think about themselves and the world around them and then make decisions about behaviors based on their cognitions. Rather than react automatically to stimuli from the environment, as do organisms governed by instincts, people’s decisions are based on the understanding of their environment, including particular objects and the context in which those objects appear.

Rejecting the simple stimulus–response model of the behaviorists (cf. Watson, 1939, for the classic approach to Behaviorism), cognitive social psychologists assert that the individual intervenes between the stimulus and the response. One interprets the stimulus, assesses its meaning, and chooses a response that is deemed to be appropriate for that meaning. Perception and cognition are no longer seen as passive and dispassionate processes. Instead, they are understood as useful functions for a thinking organism adapting to its environment.

Some have used the analogy of a computer to describe the work of the human information processing: A person perceives stimuli from the environment (input), interprets the information through cognitive processing (the brain is our central processing unit), and decides how to behave in light of this interpretation (output). However, in spite of our attempts to be rational, the processes involved in these appraisals and decisions can be (and often are) influenced by “contaminating” factors (including emotions, motivations, and individual needs) that prevent us from perceiving accurately the meaning of things in our environment.

The attribution of meanings to objects in the environment (including other people) can suffer from a variety of limiting or distorting factors. For example, because our cognitive capacities are not infinite, we cannot attend equally to all of the many stimuli available to us at a given moment; we would be paralyzed by the task of sorting it all out, and behavior would cease. In response, we have learned to be selectively perceptive, deciding which stimuli merit our attention and which can be ignored.

Our choice of what to perceive is often influenced by the motivations underlying our participation in a social encounter. In particular, our feelings and our motivations may lead to a biased understanding of what happened and why. For example, voluminous research has affirmed the existence of a self-serving bias (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987), in which people are eager to take credit for success but generally eschew responsibility for failure, unless reality constraints make the claim ludicrous (Elliott, 1989). A central part of the theoretical argument I will present in Chapter 2 for the significance of mattering is that a failure to matter is likely to distort the attributions a person makes and is likely to lead to dysfunctional behavior.

From the Cognitive Social Psychology perspective, then, the self is one of the objects in a person's experience that must be understood. As Rosenberg (1979, p. 8) notes, the self "is an object of perception and reflection, including the emotional responses to that perception and reflection." But the meanings attributed to the many aspects of the self are not a mere agglomeration of elements; rather, they possess a certain structure that organizes our understanding of ourselves into a reasonably coherent whole. For example, the elements of the self can be crudely divided into two categories: *personal identity* (the personal attributes and characteristics that make up the physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the self) and *social identity* (the social categories to which one belongs and which are recognized and affirmed by others, such as race, gender, student).

Indeed, the social psychologist Hazel Markus (1977) speaks of self-schemata as interpretive structures that help lend coherence to life experiences. They are the core of a person's self-concept. In general, a schema is defined as a structure of the process of cognition that operates as a framework for organizing and interpreting the social environment. Such a cognitive structure is derived from past experience as familiarity with the concepts they represent grows. Schemata are learned by individuals through the process of socialization, in which



significant individuals and social institutions in our lives teach us how to become a human being.

A schema serves several important functions in the cognitive process. First, it influences what information will receive attention and how it will be encoded and organized. Second, it has a selective influence on retention, retrieval, and the organization of memory. Third, it functions as an interpretive framework and so influences evaluations, judgments, predictions, and inferences. Finally, it influences overt behavior.

A self-schema is a cognitive generalization about the self, derived from socialization experiences, which organize and guide the processing of self-relevant information. They represent the way that the self is articulated and differentiated in memory. A self-schema determines what information about the self is attended to, how it is structured, and how much importance is attached to it. It reflects invariances that people discover in their own orientations and behavior and that are categorized and organized.

The self-concept is a set of cognitive structures used to recognize and interpret self-relevant stimuli in the individual's social experience. It influences what stimuli receive attention, how the information is processed, and how one actually responds to these stimuli. In short, the self-concept fits the criteria of the definition of a schema.

Further, some of the elements of the self-concept consist of a continuum over which people are arrayed by dint of the everyday socialization they experience. Placement on this range orients people to themselves and to the world around them in certain ways, and people at different points on the continuum differ in these orientations.

Mattering is one such self-concept dimension, and the extent to which we believe we matter to others is learned in the socialization process that teaches us how to be human beings. Different people, with different socialization experiences, may find themselves at different points along the mattering continuum. Some may believe that they matter a great deal. They have experienced the attention, investment and reliance from others. Others may have learned from the significant others in their lives that they are nearly superfluous in this world. It is the placement along this dimension that helps to account for differences in behavior.

Social and behavioral scientists have identified three major processes by which we construct an understanding of ourselves. The first, *reflected appraisals* (conceptualized by the psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, 1947), asserts that we are deeply influenced in our self-conceptions

by the way that others react to us. People are continually communicating to us how they see us, and it is easy, especially when we are children, to incorporate their understandings into our own self-concepts. We internalize the image of ourselves that is communicated to us by others and make it our own. (A public service message about child maltreatment warns parents: “Words hit like a fist. Be careful what you say to your children!”)

Reflected appraisals constitute perhaps the strongest source of mattering. The feedback we get from significant others in our lives goes a long way in determining whether we matter. On the one hand, when a parent says, “I know you, and I believe in you,” the child is reassured about mattering. On the other hand, by using the condemning phrase “Forget you!” a teenage gang member can let others know that they do not matter at all.

Another way of learning about ourselves is to compare ourselves to some well-defined standard. (Am I a tall person? Am I good at linear algebra?) However, often there is no clear standard by which we can measure our standing in some category or dimension. (Am I a good tennis player? Am I a tolerant person?) In that case, the social psychologist Leon Festinger (1957) argues that we learn about ourselves by comparing ourselves to others. We may do so in order to determine congruence with another (same vs. different) or for evaluative purposes (better or worse). In either case, we often get valuable information about who we are by the process of *social comparison*.

The social comparison process is another way to assess the extent to which one matters to others. Counting the number of friends enjoyed by others or the quality of their relationships in comparison to one’s own circle of friends may give a person a relative sense of mattering.

Finally, the psychologist Darryl Bem (1972) holds that one’s self-understanding can be based on observations of one’s own behavior and the conditions under which it occurs. Just as we are willing to make inferences about others on the basis of observing their behaviors, so we infer elements of our own self-concept by the process of *self-attribution*. We learn something about who we are by paying close attention to what we do.

Self-attributions may be an important way to assess the extent to which one matters to others. Simply recalling the number of times a person responds to a request for emotional support by another can provide convincing evidence about that person’s self-perceived mattering.

Proceeding through the life course, one's sense of mattering may change. Encountering a new person (a teacher in school, a coach at play, a mentor in a firm) may impart, for better or worse, a new understanding of the difference one makes in the lives of others. Further, there may be specific times or situations in which a transient turn-about in mattering occurs. Nevertheless, it is possible over time to build a reasonably stable sense of how often and how much other people pay attention to us, encourage and support us, and turn to us when they are in need. Although change in mattering is always possible, we expect it to be an evolutionary change, not characterized by unanticipated seismic shifts.

At the same time, we may find that we matter at different levels of intensity to specific persons, groups, or institutions. The higher the level of mattering across all possible sources, the more secure the self-concept. Yet, as with the need to belong, mentioned above, there are likely to be diminishing returns as the number of people to whom one matters increases. It may be sufficient that one matters greatly only to a few particularly significant others. Indeed, research on resilience (Goldstein & Brooks, 2004; Rubin, 1996) demonstrates that people (adults *and* children) can survive horrific trauma if there is one person who takes a special interest in them. That is, mattering to one person can save a person from a severely damaged self-concept, even in the face of terrifying physical or psychological threats to the self. The most devastating threats to the self-concept arise when an individual matters to no one.

## **Mattering and the Self as Process**

A fundamentally different way of understanding the self emerges from a uniquely sociological paradigm: *Symbolic Interactionism*. First articulated by the sociologist George Herbert Mead (1934) and elaborated by his student Herbert Blumer (1969), Symbolic Interactionism begins with a very different premise from that of Cognitive Social Psychology, a premise that also involves the nature of meaning. Both paradigms assert that human beings react toward objects in their environment according to the meanings that these objects (including other persons) have for them. From this point on, the two paradigms diverge sharply. Whereas Cognitive Social Psychology presumes that meaning is an integral part of the object itself, Symbolic

Interactionism begins with the axiom that all meaning is socially constructed and imposed on objects by those people involved with the object.

The self, then, cannot be an entity, because that would imply that it has a meaning that is internally constructed, albeit changeable. Rather, the symbolic interactionists see the self as a process by which the individual, in concert with others, creates and maintains meanings in a given social interaction. Meanings, unique to the ongoing situation, are created for all elements, including physical objects, gestures, and even the people taking part in the interaction. Successful encounters are possible only when all involved share the meaning that is constructed for the occasion. Without consensus as to meaning, the situation is not well defined, and the interaction is likely to descend into chaos. If things are to proceed, the participants must engage in “remedial work” (Goffman, 1971) to ensure that a common meaning is shared by all. As an example, students who can’t agree whether a gathering is a study group or a party will have neither until agreement can be reached.

The process that is the self consists of what Mead (1934) calls a “conversation” between the two parts of the self: the “I” and the “Me.” The “I” is the impulsive part of the self, an inclination to react to a stimulus that is prior to any cognitive assessment of it. In the common parlance, we often speak of a “gut reaction,” an almost automatic and certainly unorganized predisposition to respond. This is the “I” in action. If there were only the “I” in our selves, we would find the world a chaotic and frustrating place, as each of us, acting impulsively, without awareness of or sensitivity to the needs or behavior of others, finds interactions with others exceedingly difficult.

But Symbolic Interactionists argue that this is not the case. As the “I” goes into play, it is immediately followed by the workings of the “Me.” The “Me” is the phase of the self in which a person imaginatively takes the perspective of another to look back at the self. This perspective taking is called by Mead (1934) “taking the role of the other.” Its purpose is to understand what meaning might be attached by observers to the many potential responses a person could make to a given stimulus. After consideration of the many possibilities through the operation of the “Me,” the person can select the behavioral response whose meaning best fits with the definition of the situation (the meaning of the interaction created and maintained by all participants) and will most likely lead to the goals pursued by the

person. When someone greets me on the street, I can consider the various responses before I act. What meanings will the greeter attach to the possible responses I can make? Is a casual “hello” in keeping with the nature of the interaction, or should I be formal in addressing the other?

Initially, children are limited by newly developed cognitive skills to taking the role of specific others in a given interaction. During the pre-adolescent years, they do not have the ability to integrate these distinct (and potentially contradictory) standpoints into a unitary perspective on the self. This skill is attained only as their cognitive capacities mature. The process of cognitive maturation varies across individuals, but by early adolescence (12 years, or so), a person has learned how to take the role of the generalized other, a viewpoint on the self that is an amalgamation of the specific others in one’s life to date. When the adolescent can understand how the amorphous “they” would attach meaning to potential behaviors, the “Me” is fully formed, and self as a process is complete.

The “Me” is also a source of self-understanding. In the early days of sociological analysis of the self, Charles Horton Cooley (1922, pp. 183–184) introduced the notion of the “looking-glass self”:

In a very large and interesting class of cases, the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one’s self – that is any idea he [*sic*] appropriates – appears in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling that one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking-glass self:

“Each to each a looking-glass  
Reflects the other that doth pass.”

The looking glass self is a parallel notion of Sullivan’s (1947) reflected appraisals. By understanding the meanings that are attributed to us on the basis of our choices of behaviors, we come to gain a picture of who we are as participants in a given interaction. Symbolic interactionists call this understanding a *situated identity*.

It is the understanding of a person’s situated identity that makes possible a sense of mattering. If one is allowed to take part in goal-directed activity, it is easy to infer that one matters, at least with regard to the current interaction. If one is allowed to participate only as a

tangential entity or not at all, the message is clear: One does not matter. One important motivation for my claim of a situated identity in an interaction that is significant to me is the need to reassure myself that I matter, that I have a meaningful and necessary part to play in the ongoing interaction. If I fail to do so, I am very likely to abandon the current interaction and seek one that will reinforce my sense of mattering.

Over time, where appropriate, people strive for consistency in their situated identities across interactions. The accumulated memory of aspects of past situated identities is often brought to the current interaction to be included as part of the creation and maintenance of a current situated identity. These regularly recurring aspects of the self are called the *biographical identity* of the person. Gender is a good example of an element of a biographical identity. For most people, the situated identities they claim from one interaction to the next are constrained by the social understandings of gender appropriateness. Any situated identities that might violate gender expectations would likely be denied a person, unless the definition of the situation called for such a contradiction.

It is in the realm of identity that mattering gains full meaning for Symbolic Interactionism. Some followers of this paradigm, notably sociologists George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons (1978) and Sheldon Stryker and Peter J. Burke (2000), identify themselves as Structural Symbolic Interactionists. Structural Symbolic Interactionism, as the name implies, embeds the negotiation of situated identities and the recognition of biographical identities within the context of society's established social institutions. In particular, followers of this paradigm argue that one's locus in the structure of society will constrain the identities available for claiming in a given situation.

Structural Symbolic Interactionists have enlarged the focus on identities to include the notion of *role identity*: "the character and the role that an individual devises for himself [*sic*] as an occupant of a particular social position" (McCall & Simmons, 1978, p. 65). The role identity is a person's "imagination of himself *as he likes to think of himself being and acting* as an occupant of that position" (McCall & Simmons, 1966, p. 65; emphasis in the original). It is the place in the social order, the collection of positions (offspring, sibling, student, co-worker, spouse), that identifies an individual and makes him or her recognizable (meaningful) to others.

Stryker and Burke (2000, p. 286) assert that role identities are “internalized role expectations.” We are taught by the socializing agents in our lives to conform to the commonly accepted and shared understandings of what it means to occupy a particular position in the social order. For example, besides gender, we are taught what it means to be a member of a particular race or ethnic group according to the racial projects our society constructs (Omi & Winant, 1994); a particular level of socioeconomic status that determines our value to society (Sennett & Cobb, 1972); and a particular kind of religious belief (or unbelief) (Berger, 1969).

According to Stryker and Burke (2000, p. 286), role identities are “cognitive bases for defining situations, and they increase sensitivity and receptivity to certain cues for behavior.” As such, role identities help maintain an acceptable situated identity for each participant in the interaction. And commitment to the role identity, “the degree to which persons’ relationships to others in their networks depend on possessing a particular identity” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 286), ensures that a relationship between individuals will stand the test of time. Failing to abide by a role identity’s expectations is likely to jeopardize our ability to build and sustain a mutually satisfying relationship with others, as people will not be able to count on us to claim a familiar and easily acceptable situated identity. Adhering to the expectations of a role identity confers on any situated identity a legitimacy that makes us a trustworthy participant in any encounter (Goffman, 1971).

And this is where mattering comes in. First, one’s role identity may preclude the possibility of mattering to others in a social gathering. For example, servants, who are relegated to the status of “non-person” on the basis of their place in the social order, will learn very quickly that they do not matter to those whom they serve (Goffman, 1967). They are expected not to participate in any interaction involving their superiors, including any conversation. They are not to offer advice to their “betters,” nor show approval or disapproval of what occurs, and in fact, they are not to attend at all to what is going on around them (often more honored in the breach than in observance).

Second, when a role identity allows us to take part in an encounter, we expect that we do matter to the significant others also involved. We do not expect to be ignored; we expect to be noticed. We expect that others will acknowledge the importance of the role we play, by

supporting our role enactment. Finally, we expect them to acknowledge their reliance on the role identity we inhabit, so that the encounter can proceed to a successful conclusion.

More particularly, we expect that people with whom we are supposed to have a meaningful, perhaps intimate, relationship will allow us to enact our role identity fully. Failing to matter in this case is a violation of the expectations associated to these role relationships and so is a threat to role identity. To fail to matter means that the others in the relationship do not attend to us, refuse to give even minimal support to us, and deny their need for our place in the interaction. In short, it deprives us of the legitimacy required to assume and maintain that desired role identity.

The more salient the role identity, the more damaging the threat caused by a failure to matter. If you do not matter to an acquaintance, you may be able to avoid the shame or guilt that might otherwise overcome you, because your role identity with respect to the acquaintance is not central to your understanding of your place in the social order. However, a child who does not matter to his (or her) parents gets a powerful message that “I am not who I should be,” a violation of the “identity standard” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 287) of the socially prescribed meanings that define a person’s identity in a situation and in the family system as a whole.

Ultimately, mattering deals with the possibility of establishing a meaningful connection to the significant others in our lives. When successfully accomplished, we can be confident in our role identities and can take the necessary steps to pursue our aims. Failure raises the terrifying awareness that the desired relationship and its concomitant identity are destroyed. It may be self-produced (due to ineffective attempts to take the role of the other), but it may also be that others simply have no desire to accord us the legitimacy required for the role identity, for reasons known only to them. The point is that success in adopting a role identity is not merely a matter of personal effort or ability. If others do not recognize our claim, it is difficult to force them to do so.

Still, we may yet feel responsible for the loss of the role identity, as we ask ourselves, “What is wrong with me, that I am rejected by those to whom I should be connected?” The classic example of such self-recrimination is found in the case of child neglect, in which the child concludes that he or she somehow deserves to be a non-person within the family (cf. Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2007, ch. 5).



Both paradigms, then, acknowledge, explicitly or implicitly, mattering as a fundamental motivation within the self. The Cognitive Social Psychologists understand mattering as a dimension of the self-concept, learned from socialization by the significant others in our lives, which exerts a powerful impetus to act in ways that assure we matter to others. The Structural Symbolic Interactionists view mattering as an integral part of the process by which role identities are created and sustained in everyday life. From both perspectives, mattering is a strong element of (and failing to matter is likely to be a strong threat to) a personally and socially integrated self.

## **Mattering and the Life Course**

Whatever the orientation taken on the self, recognition of the importance of mattering is never extinguished. Once we become cognizant of the essential nature of mattering, we never reach a point at which we no longer desire to be meaningfully connected to others. As long as the need is satisfied, the issue of mattering may never rise to the level of consciousness within us. Contrariwise, when threatened with the possibility, contemplation of the loss of mattering is terrifying at any time in a person's life. Then, in our desperation, we quickly realize how necessary mattering is.

Researchers in developmental and social psychology have focused on the importance of connection to others, from the youngest of us to the oldest. The question of attachment to adult caretakers is an important part of the infant's and young child's development (Bowlby, 1969). The degree and kind of attachment surely lays the groundwork for the sense of mattering developed later in life. It is highly likely that those with a secure attachment to their parents (or parent figures) will form the strongest experiences of mattering to their families and will seek such security in other relationships. In contrast, those with ambivalent, avoidant, or disorganized attachments (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) will very likely come to believe that they do not matter to their parents.

However, the limited cognitive development of the children involved in these studies means that mattering is not meaningfully operating in their lives as yet. It is as cognitive capacities develop that young people begin to appreciate the centrality of mattering in their lives, and its effects become measurable. From that point on, the question

of mattering becomes critical for the individual. Indeed, the research on mattering to date has covered the life span from pre-adolescent youth to the elderly.

In his initial effort (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981), Rosenberg found that mattering to parents is related to self-esteem and depression among junior and senior high school students. Those who mattered more had higher levels of self-esteem and less depression than those who mattered less. The psychologist Andrea Dixon Rayle, focusing on high school students, found that females believed they mattered to their families more than did males (Rayle, 2005); results from an additional analysis of the same data revealed that mattering is a strong predictor of adolescents' evaluation of their lifestyles (Rayle & Myers, 2004).

Among college students, the psychologists Leanne Mak and Sheila Marshall (2004) investigated romantic relationships. They found that mattering is positively associated with the couple's investment in and satisfaction with the relationship and negatively associated with the perception of the quality of alternatives to the current partner. In studying cadets at West Point, the educational psychologist Jane Myers (Myers & Bechtel, 2004) discovered that mattering is positively correlated with a number of wellness measures, including "life tasks" (such as spirituality, work, leisure, friendship, and love) and "self-direction tasks" (including sense of worth, sense of control, emotional awareness, and stress management).

In the first analysis of data from the adolescents surveyed for this book (Elliott, Colangelo, & Gelles, 2005), I demonstrated that mattering is a powerful predictor of suicide ideation among adolescents, working its effects through self-esteem and, to a lesser extent, depression. That is, a failure to matter reduces self-esteem, and lowered self-esteem increases the likelihood of depression. In turn, both lowered self-esteem and increased depression lead to a higher probability that the adolescent would regularly consider suicide.

The sociologist John Taylor studied the importance of mattering among adults. In one study (Taylor & Turner, 2001), he discovered a gender difference, in that for women (but not men), lower levels of mattering are associated with greater levels of depression. A second study (Scheiman & Taylor, 2001) investigated the link between identity and mattering. Having children, and working at a job that is autonomous, complex, and involves supervising others, leads to an

increase in self-perceived mattering. In contrast, mattering decreases with increases in relationship and parenting strains.

Mattering is also central in family relationships for adults. Myers and her associates (Powers, Myers, Tingle, & Powers, 2004) compared married medical residents to the general married population and found (unexpectedly) that the former scored significantly higher on a measure of mattering. In a *post hoc* discussion, they argue that the spouse of a medical resident must deal with family stress caused by the demands of the resident's job. A willingness to do so sends a message that the resident matters, because the stress is taken off his or her shoulders.

Marshall and Lambert (2006) turned the tables in the parent-child relationship by examining self-perceived mattering of parents to their children. Parents were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire designed to elicit the extent to which they mattered to their children, situations in which mattering would increase or decrease, and the parents' emotional response to their self-perceived level of mattering. Parents reported that mattering is situationally specific, emerging from specific interactions with their children. In addition, it appears that reliance is the form of mattering that parents most consistently cite as determining their judgments as to how much they matter to their children.

Mattering is important for a second identity that is central among adults: *employment*. Counseling psychologist Norman Amundson (1993), focusing on employment counselors and their clients, holds that all three forms of mattering (awareness, importance, and reliance) are critical in establishing an effective counselor-client relationship. Rayle (2006a, 2006b) echoes this significance, finding that elementary school counselors who believed they mattered to others at their schools report greater job satisfaction than those who mattered less.

Business school professors Suzanne Masterson and Christina Stamper (2003) addressed the issue of "perceived organizational membership" for employees of business firms. One factor in this perception is mattering, evinced in the extent to which "the organization provides employees with a level of influence over organizational processes, and the organization communicates to employees that they are valuable members" (Masterson & Stamper, 2003, p. 480). When employers instill a sense of mattering among their employees, they engender a much stronger level of perceived organizational membership.

Older members of our society do not escape the motivation to matter. In an analysis of midlife (39–65) women’s narratives of living alone, nursing instructor Mary Margaret Segraves (2004) reveals the disturbing consequences of the loss of connection to others. Some women, feeling excluded by married friends, found it difficult to plan social activities. Others anticipated a future filled with increasing challenges, although they countered this anxiety with a greater sense of their own growth in wisdom. Finally, many averred that society in general had little awareness of the consequences of women’s aging alone on their well-being. All of this came from a strong shift of connections, or even disconnections to others caused by the distance from others created by living alone. Although Segraves (2004) does not use the term “mattering,” it is clearly implicit in her analysis.

In a similar vein, sociologists Leonard Pearlin and Allen LeBlanc (2001) presented evidence that bereavement following the death of a loved one included a perceived loss of mattering. The fact that people were no longer needed by those whom they had nursed for so long erased a sense of purpose in their lives (reliance). This loss was especially acute for women and spouses, less so for men and adult children. Further, the more a person is self-invested in the role of caretaker and the more intimate the relationship with the deceased, the greater the felt loss of mattering. On the other hand, loss of mattering was mitigated by the presence of emotionally supportive others, especially if the respondent had formed a new intimate relationship. Finally, loss of mattering led to lower self-esteem and a reduced sense of mastery, as well as increased levels of depression.

The research reported above is mainly focused on the antecedents to mattering (death of a loved one, change in social status and role) or the intrapersonal consequences of mattering (depression, self-esteem). If mattering is to be established as a central, motivating dimension of the self-concept, it is necessary to establish empirically the protective role that it plays in everyday doings.

## **Mattering in Adolescence**

Although mattering is a powerful motivation throughout the life course, as revealed above, there are segments in which it is singularly meaningful. In particular, I argue that mattering is critically significant during adolescence.

As sociologists Roberta Simmons, Florence Rosenberg, and Morris Rosenberg (1973) have demonstrated, beginning in early adolescence (generally, ages 12–14), the self is characterized by a great disturbance, resulting from the biological, cognitive, and social structural changes that adolescents undergo in this period. Morris Rosenberg (1979) has elegantly explained the sources of the upheaval in self-understanding that is characteristic of this stage of development.

First, the onset of puberty and its resultant physiological changes upset the rather simple understanding of the self developed before adolescence. The body changes shape in radical ways that inevitably focus attention on the self. Growth spurts create an impression of a discontinuous self, rather than a smoothly developing human being. In the mirror, the adolescent sees a physical self that looks qualitatively different from pre-adolescent days: for females, the emergence of breasts; for males, the ability to sustain an erection; for both, the presence of body hair, especially in the pubic region. In addition, the appearance of newly raging hormones, and their effects on behavior, can be difficult to understand. These changes are powerful and occasionally frightening, especially if the adolescent has not been well prepared by parents or peers for these changes. The consequence is that the confused young teenager may have difficulty making sense of the “new” self.

Second, early adolescence is the period in which most young people experience a significant change in their cognitive capacities. They begin to be able to deal in abstractions. Heretofore, the self has been understood largely in terms of external, concrete attributes (sex, race, height, weight). Now, abstract thought allows one to introspect, and therefore to see the self in very different ways. Adolescents begin to understand themselves as possessing internal and intangible characteristics, such as traits, attitudes, and feelings.

Emotions, especially, can be disconcerting. In his analysis of self-concept development in adolescence, Rosenberg (1979, pp. 213–214) found that beginning in early adolescence, over one-third of young people listed as among their chief deficiencies the inability to deal effectively with their emotions, as compared to one-sixth of the younger children. Being aware of their inner lives, the older children see themselves as struggling to control it, whereas the younger children are largely oblivious to their internal states. It is very difficult for new adolescents to integrate the abstract and the concrete parts into a cohesive whole, and the new image of the self may not be easily

understood until they have had some experience in dealing with these feelings and abstract notions.

A second consequence of the newly developed ability to deal with abstractions is that the early adolescent comes to recognize the self as the object of others' scrutiny, as a stimulus for their behavior. Once a child learns to see the self from another's point of view, a new order of complexity in understanding the self is introduced. On the one hand, there are many significant others in a person's life. Each views the adolescent from a unique perspective. Cognitive Social Psychologists would say that it becomes the young person's task to form a stable and consistent understanding of the self by synthesizing all the reflected appraisals into a coherent whole. Symbolic Interactionists would argue that this occurs during the growth in the ability to take the role of the other, from the specific to the generalized. In either paradigm, the message is the same: It is a daunting task to use this new-found capacity to re-form a solid understanding of who one is. Add to all this concern the anxiety that we can never be sure that our attempts to see ourselves from another person's perspective are entirely accurate, and we heighten the difficulty of confidently understanding ourselves.

Finally, structural changes in the young adolescent's life can contribute to self-concept disturbance. For example, the shift from elementary to middle school often means a change in peers. For most children, elementary school consists of a group of students relatively homogeneous along such characteristics as socioeconomic status and (sometimes) race. In contrast, in middle school, the classes are more heterogeneous. The challenges to a coherent understanding of the self are thereby multiplied.

Further, in elementary school, the student faced one or two teachers each day, but in middle school the student has several teachers. As a consequence, the feedback the child gets about itself becomes variegated. From the Cognitive Social Psychology approach, this means that there are more and different reflected appraisals that must be integrated into a coherent image of the self. On the other hand, Structural Symbolic Interactionists would argue that the construction of a role identity becomes more complex, in that it requires validation from a greater number of teachers. Indeed, the teachers may not bother to coordinate their understandings of the student with each other, and it is left to the student to deal with any contradictions or inconsistencies.

In addition, qualitative differences in performance expectations emerge in middle school. The young person must learn new ways of learning. With the newly gained ability to deal in abstractions, the focus begins to turn from rote memorization to an investigation of the concepts and processes that underlie observed phenomena. It is no longer sufficient to know what happens; it is now necessary to understand why or how it happens.

It is not surprising, then, that the confluence of these factors can lead to serious upheaval in the self-concept. In his extensive research on the adolescent self-concept, Rosenberg (1979) has demonstrated that the consequences of this period of disruption include a markedly unstable self-concept, very low self-esteem, and unusually high levels of depression. Adolescents spend the later part of their youth rebuilding the self-concept, and fortunately, most do so successfully. Still, people can recall, wistfully or ruefully, the *sturm und drang* of early adolescence.

The extent of self-concept disturbance and the time it takes to repair the damage will, of course, vary across individuals. Elements of the self may facilitate or inhibit the recovery. In particular, the process of building a qualitatively different understanding of the self may be significantly easier if one matters. Mattering serves as an anchor in the turbulence of adolescent self-concept development. Such a meaningful connection to others provides a reassuring basis for simplifying the redefinition of self necessitated by the normal changes encountered in adolescence. Mattering means that others empathize with what you are going through, reach out to assist you when you are ready, and continue to include you in their lives. Its major service to the adolescent is to promote behaviors that would facilitate the development of a self-concept that would be better able to ride through the confusion of this period of development, and to preclude behaviors that would threaten these goals. In short, mattering offers a haven in which one can more safely work out the challenges of adolescence.

On the other hand, failing to matter means one is alone in facing the qualitative changes experienced by the self. Without a firm basis from which to deal with these changes, the “reconstructed” self is likely to be much less satisfactory and the behavioral consequences may be more dire. The research reported in this book focuses on the protective function of mattering for adolescents and the dysfunctional outcomes too often associated with not mattering.

## The Structure of the Book

I explore the relationship between mattering and a wide range of anti-social and self-destructive behaviors and confirm that even when controlling for other theoretically meaningful predictors, mattering plays a powerful role in preventing these behaviors. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical reasoning behind the link between mattering and such negative behaviors. In Chapter 3, I briefly describe the data gathered for the research and explain the plan of analysis used to obtain the results presented herein; for the research-oriented reader, Appendix A contains a more detailed exposition. The next two chapters present the results of empirical analyses that confirm the pivotal role of mattering for anti-social (Chapter 4) and self-destructive (Chapter 5) behaviors.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I discuss the antecedents to mattering. First, I examine some of the personal and structural factors that account for some of the variation in mattering found among the adolescent respondents in my study. For example, differences in mattering can be traced to a person's gender, race, and the family's socioeconomic status and structure. Further, personal factors, such as age and religiosity, also help determine the extent to which adolescents believe they matter.

Second, extending the theories from Cognitive Social Psychology and Structural Symbolic Interactionism, I will discuss the underlying processes that work to inculcate mattering in a young person. As children grow and build an understanding of themselves, there are things that adults (parents, of course; teachers; coaches; and any other significant adult figures in their lives) can do to teach them that they matter. For mattering does not come "naturally." Neither can it be *imposed* on a child. It can, however, be *induced*.