They are the best: The significance of others to emerging adults and well-being

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April 18, 2023

Abstract

We know little about the relationships that matter to emerging adults. This preregistered report elaborates our plan to survey 200 emerging adults (approximately half male) to better understand the role of significant others. First, we plan to ask emerging adults to list individuals who matter and we will code the open-ended text for relationship type. Second, we will use an adapted version of Schneck's (2009) Mattering Scale to assess mattering among five common close relationships (i.e., mother figure, father figure, partner, best friend, sibling). We predict that mattering of partner and best friend will be highest, mothers will matter more than fathers, and siblings will matter least. We hypothesize failing to mention a relationship in the open-ended portion will be related to lower mattering of that relationship. Finally, we anticipate better well being and less loneliness when the list of those who matter is longer and when significant others matter more.

Keywords : mattering, significant others, emerging adults, wellbeing, loneliness

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Mattering has been conceptualized as the sense of being important and valued by other people (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) and adolescents who believe they matter to their parents experience less depression (Schneck et al., 2009) and fewer severe emotional or behavioral symptoms (Stevenson et al., 2013). However, while Henry Stack Sullivan directed attention to "significant others" over 70 years ago (Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry, 1953), we know considerably less about relationships that matter to emerging adults, a developmental period known for its focus on peer and romantic relationships (Erçelik & Dost-Gözkan, 2020). For the research that has been conducted on emerging adults and their parents, most has focused on the process of gaining autonomy as they become more independent (Assor et al., 2021). There is an existing body of research on the construct of how one perceives themselves to matter to others, but less is known about how

emerging adults perceive significant others as individuals who matter and have value in their lives. In the current study, we will find out who matters to emerging adults, and we will ask emerging adults to evaluate how much some common close relationship (i.e., mother figure, father figure, closest-in-age sibling, partner, best friend) matter.

Emerging adulthood marks a time when individuals are transitioning into adulthood, becoming increasingly self-reliant, and more capable of maintaining mature relationships (Lindell et al., 2017). During this transitional period, emerging adults tend to think more about their futures as well as their place in society. They may become more selective with their relationships, choosing to maintain the relationship they feel are supportive and are complementary to their growth as individuals (Assor et al., 2021). Relationships with family members may also change during this transitional period, as many emerging adults move away from home to attend university or to work away from home. If emerging adults are moving away from family to live in environments where they are surrounded by peers their age, it may be that they develop closer bonds with those friends due to proximity and shared interests. For all of these reasons, we have elected to examine perceived mattering of relationships among emerging adults.

To the best of our knowledge, no prior studies have examined the significant others in the lives of emerging adults. As a result, in this study we will ask emerging adults to generate a list of the individuals in their lives who matter the most to them. We plan to ask for an open-ended list to capture the diversity of relationships that might occur to the emerging adults. Regardless of the kinds of relationships mentioned, we hypothesize that when participants generate a longer list of people who matter to them, they will have better wellbeing and less loneliness.

Additionally, we are also interested in whether five common close relationships (i.e., mother, father, sibling closest in age, partner, best friend) in their lives might similarly be related to wellbeing and loneliness. We have chosen to focus on these five common close relationships because of the emphasis in prior research highlighting the importance of these relationships during emerging adulthood. Next, we review evidence for the common close relationships of mother and father figures, best friends, siblings, and romantic partners.

Mother

As emerging adults leave their family homes, their relationships with parental figures change. In examining relationships between emerging adults and their mothers, perceived meeting of basic psychological needs in that relationship was related to higher identity achievement (Erçelik & Dost-Gözkan, 2020). Because emerging adulthood is linked to identity formation, examining maternal relationships during this transitional period can be informative and significant. As emerging adults are getting older, their mothers are also getting older. Aging can bring changes to their relationships with their mothers. It would be fruitful to investigate whether these changes impact perceived mattering of the relationship, and how the perceived mattering of this relationship differs from perceived mattering of relationships with father figures. As the emotional climate of mother-child relationships influences how children develop prosocial tendencies as they mature, evaluating the closeness of this particular relationship may provide insight into the way in which emerging adults form close relationships with others (Barry et al., 2007). We aim to explore the patterns that emerge when emerging adults are asked to list people who matter the most to them, and whether they might list more people if they perceive their relationship with their mother to be very important to them.

Father

Parental figures play a pivotal role throughout a child's growth and development. Research has shown that parents have observed significant changes in their relationships with their child as soon as they transition into emerging adulthood (Jablonski & Martino, 2013). These include either the growing distance among the parent-child relationship or the closeness with each other. Jablonski & Martino (2013) examined the perspectives of parents and emerging adults on communication styles, and provided evidence that some of the fathers reported closeness to their children as they could be engaged more in conversation as an "equal" and share more common interests. However, fewer studies have considered the unique effect of fathers and the changes in the relationship from the perspective of an emerging adult. However, it has been found that for

emerging adults, relationship anxiety with fathers and avoidance with romantic partners were reciprocally related (Suh & Fabricius, 2020). This association was not found with mothers, which highlights an interesting aspect of the importance fathers hold in emerging adults' lives and how their relationships with their fathers can influence other significant relationships. Therefore, investigating the perceived mattering of the father-child relationship and the variance due to gender could provide an instrumental insight on the relationships that are important and valued by emerging adults.

Sibling

We anticipate emerging adults may be likely to include siblings on their list of people who matter to them. Siblings help shape individuals' social contexts; they are family, yet they are also peers (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). Particularly, the sibling relationship is noteworthy and eccentric and tends to be one of the longest familial relations. Although sibling relationships witness several developmental periods, during emerging adulthood siblings often become sources of companionship, support, and warmth (Scharf et al., 2005). Additionally, siblings' relative age and gender are not related to the quality of the relationship for emerging adults (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). Considering how factors other than age and gender can enforce stronger bonds may be worth further investigation. Examining whether emerging adults consider their sibling as the ones who matter to them the most will allow us to better understand the meaning these individuals prescribe to those relationships.

Best friend

Closeness of friendships and friendship quality have been associated with social skills among emerging adults (Demir et al., 2012). Additionally, emerging adults may grow closer to long-time friends as intimacy develops during adolescence and promotes feelings of closeness among friends (Radmacher & Azmitia, 2006). While young adults perceive basic support for their psychological needs from their parents, they tend to perceive more support in their relationships with their best friends (Erçelik & Dost-Gözkan, 2020). This may be because best friends are of a similar age, and may be sharing the experience of becoming emerging adults. Because of this shared experience and growing closeness, examining best friend relationships with respect to perceived mattering of the relationship may provide some important insights about what emerging adults value in their relationships with others, particularly for those who are not in romantic relationships. Emerging adults' capacity to form such close friendships may also be an indication of high perceptions of mattering of extra-familial chosen relationships.

Partner

Romantic partners play an important role in emerging adults' developing relationships (Marshall, 2004). Individuals have the opportunity to grow into adulthood alongside a romantic partner who is at a similar stage in life. This is key, as both individuals provide love and support to each other throughout this stage of transition (Schieman & Taylor, 2001). The security that accompanies these relationships can result in higher levels of perceived mattering, and in turn, can influence the individuals' investment in and satisfaction in the relationship (Marshall, 2004). Although there is generally more research on romantic partners of emerging adults, especially when compared to family relationships, there still are gaps in our understanding of how these relationships are perceived (Mak & Marshall, 2004). While most research on mattering has focused on how emerging adults feel they are important to romantic partners, there has not been much research investigating how they place importance on those relationships and perceive them to matter.

Hypotheses

We will test the following hypotheses:

1. A longer list of relationships that matter will be associated with better well-being.
2. A longer list of relationships that matter will be associated with less loneliness.
3. When specified relationships (mother, father, sibling, partner, best friend) matter more to a person, that person will have less loneliness and better well-being.

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4. If a specified relationship is not included on the list of relationships that matter, that relationship will have a lower mattering score when participants are asked to indicate how much a person matters.

Research questions for which no directional hypotheses are offered:

1. Are the lists of men and women approximately equal?
2. Which relationships are mentioned most often in the list of relationships that matter?
3. When given the chance to indicate how the list of relationships that matter changes over time, which relationships are more likely to move onto or off of the list?

Method

Participants

Participants will be 200 undergraduate students attending a university in the pacific northwest who will receive course credit for their involvement in the story. Due to the exploratory nature of our work, we chose college students largely for convenience but also because emerging adulthood is a transitionary phase of individuation and growth. We are interested in exploring the variability in these individuals' perceptions of mattering relationships, considering that some still live with family while others have moved away.

Procedures

First, participants will provide data via an online survey hosted by Qualtrics. Participants are eligible to participate if they were above the age of 18 and felt comfortable completing the survey in English. Second, participants will be asked to answer yes or *no* to the following prompt: "We would like for you to list the people who are very important to you. These are people who matter most to you. We want to know who is important to you. Please list the people who you value, who you care about the most, and who you want to spend time with. These are essential people in your life. Is there someone in your life who meets this description?" This is so that participants who feel they did not have anyone important in their lives would be taken to the end of the survey. Third, participants will be asked to generate a list of all of the people who matter to them. A description will be provided to help participants distinguish those who matter to them from those who are merely friendly. To help with this distinction, they will be provided with the following prompt: "Please list the people who you value, who you care about the most, and who you want to spend time with. These are essential people in your life. Please don't use their names but tell us how they are related to you (e.g., stepdad, older cousin, next door neighbor)."

Participants will be asked to list one relationship at a time. They will also be given the option to not list any relationships and move forward in the survey. Moving forward, we will refer to the list of names generated in the second stage of the study as *the list* and is short for what each participant considers to be *the list of individuals who matter to me* . Fourth, after providing their lists, participants will be asked to think about what their list may have looked like one year into the past and specifically, of any people on their list who may have moved up since that time. Fifth, they will be asked to think about people who may have been on their list a year ago but were no longer listed. Sixth, participants will let us know whether they were in contact with the five common close relationships we listed in the introduction. Specifically, participants will be asked to respond *yes* or *not really* to the following prompt: "The next set of questions will ask about your relationship with five different people who may or may not be in your life. Specifically, we will ask questions about your mother figure, your father figure, a sibling or step-sibling, a partner, and a best friend. Before we show you those questions, is there someone in your life who comes to mind who fulfills each role?" For each of the five relationships, participants can indicate *yes* or *not really* .

Seventh, for each common close relationship that received a yes response, participants will complete the eight-item mattering scale. The mattering scales will be randomized among common close relationship targets. Participants will respond to the mattering scale from zero to five times depending on the number of common close relationships in the lives of the participants. Eighth, participants will complete the Diener Wellbeing Scale (1984) and the 3-item UCLA Loneliness scale (1978). Ninth, participants will answer three questions pertaining to experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic to gain a broader understanding of their experiences

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during this time. Tenth and finally, participants will be asked to answer several demographic questions. We will ask questions about the university they attend, their ethnicity, their gender, and their level of education attainment. We also asked a question about their romantic relationship status and their parents' relationship status.

Measures

Significant other mattering

To assess how much significant others matter to participants, we adapted the mattering scale of Schneck et al (2009). The original 7-item mattering scale was completed by adolescents and assessed how much the adolescent felt they mattered to their mother and father. Items included "I believe I really matter to my dad" and "I am one of the most important things in the world to my dad." For the purposes of this study, we adapted the item to measure a perception of how much significant others matter to the participant. For example, "My dad really matters to me" and "My dad is one of the most important things in the world to me." Separate scales will be created for mothers, fathers, a sibling, a best friend, and a romantic partner. Items will be scaled from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Some items will be reverse coded so higher scores could indicate the significant other matters more to the participant. (See Appendix for scales that will be used to measure significant other mattering.)

In our survey, we will also be using broader terms for mothers and fathers, specifically referring to those relationships as "mother figure" and "father figure". This is to be inclusive to participants who may not have biological parents, but may have people in their lives who fulfill those roles.

Mattering Scale (Schneck et al., 2009)	Adapted Mattering Scale (
1. My (target parent) really cares about me.	1. I really care about my (
2. I believe I really matter to my (target parent).	2. My (target relationship)
3. I think my (target parent) cares about other people more than me.	3. I think I care about oth
4. I'm not that important to my (target parent)	4. My (target relationship)
5. There are a lot of things in my (target parent)'s life that matter more to him/her than I do	5. There are a lot of things
6. I know my (target parent) loves me	6. I know I love my (target
7. I am one of the most important things in the world to my (target parent)	7. My (target relationship)
8. I sometimes wonder if my (target parent) wants me around.	8. I sometimes wonder if I

Well-being

To assess well-being, we used the Diener (1984) 8-item scale. The items in this scale focus on overall happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect, and a total mean score was estimated such that higher scores indicated better well-being.

Loneliness

We used the adapted UCLA loneliness scale (1978), a 3-item scale used to measure various dimensions of loneliness. These include social and relational connectedness, and perceived isolation. Higher mean scores indicated more loneliness.

Analysis Plan

Due to the exploratory and descriptive nature of the data we will collect, analyses will involve both qualitative data coding, hypothesis testing, and descriptive analyses. First, we will ask participants to confirm whether there is someone who meets the description of being important in their life. If the participant confirms they do have someone like this in their life, we then ask them to generate a list of people who matter to them the most. They will be able to list up to twenty people. In our instructions, we will specify that they should list relationships and do not provide any names (i.e., father, neighbor). Next, we ask the participants to

think about these five specific relationships (father, mother, sibling, best friend, partner). We then ask them to indicate whether they have anyone in their lives who fulfill these roles. Based on who they indicate, we prompt them to answer a few questions about how much they communicate with that person and how they perceive that relationship to matter. next, we ask them to self-rate their well-being and loneliness.

For H1, we plan on running a Pearsons correlation between list length and well-being. For H2, we plan on running a Pearsons correlation between list length and loneliness. For H3, we plan on creating a correlation matrix that maps each of the five specified relationships onto the individual's wellbeing and loneliness scores. For H4, we plan on running a MANOVA analysis of the mean mattering scores among individuals who listed specified relationships (father, mother, sibling, partner, best friend) on their generated list, and those who did not. For each potential relationship listed, we will assign a nominal value (1 = mother, 2 = father, 2.5 = parents, 3 = stepmother, 4 = stepfather, 4.5 = godparent, 5 = partner, 6 = sister, 7 = brother, 7.5 = siblings, 8 = stepsister, 9 = stepbrother, 10 = best friend, 11= friend, 12 = work friend/coworker, 13 = grandmother, 14 = grandfather, 14.5 = grandparents, 15 = daughter, 16 = son, 16.5 = godchild, 17 = cousin, 17.5 = cousins, 18 = aunt, 18.5 = aunts, 19 = uncle, 19.5 = uncles, 20 = niece, 20.5 = nieces, 21= nephew, 21.5 = nephews, 22 = pet, 22 = social group (ministry, my friends, my family, kids I work with, chosen family), 24 = mother in law, 25=father in law, 26=sister in law, 27 = brother in law, 28 = teammate, 29 = sponsor, 30 = mentor, 31 = self, 32 = roommate).

We will ask participants to only list individual relationships and not list groups, however we will develop a coding system for individuals who still list groups. We will assign a '99' if they provide a name but no relationship. We plan to assign the value '999' to missing cases to account for missing data.

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Appendix

FAIR lab mattering scale

Mattering measures adolescents' perception of imbuing their father figure, mother figure, mother figure, partner, sibling, and best friend with love and value.

Father Figure

1. I really care about my (dad/step-dad).

2. My (dad/step-dad) really matters to me.

3. I think I care about other people more than my (dad/step-dad).

4. I sometimes wonder if I want my (dad/step-dad) around.

5. My (dad/step-dad) is not that important to me.

6. There are a lot of things in my life that matter more to me than my (dad/step-dad).

7. I know I love my (dad/step-dad).

8. My (dad/step-dad) is one of the most important things in the world to me.

Mother Figure

1. I really care about my (mom/step-mom).

2. My (mom/step-mom) really matters to me.

3. I think I care about other people more than my (mom/step-mom).

4. I sometimes wonder if I want my (mom/step-mom) around.

5. My (mom/step-mom) is not that important to me.

6. There are a lot of people or things in my life that matter more to me than my (mom/step-mom).

7. I know I love my (mom/step-mom).

8. My (mom/step-mom) is one of the most important people or things in the world to me.

Best Friend

1. I really care about my (Best Friend).

2. My (Best Friend) really matters to me.

3. I think I care about other people more than my (Best Friend).

4. I sometimes wonder if I want my (Best Friend) around.

5. My (Best Friend) is not that important to me.

6. There are a lot of people in my life that matter more to me than my (Best Friend).

7. I know I love my (Best Friend).

8. My (Best Friend) is one of the most important people in the world to me.

Sibling

1. I really care about my (sibling).

2. My (sibling) really matters to me.

3. I think I care about other people more than my (sibling).

4. I sometimes wonder if I want my (sibling) around.

5. My (sibling) is not that important to me.

6. There are a lot of people in my life that matter more to me than my (sibling).

7. I know I love my (sibling).

8. My (sibling) is one of the most important people in the world to me.

Romantic Partner

1. I really care about (partner).

2. My (partner) really matters to me.

3. I think I care about other people more than my (partner).

4. I sometimes wonder if I want my (partner) around.

5. My (partner) is not that important to me.

6. There are a lot of people in my life that matter more to me than my (partner).

7. I know I love my (partner).

8. My (partner) is one of the most important people in the world to me.