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Mattering in Danish out-of-home care

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ABSTRACT

This study aims (1) to deepen understanding of the concept of mattering through the experiences of youth in out-of-home care (OOH), and (2) to illuminate youths' experiences of OOH through mattering. Drawing on qualitative semi-structured interviews with young people in Denmark recently placed in OOH and using reflexive thematic analysis, the study examines how feeling valued and adding value are lived across arenas central to participants' lives. Four themes highlight the pragmatic nature of mattering in OOH. First, mattering was linked to being listened to, with participants describing hierarchical patterns of voice in which professionals' perspectives carried the greatest weight. Second, feeling valued often emerged when adults acted beyond standardized procedures. Third, adding value was frequently prioritized as a pathway to becoming and feeling valuable, but translated into mattering only when met with recognition and emotional responsiveness. Finally, constrained contexts sometimes fostered self-surrendering mattering strategies that proved unsustainable over time.

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Introduction

This article explores how young people with experience of out-of-home care (OOH) in Denmark understand and negotiate the experience of mattering within institutional contexts. In recent years, *mattering* has become an increasingly influential concept in psychological research, informing discussions of mental health, wellbeing, and the common good (Flett, 2025; Kruglanski et al., 2025; Prilleltensky et al., 2023). Current studies suggest that mattering may be unevenly distributed, or actively undermined in certain social contexts, and that such experiences are associated with adverse psychological outcomes, including depression, loneliness, and suicidality (Duradoni et al., 2024; Flett, 2021; Krygsman et al., 2021). While quantitative and mixed-methods research has contributed to important knowledge about patterns of mattering across populations (di Napoli et al., 2023; Krygsman et al., 2022; Paradisi et al., 2024), fewer studies have examined how individuals themselves understand and negotiate what it means to matter in everyday life, particularly in contexts characterised by relational instability, or constrained opportunities for recognition (Flett, 2021; Pychyl et al., 2022). As such, there remains a need for qualitative investigations that situate mattering more firmly within lived contexts and attend to how people make sense of mattering under conditions where it cannot be assumed to function in any standardised way.

Young people with experiences of out-of-home care (OOH) constitute one such context. Research indicates that children and adolescents placed in foster care or residential care often grow up under conditions marked by disrupted relationships and institutional constraints (Lausten et al., 2020; VIVE, 2022). These conditions have been linked to elevated psychosocial risks and long-term mental health challenges, but they also shape the relational and social environments within which young people seek recognition, belonging, and influence (Ottosen et al., 2010; Vinnerljung et al., 2005). In this present study, young people (M_age = 25.1) with OOH experience are not approached primarily as vulnerable. Rather, they are

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understood as individuals with diverse and often complex experiences of what it means to matter and not matter, albeit within constrained terms (Gilligan, 2000). From this perspective, OOH is treated as a context that may offer particular insight into how mattering is experienced and negotiated when its conditions are unstable. Young people's everyday efforts to navigate relationships, institutions, and expectations can illuminate how mattering is pursued or compensated for under such circumstances, including through strategies that do not always align with normative expectations of recognition or contribution (Duradoni et al., 2024).

In this article we draw on contemporary formulations of mattering that emphasise both feeling valued and adding value as central and interrelated dimensions of the construct (Prilleltensky, 2020). Within this framework, mattering involves not only experiencing oneself as valued by others, but also of having opportunities to contribute meaningfully to others. While these dimensions are often described as mutually reinforcing, emerging research suggests that their relationship may vary across contexts and life situations, and that one dimension may be pursued or emphasised in the absence of the other (Flett, 2021; Prilleltensky, 2020). Examining how feeling valued and adding value are articulated, and how they are related to one another, in the accounts of young people with OOH experience may help clarify how mattering is understood and enacted when relational and institutional conditions shift. Although participants were young adults at the time of the interviews, the study focuses on their accounts of childhood and adolescent experiences in OOH.

This article contributes to ongoing efforts to refine theories on mattering by exploring how young people with recent OOH experience describe and make sense of mattering. Guided by this aim, the article ask: How is mattering experienced, negotiated, and made possible within the institutional context of Danish OOH? We then turn to discuss, how these dimensions interact when conditions for feeling valued and adding value may be uneven or constrained and what these experiences suggest about the concept of mattering in contexts of institutional care. While the findings resonate with existing research on OOH, the contribution of this study lies in interpreting these experiences through mattering.

Developing the mattering concept

The concept of *mattering*, the subjective sense of being significant to others, has emerged as a somewhat new construct in contemporary psychological theory and research. Its historical roots trace back to sociologist Morris Rosenberg, who, alongside Claire McCullough (1981), introduced mattering as an extension of his work on self-esteem. Rosenberg and McCullough introduced mattering as involving three core perceptions: 1) that others pay attention to us, 2) view us as important, and 3) depend on us. In a further elaboration, Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) added the notion of *ego extension*, suggesting that mattering also includes the belief that one would be missed if absent. This conceptual expansion aligned mattering with existential concerns of presence, absence, and the relational self. Around the same time, Schlossberg (1989) proposed a fourth dimension, *feeling appreciated*, underscoring that mattering encompasses both instrumental and affective dimensions of being recognised. These conceptual and theoretical developments soon gave rise to measurement efforts including the General Mattering Scale (Marcus & Rosenberg, 1987) and the Mattering Index (Elliott et al., 2004), which operationalized mattering across social contexts. Since then, empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that mattering predicts unique variance in psychological outcomes such as well-being, loneliness, depression, and suicidality, over and above related constructs (Flett, 2021; Krygsman et al., 2022; Milner et al., 2016; Paradisi et al., 2024). Following these works, Gordon Flett (2021) introduced the complementary concept of *anti-mattering*, the feeling of being invisible, insignificant, or excluded. The Anti-Mattering Scale (AMS) captures these experiences as a distinct form of psychological vulnerability, often arising from marginalisation, trauma, or persistent social neglect. Critically, anti-mattering is not merely the absence of mattering but a distinct and damaging state with specific affective and behavioural correlates (Flett, 2021), both offline and online (Duradoni et al., 2024).

In recent years, mattering research has increasingly expanded beyond the individual as the primary point of analysis. Here, Prilleltensky (2020) reframed the concept to emphasise two interdependent experiences: *feeling valued* and *adding value*. This shift from a more static recognition to reciprocal contribution seeks to place mattering at the heart of psychological and civic well-being. In describing this and how mattering

connects to our surroundings, Prilleltensky (2020) presented the mattering wheel framework in which mattering, both feeling valued and adding value, is directly influenced by the concepts of self, relationships, work and community. Building on this 'universalist' turn, recent work also clarifies how conditions of fairness shape experiences of mattering and, through them, outcomes such as wellbeing. In the *Mattering–Wellness–Fairness (MWF)* framework, Prilleltensky et al. (2023) argue that fairness (i.e. justice) is enacted through distributive and corrective processes, and that these conditions influence wellbeing both directly and indirectly via mattering. Within this model, mattering is experienced through feeling valued and having genuine opportunities to add value; conversely, unfair conditions increase risks of being devalued or denied meaningful roles and participation (Prilleltensky et al., 2023).

Complementing these theoretical developments, recent qualitative studies on youth's lived experiences illuminate how fairness, respect, and inclusion function as concrete preconditions for mattering in everyday contexts. Botero et al. (2025) describe mattering as emerging when young people feel seen, respected, included, and safe (feeling valued) and when they can contribute meaningfully through supportive actions, purposeful roles, and goal striving (adding value). Importantly, the authors highlight that supportive and fair environments, particularly for marginalised youth, are central to preventing experiences of diminished mattering and their negative psychosocial consequences, positioning mattering as a key mechanism linking fair conditions to wellbeing (Botero et al., 2025; Prilleltensky et al., 2023).

It is within this evolving landscape that the present article situates itself. Much of the current empirical literature has focused on measurement, correlates, and outcomes of mattering and anti-mattering (Duradoni et al., 2024; Flett et al., 2022; Krygsman et al., 2021). While this work has been crucial for establishing mattering as a distinct construct, it provides a limited insight into how mattering is experienced and pursued in everyday life, particularly in contexts marked by institutional regulation. This gap is notable given that mattering, by definition, does not exclude anyone. Recent research on anti-mattering further suggests that experiences of being treated as insignificant do not eliminate the striving for significance, but may instead intensify or redirect it, sometimes toward non-normative or costly forms of action (Duradoni et al., 2024; Flett, 2022). These observations point to the need to understand mattering as a dynamic and contextualised phenomenon. At the same time, this development raises an important and timely normative concern. As mattering increasingly becomes articulated as a societal and policy-relevant concept, there is a risk that it may be standardised or 'regulated' in ways that overlook how mattering is lived and negotiated across individuals and groups. To address this concern, we have chosen to include a group of young people with experiences of OOH in this qualitative study, whose perspectives can contribute to a more inclusive and empirically grounded understanding of mattering.

Mattering and out-of-home care

Research on young people with OOH experiences is rarely linked to the concept of mattering, just as the concept of mattering has not been informed by empirical studies of young people and/or OOH. Yet, knowledge about the life conditions of young people, and about how they experience the contexts of care arrangements, may be valuable for exploring and further developing the concept of mattering, and better understand the experience of experiences of OOH through the concept of mattering.

Over the last 25 years, a vast amount of research in the Nordic countries has examined how children and young people in OOH develop and thrive compared to peers not in OOH. While early studies focused on and showed how a larger proportion of these children and young people suffer from disadvantaged living conditions and vulnerabilities (e.g. Backe-Hansen et al., 2014; Egelund & Hestbæk, 2003; Egelund et al., 2009) recent research has shifted towards a focus on the everyday life and well-being of children and young people in OOH (e.g. Lausten et al., 2020, 2025), as well as on how care arrangements may also lead to positive outcomes with regards to education and employment (Boddy et al., 2019). Underpinning this development is a growing recognition of the diversity among children and young people in OOH, of the fact that while a majority perform well on classical indicators of welfare, other vulnerabilities may persist, and of how the context and the quality of care arrangements affect their well-being during and after care.

International research shows that child welfare and protection policies and systems shape perceptions of, and interventions directed at the family, parents and children (Gilbert et al., 2011). Even though a stronger child focus, valuing the diversity, individual needs and participation of children and young people

has emerged in Nordic countries (Kriz & Petersen, 2023; Nissen et al., 2023), research also shows that practices within the child protection system as well as in care arrangements have been and continue to be permeated by categorical perceptions of children and young people as either 'problematic' or 'vulnerable' (Espersen, 2010; Henze-Pedersen, 2025). Such stereotypical categorisations are associated with paternalistic approaches to the child's best interest and with a risk of young people's experiences being sidelined before, during, and in the processes of leaving care (Pohl & Pomey, 2025; Clark et al., 2025; Equit and Keller, 2025; Göbbels-Koch & Gupta, 2025).

Research shows that in the encounter with the child welfare and protection system, children value a dialogical and emotionally sensitive approach, allowing them to express what matters to them (Salkauskiene et al., 2025). In addition, they value an exploration of how relationships to parents, family, and caregivers matter and affect their emotional well-being (Nissen, In Press; Ravn, 2025). While young people leave care, they may thrive by participating in education, labour market and relational networks. However, they also struggle practically and emotionally to manage their daily affairs without support from a family. When they evaluate their lives, they do so in light of internalised expectations of what it means to be 'young' and 'normal' (Bengtsson & Mølholt, 2018; Mølholt, 2017; Paulsen et al., 2018).

Together, this body of research suggests that young people with experiences of OOH can reveal fundamental and perhaps less recognised dimensions of mattering. Their experiences may offer valuable knowledge about not only what mattering/not-mattering are, but also about how people reflect, respond, cope and develop resilience when fulfilment of fundamental needs for recognition, significance, and contribution is structurally, relationally and emotionally contingent.

Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative, interpretive design and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Consistent with the assumptions of reflexive thematic analysis, meaning is treated as co-produced through participants' accounts and the researchers' interpretive engagement with the material, rather than as something that can be extracted from the data as an objective entity (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Although participants were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences, the interviews were explicitly oriented around the concept of mattering, which was introduced by the researcher and used throughout the study. Mattering is therefore approached not as a standardised psychological attribute, but as a phenomenon and concept enacted and abductively co-produced with the participant in the context of the interviews. The first author is a psychologist with experience working with children and young people in welfare contexts. This background informed both the sensitivity to participants' accounts and the analytical focus on institutional practices. At the same time, reflexive attention was given to how the concept of mattering, introduced by the researcher, may have shaped the interview process and subsequent analysis.

Recrutiment and participants

Six young people with recent OOH experiences volunteered to participate. All participants lived in different parts of Denmark, and none resided within the same municipality. The sample consisted of one male and five women, all under the age of 28 at the time of the interviews (M_age = 25.1). Notably, one participant was still placed in OOH at the time of the interview. All interviews were conducted by the first author, who is a clinical psychologist and PhD student, and who had no prior relationship with the participants. Procedures were in place to pause or terminate interviews if participants experienced distress.

Participants varied in both the duration and type of their placements. Three had been placed in residential care facilities for children and youth, while the remaining three had lived in foster families. Lengths of placement ranged from long-term placements commencing at birth and extending into adulthood to shorter-term placements of approximately three years. Participants were recruited based on the criterion that they had recent experiences of OOH while simultaneously having sufficient temporal distance from these experiences to allow for reflective accounts of their overall placement trajectories and the specific characteristics of everyday life in care. Throughout this article, the term *out-of-home care* (OOH) refers to formal care placements outside the biological family home, including both placements in foster families and placements in residential care facilities for children and youth.

Recruitment was conducted through the Danish organisation *De Anbragtes Vilkår* (The Danish Association for People in Out-of-Home Care), an organisation founded by people with lived experience of care that works to strengthen the conditions of children and young people in OOH by promoting participation, voice, and the inclusion of lived experiences in policy and practice. An email invitation describing the study and inviting participation was distributed by the organisation, and individuals who expressed interest subsequently contacted the first author directly to arrange the time and location of the interview. The organisation had no access to interview data and was not involved in analysis.

Data collection

The study procedure and interview protocol were approved by the Aalborg University Ethics Committee (case.no. 2025-505-00569, 2025). All participants were encouraged to choose a meeting location where they felt comfortable and at ease. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with written and oral information about the study and signed an informed consent form. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. No monetary compensation was offered for participation, however, all participants were offered a small token of appreciation as a gesture of thanks for their time and contribution.

While the semi-structured interview guide was designed to address core components of mattering while preserving an open-ended structure, the questions were overall centred on the dichotomy between adding value and feeling valued. Questions were intentionally formulated to invite breadth, nuance, and contextual depth. Throughout the interviews, follow-up questions such as 'How did you manage that?' or 'How did that made you feel?' were used to elicit richer accounts of participants' situated experiences. Interviews always began with questions concerning fundamental aspects of mattering. These opening questions served both to introduce the term *mattering* and to anchor participants' reflections in its conceptual foundations. The main section of the interview focused on participants' lived experiences during their OOH placements. While this constituted the primary analytic focus, the interview structure itself was deliberately flexible. Participants were encouraged, when relevant, to describe aspects of life before and after their placements in order to nuance their responses.

Each interview concluded with two forward-looking questions. First, participants were invited to share their perspectives on how mattering could be strengthened within OOH arrangements. Second, they were offered the opportunity to pose an anonymous question to the next participant, creating a sense of continuity across interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Interview durations ranged from 66 to 87 minutes. The researcher wrote field notes both before and after each interview to capture contextual impressions and immediate analytic reflections. All interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim by the researcher for the purposes of analysis.

Data analysis

The interview material was analysed using the six phases from reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Analysis was conducted as an iterative and reflexive process aimed at identifying recurring patterns in how participants described experiences of mattering and non-mattering in relation to OOH. Particular attention was paid to participants' accounts of action and adaptation, in situations where mattering was uncertain or threatened. This orientation reflects a view of meaning as emerging through situated experience and its practical consequences (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Codes were subsequently compared and organised into broader thematic patterns. Themes were refined through repeated engagement with the interview material, ensuring that they captured shared ways in which participants managed and pursued mattering within specific relational and institutional contexts.

Findings

The analysis and findings suggest that mattering is fundamentally pragmatic in nature. Across interviews, participants described mattering not as something one simply *has*, but as something one continuously tries to achieve within the concrete conditions and constraints of everyday life in care. Overall, participants' accounts depict mattering as a decisive concern that shapes how they act, adapt, and relate to others.

Being significant, feeling valuable, or being allowed to add value emerged as matters of urgency rather than abstract ideals. Participants emphasised that their attempts to matter were shaped by what appeared possible, rewarded, or necessary in a given context. The findings therefore suggest that mattering, takes on a pragmatic and agentic quality, being oriented toward strategies that register, that elicit recognition, and that enable one to be seen as having weight in the situations they navigate.

Based on this, four interrelated themes are presented below. Together, they illustrate how mattering is pursued, negotiated, and sometimes compromised in OOH. Although analytically separated, the themes should be understood as overlapping perspectives on a shared phenomenon: young people's ongoing, context-sensitive efforts to become significant in environments that are often constrained.

I: Being heard as a condition for mattering.

Already during the first interview it became clear that an interview about mattering could not meaningfully begin without addressing important conditions for mattering. Wilhelmina had asked her (biological) parents to participate. Before we met, she had told me that they would be able to contribute important experiences. When we met, I initially oriented the conversation toward mattering, but the interview quickly, almost naturally, shifted to experiences of not being listened to and of having one's knowledge dismissed or unrecognised. At the end of our interview, Wilhelmina even suggested that a key question for the next young participants should be whether they felt heard. Across interviews, being listened to appeared closely intertwined with the experience of mattering. This resonates with Rosenberg and McCullough's early understanding of mattering as dependent on one's existence being acknowledged through attention and responsive engagement from others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Several participants described the absence of being listened to as an embodied sign of not carrying weight in the world.

A recurrent pattern in the material was a perceived shift in whose voice counted as important. Wilhelmina's parents repeatedly described how their own perspectives only seemed to matter when communicated through professionals. As her mother put it, *"You can state your opinion, but it is unclear whether it has any significance at all for the decisions that are made on your behalf"*. Her father added that this often took the form of long periods without real influence, describing *"that vacuum you enter, where you yourself have no influence over your life situation"* as *invalidating'*. Wilhelmina confirmed this experience and emphasised that she often felt she had the least say, even in decisions that directly concerned her: *"Even within the out-of-home care situation, I still felt that I had less to say, even though it was about me"*. In the family's account, the shift resembled a hierarchy in which statements gradually gained weight the more professional authority they carried. As Wilhelmina's mother described it, *"We might be heard more if it comes through the mouth of a youth professional … and it's actually a bit silly that none of us are listened to directly"*. This position was condensed in her father's metaphorical description that they were '*CC'd*' in their own child's case. A similar pattern appeared across the other participants' accounts. Andrea described how her own contributions were routinely positioned last, while youth professionals' assessments were prioritised. She articulated this link between listening and mattering explicitly:

> "*If you are listened to, then you will also feel that you matter, right? But when you are not listened to, then you don't really feel that you matter, because then it's not worth listening to. My voice isn't very important, even though it's about me. I could be listened to, but my comments would come last. The child and youth counsellor writes it down at the end. And I think very clearly that youth professionals words carry much more weight than my own*."

Here, whose words are written down first, and whose are relegated to the margins, became an embodied indicator of mattering. At the same time, Andrea also described moments where this hierarchy was temporarily disrupted. One such moment occurred when she was invited to read a letter aloud at a staff meeting she would normally not have access to:

> "*It worked really well that I was allowed to come to that staff meeting. I read it aloud, and they were just supposed to be quiet and listen. And afterwards my contact person came and talked to me and apologised. She said there were many things they hadn't known and many things they had forgotten to talk to me about, because they had listened to each other instead. And that meant a lot. That's also the thing about feeling that you matter, when youth professionals can come and say sorry*."

Sarah articulated a similar situation. She described one caseworker, Jens, who physically changed the setting of their meetings by putting paperwork aside and suggesting a walk around the lake. Reflecting on this experience, Sarah described it as revolutionary:

> "*It was revolutionary for me. To suddenly experience an adult saying: it is actually your needs that matter now. Not your mother's. And not just saying it, but showing it. I could see it. They listened to what I said, and things actually changed*."

Across interviews, a tentative pattern emerged: participants who described growing up in family contexts where they were rarely listened to appeared to experience it as particularly striking, and at times almost revolutionary, when institutional actors actually acted on what they said. At the same time, the material also points to important exceptions. Cathrine described periods where being listened to became associated with disproportionate responsibility. What she said in certain moments could have far-reaching consequences, even when she felt emotionally overwhelmed or was at a vulnerable age. She described this as having '*too much power*' in her own case, and as something that required constant regulation of what she said out of fear of what it might trigger. In this sense, being listened to does not appear as an unambiguously protective or positive experience, but as something that, when detached from context and proportionality, can also become burdensome.

Taken together, the material points to a shared understanding: being listened to is a condition for mattering. Research shows that in encounters with the child welfare and protection system, children value dialogical and emotionally sensitive approaches that allow them to express what matters to them (Salkauskiene et al., 2025). In this way, the findings support Rosenberg and McCullough's emphasis on acknowledgement as a basic condition for mattering (1981), while also nuancing the concept by showing that being listened to can take more ambivalent forms.

II: Feeling valuable through exception and enacted care.

While being listened to emerged as a foundational condition for mattering, participants also described a second, closely related dynamic: feeling valuable was often tied to moments where care took a form that exceeded what was formally expected (Flett, 2021; Prilleltensky, 2019). Across interviews, mattering was not primarily associated with standardised procedures or equal treatment, but with situations in which someone acted in ways that signalled personal investment, or willingness to make an exception. These moments were not necessarily dramatic or formally sanctioned, yet they stood out precisely because they broke with what the young people had come to expect from the system. Wilhelmina described how feeling valuable was often connected to being able to matter *to* staff members at OOH, not only as a recipient of care, but as someone who could also contribute positively to their lives. She emphasised that it was '*a positive thing*' to matter to staff, and illustrated this through a seemingly small but meaningful episode:

> "*One of the ways it worked for me was that there was a staff member with a grandchild who loved chocolate bars. And when we were in Sweden and they were on sale, I asked if it was okay if I bought two to bring home for the grandchild. And something just lit up in that staff member's eyes, and they ended up saying, you may do that with pleasure. And that really meant something. It was me showing interest in them, instead of it always being about how I was doing or how the other young people were doing. Those small things really matter*."

In this sense, being allowed to add value, gave her a feeling of being valuable, echoing relational understandings of mattering as something enacted (Prilleltensky, 2019, 2023). A similar dynamic appeared in Andrea's account, where feeling valuable was closely linked to being treated as someone who could give something back. One of the moments she described most vividly took place when she was leaving out-home-care and her contact person held a farewell speech:

> "*She said thank you for what you have taught me. Thank you for letting me help you and thank you for what you have taught me. And I remember thinking, have I been able to teach you something? Because that made me feel really significant*."

Here, feeling valuable arose not from being helped, but from being recognised as someone who had contributed to another person's learning. Andrea was surprised by this, and she returned to this theme several times, emphasising that moments where staff chose to spend time with her outside formal obligations stood out as particularly meaningful. Going for hot chocolate, sitting at a café, or shopping

for Christmas gifts together were described as powerful markers of significance precisely because they involved personal choice and a clear personal cost. As she put it, "*you want to spend your own money on me*?"

At the same time, Andrea contrasted these experiences with situations where institutional procedures dominated, particularly during meetings focused on goals and action plans. In those contexts, she described feeling less significant and more like '*a problem*,' noting how predefined categories of what was '*working*' and what was '*the problem*' left little room for her own experience. Feeling valuable, in this sense, appeared difficult to realise within rigid frameworks that prioritised documentation and standardisation. Sarah articulated this tension explicitly by reflecting on the role of rule-breaking in her experiences of mattering. She emphasised that both she and the staff were aware of professional boundaries and institutional rules, but that moments when those rules were quietly bent communicated care: "*Those rules break made it visible that they were something other than professionals. That they were also just people. And the feeling that they were willing to break the rules for my sake meant that I mattered*."

Sarah described several instances where staff knowingly acted outside formal guidelines, for example by sharing a cigarette at night. While she acknowledged the ethical ambiguity of these actions, she emphasised that she experienced them not as violations, but as expressions of genuine care, as also described by Flett (2018). This pattern was also present in Peter's account, though in a more understated form. He described how teachers once chose not to report a fight to his foster family, explaining that they understood his situation and trusted him. This discretion allowed him to form a bond of trust and contributed to his sense that someone had '*seen something*' in him that others had missed.

These accounts suggest that feeling valuable in OOH was often tied to acts of care that involved exception, discretion, or situations not permeated by categorial perceptions of young people as either problematic or vulnerable. Mattering was not always compatible with institutional ideals of fairness, equal treatment, or strict rule adherence (Prilleltensky et al., 2025). Instead, participants described how care that did not risk anything did not necessarily register as mattering. At the same time, these findings point toward an inherent dilemma. If feeling valuable depends on exception, rule-breaking, or differential treatment, this could challenge institutional principles designed to ensure fairness and protection. The findings thus raises an open question about whether mattering can always be realised within systems governed by standardised rules, or whether some experiences of mattering is felt because of their inherent exceptionality.

III: Feeling valued and adding value in experiences of mattering.

Across interviews, nearly all participants responded affirmatively when asked directly whether feeling valuable and being able to add value were closely connected. For almost all participants, the two were described as closely intertwined rather than separate, and there was a clear tendency to place adding value first as a pathway to becoming and feeling valuable. Sarah described this connection explicitly, emphasising how contributing to others was a primary source of value in her life. Being something for others was not merely an outcome of mattering, but a way to experience it. Eva articulated a similar logic, stressing that mattering had to be shown through action rather than words: "*If you are going to show that I matter to you, then you also have to do something actively*."

Andrea's account further illustrated how adding value became meaningful when it involved responsibility. Being trusted with leadership tasks and having her ideas implemented in OOH created a strong sense of mattering precisely because her contribution was acted upon. Cathrine's account brings this dynamic into particularly sharp focus and shows most clearly that adding value alone is not sufficient. Early in the interview, she described mattering as closely tied to having an impact in the bigger picture, a relationship that is also conceptualised in the mattering wheel (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021).

> "*When you matter, when you mean something to someone, it's really about having an impact. And that impact can be both positive and negative. It's about understanding your own impact, not just in your family or your class, but in the bigger picture*."

When asked directly about the relationship between feeling valued and adding value, she was unequivocal: "*One hundred percent. The more responsibility you have, and the more you commit yourself, the more significant you experience that you are*."

This understanding frames her reflections on adoption, which carried particular personal and relational significance for her. Cathrine had been placed in care since birth, and the formal adoption by her foster parents was a highly significant act to her. However, what stood out in her account was that the adoption itself did not automatically generate mattering. When asked what the adoption meant to her, Cathrine became moved: "*I get a bit emotional when you ask, because no one has actually asked me that. Not even my foster family. And that's something I've criticised a lot*". She rejected the idea that the adoption was 'just paperwork' and tried to articulate why it mattered so deeply: "*For me, I can feel that it means more than just a piece of paper. It's like saying that getting married is just a piece of paper. It can be that, but it can also be much more*". What followed, however, was marked by a sense of disappointment. "*There was no conversation about why we are adopting you, what it means for us, what it means for you, how we prepare you for reactions from your biological family, or whether you want to celebrate it*". In Cathrine's account, the adoption mattered as an act of recognition, but its potential to generate mattering were closely tied to the emotional response following it. Her story shows that even highly significant acts of adding value to her and feeling valued by the adoptive family do not produce mattering on their own. They require emotional engagement, and relational resonance.

Taken together, Theme III shows that although participants overwhelmingly experienced feeling valued and adding value as closely connected, there was a distinct tendency to place adding value first to become and feel valuable. At the same time, the stories demonstrates that adding value only leads to feeling valuable when it is met with emotional response. Mattering, in this sense, emerges in the relational space where contribution is seen and cared for. Both Peter and Wilhelmina added an important nuance. They did not reject the connection between feeling valued and adding value but emphasised that adding value only led to mattering when it was experienced as meaningful and voluntary. In Peter's experience, contributions demanded under conditions of control or consequence did not generate mattering. This distinction mirrors Flett's argument that adding value contributes to mattering only when it is experienced as personally meaningful rather than imposed (Flett, 2021).

IV: Mattering under constraint—adapting and surrendering in unsustainable ways.

Across the interviews, participants described how attempts to matter were deeply shaped by the contexts they were placed in. Rather than freely choosing how to contribute or become significant, several of the young people recounted how they gradually adapted their behaviour, aspirations, and even sense of self. These adaptations often involved acting in ways that were not experienced as desirable, authentic, or sustainable, but which nonetheless became necessary in order to be seen, or even allowed to add value.

Peter's account offered a particularly clear illustration of this dynamic. During his placement in a foster family with a strong agricultural identity, he described how his possibilities for autonomy and self-expression were narrowed upon arrival. Activities he had previously been allowed to do were no longer possible. Over time, Peter began to lean into what was possible within the foster family context. After repeatedly expressing his wish to live with his father and gradually accepting that this would not happen, he described how he started adapting to the life he was placed in: "*At some point, I just accepted that it probably wasn't going to happen. And then I started to accept that life and try to make the best of it in some way*". This adaptation involved actively engaging with the identity and practices valued in the foster family, even though they did not always feel aligned with who he experienced himself to be. He explained: "*I tried to take on that lifestyle… that whole thing about suddenly being a farmer. Even though I can see now that it wasn't really me. But I tried to take it on, in order to fit into that family*". This process also took on a concrete form:

> "*For example, they gave me these overalls that I started wearing. And I had these model tractors that I began playing with, and I started asking questions about how the tractor works, even though I wasn't allowed to drive it.*"

For a period, this strategy allowed Peter to experience a sense of mattering, of being valuable and being allowed to contribute. At the same time, Peter was explicit that this way of adapting did not hold in the long run. What began as an effort to cope gradually turned into something he could not sustain over time.

Similar dynamics appeared across other participants' accounts, though they took different forms. Several participants described how, in contexts where many young people were struggling simultaneously, ordinary expressions of distress failed to register. In these environments, being calm or compliant did

not lead to mattering. Instead, significance appeared to require painful attempts to matter. Wilhelmina recounted episodes where she began hitting her head against the wall, describing this not as an expression of impulsivity, but as a response to a situation in which being quiet or restrained did not seem to count. In these moments, painful attempts to matter became a way of signalling that she, too, was not okay. At the other end of the spectrum, Andrea described a contrasting, yet equally context-sensitive strategy. In environments marked by a high level of conflict, she described how becoming invisible became her way of trying to add value in the family. At the same time, Andrea was explicit that this strategy did not hold over time. Reflecting on this period, she described it as containing pressure until it eventually broke after she was placed in OOH: "*It was a bit like a pump that just kept filling up. And at some point, it just went off*."

Eva's account illustrated a related, but slightly different attempt to matter under constraint. She described how, during periods where she felt overlooked, she would sit alone in the common room. This was not experienced as withdrawal, but as a quiet attempt to be noticed. Sitting visibly alone became a way of testing whether she mattered enough for someone to intervene or ask her, what she was doing.

Sarah offered a particularly explicit account of her painful attempt to matter. She described being introduced to cutting and gradually realising that visible self-harm made her suffering legible to adults in ways that words did not:

> "*What happened for me was that I was introduced to cutting, and I quite quickly started to connect the dots and realise that if I had cut, then you could actually see my pain on the outside. And then it started to pay off. Suddenly they were like, okay, now she's really not doing well*."

She went on: "*It became almost like a linear regression. The more I cut during periods, the more attention and help I got from the system. And I knew that. I wasn't stupid*." For Sarah, this was not simply about manipulation, but also about discovering what it took to be taken seriously: "*It was what made me matter to someone. It had to be that bad for it to count. So they would think, okay, she's actually not doing well. It's not just something she's saying*."

Across these accounts, attempts to matter were not inherently positive or self-affirming. Rather, they were deeply pragmatic and shaped by inherent possibilities. When many others were struggling, quiet suffering did not register. When care was scarce, extreme behaviour became a means of being seen, and of becoming valuable. These findings suggest that mattering in OOH was not only something young people strove for, but something they were often forced to negotiate under constrained and shifting conditions. While adding value could create temporary experiences of mattering, several participants described how such strategies were ultimately unsustainable. The material thus pointed toward what may be conceptualised as *self-surrendering mattering strategies*, in which the pursuit of significance became contingent upon self-erasure or different painful attempts to matter.

Discussion

This study explored how young people recently placed in OOH experience and search for mattering. Importantly, the article was guided by a dual ambition: to use these experiences to enrich and nuance the conceptualisation of mattering itself, while also illuminate the lived experiences of youth in OOH. A central finding is that mattering emerges as fundamentally pragmatic. Participants' accounts repeatedly show how attempts to matter were guided less by ideals of authenticity or self-expression and more by what appeared possible. These patterns resonate strongly with pragmatist traditions that emphasise action, consequence, and adaptation over internal states or abstract intentions (Brinkmann, 2004; Dewey, 1896; James, 1890). From a pragmatist standpoint, behaviour is oriented toward what works in practice. In line with pragmatist relationalism (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Kivinen & Piiroinen, 2006; Morgan, 2014), the young people's actions are best understood as situated responses to concrete conditions. This pragmatism is especially visible in how participants describe adjusting their ways of adding value in order to feel valued. Whether by leaning into identities valued by caregivers, becoming quiet in chaotic environments, having painful apptempts to be noticed, or withdrawing strategically, these actions reflect attempts to secure some form of significance under constrained circumstances. Importantly, several of these efforts can be understood as what may be conceptualised as self-surrendering mattering strategies, in which the pursuit of

significance becomes contingent upon some level of self-erasure, painful attempts to matter, or the endurance of personal cost. Such strategies were rarely described as desirable or self-affirming, by the young participants. Rather, they were often narrated as necessary. This challenges accounts of mattering that implicitly frame adding value as prosocial, generative, or growth-oriented, and suggests that adding value may also take forms involving self-limitation, endurance, or the relinquishing of one's own needs. This further highligths the normative breadth of mattering. If mattering is a universal existential need (Flett, 2018; Prilleltensky, 2019; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981), the concept must encompass not only socially sanctioned or therapeutically desirable forms of striving. Rather than treating such strategies as deviations from mattering, they may be better understood as expressions of mattering under conditions of constraint, suggesting a path beyond dichotomies between mattering and anti-mattering, and of our understanding of youth placed in OOH as either problematic or vulnerable.

The relationship between feeling valued and adding value is likewise shown to be dynamic and hugely consequential. While mattering can be conceptualised as the combination of these two dimensions (Prilleltensky, 2020), the findings indicate that their relative importance appears to shift under conditions of heightened vulnerability. Among participants exposed to high levels of instability or emotional distress, feeling valued becomes increasingly contingent upon visible acts of contribution. In these contexts, feeling valued does not precede action but seems to follow it. Adding value becomes the primary pathway to mattering precisely because it can be seen, verified, and responded to. In some accounts, this relationship appears almost reversed, such that adding value must come first for feeling valued to become possible at all. This dynamic can be understood in relation to the concept of *teleological mode*, developed within attachment theory to describe situations in which individuals require concrete, observable actions from others to experience care or trust (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016; Fonagy & Target, 1996). When trust is fragile, symbolic or verbal assurances are insufficient, what matters is what is done. This suggests that for young people in care, particularly those with histories of disrupted attachment, mattering may similarly depend on enacted (and expected) responses, showing a clear possible connection between attachment theory and mattering. This aligns with relational perspectives emphasising action over intention and supports accounts suggesting that shared activity can carry reparative potential, perhaps even more so than verbal therapeutic interventions.

At the same time, these findings challenge institutional ideals of fairness in places where fairness is equated with strict rule-following. As shown in the findings of the current study, experiences of mattering often arise in moments where adults act beyond standardised procedures. This does not necessarily imply a conflict between mattering and justice. If justice is understood in terms of equity rather than equality, that is, as giving each person what they uniquely need, responsiveness to individual circumstances becomes a condition of justice rather than its violation (Prilleltensky, 2019; Prilleltensky et al., 2025). In OOH settings, however, institutions and foster families actions are deeply shaped by professional norms and changing treatment paradigms, which creates a lived paradox for many young people: even if care were perfectly individualised, the extra effort that signals mattering might simply shift in its form. Instead of informal flexibility, mattering could now come to be experienced as the adult who is willing to learn and apply a specialised method or intervention on the young person's behalf. This suggests that the meaningful 'extra' does not neccisarily disappear with increased individualisation, but may be redefined. If everyone is singled out and provided with individualised care, how can a young person in OOH discern that they matter to a particular staff member more than, or differently from, the other children? Future research may identify what, under such conditins, becomes the mechanisms underlying the experience of mattering.

Limitations and future research

This study is based on a relatively small and heterogeneous sample of young people placed in different forms of OOH, and participants were recruited through an organisation, which may have shaped who chose to participate. As participants were young adults reflecting on earlier experiences in out-of-home care, the findings are based on retrospective accounts. These accounts may be shaped by subsequent life experiences. The analysis therefore reflects participants' present meaning-making rather than direct representations of past events. Future research could benefit from more ethnographic approaches from within OOH settings, allowing closer attention to embodied, everyday practices of mattering as they unfold in situ. A

further limitation concerns the analytical use of the mattering concept itself. While the concept proved generative, it was at times analytically imposed rather than emerging organically from participants' own vocabularies. Finally, while this article foregrounds young people's experiences of not mattering, future studies could productively include institutional or municipal perspectives to explore how constraints, priorities, and rationales shape professionals' possibilities for enabling mattering, thereby offering a more dialogical understanding of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on mattering by grounding the concept in the lived experiences of young people placed in OOH. Across interviews, mattering emerged as a situated and deeply pragmatic experience. The findings show how feeling valuable and being able to add value are tightly intertwined in this context, often with adding value functioning as a prerequisite for feeling valuable. Importantly, this relationship seemed to be intensified under conditions of vulnerability and institutional pressure, where recognition increasingly depended on visible action and self-adjustment. By tracing how young people adapt their behaviour in response to what each context rewards, the findings illustrate how mattering can become contingent on strategies that involve compliance, self-restraint, painful attempts to matter, or self-erasure. These self-surrendering mattering strategies highlight that attempts to matter are not inherently positive or self-affirming, but shaped by structural conditions, relational histories, and limited possibilities for recognition. In this sense, the findings expand existing understandings of mattering by showing how it is negotiated. At the same time, the study enriches knowledge of OOH by foregrounding young people's own interpretations of what it takes to be seen, heard, and valued. Taken together, the findings suggest that mattering should be understood as a pragmatic and context-sensitive process, one that is inseparable from the concrete conditions under which young people attempt to contribute and feel valuable.

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