



# Homeless at heart, and in mind: Exploring Citizenship and Mattering

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## Abstract

In this article we discuss how the concept of mattering may apply to ‘citizenship work’ and enhance efforts to help people experience connectedness. We take a dialogical autoethnographic approach (first author), seeking to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience, followed by a commentary (second author) reflecting on key points. We argue that it is important for the person to maintain or attain a balance between adding value to others and to oneself through the citizenship approach, and emphasize the importance of identity formation for individuals engaged in the work of shifting their self-perspective from patient to citizen. We want to communicate the importance of the concept of mattering as a component of citizenship that has been lacking or undeveloped to date. This process, we contend, calls for further exploration in citizenship work and research.

## Keywords

Citizenship, mattering, mental health, identity

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the lived experience of citizenship and discuss how the concept of ‘mattering’ may apply to ‘citizenship work’. The mattering concept stresses the importance of one’s experiences of feeling valued by and adding value to self and others (Prilleltensky, 2020). Expanding the ways to help people find their place in their local communities might support the quality of life of people who experience disconnectedness to mainstream society.

The paper presents a personal narrative by a person with lived experience of mental illness who is a trained psychologist and a doctoral student researching social inclusion among young adults with complex problems in Norway. The paper and method takes a dialogical autoethnographic approach that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 1). This narrative and reflections on it are based on the author’s personal experience, reflexivity as a researcher with lived experience, conversations with scholars working on citizenship, and meetings with people with lived experience receiving services and working in the field.

In the commentary that follows, a citizenship researcher reflects on key points from the paper as part of an ongoing dialogue with the first author on the relationship between citizenship and mattering.

## **Citizenship**

Citizenship and the five Rs came out of Rowe's work on and study of homeless outreach teams (Rowe, 1999), and his and colleagues' study and practice of the concept for more than two decades in other contexts. Citizenship provides a framework for theory and practice which has proven itself useful for people with mental health struggles who experience being on the outskirts of society. It is defined as a person's strong connection to the 5 Rs of rights, responsibilities, roles, resources, and relationships that a democratic society offers its members through public and social institutions and associational life, and a sense of belonging in society that is validated by other members of society (Rowe, 2015).

Citizenship was not developed or offered as a framework for treatment but might be employed in treatment as a means to support improved quality of life, which in turn has positive effects on mental health and mastery of everyday life (Leamy et al., 2011). It may help people find support in their local communities on equal terms, outside mental health clinics where relationships are tied to, or built around, one's mental illness and life struggles. Quality of life and social connectedness may, in turn, contribute to recovery processes and prevention of relapse to severe mental illness (De Ruyscher et al., 2017; Ness et al., 2014). The synergistic effects of citizenship and recovery-oriented treatment may help people gain greater mastery of their lives (Rowe & Davidson, 2016). This formulation, however, is not fully acknowledged or implemented in health and welfare service fields.

## **A defining moment**

I recently joined an outreach run with a team in Connecticut (USA) as part of a visit to Yale University to explore the citizenship framework and practice. As we walked and drove around, I talked with two outreach workers who shared with me some of their personal experiences and reasons for taking up the work of outreach to people who are homeless. One said, 'I had a place to live, but I was homeless at heart, and in my mind' (personal communication, September 27<sup>th</sup> 2022). I can relate to this, while at the same time acknowledging the stark contrast of my life to that of the homeless people we met, some of whom, wandering the streets and sitting on benches in the park, had complex physical, mental health and drug problems.

I am not homeless, nor have I ever been. From what I can determine, the resources and opportunities I have are worlds apart from what is available to the people we met on the outreach run. Still, the feelings of being on the outside and not fitting in, or feeling unwanted, are feelings I know well. The outreach run, and my visit as a whole, awakened a lifelong sense of otherness and alienation that I had been trying to combat and forget. It left me filled with dark emotions and confusion. At the same time, it gave me a sense of gratitude and humility, as I have the resources to change my situation. Still, feeling on the outside and not experiencing the good life in a rich, Nordic country is not easy. You are supposed to be happy: being born in Norway, you won the lottery at birth. 'There must be something wrong with people who are unable to thrive under such circumstances.' In my experience, we are an individualistically oriented society with much room for improvement when it comes to social responsibility and care for others.

## Who am I in this world?

I have lived experience of mental illness, which still surfaces from time to time. The visit to Yale awakened some ghosts who forced me to address existential questions that are rooted in my sense of self and identity: do I matter, am I wanted, do I fit in, and can I be accepted as I am? These questions came up for me even as a young child and have stayed with me ever since, dormant at times but reawakening at others.

Despite having troubling life experiences and a troubling mind that often tells me to give up and that I am no good, I have stayed on the expected life track when it comes to getting an education, getting a job, and starting a family. At the same time, I have battled severe depression and anxiety and dealt with them in self-harming ways. At times it has been hard for me to do my work and to engage with others socially. I have taken multiple sick leaves, both short and long term. My struggles have often led me to apply for new jobs where I could start afresh, but my history has repeated itself. It has been hard for me to maintain relationships due to a lack of trust in people and my own sense of being worthless. This self-hatred has also led to destructive behavior in the past that has pushed people away. I have often pulled out of both relationships and work, to try to maintain what little feeling of safety I had left.

I have known the feeling of off-timedness (Pickett et al., 1994), of watching other people settle into their lives, apparently on the right track with their careers and social lives, as citizens. I still do so. This has left me feeling as an outsider lacking a 'sense of citizenship' while doing 'all the right things'. I have felt helpless, broken and beyond repair despite appearing to belong. I have been putting myself down while, at the same time, feeling that all of this is unfair. I have to a large extent accepted that this is what my life is and all it can be, but after my trip I felt a protest building up. It can be more. But I lack the knowledge of what is missing in this puzzle – why am I not able to truly feel like a citizen despite appearing to be one?

Receiving help from public mental health services did not prepare me to answer these questions and challenges, even though they are relevant to the struggles I have had and still experience. The treatment I received was often limited to dealing with symptoms I experienced. It did not fully acknowledge me as a person who was engaged in a social context that was a source of both possibilities and barriers to my recovery and citizenship. When I reached a state where the symptoms were no longer impossible for me to handle, the treatment ended. The possibilities and challenges inherent in trying to build my future life, and how I would do this, were not addressed. Discovering the citizenship framework made it obvious to me that these questions must be addressed, if not in the treatment setting, then somewhere else. To me it was something that described and operationalized important aspects I needed to address in order to feel as though I could fit in.

In retrospect, I see that there was a gap between what was provided in my treatment and the confidence and knowledge I needed to achieve my 'sense of citizenship'. In my mind, citizenship should be one of the desired outcomes of treatment, even though it was not introduced as a framework for treatment but for supporting people's full membership in their home communities and society. Whose responsibility is it to prepare people for the difficulties of shifting their perspective from being a patient and recipient of services to being a citizen and contributor to society? Is this a question that should be addressed in treatment or is it one the person needs to find answers to in her own 'citizenship work', while seeking her tribe? I can't answer this question here, but I think it's important to ask it.

For years, the fear of others counting me out if I showed too much of myself, my struggles and lived experience made me want to hide this part of my life. I created a gap in

my own identity, only presenting parts of me, feeling like an imposter. To a large extent, I still do.

In addition to having lived experience with mental illness, I am a trained clinical psychologist and aspiring researcher working toward a Ph.D. My visit to Yale University and conversations with both scholars and peers made me feel more confident about the value of integrating professional skills and lived experience in research. To do so is not new, but making such a decision is not something to be taken lightly, as mental illness still is stigmatized, and academia has yet to accept that it should not be a barrier to *simply being let in* to its halls (Davidson et al., 2001). Still, if I want to fit in, I must do it while recognizing all of me.

## Citizenship and identity

I think that achieving citizenship may depend on a deeper understanding of one's identity, one's self, and one's value than is stated in the definition of citizenship. I have learned a lot about my own history and how to deal with ghosts of the past and present in different therapies, and my everyday life is seemingly in order. I own a house and have a family, a job, and friends. I have valued roles, I know and practice my rights, I have relationships and am given, and tend to, my responsibilities. I have places I belong, at least on paper, and people around me give me support and acknowledgment. Still, I do not get the feeling that I am part of something bigger than me. I'm still on the outside. I cannot seem to rid myself of the feeling of worthlessness even when I tell myself that I add value to society, that I contribute. I do not identify myself as a valuable citizen.

The definition of citizenship acknowledges the importance of identity to a certain extent by including sources to a healthy identity through citizenship acts, through connection with the five Rs, and through a sense of belonging in society that is validated by my fellow citizens. Belonging can be defined as a unique and subjective experience that relates to a yearning for connection with others, the need for positive regard and the desire for interpersonal connection (Rogers, 1951). The Rs of citizenship overlap to some degree, but the Rs of (valued) roles, resources and responsibilities are central to the attainment of being a contributor to society, one who makes a difference, and is acknowledged as such. These depend, in turn and in part, on the quality of one's relationships and knowledge and practice of one's rights.

As much as the citizenship framework makes sense to me and gives me a direction on my path to finding out who I am my local community, as an employee, a co-worker, a neighbor, a wife, a mom, a friend, I have not found the entire answer to my questions in it. The knowledge that I could score high on a measure of citizenship but still lack the feeling of being a part of my local community sent me out on a search for something that could explain this gap. What might not be as clear from the citizenship definition is the importance of the value the person gives herself through being a contributor, and how building one's identity is included and addressed in citizenship work.

## Mattering

Mattering involves one's experiences of feeling valued by and adding value to self and others (Prilleltensky, 2020). It is a multidimensional construct that includes the intrapersonal, relational, occupational, and community domains of life. Mattering overlaps with the citizenship concept but adds a *value to self*. It also emphasizes the importance of balance of validating oneself and being the recipient of other's validation of oneself, and adding value to self and others. To what degree does the lack of balance between adding value to self and others affect my ability to achieve a 'sense of citizenship'?

In my experience, being a citizen who adds value to others and being recognized by fellow citizens through this, is easier to achieve than being a person who adds value to herself through contributing acts of citizenship or simply through merely being. Hiding or trying to escape major parts of me has created an imbalance in me between *adding value to others* and *adding value to self*, and has made it difficult for me to fit in and connect with others. With the stigma associated with mental illness, I suspect this is a challenge many can relate to. If so, this might suggest a need to actively address challenges related to people's identity and self-value to support their citizenship process. I have viewed my lived experience as merely painful and worthless, letting it reflect the whole of me. I have added value to others, but only parts of myself. It is time to close this gap. Meeting people with lived experience on my trip to Yale helped me truly understand the importance of this.

I did not fully grasp that adding value to myself could be at the heart of how I could find my citizenship until I found myself in a meeting with people in a citizenship project group. In this group, where people support each other on their ways to citizenship, I overcame my nervousness about sharing my thoughts, as everyone was expected to share something. I briefly told the participants about my background and that I was trying to figure out how to fit in. I also told them that I wanted to recognize my lived experience and use it to do something useful for others but was afraid to do so. One group member said, 'You seem to have so much shame; you have to find your identity, embrace your lived experience and use it to do good.' (personal communication, Sept. 28<sup>th</sup> 2022). The authenticity and warmth I felt from this person and the group struck something in me. It was a message from my fellow citizens that I should add value to myself, that I had value. All the therapists in the world, speaking as therapists, would not have had the same impact, even if they said the exact same words. If they were speaking from their lived experience of psychiatric struggles, they might have.

As Russell (2019) points out, the twin sister of loneliness is uselessness. In my experience, trying to hide from or escape parts of myself, and thereby failing to add value to myself, has created too much distance between myself and others. This again has nurtured my lifelong feelings of being worthless and unwanted. Failing to work on creating a healthy identity has kept me from achieving a 'sense of citizenship'. In my experience, lacking a balance of adding value to others and adding value to self may limit one's attainment of full citizenship, and the capacity of the current citizenship framework to support people's achievement of internal and external citizenship in their communities and society.

## **Commentary on 'Homeless at heart, and in mind: Exploring Citizenship and Mattering'**

I want, first, to acknowledge the courage of a young scholar for disclosing her own mental health struggles in relation to the topic of citizenship and mattering. Nord-Baade has gone deep. In doing so she has created a rich, thoughtful document that embodies her critique of and recommendations for citizenship work and thinking. Such contributions can stretch and deepen our understanding of mental health challenges and recognition of our fellow citizens. A commentary on this paper could easily be longer than the paper itself. I will limit myself to a few points, drawing on Nord-Baade text for each.

### **Identity**

I think that achieving citizenship may depend on a deeper understanding of one's identity, one's self, and one's value than is stated in the definition of citizenship.

This sentence brought me back to my own thinking, in the mid-1990s, that led me from homelessness and outreach work to citizenship: ‘What kind of identity or identities are we offering to help people attain,’ I wondered, ‘other than that of patients with mental illnesses who need treatment and other services and supports?’ (Rowe, 1999). I asked myself this question because the work and values of mental health outreach implicitly aim to help people achieve positive identities of their own choosing. Meeting the person first not the patient and honoring her preferences for help over your own assessment of what she needs are practical strategies for building a working relationship. They also send a respectful message that may help her build a more positive identity than being told, in effect, she’s a patient first and a person second. But due to our expanding ‘caseloads’ over time, we would need, eventually, to refer people on for treatment at the mental health center. There, we feared, they might not hear the same ‘person first’ message. Recovery was a new concept at our mental health center at the time, risk assessment was a high priority, and the 5 Rs of citizenship were unheard of.

Having started with identity, then, citizenship largely left it behind as a focal point. My and my colleagues’ ‘citizenship work’ did not precisely set it aside, as being a citizen can be part of a person’s identity. Still, we may have been too busy making the case for citizenship in the face of deep skepticism over its place in mental health care, to give identity the attention it deserved. Nord-Baade points to the need for considering and addressing identity’s role in citizenship work and study.

### Citizenship and Recovery in Relation to Treatment

Citizenship was not developed or offered as a framework for treatment ... The synergistic effects of citizenship and recovery-oriented treatment may help people gain greater mastery of their lives.

The role of citizenship in clinical care has constituted a tension and dynamic in our work for twenty years. Generally, we say that treatment can be citizenship-informed and supportive of people’s citizenship but that most citizenship work, by definition, takes place outside of treatment.

In the foundational story of citizenship, Jim, who was homeless, refused all help from our team until Ron, a peer outreach worker, built a relationship with him, building trust slowly and at Jim’s pace. Over time and with Ron’s help, Jim agreed to see the team psychiatrist, apply for and receive disability benefits, and find an apartment. Two weeks after moving in, he told Ron he wanted to leave his apartment and live on the street again. There, he had friends and occupied a valued role as one who could survive homelessness. In his apartment building he was lonely and socially disconnected. Thus it was only after we had ‘proof’ that outreach ‘worked’ (‘If we can get Jim housed, we can help anybody’), that we understood that getting Jim, and others, into treatment, housed, and providing other services, was not enough. We offer our clients ‘program citizenship’ within the local mental health system of care, but not full membership in their community and society.

This was not an argument that recovery had made. Recovery acknowledges people in their social context, but critics would say it does so within too narrow and individualistic a context, failing to pay enough attention to the person’s social landscape and place in it. Nord-Baade’s ‘mattering’ approach may inform and enrich both citizenship and recovery work, to the benefit of the person, with recovery and citizenship as complementary and, to some degree, overlapping approaches.

## Mattering

Mattering overlaps with the citizenship concept but adds a value to self. It also emphasizes the importance of balance of validating oneself and being the recipient of other's validation of oneself, and adding value to self and others. To what degree does the lack of balance between adding value to self and others affect my ability to achieve a 'sense of citizenship'?

Nord-Baade draws on mattering theory, involving one's experiences of feeling valued by, and adding value to, oneself and others. Citizenship may impute that the adding of value to others is part of what allows the person to add value to themselves. Additionally, Nord-Baade's insight seems to come most powerfully out of a Citizens Project meeting, the longest running citizenship intervention/practice among all the citizenship work and study my colleagues and I have undertaken. Still, 'mattering' gets a deeply personal experience that citizenship theory may suggest or imply but doesn't state, and so falls short of giving it the attention it deserves.

In this group, where people support each other on their ways to citizenship, I overcame my nervousness about sharing my thoughts, as everyone was expected to share something. I briefly told the participants about my background and that I was trying to figure out how to fit in. I also told them that I wanted to recognize my lived experience and use it to do something useful for others but was afraid to do so. One group member said, 'You seem to have so much shame; you have to find your identity, embrace your lived experience and use it to do good' (personal communication, Sept. 28th 2022). The authenticity and warmth I felt from this person and the group struck something in me. It was a message from my fellow citizens that I should add value to myself, that I had value.

This passage refers to Nord-Baade's participation in the 'What's up?' portion of a citizenship session that starts all citizenship sessions. 'What's up?' is one of four integrated elements of the six-month project, along with non-traditional classes based on the 5 Rs, individual or group community valued role projects, and 'wraparound' peer mentor support to individuals and the group.

A different student leads it each time, everyone speaks, and students comment supportively on each other's 'What's up?'. People talk about their work, their relationships with family members or with their probation officer, and myriad other topics. In addition, group ownership, leadership, and contribution of feedback to fellow students (not 'patients' or 'clients'), along with the non-clinical physical setting of citizenship meetings, adds to the social sense and feel of 'What's up?' in comparison to group therapy. 'What's up?' was created by Citizens Project students when they sensed that something else was needed than classes, peer support, and valued role projects. That 'something' may relate to the mattering element that was in play in the citizenship 'What's up' in which Nord-Baade participated.

A 'sense of belonging that is validated by others' is the second half of the definition of citizenship, following the 5 Rs. The sense of belonging may link with mattering, as a felt experience of the individual that can support one's sense of mattering and adding value to self. It does not, however, explicitly refer to it or operationalize it. A dual question about the relationship between these concepts that might be explored further is this: Citizenship links the sense of belonging with its validation by others, but does a sense of belonging derive strictly and directly from relationships with others, or is it only strengthened by, without depending fully on them? In turn, are the subjective sense of mattering and a subjective sense of mattering related, supportive of each other, or distinct as felt experiences?

Nord-Baade's personal insight about the need for 'a balance between *adding value to others* and *adding value to self*' came through talking with others about her personal experiences and feelings, and the social context in which she gained or solidified this insight was that of a citizenship intervention. This may be the best illustration we have yet for the meeting point between the person who adds value to herself by telling her story, while adding value to others who hear her story and have an opportunity to support her 'mattering'. As above, though, this element is not specified in citizenship theory and practice. Nord-Baade's argument that mattering theory can add an important element to citizenship theory and practice is new and powerful. It should be explored in future citizenship practice and research.

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