SUMMARY

Employee identification can provide an important competitive advantage to organizations (Fiol, 2001). In this respect, it has been associated with numerous positive outcomes such as extra-role behavior, satisfaction, well-being, and retention (e.g., Haslam, O’Brian, Jetten, Vornedal, & Penna, 2005; Riketta, 2005; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005) and gains increasing importance under conditions of more flexible work, heightened individual responsibility, virtual collaboration, or shortages in suitable staff (Ellemers, 2001; Van Dick, 2004). Especially in contemporary work settings, when globalization, frequent restructuring, or an increasingly diverse workforce pose challenges to the natural development of identification (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2001; Cappelli, 2009; Ellemers, 2001), identification requires particular attention from both researchers and managers.

Importantly, employees can identify with a variety of different targets in their work environment, so that the question arises what employees identify with. In this respect, organizations, teams, leaders, or professions are common foci of identification (Meyer, Becker, and Van Dick, 2006), all of which are associated with unique dynamics and outcomes (Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2004). Thus, it is crucial to consider the focus of identification and take a more holistic approach to identification that encompasses multiple foci of identification simultaneously.

Furthermore, given that managers are confronted with the need to actively manage identification (Barker, 1998), we need to understand how identification develops and which antecedents promote identification (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Interestingly, to date evidence on precursors of identification is scattered and an integrated model of identification development is lacking. Additionally, much prior research has emphasized the role of rather global and distal antecedents of identification like image, prestige, or climates (Bartels, Pruyn, De Jong, & Joustra, 2007; Wan-Huggins, Riordan & Griffeth, 1998), which often are too abstract to provide a practical basis for management actions.
In the pursuit to advance our knowledge of identification in organizations, this dissertation focuses on two key aspects. First, I take a more holistic approach to identification in that I systematically investigate identifications with various foci simultaneously. Second, I aim to provide guidance to managers who seek to foster employee identification actively by concentrating on the capability of leader and coworkers’ behaviors to shape employees’ identifications. To this end, I report a series of three empirical studies, which each investigate the influence of different antecedents on identifications with multiple foci.

The first study is a meta-analysis on transformational leadership and identification with the leader, the team, and the organization. Transformational leadership has long been suggested to unfold its unique effects by transforming followers’ self-concepts (Bass, 1998; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Consequently, ample evidence has attested to the positive associations between transformational leadership and follower identification. However, most primary studies have treated identification as a side note to explain leadership-outcome relationships, and this rich body of evidence has not been examined from an identification point of view. As such, with the presented meta-analysis I explicitly explore transformational leadership as an antecedent of identifications with the leader, the team, or the organization. Taking this more systematic approach to distinguish identification foci, the results reveal that although transformational leadership is positively related to identifications with all three foci under study, it exhibits a stronger association to leader identification than to team or organizational identification. Furthermore, integrating these insights into a comprehensive model using meta-analytic structural equation modeling (MASEM), transformational leadership is found to shape leader identification primarily, which in turn fosters identification with the team or the organization.

The second study is an organizational field study of blue-collar workers from different work units and moves beyond transformational leadership to investigate the effects of
consideration and initiating structure on multiple identifications and organizational outcomes (individual and unit performance as well as job satisfaction). For the purpose of this study, I combine the social identity approach to leadership (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011) with recent insights into the necessity to distinguish identifications according to their foci (Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006; Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2004) and propose differential effects of the two leadership styles on leader and organizational identification. In extending the correspondence of focus principle to antecedent of identification, the task-focused initiating structure was found to directly appeal to organizational identification. In contrast, the relation-focused leadership behavior consideration primarily influences leader identification and subsequently generalizes to organizational identification. Moreover, prior findings that each identification focus enhances those outcomes, to which it corresponds in level, are replicated. As such, leader identification is associated with individual performance, whereas organizational identification relates to unit performance and job satisfaction.

Finally, the third study is devoted to shed more light on the process of identification formation. To this end, the development of identification with the leader, the team, and the profession are studied over a six months time interval in a sample of apprentices, who are newcomers to both the profession as well as the organization. Drawing on the notion that identifications are construed in social interaction (Bartel & Dutton, 2001) and integrating insights from previous research on identification development (Ashforth, 1998; Ibarra, 1999; L. G. E. Smith, Amiot, Callan, Terry, & Smith, 2013), I propose that identification develops in social interactions through the social validation of tentative selves. More specifically, social support and feedback from leaders and coworkers are examined as antecedents of identification. In line with findings from the previous study, social support from leaders and coworkers can be classified as a relation-focused interaction and nurtures identification with the source of the supportive behavior (i.e., leader or team identification,
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respectively). Similarly, feedback is a task-focused interaction directed at the professional development of the employee. Consequently, feedback from coworkers, but not from leaders, emerged as the driving antecedent of professional identification development.

In sum, this dissertation makes several essential contributions to advance our knowledge of identification in organizations. First, it stresses the importance to differentiate identifications according to their foci, as they vary with regards to their association pattern and association strength to antecedents and outcomes. Second, the results demonstrate that focusing on everyday workplace interactions is a viable way to actively shape identification. As such, transformational leadership, consideration and initiating structure as well as social support and feedback from leaders and coworkers have proven to be capable of fostering identifications. Importantly, different antecedents are related to identifications with different foci, so that different interactions are needed to shape various identifications. Thereby, the presented studies extend the correspondence of focus principle from identification-outcome associations to antecedent-identification relationships. Moreover, the findings of the first two studies provide systematic support for the proposition that leadership in general might be capable of shaping followers’ identifications, as suggested by the social identity approach to leadership (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011). Likewise, the third study draws attention to an underlying mechanism of identification, on which practitioners and future research can build to deduce further promising antecedents of identification development. Further theoretical and practical implications are discussed and a variety of different avenues for future research are highlighted.