CHAPTER 5

GENERAL DISCUSSION
This dissertation set out to deepen our understanding of identification in organizations, both with respect to its multi-foci nature (Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006) and its more proximal, and thus manageable antecedents. Whereas all three empirical studies have been conducted to contribute to this overarching goal, they were presented separately in the previous chapters, and the findings and implications were illustrated within each study’s horizon. In this chapter, I will explore how these findings relate to each other on a broader scale and discuss the results of the dissertation as such. After briefly summarizing the main findings of each empirical chapter, I will turn to highlight the theoretical and practical contributions of the three studies taken together based on some recurring topics and assess their overall limitations. Importantly, these contributions and limitations point to a variety of promising avenues for future research, which I will outline in the last part of this chapter.

**OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN FINDINGS**

The first study of my dissertation shed meta-analytic light on the relationships between transformational leadership and identifications with the organization, the team, and the leader. Although transformational leadership exhibited positive relationships with all identifications under study, it was most strongly related to leader identification. Furthermore, the results of the meta-analytic structural equation model supported an integrated sequential model, in which transformational leadership primarily shaped leader identification and subsequently led to collective identifications (i.e., team and organizational identification). Additionally, similar sequential models were found when separately exploring the four subfacets of transformational leadership (i.e., idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation) as antecedents of identifications. However, these results are based on a rather small number of studies and should thus be interpreted with caution.

The second study examined how Ohio leadership behaviors (i.e., consideration and
initiating structure) influence identification with the organization and the leader as well as important organizational outcomes (i.e., satisfaction as well as individual and unit performance). The relationships were tested in two path analyses models, one at the individual level including individual performance and job satisfaction as outcomes and one at the unit level using unit performance as outcome. The results revealed that consideration, a relation-focused leadership style, first and foremost shaped identification with the leader, which in turn predicted individual performance. Conversely, initiating structure, a task-focused leadership style, fostered organizational identification, which exhibited significant paths to job satisfaction and unit performance. Moreover, supporting a generalization effect, leader identification was found to predict organizational identification. Additional indirect effects analyses indicated that identification fully mediated the effects on individual performance and partially on job satisfaction, whereas the mediation for unit performance was only marginally significant.

The third study demonstrated that other common workplace interactions, in this study social support and feedback from supervisors and coworkers, differentially contribute to the development of identifications in a latent change model. More specifically, social support is a relation-focused behavior and was found to nurture identification with the leader or the team, when support was provided by the leader or coworkers, respectively. In contrast, feedback revolves around how employees execute their task and consequently informs about professional identification. In this respect, changes in feedback from coworkers emerged as the driver of changes in professional identification, whereas the path connecting changes in feedback from the supervisor to changes in professional identification was not significant. Thereby, this study provided important evidence in support of the proposition that interactions shape identifications through the validation of tentative identifications.
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THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The specific findings of the three empirical studies, taken together, make several substantial contributions to identification research in organizational contexts. Moreover, they highlight the importance of identification for other related research fields. Calling for a more integrated and management-oriented approach to identification, this dissertation focused on two major aspects. First, employees can identify with multiple foci at their work and researchers need to specify the focus of identification under investigation. Second, uncovering proximal antecedents of identification advances our understanding of identification development processes and provides managers with the much needed insights to actively foster employee identification. Additionally, taken these two aspects together, investigating the differential effects of antecedents on multiple identifications emerges as a third contribution of my dissertation.

Revisiting Identifications with Different Foci

Taking a closer look at identification in organizational research, prior research has recently started to separate multiple identifications according to their focus (e.g., Johnson et al., 2006; Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006; Van Dick et al., 2004). Through evidence stemming from confirmatory factor analyses (Studies 2 and 3), moderate intercorrelations between identifications (Studies 1, 2, and 3), and differential relations of identifications to antecedents and outcomes (Studies 1, 2, and 3), this dissertation emphasizes once again that the differentiation of identification foci is crucial from a researcher’s as well as a practitioner’s point of view. Consequently, the findings obtained within this dissertation stress the need for researchers to specify the identification focus of interest and tie their reasoning and measurement specifically to the identification focus at hand. Furthermore, a more complex approach towards identification is warranted that investigates multiple foci simultaneously (e.g., Podnar et al., 2011; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008).
First, as identifications are often not independent of each other and positively correlated (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2001; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008), a simple comparison of association strength might fall short of capturing the essence of multiple identifications (for such examples see Riketta & Van Dick, 2005; Johnson et al., 2006; Van Dick et al., 2004; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). Hence, the chosen methodology needs to be capable of handling multiple interrelated predictors and outcomes in order to examine multiple identifications within the same model. Through the application of such procedures, this dissertation underscores that identifications with different foci can and should be viewed in combination in order to advance our understanding of identification processes.

Second, the findings also show that identifications with different foci are not mutually exclusive, but instead can evolve in parallel or even follow sequential routes. Thereby, the results are in severe contrast to the assumption inherent in some previous writing on multiple identifications that identifications compete with each other in a way that an increased identification with one focus is associated with a decrease in others (e.g., Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Johnson et al., 2006; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). Speaking to parallel paths of identification development, both Studies 2 and 3 highlight that identifications with different foci can be promoted simultaneously through different antecedents. Moreover, the presented results go hand in hand with Sluss and colleagues’ recent assertion that “multiple identifications may be more cooperative than competitive” (2012, p. 950). I will return to these seemingly conflicting propositions below and suggest potential moderators of associations between identifications for future research.

Regarding positive associations between identifications, nested identifications have further been proposed to be connected through generalizing (i.e., bottom-up) and/ or trickle down (i.e., top-down) effects (e.g., Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). As
leadership was studied as an elicitor of identification in Studies 1 and 2, which resides at the level of the lower level identification (i.e., leader identification), I expected generalizing effects to higher level identifications in these particular cases. Indeed, both studies demonstrated that leader identification subsequently informed identifications with more inclusive collectives (i.e., team and organizational identification). This is also in line with the conceptualization of lower level identifications as means-ends for higher level identifications (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001) as well as with some previous evidence demonstrating generalizing effects among nested identifications (Bartels et al., 2007; Sluss et al., 2012). In addition, in order to acknowledge a potential top-down transmission, I tested for an additional path from organizational to leader identification in Study 2, but did not find support for such a top-down path in the data. Nevertheless, this was an additional exploratory analysis carried out without reasoning about potential underlying mechanisms. Consequently, the presented findings do not provide conclusive evidence with respect to the question when and how bottom-up or top-down processes among identifications occur, which would be an interesting question for future research to investigate.

**Antecedents of Identification**

In the endeavor to uncover proximal antecedents of identification, the three studies clearly point to interpersonal interactions as precursors of identification. From a theoretical point, identification has long been argued to require some form of interaction with others to develop (Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Burke, 1950/1969; Cheney, 1983), but researchers have only recently started to look empirically into interactions’ role for shaping identification (e.g., Dobrow & Higgins, 2005; Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Jones & Hamilton Volpe, 2011). Following the assumption that interactions are prerequisites of identification development, my dissertation concentrated on the impact of common workplace behaviors on identification.

To this end, the first two studies examined different leadership styles, namely
transformational leadership and the Ohio leadership styles, as potential drivers of identification. Moving beyond leadership, the third study investigated social support and feedback from supervisors and coworkers as antecedents of identification development and proposed a general process how identifications are shaped. Hence, I first consider implications specific to leadership as an antecedent of identification and then take a broader outlook to include also coworker interactions as drivers of identification.

**Leadership.** Transformational leadership has long been suggested to generate exceptionally successful effects because it transforms followers’ self-concepts (e.g., Bass, 1998; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Shamir et al., 1993). To use these insights with respect to identifications’ antecedents, the results of the meta-analysis (Study 1) demonstrated robust links between transformation leadership and identification with the organization, the team, and the leader. Study 2 challenged the assumption that shaping followers’ self-concepts is a unique property of transformational leadership and found that consideration and initiating structure are both capable of shaping identifications as well.

Finally, Study 3 also investigated a leadership behavior, namely social support and feedback from the leader. Even though these concepts have not been derived from a particular leadership style, social support resembles earlier notions of supportive leadership (Bowers & Seashore, 1966; House, 1971, 1996). Similarly, drawing on Yukl et al.’s (2002) leadership taxonomy, social support is part of the supporting behaviors subcategory, whereas feedback fits well into the developing subcategory. In this respect, changes in social support and changes in feedback both were correlated with changes in leader identification over time, whereas the path linking feedback and professional identification was not significant. However, this might be due to the particularities of the investigated newcomer sample, which was also addressed in the discussion section of the specific paper.

In sum, the findings from the three studies showed that different leadership behaviors are capable to foster employee identifications. Thereby, my dissertation also provides
substantial systematic support for the social identity approach to leadership. This meta-
theory suggests that leaders reach their goals through transforming their followers’ self-
concepts and installing desirable identifications (Haslam et al., 2011; Lord et al., 1999; Van
Knippenberg et al., 2004). Whereas prior evidence on leadership-identification links has
been disparate and emerged as a by-product of other-focused research (e.g., Sluss et al.,
2008; Van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010; Vondey, 2010; L. Wu et al., 2010; Walumbwa et
al., 2011; H. Zhang et al., 2012), a more pointed investigation of leadership’s influence on
identifications was needed in order to advance the social identity approach to leadership
(Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). The results obtained within the framework of the present
dissertation therefore nicely complement and systemicize prior findings on leadership-
identification associations and reinforce speculations that leadership in general might
operate through identification. As such, the three studies also make a valuable contribution
to the leadership literature in that they draw attention to the social identity approach to
leadership and emphasize identification as an important concept in leadership research.
Accordingly, identification could be a common underlying mechanism through which all
leadership styles similarly achieve their effectiveness.

**Interactions with significant others: Coworkers.** Besides leaders, interactions with
direct coworkers make essential contributions to an employee’s work experience, as
coworkers work at the same hierarchical level and interact frequently in most work settings
(Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; see also Felps, Mitchell, Hekman, Lee, Holtom, & Harman,
2009; Schneider, 1987; Sherony & Green, 2002). Reinforcing the idea that coworkers are
important interaction partners, the results of Study 3 demonstrated that social support and
feedback received from coworkers enhance employee identification. Thereby, this study
supported the more general assumption that interactions with different interaction partners
can promote identifications and highlighted the particular role of interactions with
coworkers, next to those with leaders, to foster identifications. Coworker interactions can
thus be regarded as a useful proximal way to manage workplace identifications.

Interestingly, this assertion is in line with some previous research on newcomer socialization, which has highlighted the essential role of coworkers for newcomer adjustment (e.g., Moreland & Levine, 2001). More specifically, newcomers directed a significant portion of their information seeking toward coworkers (Morrison, 1993; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). Likewise, coworkers’ influence has proven to be critical for newcomers’ group integration and organizational commitment (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). In linking both streams of research, this dissertation contributes also to the newcomer socialization literature in that it focuses specifically on newcomers’ identification development. Thereby, the study emphasizes the importance of identification acquisition during the socialization process.

Taken together, the three empirical chapters demonstrate that social interactions can be powerful proximal levers to enhance employee identification. Thus, a key to a proactive management of identification lies in interpersonal interactions. In this respect, each of the three studies presented different interactions – transformational leadership, consideration and initiating structure (i.e., Ohio leadership dimensions) as well as social support and feedback from supervisors and coworkers – as means to elicit employee identification.

This also resonates with the recent conclusion that identification processes are “more relationally focused than previous research would suggest” (Sluss et al., 2012, p. 966). This previous research, which was oftentimes grounded in the social identity approach, has repeatedly demonstrated in minimal-group experiments that minimal interventions (e.g., composing two groups based on their alleged preference for the painters Klee or Kandinsky) were sufficient to generate identification and result in ingroup-favoring behaviors (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This social identity approach has been influential within research in organizational contexts as well, focusing on impersonal drivers of identification such as prestige or a distinctive positive image (Smidts et al., 2001; Wan-Huggins et al.,
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1998). Although subsequent research has started to investigate other antecedents not
directly suggested by the social identity approach, the emphasis has remained on rather
global and stable predictors such as tenure, communication climate, or justice perceptions
(Bartels et al., 2007; Kraus et al., 2012; Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006). Extending the
domain of antecedents to more proximal precursors of identification, which can be found in
social interaction, this dissertation broadens the scope of antecedents considered and
contributes to acknowledging relational drivers of identification (e.g., Sluss et al., 2012).
Yet, whether social interactions are always a prerequisite for identification development as
suggested by some scholars (Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Cheney, 1983) or whether
identifications can also be formed based on global antecedents alone (i.e., without any
social interactions), remains for further research to explore.

Differential Effects of Antecedents on Identifications with Different Foci

Not all identification associations are created equal in that associations of
identifications with different foci to antecedents or outcomes vary both in pattern and
strength. In this respect, Study 1 explicitly tested different association strengths of
transformational leadership and various identifications. Although transformational
leadership was related to all identifications under study, the association to leader
identification was stronger than the ones to team or organizational identification. Similarly,
Studies 2 and 3 revealed that identifications with different foci vary in their association
strengths to antecedents and outcomes.

Moreover, Study 3 illustrated that identifications with different foci can exhibit
different patterns of associations in that some identifications are associated with an
antecedent, whereas others are not. Coworker feedback, for instance, was unrelated to
identification with the supervisor, whereas social support from the supervisor was only
related to identification with the supervisor, but not to identifications with other foci. Taken
together, the three studies emphasize that antecedents and outcomes are not isomorphically
related to all identifications with different foci.

Taking this idea a step further, the research of this dissertation asserts that different interactions are needed to foster identifications with different foci. In Study 2, for instance, consideration was predominantly related to leader identification, whereas initiating structure was directly linked to organizational identification. Likewise, Study 3 demonstrated differential effects of social support and feedback from supervisors and coworkers on the development of identifications with the leader, the team, and the profession. In this respect, there is not one interaction that fosters identifications with all sorts of different foci, but different precursors are capable of enhancing identifications with different foci.

**Classification of Antecedents.** With respect to the recurring patterns between antecedents and identifications throughout the studies, both Studies 2 and 3 contrasted interactions that can either be classified as task-focused or as relation-focused behavior. Relation-focused behaviors were consistently found to strengthen identification with the elicitor(s) of such behavior as they can serve to validate the tentative identification with the elicitor(s). In this respect, consideration (Study 2) and social support (Study 3) from the leader were associated with leader identification, whereas social support from coworkers (Study 3) shaped team identification. For task-focused behaviors, however, the emerging picture seems somewhat less clear. Whereas initiating structure fostered organizational identification (Study 2), feedback was related to professional identification in Study 3. Importantly, most task-focused behaviors are concerned with the organization and execution of tasks (e.g., structuring, planning, or clarifying), whereas some others revolve around enhancing an employee’s skills and abilities (i.e., developing behaviors in the taxonomy of Yukl et al., 2002). According to the results, task-focused behaviors of the former type might be more strongly associated with the organization as the primary beneficiary of such behaviors and therefore enhance organizational identification. On the
contrary, developing behaviors primarily promote the individual as a professional and consequently can be expected to nurture professional identification. However, this proposition remains for future research to explore, as I have not contrasted different task-focused behaviors and organizational and professional identification within one study.

Study 1 concentrated on a single antecedent, namely transformational leadership. Importantly, transformational leadership cannot easily be classified into the meta-categories proposed by Yukl et al. (2002) because transformational leadership measures vary in the specific subscales they include. Usually these measures contain some elements of relation-oriented and change-oriented behaviors as well as behaviors that are hard to classify into a meta-category, such as leading by example or talking about personal values (Yukl, 2013). However, even when looking at different subfacets of transformational leadership, contrary to our expectations no differential patterns were found (cf. Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Two rivaling explanations might explain this unexpected finding. On the one hand, all transformational leadership behaviors might share that they emphasize the idiosyncratic properties of the leader, making the leader as a person highly salient and thereby fostering predominantly leader identification. On the other hand, only few studies examined the subfacets of transformational leadership. Consequently, differences in associations due to specific samples, settings or measures might be confounded with the associations of interest and therefore hinder the detection of systematic differences. A closer examination, for instance through a direct comparison of subdimensions and different identifications within the same model, might be able to detect existing differences. As the data presented within this dissertation does not provide conclusive evidence in favor of one or the other explanation, future research is warranted to shed more light on this issue.

**Correspondence of focus principle.** My dissertation also contributes to the identification literature in that it replicates the correspondence of focus principle for identification-outcome relationships (Study 2) and extends it to antecedents of
identification (Studies 1, 2, and 3). As such, the findings of this dissertation mirror insights from the target similarity model, which has pointed out that justice perceptions, social exchange relationships, and citizenship behaviors – like identifications – can be related to different targets or foci (Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007). Consequently, researchers should align the foci of their respective research in a way that they study justice perceptions, social exchange, and citizenship behaviors related to the same target in order to be able to better understand and predict their relationships.

Yet, the presented studies of this dissertation also hint at the fact that the correspondence of focus principle might occur for different theoretical reasons for antecedents and outcomes, although they appear to be phenomenologically similar. With respect to outcomes, the correspondence of focus principle is based on the idea that the values and goals of the identification target become parts of the self through identification, which subsequently guide perceptions and behavior directed toward this target. As such, a shared focus can serve to create a common frame of reference (Riketta & Van Dick, 2005). When identifications correspond to the outcome in focus or level of categorization, this identification is likely to become more salient when thinking about or taking actions related to this outcome (Ellemers & Rink, 2001; Ulrich et al., 2007; Van Dick et al., 2005). Furthermore, research on the attitude-behavior link demonstrated that such associations are strongest, when attitude and behavior are measured at the same level and when the attitude is specific (as opposed to more abstract or distal) for the particular behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fazio & Roskos-Ewoldson, 1994). Similarly, an identification that is more specific to the outcome, in that they share the same focus or operate at the same level, can be expected to better predict that outcome than other identifications.

For antecedents, on the contrary, the correspondence of focus is a result of an antecedent being informative about the targeted identification. Drawing on the general identification process proposed in Chapter 4, only those interactions that can inform about
an employee’s tentative identification will be able to shape this particular identification. As such, antecedents that correspond to the identification in a way that the precursory behavior is closely connected to the specific identification focus are expected to be particularly well suited to foster this identification and consequently show the strongest association.

**PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Employee identification is an indispensible asset for contemporary organizations, as it is associated with a variety of desirable outcomes and constitutes a competitive advantage (e.g., Fiol, 2001; Riketta, 2005; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005; Zhu et al., 2012; see also Study 2). As such, and especially paying tribute to the manifold changes in contemporary work settings (e.g., Ellemers, 2001; Pratt, 2001; Van Dick, 2004), identification needs to be managed actively (Barker, 1998). To this end, this dissertation provides valuable insights as the findings can be applied in managerial practices.

First, the findings of this dissertation directly point to specific interactions as effective proximal means to promote employee identifications. Inarguably, some global features of the organization, such as prestige, communication climate, or justice perceptions, might facilitate employee identification (Bartels et al., 2007; Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006; Wan-Huggins et al., 1998). However, in my dissertation I suggest to focus on everyday behaviors as more proximal processes instead, in order to actively shape identification. This could be viewed as a paradigm shift in identification management, as my research provides organizational actors with the confidence and knowledge how to enhance employee identification in a more proactive way. In this regard, the findings of this dissertation directly suggest the use of transformational leadership, consideration and initiating structure as well as support and feedback from supervisors and coworkers as proximal antecedents to promote identifications with the leader, the team, the organization, or the profession (Studies 1, 2, and 3). Although the immediate recommendations are limited to the investigated behaviors of the three studies, more far-reaching suggestions can be derived.
through the application of the proposed identification development process and the correspondence of focus principle. Thereby, managers are enabled to deduce additional antecedents and develop further management practices to enhance identifications based on a sophisticated reasoning.

Second, this dissertation draws practitioners’ attention to different foci of identification and underlines the need to specify the identification focus of interest. In this respect, the studies included in my dissertation clearly show that different actions are required to shape the various identifications (Studies 2 and 3) and that different identifications in turn are associated with different outcomes (Study 2). Thereby, the results strongly advocate adapting management practices to the identification focus of interest.

Building on the generalization process of identifications and specifically on the link from leader to team and organizational identification found in Studies 1 and 2, managers might be tempted to solely invest in tactics that elevate leader identification, as it can eventually generalize to higher level identifications. However, relying exclusively on behaviors such as transformational leadership or consideration to foster multiple identifications might turn out to be short-sighted because leader identification becomes the critical gatekeeper of fostering identification with larger entities in such a set-up. Consequently, organizations might run the risk to spoil employees’ collective identifications, if leader identification is not generalized to the collective for some reason (see the discussion on potential boundary conditions below) or does not emerge in the first place. Therefore, organizations are well advised to rely on additional antecedents that foster collective identifications more directly. In this respect, the leader’s structuring behavior was found to nurture organizational identification as it can be perceived to occur on behalf of the organization (Study 2). Similarly, support from coworkers was useful to foster team identification directly (Study 3). Additionally, managers could derive further cues that might serve to foster collective identification directly when they apply the proposed
identification development process and concentrate on precursors that correspond to the collective identifications in level.

**STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS**

This dissertation takes a more holistic approach to identification processes in work contexts by examining proximal antecedents of social identifications with the most common foci (i.e., the organization, the team, the leader, and the profession; Meyer et al., 2006; Van Dick, 2001). In following through with this multi-foci conceptualization of interrelated identifications, all three studies examine identifications with different foci simultaneously. Furthermore, the different methods used for each study (i.e., meta-analytic structural equation modeling, path modeling, and latent difference scores within a structural equation modeling framework) were chosen based on the necessity to model relationships between multiple related predictors and outcomes.

However, whereas each empirical chapter tackled an important question with respect to multiple identifications at work, and thus contributed to a better understanding of how employee identifications can be managed, not all of these aspects could be included in all three studies. Even though a large overarching model would have been preferable, I was limited by (viable) sample sizes and thus had to reduce the complexity of reality in order to derive more specific, testable models. Importantly, in choosing such models there was a trade-off between the number of variables included in the model and the complexity of the modeled relationships. In this respect, some models included a smaller number of antecedents, but explicitly tested for sequential paths among identifications (Studies 1 and 2). In contrast, other models concentrated on only parallel paths from a larger number of antecedents to identifications, but neglected further paths among identifications (Study 3). Future research should therefore explore additional parts of the overall model, for instance, by combining different sets of identifications (e.g., organizational and professional identification) or by focusing more explicitly on bottom-up and top-down processes.
between identifications with different foci. An integration of the several different aspects examined in the single studies into an overall model – as desirable as it might be – would require an enormous number of participants in order to be able to detect the expected complex relationships between identifications, antecedents, and outcomes with sufficient power (cf. Bosco, Aguinis, Singh, Field, & Pierce, 2014; Kaplan, 1995) and therefore might remain more of an utopia than an actual endeavor.

Likewise, the proposed process underlying identification development was not investigated to its full extent, as not all the different parts of the model were tested explicitly. Specifically, I suggested that identifications are shaped through the validation of tentative identities in social interactions, which represents a more complete synthesis of many different earlier approaches to identification development. In this respect, some prior research has investigated the construction of tentative identifications (Gibson, 2003; Ibarra, 1999), whereas other studies highlighted the effects of social validation perceptions without answering where they come from (L. G. E. Smith et al., 2012, 2013). Study 3 complements these findings by focusing on proximal behaviors that serve to validate tentative identifications without directly measuring perceptions of validation. Consequently, even though the results obtained within this dissertations as well as earlier evidence are in line with the assumed mechanism of identification development, a more pointed investigation of the integrated process as a whole would be important to further substantiate the suggested identification development process.

In addition, some methodological considerations of the conducted studies warrant attention. First, even though the sample sizes for the primary studies (Studies 2 and 3) were impressive and in line with similar prior research, the complex models investigated in these studies would have benefited from an even larger number of participants, especially given the rather small expectable effect sizes (Bosco et al., 2014). Thereby, the presented analyses can be viewed as a conservative test of the hypotheses due to power limitations. Likewise,
the only marginally significant results obtained for the mediation effects at the unit level of analysis in Study 2 should be interpreted in light of the restricted power associated with the analyzed number of units.

Second, this dissertation is mostly based on field data, which yields serious implications for its internal and external validity. Chapters 3 and 4 report two organizational field studies, whereas the meta-analysis’ primary data mostly stems from organizational settings as well. While the presented research can thus be expected to have a high external validity, questions concerning its internal validity may arise. In order to address concerns about the directionality of the effects, several remedies were taken: First, the proposed links were all based on rigorously derived hypotheses and well grounded in firm theory (Studies 1, 2, and 3). Second, they were tested within a path modeling framework, which allowed me to explicitly test differential effects and examine alternative models (Studies 1, 2, and 3). Third, data was collected at different measurement points to enhance the confidence in the directionality of the effects (Studies 2 and 3). Nevertheless, the presented studies cannot conclusively speak to the causality of the relationships, and controlled experiments are needed to do so. As lab experiments are more apt to assess situated than deep structure identification (Ashforth et al., 2008), especially field experiments would be desirable.

Finally, the same source bias is a crucial weakness of the presented studies. More specifically, antecedents (e.g., leadership behavior or other’s support and feedback behavior) and identifications were assessed through the same rater in both primary studies (Studies 2 and 3) as well as in most of the research, on which the meta-analysis is based. Identification, by the very nature of the construct, can only be measured through self-ratings. Similarly, antecedent ratings through the focal employee are in line with the proposed underlying process of feeling validated. Also from a practical perspective, other-ratings or observations of the antecedents, although technically possible, were not feasible.
due to specific data-collection restrictions of the cooperating company in Studies 2 and 3. Moreover, using the same rater for antecedents and identifications is often inherent in studies on self-perceptions like identification (Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006; see also Markoczy, 1997). Yet, even though the choice to rely on self-rated data is defendable, it bears the risk that the obtained results were inflated through the same source bias.

In this regard, some aspects should be noted that might counterbalance the dangers associated with the same source bias. Luckily, potential inflations of all correlations are less of a problem, when the focus of the research is on differential relationships rather than on the absolute strength of the relationships, as it was the case in all of the presented studies (Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Furthermore, Study 2 is enriched with additional data from two other sources, whereas in Study 3 all key variables were assessed at two measurement points. Here, some non-significant relationships between variables were detected, which discount the same source bias as the primary driver of the results. Nevertheless, combining self-ratings with other-ratings or observations could shed additional light on whether the specific behaviors, rather than mere perceptions of those behaviors, are indeed related to identifications.

**DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Even though the research presented in this dissertation clearly advances the research on identification, the results of course also open up several avenues for future research. In the previous sections I outlined the theoretical and practical contributions of this dissertation and highlighted strengths and weaknesses. Whenever the implications or limitations were associated with a specific unanswered question and gave rise to obvious future research needs, I pointed them out right away. In this section, on the contrary, I will delineate major directions for future research investigating multiple identifications and their antecedents.
Identifications with Multiple Foci

Given that employees can identify with multiple foci, many unanswered questions point to at least three important lines of further research. First, the field has much to gain from better understanding when identifications with different foci are more or less likely to be positively associated. Second, while previous research has concentrated on recognizing the single most important identification to predict an outcome, a closer look at the configuration of multiple identifications (e.g., interaction effects or profiles) could advance the field significantly. Finally, as research has started to recognize the potential downsides of identification, future studies should examine detrimental effects in more detail and could draw on the configuration idea mentioned above to prevent negative consequences.

Moderators and boundary conditions of interrelations between identifications. Identifications with different foci often exhibit moderately positive correlations (see Studies 1, 2, and 3), and researchers have put forward many arguments proposing either converging or conflicting identifications (e.g., Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). In this regard, Meyer et al. (2006) suggested that identifications might reinforce each other, when compatible, and undermine or compete with each other, when incompatible (see also Pratt, 2001). In order to advance our understanding of more or less compatible or incompatible identifications, two important directions for future research arise, namely insight into (1) bottom-up and top-down processes among nested identifications and (2) the psychological similarity of identifications.

First, especially nested identifications are likely to be aligned through some logical inherent structure (Hogg & Terry, 2001). The leader, for instance, is appointed and formally defined by the organization, and the organization consists of different teams belonging to different divisions. As a result, both bottom-up and top-down processes between nested identifications have been proposed to occur (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). Some initial evidence supported a generalization effect from lower level to higher
level identifications (e.g., Bartels et al., 2007; Carmeli et al., 2011; Hobman et al., 2011; Sluss et al., 2012), whereas the trickle down hypothesis has received less attention. Drawing on the correspondence of focus principle for antecedents, however, it can be assumed that proximal antecedents situated at a higher level predominantly influence identification at this level, which subsequently could trickle down to inform lower level identification. For example, top management communication about the values and goals of the organization can be expected to predominantly shape organizational identification, but might also inform team or leader identification subsequently. Furthermore, additional research on the underlying process of such identification dynamics is warranted (for a notable example see Sluss et al., 2012).

Second, also formally nested entities with an inherent logic structure (e.g., organization – team – leader) can vary in the degree to which they are aligned (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2001; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). The interrelation between two identifications might thus reflect the degree to which the two entities are intertwined and psychologically resemble each other (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008, Sluss et al., 2012). In this respect, when identification targets are aligned by following the same values and goals or by sharing a large number of members, it is easier to integrate both targets into a coherent self-concept (Meyer et al., 2006; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). Thus, future research should investigate which factors exactly determine psychological resemblance and consequently moderate the relationship between two identifications.

With respect to the alignment between leader and organization, prior research from a variety of different research areas provides important insights, on which future research on relationships between identifications might build. For instance, a leader’s organizational upward influence, an indicator that the organization is taking the leader seriously, is related to employees’ perception of the leader being representative of the organization (Pelz, 1951; see also Anderson & Tolson, 1991). Likewise, research on leader’s organizational
embodiment found that leader’s behavior only translated into employees’ organizational perceptions, when the leader’s organizational embodiment was high (Eisenberger et al., 2010; Shoss, Eisenberger, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2013). The generalization process from leader to organizational identification, for instance, occurred only when the leader’s organizational prototypicality was high (Sluss et al., 2012). Similarly, leaders are only likely to foster organizational identification, when they identify with the organization themselves. For example, a leader’s own organizational identification has been shown to translate into follower’s organizational identification through leadership processes (Schuh et al., 2012). On the contrary, when a leader is dissatisfied with the organization and thinks of leaving the organization, employees might adopt a similar view, when leader identification is high.

Whereas the leader and the organization are often aligned due to their structural connection, relational identifications with coworkers might be especially prone to be antitypical to the organization in terms of goals and values, as coworker relations unfold within the work context, but are usually not formally instilled on the basis of the organization’s values and goals (Collinson, 1992; S. Zhang et al., 2014). Therefore, coworker relations and the organization might be especially susceptible to represent conflicting identification targets and consequently can lead to competing identifications (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008).

Following a different line of thinking, psychological vicinity between identification targets could depend on the actual or perceived overlap between the two groups. For instance, when the team consists of coworkers from many different professions (e.g., a project teams with a high professional diversity), the overlap between team and profession is comparably low and the correlation between both identifications should consequently be reduced. Similarly, having worked as a professional in many different teams could help to decouple professional identification from identification with the particular team.
Conversely, for newcomers, such as in Study 3, team members often represent a large portion of the professionals newcomers know, which consequently blurs the boundaries between the team and the profession and results in higher intercorrelations.

**Interplay between different identifications to predict outcomes.** Identifications with different foci have been associated with different outcomes and could hence serve different purposes according to the correspondence of focus principle. However, even though the corresponding identification has been shown to have the strongest influence on an outcome, it is often not the sole one. Especially, when the outcome is situated at a more abstract level or does not have a predetermined referent (i.e., the beneficiary or the level is not obvious from the construct itself), it seems likely that other identifications besides the dominant corresponding identification might also contribute to that outcome. For example, turnover intentions, which have been suggested to correspond to organizational identification in level (Riketta & Van Dick, 2005), might additionally be informed by the identifications with the specific team and leader.

Moreover, different identifications do not exist in isolation, but all form part of an integrated self. As such, different identifications might reinforce or neutralize each other in their effects on outcomes. To date, only a handful of studies have reported interaction effects of different identifications on outcomes (Hekman, Bingley, Steensma, & Hereford, 2009; Hekman, Steensma, Bingley, & Hereford, 2009; Van Dick et al., 2008; Lipponen et al., 2005), which could be a promising avenue for further investigation.

In this respect, a certain combination of identifications, which could also be understood as identification profiles, might prove especially beneficial for certain outcomes. For instance, a combination of high team identification and moderate organizational identification could be particularly well suited in times of organizational adaptation or restructuring. Here, a moderate organizational identification might render employees open to changes, whereas high team identification might provide them with the
needed stability (for a similar idea see Giessner, 2011, or Jetten, O’Brien, & Trindall, 2002). Similarly, employee retention could be expected to require a minimum of identification with the organization, the team, the leader, and the profession. As soon as identification with one focus falls below a critical cut-off, employees might be likely to look for a different job, even though other identifications are high.

**Considering downsides of identification.** This dissertation rests on the premise that identifications are associated with manifold positive outcomes, which is supported by an abundance of work on identification-outcome relationships (e.g., Riketta, 2005; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005; Zhu et al., 2012) and reaffirmed through the findings of Study 2. Nevertheless, the association might not be as straightforward as suggested by previous research and warrants some further investigation. In this respect, few studies have explored the dark side of identification and highlighted that (too much) identification could actually be associated with detrimental consequences such as dysfunctional rigidity, workaholism, dependence on the leader, or unethical behavior on behalf of the organization (Avanzi et al., 2012; Fiol, 2001; Kark et al., 2003; Umphress, Bingham, & Mitchell, 2010). In this respect, identification research has much to gain from systematically addressing potential downsides of identification (Pratt, 2001) and explicitly investigating curvilinear effects between identifications and outcomes. Assuming that indeed identifications’ positive effects might not increase infinitely and that instead at certain higher levels identifications might also cause undesirable effects (e.g., Avanzi et al., 2012), the question arises how to prevent these negative consequences.

One potential remedy might be to foster a balanced set of identifications, so that identification with one focus prevents identification with another focus from going overboard (i.e., a buffering effect; for a similar idea see also Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). For instance, unethical behavior on behalf of the organization increased with higher levels of organizational identification (Umphress et al., 2010). However, a high professional
identification might curtail these negative consequences, because the unethical behavior in support of one’s organizational identification might conflict with the values and goals of the professional identification, so that the unethical behavior might consequently occur less frequently. In practical terms, whistle blowers, like Edward Snowden, might only be willing to reveal secrets of their organization for the benefit of society, when they have a high professional identification to confront their doubts associated with their organizational identification. Similarly, high leader identification might go along with dependency on the leader, causing followers to follow the leader for the good or the bad (Kark et al., 2003). An additional pronounced organizational identification might alleviate such effects in that it offers an alternative point of reference to shape behavior. Thus, combining multiple identities can enable employees to take “rich and circumspect actions” (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001, p. 45). In this sense, future research might want to include both identifications from inside and outside the workplace to detect how they can work together to counterbalance each other’s negative effects.

Antecedents of Identifications

The social identity approach to leadership. With respect to the leader as a key figure in shaping employee identification, this dissertation opens the door for much further research based on the social identity approach to leadership (Haslam et al., 2011). First, the range of leadership styles and behaviors associated with identifications needs to be expanded systematically. In this respect, I have examined relation-focused (i.e., consideration and social support) as well as task-focused behaviors (i.e., initiating structure and feedback) and outlined above how they shape identification with the leader and identification with the organization or profession, respectively. Furthermore, Study 1 focused on transformational leadership as an important leadership style, which, as an overall construct, unfortunately cannot be classified into current taxonomies of leadership (De Rue et al., 2011; Yukl et al., 2002). Nevertheless, broadening the range of leadership
styles to include further behaviors from different categories of the taxonomy might be especially insightful.

In this respect, relating behaviors from the change-oriented or passive leadership category to a specific focus of identification could prove more difficult. Importantly, these behaviors could even be associated with multiple identifications in opposite directions. For example, change-oriented leadership behaviors, such as risk taking or stimulating behaviors, might challenge collective identifications, as they challenge the status-quo, while at the same time fortifying the leader in his or her role as sensemaker, thereby enhancing leader identification.

With respect to negative leadership behaviors, such as laissez-faire leadership, abusive supervision or non-contingent reward and punishment (Podsakoff, Bommer, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006; Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007; Tepper, 2007), future research could make use of the expanded model of identification. This model proposes that in addition to (positive) identification, employees can hold ambivalent identifications towards an identification target or even disidentify with it (Ashforth, Joshi, Anand, & O’Leary-Kelly, 2013; Elsbach, 1999; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). In this respect, it seems likely that passive or negative leadership does not only lead to an absence of a positive identification, as would be indicated by low scores on the “regular” identification scale, but could also provoke ambivalent or disidentification. As to date such expanded models of identification have received fairly little attention, both the identification and the leadership literature would profit from the suggested research.

Second, it would be interesting to investigate whether behaviors pertaining to the same meta- or subcategory in leadership taxonomies actually exhibit comparable effects on identifications. Alternatively, by looking at different behaviors and systemizing them based on association patterns with identifications (e.g., with respect to their primary identification focus), identification research might also provide an alternative basis for leadership
taxonomies. Future research might show that relation-oriented leadership styles all predominantly foster leader identification, whereas task-focused behaviors in general stipulate organizational identification. A third category could be development-focused behaviors that encompass notions of mentoring, communicating high expectations or providing intellectual stimulation, which would above all appeal to professional identification.

Third, scholars have advocated that identification is the mechanism underlying leadership’s effects on outcomes based on the social identity approach to leadership (Haslam et al., 2011; Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Corroborating this proposition, various studies have reported identification to mediate leadership effects on outcomes (e.g., Cicero & Pierro, 2007; Effelsberg, Solga, & Gurt, 2013; Shamir et al., 2000; see also Study 2). However, some of these studies have included identification as one among other mediators (e.g., Conger et al., 2000; Vondey, 2010; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Similarly, the additional direct effect found in Study 2 also indicates that there are mediators beyond identification involved in explaining this process. Hence, future research is called for to systematically investigate identification in combination with other mediators and to explore how identification as a mediator compares to other common mediators (e.g., justice perceptions or positive affect) in the leadership-outcome-relationship.

Identification development processes. First, this dissertation points to the key role of interactions with leaders and coworkers as proximal drivers of identification. Beyond the interactions analyzed in the presented studies, the underlying process enables researchers to derive specific hypotheses about other potential precursors of identifications. As tentative identifications need to be validated through social interactions, being chosen to represent the profession or the organization to externals such as customers or business partners might nurture professional or organizational identification, respectively. Similarly, speaking or
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acting on behalf of the team in a meeting could reinforce the tentative team identification. Finally, interactions with others from outside the work context, like interactions with family or friends, can reinforce an organizational or professional identification in that they address the focal person as a representative member of these groups.

Second, future research should extend the presented findings not only by investigating others’ favorable behaviors that contribute to identification, but also by taking a closer look at what the focal individual does to establish identification. As I was primarily interested in antecedents of identification which can guide managers in their attempt to enhance identification the research presented in this dissertation has concentrated on the role of others to instigate identification in an employee. Nevertheless, employees are not passive recipients of others’ behavior, but also proactively contribute to their own social reality (Crant, 2000). In this respect, employees have been suggested to act their way into identification (Sluss et al., 2012). Following a recent trend in the socialization literature to emphasize the active behavior of newcomers, such as information seeking or relationship building behaviors (Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Morrison, 1993; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000), emphasizing the focal employee’s proactive behavior could yield important additional insights.

Moreover, identification has been described to develop in a mutual effort of a self, who claims membership, and others, who grant it (Bartel & Dutton, 2001). Some previous research has concentrated more on the “claiming” side, illustrating how individuals look for role models to construe (tentative) identities or use identity narratives to actively create their identification (Gibson, 2010; Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulsecu, 2010). Future research, however, should further integrate these two sides of the same coin and shed light on how different activities of claiming and granting interact to form stable identifications.

**Moderators and boundary conditions of identification development.** Having pointed to the importance of social interactions for managing identification, an important
next step would be to establish boundary conditions of such relationships. Such moderators could be found in the individual, the situation, context factors or a mix of them.

With respect to the focal employee, individuals can vary in the degree to which they are inclined to conceptualize their self at the individual, relational, or collective level, depending on their cultural and personal background (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Consequently, employees might be especially receptive to antecedents that foster identification at their preferred level of self-representation (Hogg et al., 2005; Lord & Brown, 2004), which might have two important implications. On the one hand, focusing on antecedents that foster identifications at the preferred level of self-representation might be especially powerful, as the employee responds more readily to them. On the other hand, identifications at the dominant level of identification might evolve more easily in general and lead to high levels of identification, thereby weakening the relationship between the antecedents and identifications at that level. For instance, if an employee prefers relational identifications, identification with the leader might emerge easily without much assistance through external cues. Consequently, making use of antecedents that nurture identifications beyond the dominant level of self-concept (e.g., fostering collective identification in an employee with a dominant individual self-representation) might be more exhausting and less fruitful at first, but could be more valuable to instill multiple equally well-developed identifications in the long run.

Similarly, situational characteristics might influence the effectiveness of certain antecedents in fostering identifications. In this respect, interaction frequency or physical distance between the interaction partner (e.g., coworkers or leaders) and the focal employee might weaken the link between the antecedent and the resulting identification in general. For instance, the association strengths between perceptions of leader’s accessibility, isolation, and information equity on the one hand and leader identification on the other hand differ for collocated and dispersed teams (Connaughton & Daly, 2004). Likewise,
transformational leadership has been demonstrated to require time to transfer a leader’s vision and values to followers (Hoffmann et al., 2011), which might be more limited in virtual collaboration.

Furthermore, in specific situations like organizational crisis, mergers, or virtual collaboration different interactions might be particularly important to maintain employees’ identifications or reach a specific goal. Therefore, specific leadership behaviors might be more apt to elicit the desired identifications and could therefore prove especially useful in such situations.

Taken all these versatile suggestions together, there are many possibilities for future research endeavors – those pointed out here and beyond – that would contribute different insights and thereby work toward a more precise understanding of identifications in organizations.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Employee identification provides contemporary organizations with a crucial competitive advantage, which consequently calls for an active management of identification at work. In order to advance our understanding of identification processes, this dissertation tackled two crucial issues. First, in the pursuit to take a more integrated approach to identification, multiple foci of identifications (e.g., identification with the organization, the team, the leader, or the profession) were investigated simultaneously, in order to shed more light on the complex nature of employee identifications. The results of the three empirical studies unanimously stress the necessity to treat identifications with different foci separately, as they exhibit differential association patterns to antecedents and outcomes.

Second, as identifications are construed in interaction with others, common workplace interactions might be proximal precursors of identification. In this regard, this dissertation has convincingly shown that leadership or coworker support and feedback are capable of shaping employee identifications by validating their tentative identifications. Consequently,
social interactions can be a fruitful way to actively manage employee identification. However, several interactions are needed to enhance multiple identifications, as different interactions appeal to identifications with different foci according to the correspondence of focus principle.

All in all, this dissertation takes a more holistic view on identification and marks a crucial first step to advance our understanding of the complex identification processes. Nevertheless, the presented results are by no means exhaustive or claim to present a complete picture. Instead, my research rather points to the mindset that is necessary to study identification as a complex social process at work. Identification is at work – and we can manage it through applying an integrated approach.