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Mixed feelings, mixed blessing? How ambivalence in organizational identification relates to employees' regulatory focus and citizenship behaviors

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Abstract
Recent conceptual work suggests that the sense of identity that employees develop vis-a-vis their organization goes beyond the traditional notion of organizational identification and can also involve conflicting impulses represented by ambivalent identification. In this

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study, we seek to advance this perspective on identification by proposing and empirically examining important antecedents and consequences. In line with our hypotheses, an experimental study (N = 199 employees) shows that organizational identification and ambivalent identification interactively influence employees' willingness to engage in organizational citizenship behavior. The effect of organizational identification on organizational citizenship behavior is significantly reduced when employees experience ambivalent identification. A field study involving employees from a broad spectrum of organizations and industries (N = 564) replicated these findings. Moreover, results show that employees' promotion and prevention focus form differential relationships with organizational identification and ambivalent identification, providing first evidence for a link between employees' regulatory focus and the dynamics of identification. Implications for the expanded model of organizational identification and the understanding of ambivalence in organizations are discussed.

Keywords
ambivalence, ambivalent identification, expanded model of organizational identification, OCBI, OCBO, organizational citizenship behavior, organizational identification, prevention focus, promotion focus, regulatory focus

Since the seminal work by Ashforth and Mael (1989), organizational identification has emerged as one of the key concepts in organizational psychology. Organizational identification is the degree to which employees define themselves as a member of an organization and experience a sense of oneness with it (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Haslam, 2004). A large body of research has underscored the importance of organizational identification for employees and organizations alike. This research suggests that when employees identify with their organization they show higher work performance, they are more likely to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors such as voicing constructive suggestions or helping coworkers, they are more satisfied with their job, and they are less likely to quit (Blader and Tyler, 2009; Dukerich et al., 2002; Van Dick et al., 2006; for a meta-analysis, see Riketta, 2005).

Although existing research on organizational identification has provided important insights, several scholars have noted that it has focused too narrowly on one aspect of identification, namely the strength of individuals' identification with their organization (Dukerich et al., 1998; Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Pratt, 2000). However, the danger of this approach is that it may overlook important aspects of identity-related dynamics and thus provide an incomplete understanding of organizational identification (Elsbach, 1999). Indeed, organizations are multi-faceted entities characterized by a wide array of goals, interests and activities (Ashforth et al., 2014). Moreover, given the growing pace and dynamics in organizations' environments, the complexity of organizations is steadily increasing (Cascio, 2012). It may thus be an oversimplification to expect employees to have the same feelings toward various characteristics of their organization; by contrast, organizations often evoke contradictory responses in their members who may feel torn

between conflicting impulses (Pratt, 2000). For example, employees of a leading consumer electronics firm may be proud of their organization's innovativeness and largely define themselves by it, while at the same time, they might be repelled by the poor conditions of the workers who manufacture the products. Relatedly, members of a prestigious symphony orchestra may be attracted to their organization's musical excellence yet, simultaneously, feel deterred by the orchestra's economic constraints that demand sacrifices for artistic ethos and idealism (e.g. staging a more commercial repertoire; see also Glynn, 2000).

Building on this observation, we posit that although the *strength* of individuals' identification with their organization is an important aspect of identity-based processes, it is equally important to consider a second dimension, namely the *consistency/ambivalence* in a person's identification. Our perspective mirrors recent discussions in the field that an expanded perspective, considering organizational and ambivalent identification, is important as it can 'provide a more complete picture of a person's identity as derived from the employing organization' (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004: 18; see also Pratt, 2000). An initial study provided support for differentiating between these two dimensions. It showed that organizational and ambivalent identification are empirically related but unique forms of identification and that organizational and ambivalent identification are the most common types of identification in organizational settings (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004).

Building on this distinction, there are two important next steps in the literature: (a) to yield a firmer understanding of what triggers ambivalent identification and (b) to examine how ambivalent identification may affect important employee outcomes. Indeed, as Ashforth and colleagues (2014) noted, given that ambivalence is a common aspect of organizational life, it is a central shortcoming that the factors that cause ambivalence and the effects of ambivalence on employees' behaviors are still poorly understood. The present study seeks to address these two points. Specifically, by integrating organizational identification theory with recent conceptual work on employees' regulatory focus (Johnson et al., 2010; Kark and Van Dijk, 2007), we argue that employees' promotion and prevention focus may be important and differential antecedents of organizational and ambivalent identification. Moreover, we examine how ambivalent identification may interact with organizational identification and affect employees' motivation to engage in organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Figure 1 depicts our conceptual model.

By studying these dynamics, the present study extends prior research in several important ways. First, although ambivalent identification is a common phenomenon in organizations (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Pratt, 2000), extant work on this variable has largely remained conceptual or qualitative in nature. Our study is among the first to empirically examine this variable and with it the expanded perspective on organizational identification. In fact, it is the first study to examine whether and how ambivalent identification affects important employee behaviors – that is, whether this variable is relevant for understanding key employee outcomes. Hence, we believe that our study provides an important test for the nascent study of ambivalent identification (and the expanded model of identification), may move this novel variable beyond the conceptual stage, and may help to establish it in empirical studies.

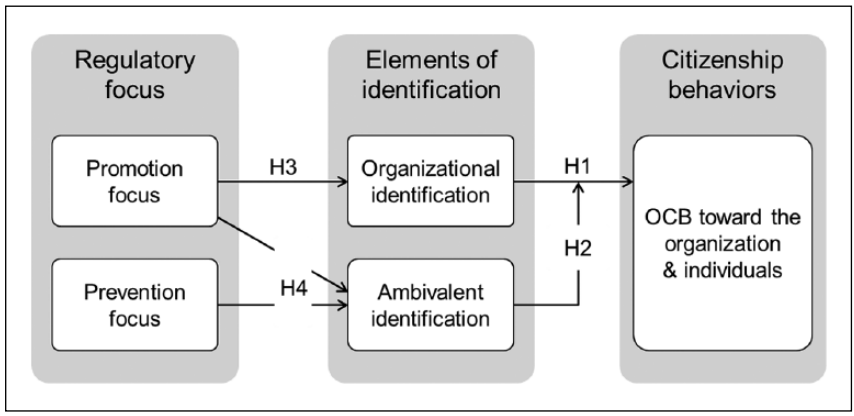

Figure 1. Hypothesized model linking regulatory focus, elements of identification and citizenship behaviors.
OCB = organizational citizenship behavior.

Second, our study provides a test of whether an expanded approach to organizational identification can indeed effectively address some of the limitations of prior, somewhat narrow, considerations of identification. Indeed, as evidenced by meta-analytic studies, unidimensional identity models may not fully represent the dynamics of organizational identification as there are, for instance, considerable degrees of fluctuation and not always significant relationships between employees' identification and citizenship behaviors (Riketta, 2005). Yielding a firmer understanding of the relation between identification and OCB is important as this link has become an integral part of influential accounts in the organizational domain, including the group engagement model (Blader and Tyler, 2009), the transfer model of organizational identification (Van Dick et al., 2007), and the self-concept theory of charismatic leadership (Shamir et al., 1993). Moreover, from a managerial perspective, the link between organizational identification and OCB is important as OCB is one of the central indicators of employees' work performance (Robbins and Judge, 2012). Indeed, as recent studies suggest, OCB is an important factor for the viability and success of organizations; organizations with low OCB tend to be less productive, less innovative and consequently less profitable than organizations where OCB is high (Podsakoff et al., 2009).

Third, our study also contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that foster or reduce feelings of ambivalent organizational identification in the first place. To date, identity theory and research have largely focused on contextual antecedents of ambivalent and organizational identification such as organizational prestige, organizational distinctiveness, intra-role conflict and organizational support/obstruction (e.g. Gibney et al., 2011; Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Yet, as theories of ambivalent identification evolve, it seems important to also examine how individual differences may contribute to a sense of ambivalence in order to achieve a more complete understanding of this key element of identification. Indeed, as identity researchers have recently stated, it is surprising how little we know about the effects of individual

differences on employees' sense of identification (Ashforth et al., 2013). Specifically, although it has been suggested that people may differ in 'their propensity to identify with social objects' (Glynn, 1998: 238), we still lack a clear understanding of which individual differences may influence ambivalent and organizational identification. Thus, by examining the links between regulatory focus and ambivalent/organizational identification, our study does not only shed light on how motivational processes may affect individuals' propensity to identify, it also provides important insights for identity theory into whether and how individual-level predictors (and not just contextual factors) may shape employees' identification with their organization.

In the following paragraphs, we first focus on the proposed relationships between organizational/ambivalent identification with OCB. We then turn to the links of regulatory focus and organizational/ambivalent identification. Indeed, one may argue that only if we find that organizational and ambivalent identification jointly predict OCB (and thus are theoretically and practically relevant to understand employee behaviors) it becomes more important to also discuss and examine potential antecedents.

Organizational identification and organizational citizenship behavior

Organizational identification involves a strong sense of connectedness with the group, and highly identified individuals regard the self and their organizations as overlapping entities (Giessner, 2011). Organizational identification thus goes beyond the status of being a group member. Successes and failures of the group are perceived as being one's own, and strongly identified individuals 'are likely to consider those behaviors that benefit the organization as also benefiting themselves' (Dukerich et al., 2002: 511). Based on these dynamics, it is a key notion of the social identity framework that organizational identification fosters individuals' motivation to engage in group-oriented actions (Haslam, 2004). These behaviors foster the prosperity of the group, which, in turn, elevates one's own self-perception (Schuh et al., 2012). In the organizational setting, OCBs can be regarded as prototypes of group-oriented behaviors (Van Knippenberg, 2000). These behaviors effectively contribute to the success and functioning of the group; however, they are costly to the individual employee. For example, if employees engage in OCBs, such as taking on higher workloads or supporting fellow team members, they likely help the organization to perform better. However, these employees will have less time and resources to focus on their own interests. Thus, employees who weakly identify with their organization should be less likely to engage in these group-oriented behaviors as they do not see the group as an important part of their self. In contrast, employees who strongly identify with their organization feel a strong connection with the group. If the group performs well, it will positively reflect on them. Thus, highly identified employees should be particularly motivated to engage in group-oriented citizenship behaviors. We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Organizational identification is positively related to OCB.

The moderating role of ambivalent identification

To date, theories and empirical studies on identity processes in organizations have primarily focused on the straightforward link between organizational identification and employees' group-oriented behaviors. However, in doing so, prior studies have overlooked more recent conceptual developments toward a better understanding of how organizational identification may be affected by the increased complexity of organizational life (Elsbach, 1999; Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Pratt, 2000). Moreover, the traditional identity approach to organizational behavior has neglected a key insight of the psychological literature: that considering only the strength of an individual's sentiment toward an object does not fully capture how that person reacts toward this entity. Indeed, this unidimensional focus often results in inaccurate predictions of people's actual behavior (Conner and Armitage, 2008). To resolve this dilemma, social psychologists have argued that it is equally important to consider a second dimension that represents the *consistency* of people's beliefs, ranging from univalent to ambivalent (Thompson et al., 1995).

Ambivalence represents the degree to which a person has 'mixed feelings,' feels 'torn between conflicting impulses,' and feels 'pulled in different directions' (Ashforth et al., 2014: 1454). Specifically, ambivalence can be defined as an individual's simultaneous experience of positive and negative reactions toward an entity (Piderit, 2000). Whereas the concept has been established in many areas of research, it has only been gradually diffusing into the organizational literature. This is surprising given that it is a rare experience to be unequivocally positive or negative about all facets of a person, idea, or object – particularly in organizational settings (Ashforth et al., 2014). Moreover, ambivalence is a stable experience that is likely to prevail for months and years (Conner and Armitage, 2008).

Building on these observations, it has been argued that identity-based ties with an organization go beyond simple identification. The expanded model of organizational identification suggests that it is crucial to consider a second dimension that captures the consistency of a person's sense of identification (Elsbach, 1999). This dimension of ambivalent identification denotes the extent to which individuals experience contradictory thoughts and feelings toward their organization (Pratt, 2000). Specifically, employees with an ambivalent identification connect some aspects of the organization to their self-definition, whereas they also seek to separate and disconnect themselves from other aspects (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001; Pratt, 2000). The previous example of the symphony orchestra, where employees identify with some characteristics (its musical excellence) but feel deterred by others (its commercial orientation) illustrates this point. Moreover, as Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) noted, employees may not only experience ambivalent identification toward different aspects of the organization; they may also be ambivalent toward the same characteristic of the organization. For example, when it comes to cost-cutting, employees may identify with the organization's focus on efficiency but are repelled by the neglect of product quality.

Importantly, theoretical accounts suggest that both organizational identification and ambivalent identification are central dimensions of identity-based dynamics (Elsbach, 1999). Moreover, these dimensions are generally assumed to be related but distinct

(Pratt, 2000). An initial study (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004) supported this perspective and provided several noteworthy findings. First, according to factor analyses, organizational identification and ambivalent identification form distinct dimensions, which are moderately and negatively correlated ($r = -.41$). While the authors did not discuss this correlation, it appears plausible that employees who are ambivalent toward their organization and thus seek to differentiate themselves from certain aspects of it should also experience lower identification strength. For example, employees who are proud of their company but deterred by the working conditions in its manufacturing plants may not only feel more ambivalent but also experience a lower level of overall identification based on their partly negative sentiments. Second, focusing on contextual antecedents, the authors predicted and found differential effects for organizational and ambivalent identification. Specifically, the study showed that identity incongruence (i.e. conflicting organizational values and goals) and intra-role conflict (i.e. incompatible demands within a work role) were positively related to ambivalent identification. In contrast, these variables did not predict organizational identification. Third, the authors also examined the prevalence of different forms of identification in organizations. They found that organizational and ambivalent identification are the two most common forms and significantly more common than other dimensions of the expanded model of identification, such as neutral identification (Elsbach, 1999). Summarizing their findings, Kreiner and Ashforth (2004: 20) concluded that 'ambivalence is not a rare existential experience in organizational contexts and . . . warrants further study.'

Whereas ambivalence is an interesting phenomenon in its own right, the relevance of this concept is based on its role in predicting behavior. Indeed, ambivalence has emerged as an influential concept in social psychology given its ability to account for the relatively weak link between people's attitudes and actions (Thompson et al., 1995). Prior research, for instance, has shown that ambivalence explains why citizens will vote for a different presidential candidate than they said they would (Lavine, 2001), why individuals will avoid a medical screening even though they endorse screening (Dormandy et al., 2006), or why individuals will fail at maintaining a low-fat diet despite their intentions to eat healthily (Armitage and Conner, 2000). These findings suggest that ambivalence can qualify the impact of individuals' beliefs on their subsequent behaviors.

Anecdotal accounts indicate that ambivalence is also relevant for understanding behavioral responses at work. For example, drawing on interviews with employees of a direct marketing organization, Pratt (2000) suggested that ambivalent identification may go along with a sense of paralysis that offsets employees' impetus for activities that benefit the organization. In a similar vein, Kreiner and Ashforth (2004: 4) noted that individuals who experience ambivalent identification may be 'reluctant to go above and beyond the required level of job performance.' Regrettably, no prior study in the organizational domain has built on this lead by providing a theoretical account, let alone empirically tested the proposed relations. In the present study, we base our analysis of the influence of ambivalent identification on two theoretical considerations.

First, theories of self-concept clarity posit that individuals with a consistently defined sense of self strive to express and validate their self-view (Campbell et al., 1996). Because they are confident and clear about who they are, these individuals are likely to engage in behaviors that demonstrate the cornerstones of their self-perception (Setterlund

and Niedenthal, 1993). Compared with individuals with less clearly defined self-concepts, they are more secure about their true goals and convictions, and, consequently, more determined in their actions (Bechtoldt et al., 2010). This sense of coherence and confidence allows them to focus on and act in line with their inner motivations (Conner and Armitage, 2008). Thus, for employees who strongly identify with their organization and experience little ambivalent identification, the organization is a central *and* clear part of their self-definition. Because they feel secure and confident about this part of their self-concept, these employees should be particularly likely to express their dedication to the group. They feel a strong connection to the organization and they are clear that behaviors that benefit the organization and its success will, in turn, benefit them and contribute to a more positive self-perception. Accordingly, if ambivalent identification is low, the effect of organizational identification on OCB should be particularly pronounced. In contrast, for employees who do not identify with their organization and experience little ambivalence, the organization is clearly not a defining part of how they see themselves. In other words, they are certain that the bond between themselves and the organization is weak and their motivation to engage in behaviors that benefit the group should be low. These employees are more likely to focus on their personal interests and they should thus be particularly unlikely to engage in group-oriented OCBs.

Second, and relatedly, a resource-based perspective suggests that ambivalent identification is likely to occupy considerable attention and energy (Kuhl and Beckmann, 1994). Because they experience contradictory and conflicting impulses, individuals who are ambivalent need to devote substantial efforts to determine how to act (Thompson et al., 1995). Indeed, ambivalence is generally described as uncomfortable or even agonizing (Pratt, 2000) and individuals need to dedicate psychological resources toward coping with this aversive experience (Ashforth et al., 2014). Specifically, ambivalent identification is likely to make employees more hesitant, less determined and less persistent (Kuhl and Beckmann, 1994), and it detracts attention and resources from acting in line with their inner goals and motivations (Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989). Thus, employees who identify with their organization but also feel a sense of ambivalence will have less resources and energy to act in line with their group-oriented motivation and to engage in group-oriented behaviors. Parts of their resources will be occupied and diverted by their need to deal with the undesired state of ambivalent identification. Hence, they will have less energy to initiate and maintain citizenship behaviors. In contrast, employees who experience low ambivalent identification have more resources available to act in line with their true motivation. They do not need to cope with the conflicting impulses associated with ambivalent identification and it is easier for them to determine how to act. Accordingly, the link between organizational identification and citizenship behaviors should be more pronounced when employees do not feel ambivalent toward their organization. In summary, we predict:

> *Hypothesis 2*: Ambivalent identification moderates the positive relationship between organizational identification and OCB, such that this relationship is stronger for employees who experience low ambivalent identification compared to employees who experience high ambivalent identification.

Regulatory focus and organizational/ambivalent identification

If ambivalent identification affects important employee outcomes, it is also desirable to achieve a more complete understanding of what triggers ambivalence in the first place (Pratt, 2000). However, little is known about the antecedents of ambivalence in organizational identification – especially, about whether and how individual differences influence ambivalent identification. Two studies have examined antecedents of ambivalence in organizational identification. As mentioned above, Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) found that identity incongruence and intra-role conflict predicted ambivalent identification but not organizational identification. More recently, Gibney and colleagues (2011) found that ambivalent identification was related to organizational obstruction (i.e. beliefs that the organization hinders employees from achieving their goals), whereas organizational identification was related to organizational support.

Recent conceptual work suggests that motivational processes, especially self-regulation, may offer a promising route for understanding individual differences in employees' attachment to their organization (Johnson et al., 2010; Kark and Van Dijk, 2007). This perspective posits that central aspects of employees' identification such as internalization, compliance and group-oriented behaviors require self-regulatory processes (Johnson et al., 2010). To date, this work has focused on how employees' regulatory focus may predict different forms of organizational commitment (i.e. affective, continuance and normative commitment) and largely remained conceptual. For example, Kark and Van Dijk (2007) proposed a positive link between employees' promotion focus and affective commitment and a second positive link between employees' prevention focus and continuance and normative commitment. Relatedly, Johnson et al. (2010) presented a comprehensive model relating employees' regulatory focus and commitment to different levels (e.g. commitment to the organization versus to the supervisor). We seek to advance this emerging perspective by extending it to the domain of organizational identification and by providing an empirical test.

Regulatory focus theory describes how people represent and seek to achieve goals (Higgins, 1997). The theory has received strong attention and support in organizational research (Lanaj et al., 2012). At its core, it posits two distinct modes of self-regulation. First, it posits a promotion focus that is sensitive to the presence and absence of positive outcomes. This regulatory focus motivates people to concentrate on desired end-states and seeks to approach them. In contrast, the second self-regulatory mode, prevention focus, is sensitive to the presence and absence of negative outcomes. It motives people to focus on non-desired end-states and seeks to avoid them. Prior research indicates that people differ in the degree to which they use promotion and/or prevention strategies and that these differences are stable over long periods of time (Elliot and Thrash, 2010).

An integration of regulatory focus and identity theory suggests that a sense of identification may largely be consistent with an approach-orientation. Indeed, organizational identification is fueled by employees' desire to achieve a positive outcome, namely to enhance one's self-perception based on this group membership (Hogg, 2001). Employees identify more strongly with their organization if the group status is high and if they

perceive that the group-membership provides them with benefits and rewards (Haslam, 2004). In addition, employees' identification with their organization is stronger when they perceive an overlap in their personal and their organizations' values and goals (Pratt, 2000). Values and goals are desirable end-states that employees and organizations seek to achieve and are thus in line with an approach-orientation (Lanaj et al., 2012). As individuals with a promotion focus are sensitive to such rewards, ideals and approach-oriented outcomes, we expect a positive link between employees' promotion focus and their identification with the organization:

Hypothesis 3: Employees' promotion focus is positively related to organizational identification.

Ambivalent identification, in contrast, denotes an ambiguous stance toward the organization (Elsbach, 1999). Although ambivalent employees identify with some aspects of the organization, they are also aware of aspects that they personally reject (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). Based on this dual nature, employees who experience ambivalence are attentive to characteristics of the organization that they see as desirable (Higgins, 1997). In line with the reasoning in the previous paragraph, a promotion-oriented motivation may enhance the likelihood of detecting such positive elements. However, employees with an ambivalent identification are also aware of undesired aspects of the organization, such as the fact that they need to stage a commercial yet less artistic composition. From a regulatory perspective, this awareness of unfavorable aspects aligns with a prevention orientation. Employees who are high in prevention focus are particularly sensitive to undesired outcomes (Lanaj et al., 2012). In fact, such employees should be more aware and react more strongly to aspects of the organization that they reject. Hence, this awareness of undesired and avoidance-oriented aspects, paired with an awareness of positive and approach-oriented elements, may contribute to an ambivalent stance toward the organization. We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4: Employees' promotion focus and prevention focus are positively related to ambivalent identification.

Overview of studies

To test our hypotheses we conducted two studies, a scenario experiment and a field study. As methodologists have noted, a combination of different research methods can bolster the confidence in empirical findings (Chatman and Flynn, 2005). Specifically, this approach has the advantage of combining high internal validity (experiment) and high external validity (field study). In Study 1, the experiment, we first sought to test whether ambivalent identification is relevant to understand employee outcomes and we focused on Hypotheses 1 and 2. Owing to the scenario nature of this study, we were not able to capture regulatory focus as an antecedent of organizational/ambivalent identification. In Study 2, the field study, we aimed to replicate the findings of Study 1 and to test the full hypothesized model including the proposed antecedents and outcomes of ambivalent identification (i.e. Hypotheses 1–4).

Study 1

Participants and design

Two hundred and six employees participated in this study. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (organizational identification: high vs. low) x 2 (ambivalent identification: high vs. low) between-subject design. To reach employees from a broad spectrum of industries and occupations, we recruited participants through Amazon Mturk, an online panel that is valid and commonly-used for experimental studies (Berinsky et al., 2012). The survey was restricted to employed participants from the USA. We excluded seven participants because they provided incomplete data, resulting in a final sample of 199 employees. Seventy-one participants were women (36%), the average age was 32.8 years (SD = 9.6), and the average work experience was 12.6 years (SD = 8.6). Participants worked in a wide range of sectors with the most frequent ones being information technology (24%), consumer products (10%) and public administration (9%).

Procedure and materials

We invited participants to take part in a study on 'behaviors at work.' After reading and agreeing to the consent form, we introduced participants to the description of a workplace situation. We asked them to imagine that they were actual employees in the described situation and to answer all questions with this idea in mind. As valid experimental procedures with respect to both organizational identification and ambivalence do not exist, we ensured that our manipulations were as close as possible to the meaning and content of the definition and established measure by Kreiner and Ashforth (2004). This approach allowed us to introduce participants to experimental conditions that are similar to the items that can be used in field research, thus fostering a high degree of consistency between the experiment and Study 2. The scenario asked participants to imagine that they were managers in a company called 'Duran Paints.' Thereafter, the organizational identification manipulation was introduced. In the *high organizational identification* condition, participants read:

> Thinking about your time working for this company, you realize that you strongly identify with it. When someone praises the company, it feels like a personal compliment to you. In fact, you see the company's successes as your successes. And when someone criticizes the company, it feels like a personal insult.

In the *low organizational identification* condition, the description stated:

> Thinking about your time working for this company, you realize that you don't really identify with it. When someone praises the company, it doesn't feel like a personal compliment to you. In fact, you don't see the company's successes as your successes. And when someone criticizes the organization, it doesn't feel like a personal insult.

Next, participants were introduced to the manipulation of ambivalent identification. In the *high ambivalent identification* condition, participants read:

> You also realize that you have mixed feelings about the company. At times, you feel torn between both loving and hating the company. Moreover, you sometimes feel torn between being proud and being embarrassed to belong to the company.

In the *low ambivalent identification* condition, the description stated:

> You also realize that you don't have mixed feelings about the company – in fact, your feelings about the company are quite clear. You never feel torn between loving and hating the company. Moreover, you never feel torn between being proud and being embarrassed to belong to the company.

Measures

After reading one of the four scenarios, participants answered the manipulation checks and dependent measures. To examine whether participants correctly read the manipulation of organizational identification, we asked, 'According to the description, do you identify with the company?' (yes/no). To check whether they read correctly the manipulation of ambivalent identification, participants were asked, 'According to the description, do you have mixed feelings about the company?' (yes/no). We then presented the dependent measures to the participants. We measured the two established forms of OCB – citizenship behaviors directed toward the benefits of the organization (OCBO) and citizenship behaviors directed toward the benefits of coworkers, that is, individuals (OCBI; Marinova et al., 2010). To assess OCBO, we used Morrison and Phelps' (1999) 10-item scale. Sample items are: 'I often try to institute new work methods that are more effective for the organization' and 'I often make constructive suggestions for improving how things operate within the organization' ($\alpha = .96$). To measure OCBI, we applied the seven-item scale by Van Scotter and Motowidlo (1996). Sample items include: 'I support or encourage a coworker with a personal problem' and 'I help colleagues without being asked' ($\alpha = .91$). Participants answered the items on seven-point scales from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*).

Both scales have been widely used in prior research (Podsakoff et al., 2009).

Results

Manipulation checks. To examine whether the manipulations had the intended effects, we conducted two two-factorial logistic regression analyses on the measures of organizational identification and ambivalent identification. These analyses allow for testing the main and interactive effects of the manipulations (Hayes, 2013). For the measure of organizational identification, we found that participants in the high organizational identification condition were more likely to identify with the organization than participants in the low organizational identification condition ($b = 2.67$, SE = .30, $p < .001$; 94% vs. 8%). The main effect of ambivalence and the interaction were not significant. For ambivalent identification, results showed that participants in the high ambivalence condition were more likely to report ambivalence than participants in the low ambivalence condition ($b = 2.00$, SE = .24, $p < .001$; 92% vs. 21%). The main effect of organizational identification and the interaction were not significant. In sum, both manipulations were successful.

Hypothesis tests. We conducted two 2 (organizational identification) × 2 (ambivalent identification) ANCOVAs on the measures OCBO and OCBI. In support of Hypothesis 1, organizational identification had a significant main effect on OCBO and on OCBI (OCBO: $F(1, 195) = 65.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$; OCBI: $F(1, 195) = 33.47$, $< .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$).

Moreover, results further showed a small main effect of ambivalent identification on OCBO ($F(1, 193) = 3.97$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$) but not on OCBI ($F(1, 193) = 0.58$, $p = .45$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$). Finally, both ANCOVAs indicated significant interactions of organizational and ambivalent identification (OCBO: $F(1, 195) = 14.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$; OCBI: $F(1, 195) = 4.73$, $< .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$; see Figure 2). In line with Hypothesis 2, simple effects analyses showed that the effects of organizational identification on OCBO and OCBI were stronger when ambivalent identification was low (OCBO: $F(1, 97) = 59.34$, $p < .001$; OCBI $F(1, 97) = 27.80$, $p < .001$) rather than high (OCBO: $F(1, 98) = 11.56$, $p < .01$; OCBI $F(1, 98) = 7.55$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

Consistent with the idea that the sense of identity that individuals develop vis-a-vis their organization goes beyond unidimensional ties based on organizational identification and can also involve conflicting impulses, we found that ambivalent identification and organizational identification interacted in predicting employees' citizenship behavior. Specifically, the positive effect of organizational identification on OCBO and OCBI was considerably stronger when ambivalence was low rather than high. These findings are important as they provide first evidence for whether and how ambivalent identification can influence key employee outcomes and thus provide support for an expanded perspective on organizational identification.

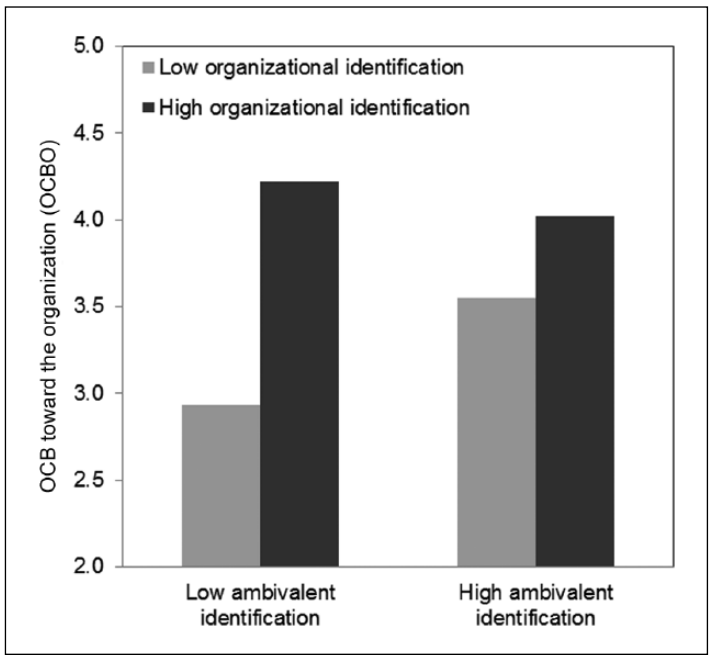

Figure 2a. Interaction between organizational identification and ambivalent identification on organizational citizenship behavior toward the organization (Study 1).

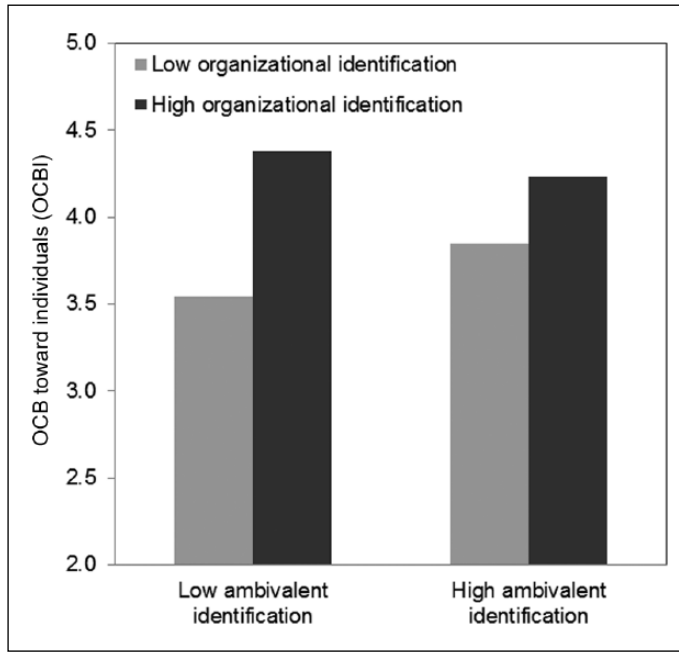

Figure 2b. Interaction between organizational identification and ambivalent identification on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) toward individuals (Study 1).

However, the findings of Study 1 need to be considered in light of two limitations. First, despite its advantage of providing causal evidence, the realism of a scenario experiment is relatively low. Moreover, as noted earlier, Study 1 only focused on the effects of ambivalent identification but did not provide insights on its antecedents. To address these two points, we conducted a field study involving participants from a wide range of organizational and occupational backgrounds and testing the full hypothesized model.

Study 2

Participants and procedures

Our sample consisted of 564 employees. Participants were recruited via Wiso-Panel, an academic online data collection service in Germany that allows researchers to advertise their studies to potential participants. Recent research has demonstrated that this and similar services (e.g. study response in the USA) provide reliable means of collecting data (e.g. Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006). Initially, a random sample of 4045 employed individuals was invited via email to take part in the study. Individuals were informed that participation was anonymous and that the study examined 'relations between work-related attitudes and job behaviors.' Furthermore, they were told that the study consisted of two parts and that those who participated at Time 1 would be invited to the second part

three weeks later. Participants who completed both parts received loyalty points in the panel, which they could exchange for money. At Time 1, a total of 885 participants completed the questionnaire. The resulting response rate of 21.9% is in line with previous work using data collection services (Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006; Tepper et al., 2009). At Time 2, a total of 589 individuals completed the questionnaire, yielding a return response rate of 66.5% based on the responses of Time 1. This figure also aligns well with previous work (Tepper et al., 2009). We excluded 25 individuals from our analyses because they no longer worked in the same position. Hence, our final sample consisted of 564 employees. Two hundred and thirty-seven participants were women (42%), the average age was 41.9 (SD = 10.6) and the average work experience equaled 20.4 years (SD = 12.6). Participants worked in multiple sectors with the most frequent ones being healthcare (12%), public administration (7%) and IT (5%).

To reduce potential effects of common method variance that may inflate the core relationship in our study, the link between organizational identification and OCB, we separated these variables by time. The questionnaire at Time 1 captured organizational identification, ambivalent identification as well as promotion and prevention focus. At Time 2, participants answered the items on both dimensions of OCB and indicated whether they had changed their work positions since Time 1. We chose a three-week interval between Time 1 and Time 2 because shorter time lags may not sufficiently reduce influences that can inflate relations (e.g. memory effects). Conversely, a longer interval may increase the risk of respondent attrition and the influence of factors that may mask the proposed relations (e.g. changes in the work environment). A three-week interval balances these two effects and has been applied in previous studies (e.g. Tepper et al., 2009).

Measures

All scales were drawn from previous research. Items were translated into German and back-translated by two bilingual researchers to ensure translation equivalence. Participants answered the items on seven-point scales from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*).

Organizational identification. We measured this variable with Mael and Ashforth's (1992) six-item scale. Sample items are: 'When I talk about this organization, I usually say "we" rather than "they"' and 'This organization's successes are my successes' ($\alpha = .81$).

Ambivalent identification. In the ambivalence literature, two measures are widely applied: a direct measure that asks participants to indicate their ambivalence explicitly and an indirect measure that uses a formula to combine positive and negative reactions toward an object into a single measure (Conner and Armitage, 2008). As there is an ongoing debate about which measure is superior, we calculated our analyses based on both approaches. For the direct measure, we applied Kreiner and Ashforth's (2004) six-item measure of ambivalent identification. Sample items are: 'I have mixed feelings about my affiliation with this organization' and 'I feel conflicted about being part of this organization' ($\alpha = .92$).

To compute the indirect measure, we applied Thompson et al.'s (1995) formula, which is the most widely applied operationalization of the indirect approach (Conner and Armitage, 2008). The formula defines ambivalence as:

$$\text{Ambivalence} = \left(P + N\right) / 2 - \left|P - N\right| \quad (1)$$

P denotes the positive and N the negative elements of ambivalence. Specifically, for P we used participants' responses to Mael and Ashforth's (1992) scale of organizational identification that we described above. For N we used participants' responses to Kreiner and Ashforth's (2004) six-item scale of disidentification. Sample items of this scale are: 'I want people to know that I disagree with how this organization behaves' and 'This organization does shameful things' ($\alpha = .86$). This approach of measuring P and N is consistent with existing work on ambivalence (Conner and Armitage, 2008).

Organizational citizenship behavior. In line with Study 1, we measured OCBO and OCBI with the scales by Morrison and Phelps' (1999; $\alpha = .90$) and Van Scotter and Motowidlo (1996; $\alpha = .95$), respectively.

Promotion and prevention focus. We used two five-item scales based on Lockwood et al. (2002) to measure promotion and prevention focus. Sample items are: 'In general, I am focused on achieving positive outcomes in my life' (promotion; $\alpha = .68$) and 'I am more oriented toward preventing losses than I am toward achieving gains' (prevention; $\alpha = .78$).

Controls. Because age and gender can affect employee motivation, identification and OCB we controlled for these variables (Johnson and Ashforth, 2008; Kidder, 2002).

Results

Nonresponse analyses. We conducted two sets of analyses to explore whether our data were affected by nonresponse bias. First, we examined whether respondents differed from individuals from the panel who were invited to participate but did not take part. For this purpose, we received demographic information from the panel provider on age, gender and level of education. The analyses showed that respondents and nonrespondents did not differ on any of these variables. Second, we explored whether the dropout between Time 1 to Time 2 occurred randomly or whether it depended on participants' characteristics. To this end, we assessed the same three variables as for our first nonresponse analysis. Additionally, we were able to compare respondents and nonrespondents regarding the model variables measured at Time 1. The analyses showed that respondents and dropouts did not differ significantly on any of these variables. We concluded that our data were not affected by nonresponse bias.

Confirmatory factor analyses. To evaluate the distinctiveness of our model variables we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs). Results showed that our six-factor measurement model acceptably fit the data ($\chi^2 = 1542.27$, d.f. = 673;

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations of Study 2.

Variables	*M*	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Age	41.91	10.63	–								
2. Gender[a]	0.42	0.49	–.06	–							
3. Promotion focus	5.10	1.13	–.07	.01	–						
4. Prevention focus	4.00	1.48	–13***	.10*	.13	–					
5. Organizational identification	4.72	1.24	.02	–01	.39***	.10*	–				
6. Ambivalent identification –direct measure	2.50	1.60	–.04	.04	.01	.32***	–.12**	–			
7. Ambivalent identification –indirect measure	0.43	1.82	–.03	–.02	–.11**	.25***	–.29***	.75***	–		
8. OCB toward the organization	5.05	1.17	.01	.00	.49***	.01	.44***	–.03	–.12**	–	
9. OCB toward individuals	5.75	0.91	.09*	–.03	.29***	.01	.28***	–.11**	–.23***	.53***	–

N = 564 employees; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; OCB = organizational citizenship behavior.
[a]0 = man. 1 = woman.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. two-tailed.

Comparative Fit Index [CFI] = .95; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation [RMSEA] = .05). We compared this model with four alternative models – a one-factor model combining all six variables into one factor and three five-factor models: one combining organizational and ambivalent identification, one combining OCBO and OCBI, and one combining promotion and prevention focus while the remaining scales in each case built individual factors. All four alternative models fit the data significantly worse than the measurement model. The best fitting alternative model was the five-factor model that combined OCBO and OCBI ($\chi^2 = 2961.83$, d.f. = 678; CFI = .86; RMSEA = .08; $\Delta\chi^2 = 1578.74$, $p < .001$).

Descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations are presented in Table 1. As can be seen in the table, both measures of ambivalent identification were highly correlated ($r = .75$, $p < .001$).

Hypotheses tests. To test our hypotheses, we conducted hierarchical regression analysis. The results for the direct and indirect measure of ambivalent identification were similar. Tables 1 and 2 present the detailed results for both measures. Moreover, for one of the measures, the direct measure, we describe the results in detail in the text:

First, in support of Hypothesis 1, we found that organizational identification was significantly related to OCBO ($b = .36$, SE = .05, $p < .001$) and OCBI ($b = .17$, SE = .04, $p < .001$). Next, we tested the proposed interaction of organizational and ambivalent identification. The interaction term was significant for OCBO ($b = –.08$, SE = .04, $p < .05$) and for OCBI ($b = –.10$, SE = .04, $p < .01$). In line with Hypothesis 2, the simple slope test revealed that the relation between organizational identification and OCBO was stronger for employees who experienced low ambivalent identification ($b = .44$, SE = .04, $p < .001$) than for those reporting high ambivalence ($b = .27$, SE = .06, $p < .001$). Similarly, the simple slope test showed that the relation between organizational

Table 2. Regression coefficients for the relationships between organizational and ambivalent identification with organizational citizenship behavior (Study 2).

	OCB toward the organization		OCB toward individuals	
	b	SE	*b*	SE
Model 1: Direct measure of ambivalent identification				
Intercept	5.04***	.05	5.77***	.05
Age	.03	.04	.09*	.04
Gender[a]	.00	.08	–.07	.07
Promotion focus	.46***	.05	.20***	.04
Prevention focus	–.08	.04	.01	.04
Org. ident. (OI)	**.36*** **	**.05**	**.17*** **	**.04**
Amb. ident. (AI)	.04	.04	–.07	.04
OI × AI	**–.08***	**.04**	**–.10****	**.04**
R^2	.33***		.15***	
ΔR^2 of interaction	.01*		.02**	
Model 2: Indirect measure of ambivalent identification				
Intercept	5.01***	.06	5.76***	.05
Age	.03	.04	.09*	.04
Gender[a]	.00	.08	–.06	.07
Promotion focus	–.08	.04	.20***	.04
Prevention focus	.46***	.05	.02	.04
Org. ident. (OI)	**.38*** **	**.05**	**.14*** **	**.04**
Amb. ident. (AI)	.11*	.05	–.11**	.04
OI × AI	**–.14****	**.05**	**–.09***	**.04**
R^2	.33***		.18***	
ΔR^2 of interaction	.01*		.01*	

N = 564 employees. OCB = organizational citizenship behavior; SE = standard error. All continuous variables were standardized prior to analysis.
[a]0 = man. 1 = woman.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. two-tailed.

identification and OCBI was strong at low levels of ambivalent identification (b = .27, SE = .05, p < .001) but not significant at high levels of ambivalent identification (b = .07, SE = 0.05, p = .13; see Figure 3).

To gain a more comprehensive view of the link between organizational identification and OCB, we compared employees high and low in ambivalence using a quartile split (Preacher et al., 2005). Results show that if ambivalence was low (for the lowest 25% of employees), organizational identification and OCBO/OCBI correlated at r = .52/.39 (p < .001). This equals a shared variance of 27% and 15%. In contrast, if ambivalent identification was high (for the highest 25% of employees), organizational identification and OCBO/OCBI correlated at only r = .34/.06 (p < .001/p = .43). The shared variance was 12% and 4%. Hence, for employees with low ambivalent identification, the shared variance between organizational identification and OCB was more than twice as strong as for employees with high ambivalence.

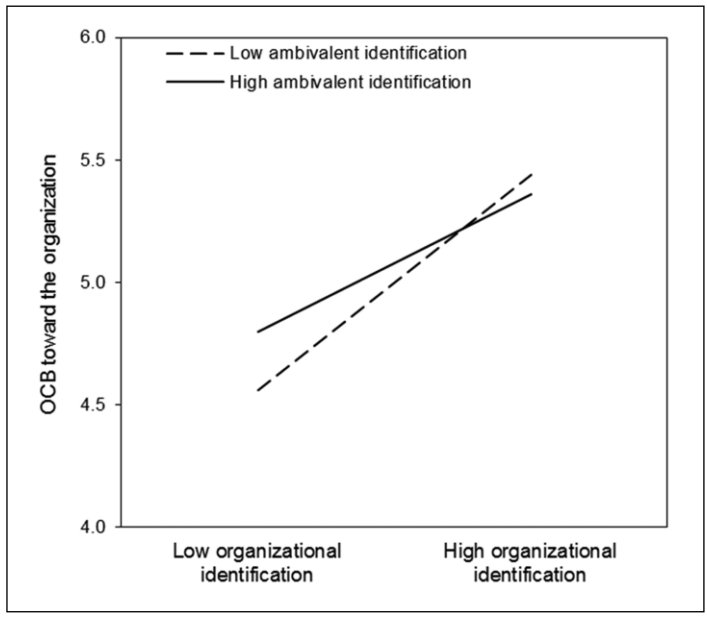

Figure 3a. Interaction between organizational identification and ambivalent identification on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) toward the organization (Study 2).

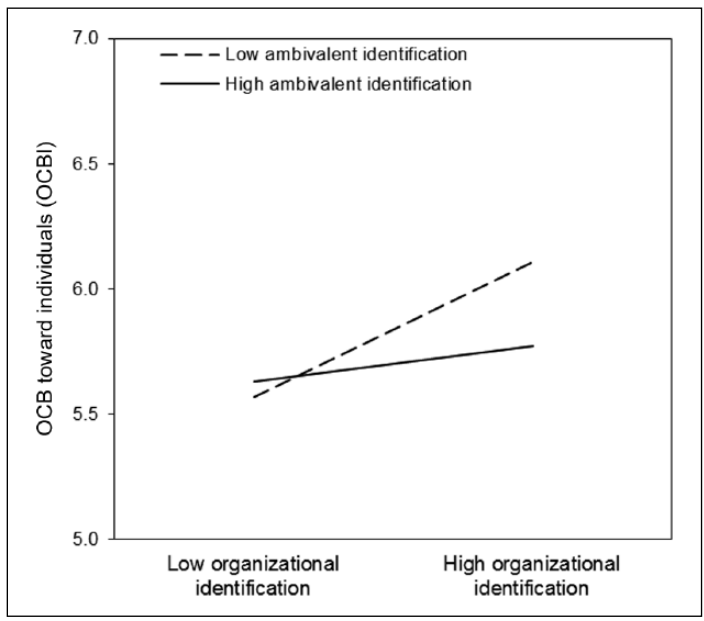

Figure 3b. Interaction between organizational identification and ambivalent identification on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) toward individuals (Study 2).

Finally, we examined the proposed links with promotion and prevention focus. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, promotion focus was significantly related to organizational identification (direct measure: $b = .48$, SE = .05, $p < .001$). Moreover, the results showed the expected relationship between prevention focus and ambivalent identification (direct measure: $b = .52$, SE = .07, $p < .001$; indirect measure: $b = .49$, SE = .08, $p < .001$). For promotion focus, unexpectedly, we found no relationship for the direct measure of ambivalence ($b = –.05$, SE = .07, $p = .23$) and a negative relationship for the indirect measure ($b = –.27$, SE = .08, $p < .001$). These results provide partial support for Hypothesis 4.

General discussion

Since the seminal work by Ashforth and Mael (1989), organizational identification has emerged as a central framework against which individuals' actions in organizations have been examined and understood. Conducting the present research we aimed to contribute to a better understanding of such identity-based dynamics. Specifically, we studied the interplay of the *strength* of organizational identification and the *consistency* of individuals' identification with their organization in predicting employees' citizenship behaviors. Moreover, we examined the relationship between employees' regulatory focus and their sense of identification. The results of this study have several theoretical and practical implications.

First, the findings suggest that the ties that individuals form around their membership in organizations are more complex than often assumed in organizational research. Specifically, these ties go beyond a unidimensional relationship based on organizational identification but also include a second facet of mixed feelings and conflicting impulses represented by ambivalent identification. Although conceptual work has emphasized the value of this expanded perspective, it has been largely left out of empirical studies. Being among the first studies to test and to provide empirical support for the expanded model of organizational identification, our study contributes to a more complete understanding of identification in organizations. With this, it may lay the foundation for future studies to embark on this nascent and important field of study. Indeed, as Kreiner and Ashforth (2004: 18) noted, the expanded perspective on organizational identification can offer 'a more thorough and complex approach to understanding the multiple paths by which a person might derive his or her identity vis-à-vis the organization' and thus contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of identification in organizations.

Second, the present results contribute to a deeper understanding of the manner and extent to which employees' actions are a function of their organizational identification. As such, the findings qualify prior theoretical accounts regarding the link between individuals' organizational identification and their subsequent citizenship behaviors. As hypothesized, we found that the relationship between organizational identification and OCB was considerably stronger when ambivalent identification was low. For those employees who experienced little ambivalent identification (i.e. the lower quartile), organizational identification accounted for more than twice as much variance in OCB than for employees with high ambivalent identification (i.e. the highest quartile).

These findings are important because they provide first evidence for the idea that ambivalent identification has an impact on key employee behaviors. The results thus give credit to recent calls for a closer examination of ambivalent identification (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004) and indicate an important addition to the common understanding of organizational identity. Indeed, the findings suggest that the model of organizational identification should additionally take into account the idea that individuals may be inconsistent (i.e. ambivalent) in their sense of identification.

Third, our findings also contribute to emerging theories of ambivalent identification by offering novel insights into its antecedents. Specifically, by building on and extending recent conceptual work, our results support the idea that individual differences do indeed relate to ambivalent and organizational identification. In line with our hypotheses, we found that promotion focus was positively related to employees' identification with their organization. This finding is consistent with the idea that identification is largely an approach-oriented phenomenon grounded in a desire for a positive self-perception and an advancement of the group (Hogg, 2001). For ambivalent identification, the findings were more complex. As hypothesized, we found a positive link between prevention focus and ambivalent identification. However, we did not find support for the notion that promotion focus positively relates to ambivalent identification. Specifically, for the direct measure of ambivalence, we found no relationship with promotion focus; for the indirect measure of ambivalence, we even found a negative link between promotion focus and ambivalence. This finding is surprising and may indicate an interesting avenue for future research. One explanation could be that ambivalence is not a neutral but rather an aversive experience (Pratt, 2000). Indeed, it involves a sense of conflicting views and contradictory impulses, which people generally see as non-desirable (Van Sell et al., 1981). This would suggest that an avoidance-orientation may increase the susceptibility to ambivalent identification whereas an approach-orientation may be unrelated to or even decrease feelings of ambivalence.

Fourth, on a broader level, the present research also offers insights for the emerging study of ambivalence in general. Besides the moderating role that we predicted, we found that ambivalent identification showed relatively small relations with employees' behaviors. The average correlation with employees' citizenship behaviors was $r = -.12$. Prima facie, this may appear surprising as one might have expected a stronger correlation – comparable, for example, to the negative relation between role ambiguity and OCB (Van Sell et al., 1981). However, these links are in line with extant social psychological research that suggests that attitudinal ambivalence on its own is often not a very strong predictor of subsequent behavior (Conner and Armitage, 2008). Interestingly, when looking at other research on ambivalence in the organizational domain, the present results may point toward important avenues for future research. For example, Fong (2006) showed that emotional ambivalence had a positive effect on individuals' creativity. Comparing this and the present findings, it becomes evident that the consequences of ambivalence are complex, and that avoiding a sense of ambivalence may not always be beneficial. A key task for future research lies in the disentanglement of such seemingly contradictory results to help to understand and to effectively manage the dynamics of ambivalence in organizations.

Implications for practice

Organizations generally benefit from their employees' organizational citizenship – not least of all because of its direct impact on an organization's financial performance (Podsakoff et al., 2009). Hence, a natural implication of the present research is that managers should attempt to create an organizational environment that provides rich opportunities for employees to identify with it. Previous research has identified several measures that effectively address employees' organizational identification, including reducing the number of limited-term contracts and emphasizing the value of long-term work relationships, implementing decision processes that employees perceive to be fair, and using internal communication (e.g. the intranet) to keep employees informed about developments in the organization (see Haslam, 2004). Moreover, the present findings suggest that selecting employees with a promotion focus may be another effective way.

However, the central implications of the present study go beyond these recommendations. They suggest that focusing organizational identification might not result in the intended positive effects on OCB unless employees simultaneously experience low ambivalence. As such, management is advised not only to monitor and enhance employees' identification but to also pay attention to aspects that might lead employees into an ambivalent identification. Importantly, this approach seems to indicate an effective means to more sensitively and selectively allocate organizational resources. Following the Pareto principle, enhancing organizational identification may require an undue amount of resources if the level of identification among employees is already high (Cascio, 2012). Under these circumstances in particular, it may prove more beneficial to reallocate a fair proportion of resources to factors that might reduce ambivalence. Reducing contradictory demands (e.g. between multiple goals and values) seems to provide a central route for doing so (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). As our findings suggest, efforts invested in diminishing ambivalence may unleash the influence of existing organizational identification among employees and pay off in terms of higher levels of citizenship behavior.

Conclusion

Although having mixed feelings about an idea or object is a common experience, the notion of ambivalence has been largely neglected in research on organizational identification. Yet, in view of the increasing complexity of organizational life, it seems to be particularly crucial to consider this dimension. Building on the expanded model of organizational identification, the present study examined the antecedents and consequences of ambivalent identification and showed that this notion can significantly improve our understanding of identification in organizations. In view of our findings and their implications for theory and practice, we hope that our study will provide an impetus for future research to further explore the complex yet insightful concept of ambivalence and its effects on identity-based dynamics.

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