Psihologia Resurselor Umane, 10 (1), 2012, 57-69

ISSN: 1583-7327; http://www.apio.ro/pru

To be or not to be…identified. Explorations of students' (dis)identification in a Romanian university

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Abstract

The paper explores the way in which contextual and dispositional factors impact on students' development of identification and disidentification. We investigate these relations in one cross-sectional and one longitudinal study. The results indicate that need for identification moderates the impact of contextual variables upon disidentification and the transformation of ambivalent identification into disidentification. Based on these findings, the proposed guidelines for building an effective strategy to foster students' identification with their university follow two lines. The first one refers to the differential impact of policies on students, depending on their need for identification and initial level of organizational identification. The second targets the manipulation in strategy making of organizational level factors affecting identification, such as the incongruence of the organization's identity and organizational prestige.
Keywords: ambivalent identification, organizational identity incongruence, need for identification

Résumé

L'article explore la manière dont les facteurs contextuelle et personnel ont un impact sur le développement de l'identification et désidentification des étudiantes. Nous explorons ces relations dans une étude longitudinale et une enquête. Les résultats montrent que le besoin d'identification modérés l'impact des variables contextuelles sur désidentification, tant bien que la transformation de l'identification ambivalente dans désidentification. Sur la base de ces constatations, nous proposons deux lignes directrices proposées pour la construction d'une stratégie efficace pour favoriser l'identification des étudiantes avec leur université. La première se réfère à l'impact différencié des politiques sur les élèves, en fonction de leur besoin d'identification et le niveau initial de l'identification organisationnelle. La seconde vise la manipulation dans la stratégie des facteurs au niveau organisationnel affectant l'identification, tels que l'incongruité de l'identité de l'organisation et le prestige de l'organisation.
Mots-clés: identification ambivalente, incongruence d'identité organisationnelle, besoin d'identification

Rezumat

Articolul explorează modul în care factorii contextuali şi dispoziţonali afectează dezvoltarea identificării şi dezidentificării studenţţilor. Investigăm aceste relaţii într-un studiu longitudinal şi unul transversal. Rezultatele indică faptul că nevoia de identificare moderează impactul variabilelor contextuale asupra dezidentificării, precum şi transformarea identificării ambivalente în dezidentificare. Pe baza acestor rezultate propunem două direcţii de luat în calcul în elaborarea unei strategii eficiente pentru stimularea identificării studenţilor cu universitatea lor. Prima se referă la impactul diferenţial al politicilor asupra studenţilor, în funcţie de nevoia lor de iden-

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tificare şi de nivelul iniţial de identificare organizaţională. Al doilea vizează manipularea în cadrul strategiei a factorilor care afectează nivelul de identificare, cum ar fi incongruenţa identităţii organizaţiei şi prestigiul ei.

Cuvinte-cheie: identificare ambivalentă, incongruenţa identităţii organizaţionale, nevoia de identificare.

Introduction

Budget cuts in higher education currently affect universities world-wide. US proposes budget cuts that would reduce support for higher education by $89 billion over 10 years (Johnson & de Vise, 2010), while the UK spending review cuts 40% of the higher education budget, from £7.1billion to £4.2billion by 2014 (Richardson, 2010). These cuts push all universities towards a business, self-sustaining model of organizing. The endeavor to retain current students and keep a steady inflow of prospective students becomes more prominent (Lang, 2009; Shulruf, Hattie & Trumen, 2008). In this race, prestigious universities have a clear advantage. They attract higher numbers of candidates, and hence have a broader selection pool. Not only can they retain more students (Jamelske, 2009), but these students are also more engaged and committed to their education, and put in a higher effort (Sung &Yang, 2009). This results in better prepared professionals who will become more successful, which reflects back on the prestige of these universities and their competitiveness. The cornerstone process of this cycle is students' identification with their university.

Organizational identification is the perception of unity with or belonging to an organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), in this case, the university. The process of identification consists of a person defining themselves by the same attributes that they believe define the organization (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). Through organizational identification, organization members fulfil such psychological needs as safety, affiliation, self-enhancement, and self-actualization, while the organization gets members who are more likely to act in ways congruent with organizational goals and needs (Mills, Bettis, Miller & Nolan, 2005). In this case, identified students are more committed and find it more difficult to drop their studies, they work harder towards the collective goal (Curşeu, Janssen & Raab, 2012; Sung &Yang, 2009), and get more involved in altruistic and helping behaviors towards their peers (van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Furthermore, identified students have a stronger desire to participate in activities organized by the university and to demonstrate their identifications by wearing distinctive insignia or logos (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). After graduation, they tend to be more involved as alumni, both by financial (i.e., donations) and symbolic (i.e., positive advertising) contributions (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

However, the process of identification is complex because neither the individual nor the organization has a single identity or even consistency among identities (Mills et al, 2005). It does not suffice for a university to be perceived as a prestigious unit. For its members, the incongruent messages it sends with respect to who it is and what it stands for (e.g., messages tailored differently for various stakeholders, incongruence between formal policies and their implementation, etc) are also a capital element in their identification. This incongruence in the university's identity (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Pratt, 1998) can trigger ambivalent identification or even disidentification from its students.

Disidentification is "a self-perception based on (1) a cognitive separation between one's identity and one's perception of the identity of an organization, and (2) a negative relational categorization of oneself and the organization" (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001, pp. 393), while ambivalent identification is a dual state of both identification and disidentification with an organization.

Students who are disidentified with their university will act in opposition to the values and norms held by that unit. They will do anything to distance themselves behaviorally from that organization. Clearly, students' disidentification can be highly detrimental to universities in the current situation.

The current study is an investigation in the emergence of students' disidentification with their universities. In our exploration, we focus on two elements that universities can influence through their policies and strategies: their perceived prestige and their organizational identity incongruence, and on the moderating role of students' intrinsic need for identification in this relation.

Context for the study

Higher education institutions in post-communist countries represent a fast-changing yet underexplored terrain. The development of the higher education system the past 18 years in Romania is a typical example for Eastern European ex-communist countries (Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009). The communist regime had prohibited the existence of private higher education institutions. As a reaction to that, a large number of private universities appeared after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. Still, it is only in recent years (namely 2006) that Romania has started to develop a system that assesses the quality of teaching in these institutions (the ARACIS commission). Up until very recently (i.e., 2011), no national classification for them existed. In this context, research on higher education settings and dynamics has been more than scant.

Furthermore, there was no real need until recent years for research about students' dynamics. Several contextual factors contributed to this. First, students used to choose their university according to a desired profession and depending on the region in which they lived. These combined elements reduced the number of universities to choose between. More importantly, the baby boom of the 1980s secured constantly high number of applications. Therefore, universities did not need, until recently, to promote themselves: the number of applications was steady anyhow. Second, since transfers to other universities were rather rare, the need of students' retention was not a priority either. Third, alumni didn't play a role in their university; in fact, the relation of students with their university was broken after graduation.

However, all these conditions have undergone major shifts in the past years. Consequently, universities started to be proactive in their policies of student attraction and retention. Their current struggles in this respect resemble now the ones of their West-European and American counterparts (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009).Therefore, the findings of this study are relevant both for countries in which the business-model of universities is relatively recent, as well as in countries where it has a long tradition, given the current economic constraints all higher education units go through.

Literature

We started this paper by emphasizing the positive impact of university prestige on student identification. The first accounts on identification, coming from social identity theory, postulated that high status groups (i.e., prestigious organizations), trigger higher identification from their members (Tajfel, 1972). Being affiliated with a successful group provides individuals with an important way to establish and maintain a positive view of themselves. Therefore, prestigious organizations trigger more identification and reduce the probability of disidentification in their members, since it is more difficult not define yourself in a similar manner to a successful entity (Boroș, Curșeu & Miclea, 2011). Nevertheless, this motivation alone fails to explain why group members stick with their group (i.e., remain identified) even through bad times, when the group's negative image fails to enhance their self-esteem (Ellemers, Spears &Doosje, 1997).

Perceived organizational prestige is members' perception of what outsiders think of the organization. However, and more importantly, members experience the organization first-hand. They are aware of not only the organization's intended image or how others perceive it, but also of its identity. An organization's identity is its shared answer to the question 'who we are and what we stand for' (Boroș, 2009). It is the structure of the central, enduring and distinctive attributes that describe the organization (Albert &Whetten, 1985). These attributes can form a consistent, unitary image, and then the identity is defined as strong. Alternatively, an organization may send contradictory or mixed messages to its stakeholders regarding what it stands for and why it does so. In this case, the organization has an incongruent identity. Organizational identity incongruence can be caused either by organizations having multiple and sometimes conflicting identities (Pratt, 1998) or by a lack of alignment between image (what we say we stand for) and action (what our actions deem important for us as an organization).

As a consequence of this incongruence, members of the organization may have mixed attachments towards the organization. In other words, their identification becomes ambivalent. Ambivalent identification is a dual state of both identification and disidentification to an organization. It can take the form of identifying with certain dimensions or traits of the organization's identity or of simultaneous identification and disidentification with the same traits (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). The antecedents that can trigger ambivalent identification, are primarily the incongruence of the organization's identity (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004) and the negative image/prestige of the organization (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Based on the predictions of cognitive consistency theories (Heider, 1958; Festinger, 1957), ambivalent identification is not a cognitive state one can endure for long time, which means that one will try to find strategies to come to terms with it. However, this might be more difficult for students with a propensity to identify with social groups or organizations.

Although all individuals are at least somewhat receptive to identification (as a means of fostering a sense of belonging and self), individuals might differ in their propensity to identify with social objects (Glynn, 1998) — a propensity termed need for organizational identification (nOID). nOID is a desire to be 'imprinted upon' (Glynn, 1998:240) by an organization and receptivity to socialization, and is negatively associated with a desire for separateness from the organization. nOID is an individual disposition that tends to generalize across various personal, situational or organizational contexts. Individuals with a high need for organizational identification present a marked tendency to publicly identify themselves as organizational members so as to extend the self to incorporate the organization (Glynn, 1998). Unsurprisingly, need for organizational identification is positively associated with identification and negatively associated with disidentification (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). More importantly though, people who differ in their need for identification will react differently to similar situations (Boroș, Curșeu & Miclea, 2011). Hence, need for identification is a moderator of the external antecedents of identification.

Therefore, our assumption is that ambivalent identification is a transient state for group members only when it is associated with a low need for identification. In this case, ambivalent identification will in time transform into disidentification. For people who preserve a high need for identification, ambivalent identification will maintain over time, provided the external conditions remain stable, but its consequences will alter. A number of recent studies (Armstrong-Stassen, 2004; Doosje, Spears & Ellemers, 2002; Worchel & Countant, 2001) investigated how reactions to group status may be moderated by initial levels of identification and how the latter affects group perceptions and cognitions. As Social Identity Theory predicts, in the case of a high need for identification, threat to the group will be met in terms of collective behavior responses and group affirmation strategies (Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 2002). Hence, instead of disidentifying, these group members might try to act in order to improve the group status**.**

Building on these theoretical considerations, we propose three hypotheses. The first one looks into the effect of organizational identity incongruence on ambivalent identification, disidentification and identification, moderated by need for organizational identification. In this respect, we expect that:

Hypothesis 1a*. Need for organizational identification strengthens the positive impact of organizational identity incongruence on ambivalent identification.*

Hypothesis 1b*: Need for organizational identification weakens the positive impact of organizational identity incongruence on disidentification.*

Hypothesis 1c*: Need for organizational identification strengthens the negative relation between organizational identity incongruence and identification.*

Considering the same moderator, we then look into the impact of perceived organizational prestige on the three forms of identification and predict that:

Hypothesis 2a*: Need for organizational identification strengthens the negative impact of perceived organizational prestige on ambivalent identification.*

Hypothesis 2b*: Need for organizational weakens the negative impact of perceived organizational prestige on disidentification.*

Hypothesis 2c*: Need for organizational identification strengthens the positive impact of perceived organizational prestige on organizational identification.*

Finally, we explore the moderating role of initial need for identification from a temporal perspective, in order to explain contradictory results arguing whether ambivalent identification is a transient or permanent state (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). We argue that need for organizational identification moderates the development of ambivalent identification in such a way that: people with ambivalent identification and high need for identification will maintain their ambivalent identification over time, whereas those with ambivalent identification and low need for identification will become more disidentified in time. Hence, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 3a*: Need for organizational identification strengthens the development of ambivalent identification over time.*

Hypothesis 3b*: Need for organizational identification weakens the development of ambivalent identification in disidentification over time.*

Method and findings

In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted a cross-sectional and a longitudinal investigation. The cross-sectional investigation was carried out on a larger sample of students attending five different Schools of the university. Due to the type of this design, in study 1 we could only test hypotheses 1 and 2. Further on, to go more in-depth with our investigation, and to be able to study causality, we proceeded to a longitudinal study in one of the Schools. Study 2 tested the predictions of all three hypotheses. In the next section, we report the procedure and the results of each study.

Study 1. A cross-sectional investigation

Respondents and procedure

344 students from four different Schools: Psychology (117), Sociology (89), Geography (69), and Economics (69) filled in a question-

Table 1. Overview of the measures used in the study

Name	Nr. of items	Source	Response scale	Sample item	αCronbach
1.Organization identity incongruence	6 items	Kreiner&Ashforth, 2004	5-point.Likert scale	*My School sends mixed messages concerning what it cares about*	.85
2.Perceived organizational prestige	8 items	Mael&Ashforth, 1992	5-point.Likert scale	*People in my community think highly of this School*	.71
3.Need for organizational identification	5 items	Kreiner&Ashforth, 2004	5-point.Likert scale	*Without an organization to belong to, I would feel incomplete*	.67
4.Organizational identification	6 items	Mael&Ashforth, 1992	5-point.Likert scale	*When I talk about the School I attend, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they'*	.81
5.Organizational disidentification	6 items	Kreiner&Ashforth, 2004	5-point.Likert scale	*I have tried to keep the School I attend a secret from people I meet*	.86
6.Ambivalent identification	6 items	Kreiner&Ashforth, 2004	5-point.Likert scale	*I find myself being both proud and embarrassed to be a part of this School*	.75

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the variables employed in study 1

Scale	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1.Organization identity incongruence	2.16	x.79x	xx1xx	-.317**	-.267**	-.191**	.440**	.500**
2.Perceived organizational prestige	3.88	.57		1	.267**	.245**	-.411**	-.400**
3.Need for organizational identification	3.47	.76			1	.508**	-.276**	-.155**
4.Organizational identification	3.25	.83				1	-.220**	-.059
5.Organizational disidentification	1.31	.56					1	.497**
6.Ambivalent identification	1.95	.86						1

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01

naire assessing organizational identification and commitment. The respondents' age ranged between 19 and 49 (M=21.60, SD=2.62). 34 of them were males, and 297 females. They were chosen from all 4 study years: 33- 1st year, 147- 2nd, 62- 3rd and 102- 4th.

Measures

Identification with the organization (in our case, the School), as well as the antecedents of identification were measured by adapting to university settings several corresponding scales from the organizational studies literature. The sources of the scales, samples of items, as well as the alpha Cronbachs for each scale are reported in Table 1. All measures used a 1 to 5 Likert scale, in which 1 meant strong disagreement or very low fit with the personal situation, and 5 strong agreements or high fit with the personal situation.

Results

Table 2 gives a concise overview of the means, standard deviations and correlations between all variables included in this study. After inspecting these descriptive data and in order to avoid the multicollinearity effect, we

Table 3. Regression analyses for hypotheses 1 and 2 (study 1).

	Ambivalent identification		Organizational disidentification		Organizational identification	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
β Organization's identity incongruence	.42***	.42***	.32***	.32***	-.03	-.02
β Perceived organizational prestige	-.27***	-.27***	-.28***	-.28***	.10**	.11**
β Need for identification	.03	.03	-.11**	-.10**	.47***	.47***
β Interaction effect incongruence-need for identification		-.00		-.14***		.04
β Interaction effect prestige-need for identification		-.02		.11**		.07
Overall F model	52.33***	31.27***	45.80***	33.25***	42.21***	25.78***
Adjusted R^2	.31	.30	.28	.32	.27	.27
ΔR^2	.31	.00	.28	.04	.27	.00

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01
Note: all variables presented in these regressions were centered.

centered all variables included in the study. The centered variable is in fact the mean of the differences between each individual value taken by this variable and its average value.

As reported in Table 3, only hypotheses 1 b and 2 b received full support. Need for organizational identification (nOID) had a direct effect on both identification and disidentification, but not on ambivalent identification. However, it only moderated the effect of organizational identity incongruence on disidentification (H1b). Organizational identity incongruence had a direct positive relation with both disidentification and ambivalent identification.

Perceived organizational prestige had a direct significant impact on all three dependent variables. However, need for organizational identification only moderated the impact of perceived organizational prestige on disidentification (H2b).

Study 2. A longitudinal investigation

Respondents and procedure

128 students in Psychology at Babeş-Bolyai University were invited to participate in a panel study, as a part of their Research Practice module. The students belonged to all 4 study years (24 freshmen, 48 sophomores, 14—3rd year, and 42—4th year students), they were aged 18 to 28 (m=20.51), and most of them were females (11 males, 117 females). All 4 study years (the first year students are the only Bologna generation in the sample) completed 2 waves of questionnaires, one academic year apart. The final sample consisted of 52 subjects (2 males, 50 females), aged 19 to 24 (m=20.46). This was the sample considered for testing all our hypotheses. Their distribution on study years was: 32 freshmen (sophomores at wave 3), 13 sophomores (3rd year students at wave 3), and 7 3rd year students (seniors by wave 3). For each wave, the students were announced in advance when they would have to complete the questionnaire, and there were three occasions for each wave when they could come and complete the questionnaire.

Results

The descriptive statistics for the data obtained in study 2 are reported in Table 4. Once again, and now considering the small final sample, we centered all variables included in the study.

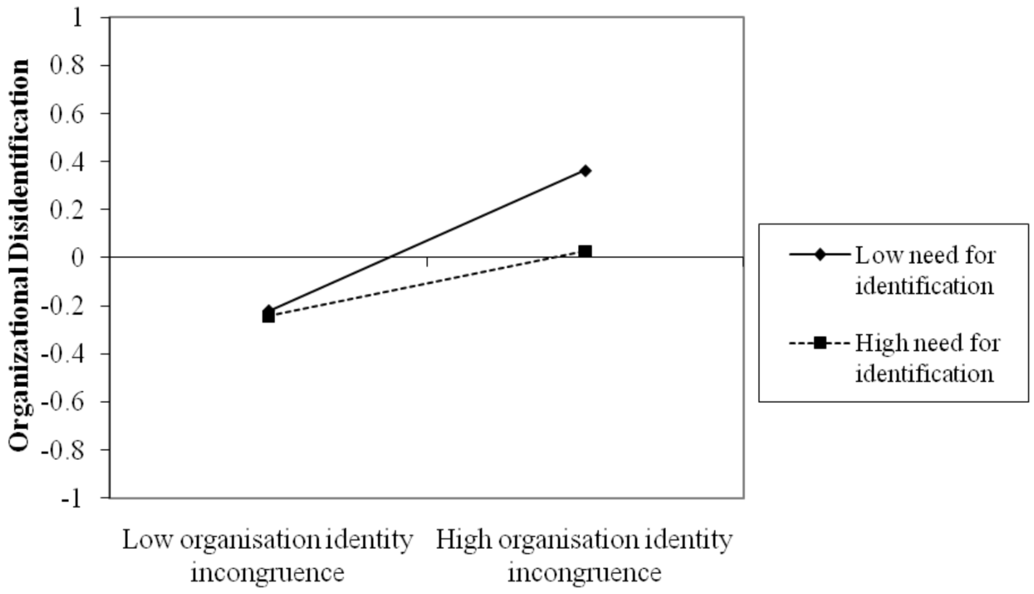
As reported in Tables 5 and 6, our data partially supported the proposed hypotheses. Need for organizational identification at time 1 (nOID1) had a direct impact upon all three dependent variables at time 2 (identification, disidentification and ambivalent identification). However, it only moderated the effect of organizational identity incongruence (time 1) on sub-

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the variables employed in study 2

Scale	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1.Organization identity incongruence at time 1	1.76	x.60x	xx1xx	-.375**	-.460**	-.080	.397**	.479**	.360**
2.Perceived organizational prestige at time 1	4.18	.40		1	.194	.300*	-.092	-.251	-.144
3.Need for organizational identification at time 1	3.57	.57			1	.342*	-.354*	-.073	.100
4.Organizational identification at time 2	3.42	.84				1	-.249	-.068	.023
5.Organizational disidentification at time 2	1.14	.25					1	.269	.355**
6.Ambivalent identification at time 1	1.72	.74						1	.603**
7.Ambivalent identification at time 2	1.61	.80							1

* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$

Figure 1. Interaction plot for the impact of need for identification and organization's identity incongruence upon organizational disidentification in (a) study 1 (cross-sectional) and (b) study 2 (longitudinal)



sequent disidentification (H1b). Organizational identity incongruence at time 1 also had a significant direct positive impact on ambivalent identification at time 2, but this relation was not strengthened by need for organizational identification (nOID1), as predicted in hypothesis 1a.

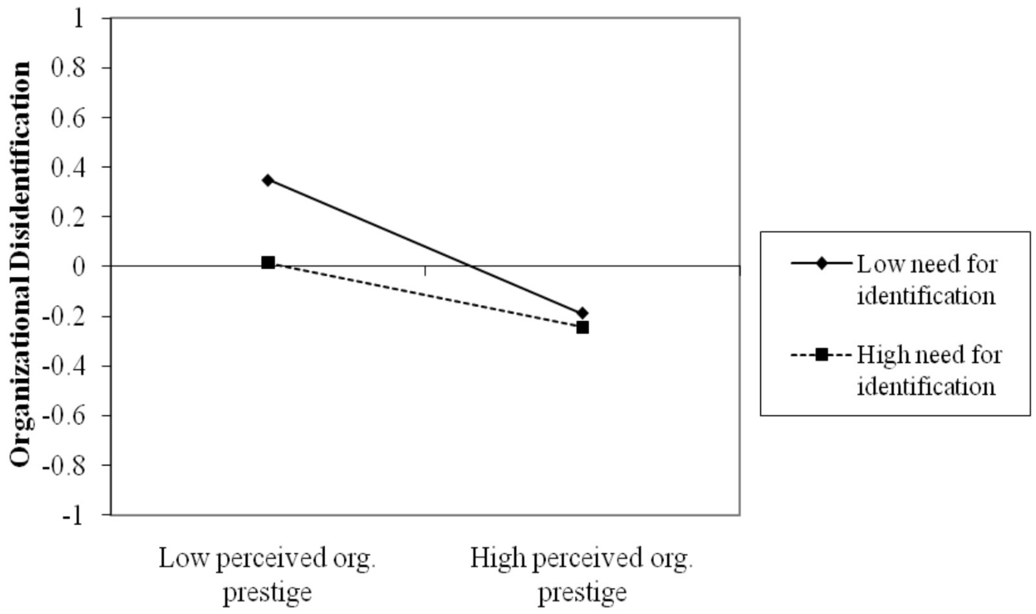
Perceived organizational prestige (time 1) had a direct significant impact on organizational identification (time 2). However, this effect was not strengthened by nOID1 in any of the cases (H2).

Table 5. Regression analyses for hypotheses 1 and 2 (study 2).

	Ambivalent identification		Organizational disidentification		Organizational identification	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
β Organization's identity incongruence	.50***	.44**	.32**	.09	.21	.27
β Perceived organizational prestige	-.01	-.01	.07	.09	.30**	.30**
β Need for identification	.33**	.29*	-.22	-.38***	.37**	.42***
β Interaction effect incongruence-need for identification		-.11		-.40***		.09
β Interaction effect prestige-need for identification		.03		.10		-.07
Overall F model	4.48***	2.78**	3.79**	5.10***	4.09**	2.58**
Adjusted R^2	.17	.15	.15	.28	.15	.13
ΔR^2	.21	.01	.20	.16	.20	.01

* $p<0.1$, ** $p<0.05$, *** $p<0.01$
Note: all variables presented in these regressions were centered.

Figure 2. Interaction plot for the impact of need for identification and perceived organizational prestige upon organizational disidentification in (a) study 1 (cross-sectional) and (b) study 2 (longitudinal)



Furthermore, our data supported the hypothesis that ambivalent identification is only a transient state for people with low need for identification, and will in time transform into disidentification, whereas people with high need for identification, unable to disidentify, will remain in a state of ambivalent identification (H3).

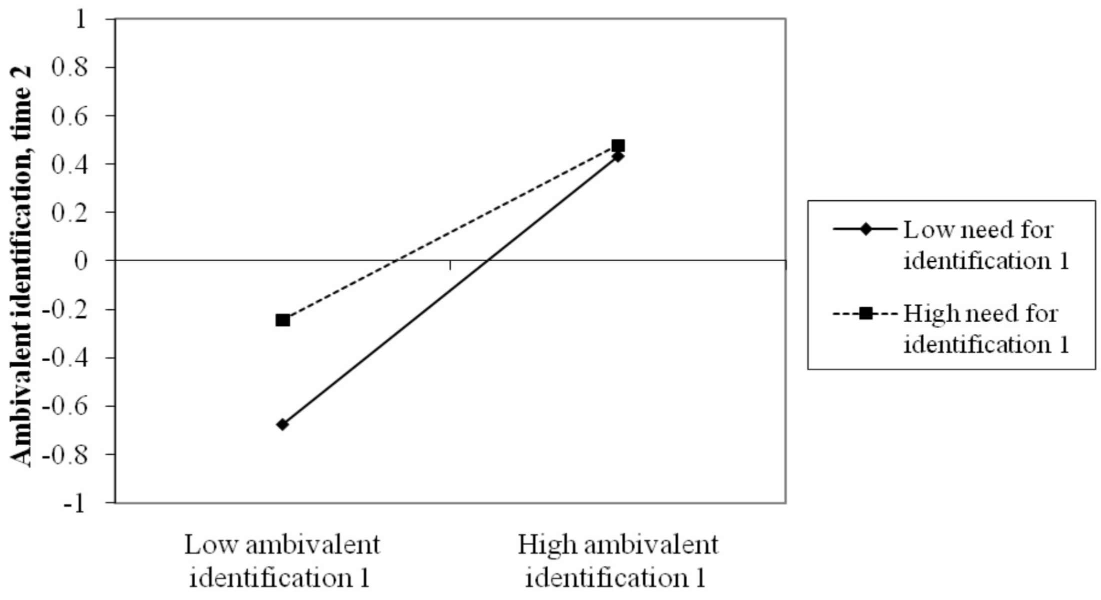
As predicted, need for identification at time 1 had a positive impact on ambivalent identification at time 2 (β=.21), and a negative impact on disidentification at time 2 (β=-.14). The interaction effect of ambivalent identification 1 and need for identification 1 on ambivalent identification 2 and disidentification 2 also had opposite signs: β=.27 for the former and β =-.20 for the latter. The inspection of the slopes in Figures 3a and 3b confirm that need for organizational identification strengthens the development of ambivalent identification over time (H3a), and at the same time it weakens the trans-

Table 6. Regression analyses for hypothesis 3 (study 2)

	Ambivalent identification 2		Organizational disidentification 2	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
β Ambivalent identification 1	.66***	.62***	.08*	.05
β Need for identification 1	.20	.21	-.14**	-.14**
β Interaction effect		.27		-.20***
Overall F model	15.27***	10.63***	5.54***	7.00***
Adjusted R^2	.35	.36	.15	.26
Δ R^2	.38	.01	.18	

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01
Note: all variables presented in these regressions were centered.

Figure 3. Interaction plot for the impact of ambivalent identification and need for identification at time 1 upon (a) ambivalent organizational and (b) and disidentification at time 2



formation of ambivalent identification into disidentification over time (H3b). In other words, those who need to identify will carry on an ambivalent identification, while those who don't intrinsically need to, will simply start disidentifying.

One final procedure investigated the impact of initial levels of identification on subsequent participation in the study. Our assumption here was that students with lower levels of identification would slowly disappear from the study (hence confirming the lack of engagement in academic activities of non-identified students). Therefore, we compared the levels of identification at time 1 between drop-outs and the sample that continues (stayed in) the study. Between-group t-tests confirmed significant differences in organizational identification ($t=-1.71$, $p=0.09$), disidentification($t=2.28$, $p=0.02$), and ambivalent identification($t=2.33$, $p=0.02$) between drop-outs and remaining students: drop-outs had slightly lower levels of identification ($M=3.16$, $SD=.83$), and significantly higher levels of disidentification ($M=1.26$, $SD=.64$) and ambivalent identification ($M=1.97$, $SD=.83$) than remaining students ($M=3.38$, $SD=.72$ for identification; $M=1.09$, $SD=.26$ for disidentification, $M=1.72$, $SD=.74$ for ambivalent identification).

Hence, we received evidence in favor of our assumption of identification forms (especially the negative ones) impacting on student engagement (both in terms of participation to activities and as mere class attendance).

Discussions and implications

Discussions

The present research set out to explore how organizational and individual factors influence the development of identification, ambivalent identification and disidentification of students with their Schools. Our results with respect to positive identification are in line with previous research on organizational identification. The more prestigious the School, the more identified its students are. Students' propensity to identify with various social entities enhances their positive identification, and acts in parallel with the unit's prestige. The School's identity incongruence does not seem to significantly impact on students' identification, regardless of their need for identification. These results so far bring nothing new to previous research (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). The contribution of our research is apparent when looking at other forms of identification (i.e., ambivalent identification and disidentification), which have been largely ignored previously.

Organizational disidentification is a result of the interaction effect between internal and external variables. Although a lower prestige and a higher incongruence have a direct immediate impact on disidentification (study 1), this direct effect is no longer apparent in time (study 2). In time, disidentification is triggered by lower prestige and higher incongruence only if students have a less accentuated need for identification. In other words, need for organizational identification is a really important moderating factor when we look at how disidentification develops in time. Considering the results for our first two hypotheses, we can assert that external (organizational) and internal (individual) variables have a different impact on the unfolding of different types of identification. We argued that external variables (such as organization's identity incongruence or organizational prestige), being contextual in nature, have a more accentuated here and now impact, which allows organizational members to adapt flexibly to their environment. While these external variables have a significant impact in the cross-sectional investigation, their effect is far less significant in the longitudinal dataset. The individual-level variables (e.g., need for identification), on the other hand, are those supporting consistency and stability in identification patterns, and their effect is more evident in time. This pattern of results is in accord with previous findings (Doosje, Ellemers & Spears, 1995; Ellemers & al., 1997) stating that people don't only identify when the social group's (i.e., organization's) situation is favorable; they remained identified even through the bad times, because of a more powerful subjective factor (Ellemers & al, 1997). In other words, the influence of external factors upon the various dimensions of identification proves indeed to be moderated by subjective factors. Our data proves that this is even more the case for ambivalent identification and disidentification than for positive identification.

When comparing the data for hypothesis 1a in study 1 and study 2, it becomes clear that ambivalent identification is only momentarily dependent upon organizational prestige (i.e., it has a significant impact in the cross-sectional, but not in the longitudinal analysis). What matters in time is a School's organizational identity incongruence. Identity incongruence directly and immediately triggers ambivalent identification. Previous research has already pointed to the fact that organizational identity incongruence brings about ambivalent identification (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). Our results support this assertion, but take it a step further. Ambivalent identification is a cognitively inconsistent state, hence a disturbing one. Those students who strongly need to identify with their organization can bear for longer the organization's identity incongruence than those with a low need for identification, and remain ambivalently identified. For those with a lower propensity for identification however, disidentification (hence the rejection of the organization by defining oneself through opposite attributes than the ones used to define the organization) is the only means powerful enough to solve this cognitive inconsistency. It is important to notice here that the moderating effect of need for organizational identification is not so obvious in triggering ambivalent identification (as it was for disidentification, for instance), but on its subsequent development.

To summarize, our data showed that need for identification is a moderator which influences the development of disidentification in two ways: first, it filters the effect of external variables on disidentification; second, it determines the development of ambivalent identification into disidentification. Our second important finding regards external variables that impact students' identifications: while the School's perceived prestige has a momentary impact on all forms of identification, it is only relevant in time for positive identification. However, it is important to remember that the impact of identity incongruence remains visible in time and may be the foundation of future disidentification. These conclusions are important for strategy makers in universities in their choice to focus on foster positive identification and counteract disidentification. Based on the findings of our study, we draw in the following section some outlines of applications for decision-makers in universities.

Applications and implications

Universities who want to have identified students need to pay attention to several considerations: students' traits (hence, individual level factors) and external variables that can be influenced by strategy (at organizational level). The individual level factors are definitely not the focus of any policy or strategic plan. Yet, they need to be taken into consideration whenever implementing one, as important moderators of the external factors, which are the ones manipulated through various interventions.

Students enter universities prone to be imprinted upon: they are here not just to learn, but also willing to develop a new identity. They differ with respect to their need for identification, and are hence differently prompted to look for cues that would increase their bond to the university, or to react to these cues. One must bear this in mind when assessing the efficacy of a policy, in that its possible differential impact might not be a flaw of the policy, but the natural reaction of those targeted by it.

Bearing this in mind, the second and more important aspect concerns the external factors affecting identification: these are the ones that any strategic policy-maker should focus on. Although several researches have pointed to the high impact of middle-level factors (i.e., group-level factors) on identification (Riketta & van Dick, 2005; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000; van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher & Christ, 2004), these factors are more difficult to control in a university setting, given the large autonomy (hence heterogeneity) of departments in general and the organization of each department, and further each course in particular. In these settings, the most relevant factors for policy makers are those pertaining to the organizational level. The present research outlines some important aspects regarding two of these factors: organization's identity incongruence and organizational prestige. In terms of policy making, one must know that the identity of the organization strongly affects its members' identification. This identity needs first and foremost to be clear, strong, coherent and unitary. In order to achieve this, policies need to be articulated, so that they wouldn't send contradictory messages. Even more important, and often disregarded, their implementation should be carefully monitored, so that the actual form in which they reach their target would keep the coherence and consistency of the university's identity. One of the most detrimental influences comes from a perceived incongruence in the identity of the organization. Not achieving either of the two demands of consistency above may lead to such a perceived incongruence. This incongruence can be even more harmful to member identification than the prestige of the organization. The latter bears a strong influence on identification. Yet, it is incongruence that has the most negative effects. This statement puts strategic policies into a new light: not always can we obtain prestige, when compared to other players in the field, but building and implementing a coherent and clear strategy, with the existent means, is a powerful tool, which decision makers should not disregard.

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