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Published in:
Motivation Science

DOI:
[10.1037/mot0000019](https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000019)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2015

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hamstra, M. R. W., Sassenberg, K., Van Yperen, N. W., Wisse, B., & Rietzschel, E. F. (2015). Regulatory fit buffers against disidentification from groups. *Motivation Science*, 1(3), 184-201.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000019>

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Regulatory Fit Buffers Against Disidentification From Groups

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Disidentification refers to people's active psychological distancing from a group due to a negative self-defining affiliation with the group. Because disidentification can threaten group survival and group functioning, it is important to gain insight into factors that potentially buffer its occurrence. A field study and an experiment (with 2 replications) suggest that regulatory fit between group regulatory focus and individual regulatory focus can reduce group members' tendency to disidentify from their group. Specifically, we found that in promotion-focused groups, members' promotion focus reduced disidentification whereas in prevention-focused groups, members' prevention focus reduced disidentification. These findings suggest groups and organizations aiming to reduce lack of effort, attrition, and turnover associated with disidentification, might do so by tailoring the work environment to the individual's self-regulatory preferences.

Keywords: disidentification, regulatory fit, regulatory focus, motivation, social groups

Social groups exist because of their members. However, individuals often drop out of groups, which harms the functioning and, in extreme cases, the survival of a group. A crucial, yet ill-understood psychological phenomenon in this context is *disidentification* (i.e., a negative but still upheld self-defining relationship with that group). Psychologically, disidentification involves experiencing negative emotions when interacting with or thinking about the group, thoughts about one's distance to the group, and

a (not yet completed) intention to leave the group (Becker & Tausch, 2014; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Matschke & Sassenberg, 2010a, 2010b; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007; Zou, Morris, & Benet-Martinez, 2008). For example, imagine an employee who is highly dissatisfied with certain aspect of his or her job, but needs to affiliate with the organization and its identity because of factually being a member of this group. Due to their negative relation to the group, individuals who disidentify separate themselves and put effort into things other than the group's well-being and success (Matschke & Sassenberg, 2010b; Zou et al., 2008). Although disidentification can be a major threat to the survival and functioning of social groups, research has largely ignored this group-related response and, as a consequence, little is known about factors that may help reduce people's tendency to disidentify.

Research on people's relation to their groups has revolved almost exclusively around social identification, its causes and positive consequences (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see also Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Brewer, 1991). However, just as negative affect is not the opposite

This article was published Online First October 12, 2015.

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This research was supported by a Vidi Grant 452-07-006 from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research awarded to Kai Sassenberg. We thank Jasper Vogel for his help in collecting the data for Study 1.

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of positive affect (Carver & Scheier, 1990), disidentification is not simply the *absence* of a particular social identity, but implies the presence of a *negative* relation to the group, associated with the desire to discontinue group membership (Dukerich, Kramer, & Parks, 1998; Elsbach, 1999; Long & Spears, 1997). As such, disidentification can be seen as an active self-regulatory response to a negative self-defining relationship. The current research therefore proposes that a *self-regulation perspective* on disidentification may be useful in uncovering factors that potentially buffer its occurrence. Specifically, when individuals have a strong preference to apply a specific self-regulation strategy (compared with when they do not) they may be more susceptible to the effects of membership of a group that is strongly characterized by the use of that particular strategy. That is, when such individuals are members of a group that creates this *regulatory fit* (Higgins, 2000), it provides them with the opportunity to act in a way that feels right. Because of a membership feeling right, fit between the individual and a group is expected to negatively relate to the tendency to disidentify from the group.

Disidentification

Disidentification involves a *negative* relationship of an individual to a group and the active separating response that ensues from it (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Matschke & Sassenberg, 2010a, 2010b). Disidentification is distinct from the phenomenon of categorization threat (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999), because the latter implies that an individual does not categorize as a group member while others do categorize this person as a group member. In contrast, disidentification implies a still ongoing group membership that the individual does subscribe to. Furthermore, although disidentification is aversive, it is not conceptualized specifically as a threat. Thus, disidentifying group members still see themselves as part of the group, the membership is not threatening, but they are unhappy about their group membership and would prefer to leave the group.

Disidentification affects the survival, stability, and functioning of social groups, but not only because of the high costs associated with members exiting their groups and organizations

(Hom & Griffith, 1995). Disidentified group members need to stay in groups with no or low permeability. For example, in work settings, group members may be unable to leave their jobs due to recession or limited employability. In educational settings, attending group meetings may be required for a course grade. In such cases, the group may have to deal with individuals who hold negative views of the group and who pose a threat to the cohesion of, and the climate within, the group or organization (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). Moreover, disidentifying group members suffer from lowered well-being, while the group suffers because disidentifying members start exerting effort in domains other than those relating to their group membership (Matschke & Sassenberg, 2010b). Given the costs and negative consequences of disidentification for the individual and the group, factors explaining (and hence possibly helping to reduce) the occurrence of this detrimental response may be of interest to those aiming to reduce the erosion of groups. Nevertheless, next to nothing is known on antecedents and, particularly, on motivational factors that may be influential in the prevention of disidentification (see Matschke & Sassenberg, 2010a, 2010b).

Crucially, disidentification implies both an individual *and* a group. Working from the notion that individuals and groups are both entities in possession of variable motivational properties (De Dreu, Nijstad, & van Knippenberg, 2008; Sassenberg & Wolin, 2008), we propose that a motivational self-regulation approach may yield insight into factors that potentially buffer the occurrence of disidentification. Self-regulation models incorporate individual differences in motivational orientations and preferred strategies with motivation-relevant aspects in the environment (e.g., Scholer & Higgins, 2011). Therefore, such an approach can theoretically account for situational and individual factors of motivation from a conceptually unified perspective; particularly, the interplay between the two entities that are crucial to the process of disidentification, the group and the individual, fits such a perspective very well.

The Regulatory Fit of Group Membership

The (mis)match between individuals' preferred strategy and (social) contextual charac-

teristics that allow for the use (or anticipated use) of that strategy affects subjective experiences of individuals' self-regulatory activity—a phenomenon known as *regulatory fit* (Freitas & Higgins, 2002; Higgins, 2000). To be more precise, regulatory fit refers to a situation in which individuals use goal-pursuit behaviors that correspond to their preferred ways of goal-pursuit (i.e., their self-regulatory strategy). For instance, when individuals are eagerly oriented on pursuing gains, risk-taking, rather than risk-avoidance, is a goal-pursuit behavior that fits them. When regulatory fit occurs, it makes individuals feel “right” about the activity, leading to enhanced engagement (Higgins, 2005). Those individuals who are highly focused on the application of a specific self-regulatory strategy (compared with those who are less focused) are particularly affected by contexts that provide opportunity or necessity to sustain this strategy (e.g., Hamstra, Sassenberg, Van Yperen, & Wisse, 2014; Hamstra, Van Yperen, Wisse, & Sassenberg, 2013). This may also generalize to group memberships implying or requiring to engage in certain strategic behaviors.

In the current research, we study regulatory fit using the strategic differences described by regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1999). Regulatory focus theory distinguishes two foci of self-regulation implying self-regulatory strategies that are related to sensitivities to different end-states (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Hamstra, Bolderdijk, & Veldstra, 2011; Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994). When individuals are promotion-focused, their attention is directed toward possibilities to attain their ambitions, hopes, and aspirations. A promotion focus coincides with a preference for eager goal-pursuit strategies. Eagerness implies approaching gains and avoiding nongains in a way that is characterized as hit-ensuring. That is, individuals consider each possibility to be an opportunity for potential gain and, accordingly, go for each outcome.

In contrast, when individuals are prevention-focused, their attention is directed toward possibilities to fulfill their duties, responsibilities, and obligations. A prevention focus coincides with a preference for vigilant goal-pursuit strategies. Vigilance implies avoiding losses and approaching nonlosses in a way that is characterized as error-avoiding. That is, individuals in

a vigilant state need to consider each possible outcome as a potential for loss and thereby do not act upon each opportunity, but instead act only when they are sure.

Promotion-focused individuals experience regulatory fit and feel right when they use, or anticipate using, eager goal-pursuit strategies, whereas prevention-focused individuals experience regulatory fit and feel right when they use, or anticipate using, vigilant goal-pursuit strategies (Cesario & Higgins, 2008; Freitas & Higgins, 2002; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003). Thus, the stronger the individual's promotion focus or prevention focus, the more desirable fitting environmental characteristics may become or, in other words, the stronger the influence of the self-regulatory style in a social group may be (in this case, on disidentification).

Central to our proposition is that regulatory focus need not only be an individual-level characteristic; groups may also provide grounds for a certain regulatory focus. For instance, a group of accountants may naturally converge collectively on a vigilant prevention orientation, whereas a group of sales agents (see Hamstra, Rietzschel, & Groeneveld, 2015) might naturally converge toward an eager promotion orientation. This group regulatory focus has consequences for group-level strategic behavior and performance. Evidence for this assumption is provided by studies that assessed homogeneous regulatory focus in groups (Rietzschel, 2011), studies that manipulated regulatory focus at the group level (Faddegon, Ellemers, & Scheepers, 2009; Faddegon, Scheepers, & Ellemers, 2008), studies that found behavioral effects indicating the formation of a collective regulatory focus (Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000), and studies providing evidence for regulatory fit from group characteristics that may provide opportunity or necessity to behave in line with the strategies resulting from one or the other regulatory focus (Sassenberg, Brazy, Jonas, & Shah, 2013; Sassenberg, Jonas, Shah, & Brazy, 2007).

The regulatory orientation in a group may be seen as characterizing how members of that group tend to act in terms of their goal-pursuits (Faddegon et al., 2008, 2009; Rietzschel, 2011). As such, the behavior that comes with membership of a group with a particular regulatory orientation may generally be seen as offering

the individual the option to employ a certain behavioral strategy. For instance, if a group as a whole is promotion-focused, it implies that group members behave eagerly, that they take risks, and that they seize any opportunity for progress. An example of a specific behavior afforded by such a group would therefore be risk-taking, such as the tendency to say yes on, or to act upon the potential to pursue a gain (rather than to say no or to await certainty). If the individual has a strong preference for that particular strategic behavior, the activity implied by a group membership matches the individual's regulatory orientation, that is, creates regulatory fit. When an activity implied by a group membership matches an individual's regulatory orientation, the individual is likely to experience the group membership as "right," engaging, or motivating (Higgins, 2000, 2005), which we expect to reduce group members' tendency to disidentify.

The Current Research

The current research sought to investigate whether the regulatory fit between group regulatory focus and individual regulatory focus helps to prevent group member disidentification. Specifically, we hypothesized that individual regulatory focus is negatively related to disidentification when there is a match with the group regulatory focus, but not when there is a mismatch with the group regulatory focus. Individuals who are high in a particular regulatory focus, compared with those who are low, exhibit a particularly strong preference for a certain self-regulatory strategy and may be most susceptible to group characteristics relevant to that strategy. That is, those individuals may be able to sustain their preferred strategy when they are members of a group in which the self-regulatory style is high in, or matches, that same regulatory orientation. In other words, we expect that individual regulatory focus is negatively related to disidentification when the group is high in that particular regulatory focus (rather than low), or matches it (rather than mismatches it).

An important distinction, which was also noted above, is that disidentification is not the opposite of identification: to disidentify strongly does not mean having low identification. In fact, Becker and Tausch (2014) recently

provided strong evidence of the divergent validity of the two concepts. Disidentification implies a negative but still ongoing relationship to the group; this means that although low identification implies that the relationship to a group is (almost) nonexistent (people do not feel like they are part of the group), disidentification actually implies the presence of a relationship, but a negative one (people feel like part of the group, but would prefer not to). In this regard, it is important to note that our reasoning suggests that it is not the group per se that feels right to the individual, but the self-regulatory *activity* that is implied by the individual functioning as a member of the group. In other words, individuals experience or anticipate that the activity that group membership implies feels right. That is, regulatory fit experiences originate from the individual using a particular kind of behavioral strategy (one that fits). Although the group creates the precondition or opportunity for using a particular strategy, the focal object about which the individual feels right is not the group per se but, rather, the individual's membership of the group that allows for the use of specific behaviors.

If fitting group membership indeed decreases disidentification, this does not necessarily imply that regulatory fit also enhances *identification* with the group. We expect that regulatory fit between one's own preferred strategy and the strategy to be shown in a group would not affect the social identification with this group (i.e., the centrality of the group to self-concept). This is, first, because the feeling of rightness comes from an (anticipated) opportunity of fitting activity and not from the group per se. Second, and more important, the positive feeling resulting from "feeling right" certainly is not sufficient to affect the integration of the group into one's self-concept or identity. The notion that the group membership feels right refers to how the individual feels in the group context, not to categorization of the self into the group or its role in the self-concept.

Given that our dependent variable of interest—disidentification—is a "negative" variable and we are expecting a "positive" pattern, one might wonder whether we should expect regulatory *misfit* to increase disidentification. Regulatory fit, in general, has been presented as an experience that can strengthen any positive or negative judgment (Higgins, 2000, 2005), and in

social situations, the default effect seems to be that a beneficial variable is enhanced or a detrimental variable is reduced (see Hamstra et al., 2014; Hamstra, Van Yperen, Wisse, & Sassenberg, 2011, 2013). However, regulatory *misfit* is generally not seen to increase negative experiences. Hence, the theoretically most strongly supported proposition is that fit increases the subjective experience that group membership is “right” but decreases the negative relational experience of disidentification.

In Study 1, a field study of existing groups, we assessed group regulatory focus by measuring the promotion focus and prevention focus individuals use in their groups and determining its shared component. Next, in Study 2A we manipulated group membership by employing a modified minimal group paradigm in which we assigned individuals to either a promotion-focused group or a prevention-focused group. In Study 2A, we set out to experimentally replicate the findings from Study 1 regarding regulatory fit and disidentification. Study 2A further tested whether the extent to which group membership feels right statistically accounted for the effects on disidentification (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). Studies 2B and 2C replicated the findings from Study 2A while dealing with certain limitations of Study 2A. Further, in order to test our hypothesis regarding the distinctive effects of regulatory fit on disidentification versus identification, in Studies 1, 2B, and 2C we also measured identification and (a) tested whether fit affects identification and (b) confirmed that the effect on disidentification holds when controlling for identification.

Study 1

Study 1 first sought to test our basic hypothesis concerning the relationship between regulatory fit and disidentification and did so in the field with existing groups. Thus, we hypothesized that individual regulatory focus is negatively related to disidentification when the group is high in that particular regulatory focus, but not when the group is low in that particular regulatory focus.

In this study, we operationalized individual regulatory focus in terms of the strategic behaviors used in the group context, and we operationalized group regulatory focus as the average use of strategic behaviors within the group

(Faddegon et al., 2008, 2009; Rietzschel, 2011). That is, we aggregated individuals' reports of their strategic behaviors to the group level.

Method

Participants. Participants were members of 32 psychology student groups ($N = 353$; 76.20% female; $M_{age} = 20.94$, $SD_{age} = 2.98$), each of which comprised between 7 and 12 members ($M_{groupsize} = 11.03$, $SD_{groupsize} = 1.15$). The groups of students worked together on learning communicative and diagnostic skills in a semester-long tutor-moderated program of 12 sessions.

Procedure. At the end of the sixth session, that is, halfway through the program, participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire which included measures of participants' promotion focus and prevention focus, disidentification, and identification. As the questionnaire was completed in sessions with tightly planned schedules, and all groups completed the questionnaire in the same parallel session, rigorous constraints concerning the number of items were applied.

Measures.

Promotion and prevention focus. It was assessed using six items each (see the Appendix). Participants were asked to respond to all items on a scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Promotion focus ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.76$; $\alpha = .66$) was measured with items such as “In this group, I regularly take risks”; prevention focus ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.75$; $\alpha = .61$) was measured with items such as “In this group, I work vigilantly.”

Disidentification. It was assessed using the disidentification scale developed by Matschke and Sassenberg (2010a, 2010b). As we needed to keep the questionnaire as brief as possible, we only used the items that showed the highest factor loadings in the original development of the scale. Specifically, participants responded to seven items on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Example items were: “Sometimes, I feel very bad when being in this group”; “I am in doubt about whether I want to stay in this group”; “I think about leaving this group before the end of the training”; “I reluctantly spend my time with this group”; and “I would rather invest time and effort in other groups” ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 0.74$; $\alpha = .72$).

Identification. It was assessed using the scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992). This scale measures identification with the group using six items such as “When I talk about this group, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they.’” Participants responded to these items on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). We also included five additional items taken from the general group identification scale developed by Hinkle, Taylor, Fox-Cardamone, and Crook (1989). On the same response scale, participants rated items such as “I feel strong ties to this group.” Although the Mael and Ashforth measure of identification is well accepted and often used, including these additional items improved the reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) of the scale from .81 to .90 ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.97$). Thus, we utilized the scale with the highest reliability.

Results

First, we examined the relationship between identification and disidentification at the individual level to show that the two are distinct. The correlation between these two concepts was only small $r(351) = -.13$, $p = .017$ (two participants of the 353 did not fill out the identification items). Furthermore, confirmatory factor analyses on these items indicated that a two-factor solution fit the data significantly better than a one-factor solution, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 474.38$, $p < .001$.

Because our hypotheses imply statistical interactions across the group and individual level of promotion focus and prevention focus, we first examined the extent to which promotion and prevention focus exhibited between group variance. With regard to promotion focus, one-way analysis of variance revealed that groups differed significantly, $F(31, 321) = 2.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$. The variance between groups, or intraclass correlation [1] (ICC1) was .10, the reliability of the aggregated group mean, or intraclass correlation [2] (ICC2) was .56, and the within-group agreement R_{wg} was .77 (see James, DeMaree, & Wolf, 1984). Similarly, with regard to prevention focus, groups differed significantly, $F(31, 321) = 2.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .21$. ICC1 was .14, ICC2 was .64, and R_{wg} was .78. Thus, a clear group-level component is visible in promotion and prevention focus, im-

plying that aggregation is statistically acceptable (Snijders & Bosker, 1999).

To test our Group $\times$ Individual Regulatory Fit hypotheses, we carried out a multilevel analysis. Independent variables were group-level promotion and prevention, individual-level promotion and prevention, and all cross-level interactions (all main effects variables were standardized prior to computation of the interactions). The significant interaction of between-groups and individual-level promotion focus on disidentification (see Table 1) is plotted in Figure 1 (top panel), and the significant interaction of between-groups and individual-level prevention focus on disidentification (see Table 1) is plotted in Figure 1 (bottom panel). All other relations were nonsignificant.¹

Next, we derived simple slopes from these interactions (Aiken & West, 1991) at high (1 SD above the mean) and low (1 SD below the mean) values of group promotion focus and prevention focus. As expected, these analyses showed that the relation between individual-level promotion focus and disidentification was negative and significant at a high level of group promotion, estimate (γ) = $-.15$, $SE = .07$, $t(29) = -2.12$, $p = .043$, whereas no relation was present at a low level of group promotion, $\gamma = .04$, $SE = .06$, $t(29) = 0.66$, $p = .52$. Similarly, the relation between individual-level

¹ In multilevel analysis, a different option for individual level variables is to center around the group mean, rather than the grand mean (for a discussion of different types of centering, see Kreft, de Leeuw, & Aiken, 1995). This approach could also be defensible in the current research. However, given the relatively small number of members per group, centering around the group mean would rather create a variable that represents the extent to which group members are *more* or *less* promotion-focused or prevention-focused compared with their group average. Thus, the choice to center around the grand mean makes more theoretical sense in this case. Although, we chose to analyze our hypotheses using the grand mean centered individual level variables, it may be noted that the alternative, centering around the group mean, revealed nearly identical results. That is, we found the same interaction patterns as with the grand mean centered versions ($ps < .06$).

Another alternative would be to calculate a group mean for each individual while leaving that particular individual out of the analysis (Kenny & Garcia, 2010a, 2010b). We also conducted the analysis this way and again found the hypothesized interactions ($ps < .01$; in fact, because these analyses are statistically all done at the individual level, it increase the power of the analysis leading to much smaller probabilities of Type I errors).

Table 1
Multilevel Regression Analysis of Disidentification on Group-Level and Individual-Level Promotion Focus and Prevention Focus and the Cross-Level Interactions (Study 1)

Predictors	Disidentification	
	Estimate (γ)	SE
Promotion (individual)	-.05	.04
Prevention (individual)	-.05	.05
Promotion (group)	-.07	.05
Prevention (group)	.02	.05
Promotion (individual) $\times$ Promotion (group)	-.09*	.05
Promotion (individual) $\times$ Prevention (group)	.08	.05
Prevention (individual) $\times$ Promotion (group)	.00	.04
Prevention (individual) $\times$ Prevention (group)	-.08*	.04

* $p < .05$.

prevention and disidentification was negative and significant at a high level of group prevention, $\gamma = -.13$, $SE = .06$, $t(29) = -2.27$, $p = .03$, whereas no relation was present at a low level of group prevention, $\gamma = .03$, $SE = .06$, $t(29) = 0.49$, $p = .63$.

Finally, we sought to test whether regulatory fit was positively related to *identification* and whether the hypothesized interactions on disidentification remained significant when including identification in the model. We did so using the same analytic procedure as used for disidentification. In line with our expectations, neither the interaction between individual and group promotion, $\gamma = -.01$, $SE = .06$, $t(29) = -0.15$, $p = .89$, nor the interaction between individual and group prevention, $\gamma = -.01$, $SE = .06$, $t(29) = -0.21$, $p = .84$, were significant predictors of identification. The other two interactions also were not significant ($ts < |0.27|$, $ps > .78$). Furthermore, the interactions on disidentification remained similar and significant ($ps < .02$) and lead to the same conclusions, when including identification in the main model.

Discussion

The results from Study 1 support the hypothesis that group members' tendency to disidentify was lower when there was a fit between individual regulatory focus and group regula-

tory focus. When the group was high in a particular focus—either promotion or prevention—that same individual regulatory focus was negatively related to disidentification. However, when the group was low in promotion focus or prevention focus, no relationship emerged between individual regulatory focus and disidentification. Furthermore, this result was not attributable to identification: including identification in the model did not affect the results and identification analyzed as dependent variable did not exhibit the opposite pattern of disidentification.

Because Study 1 was conducted in the field, and with existing groups, it is high in ecological validity. Nevertheless, a number of limitations should also be noted. First, the methodology in

Figure 1. Disidentification as a function of the interaction between individual and group promotion focus (top panel) and prevention focus (bottom panel; Study 1).

Study 1 does not allow for claims regarding causality. In Study 2A, we aimed to remedy this issue by experimentally manipulating group regulatory focus. Second, a possible limitation of this study is that it used a nontraditional measure of regulatory focus. Therefore, Study 2A sought to replicate the pattern we found in Study 1 using the traditional measure of chronic regulatory focus (Higgins et al., 2001). Third, although group and individual regulatory focus may be seen as forming the constituent parts of “fit,” we did not explicitly assess whether individuals actually *experienced* regulatory fit from their group. Therefore, in Study 2A we used an explicit measure of experienced regulatory fit (feeling right; cf. Cesario & Higgins, 2008; Sassenberg et al., 2007), and also examined whether the relation between the match in group and individual regulatory focus and disidentification is statistically accounted for by the subjective experience of regulatory fit. We aimed to accomplish both of these things by employing a modified minimal group paradigm. This paradigm, although it does not involve existing group membership, is widely recognized as a valid way to induce the sense of group membership experimentally (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). As such, it is a useful way to examine the causal role of group characteristics in shaping individuals’ disidentification from their groups in interaction with individual characteristics.

Study 2A

The characterization of groups in terms of their self-regulatory style (eager vs. vigilant) may occur in different ways (e.g., Faddegon et al., 2008, 2009; Levine et al., 2000; Rietzschel, 2011). For example, a group with a specific task or function such as a brainstorming team in an innovation-hungry company might be characterized by an eagerness to generate many new ideas, whereas a group charged with the responsibility to make budget cuts might be characterized by a vigilance to examine every needless cost in the books. When a group is characterized by these distinct goal-pursuit strategies, it has the potential to provide individual group members who are most susceptible to this self-regulatory style with strategic fit and make them feel right about their group membership.

We expected individual prevention (promotion) focus to be positively related to the subjective experience of group membership-based regulatory fit (feeling right about membership) and negatively to disidentification when the group is prevention-focused (promotion-focused), but not when the group is promotion-focused (prevention-focused). Finally, we also hypothesized that the effects on disidentification are statistically accounted for by the subjective experience of fit.

Method

Participants. Participants were 51 (66.7% female) individuals who were recruited online through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (cf., Bohannon, 2011; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) to take part in a study about working in a group. Their age ranged from 19 to 82 years ($M = 37.51$, $SD = 14.57$). Four participants from an initial sample of 55 were removed prior to data analysis based on manual checks for inconsistent responses (e.g., responding with a seven on a seven point scale to two items that mean the exact opposite).

Procedure. Participants first completed a measure of their chronic regulatory focus, after which they were randomly assigned to the “eager” or to the “vigilant” group using a modified-minimal group procedure. Finally, they completed a measure of regulatory fit, and a measure of disidentification.

Measures and manipulation.

Promotion and prevention focus. It was assessed with the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ; Higgins et al., 2001). The subscale measuring promotion focus ($M = 3.85$, $SD = .69$; $\alpha = .67$) consists of five items (e.g., I feel like I have made progress toward being successful in my life); the subscale assessing prevention focus ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .97$; $\alpha = .82$) consists of six items (e.g., Not being careful enough has gotten me into trouble at times [reversed item]). Participants responded to the items on a scale ranging from 1 (*Never or seldom*) to 5 (*Very often*).

Modified-minimal group manipulation of group regulatory focus. Participants were presented with a Gestalt picture in which either a vase or two faces can be seen. They were asked to answer which of the two they saw first when looking at the picture. After giving their

response, on the next screen participants were informed that their choice meant they were part of the group of “alpha visualizers” and that alpha visualizer groups tend to be good at tasks that require eagerness (in the promotion group condition) or that require vigilance (in the prevention group condition). To give participants an opportunity to experience this group strategy, we next informed participants that we were going to ask them to carry out a task that suited what their group was good at (participants did not actually carry out the task, this was only part of the group regulatory focus cover story). In the promotion group condition, participants were informed they would be carrying out a task in which they would generate ideas, whereas in the prevention group condition, participants were informed they would proofread a passage of text. These are tasks that are known to fit promotion-focused versus prevention-focused individuals’ preferences (cf., Förster, Higgins, & Bianco, 2003; Friedman & Förster, 2001) and are therefore valid representations of group focus. Next, we asked them to respond to several questions about the group, after which they were informed of the purpose of the study and that they would not actually be asked to carry out a task.

Subjective experience of regulatory fit. It was assessed with the two items “Being a member of this group feels right,” and “Being a member of this group feels wrong” (recoded). Participants responded to these items on a scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all true*) to 5 (*Very true*). The two items were summarized in a scale by averaging them ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.04$; $r = .84$).

Disidentification. We designed a three-item scale of disidentification ($M = 2.32$, $SD = .95$; $\alpha = .77$) based on the disidentification measure of Matschke and Sassenberg (2010a, 2010b) that we used in Study 1, but adapted to the experimental context. We used one item for each of the three aspects of disidentification (intention to leave, behavioral investment, emotions): “I doubt that I would stay in this group”; “I would rather invest time and effort in other groups”; and “I would feel bad if I would meet this group.” Participants responded to these items on a scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Very much*).

Results

To test our hypothesis, we conducted two moderated regression analyses, one of regulatory fit and one of disidentification. Predictor variables were promotion focus, prevention focus, and the effect-coded dummy variable representing the group focus manipulation [coded 1 for the promotion group, -1 for the prevention group] and the interactions between group regulatory focus and individual regulatory foci. Table 2 shows statistical details on the expected significant interactions between group regulatory focus and individual promotion focus and prevention focus on experienced regulatory fit and on disidentification. Further analysis with regulatory fit as the dependent variable, showed a positive relation between promotion focus and experienced regulatory fit when the group was promotion-focused, $\beta = .51$, $t(45) = 2.41$, $p = .02$ (see Figure 2, top panel), but not when the group was prevention-focused, $\beta = -.18$,

Table 2
Moderated Multiple Regression Analyses of Experienced Regulatory Fit (RF)
and Disidentification on Individual Promotion Focus and Prevention Focus,
Group Regulatory Focus Condition, and the Interactions (Study 2A)

Predictors	Regulatory fit		Disidentification	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>
Promotion (individual)	.17	.16	-.28	.15
Prevention (individual)	.05	.16	-.04	.15
Group RF	-.13	.14	.15	.14
Promotion (individual) $\times$ Group RF	.35*	.16	-.32*	.15
Prevention (individual) $\times$ Group RF	-.43**	.16	.42*	.15

Note. Conditions were coded 1 for promotion, -1 for prevention.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Figure 2. Regulatory fit as a function of the interaction between group focus condition and individual promotion (top panel) and individual prevention (bottom panel; Study 2A).

$t(45) = -0.80, p = .43$. In contrast, prevention focus was positively related to experienced regulatory fit when the group was prevention-focused, $\beta = .48, t(45) = 2.05, p = .046$ (see Figure 2, bottom panel), and a marginally negatively related when the group was promotion-focused, $\beta = -.38, t(45) = -1.82, p = .076$. Analogously, further analysis with disidentification as the dependent variable showed a negative relation between promotion focus and disidentification when the group was promotion-focused, $\beta = -.61, t(45) = -2.91, p = .006$ (see Figure 3, top panel), but not when the group was prevention-focused, $\beta = .04, t(45) = 0.17, p = .86$. In contrast, prevention focus was negatively related to disidentification when the group was prevention-focused, $\beta = -.46, t(45) = -1.99, p = .052$ (see Figure 3, bottom panel), but marginally positive when the group was

promotion-focused, $\beta = .38, t(45) = 1.83, p = .074$.

We also examined whether the conditional relation between promotion focus and disidentification (in the promotion group condition) and the conditional relation between prevention focus and disidentification (in the prevention group condition) were mediated by the subjective experience of regulatory fit. To this end, we used the procedure for mediated moderation developed by Preacher and colleagues (2007). Corroborating our reasoning, the interactions of the dummy variable (coded 1 for the promotion group, -1 for the prevention group) representing the group focus with participants' promotion focus and participants' prevention focus were no longer significant after entering the subjective regulatory fit experience into the

Figure 3. Disidentification as a function of the interaction between group focus condition and individual promotion (top panel) and individual prevention (bottom panel; Study 2A).

model, $B_s < |0.11|$, $SE_B = 0.11$, $ts < |0.97|$, $p > .34$, and regulatory fit was significantly related to disidentification, $B = -0.32$, $SE_B = 0.05$, $t(44) = -6.88$, $p < .001$. Moreover, bootstrapping analyses indicated that the relation between promotion focus and disidentification was mediated by regulatory fit when the group was promotion-focused, $B = -0.34$, $SE_B = 0.15$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.80; -0.02]$, but not when the group was prevention-focused, $B = 0.12$, $SE_B = 0.16$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.05; 0.35]$. In contrast, the relation between prevention-focus and disidentification was mediated by regulatory fit when the group was prevention-focused, $B = -0.32$, $SE_B = 0.16$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.71; -0.02]$, but not when the group was promotion-focused, $B = 0.26$, $SE_B = 0.15$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.10; 0.71]$.

Discussion

The results from Study 2A replicate the findings from Study 1. Again, individual regulatory focus was negatively related to disidentification, and positively to subjective group membership-based fit, when the group regulatory focus fit, but individual regulatory focus was not related (or marginally in the opposite direction) to disidentification when group regulatory focus did not fit. Hence, group members' tendency to disidentify was lower when there was a match with the group regulatory focus, but not when there was no match. Additionally, the extent to which group membership felt right accounted for the effect of the match between group and individual regulatory focus on individuals' disidentification. This finding suggests that the subjective experience of regulatory fit is responsible for, or mediates, the effect on disidentification. As such, these findings complement the findings of Study 1, in which we assumed that group by individual focus interactions constituted fit, yet did not provide explicit evidence of the experience of feeling right. In addition, Study 2A provided evidence for the assumed causal relation.

Two potential limitations of this study were addressed in two subsequent replication Studies 2B and 2C. First, in Study 2A, we proposed and found that the extent to which group membership felt right mediated the effects on disidentification. Yet, some researchers justifiably argue that the measurement of a mediator can sometimes account for an effect occurring (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). Therefore, we wanted to replicate the

effect on disidentification without also assessing experienced fit of group membership. Second, our sample in Study 2A was comparatively small. Therefore, we wanted to replicate our findings from Study 2A in a larger sample. As in Study 1, in Study 2B we also assessed identification in addition to disidentification in order to test for any effect on identification. Study 2C was a final replication, but this time using a different measure of identification that more clearly distinguishes several subcomponents (Leach et al., 2008).

Study 2B

This study followed the exact same procedure as Study 2A, except that subjective fit of group membership (feeling right) was *not* assessed, whereas identification was assessed. Because this is a direct replication, we only briefly describe the method and results (more details can be obtained upon request). Participants were 100 Mechanical Turk workers (48.5% female; 1 participants did not indicate; $M_{age} = 32.81$, $SD_{age} = 13.02$) who first completed the promotion ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.72$; $\alpha = .80$) and prevention ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.91$; $\alpha = .81$) measures and after the manipulation completed the disidentification measure ($M = 2.30$, $SD = .84$; $\alpha = .81$), which were all identical to the previous study, and the same identification measure as in Study 1 ($M = 2.77$, $SD = .82$; $\alpha = .93$). Two participants from an initial sample of 102 were removed prior to data analysis based on manual checks for inconsistent responses.

The correlation between identification and disidentification was negative and moderately strong: $r(100) = -.46$, $p < .001$. Furthermore confirmatory factor analyses on these items indicated that a two-factor solution fit the data significantly better than a one-factor solution, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 52.66$, $p < .001$.

As expected, for disidentification the interactions between individual promotion and prevention foci and group regulatory focus were significant and in the expected direction (see Table 3 for full details and see Figure 4), and remained unchanged when including identification in the model. In addition, the slopes of individual promotion and prevention were negative and significant ($ps < .05$) when the group fit, but nonsignificant in the other group condition ($ps > .2$). Thus, Study 2B fully replicated the results from Study 2A. Finally, just as in Study 1, there were no fit inter-

Table 3
Moderated Multiple Regression Analyses of Disidentification on Individual Promotion Focus and Prevention Focus, Group Regulatory Focus (RF) Condition, and the Interactions (Studies 2B and 2C)

Predictors	Study 2B		Study 2C	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>
Promotion (individual)	−.39**	.09	−.24*	.11
Prevention (individual)	−.06	.09	.02	.11
Group RF	.17	.09	.12	.11
Promotion (individual) × Group RF	−.25**	.09	−.24*	.11
Prevention (individual) × Group RF	.23*	.09	.23*	.11

Note. Conditions were coded 1 for promotion, −1 for prevention.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

actions when analyzing identification as the dependent variable, both $ps > .65$.

Study 2C

Again, this study followed the same procedure as Studies 2A and 2B, except that subjective fit of group membership (feeling right) was *not* assessed and that identification *was* assessed, this time with a different measure from the one used in Study 2B. As this is another direct replication, we only briefly describe the method and results (more details can be obtained upon request). Participants were 85 Mechanical Turk workers (29.4% female; $M_{age} = 29.65$, $SD_{age} = 8.60$) who first completed the promotion ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .59$; $\alpha = .62$) and prevention ($M = 3.19$, $SD = .84$; $\alpha = .81$) measures. After the group manipulation, participants completed the measure of disidentification ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .87$; $\alpha = .78$) and the Leach and colleagues (2008) measure of identification, which includes aspects of centrality ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.20$; $\alpha = .95$), satisfaction ($M = 3.22$, $SD = .93$; $\alpha = .94$), solidarity ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.01$; $\alpha = .96$), in-group homogeneity ($M = 2.94$, $SD = .98$; $\alpha = .96$), and individual self-stereotyping ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .97$; $\alpha = .90$). Four participants from an initial sample of 119 were removed prior to data analysis based on manual checks for inconsistent responses and 30 participants were removed because they were non-native speakers of English that got access to the study due to an error in recruitment.

The correlation of disidentification with solidarity, $r(85) = -.46$, $p < .001$, with satisfaction, $r(85) = -.54$, $p < .001$, with centrality, $r(85) = -.27$, $p < .001$, with in-group homogeneity, $r(85) = -.36$, $p < .001$, and with individual self-stereotyping, $r(85) = -.40$, $p < .001$, were all negative and significant, but markedly smaller than the correlations among the aspects of identification, which were all above $r(85) = .72$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, a set of confirmatory factor analyses on these items indicated that a two-factor solution fit the data significantly better than a one-factor solution, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 24.26$, $p < .001$.

As expected, for disidentification the interactions between individual promotion and prevention foci and group regulatory focus were significant (see Table 3 and Figure 5). In addition, the slopes of individual promotion ($p = .007$) and prevention ($p = .11$) were negative when the group fit, but not-significant for promotion ($p = .97$) or trending toward positive for prevention ($p = .13$) in the other group condition. As for the

Figure 4. Disidentification as a function of the interaction between group focus condition and individual promotion (top panel) and individual prevention (bottom panel; Study 2B).

Figure 5. Disidentification as a function of the interaction between group focus condition and individual promotion (top panel) and individual prevention (bottom panel; Study 2B).

identification components, we did not find any significant group by individual regulatory focus interactions on centrality ($ps > .46$), on satisfaction ($ps > .17$), on solidarity ($ps > .31$) on self-stereotyping ($ps > .43$), or on in-group homogeneity ($ps > .22$). Finally, it may be noted that inclusion of none of these identification aspects rendered the interactions on disidentification non-significant, again supporting the notion that the effect of regulatory fit on disidentification is not due to any potential effect regulatory fit might have on identification.

General Discussion

In a field study and an experiment (with two replications), we found that disidentification decreased as a function of the match between individual regulatory focus and group regulatory focus. The stronger individuals' promotion focus, the less they disidentified from a promotion-

focused group and the stronger their prevention focus the less they disidentified from a prevention-focused group. Whereas Study 1 found this pattern in a multilevel field study of existing groups, Studies 2A–2C employed a modified minimal group paradigm and provided support for the causal role of group regulatory focus in determining promotion-focused and prevention-focused individuals' disidentification. Study 2A further found that the subjective experience of regulatory fit (the extent to which group membership felt right) explained the conditional relations between individual regulatory focus and disidentification. Study 2B replicated the results concerning disidentification with a larger sample and, it is important to note, while not assessing the subjective experience that group membership felt "right" (see Spencer et al., 2005). Finally, we also consistently found that the effects on disidentification could not be attributed to identification (Studies 1 and 2B) and once more replicated this pattern with a different measure of identification (Study 2C). As such, this research provides direct evidence for the hypothesis that regulatory fit can help combat disidentification.

Previous research has investigated the implications of group-level regulatory orientations (Faddegon et al., 2008, 2009; Rietzschel, 2011), and has highlighted that certain group characteristics (i.e., power and gender) can give rise to fit effects (Sassenberg et al., 2007, 2013), yet the current research is, to our knowledge, the first to integrate these separate areas of research and to show that group-level regulatory orientations interact with individual-level regulatory orientations to predict individually and socially relevant outcomes.

The results of the current research point at reduced disidentification when there is regulatory fit between groups and members. Although variation in disidentification—as a function of regulatory fit—seemed to arise quite quickly in the experiments (suggesting that variation in disidentification can occur in a short term group membership), the studies represent snapshot or static perspectives on regulatory fit and disidentification. The relationship between individuals and their groups may be more dynamic and unfolding over time. For example, it seems likely that the effects we found could be stronger when the importance, prominence, or salience of group membership is greater, such as in situations at work. In these situations, an individual's livelihood depends on

group membership, and the relationship to a group continues for longer periods of time.

Strengths and Limitations

By studying a combination of existing and minimal, simulated group memberships, and field and experimental samples, the limitations of each of the respective methods are offset by the strengths of the others. The studies together provide consistent support for our hypotheses (for detailed discussions of the advantages and drawbacks of the individual studies, see the discussion sections of the respective studies).

Integral to our group manipulation (Studies 2A–2C) was the notion that participants would be able to experience the group strategy—they anticipated performing either an eager or a vigilant task. It may be objected that regulatory fit occurred based on the appeal of the task, and not based on the appeal of the group. However, if groups and members do not carry out an activity, there is also no possibility for *strategic regulatory* fit, because this fit in essence involves behavioral strategies. Most important, people's (anticipated) behavioral experiences that cause fit had consequences that *extended* to the group, implying that the experience of regulatory fit that can be created by the membership of a certain group, but is experienced as a consequence of the behaviors and activities implied by group membership, ultimately affects people's group-related response, their disidentification.

In all studies, we investigated groups that individuals had not freely chosen. On the one hand, if it is speculated that not freely choosing group membership is a fertile soil for the development of disidentification, it may be objected that the observed effects are overestimations. On the other hand, the fact that the groups we studied were groups with a very short life span (a matter of minutes in the experiment) or relatively short life span (a matter of a few weeks or months in the field study) may be interpreted as a strength of these findings. That is, even more prolonged involvement in a group is likely to provide individuals with even more opportunity for regulatory fit. As such, the beneficial effects of regulatory fit, or the detrimental effects of a lack of fit may be even more pronounced when people have to deal with their groups for longer periods of time. The fact that we observed these effects in experimental groups lasting only minutes, and real groups that

would discontinue in a few weeks, therefore, may be taken as strong evidence for our hypotheses.

Directions for Future Research

There are certainly also other boundary conditions of these effects. For instance, they are particularly likely to be observable in relatively small and homogenous groups with a clear goal and a particular task that entails eagerness or vigilance. An important question for future research is how this process would play out in more diffuse or diverse groups. Such research would also be helpful in further clarifying the practical implications of this research. Organizations that aim to reduce disidentification could consider the implications that tailoring the work environment to individual regulatory orientations might have for disidentification. For instance, organizations often have structural functional separations, in that certain teams are tasked with a certain type of responsibility. One way to tailor individuals' work environments, and in doing so reduce disidentification tendencies, would be to allocate individuals to units or tasks that fit their own strategy.

An important goal for future research would be to *longitudinally* investigate the development or reduction of disidentification based on regulatory fit. Such research could yield important insights, not only into the occurrence and development of this phenomenon, but also into the way successful teams manage to resolve these issues (e.g., do they somehow increase members' experience of regulatory fit?). Future research might also test potential intervention methods to deal with disidentification.

We conceptualized group regulatory focus as group members' tendency to behave in an eager or vigilant way and we found that group focus interacted with individual focus in predicting disidentification. In Study 1, we operationalized group regulatory focus in terms of measuring how group members tended to behave and averaging these responses, whereas, in the experimental studies, we simulated group regulatory focus rather than measuring it. In both operationalizations, fit is derived from the interaction between individual and group regulatory focus but, in the former, the individual also contributes to the group regulatory focus. One may argue that the manipulation of group regulatory focus corresponds to a "deductive" process of group membership while the measurement of group regulatory focus leaves open

the possibility that it developed through “inductive” process of group membership (Jans, Postmes, & Van der Zee, 2012; Postmes, Spears, Lee, & Novak, 2005). Although this analogy might be taken to suggest that the two operationalizations of regulatory fit might also bring about social identification, we did not find any effects on categorization. Nevertheless, interesting questions for future research are (a) from what factors group regulatory focus emerges in the first place (e.g., leadership, situational factors, or inductive factors) and (b) whether the consequences of regulatory fit are different depending on the origins of the group’s regulatory focus. We would suggest that group regulatory focus is likely to be less consistent within the group when inductive group formation processes are at play, but that individuals might experience a stronger sense of rightness when they feel their own strategic orientation complements (rather than fits) the rest of the group (see also Jans et al., 2012).

Concluding Remarks

When group members start to separate themselves from their group, it threatens the survival and functioning of the group. The current research revealed that such disidentification may be reduced through regulatory fit, the engaging “right” motivational experience that may be caused when individuals’ orientation is sustained by the activities that are implied by a group membership. Thus, groups, teams, and organizations aiming to reduce the lack of effort, attrition, and turnover associated with disidentification, might do so by tailoring the work environment to the individual’s self-regulatory preferences.

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Appendix

Promotion and Prevention Focus Items (Study 1)

Promotion focus

In this group, I regularly take risks.
 In this group, I aim to achieve a lot.
 In this group, I habitually try out new things.
 In this group, I start trying even harder when I notice that I'm doing well.
 My motto in this group could be: "If you don't dare, you don't succeed."
 In this group, I am primarily guided by my ideal image.

Prevention focus

In this group, I always follow the rules and regulations of the course.
 In this group, I primarily try to fulfill obligations toward others.
 In this group, I work vigilantly.
 In this group, I break rules on occasion (reversed).
 In this group, I pay close attention to what others expect of me.
 In this group, I rarely take risks (reversed).

Received November 2, 2014

Revision received August 19, 2015

Accepted August 19, 2015 ■

SSM Call for Submissions

The Society for the Study of Motivation (SSM) conference will take place in conjunction with APS on Thursday May 26, 2016, in Chicago, IL. The conference will feature a joint keynote address by Gráinne Fitzsimons (Associate Professor of Psychology at Duke University: The Fuqua School of Business) and Eli Finkel (Professor of Psychology at Northwestern University). The conference will also feature a presidential address by David Dunning (Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan).

We invite submissions for symposia, debates, data blitz presentations, and poster presentations. We also encourage young scientists to submit for the poster award.

The deadline for symposia, debates, and data blitz submissions is December 1, 2015.

The deadline for poster presentations is January 31, 2016.

For more information, please visit <http://www.thessm.org/conference2016.php>.

The Program Committee