

# **What Predicts Individuals' Disidentification? The Joint Effect of Fearful Attachment and Social and Economic Exchanges**

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*Integrating attachment and exchange theories, we examined the joint effect of fearful attachment and two types of exchange behavior (social and economic exchange) on individuals' disidentification from the organizations. Results indicated that fearfully attached individuals reported more disidentification when they engaged in both low social exchanges and high economic exchanges with their organizations. From a practical standpoint, reducing individuals' disidentification can be accomplished by organizations, leaders, or coworkers who need to emphasize their social exchanges and deemphasize their economic exchanges with the focal individual.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Identification is referred to as the extent to which an organizational member defines himself/herself with reference to his/her organizational membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Identification with an organization is important because employees high on identification tend to perform better on their job-related tasks, have a more positive attitude toward their organizations, and 'go the extra-mile' for the organization (e.g., Riketta, 2005). Higher identification can also bring a few liabilities for the employee and the organization, with identified employees being too complacent with the organizational status-quo, lacking critical thinking and even failing to report organizational wrongdoing (Dukerich, Kramer, & McLean Parks, 1998).

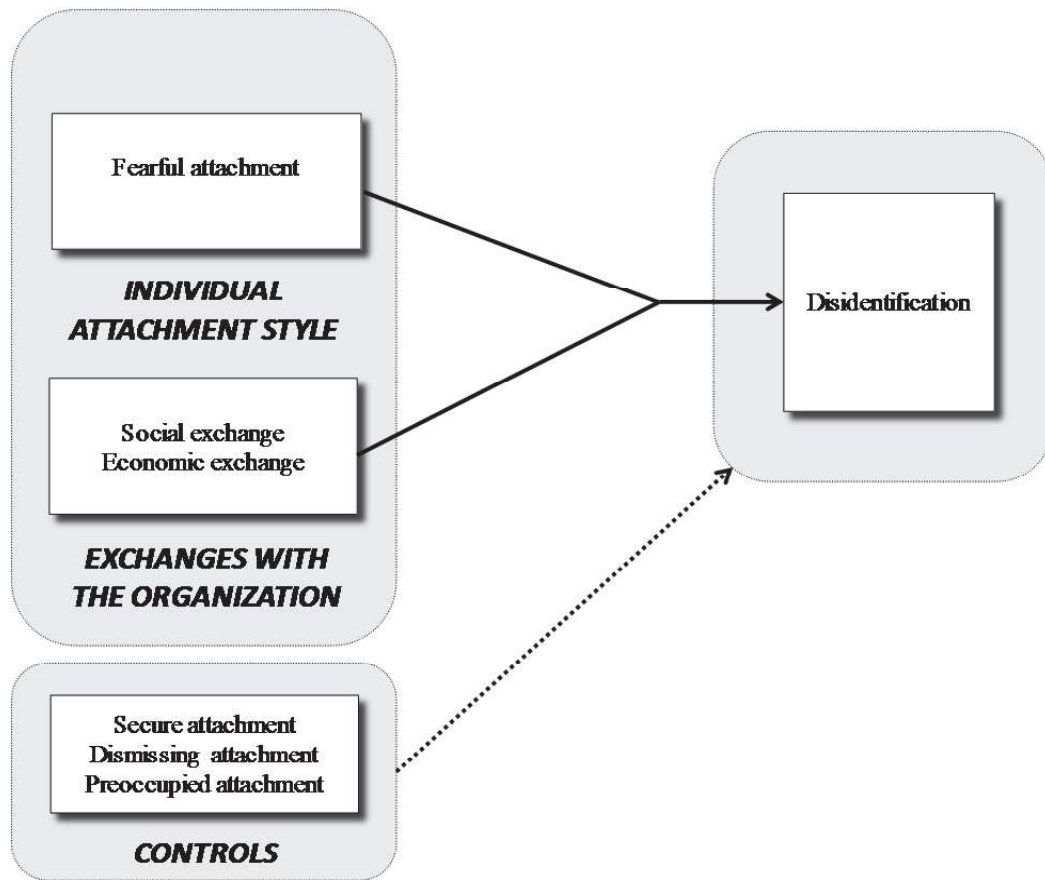
Despite the importance of understanding organizational identification, there is a critical gap in the literature. Specifically, most of the studies on identification have focused exclusively on the form of a positive aspect of identification. However, it is critical to broaden our understanding of a similar, yet distinct form of identification, *disidentification* (Pratt, 1988; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). Disidentification refers to the extent to which individuals define themselves as not having the same attributes or principles they believe define the organization (Elsbach, 1999; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). Although identification and disidentification can be semantically located at different points on a single continuum, evidence has documented that they are not mirror images of one another but rather distinct and unique psychological states (Ashforth, 2001; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Dukerich et al., 1998; Elsbach, 1999, 2001; Kreiner &

Ashforth, 2004; Pratt, 2000; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998). Whereas identification refers to an individual connecting perceived positive aspects of the organization to the self, disidentification involves disconnection of perceived negative aspects of the organization from oneself. Although the primary goal of both psychological states is to sustain a positive identity, the avenues to accomplish the goal differ considerably.

Although it is important to understand organizational identity formation and preservation, little is known about what predicts disidentification (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Pratt, 1998). Also, some researchers have highlighted that individual differences play an important role in shaping organizational identification, it is unknown whether disidentification is determined by individual differences (Zagenczyk, Cruz, Woodard, Walker, Few, Kiazad, & Raja, 2013 for one exception). This lack of research coupled with calls for more studies to expand our understanding of various forms of identification. An examination of why individuals disidentify is warranted due to practical implications. For instance, disidentified individuals tend to not only engage in ethically-questionable practices in an organization, but also confront with corporate mishaps or scandals.

The objective of the present study is to investigate theoretically-relevant predictors of organizational disidentification. More specifically, we highlight one's attachment style that can potentially predict organizational disidentification, which is different from the most existing literature focusing on the notion that individuals appear to disidentify due to negative aspects that organizations may possess. In particular, it is posited that individuals with a fearfully avoidant attachment, one of three types of insecure attachment patterns, may disidentify from their organization because of the tendency of fearfully-attached individuals who seek less intimacy from attachments and often deny their emotional feelings. Along with a fearful avoidant attachment style, we further suggest exchange behaviors (in the form of social and economic exchanges) as potential moderators that can amplify or diminish the effect of the fearful attachment on disidentification. The next two sections outline our arguments and hypotheses for direct effects, followed by a section describing their possible joint relationship of the attachment style and exchange behaviors (see theoretical model presented in Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1  
CONCEPTUAL MODEL**



**Direct Effects: Fearful Attachment and Disidentification**

Originally, attachment was conceptualized in the form of a three- (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) or a four- (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) category typology. More recently, some consensus has emerged that there is a two-dimensional conceptualization: *attachment-related avoidance* and *attachment-related anxiety* (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Highly avoidant individuals tend to show a fear of personal closeness in relationships and discomfort with interpersonal intimacy. Thus, the notion of attachment-related avoidance has to do with a negative view of others as unreliable and untrustworthy. Anxious individuals tend to reflect a fear of rejection and abandonment (Florian et al., 1995). Accordingly, the notion of attachment-related anxiety represents a negative view of the self. The interactions of these two dimensions result in four attachment styles. Those low on both avoidance and anxiety are considered secure individuals. Those high on anxiety and low on avoidance are perceived as preoccupied individuals. Those high on avoidance and low on anxiety are perceived as dismissing individuals. Those high on both dimensions are perceived as fearful individuals (Albert & Horowitz, 2009; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Among the four attachment styles, we emphasize the importance of considering a fearful attachment style in predicting disidentification because a fearful attachment style represents a theoretically-relevant aspect of disidentification. Specifically, highly fearful individuals are likely to exhibit disidentification, not due to a negative organizational attribute that they might perceive, but due to the individuals' own disposition. Bowlby (1980) indicated that insecure individuals are likely to have difficulty getting involved in a close relationship with others, because of the urgency and priority of threats to oneself

(especially during early childhood). In particular, this trend is pronounced for those with fearful individuals. For instance, fearful individuals who are high on both anxious and avoidant have *mixed* feelings about relationships with others simultaneously. That is, they are inclined to have an emotionally close relationship with others, but they feel uncomfortable getting close to them at the same time. These mixed feelings result in unconscious, negative, and undesirable views about themselves and their attachments. Because they rely heavily on their own vulnerability when it comes to relationship, such individuals may lack the mental resources necessary to attend thoughtfully to others' needs for help. Also, due to their tendency to distrust others' goodwill, highly fearful individuals are often cynical and suspicious of their organization and its representatives (e.g., Albert & Horowitz, 2009; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Thus, it is possible that individuals with a fearful attachment style will report high levels of organizational disidentification.

*Hypothesis 1:* Fearful attachment will have a positive relationship with organizational disidentification.

### **Direct Effects: Social and Economic Exchanges and Disidentification**

The connection between employees and their organizations has often been described as an exchange relationship (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). In particular, there are at least two conceptualizations as to why employees engage in exchange behaviors with their organizations: social and economic exchanges. *Social* exchange emphasizes the socioemotional aspects of employment relationships. Those high on social exchanges entail unspecified obligations based on trust (Blau, 1964) given that trust is viewed as the foundation for the relationship between an employee and an organization. In contrast, *economic* exchanges involve discrete, financially-oriented interactions. Transactions between an employee and an organization are impersonal so that trust is not emphasized in economic exchanges. Instead, tangible aspects of exchange relationships such as pay for performance are expected (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Rousseau, 1995).

Given the two distinct aspects of exchange relationships, social and economic exchanges will differentially predict the tendency to identify him or herself with an organization. Regarding social exchanges, we expect social exchange to be positively related to organizational identification. When employees perceive that the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being, employees are more likely to have emotional attachment with and feel obligated to their organization (Shore, Tetrick, Lynch, & Barksdale, 2006), which could potentially lead employees to engage in positive behaviors as a means of fulfilling the obligation within an organization. Several studies have demonstrated that social exchanges are positively associated with constructive work behaviors (Shore & Wayne, 1993; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002). Therefore, it is posited that social exchange will reduce individuals' tendencies to disidentify from their organization, given that such social exchanges are based on trust and a lower need to disassociate from one's organization (Blau, 1964; McLean Parks & Smith, 2012).

*Hypothesis 2a:* Social exchange will be negatively associated with organizational disidentification.

In terms of economic exchanges, the financial aspects of exchange tend to allow individuals to engage in behaviors that just meet rather than exceed and go the "above and beyond" requirements of the job. As a result, economic exchange is positively associated with relative absence and tardiness (Shore et al, 2006), which can be seen as an indication of disengagement and disidentification (Li, Barrick, Zimmerman, & Chiaburu, 2014). Thus, we posit that individuals who display economic exchanges are less likely to identify with their organization and in fact more likely to disidentify given the underlying lack of trust and the transactional relationships with their organization.

*Hypothesis 2b:* Economic exchange will be positively associated with organizational disidentification.

### **Joint Effect of Fearful Attachment and Exchanges on Organizational Disidentification**

We also provide an argument for the joint effects of the fearful attachment style and the two forms of exchange on organizational disidentification. In other words, the two types of exchange behaviors will moderate the relationship between the fearful attachment style and organizational disidentification. Specifically, the detrimental effect of being fearful on organizational identification will be pronounced when individuals tend to show low social exchange and high economic exchange. When fearful individuals think that their relationship with the organization is based on trust and emotional attachment, the tendency to distrust their organization will be decreased, leading to less organizational disidentification. However, when fearful individuals believe that the organization emphasizes financially oriented interactions and tangible aspects of the exchange relationship, they may rely less on their attachments with their organization and are less likely to ask for support from their organization due to the mistrust. Accordingly, the effect of the fearful attachment style on misidentification will be amplified when employees engage in economic exchanges with their organization. In sum, we expect that individuals' fearful attachment style and their social and economic exchange will interact, such that low levels of social exchange and high levels of economic exchange will accentuate the negative relationship between fearful attachment style and their disidentification.

*Hypothesis 3:* (a) Low social exchange and (b) high economic exchange will amplify the negative effect of fearful attachment on organizational disidentification.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants and Procedure**

Volunteers ( $N = 128$ ) participated in the study in exchange for course credit. They were undergraduate students (male = 55.47 %) from a large Southern university in the United States. Among 232 potential respondents in the subject pool, we selected the ones who had at least one prior job and included them in our sample. Slightly more than half of them (50.78%) were employed in an either full- or part-time job at the time the data were collected, and all participants had previous work experience at least once. The mean age for the participants was 20.90 years ( $SD = 1.60$ ). In terms of ethnicity, the group consisted of Caucasians (70.63%), Hispanics (13.49%), Asian (7.94%), African American (2.38%), and others (5.48%). For each measure, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with the respective statements on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Data were obtained at two different times from two questionnaires administered online four to five weeks apart.

### **Measures**

*Attachment styles.* At time 1, attachment styles with the Relationship Styles Questionnaire (RSQ) provided by Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) were measured. Specifically, *fearful attachment* was measured with 4 items (e.g., "I find it difficult to depend on other people" [ $\alpha = .83$ ]). The other three attachment styles were used as controls and are described below.

*Exchanges with the organization.* At time 1, social and economic exchange with their organizations using the measures developed by Shore, Tetrick, Lynch and Barksdale (2006) were measured. Specifically, social exchange was measured with 8 items (e.g., "My relationship with [my organization] is based on mutual trust" [ $\alpha = .75$ ]). Economic exchange was measured with 9 items (e.g., "My relationship with [my organization] is strictly an economic one- I work and they pay me" [ $\alpha = .86$ ]).

*Disidentification from an organization.* At time 2, disidentification was assessed with 3 items developed by Kreiner and Ashforth (2004). An example item includes, "I am embarrassed to be part of this organization" ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

### **Controls**

For completeness, we collected information about the three other attachment styles from the Relationship Styles Questionnaire (RSQ; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and used them as controls. Specifically, we measured *secure attachment* (5 items) (e.g., "I find it easy to get emotionally close to

others" [ $\alpha=.63$ ], *dismissing avoidance attachment* (3 items) (e.g., "It is very important to me to feel independent" [ $\alpha=.61$ ]) and *preoccupied attachment* (4 items) (e.g., "I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others" [ $\alpha=.75$ ]).

**TABLE 1**  
**DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND INTERCORRELATIONS AMONG STUDY VARIABLES**

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Fearful	3.79	1.31	(.81)						
2. Secure	4.44	1.03	-.59**	(.68)					
3. Dismissing	5.33	0.90	.29**	-.28**	(.70)				
4. Preoccupied	3.85	1.18	.25**	-.12	-.10	(.74)			
5. Social exchange	4.56	0.76	-.17	.10	.11	.15	(.74)		
6. Economic exchange	3.58	1.01	.06	-.05	-.12	-.10	-.34**	(.86)	
7. Disidentification	2.02	1.02	.24**	-.13	-.03	-.08	-.25**	.29**	(.82)

Note:  $N=128$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ . Cronbach alphas represent estimated reliability and are presented on the diagonal.

## RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among study variables are presented in Table 1. As expected, fearful attachment style is positively correlated with disidentification ( $r = .24$ ). Also, in line with our expectations, economic exchange is positively related to disidentification. ( $r = .29$ ), whereas social exchange is negatively related to disidentification ( $r = -.25$ ). Hypothesis 1, which predicted that fearful attachment style would be positively related to organizational disidentification, was supported ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $p < .01$ ; see Step 2, Table 2;  $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .01$ ; see Step 2, Table 3). Hypothesis 2a, which predicted that social exchange would be negatively related to organizational disidentification, was also supported ( $\beta = -.17$ ,  $p < .05$ ; see Step 2, Table 2). Hypothesis 2b, which predicted that economic exchange would be positively related to organizational disidentification, was also supported ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < .05$ ; see Step 2, Table 3).

**TABLE 2**  
**THE INTERACTION EFFECT OF FEARFUL ATTACHMENT STYLE AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE ON DISIDENTIFICATION**

Variables	<i>Disidentification</i>		
	Step 1	Step 2	Final Step
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Intercept	.09**	.09**	.09**
Secure	.09	.00	.11
Dismissing	.11	-.10	.11
Preoccupied	.08	-.12	.08
Fearful attachment (F)		.27**	.09**
Social exchange (S)		-.17*	.12*
F × S			.09 <sup>+</sup>
Model $R^2$	.03	.12**	.14*
$\Delta R^2$		.09**	.02*

*Note:* F × S, Fearful attachment × Social exchange; + $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

We tested our joint effects by using the moderated multiple regression procedures recommended by Aiken and West (1991). Specifically, to test Hypothesis 3a and 3b, in step 1, three attachment styles (secure, dismissing, and preoccupied) were entered as control variables in the regression model, and then in step 2, we regressed the dependent variable (disidentification) onto an independent variable and a moderator, followed by an interaction term in the final step.

In Hypothesis 3a, we predicted that the relationship between fearful attachment style and disidentification will be moderated by social exchange. The interaction effect between fearful avoidance attachment and social exchange on disidentification was significant ( $\beta = .09, p < .10$ ). Following Cohen and Cohen (1983) guidelines, we computed a simple slope analysis to examine the nature of the interaction. Figure 2 shows that for those low in social exchange with organization, individual fearful attachment style was significantly positively related to disidentification ( $\beta = .41, p < .01$ ), but those high in social exchange with organization, the relationship between fearful attachment style and disidentification was not significant ( $\beta = .11, ns$ ), supporting Hypothesis 3a.

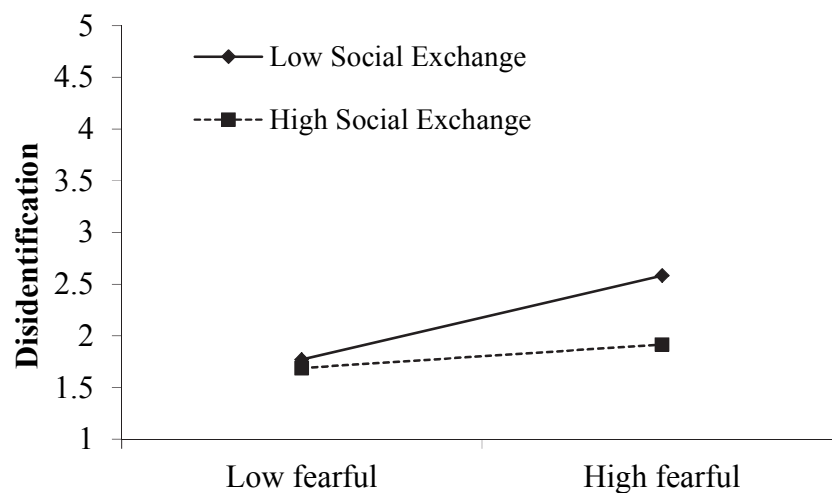
In Hypothesis 3b, we predicted that the relationship between fearful attachment style and disidentification is moderated by economic exchange. As shown in Table 3, the interaction effect between fearful attachment style and economic exchange on disidentification was significant ( $\beta = .06, p < .10$ ). Specifically, a simple slope for high economic exchange was significant ( $\beta = .31, p < .01$ ), but a simple slope for low economic exchange was not significant ( $\beta = .10, ns$ ). Figure 3 showed that high economic exchange strengthened the positive relationship between fearful attachment style and disidentification, but low economic exchange did not significantly moderate the relationship, thus supporting Hypothesis 3b.

**TABLE 3**  
**THE INTERACTION EFFECT OF FEARFUL ATTACHMENT STYLE AND ECONOMIC EXCHANGE ON DISIDENTIFICATION**

Variables	<i>Disidentification</i>		
	Step 1	Step 2	Final Step
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Intercept	.09**	.09**	.08**
Secure	.09	.00	.10
Dismissing	.11	-.10	.10
Preoccupied	.08	-.13	.08
Fearful attachment (F)		.29**	.09**
Economic exchange (E)		.24**	.09**
F $\times$ E			.06 <sup>+</sup>
Model $R^2$	.03	.15**	.16**
$\Delta R^2$		.12**	.01**

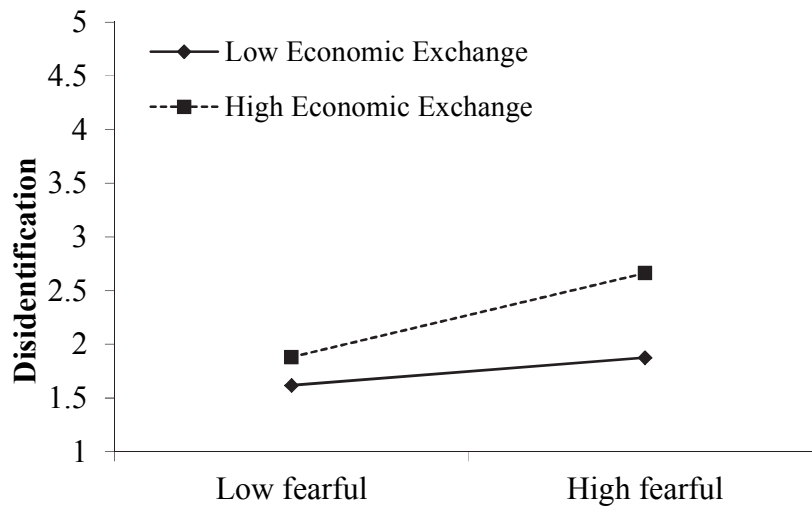
*Note:* F  $\times$  S, Fearful attachment  $\times$  Social exchange; <sup>+</sup>p < .10, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01

**FIGURE 2**  
**THE INTERACTION EFFECT OF FEARFUL ATTACHMENT AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE ON DISIDENTIFICATION**





**FIGURE 3**  
**THE INTERACTION EFFECT OF FEARFUL ATTACHMENT AND ECONOMIC EXCHANGE ON DISIDENTIFICATION**



## DISCUSSION

This study attempts to examine fearful attachment (one of the adult attachment styles) and two types of exchange behaviors (social and economic) as predictors of disidentification from an organization. Consistent with our predictions, individuals high on fearful attachment reported higher levels of disidentification from their organization. Also, individuals low on social exchange and high on economic exchange reported higher levels of disidentification. Moreover, we found that fearful attachment styles and exchange behavior jointly predicted disidentification such that fearfully attached individuals seemed to disidentify from their organization when they exhibited low level of social exchange and high level of economic exchange.

### Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Our study has some implications for theory and adds to the growing body of literature regarding attachment styles (e.g., Albert, Allen, Biggane, & Ma, 2015; Albert & Horowitz, 2009; Geller & Bamberger, 2009; Richards & Schat, 2011) indicating that individual attachment styles can improve our understanding of employee attitudes and behaviors in organizational settings. In particular, our findings on the negative relationship between fearful attachment styles and outcomes are in line with previous research findings (e.g., Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Pooer, 2007; Richards & Schat, 2011).

In addition, our prediction of disidentification by social and economic exchanges extends prior research. Specifically, focusing on psychological contract breach as predictor of disidentification, Zagenczyk, Gibney, Few, and Scott (2011) demonstrated that breach of both relational and transactional contracts positively predicted disidentification to almost identical extent. Although we did not posit nor test “socioemotional” and “material” needs as predictors as Zagenczyk et al. suggested (p. 277), our social and economic exchange predictors captured *general* patterns of exchange behavior and provided an empirical test extending the focus on *specific* psychological contract breaches already examined by Zagenczyk and colleagues.

More importantly, understanding the joint effects of attachment style and exchange behaviors is useful in that organizations and managers can identify *when* fearful attachment styles are more deleterious in terms of disidentification and *how* they can possibly prevent negative consequences of having fearful individuals who tend to disidentify from their organizations. Evidence has documented that organizational

disidentification is associated with a number of negative outcomes, including lower levels of job satisfaction, work engagement and well-being (Egold & Van Dick, 2015) and possibly reduced performance and extra-role behaviors. Our study revealed that fearful attachment style and exchange behaviors jointly predicted disidentification such that fearful individuals with low level of social exchange and high level of economic exchange respectively showed increased levels of disidentification. From a practical standpoint, to the extent that organizations can implement practices that provide employees with an appropriate exchange signal (more social and less economic exchange), such practices can decrease organizational disidentification for individuals with a fearful attachment style.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Our study has several limitations. We used a convenience sampling method with self-reports. However, we tried to reduce this sampling-related limitation by including only those individuals who had prior job experience. More importantly, self-reported data are less problematic given the constructs assessed in this research (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, Podsakoff, 2003) in which respondents are the best sources to report within-individual predictors (attachment styles, preferred forms of exchange) as well as our specific outcome (disidentification). Nevertheless, future studies need to establish with more precision as to the extent to which our findings extend to various organizations with a sample of full-time employees.

Although we focused on one specific form of identification (disidentification) and one type of attachment style (fearful attachment), future research can theoretically link other forms of identification (e.g., ambivalent and neutral identification, Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004) to other types of attachment styles. For example, it is possible that anxious forms of attachment may predispose individuals having ambivalent identification with an organization and avoidant forms of attachment could be in line with neutral identification (Ronen & Mikulincer, 2011). Similar extensions of the criterion space can take place by investigating the effect of attachment style on identification with *multiple foci* of organizational identification. This is because the strength and salience of individuals' identification may vary across different targets such as coworkers and leaders (Bugental, 2000; Davidovitz et al., 2007). In addition, as disidentification is conceptualized in different manners including career disidentification (Egold & Van Dick, 2015) and occupational disidentification (Ashforth, Joshi, Anand, & O'Leary-Kelly, 2013), future research can examine how attachment styles are associated with different types of disidentification.

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