

ATTRIBUTION PROCESSES AND SALESFORCE EXPECTANCY PERCEPTIONS

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Considerable research has been conducted on the applicability of Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory of motivation within the context of salesforce management. A number of models have been specified that attempt to explain salesperson expectancy estimates. Unfortunately, the results of much of the research directly linking individual, organizational, task, and environmental antecedents with salesperson expectancy estimates have been equivocal. The purpose of this paper is to apply a model based on attribution theory to explain the inconsistencies in previous research. Implications for sales managers, as well as future research directions, are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Several authors have examined questions concerning salesforce motivation (Evans, Margheim, and Schlacter 1982; Oliver 1974; Johnston and Kim 1994; Teas and McElroy 1986; Teas 1981, 1982; Tyagi 1982; Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1977) using the expectancy theory of motivation (Vroom 1964). Expectancy is defined as the salesperson's belief or estimate of the likelihood (probability) that focusing a given amount of effort on a particular task will result in an increased level of performance on a particular dimension of the task. In general, expectancy theory suggests that a salesperson's expectancy estimates are positively related to motivation which, in turn, is positively related to performance. Consequently, the concept of expectancy has become an integral part of research on salesforce motivation.

Walker, Churchill, and Ford's (1977) classic model of industrial salespeople's motivation and performance is illustrative of the central importance of

expectancy perceptions in the prediction of salesforce performance. The model details a series of propositions aimed at identifying possible antecedents of salesperson expectancy estimates.¹ The Walker et al. model has been expanded by Teas (1981) and Tyagi (1982) to include several individual, task, organizational, and environmental factors as potential predictors of salesperson expectancy estimates. For example, the results of an empirical study reported by Teas (1981) indicated a positive relationship between salesperson expectancy estimates and task specific self-esteem,² participation, task complexity, and task variety/completeness and a negative relationship between expectancy estimates and perceived selling constraints. In addition, Tyagi (1982) found support for leader consideration, management concern and awareness, organizational identification, and task conflict as antecedents of salesperson expectancy estimates, with the last being negatively related to expectancy estimates.

However, many of the proposed relationships have not been supported by the empirical evidence. No support was found for any of the following hypothesized antecedents of expectancy estimates: salesperson global self-esteem, experience, locus of control, perceived leader initiating structure,

performance feedback, perceived task autonomy and significance (Teas 1981), perceived job challenge and task variety, job importance, and perceived role overload (Tyagi 1982). Further complicating this issue is the fact that research by Tyagi (1982) supports task variety and leader consideration as antecedents to expectancy estimates. Other research findings, however, indicate an opposite pattern for task variety and a lack of support for leader consideration as a predictor of salesforce expectancy estimates (Teas 1981). The Table below summarizes the empirical findings of hypothesized antecedents of salesperson expectancy estimates.

The purpose of this paper is to use and further develop the conceptual framework proposed by Teas and McElroy (1986) on the integration of attribution theory and expectancy theory to explain the lack of, and sometimes inconsistent, results in applying expectancy theory to salesforce motivation. Briefly, the framework eliminates several of the antecedents previously proposed (*e.g.*, experience, leader consideration) and specifies the remaining antecedents (except participation) as affecting salesforce expectancy estimates through performance attribution processes. As illustrated in Figure 1, locus of control and global self-esteem are positioned as natural attribution tendencies that influence expectancy estimates through the causal attribution process. Performance feedback, task characteristics, and environmental characteristics provide input to causal information used in self-evaluations which, in turn, influences causal attributions. Thus, we specify the model in mediation terms; the effect of natural attribution tendencies (*i.e.*, locus of control and global self-esteem) and causal information (*i.e.*, feedback, task characteristics, and environmental characteristics) on expectancy estimates is expected to be *mediated* by salesperson causal attributions. Therefore, discussion of the conceptual framework centers on specific factors affecting salesperson performance attributions. Though attribution processes related to expectancy estimates is only one element of salesforce motivation processes, we believe it is a crucial element because it focuses on the cognitive processes that salespeople use to interpret events and how these interpretations affect effort-performance linkage perceptions. Consequently, in this paper we provide a conceptual framework of

salesperson expectancy estimates that can be used to (a) examine prior inconsistent empirical findings and (b) guide future research efforts. It is imperative to have a solid theoretical framework in that empirical efforts should be guided by theory (Kaplan 1964). Such an approach should ensure that theory will not be prematurely rejected on the basis of hastily designed research efforts (Olson 1981). Therefore, this paper is designed to increase the likelihood that future empirical studies will constitute valid tests of the core arguments presented here. The conceptual logic underlying our model with testable research propositions follows.

THE ATTRIBUTION INFORMATION MODEL OF EXPECTANCY ANTECEDENTS

Attribution processes are used by individuals to interpret events. In essence, attribution processes involve post hoc reasoning whereby the causes of a behavior or event are inferred from the observation of the behavior or event (Steers and Mowday 1981). Causal attributions, or the particular causes that an individual attributes to a given event, are assumed to have important consequences for individual feelings and subsequent behavior (Jones et al. 1972; see Folkes 1988 for review of attribution theory in marketing). Consequently, as indicated in Figure 1, salespersons' causal performance attributions with respect to a selling task are hypothesized to affect salespersons' expectancy estimates.

The Nature of Causal Attribution Processes

Attribution theorists and sales researchers postulate that in achievement-related contexts such as sales, success and failure are cognitively attributed to such factors as ability, effort, task difficulty, and/or luck (*e.g.*, Dubinsky, Skinner, and Whittler 1989; Gentry, Mowen, and Tasaki 1991; Teas and McElroy 1986; Weiner 1972; Weiner et al. 1972). Weiner (1972, 1985) has developed a causal scheme suggesting that these four commonly used sources of causality vary along two dimensions: internal-external and stable-variable.³ Examples of those attributions internal to the individual would include ability and effort, and

TABLE
Review of Research on Selected Antecedents of Salesperson Expectancy Estimates

Concept	Hypothesized Relationship with Salesperson Expectancies	Support/No Support
Global Self-esteem	Positive (Walker et al. 1977; Teas 1981)	No Support (Teas 1981)
Specified Self-esteem	Positive (Teas 1981)	Support (Teas 1981)
Internal Locus of Control	Positive (Teas 1981)	No support (Teas 1981)
Experience	Positive (Walker et al. 1977; Teas 1981)	No support (Teas 1981)
Performance Feedback	Positive (Teas 1981)	No support (Teas 1981)
Leadership Consideration	Positive (Tyagi 1982; Teas 1981)	Support (Tyagi 1982) No support (Teas 1981)
Initiation of Structure	Positive (Teas 1981)	No support (Teas 1981)
Participation	Positive (Teas 1981)	Support (Teas 1981)
Task Characteristics		
• Task variety/challenge	Positive (Tyagi 1982; Teas 1981)	Support (Teas 1981) No support (Tyagi 1982)
• Job importance	Positive (Tyagi 1982; Teas 1981)	No support (Tyagi 1982)
Environmental Constraints (examples include: economic conditions, strength of competition, sales territory potential, restrictions of product availability)	Negative (Walker et al. 1977; Teas 1981)	Support (Teas 1981)

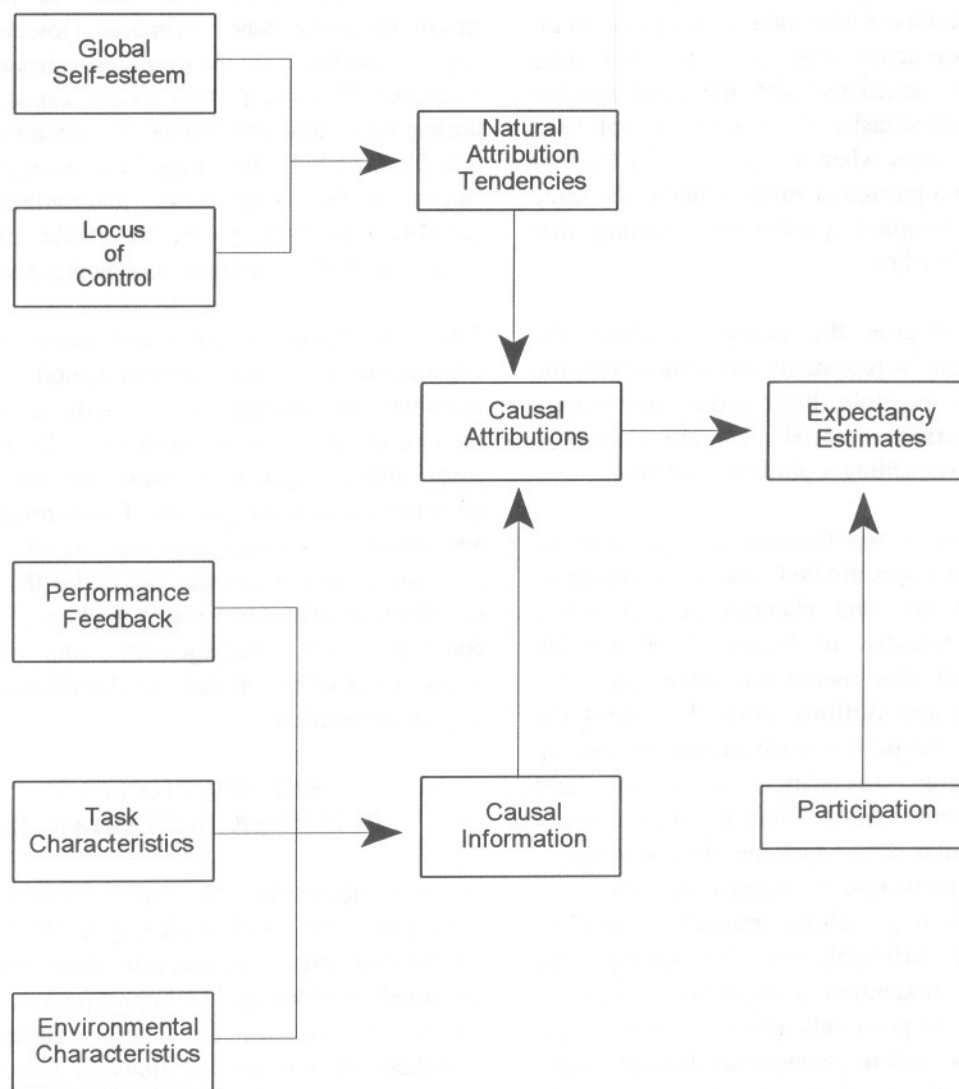
examples of external attributions would include the difficulty level of the task and/or luck. A stable-variable interpretation of these same four attributions has been developed (*e.g.*, Frieze and Weiner 1971; Weiner, Nierenberg, and Goldstein 1976). This perspective makes a distinction between those possible causal explanations for success and failure that remain relatively fixed over time (*e.g.*, ability and task difficulty) and those that vary over time (*e.g.*, effort and luck).

The process of attributing behavior and events to causes varies depending on the amount of information available to the attributor. In some instances, individuals may make causal inferences on the basis of a single observation of a behavior

or event. In this case, use is made of *a priori* causal beliefs (*e.g.*, causal preconceptions and stereotypes) in the assignment of causality. Heider (1958) describes this phenomenon in terms of individuals possessing a "naive psychology of action." That is, individuals carry with them their own implicit theories concerning effects and their causes and use them to give meaning to the events and actions they observe.

Of more relevance to a sales context are those instances when individuals have access to information from multiple observations of their job performance. In these situations, Kelley's (1967, 1973) principle of covariance predicts that a behavior or an event will be attributed to a cause

FIGURE 1
A Model of Antecedents Influencing Salesperson Expectancy Estimates



with which it covaries over time. Multiple observations of job performance produce information that is vital to the process of determining the extent to which a behavior or event covaries with a possible cause. Three such pieces of information are distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency.

Distinctiveness refers to the extent that the event, *i.e.*, the individual's specific performance level on task *j*, is different from the same individual's performance level on other tasks. For example, high levels of distinctiveness occur when a salesperson performs poorly when selling a specific product line, as

compared to his/her performance with other product lines.

Consensus refers to whether an event produces the same response in others who interact with that event. That is, consensus concerns the extent to which other salespeople are associated with the same specific performance level on task *j*. For example, a high level of consensus occurs when a salesperson's level of performance for a particular product line is the same as other salespeople's performance selling that particular product line.

Consistency concerns the extent to which the behavior or event is repeatedly associated with the individual. For example, high consistency occurs when a salesperson repeatedly exhibits a specific performance level selling a particular product.

A general model of hypothesized linkages between performance on a specific task, causal information, causal attributions, and changes in expectancy estimates is presented in Figure 2. A detailed rationale behind this model has been presented elsewhere (Teas and McElroy 1986). In general, the model predicts that performance causal attributions are based upon consistency, consensus, and distinctiveness information. First, if performance is high on a particular selling task and the consistency-consensus-distinctiveness information leads to internal-unstable (*e.g.*, effort), internal-stable (*e.g.*, ability), or external-stable (*e.g.*, the selling task) attributions, the magnitude of expectancy estimates are predicted to be positively affected or reinforced. Second, if the consistency-consensus-distinctiveness information leads to external-unstable (*e.g.*, luck) attributions for high performance, no impact on expectancy estimates is predicted. Third, if performance is low on a particular selling task and the consistency-consensus-distinctiveness information leads to external-stable or internal-stable attributions (*e.g.*, selling task or ability), expectancy estimates are predicted to be negatively affected. Fourth, if low performance is attributed to internal-unstable causes (*e.g.*, effort), expectancy estimates are predicted to be positively affected. Fifth, if low performance is attributed to external-unstable causes (*e.g.*, luck), no impact on expectancy estimates is predicted.

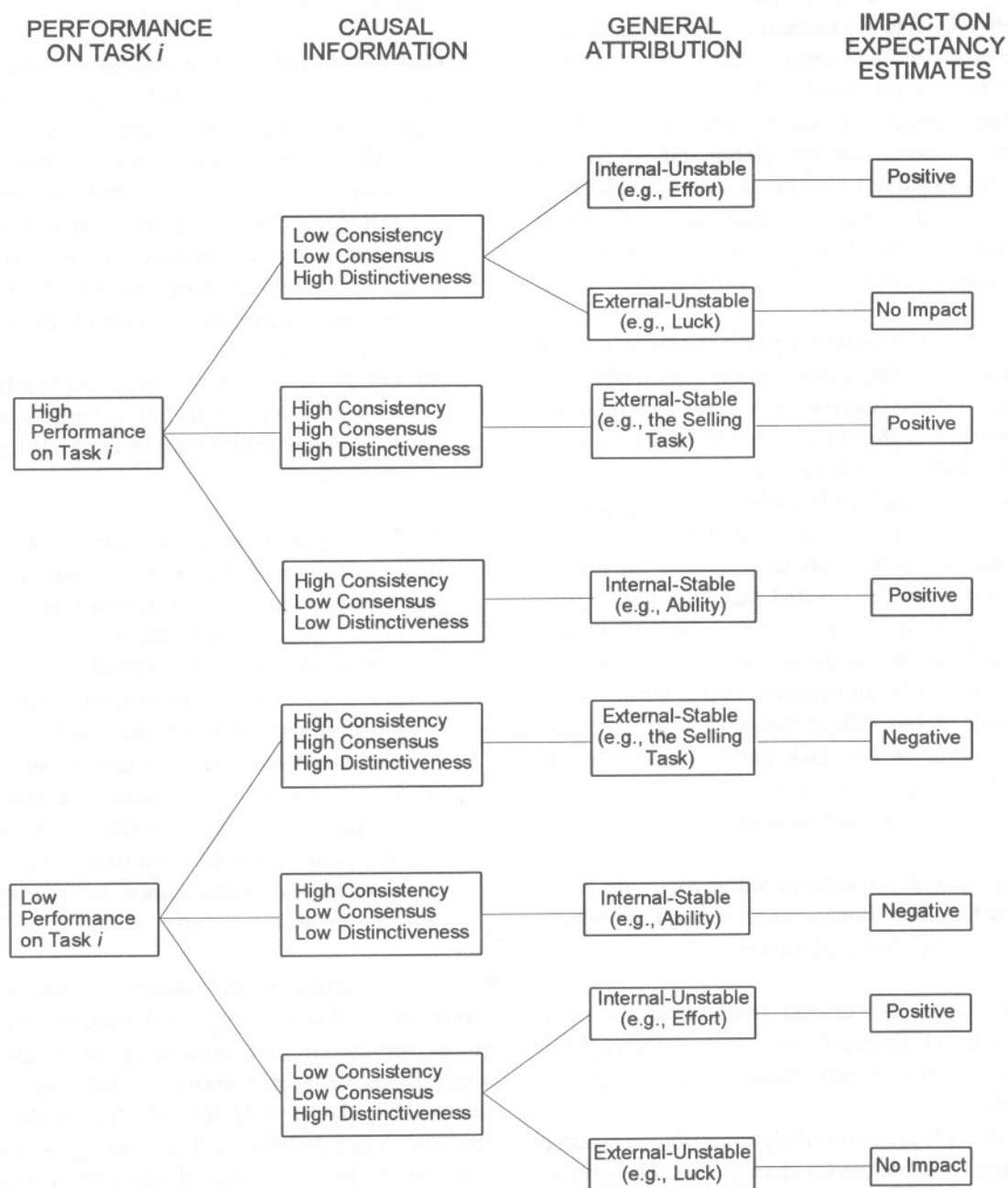
A recent empirical study of this model by Johnston and Kim (1994) yielded mixed results. The results supported the notion that consistency-consensus-distinctiveness information leads to changes in salesperson expectancy estimates. However, limited support was found for the hypotheses proposed in the Teas and McElroy (1986) model, especially those dealing with stable attributions. As noted by Johnston and Kim (1994), this may have resulted from a failure of the experimental manipulation of the stability dimension to induce stable attributions. Hence, further research on this model is warranted.

The remainder of this paper will specify individual, organizational, and environmental constraint variables as antecedents of natural attribution tendencies, or as causal information factors that, in turn, affect expectancy estimates via a causal attribution mediating process. Furthermore, as each antecedent is discussed, explanations will be offered concerning how the model reconciles the equivocal salesforce motivation research findings. Finally, we conclude with management and theoretical implications of our model and directions for future empirical research.

ATTRIBUTIONS AS INTERVENING VARIABLES

Previous theoretical and empirical research (Tyagi 1982; Teas 1981, 1982; Walker et al. 1977) indicates that personal, organizational, task, and environmental constraint variables may be important antecedents of salesforce motivation. These authors have hypothesized a direct relationship between these antecedents and salesperson expectancy estimates. However, many of the relationships have received mixed support or no support, as indicated in the Table. Therefore, rather than being direct antecedents of expectancy estimates, the attributional framework proposed in this paper indicates the relationships between these antecedent variables and salesforce motivation may be more complex than previously hypothesized.

FIGURE 2
The Impact of Past Performance, Causal Information,
and Causal Attributions on Expectancy Estimates ¹



¹ For a detailed discussion of these linkages, see Teas and McElroy (1986).

Personal Variables

Global Self-Esteem. Global self-esteem refers to the overall competence with everyday life situations and broad feelings of personal regard for the self. It has been hypothesized that global self-esteem is positively related to salesperson expectancy estimates (Walker et al. 1977). However, Teas (1981) found no support for this relationship. It is apparent from an attribution perspective that this hypothesized direct linear relationship between global self-esteem and expectancy estimates may be an oversimplification. Only in certain instances would the attributional framework proposed here support this hypothesized relationship (see Figure 3 for a summary).

Weiner's (1985) attribution process model states that performance meeting prior expectations tends to be attributed to stable (internal or external) attributions. An unexpected performance tends to be attributed to unstable (internal or external) attributions. Under the assumption that high global self-esteem salespeople, when compared to low global self-esteem salespeople, are more likely to perceive a life history of success, it can be posited that high global self-esteem salespeople will be more likely than low global self-esteem salespeople to perceive high task performance to be an expected event. On the other hand, high global self-esteem salespeople are less likely to perceive low task performance to be an expected event than low global self-esteem salespeople. Hence, the following propositions:

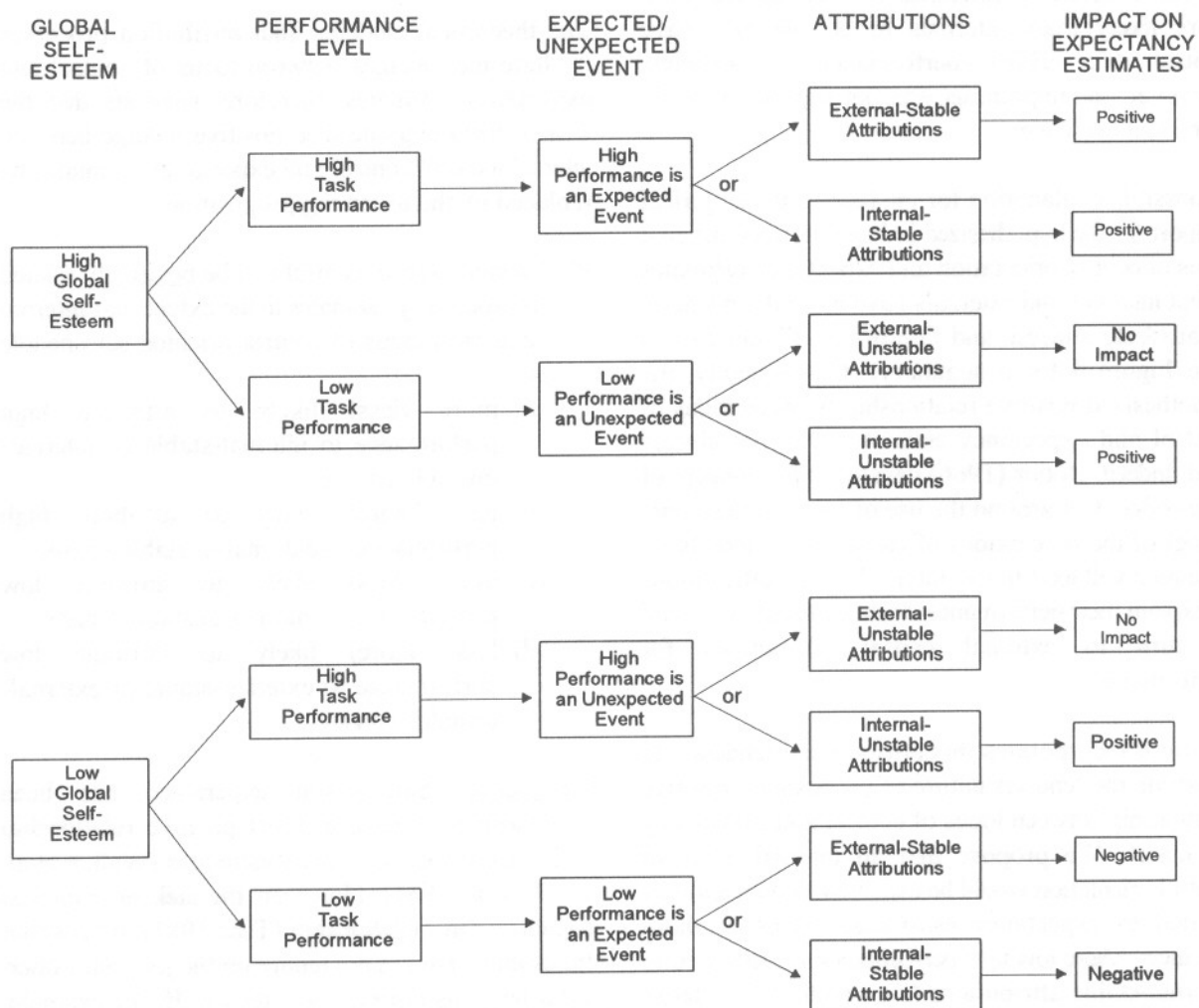
- P1: High global self-esteem salespeople are more likely than low global self-esteem salespeople to perceive high task performance to be an expected event.
- P2: Low global self-esteem salespeople are more likely than high global self-esteem salespeople to perceive low task performance to be an expected event.
- P3: Salespeople are more likely to attribute expected events to stable causes than to unstable causes.
- P4: Salespeople are more likely to attribute unexpected events to unstable causes than to stable causes.

Using these propositions, the Weiner (1985) attribution process model, and the linkages specified in Figure 2, we hypothesize the relationships between salespeople's global self-esteem and expectancy estimates are more complicated than originally specified by Walker et al. (1977):

- P5: Under *high* performance situations, global self-esteem will be positively linked to salespersons' expectancy estimates to the extent that:
 - (a) high global self-esteem salespeople, compared to low global self-esteem salespeople, will be more likely to attribute successful performance to internal- or external-stable factors, both of which result in a predicted positive impact on expectancy estimates, and
 - (b) low global self-esteem salespeople attribute successful performance to external-unstable attributions rather than to internal-unstable attributions.
- P6: Under *low* performance situations, global self-esteem will be positively linked to salespersons' expectancy estimates to the extent that:
 - (a) high global self-esteem salespeople, compared to low global self-esteem salespeople, will be more likely to attribute low performance to internal-unstable rather than to external-unstable factors, and
 - (b) low global self-esteem salespeople, compared to high global self-esteem salespeople, will be more likely to attribute unsuccessful performance to internal- or external-stable factors.

Figure 3 illustrates the difficulty inherent in proposing a direct positive relationship between global self-esteem and expectancy estimates. The propositions delineated above predict that such a relationship should hold for only five of the eight scenarios depicted in Figure 3 (*i.e.*, the three positive connections between high global self-esteem and expectancy estimates and the two negative relationships between low global self-esteem and expectancy estimates).

FIGURE 3
A Summary of Potential Linkages Among Global Self-esteem, Causal Attributions, and Expectancy Perceptions



Locus of Control. Locus of control as a personality variable refers to the degree to which individuals believe they are in control of their own destiny (internals) or whether they believe in fate or luck (externals) (Rotter 1966). Based upon research results reported by Sims, Szilagyi, and McKemey (1976) and Lied and Pritchard (1976), Teas (1981) hypothesized that the degree to which a salesperson is internal control-oriented is positively related to his/her expectancy estimates because internals are more likely than externals to believe they have control over effort—performance relationships. However, the hypothesis was not supported by the empirical evidence.

A possible explanation for the lack of the empirical support for the hypothesized linkage between internal locus of control orientation and expectancy estimates is that internals and externals have natural tendencies to attribute success and failure to different causes (see Figure 4 for a summary). Consequently, the hypothesized positive relationship between locus of control and expectancy estimates may not always hold. Indeed, Rotter (1966) developed his concept of locus of control around the use of a one-dimensional model of the perceptions of causality—internals by definition will tend to use internal causal attributions to explain their performance while externals will tend to turn to external causal attributions for performance.

Figure 4 incorporates this attributional tendency to illustrate the tenuous nature of proposing a positive relationship between locus of control and expectancy estimates. We propose that an internal locus of control orientation would be expected to be positively related to expectancy estimates, except in those instances where low task performance is attributed to internal-stable attributions (*e.g.*, ability). The latter scenario, however, is unlikely given the self-serving bias in attributions and the lack of personal control inherent in attributions to internal-stable causes following a poor performance. Similarly, a significant relationship between external locus of control and expectancy estimates is expected only in certain situations. For a positive relationship between the concept of locus of control, in general, and expectancy estimates, external orientation would

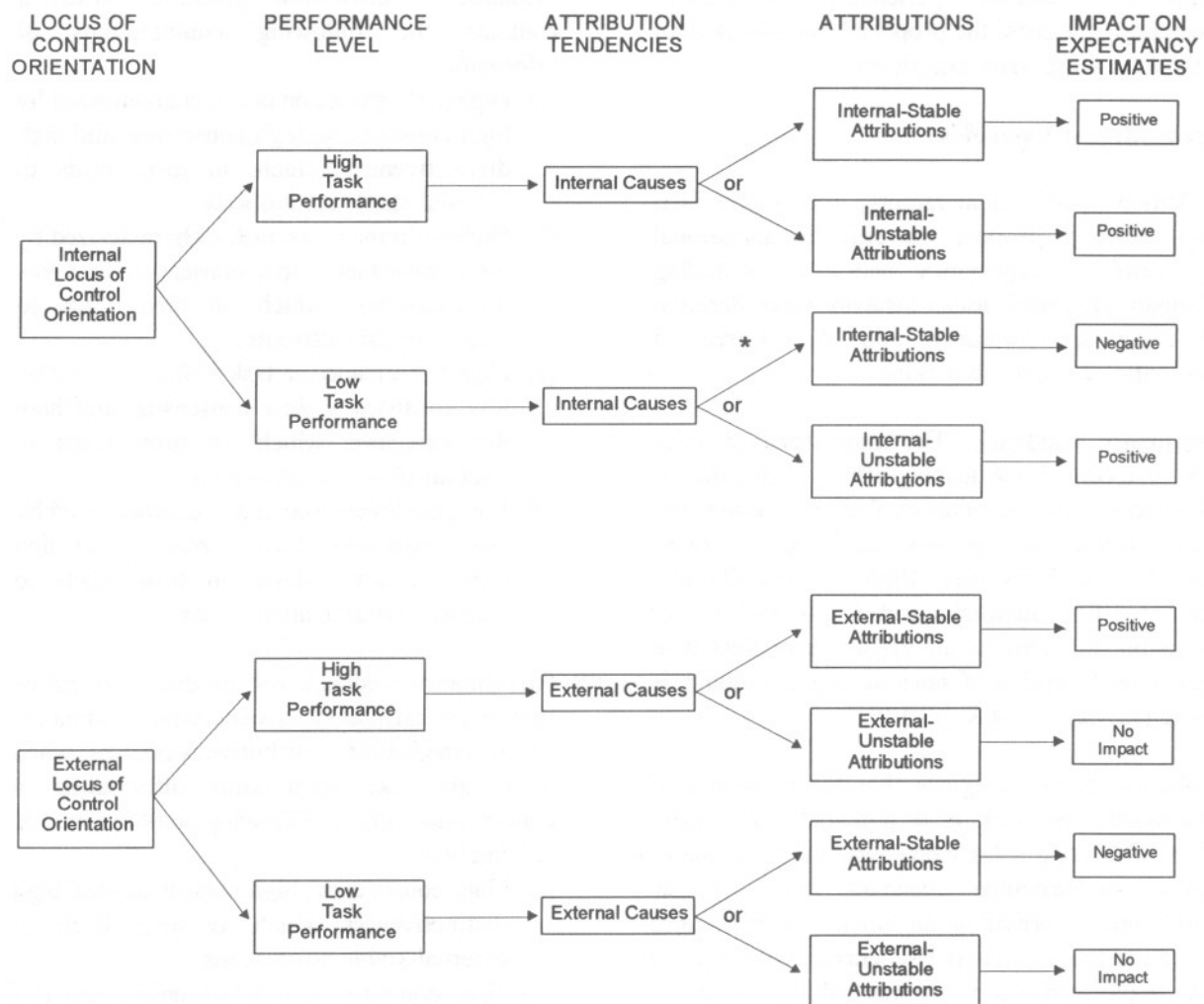
have to be negatively related to expectancy estimates. As shown in Figure 4, such would be the case only in those situations where low task performance is attributed to external-stable causes. In summary, of the eight possible situations depicted in Figure 4, a positive (negative) relationship between internal (external) locus of control and expectancy estimates would be expected in only one-half of those conditions.

The theoretical evidence that attribution processes mediate the linkages between locus of control and expectancy estimates, therefore, suggests that the Teas (1981) hypothesized positive linkage between internal locus of control and expectancy estimates be replaced by the following proposition:

- P7: Internal locus of control will be positively related to expectancy estimates to the extent that internal (external) locus of control oriented salespeople are:
- (a) more (less) likely to attribute high performance to internal-stable or internal-unstable causes.
 - (b) less (more) likely to attribute high performance to external-unstable causes.
 - (c) more (less) likely to attribute low performance to internal-unstable causes.
 - (d) less (more) likely to attribute low performance to external-stable or external-unstable causes.

Experience. Salesperson experience has been hypothesized to have a direct positive relationship with salesperson expectancy estimates (Walker et al. 1977; Teas 1981). However, the lack of empirical support for this relationship (Teas 1981) implies that the essential issue is not tenure on the job, but rather, what happens during one's tenure. If, for example, experience on the job results in repeated high performance on a particular selling task, expectancy estimates are likely to be high for that task. If the salesperson consistently experiences low job performance over time, his/her expectancy estimates are likely to be low. On the other hand, to the extent that a consistent high performer may be more likely to remain in his/her job while a consistent low performer is more likely to leave, it is possible that

FIGURE 4
A Summary of Potential Linkages Among Locus of Control Orientation, Causal Attributions, and Expectancy Perceptions



* Unlikely path

experience could be positively correlated with expectancy estimates. However, there is a low probability that a company's entire salesforce is composed of high performers. Thus, if the nature of the experience, rather than simply tenure, is at issue, then experience may be better conceptualized in terms of the performance feedback variable and the configuration of performance information addressed below. Consequently, because there is no theoretical or empirical evidence for experience, *per se*, to affect expectancy estimates, the proposed framework does not include salesperson experience.

Organizational Variables

In addition to individual factors, Teas (1981) and Tyagi (1982) propose several organizational antecedents of expectancy estimates, including performance feedback, leader behavior (consideration and initiating structure), and the degree of participation in decision making.

Performance Feedback. The importance of sales manager feedback influencing sales performance is clearly recognized. Supervisory feedback powerfully shapes future salesperson performance (e.g., Anderson and Chambers 1985; Challagalla and Shervani 1996; Jaworski and Kohli 1991). Yet systematic attention to the cognitive processes in salesperson reception of sales manager feedback is lacking (Jaworski and Kohli 1991).

Attribution theory suggests that the provision of performance feedback is a potentially important factor influencing sales force expectancy estimates because performance feedback may contain attributional information on whether performance was high or low as well as how current performance relates to past performance on this task (consistency), performance on other tasks (distinctiveness), and the performance of others on similar tasks (consensus). Recipients of such feedback can use consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus information to formulate attributions about their performance.

For reasons specified in Figure 2, from the perspective of influencing expectancy estimates, sales managers have an incentive to provide feedback

information in a way that increases the likelihood of salespeople attributing their performance to (a) internal-unstable causes (e.g., effort) following low performance or (b) internal-unstable, internal-stable causes, or external-unstable causes following high task performance. More formally:

P8: Performance feedback will produce a *positive* impact on salespeople's expectancy estimates, mediated by attribution processes, when it contains the following combinations of information:

- (a) High performance on task *j*, characterized by high consistency, high consensus, and high distinctiveness which, in turn, leads to external-stable attributions.
- (b) High performance on task *j*, characterized by high consistency, low consensus, and low distinctiveness which, in turn, leads to internal-stable attributions.
- (c) High performance on task *j*, characterized by low consistency, low consensus, and high distinctiveness which, in turn, leads to internal-unstable attributions.
- (d) Low performance on task *j*, characterized by low consistency, low consensus, and high distinctiveness which, in turn, leads to internal-unstable attributions.

P9: Performance feedback will produce a *negative* impact on salespeople's expectancy estimates, which is mediated by attribution processes, when it contains low performance information in conjunction with the following combinations of information:

- (a) High consistency, high consensus, and high distinctiveness which, in turn, leads to external-stable attributions.
- (b) High consistency, low consensus, and low distinctiveness which, in turn, leads to internal-stable attributions.

P10: Performance feedback will produce *no* impact on salespeople's expectancy estimates, which is mediated by attribution processes, when it contains the following combinations of information:

- (a) High performance on task *j*, characterized by low consistency, low consensus, and high distinctiveness which, in turn, leads to external-unstable attributions.
- (b) Low performance on task *j*, characterized by low consistency, low consensus, and high distinctiveness which, in turn, leads to external-unstable attributions.

Consideration. The consideration dimension of leadership style concerns the degree to which a leader promotes a climate of psychological support, trust, respect, helpfulness, and friendliness. Consideration, therefore, pertains to the personal relationships dimension of leadership style. Although leader consideration has been hypothesized to be positively related to salesforce expectancy estimates (Teas 1981; Tyagi 1982), the attribution framework proposed in this paper offers no support for such a hypothesis. For example, there is no current theoretical or empirical evidence suggesting that salespeople of considerate sales managers are more likely to make expectancy enhancing attributions, such as attributing low task performance to internal-unstable causes or attributing high task performance to external-unstable causes. Consequently, the attribution framework proposed in this study supports the Teas (1981) findings of no statistically significant relationship between leader consideration and salesforce expectancies. Tyagi (1982), on the other hand, did find a significant relationship between consideration and salesperson expectancy estimates. This may have been due to the fact that in his study consideration was defined as the degree of subordinates' participation in the design of jobs rather than in terms of more traditional supportive leader behavior sense of the term consideration, as defined in this paper. Hence, while consideration may be an important antecedent of salesforce motivation (e.g., salespeople may attach a high valence to consideration), it is not integral to expectancy estimates, *per se*, and, therefore, is not included in this model of expectancy antecedents.

Initiation of Structure. The initiation of structure dimension of leadership style concerns the degree to which leaders structure and define their role and that of their subordinates in job-related activities. While

the leader's structuring role may be related to expectancy perceptions, the model proposed in Figure 1 suggests that initiating structure does not play a role in affecting salesperson expectancy estimates via causal attributions. Providing structure and defining roles can be expected to clarify the roles of the participants in the marketing activities of the firm. This clarification may increase the likelihood of salespersons making performance attributions that are congruent with the defined role (i.e., more accurate attributions). However, making more accurate attributions, initiating structure, *per se*, will not necessarily result in higher expectancy estimates.

We are not implying that initiating structure is not an important aspect of salesforce motivation. What we are suggesting is that initiating structure does not play a role in affecting expectancy estimates via attributional processes. The lack of support for a general positive link between initiating structure and expectancy estimates is more likely due to the nature of the initiating structure, *per se*. For example, one manager could be high on initiating structure but establish fairly easy sales quotas. This would result in high expectancy estimates on the part of the salesperson. On the other hand, another manager could also be high in initiating structure but establish extremely high sales quotas which are virtually impossible to achieve, resulting in low expectancy estimates on the part of the salesperson.

Participation. Based upon evidence from the organizational behavior literature, Teas (1981) hypothesized that participation, defined as "... the degree to which the salesperson is able to influence organizational decisions about the job" (Teas 1981, p. 211), is positively related to salesforce expectancy estimates. Empirical results reported by Teas (1981) and Tyagi (1982) support the hypothesis. Because of this support and because the attribution theory framework used in this paper does not indicate the original hypothesis should be modified, no attribution-based propositions are specified concerning the linkage between participation and salesforce expectancy estimates.

Task Characteristics

Some evidence has been reported that job characteristics such as task variety, completeness, and complexity (Teas 1981) and task variety, importance, and challenge (James et al. 1977) may be positively related to employees' expectancy estimates. In addition, other task characteristic variables—job pressure and the degree to which the employee is required to deal with others—have been found to be negatively related to employees' expectancy estimates (Sims et al. 1976). The attribution theory perspective presented in this paper indicates that future research concerning a possible task characteristics-expectancy estimate linkage should examine the potential mediating role of salesperson performance attributions. The relationships between job characteristics and expectancy perceptions may depend upon the level of job performance and the effects that task characteristics have on performance attributions. That is, job characteristics may contain information concerning the degree to which the task has stable and (or) unstable elements and the degree to which performance is likely to be affected by internal or external causes. This information, in conjunction with job performance outcomes, may affect salespeople's expectancy estimates via the attribution process outlined in Figure 2. To illustrate, an institutional salesperson for new large accounts, who is expected to prospect and sell new products, may perceive more unstable elements in his/her job than an order taker salesperson, who provides service to smaller, regular accounts, would perceive (cf. Moncrief 1986). Hence, the following propositions:

- P11: Task characteristics will be positively related to expectancy estimates to the degree to which they cause the salesperson to:
- (a) attribute high task performance to internal-unstable, external-stable, or internal-stable causes.
 - (b) attribute low task performance to internal-unstable causes.
- P12: Task characteristics will be negatively related to expectancy estimates to the degree to which they cause the salesperson to attribute low task performance to internal-stable causes.

Three specific task characteristic dimensions that are particularly relevant for future research examining Propositions P11 and P12 are skill variety, task identity, and autonomy, which are defined by Hackman and Oldham (1974) as follows:

1. *Skill variety*. "The degree to which a job requires a variety of different activities in carrying out the work, which involves the use of a number of different skills and talents of the person."
2. *Task identity*. "The degree to which the job requires completion of a 'whole' and identifiable piece of work; that is, doing a job from beginning to end with a visible outcome."
3. *Autonomy*. "The degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out."

First, the degree to which the job is characterized by high levels of skill variety may be positively related to the tendency to attribute high performance to internal factors and low performance to external-stable factors. That is, in a high performance situation, salespeople may perceive they have been successful in a demanding, difficult job that requires a set of skills. Depending on whether the set of skills required are vertical (*i.e.*, increasingly complex skills) or horizontal (*i.e.*, more use of basic skills), the success may be perceived to be the result of internal-stable (*e.g.*, ability) or internal-unstable (*e.g.*, effort) causes. In either instance, as indicated in Figure 2, the expected result would be a positive influence on expectancy estimates. Conversely, in a low performance situation, salespeople in high skill variety selling jobs may perceive they have been unsuccessful in a difficult job. Therefore, they may be more inclined than other salespeople to attribute their failure to a stable-external factor (*e.g.*, the task).

As indicated in Figure 2, the expected result would be a negative influence on expectancy estimates.

Second, task identity may affect expectancy estimates either by requiring more skills to perform a whole task or by affecting the degree to which a salesperson

feels personally responsible for his/her selling performance. An example of the former case would be the degree to which a salesperson perceives the amount of selling skills required to turn a prospect into a satisfied customer. In this case, task identity may affect expectancy estimates in a manner similar to skill variety. In the latter instance, the fact that the salesperson does not have to rely on other individuals to complete the sales cycle may cause him/her to internalize task performance. As a result, high performance would tend to be attributed to internal factors (stable or variable) with a corresponding positive impact on expectancy estimates. On the other hand, low performance, if also internalized, would have a positive or negative impact on expectancy estimates if attributed to an internal-unstable cause or an internal-stable cause, respectively.

Third, job autonomy may also prove a fruitful job dimension to explore in future research. Autonomy may be shown to influence one's personal responsibility toward task performance. If so, job autonomy would be expected to affect expectancy estimates in a manner similar to task identity as described above. On the other hand, autonomy may simply be analogous to participation. If so, it would be important to salesperson motivation, but would not involve an attributional link.

Environmental Characteristics

Walker et al. (1977) hypothesized that salespersons' perceptions of environmental constraints such as economic conditions, strength of competition, sales territory potential, and restrictions of product availability would be negatively related to the salespersons' expectancy estimates. Although empirical support has been found for the hypothesis (Teas 1981), the attribution theory framework proposed in this paper indicates some modifications of the original Walker et al. (1977) propositions may be necessary.

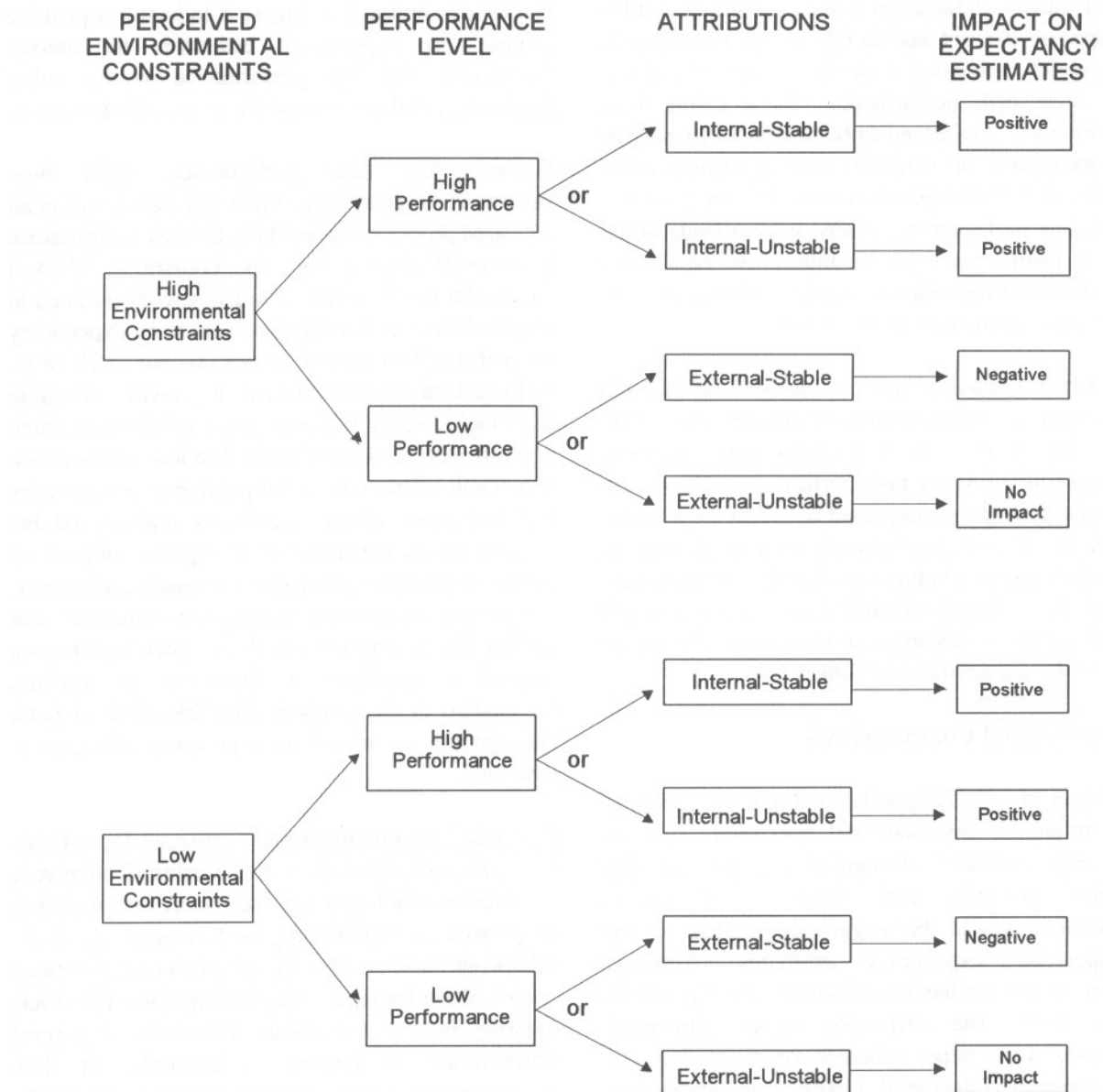
Perceived High Environmental Constraint Conditions. High environmental constraint conditions involve a situation in which external factors may be perceived as factors that must be overcome to achieve high performance that, if not overcome,

represent potential explanations for low performance. First, high task performance under high environmental constraint conditions may result in an increased propensity to attribute the high performance to internal causes, *e.g.*, the constraints were overcome via superior ability or effort. The framework outlined in Figure 5 indicates a positive impact on expectancy estimates if internal attributions for high performance involve either stable (*e.g.*, ability) or unstable (*e.g.*, effort) factors.

Second, low task performance under high environmental constraint conditions may result in an increased propensity to attribute the low performance to external causes, *e.g.*, the constraints blocked successful performance. The framework outlined in Figure 5 indicates a negative impact on expectancy estimates if the external causes involve stable (*e.g.*, task) factors and no impact if they involve unstable (*e.g.*, luck) factors. For example, a situation in which a salesperson perceives that his/her low performance is a result of the severe competition or a poor sales territory from which transfer is unlikely (stable environmental constraints), a negative impact on his/her expectancy estimates is expected. However, a situation in which a salesperson perceives that his/her low performance is due to such factors as a temporary shortage of inventory or random fluctuations of the economy (unstable environmental constraints), no impact on expectancy estimates is predicted.

Perceived Low Environmental Constraint Conditions. Low environmental constraint conditions involve a situation in which external factors are not primed to be viewed as constraining performance. As such, salespeople have all four causal attributional options open to them for explaining performance. However, drawing from our previous discussion of natural attributional tendencies, salespeople in low environmental constraint conditions would still be likely to take credit for success and ascribe failure to external factors, as shown in Figure 5. This ego-defensive attributional bias should result in a positive impact on expectancy estimates following high performance and a negative or no impact on expectancy estimates following low performance.

FIGURE 5
A Summary of Potential Linkages Among Perceived Environmental Constraints, Causal Attributions, and Expectancy Perceptions



The environmental constraint propositions are:

- P13: The degree to which salespeople perceive high environmental constraints is positively related to their propensity to attribute high task performance to internal (stable or unstable) factors.
- P14: The degree to which salespeople perceive high stable environmental constraints is positively related to their propensity to attribute low task performance to external-stable causes.
- P15: The degree to which salespeople perceive high unstable environmental constraints is positively related to their propensity to attribute low task performance to external-unstable factors.

Using Propositions P13-P15 and the linkages specified in Figure 2, we hypothesize that relationships between salespeople's perceptions of environmental constraints and their expectancy estimates are more complicated than originally specified by Walker et al. (1977):

- P16: The degree to which salespeople perceive high environmental constraints is positively related to their expectancy estimates to the degree to which their perceptions of high environmental constraints cause them to attribute high task performance to internal (stable or unstable) factors.
- P17: The degree to which salespeople perceive high environmental constraints is negatively related to their expectancy estimates to the degree to which their perceptions of high environmental constraints cause them to attribute low task performance to external-stable factors.
- P18: The degree to which salespeople perceive high environmental constraints is not related to their expectancy estimates to the degree to which their perceptions of high environmental constraints cause them to attribute low task performance to external-unstable factors.

Management Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

The contention of this paper is that current models concerning antecedents of salesforce motivation do

not adequately reflect the potentially complex relationships between (a) individual, task, organizational, and environmental variables and (b) salesforce expectancy perceptions. The result has been inconsistent empirical support for the models. The purpose of this paper has been to propose an alternative model of the impact of motivational antecedents on expectancy estimates by incorporating causal attributions as intervening variables.

The above propositions also extend the use of attribution theory in sales management in a number of ways. First, the framework outlined in this paper is based on the notion that salesperson natural attribution tendencies, task and environmental characteristics, and the management style of salesforce supervisors mediate the influence of attributions on salesperson expectancies. Whereas previous research has indicated that prior beliefs may influence consumer attributions (Folkes 1988), our model specifically outlines how individual and environmental factors and management style influence salesperson causal attributions of performance. Furthermore, our model suggests that the configuration of performance feedback could potentially affect performance attributions. Thus, it augments Kelley's (1972) covariation analysis framework by specifically outlining the mechanism by which sales manager input may influence the attribution process of salespeople.

This model, if supported, could be useful in managing salesperson attribution processes by assisting in the elicitation of optimal causal explanations by salespeople as they seek to understand events that surround them. Where sales performance is the event, optimal causal explanations are those involving a strong positive link between salesperson causal attributions and salesperson expectancy estimates. For example, following a successful performance managers should attempt to instill stable- or unstable-internal attributions, such as salesperson ability/effort when performance information warrants. However, following an unsuccessful performance, managers should foster unstable-internal attribution information, such as a lack of effort, in order to bolster the perceived connection between effort and performance.

Salespeople who improperly interpret the reasons for their sales performance could potentially damage their careers with self-defeating behaviors. For example, salespeople who attribute their poor performance to external-unstable attributions, such as luck, do not perceive that their actions will result in a change in their sales performance. Over time these attributions may reduce job satisfaction and increase turnover intentions. Since sales managers are one of the primary means of obtaining consistency, consensus and distinctiveness performance information, they are in an ideal position to manage this information for more accurate salesperson attributions.

Sales managers seeking to influence subordinate attribution processes must also be aware of the various biases that impact salesperson assessments of their own performances, as highlighted in this paper. Understanding how these factors ultimately impact expectancy estimates empowers managers to understand and effectively deal with individual motivation problems. For example, this model suggests the need for sales managers to identify common attributional strategies among salespeople employed in different environments. If successful, the sales manager could then attempt to manage performance feedback for optimal impact on salesperson expectancies for future performance. One method of identifying these biases is to use role plays and other videotaped exercises (*e.g.*, Latham and Wexley 1977; Latham, Wexley, and Pursell 1975). This may help salespeople gain awareness of how their own personalities and values relate to attributional tendencies and inappropriate expectancy estimates. Alternatively, a useful approach may be the development of informal, or even formal, cognitive maps of individual salespeople's decision processes. From these cognitive maps the manager might then develop his/her own strategy for managing particular salespeople's performance information.

One objective of this conceptual research is to stimulate intellectual curiosity and provide guidance for further empirical and conceptual research in the area. A variety of empirical opportunities are available to engage either in laboratory or field research to test these propositions. For example,

Johnston and Kim (1994) have used an experimental design approach to test the basic causal information - causal attribution - expectancy framework. A similar approach may also be used to test the propositions in our model. Alternatively, a survey design measuring the salesperson's own performance perceptions could be used. For example, salespeople could be asked to evaluate their performance with a particular product line for a specific time frame. Multiple measures of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness performance measures could then be taken of salespeople's performance perceptions as compared to others (consensus), as compared to other time frames (consistency), and as compared to other product lines they sell (distinctiveness). Next, salespeople could complete multiple measures of causal attributions, individual, task, organizational, and environmental variables and salesforce expectancy perceptions. Multiple regression and confirmatory factor analytic techniques could then be used to test the propositions.

Additional research might also examine affective outcomes from causal attributions. For example, the linkage of salesperson performance information - causal attributions on affective considerations, such as job satisfaction, propensity to quit, organizational citizenship behaviors and customer commitment. Effort directed toward performance is not the only meaningful measure of salesperson motivation. Such investigations have the potential for greatly advancing our understanding of both the determinates and consequences of salesperson attribution processes.

Three limitations of this model are noted. First, the model deals with only one aspect of expectancy theory, namely, expectancy estimates. It should be emphasized that salesperson motivation, according to the Vroom (1964) expectancy model, is also a function of instrumentality estimates (the perceived relationship between task performance and rewards) and valence (the perceived value of rewards to the salesperson). While preliminary theoretical work has already linked attribution theory to a more comprehensive expectancy theory model (McElroy and Teas 1987), such was not the intent of this paper. Rather, this paper sought to use this linkage to

explain the equivocal findings surrounding existing empirical research testing the expectancy estimate aspects of expectancy theory. Second, this paper focused on an attributional approach to expectancy estimate predictions. As such, some antecedents identified by others were not included in the model. It should be recognized that (a) some variables may be important for other nonattributional reasons and (b) alternative intervening mechanisms, other than causal attributions, are possible. Third, this paper focused on the antecedents identified by previous research as predictors of salesperson expectancy estimates. Future research should attempt to integrate into this attributional framework antecedents not discussed in this paper.

The potential for attribution theory to assist researchers in understanding the dynamics of expectancy theory was noted years ago (Campbell and Pritchard 1976). While the integration of causal attributions within expectancy theory complicates an already complex model of motivation, it does add to the usefulness of the theory in that it allows us to gain greater insights into actual events that affect the cognitive components in expectancy theory. From a theoretical perspective, the integration of these theories has intuitive appeal. Expectancy theory attempts to predict future effort expenditures based upon perceptions of future events. Attribution theory concentrates on cognitively explaining past events. It is logical, therefore, to connect cognitive assessments of past events to the future prediction of similar events, thus giving expectancy theory a more dynamic posture with respect to salesperson motivation. The delineation of the propositions included in this paper constitutes a necessary first step in unraveling the complexity of this process.

NOTES

1. It needs to be emphasized at this point that the focus of this paper is on expectancy estimates as defined within expectancy theory. This is not to be confused with the concept of expectations inherent in attribution theory.
2. An examination of the specific self-esteem and salesperson expectancy concepts as defined in previous research (Bagozzi 1978; Walker et al.

1977) indicates that the Bagozzi (1978) specific self esteem concept and the Walker et al. (1977) expectancy concept are very similar and may not be conceptually distinct. An important question for future theoretical and empirical research, therefore, concerns whether or not specific self-esteem and job expectancies in sales are different concepts. If they are not distinct and (or) their operationalizations are not characterized by discriminant validity, using specific self-esteem to predict salesforce expectancies may result in a tautology that, in turn, affects the validity of the estimates of multiple regression equations containing the tautological specification.

3. The model presented in this paper follows the Teas and McElroy (1986) model of causal attribution and does not include the controllability dimension. According to Weiner (1985, p. 346), the controllability dimension of causality is not clearly distinct from the locus and stability dimensions. For example, from the perspective of the actor, all external causes may be uncontrollable.

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