

EVALUATIONS, ATTRIBUTIONS, EXPECTATIONS AND SALES MANAGER BEHAVIOR

STEVE HENSON, University of New Orleans
WESLEY JOHNSTON, Georgia State University
FELICIA MORGAN, University of New Orleans

Attribution Theory has been a fruitful source of insights into sales manager evaluations and behaviors. This paper develops an expanded model for examining attributions and empirically tests several of the model components. Relationships are established between overall performance and attributions, between attributions and expectations, and between expectations and managerial behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers examining determinants of sales person and sales manager behavior, particularly sales manager evaluations, have used attribution theory as the basis for a number of empirical studies. (e.g. Badovick 1990; Dubinsky, Skinner, and Whittler 1989; McKay, et al. 1991; Seligman and Schulman 1986; Sujan 1986). While the results from these studies have provided promising insights, no complete framework for the role of sales manager attributions has yet been provided. The purpose of this paper is to expand our knowledge of the role attributions play when sales managers evaluate sales people by providing a comprehensive model of attributions and motivation which includes expectations and behavioral responses.

The model that we develop expands on prior studies of sales managers' attributions by adding expectations as a link to behavior. We describe the roles of overall evaluations, attributions, and expectations in the sales managers' evaluation and feedback process, and provide an empirical test for several important relationships.

Our model draws from research in sales and sales management studies, supplemented by results from

studies of intimate relationships. We use common elements from these areas to predict patterns of attributions and cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. By doing so, we add to our understanding of the important process of sales manager evaluation and feedback.

We begin our model development by summarizing key linkages between sales manager attributions, expectations, and behaviors. Next, we develop specific hypotheses by reviewing results of previous studies in several different contexts. We conclude with a description of an empirical study and the implications we draw from the study.

SALES MANAGER ATTRIBUTIONS

Attribution theory is one of several approaches that attempt to provide an underlying cognitive component to behavior. To attribution theorists, the search for causal connections between events is a process people use to organize, understand, and control their environment. Attribution theory is primarily concerned with the explanations for outcomes, such as the explanations for sales successes and failures.

Although there are several different approaches to attributions, early sales manager studies (Mowen, Brown, and Jackson 1981; Mowen, et al. 1985; Mowen, Fabes, and LaForge 1986) relied primarily on Heider's (1958) seminal work. This was

appropriate for the studies by Mowen and colleagues that were early investigations into sales manager evaluations. Later studies by Dubinsky, Skinner, and Whittler (1989) and McKay, et al. (1991) began to examine sales manager responses to attributions and using Weiner's (1971; 1986) theory of motivation and emotion as a source for theory development.

We continue this reliance on Weiner's work for several reasons. First, by 1986, Weiner could draw on more than three decades of empirical work in developing his influential book *An Attributional Theory of Motivation and Emotion*. Second, much of the empirical work Weiner examined was in the context of classroom performance where an evaluator (teacher) observed and responded to an achievement-oriented performer (student), much as a sales manager observes and responds to sales person behaviors. Finally, by incorporating expectations, Weiner could describe a convincing link between the stability of attributions, expectations change, and behaviors.

While sales managers have many methods for evaluating selling performance, one of the most important is to monitor actual performance through direct observation. Sales managers observe the *outcomes* of salesperson performance in selling or other situations. In unexpected, negative or important outcomes, or if the sales person is not well known to the manager, the manager goes through a cognitive process and *attributes* causation to that outcome. Several *antecedents*, which include history, attribution errors and biases, and prior beliefs will influence the attribution.

Given these antecedents, the sales manager will *ascribe* the outcome to one of several causes such as ability, luck or effort. These ascriptions are located in a *dimensional space* based on whether the salesperson caused the outcome (*locus*), on whether that cause is *stable* over time and situations, and on whether the sales person had *control* of the outcome. Based on the stability of the cause, *expectations* of future performance may change, and a variety of *emotional responses* may result. Expectations are direct determinants of managerial behaviors, such as corrective and coercive actions.

Antecedents, ascriptions, dimensions and responses have all been examined in contexts that are important to understanding sales manager behaviors.

Antecedents of Attributions

History

Early attribution studies were primarily concerned with antecedents to attributions. These include the *consistency*, *distinctiveness*, and *consensus* of information (Kelley 1967). Consistency of information refers to the occurrence of effects at different points of time. Distinctiveness of information means the information is associated with specific entities. Consensus information is information about whether the cause is associated with different people. Weiner includes these factors and other specific situational influences as important, but not particularly interesting antecedents. Across many different contexts, people have shown the ability to associate historical information with attributions (Weiner 1986).

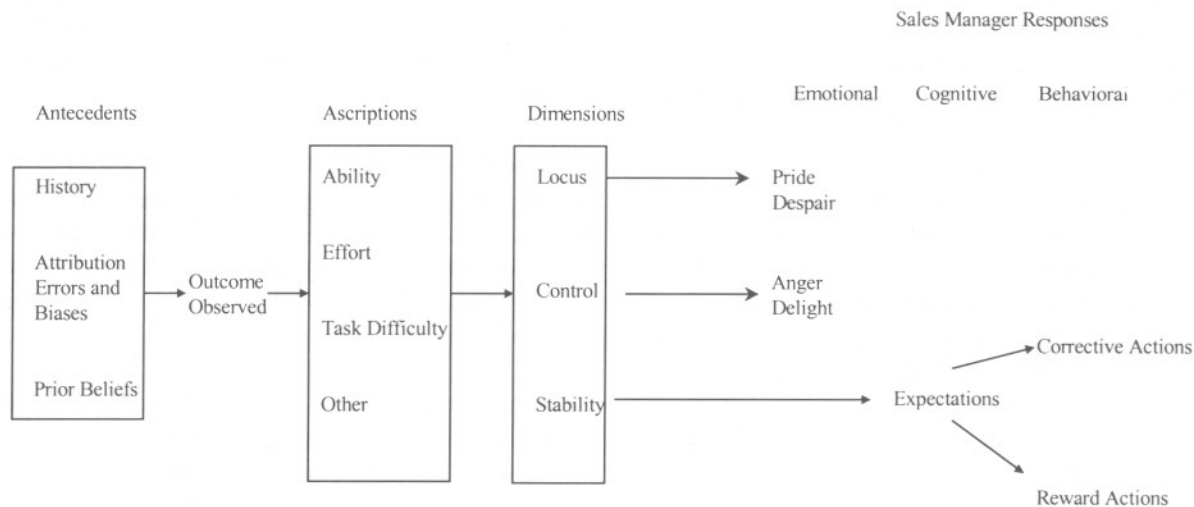
Attribution Errors and Biases

People have a strong tendency to attribute causes to other people's behavior, even when that behavior is obviously constricted by situational factors. This tendency is so pervasive that it has been termed the *fundamental attribution error*. In a sales context, a sales manager might blame a salesperson for a sales failure, even though there is ample evidence that a competitor's product was a better fit to the customer's needs.

This tendency to ignore environmental effects has been tested several times in sales management contexts. Mowen, Brown, and Jackson (1981) used MBA students role-playing sales managers in an experiment to decide whether sales managers ignored *task difficulty* when evaluating sales people. They found a tendency to ignore task difficulty's impact on judgements of ability and sales performance.

In a similar experimental manipulation of 120 field sales managers, Mowen et al. (1985) found again that sales managers did not consider task difficulty

Figure 1
An Attribution Theory of Sales Manager Evaluation
and Feedback



Adapted from Weiner (1986)

when evaluating sales performance. Dubinsky, Skinner, and Whittler also found that when sales managers evaluated a fictitious Bill in an experiment, task difficulty had no influence on managerial action.

Suspecting that information processing might provide a clue to this seemingly well established bias, Mowen, Fields and LaForge (1986) designed a student role play experiment that supplemented task difficulty information with a spread sheet presentation of supporting facts. These students who were required to process the task difficulty information actively did consider task difficulty when evaluating performance.

Although results have been mixed, the weight of evidence suggests sales managers tend to ignore the difficulty of the task when evaluating sales performance, especially when they do not use tools such as spreadsheets to influence information processing. Specifically, sales managers will not be

more likely to ascribe sales failures to external factors when task difficulty is higher.

Hypothesis 1. The difficulty of a sales task will have no influence on a sales manager's attribution for failure to external causes.

Prior Beliefs and Attributions

Following historical association and attributional errors, the final antecedent to attributions which we expect sales managers to demonstrate is the impact of prior beliefs on attributions. The two primary beliefs and attitudes which we will examine are expectations for future performance and the overall evaluation of the sales person.

There have been many investigations demonstrating that performance expectations are determinants of attributions. To quote Weiner (1986):

"It is evident that most of this research was published more than a decade ago; the empirical question certainly was decided at that time, and demonstration experiments are no longer needed (p. 230)."

Of more interest than simple experimental manipulations of expectations and attributions are recent developments in theories of intimate and other social relationships. The relationship between attributions and overall evaluations of relationships, termed satisfaction, has been a focus of extensive research in intimate relationships.

A number of empirical studies have shown that there is a consistent pattern of attributional activity which differentiates distressed and non distressed marriages (see Bradbury and Fincham 1990 for review). In distressed marriages, spouses tend to attribute causes for negative events to internal, controllable and stable factors in their partners. Positive events are attributed to external, uncontrollable and unstable factors. In non distressed marriages, the pattern is reversed. Marital theorists assume that attributions and satisfaction are separate, but mutually reinforcing constructs.

Seven studies (Baucom, Bell and Duhe 1982; Fichten 1984; Holtzworth-Munroe and Jacobson 1985; Jacobson, et al. 1985; Kyle and Falbo 1985; Griffin and Foster 1986; Baucom, Sayers and Duhe 1989) have documented the tendencies of dissatisfied spouses (as opposed to satisfied spouses) to attribute the cause for positive events in their marriages to something other than their spouse (external locus). The same seven studies also showed the tendencies of dissatisfied spouses to attribute the cause for negative events in their marriages to the spouse.

Nine studies (Madden and Janoff-Bulman 1981; Baucom, Bell and Duhe 1982; Fincham 1985; Fincham and O'Leary 1983; Fincham, Beach and Nelson 1987; Fincham, Beach and Baucom 1987; Holtzworth-Munroe and Jacobson 1985; Camper et al. 1988; Baucom, Sayers and Duhe 1989) showed that dissatisfied spouses were more likely to characterize the causes of negative events in their marriages as stable across time or situations. The same studies again showed the opposite pattern for

positive events. Dissatisfied partners were more likely to characterize positive events as unstable across time or situations.

Fewer studies have examined the relationship between satisfaction and controllability. Of the studies which have examined this relationship, only Fincham and O'Leary (1983) found any significant results. They found that dissatisfied partners were more likely to attribute the causes for positive events to uncontrollable factors, as compared to satisfied spouses.

Of course, evidence of attributional patterns in marital relationships may not be a predictor of attributional patterns in sales manager evaluations. There are some striking similarities between the two relationships and some equally striking dissimilarities.

Both relationships tend to be long-term, can be evaluated across multiple personal, social and financial dimensions, and involve mutual exchange. Conversely, marital relationships seem more intensely personal, more likely to be influenced by affective responses, and more influenced by personal and social influences. Ultimately, whether or not marital relationships provide insight into sales manager attribution processes will be an empirical question.

There is already some evidence that overall evaluations do affect the attribution patterns of sales managers. Dubinsky, Skinner, and Whittler (1989) in an experiment with sales managers evaluating a fictitious Bill found that a sales person's usual performance tended to influence attributions. Failures for sales people with higher usual performance were more likely to be attributed to external causes than were failures for sales people with lower usual performance.

Similarly, research in the area of vertical exchange relationships and attributions suggests that leaders differentiate among and group their subordinates, developing a different type of relationship with each. A study by Swift and Campbell (1995) defined two distinctive groups: ingroup employees, or cadres, whose relationships with managers are

characterized by mutual respect, trust, and liking, and outgroup employees, or hired hands, whose relationships with managers are characterized by low levels of trust, interaction, and support. Results of the study indicate that cadres typically receive more favorable treatment and higher performance evaluations from managers than do hired hands.

DeCarlo and Leigh (1996) suggest that sales managers attribute cause differently depending on a priori affect for the salesperson in question. Particularly when poor performance is an issue, interpersonal affect both directly and indirectly influences sales managers' performance appraisal processes and feedback choices. Sales managers are more willing to attribute cause externally when the salesperson benefits from either task or social attraction and internally when the salesperson is lower in either task or social attraction.

Given the extensive evidence of the relationship between overall evaluations of spouses and attribution patterns and some evidence that the same pattern has held true with sales managers, we predict that usual performance will affect attributions. Specifically, once an overall evaluation of a sales person is made by a sales manager, outcomes will tend to be attributed to causes consistent with prior evaluations and expectations.

Hypothesis 2. Sales managers are more likely to infer external attributions for selling failures for those sales people whose overall performance evaluations are higher than for those sales people whose overall performance evaluations are lower.

Hypothesis 3. Sales managers are more likely to infer uncontrollable attributions for selling failures for those sales people whose overall performance evaluations are higher than for those sales people whose overall performance evaluations are lower.

Hypothesis 4. Sales managers are more likely to infer unstable attributions for selling failures for those sales people whose overall performance evaluations are higher than for

those sales people whose overall performance evaluations are lower.

We now move from the influences on attributions to attributions themselves, beginning with *ascriptions*.

Ascriptions

Ascriptions are the common everyday descriptions people give for the causes of outcomes, such as sales successes and failures. Weiner (1986) suggests that there are a limited number of classifications which are common to most situations, particularly *ability, effort, task difficulty* and *strategy*. Weiner also agrees that other categories may exist in specific situations.

Ascriptions have been of interest to several authors examining sales manager attributions. As discussed earlier, most of these studies have examined the apparent bias which leads sales managers to ignore task difficulty when evaluating sales people. *Ability* and *effort* have also received some attention. On the other hand, any classifications scheme which forces responses into categories will lead to categorical data. This has limited the importance of causal ascriptions in empirical research. Instead, the focus has turned to the *dimensions* of attributions.

Attributional Dimensions

Based on conceptualizations by Rotter (1966), Heider (1958) and others, Weiner proposes that there are three independent dimensions of attributions. Using an inductive approach, Weiner develops arguments which support *locus, stability, and controllability* dimensions. The locus dimension refers to whether the cause was attributed to factors internal to the actor or to the environment. For example, a sales failure could have been caused by the sales person, or by the difficulty of the sales task.

The stability dimension refers to the likelihood that the causal factor will always be evident, either across time or in other, similar situations. A distinction can be made between stability across time and stability across situations. Stability across situations has been termed *globality*. To continue

with sales examples, a sales failure could be caused by the low intelligence of the salesperson (stable) or by lack of effort (unstable). Ability would be stable over time and global over situations. Effort might change over time or in other situations.

Weiner (1986) describes a third attribution dimension of *controllability* or *intentionality*. As an example, *industriousness* and *intelligence* might both be considered components of ability. Industriousness is controllable. Intelligence is not.

The dimensionality of attributions is important since the dimensions provide important links to affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses.

Consequences of Attributions

Emotional and Behavioral Responses to Attributions

Describing the emotional and behavioral consequences of attributions has been the goal of several sales and marketing studies. Based on Weiner's (1986) model, Badovick (1990) developed an attributional model of motivation and emotion for salespeople. He assessed the emotional responses of 146 sales people to a failure to achieve monthly sales quotas. His study linked the locus dimension to *self-blame*, *performance satisfaction*, and *blaming others*. The stability of attributions also impacted performance satisfaction and blaming others.

Seligman and Schulman (1986) tied *optimistic* and *pessimistic* explanatory styles to productivity and quitting among life insurance sales agents. An optimistic explanatory style means that successes tend to be attributed to internal, stable and controllable factors. Failures tend to be attributed to external, unstable and uncontrollable factors. Pessimistic explanatory styles are just the opposites. Salespeople with optimistic explanatory styles had higher levels of productivity and were less likely to quit than salespeople with pessimistic explanatory styles. This selection process appears to be consistent with Badovick's (1990) conjecture that salespeople who blame failures on internal, stable, or controllable factors will leave the field.

Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan (1986) linked attribution theory to adaptive selling behavior in a series of propositions. They suggested that when sales people make strategy as opposed to effort attributions, they should be more motivated to practice adaptive selling. Emphasizing the role of the sales manager in providing cognitive feedback, they conjectured that if sales managers showed bias toward internal factors and provided feedback based on that bias, sales people would be demotivated to practice adaptive selling.

In an empirical test of some of these propositions, Sujan (1986) surveyed 1283 sales people. He found a significant and positive relationship between strategy attributions for failure and the motivation to use more different strategies (work smarter). Surprisingly, he also found a significant relationship between effort attributions for failure and the intention to use fewer different strategies. In other words, sales people who attributed failure to lack of effort planned to work harder, and to use fewer different strategies. If the true cause of the sales person's failure was bad strategy and not effort, this attribution error could lead to harder work but poorer results.

McKay, et al. (1991) also examined the relationship between sales manager attributions and corrective actions or rewards offered to salespeople who fail in a sales task. In an instrument tested on a sample of 256 students, they linked sales manager attributions of (lack of) effort to punitive actions and sales manager attributions of (lack of) ability to corrective or positive actions. The authors pointed out that effort, not ability, is most easily correctable and questioned whether sales managers were making improper decisions. We found McKay's model to be a useful descriptor of managerial responses to sales failures and adapted their measures into classifications of coercive (intended to punish) and corrective (intended to improve) behaviors.

Cognitive Responses to Attributions

The most commonly examined cognitive response to attributions has concerned changes in expectations. Very early in the examination of attributions, Weiner, Russell and Lerman (1978) provided

support for theories which link attribution theory to expectancy theory and provided evidence that different causal ascriptions lead to different emotional states. For example, a failure attributed to low effort would lead to a very different emotional state than a failure attributed to luck or timing. Since this initial work, attribution and expectation linkages have been developed in many fields, including sales and marketing.

Consumer behavior studies have provided important clues about the relationship between attributions, expectations, and behaviors. For example, Folkes (1984) manipulated the causes of product deficiency in an experimental setting by varying locus, controllability, and stability. She found that if the cause of product failure was perceived as unstable, the consumer was likely to have relatively high future expectations and want to exchange the product. If the cause was perceived as stable, future expectations were lower and the customer more likely to seek a refund.

Bitner (1990) described a model of service encounter evaluation which included attributions for failure as a cognitive process which occurs when expectations for performance are not met. These attributions, which can be influenced by marketing efforts, will mediate between disconfirmation and satisfaction with the service encounter. In a partial test of the theory, Bitner used a role play simulation of passengers at departure gates of airlines to investigate responses to service failures.

Respondents indicated that higher levels of perceived control by airlines over the service failure led to lower satisfaction and perceived quality when compared to lower levels of perceived control. If the causes were considered stable, or likely to occur again, satisfaction levels were also lower. Higher levels of satisfaction were associated with higher ratings of perceived quality and a variety of behavioral intentions.

In a similar approach, Teas and McElroy (1986) developed a series of hypotheses which linked causal attributions and expectations of salespeople. Using the dimensions of consistency, consensus, and distinctiveness, they predicted expectancy changes

(and assumed motivational changes) based on different attributions. For example, attributions to sales ability in successful situations should lead to increased expectations of sales performance in future situations. Attributions to sales representatives' ability in failure situations should lead to decreased expectations of sales performance.

Building on previous conceptual models, DeCarlo, Teas, and McElroy (1997) conducted a survey whose findings suggest that perceptions of recent performance levels for a task are positively related to a salesperson's expectancy estimates for the task. The findings also suggest that organizational support attributions moderate the linkage between performance and salesperson expectancies. Sales manager support and reinforcement of past high performance on a task can be an effective motivator independent of the salesperson's attributional process.

For purposes of hypothesis testing,

Hypothesis 5. Stable attributions will lead to increased expectations for performance following successful exchanges and decreased expectations following unsuccessful exchanges.

Hypothesis 6. Higher expectations for future performance will lead to lower levels of coercive and corrective behavior.

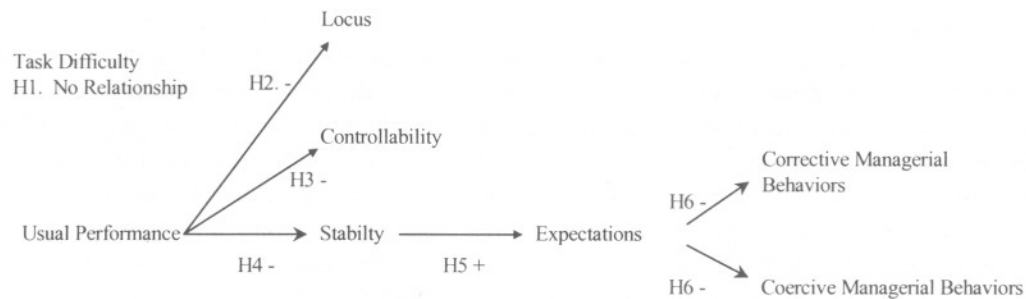
Finally, expectations may also play a more complex role, since it appears likely that expectations and overall evaluations will be closely related. For example, Boulding, et al. (1993) describe expectations as an influence on overall evaluations. This is a logical, although largely untested, proposition.

Summary. We have presented a model which describes many aspects of the sales manager's evaluation process. In presenting this model, we have developed several specific hypotheses. These hypotheses are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Hypotheses

Responses to Observation of Failed Sales Attempts



DATA ANALYSIS

We now turn to the empirical test of our conceptual model. First, we describe the procedures we used to test the model. Second, using correlation analysis, we examine the relationships between task difficulty and the locus dimension. Third, we develop a measurement model for a full theory test. Finally, we present the results from a this test.

Respondent Sample

Data were collected from a convenience sample of 155 sales managers in a major metropolitan area. Sales managers were identified by sales management students and faculty. No single company was represented by more than two sales managers. Interview subjects were required to supervise at least five sales people, to be personally responsible for performance evaluations, and to regularly observe sales people in selling situations. The typical sales manager in our survey supervised an average of 14 sales people, had been a sales manager for eight years, and reported that 46% of the sales attempts observed did not result in sales. Forty two percent

worked for manufacturers, 35% worked for providers of industrial services, and 23% for wholesalers. Retail managers were excluded.

Students provided the sales managers with a questionnaire as part of an assignment to work in the field with a sales manager. The sales managers completed the written questionnaire. Students were instructed not to provide any instructions to the sales manager not contained in the questionnaire. The students returned the questionnaire with a business card.

Procedure

Respondents were asked to think of the most recent situation they observed involving a salesperson in which an attempt to sell a product, program or service ended with a failure to complete the sale. The failure scenario was chosen since failure is more likely to lead to an attribution process than is success (Weiner 1986). The sales managers were asked several open-ended questions designed to focus their attention on the specific cause of failure. Next, the sales managers were asked to provide an

overall evaluation of the sales representative. Finally, the managers were asked a series of questions designed to describe the attribution processes they used and the resulting cognitive and behavioral responses.

Measures

Task difficulty was measured by single item measures described in Appendix 1. Attributions for locus, controllability, and stability were measured by the Causal Dimension Scale developed by Russell (1982), supplemented by items designed to measure globality, or stability across situations. The Causal Dimension Scale consists of nine semantic differential items and has been widely verified as reliable and valid (e.g., Russell, McAuley and Tarico 1987; Folkes 1984; Badovick 1990). Three items were developed to measure overall performance. Finally, we asked several questions about managers' behavioral responses based on research by McKay, et al. (1991). Behavioral responses included potential coercive and corrective actions. All variables which we included in our final measurement model are included in the Appendix.

Reliabilities

The measurement scales for most measures appear acceptable. Coefficient alphas were .78 (coercive managerial behavior), .93 (expectations), .65 (locus), .86 (corrective managerial behavior), and .92 (overall performance). Coefficient alphas for controllability (.09) and stability (.48) from the Causal Dimensions Scale were considered unacceptable and the two constructs were dropped from further analysis. The stability across situations scale, globality, was reduced to two items which correlated at .62. This construct is referred to simply as stability from this point on.

The measurement problems with the control and stability scales indicate that scales developed primarily for use in personal achievement situations may not be appropriate when respondents are asked to assign causation to the acts of others. Further scale development is needed in this area.

Correlation Analysis

For preliminary examination, the locus and stability items were summed to form two composite measures. These measures were compared to the task difficulty measure. Correlations are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Correlations

	Task Difficulty	Locus	Stability
Task Difficulty	1.000		
Locus	-.070	1.000	
Stability	-.056	.4431*	1.000

*Significant at .01 level

As predicted in hypothesis 1, task difficulty was not significantly related to the locus dimension. Consistent with Mowen, et al. (1985), sales managers made no adjustments in assigning causation, no matter how difficult a sales task. The locus and stability measures were highly correlated, consistent with patterns found in intimate relationships (Bradbury and Fincham 1990).

We now turn to path analysis to examine the relationships among overall evaluations of performance, stability and locus attributions, expectations, and managerial behaviors.

Path Analysis

Measurement Model Development

No variables correlated so highly as to not be significantly different, so our major respecification was accomplished by eliminating measures for one of three reasons (Anderson and Narus 1990). The items were eliminated if they did not have a significant coefficient with one of the structural variables, if they were multidimensional, or if they were not unidimensional. This analysis was performed independently of the analysis of the structural models.

After several respecifications, a final measurement model was obtained that was judged acceptable. Its

associated Chi square was non significant (χ^2 (75) = 88, $p < .145$), with a GFI value of .93, a AGFI value of .89 and a RMSR of .208. There were no large normalized residuals. This final "saturated" model was used as a base model for assessments of the structural models (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). The final model included three items for overall performance, expectations, and corrective managerial behaviors and two items for the locus, stability and coercive managerial scales (see Appendix 1).

While this model was judged acceptable, the relatively low fit indices indicate a problem in model development. One explanation for this is that some important constructs have been left out of the model and these missing constructs are affecting the fit indices. The most obvious missing constructs are the *history* and *emotional responses* described in our theoretical model, but not included in the survey.

Moving from the measurement model, we now turn to analyzing specific relationships and testing hypotheses.

Hypotheses Tests

We tested our model using the path analysis techniques from Lisrel VII. Figure 3 represents a path diagram reflecting the results of our analysis. Only paths significant at the .05 level are shown. The model shows the paths we predicted plus two additional paths between overall performance and expectations and between stability attributions and corrective managerial behaviors.

The full model provided a reasonable fit to the data. Although the Chi-square was significant, (χ^2 (82) = 108 $p = .029$), the GFI was .92 and the AGFI was .88. In comparison to the measurement model, the changes in the GFI (.93 to .92) and AGFI (.89 to .88) indicate that the remaining explanatory paths that were constrained to zero were of little practical significance. In addition, no theoretically supportable constrained paths provided a statistically significant improvement in the model.

Results

Hypotheses two and three were supported by the data. Apparently managers who rate the overall performance of their sales people higher are more likely to describe the cause of sales failures as internal or unstable across situations. This is consistent with patterns in intimate relationships. Hypothesis four was not tested due to the failure to develop an adequate measure of controllability.

Hypothesis five was also supported, with stable (across situations) attributions leading to lower expectations for future performance. This support is limited by the relatively modest relationships between the constructs and the failure to isolate a measure of stability across time.

More interesting is the strong relationship between stability attributions for failure and managerial suggestions for corrective actions. If managers do perceive the cause for a sales failure to be likely to cause other failures, they take corrective action, but any adjustment in expectations will be a relatively small one.

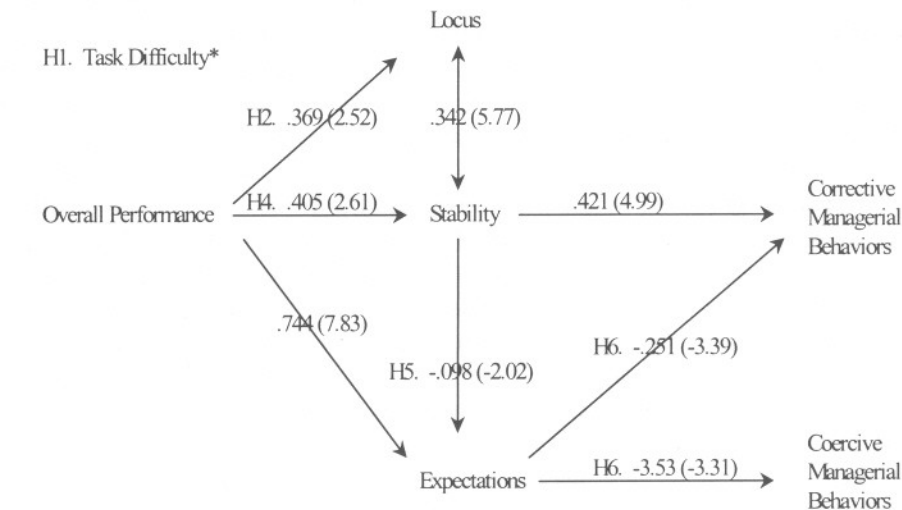
As predicted in hypothesis six, higher expectations for future performance were negatively related to corrective or coercive managerial behaviors. As suggested, the relationship between overall performance and expectations was also strong. Although this relationship seems obvious, relatively little empirical work has been done to establish the nature of the relationship. For example, although we indicate a causal flow from overall performance to expectations, Boulding, et al. (1993) suggest the causal path is from expectations to overall evaluations of service. Further empirical investigation should help clarify this relationship.

DISCUSSION

We have proposed a model of sales manager attributions that is appropriate when a relationship exists between an sales manager and a sales person. We suggested, and the data support, that attributions and expectations are closely linked to an overall evaluation of performance. Any managerial

Figure 3

Results



*No Relationship Hypothesized

T values in parentheses

responses to individual sales efforts are influenced by the manager's past knowledge and evaluations.

As best as possible, we duplicated the process a manager would follow when evaluating sales performance. We asked the manager to recall a specific recent instance of sales failure and to provide an overall rating of the sales person involved in the failure. When we asked the sales manager to describe the causes of the most recent sales failure they observed, the description of causes was consistent with overall rating.

Our findings suggest that sales manager behaviors and attitudes are influenced by prior evaluations. Before taking any action based on a specific sales failure, sales managers first access an overall evaluation of the sales person involved. This memory access leads to an interpretation of the

causes of the failure which is consistent with the overall evaluation. If the manager already *knows* that he is watching an outstanding salesperson, then the failure *must* be attributable to some external, uncontrollable, or unstable cause--if not a combination of all three. If the sales manager already *knows* that the sales person has little ability, then the failure *will* be attributed to internal, controllable and stable causes.

We should note that we do not believe that attributions do not play a role in evaluations. We believe that assigning causation is an important cognitive process and in those cases where it occurs will affect an overall evaluation. We just suggest that in most cases if people are asked to describe causes for specific situations, that causal description will be consistent with a prior evaluation.

Implications for Sales Managers and Sales Persons

There are several implications for sales managers. First, sales manager attributions for sales failures appear to be influenced by a sales person's overall performance. To the extent possible, evaluations of current performance should be consistent with current, not overall, performance. If a good salesperson suddenly stops being successful, a manager may tend toward "excusing" the failures by making external, uncontrollable or unstable attributions. While the manager's cognitive structure may be protected, the salesperson may not receive accurate feedback on performance.

In accordance with implications of a personal selling study by Johnston and Kim (1994), in a failure situation, sales managers could use the poor performance as an opportunity for learning, not criticism. Attributing failure to a lack of ability may imply that success is not possible in the future; attributing failure to insufficient effort or incorrect strategy implies that action can be taken toward goal attainment.

Second, recalling specific incidents as evidence to support an overall evaluation may be biased not only by the salience of the evidence, but by the interpretation of the causes of the events. The common practice of noting specific situations to aid in future performance evaluation will be of little value if the situations are interpreted based on overall evaluations.

Finally, sales managers should be aware of when they are actively processing information. Overall evaluations may be set very early in a relationship with subsequent events interpreted based on those expectations. To the extent possible, sales managers should set objective, behavioral criteria for performance which can be observed and measured.

For sales people, the importance of impression management is obvious. Early in a relationship, sales people should make sure overall evaluations are positive. As the relationship continues, sales people must draw attention to the causes of sales successes, particularly to internal, stable and controllable

causes. Attribution patterns in sales manager feedback provide strong signals of overall performance evaluation.

Research Implications

Our results suggest that sales management or sales performance studies which try to mix situational events with behavioral or attitudinal responses without controlling for prior history may be misguided. The first question which should be asked is whether the behavioral choice would be memory based (driven by an overall evaluation) or based on situational factors. We suggest that specific situational outcomes seldom play a role in attitudinal change or behavioral choice when there is an ongoing relationship between actors and observers, as there usually is between a sales manager and a sales person.

These implications can be expanded beyond manager-subordinate relationships. One obvious application is the relationship between buyers and sellers. Transactions may be a very inappropriate basis for the examination of relationships if they do not affect attitudes or behaviors. Much as a sales manager can "excuse" failures in a favored subordinate, buyers may "excuse" exchange failures as external, uncontrollable, or unstable. The overall evaluation of the relationship may drive both behavior and cognitive interpretation of events.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, James C. and James A. Narus (1990), "A Model of Distributor Firm and Manufacturing Firm Working Partnerships," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol 54 (January), 42-58.
- Badovick, Gordon J. (1990), "Emotional Reactions and Salesperson Motivation: An Attributional Approach Following Inadequate Sales Performance," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 18 (Spring), 123-130.
- Baucom, Donald H., W.G. Bell, and A.D. Duhe (1982), "The Measurement of Couples' Attributions for Positive and Negative Dyadic Interactions," presented to the Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy.

- Baucom, Donald H., Steven L. Sayers, and Autumn Duhe (1989), "Attributional Style and Attributional Patterns Among Married Couples," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 56-4, 596-607.
- Bitner, Mary Jo. (1990), "Evaluating Service Encounters: The Effects of Physical Surroundings and Employee Responses," *Journal of Marketing* 54 (April): 69-82.
- Boulding, William, Ajay Kalra, Richard Staelin, and Valerie A. Zeithaml (1993), "A Dynamic Process Model of Service Quality: From Expectations to Behavioral Intentions," *Journal of Marketing Research* 30 (February): 7-27.
- Bradbury, Thomas N., and Frank D. Fincham (1990), "Attributions in Marriage: Review and Critique," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol 107, No. 1, 3-33.
- Camper, P.M., N.S. Jacobson, A. Holtzworth-Munroe, and K.B. Schmaling (1988), "Causal Attributions for Interactional Behaviors in Married Couples," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 2, 195-209.
- DeCarlo, Thomas E., and Thomas W. Leigh (1996), "Impact of Salesperson Attraction on Sales Managers' Attributions and Feedback," *Journal of Marketing*, 60 (April), 47-56.
- DeCarlo, Thomas E., Kenneth R. Teas, and James McElroy (1997), "Salesperson Performance Attribution Process and the Formation of Expectancy Estimates," *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 17 (Summer), 1-17.
- Dubinsky, Alan J., Steven J. Skinner and Tommy E. Whittler (1989), "Evaluating Sales Personnel: An Attribution Theory Perspective," *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol 9 (Spring). 9-21.
- Fichten, C.S. (1984), "See It from My Point of View: Videotape and Attributions in Happy and Distressed Couples," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 2, 125-142.
- Fincham, Frank D. (1985), "Attribution Processes in Distressed and Nondistressed Couples: 2. Responsibility for Marital Problems," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 94, 183-190.
- , Stephen R. Beach, and D.H. Baucom (1987), "Attribution Processes in Distressed and Nondistressed Couples: 4. Self-Partner Attribution Differences," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 739-748.
- , Stephen R. Beach, and G. Nelson (1987), "Attribution Processes in Distressed and Nondistressed Couples: 3. Causal and Responsibility Attributions for Spouse Behavior," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* Vol. 11, 71-86.
- , and K.D. O'Leary (1983), "Causal Inferences for Spouse Behavior in Maritally Distressed and Nondistressed Couples," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 1, 42-57.
- Folkes, Valerie S. (1984), "Consumer Reactions to Product Failure: An Attributional Approach," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10 (March), 398-409.
- Griffin, J. and S. Foster (1986), "Affect and Attributions in Distressed and Nondistressed Marriages: An In-Vivo Comparison," presented at the meeting of the Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy.
- Heider, Fritz (1958), *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, New York: Wiley.
- Holtzworth-Munroe, Amy and Neil S. Jacobson (1985), "Causal Attributions of Married Couples: When Do They Search for Causes? What Do they Conclude When They Do?," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 48-6, 1398-1412.
- Jacobson, N.S., D.W. McDonald, W.C. Follette and R.A. Berley (1985), "Attributional Processes in Distressed and Nondistressed Married Couples," *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 9, 35-50.
- Johnston, Wesley J. and Keysuk, Kim (1994), "Performance, Attribution, and Expectancy Linkages in Personal Selling," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 58 (October), 68-80.
- Kelley Harold H. (1967), "Attribution Theory in Social Psychology," in *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, D. Levine, Ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 192-238.
- Kyle, S.O. and T. Falbo (1985), "Relationships Between Marital Stress and Attributional Preferences for Spouse and Own Behavior," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 3, 339-351.
- McKay, Sandra, Joseph F. Hair, Jr., Mark W. Johnston, and Daniel L. Sherrell (1991), "An

- Exploratory Investigation of Reward and Corrective Response to Salesperson Performance: An Attributional Approach," *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 11(Spring), 39-48.
- Madden, M.E. and R. Janoff-Bulman(1981), "Blame, Control, and Marital Satisfaction: Wives Attributions for Conflict in Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 43, 663-674.
- Mowen, John C., Stephen W. Brown, and Donald W. Jackson, Jr. (1985), "Cognitive Biases in Sales Management Evaluations," *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 22 (May), 185-191.
- Mowen, John C., Keith J. Fabes, and Raymond W. LaForge (1986), "Effects of Effort, Territory Situation, and Rater on Salesperson Evaluation," *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 6 (May), 1-8.
- Mowen, John C., Janet E. Keith, Stephen W. Brown, and Donald W. Jackson, Jr. (1985), "Utilizing Effort and Task Difficulty Information in Evaluating Salespeople," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 22(May), 185-191.
- Rotter, Julian (1966), "Generalized Expectations for Internal Versus External Control of Reinforcement," *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*, Vol. 80, No. 1, 1-28.
- Russell, Daniel W. (1982), "The Causal Dimension Scale: A Measure of How Individuals Perceive Causes," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 42, No. 6, 1137-1145.
- , Edward McAuley, and Valerie Tarico (1987), "Measuring Causal Attributions for Success and Failure: A Comparison of Methodologies for Assessing Causal Dimensions," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 52, No. 6, 1248-1257.
- Seligman, E. P., and Peter Schulman (1986), "Explanatory Style as a Predictor of Productivity and Quitting Among Life Insurance Sales Agents," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 832-838.
- Sujan, Harish (1986), "Smarter Versus Harder: An Exploratory Attributional Analysis of Salespeople's Motivation," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 23 (February), 41-49.
- Swift, Cathy O. and Constance Campbell (1995), "The Effect of Vertical Exchange Relationships on the Performance Attributions and Subsequent Actions of Sales Managers," *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 15 (Fall), 45-54.
- Teas, R. Kenneth, and James C. McElroy (1986), "Causal Attributions and Expectancy Estimates: A Framework for Understanding the Dynamics of Salesforce Motivation," *Journal of Marketing* 50 (January), 75-86.
- Weiner, Bernard (1971), *Perceiving the Causes of Success and Failure*, Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press.
- , (1986), *An Attributional Theory of Motivation and Emotion*, New York: Springer-Verlag.
- , D. Russell, and D. Lerman (1978), "The Cognition-Emotion Process in Achievement-Related Contexts," *New Directions in Attribution Research*, Vol. 2, 59-88, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Weitz, Barton A., Harish Sujan and Mita Sujan (1986), "Knowledge, Motivation, and Adaptive Behavior: A Framework for Improving Sales Effectiveness," *Journal of Marketing*, 50(October), 174-191.

APPENDIX Measures

Overall Performance

1. On a 1 to 10 scale with 10 representing the best performance possible, how would you rate the overall current performance of this sales person?
2. Again on a 1 to 10 scale, how would you rate this sales person in comparison to other sales people you currently manage?
3. Finally, how would you rate this sales person in comparison to other sales people you have observed (1-10 scale)?

Expectations

Based on this incident (sales failure) and your knowledge of the sales representative involved, and using 1 for agree and 9 for disagree, please respond to the following statements (circle one number):

- Future performance as a salesperson will be strong
- This person should remain in sales or sales management

- This person has a good future in the sales profession

Attributions

Think about the reason or reasons you gave me for the sales failure. The items below concern your impressions or opinions of this cause or causes of the sales failure. Please answer each question by circling a single number on the 1-9 scale.

Locus

- Was the cause something that reflects an aspect of the salesperson (1) or reflects an aspect of the selling situation (9)?
- Was the cause something about the salesperson (1) or about others (9)?

Stability

- Was the cause something that (1) happens in other selling situations with this sales person or does not happen in other situations with this sales person (9)?
- Was the cause something that could (1) change with additional experience or training or not change with additional experience or training (9)?

Behavioral Responses

Based on the performance of the salesperson during this sale and using 1 as very appropriate and 9 as very inappropriate, how appropriate would you consider the following actions you might take (Please circle number):

Coercive Responses

- Threaten to fire salesperson
- Fire the salesperson

Nonpunitive Responses

- Encourage the salesperson to improve
- Have the salesperson work with other salespeople