

Exploring the State of Salesperson Insecurity: How it Emerges and Why it Matters?

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ABSTRACT

The literature identifies several stressors (e.g., role ambiguity, role conflict) that have a detrimental effect on salesperson well-being and performance. One such stressor – salesperson insecurity – has been largely neglected in the literature and is the focus of this research. Specifically, taking a combined phenomenology and grounded theory approach, this study provides insight into the multi-faceted nature of salesperson insecurity and the process through which it emerges. The findings reveal that salesperson insecurity is a potent work stressor that results when cognitive and affective responses to felt discomforts cannot be reconciled with past beliefs and experiences. Managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: *Salesperson insecurity, job stressor, discomfort, stress appraisal*

Job stressors – factors that thwart job growth and limit the potential for gains (LePine, Podsakoff, and LePine 2005) – have been shown to affect salesperson job outcomes, including job satisfaction, sales performance, and turnover (Babakus et al. 1999; Bhuian, Menguc, and Borsboom 2005; Jaramillo, Mulki, and Boles 2011; Miao and Evans 2013). Building on role theory, the literature has directed substantial attention towards understanding how role stressors, particularly ambiguity, conflict, and overload, affect such job outcomes (e.g., Behrman and Perreault 1984; Jaramillo, Mulki, and Solomon 2006; Singh 1998). Less effort, however, has been directed towards exploring others stressors that may impact salesperson job outcomes. One such stressor is insecurity, which has been largely under developed in the literature (Holmes and Murray 2007).

Work on insecurity, primarily in domains other than sales (see Cadogan et al. 2009 for an exception¹), has begun to flourish (e.g., Cheng and Chan 2008; Lam et al. 2015; Sverke and Hellgren 2002; Sverke, Hellgren, and Näswall 2002). While this research has advanced our understanding of insecurity, prior research on this important stressor applied to business settings has focused almost exclusively on insecurity due to the perceived probability of job loss, or job insecurity (Ashford, Lee, and Bobko 1989; De Witte 1999; Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt 1984). The general premise of this literature is that job insecurity has a negative effect on employee job outcomes (Boswell, Olson-Buchanan, and Harris 2014; De Witte 1999; Jordan, Ashkanasy, and Hartel 2002; Roll et al. 2015; Wang, Lu, and Siu 2014; Yoo and Arnold 2015). Despite arriving at this conclusion, extant research on job insecurity is relatively limited in scope as it only considers one possible manifestation of the broader concept of insecurity, that is, job insecurity is focused on an employee's "overall concern about the continued existence of the job in the future" (Sverke et al. 2002, p. 243). Yet, in business environments, insecurity can be the result of

many different factors, such as relationship insecurity (e.g., from working with a difficult client or collaborating with a competitive colleague), and situational insecurity that results from the inability to deliver on a promise. This recognition implies that salesperson insecurity, the subject of this study, is a potentially broader, multi-faceted phenomenon that goes beyond extant research on job insecurity, which again, has primarily focused on job loss.

We contend that the job of selling a company's products and/or services is different and unlike other positions in an organization. Indeed, in a meta-analysis on the predictors of job performance for salespeople, Vinchur and his colleagues (1998) claim "there are aspects of the sales job that make unique demands on an employee and may contribute to a pattern of validity coefficients different from other jobs" (p. 586). For purpose of this study, we further contend that the dynamic, unpredictable, and tenuous nature of business-to-business selling in particular, contributes to insecurity by enhancing the level of day-to-day uncertainty a salesperson experiences. Because business-to-business salespeople tend to be involved in the sale of large ticket items that are often complex and characterized by long sales cycles, they may experience insecurity due to their inability to immediately meet quota expectations. Business-to-business selling relies heavily on building relationships with customers, who can often be unpredictable and contribute to feelings of inadequacy (Piercy, Cravens, and Lane 2001; Singh 1998). In sum, the day-to-day activities of business-to-business salespeople provide exposure to a multitude of factors that contribute to felt insecurity (e.g., Cassidy 1999), and thus heightened stress (Boles et al. 1997). Here, it is important to emphasize that salesperson insecurity focuses on the individual person, and not on the job itself or the loss of the job.

The primary objective of this paper is thus to advance a more robust understanding of salesperson insecurity within the business-to-business environment that can serve as a foundation

for future research on this important topic. Towards this end, salesperson insecurity is defined here as a state of felt discomfort resulting from the potential loss of a goal, unmet desire, or from an unfilled need; in other words, a state of discomfort resulting from an imbalance away from homeostasis. This definition is predicated on two key aspects – 1) an imbalance in homeostasis, and a subsequent 2) state of felt discomfort as experienced by the salesperson. Here, homeostasis (see Fletcher 1942) refers to the internal equilibrium (e.g., physical, chemical, biological, physiological) of the salesperson and involves the property of “a living organism that regulates its internal environment so as to maintain stable, constant condition” (Van den Bos 2011, p. 209). The logic employed here begins with a disturbance to this stable equilibrium, followed by an experienced state of felt discomfort. The salesperson will consciously (cognitively or affectively) recognize or subconsciously (chemically) experience this state of discomfort as a function of instability occurring in his or her homeostasis, what has been termed a homeostatic imbalance (e.g., Van den Bos 2011). As a result, the salesperson will enter a state of insecurity and will subsequently strive to regain homeostasis, much like an individual is predisposed to reduce uncertainty because he or she is in a state of uncertainty-triggered discomfort (e.g., Hogg 2007). That said, we acknowledge and certainly do not suggest that all disturbances to homeostasis lead to discomfort and thus a state of insecurity.

Building on this, the study presented here utilized grounded theory and phenomenology to identify the multiple sources of discomfort that contribute to salesperson insecurity, and, more importantly, to improve understanding of the psychological process that accounts for the emergence of this phenomenon. It also seeks to explain why salespeople operating within the same environment are likely to experience different levels of insecurity. As will be discussed in detail below, the findings reveal that salesperson insecurity goes beyond the existing notion of

job insecurity and incorporates a broader perspective of insecurity at the individual salesperson level by taking into consideration the interplay between sources of discomfort (i.e. uncertainty, self-esteem, doubt, felt-threat), cognitive interpretations, affective responses, and the salesperson experiential based belief system.

This research makes at least three different contributions to the literature. First, and foremost, a contribution is made to the general literature on insecurity by advancing a more robust view of the phenomenon, including insight into the process that gives rise to insecurity and recognition of the multiple sources of discomfort that underlie its emergence. More specifically, we demonstrate that salesperson insecurity involves much more than only the insecurities that come with the perceptions of job loss (i.e. job insecurity). Second, to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to develop the notion of insecurity, at the individual employee level, in a sales context; as such, the insights afforded by the study are specific to the sales profession and are sensitive to the idiosyncrasies of sales jobs. Finally, this work contributes to the sales literature by offering insight into the emotional factors that may negatively impact salesperson job outcomes. Extant research has largely ignored how the emotional states that a salesperson may experience influence valued outcomes, yet some scholars contend that emotions play a crucial role in stimulating volitions, goal-directed behaviors, and performance (Belschak, Verbeke, and Bagozzi 2006; Brown, Cron, and Jr. 1997; Verbeke and Bagozzi 2002).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stress in Sales

As boundary-spanners, salespeople operate in dynamic and unpredictable environments that heighten their risk of stress (Boles, Johnston, and Hair 1997; Cordes and Dougherty 1993; Dubinsky et al. 2001; Lewin and Sager 2008; Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads 1994). Stress, which

results from the detrimental impact of external factors (i.e., *stressors*) on a salesperson's cognitive-emotional-environmental equilibrium (Demerouti et al. 2001; Lazarus and Folkman 1984; McGrath 1976), is a "process set into motion when demands in the environment tax or exceed an individual's resources" (LePine et al. 2015). The results of stress processes are often referred to as strains, and include phenomena such as burnout and disengagement (Spector and Jex 1998). It is noteworthy to mention here that homeostasis and job strain are two distinct yet negatively related concepts. Homeostasis describes the harmonious equilibrium that living organisms (i.e. human beings) strive to maintain in order to survive, while job strain consists of a "number of adverse employee reactions" (Jex et al. 2001). Accordingly, stress, which leads to strain, can be viewed as "a state of disharmony, or threatened homeostasis" (Chrousos and Gold 1992, p. 1245). Therefore, maintaining homeostasis should be viewed as being desirable, while job strain should be seen as being undesirable.

The current understanding of stress processes is grounded in the Lazarus and Folkman (1984) transactional theory of stress (TTS). According to TTS, stress is the result of primary and secondary appraisal processes. During a primary appraisal process, individuals evaluate whether an encounter with the environment has positive, negative, or irrelevant implications for their personal welfare (Cavanaugh et al. 2000; Crawford, LePine, and Rich 2010). If the encounter is deemed to be positive or irrelevant, stress does not occur. However, if the encounter reveals a potential stressor (i.e., if it is perceived to have negative implications), a secondary appraisal process ensues whereby individuals determine whether they are able to perform any actions to cope with the stressful situation (Crawford et al. 2010; Gilboa et al. 2008; LePine et al. 2005).

The coping strategies that individuals utilize to mitigate the negative effects of stress are thus also an important topic in the literature (Lewin and Sager 2008; Terry, Rawle, and Callan

1995; Thoits 1995). In their seminal piece, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggest two types of coping strategies, namely problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping involves actively confronting the source of stress in an effort to alter the situation, while emotion-focused coping is based on avoiding sources of stress altogether, perhaps through withdrawal (Lewin and Sager 2008). Another prevalent view is that employees use self-regulation as a coping mechanism, which involves changing emotions, thoughts, and behaviors to diffuse stress (Baumeister et al. 1998; Chan and Wan 2012; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004; Singh 2000). For example, Chan and Wan (2012) suggest that frontline employees use surface acting (modifying facial expressions) and deep acting (modifying inner feelings) as regulatory approaches to cope with customer-induced stress.

In the sales literature, the stressors that have received the most attention are those drawn from role theory (Kahn et al. 1964). Specifically, scholars have directed substantial effort towards understanding how role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload contribute to salesperson job stress and outcomes (e.g., Babakus et al. 1999; Behrman and Perreault 1984; Johnson and Sohi 2014; Low et al. 2001; Singh 1998). In recent years, however, the literature has grown to recognize other important stressors beyond those posited by role theory, including job insecurity, work-family conflict, interpersonal conflict, abusive supervision, and laissez-faire leadership (Gilboa et al. 2008; Skogstad et al. 2007; Spector and Jex 1998; Tepper 2000). In this study, the focus is on the broader concept of salesperson insecurity, which not only includes the potential for job loss (i.e. job insecurity), but also includes a multitude of factors that pertain to the sales job specifically.

Insecurity

Insecurity, like many other psychological variables, has been conceptualized as both a trait and a state. While a trait reflects a continuous pattern of thought, feeling, and behavior (Hogan,

DeSoto, and Solano 1977), a state is transient in nature and manifests in specific situations (Fridhandler 1986). Importantly, the latter view on insecurity allows for the possibility that one can experience security in one state (e.g., family and friends), and insecurity in another (e.g., threat of job layoff due to an economic downturn). In fact, one state may or may not influence the other and certainly insecurity or security is not evenly distributed across states. The same is not true for trait insecurity, where an individual is either insecure or not and their level of insecurity does not vary dramatically over time. In this paper, the state perspective is taken to explicitly allow for the fact that salesperson insecurity is a function of the varied factors that give rise to feelings of discomfort, which may wax and wane over time.

Although adopting the trait view of insecurity, Maslow (1942) was one of the earliest scholars to discuss the feelings related to insecurity. He provides an exhaustive list to include feelings of rejection, feelings of isolation, constant feelings of threat and anxiety, feelings of suspicion and mistrust, the tendency to expect the worse, the tendency to be unhappy or discontented, feelings of tension and strain, tendency to compulsive introspectiveness, and disturbances of various aspects of the self-esteem complex. Moreover, insecurity can be reflected in emotional reactivity that is represented by heightened fear, distress, vigilance and covert hostility (Raina and Bhan 2013; Ross and Squires 2011; Wilkinson, Rowe, and Heath 2013).

There is wide agreement in the literature that every insecure person longs for security either consciously or unconsciously, thus underscoring the importance of this phenomenon (Holmes and Murray 2007; Murray, Holmes, and Collins 2006; Wills-Herrera et al. 2011). For example, the *emotional security hypothesis* postulates that the primary goal that motivates individuals' actions and reactions is the preservation and promotion of their own sense of emotional security (Cummings and Davies 1996; Davies and Cummings 1994). Similar

arguments have been made using *subjective uncertainty reduction theory* (e.g., Hewstone, Rubin, and Willis 2002; Hogg 2000) and *motivation to reduce uncertainty theory* (Kramer 1999).

Reducing uncertainty is of paramount importance to individuals and thus motivates them to act. This is particularly true of job insecurity, the most discussed form of workplace insecurity examined in the business literature (Cheng, Mauno, and Lee 2014; Debus et al. 2012; Lam et al. 2015), and one manifestation of salesperson insecurity. Job insecurity has been characterized as a “perceived powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened situation” (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt 1984, p. 438; see also Boswell et al. 2014). Job insecurity can result from uncertainty (De Witte 1999) due to a prolonged economic downturn, upsurge of mergers and acquisitions, rapidly changing industrial structure, the trend toward decreasing union representation of the workforce, a company’s effort to reorganize, restructure and cut costs (Sverke and Hellgren 2002) and inadequate job performance (e.g., Cheng and Chan 2008). In particular, job insecurity is assessed in terms of an individual’s perceived probability of job loss based on perceptions and interpretations of the immediate work environment (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt 1984; Mohr 2000).

METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to answer the following two questions: What is the nature of salesperson insecurity and how is it experienced? In order to begin exploring the notion of a salesperson’s state of insecurity, it is important to examine the phenomenon directly, plunging into the processes themselves by collecting fine-grained qualitative data (Langley 1999). This affords the opportunity to understand patterns within the phenomenon, pivotal to developing theory. Due to the infancy of the concept of salesperson insecurity, a combination of phenomenology (e.g., Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989) and grounded theory (e.g., Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1998) was used to guide this research. On the one hand,

phenomenology is aimed at understanding the actual lived-experience of individuals by focusing on describing what it is like to experience salesperson insecurity (Polkinghorne 1988). On the other hand, grounded theory provides a sensemaking strategy that facilitates the development of a theoretical structure from the “bottom up” by directly reflecting the data (e.g., Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1998). In tandem, these two traditions provide a unique and complementary approach that brings rigor to theory building by diving deep into the interpretation of the environments in which individuals exist (e.g., Mello and Flint 2009; Randall and Mello 2012).

Data Collection

Twenty-five individuals with professional sales experience in business-to-business were interviewed for this study. After the initial interviews, theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1998) was employed such that subsequent participants were identified on the basis of emerging theory (see Table 1 for participant profiles). The list of participants reflects diversity in gender, length of experience, and type of industry.

Place Table 1 about here

Semi-structured in-depth interviews provided the opportunity to delve deeply into the everyday world meanings as interpreted by the participants, and facilitated the best “pipeline for transmitting knowledge” (Morrison et al. 2012; Yin 2013). This method relied upon Holstein and Gubrium’s (1995) active and creative interviews, reflecting a set of techniques that move past the words and sentences. One of the main purposes of active interviewing is to encourage the visibility of linkages and horizons; horizons of meanings consist of meaningful configurations that emerge through patterned narrative linkages. The objective is to have the participants make the linkages and assemble horizons themselves. “Salesperson insecurity,” a term that generally

possesses a negative connotation, was not initiated, and thus not primed by the interviewer. Therefore, participants were initially asked about the challenges and uncertainties they faced in order to preserve the integrity of the qualitative data. This was important, because we did not want to prompt participants with our own rationale as the goal was for participants to make their own connections.

The design of the interviews drew upon ethnographic techniques suggested by Spradley (1979) utilizing grand tour, mini-tour and experience-focused descriptive questions as appropriate. The interviews were designed to obtain individual descriptions, narratives and experiences. An interview guide (please see appendix) was employed along with audio recording and verbatim transcription. The interviews ranged in duration from forty minutes to an hour. Data was collected until theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser 1978).

Data Analyses

As is common in qualitative research, data analysis began as data was collected. During the interviews, careful attention was paid to the participant's words and preliminary interpretations were initiated. In qualitative research, one needs to look beyond the content of the conversation and carefully interpret the worldview of the participant. In order to form an impressionistic cluster of the categories, the first step consisted of an initial reading of the transcribed interviews to derive a "gist" of the data (e.g., Bernard 2011; Maxwell 2013). To aid in the interpretation and analysis, analytical memos were generated for each transcript (Glaser 1978).

The rest of the analyses were conducted employing the well-established highly structured and staged coding guidelines of phenomenology and grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Thompson 1997). *Open coding*, the process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are revealed, was accomplished by breaking the data into discrete parts and comparing each incident. A detailed line-by-line analysis was undertaken to generate

initial categories and discover relationships at the word, phrase, and sentence meaning-unit level. Similar concepts were grouped and collapsed together into categories employing the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). *Axial coding*, relating categories to their subcategories, employed a paradigm model that coded for conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences. This form of coding aided in identifying the different components and relationships of the theory. Finally, *selective coding* afforded the identification of a storyline that integrated the categories that were established by axial coding, leading to integration and refinement of theory. The analyses and interpretations led to detecting relevant categories and linkages reflecting a conceptual model of the phenomenon of salesperson insecurity.

Methods of trustworthiness were used to ensure valid data were collected and the best interpretations were employed (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). *Confirmability*, the ability for an independent auditor to trace categories, properties, and dimensions to the original transcript, consisted of performing all analysis and synthesis using NVivo software. The analysis consisted of a micro level, line-by-line review, where the results were easily recreated and confirmed. *Transferability*, the ability of the researcher to present findings in such a way that other researchers can easily determine transferable into their research context, consisted of the use of “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973) to provide a detailed account of the findings. *Credibility*, the notion that representation of the findings is adequate and believable, consists of asking numerous questions of the interviewees to ensure that there was understanding of participant meaning. The use of a *subject matter expert* in qualitative research methods, a member of the research team, discussed in depth with the primary researcher his initial interpretations of the consistency, traceability, and verifiability. The members of the research team met and collectively reviewed the interpretations. Finally, a summary of the

interpretations was provided to *subject matter experts*, members of industry for feedback and confirmation. These professionals recommended no changes.

FINDINGS

The findings reveal the state of salesperson insecurity is comprised of a complex system reflecting the interplay of multiple components: sources of discomfort, experiential beliefs, cognitive interpretation, and affective response (please refer to Figure 1). The antecedents to states of insecurity, appear to include individual (e.g., feelings of isolation), organizational (e.g., change within the company), and environmental triggers (e.g., uncertainty associated with the industry). For example, at the individual level, insecurity may be triggered when salespeople entertain the thought of not being able to provide for their family. As another example, salesperson insecurity may be triggered when salespeople start to question the credibility and the competitive advantage of the products they sell.

Results of the interviews suggest that these triggers give rise to discomfort related to four different factors: uncertainty, doubt, self-esteem, and felt-threat. Moreover, at times, discomfort from multiple sources co-occurs and varies in intensity. Once these discomforts are experienced, the salesperson has a momentary cognitive and/or affective response that reflects a level of distress. During subsequent moments, the salesperson relies on his or her experiential based belief system in assessing the imbalance (Higgins 1996; Higgins 1987). Specifically, there is a period of time (t_1 to t_N depicted in the Model) where the salesperson responds to the imbalance caused by the discomfort experienced. This time period reflects an iterative process of becoming aware and potentially adjusting the feeling state as a result of beliefs. These beliefs are likely to be a function of past or present experiences (e.g., mentoring from another). It is likely that what is occurring during this time period will change as the salesperson gains more experience and sense of control. The important thing to note is that there is a time component and progression

that may be momentary or span a relative period of time, and is associated with the interplay between cognitive interpretation, affective response, and the experiential based belief system. Damasio (1994) suggests that the order of these initial responses to the discomfort experienced is difficult to tease apart given the split second, interactive networking of the brain.

As noted above and confirmed in this study, salesperson insecurity should be viewed as individual-centric. Each person will experience insecurity differently, depending in part on the source and intensity of the discomfort. What triggers one person's state of insecurity does not necessarily trigger another's. Moreover, participants were found to have different tolerance levels for their feelings of insecurity (Berger and Calabrese 1975; Kramer 1999). Indeed, not all participants viewed these adverse feelings as negative. Some of the participants expressed that they thrived on the challenges and uncertainties, and didn't experience negative emotions. While most participants expressed the downside of insecurity, this finding is consistent with Kramer's (1999) motivation for uncertainty reduction theory stressing that not all individuals will experience insecurity in every event or the same way.

Place Figure 1 about here

Sources of Discomfort

Uncertainty

One of the main sources of discomfort participants noted was uncertainty. Uncertainty may result from a lack of information about external circumstances (Yair 2008). For instance, Santiago describes how, as a salesperson, he is not always privy to information. By not having clear communication from management and being left in a state of uncertainty, Santiago emphasizes how stressful it can be wondering about what is going to happen.

“Well, uncertainties is that sometimes.... within our organization, we don't always now the information that's coming down from higher management so that can make it a little

bit stressful knowing that okay, you're hearing rumors that there's going to be cut backs or there's going to be, you know, things are going to change.... so the uncertainty that we face is we never know exactly what's coming from higher up because they won't let us know.”

By not regularly receiving company communication, a salesperson may be left wondering if they are still valued by the organization. The feelings of uncertainty are further present in instances where the fear of the unknown becomes salient in the salesperson’s mind. In the interviews, most of the participants expressed that there was no guarantee that they would always be employed by their organization. This uncertainty can become a hindrance to salesperson focus. Cathy, who is a seasoned salesperson, very eloquently describes her experiences.

“Well I'll say one of the biggest uncertainties with us and with the industry now is the uncertainty of, will we even have a job.... You went home, you sat by the phone until they said you still have your job. I always still had my job. I never felt like it was particularly related to who's doing the best job it was always just decisions made.... and they just did that, but we recently had a morning where we stayed home and you know we all, everybody here still had their jobs but it creates a diversion... I'm just always a little anxious you know... I've probably been through six lay-offs now but never been laid off, but you just worry about it a little bit, but you know before you know it. The kind of thing is when they say two days before okay, on Wednesday of this week, stay home. You know. If they tell you two months ahead then you know, people are biting their nails for two months.”

Along these lines, participants also discussed the uncertainties that revolved around being able to maintain the particular lifestyle to which they and their families have grown accustomed. This lifestyle becomes part of their self-identity (Hogg and Terry 2000). The uncertainty in this case may be associated with feelings of fear. This is inherent in the following quote by Parker.

“You know, fear that I'm not going to be able to sell, fear that the investments that we're making in our corporation are going to go by the wayside, fear that I'm not going to be able to support my family and keep them in a lifestyle which they've become accustomed to... You know when you achieve a certain level of success you want to continue that level and that creates an identity to who I am.”

Thus, the state of insecurity arises from uncertainties about balancing conflicting ambiguities in the salesperson’s world (Brunner and Willard 2003). The data reflect that

insecurity may or may not be related to any one particular uncertainty. Instead, it was a compounding effect of uncertainty that contributed to salesperson insecurity.

Doubt

Another major type of discomfort that emerged from the data was doubt. This doubt can be associated with the salesperson questioning their abilities and skills or questioning the products and services that they represent. The significance of doubt is heightened when people feel, think, and act differently because doubt instead of confidence is accessible (Wichman et al. 2010).

Reflected in the interviews, one instance in which doubt plays a role in salesperson insecurity is the notion of self-doubt (Flaxman et al. 2012; Frost et al. 1990; Williams et al. 2014). Unlike self-esteem, which is based on the global evaluation of one-self, self-doubt pertains to how a person feels about important abilities (Hermann, Leonardelli, and Arkin 2002) and is associated with either low perceived power or low perceived competence. Self-doubts may be comprised of self-evaluations that negatively assess the self with regard to issue-related performance (Sonenshein, DeCelles, and Dutton 2014). In the literature, self-doubt has also been linked to low levels of self-concept and self-efficacy (Stankov 2010). Participants described losing motivation and being in a negative mood when they felt like they perhaps were not capable of doing their job function. For example, one participant did not only feel like he was starting to question his abilities, but also how doubt impacted his approach towards the job. Sam, a long-time sales veteran, describes the intimidation he feels every now and then.

“First thing you feel is intimidation. A little bit of okay, you question yourself, am I up for this? In thirty-five years of being in this industry, I’ve been through so many of these they’re uncountable.”

Interestingly, it appears these feelings of doubt are reoccurring and do not seem to disappear with experience and time. This may lead to salespeople having incidents where they regularly question their own personal abilities to sell. In the following passage, Jim speaks about

how he begins to question his skills and his performance during these episodic experiences.

“You can kind of get in a funk that you start questioning your skills and questioning your performance. And sometimes, it is pretty tough to pull out of that funk... What will usually happen to me is that if I do fail with a customer, that I start questioning myself with every other customer.... so then what happens to me is I start questioning myself about, well, do my other customers feel like this, even if they haven't said anything. I just question everything I do and wonder if everybody feels the same way.”

The notion of doubt may also be associated with products and services that the salespeople represent. Some of the participants stated concern regarding the product offering and whether it will actually meet customer needs. In these instances, participants described how they felt limited by the products they were selling, and had doubts about them. As such, when competing in the marketplace, they doubted that the product they were promoting was better than that of competitors. Some participants discussed how an outdated product could make them “extinct,” leading them to doubt the products they represent. For instance, Troy's doubt can be inferred when he shares the consequences of a competitor releasing a new product that customers perceive as being cutting-edge.

“They (competitor) just launched a new machine that is a direct competitor for me personally and we're, we're not going to have anything new... when a competitor launches a brand new product and it gains momentum, people want to know what you have planned. And frankly, we don't have anything planned; I mean we're trying to enhance what we have. The perception is a big part of gaining an opportunity and the perception is right now, that our competition has launched new technology and tried to address some of the, some of the needs in the surgical industry and we don't really have anything new coming down the pipeline... that threatens me in my ability to get into new places.”

In sum, doubt can be described by instances where salespeople ponder on their own worth incessantly, focusing primarily on what they perceive as imperfections (Oleson et al. 2000). Due to the highly interdependent nature of the sales function, doubt is especially prevalent in sales, where salespeople are constantly trying to impress and please internal (e.g., managers) and external stakeholders (e.g., customers). Hence, self-doubt becomes even more heightened in

situations where approval by important others is dependent upon demonstration of competence (e.g., Jones and Berglas 1978; Wichman et al. 2010).

Self-Esteem

Another source of discomfort that emerged from our data is related to self-esteem. Self-esteem is a component of the self-concept that incorporates people's global self-evaluations of his or her overall worth (Baker and McNulty 2013; Libby et al. 2011). Our findings on self-esteem are consistent with the notion of organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) in the management literature (e.g., Liu et al. 2013; Pierce et al. 1989). Pierce and his colleagues (1989) describe OBSE as "the self-perceived value that individuals have of themselves as organization members acting within an organizational context" (p.625). According to previous research, OBSE has been found to mediate the relationship between work environment variables (e.g., job complexity) and employee behaviors, attitudes, pay level, citizenship behaviors and performance (Chen and Aryee 2007; Gardner, Dyne, and Pierce 2004; Gardner and Pierce 2013).

From this analysis, one instance in which a trigger can influence fluctuating levels of self-esteem is evident by the salesperson's comfort in the level of their knowledge. The salesperson may not always be the technical or product expert. The display of a lack of knowledge can result in losing face and trust with the customer. This can be tied to self-esteem and how salespeople view and value themselves. For example, a salesperson may become completely "deflated" when they miss out on an opportunity by taking the matter very personally. In the following passage, Linda explains,

"It sort of just kills your confidence like all of a sudden you're just like do they not want my product, or what's the deal or you know is our sales team not, you know following up with, are we not keeping those relationships like we should be doing over the course of whatever years? So, I think when with sales when you lose a deal it literally, especially these long term deals like this, these are like your babies these are long term relationships that you've had and it's almost like mourning the loss of a friend, or an acquaintance or a relationship of some sort, so I mean when it was low, because selling is such a personal

thing, you took it very personally.”

Participants also expressed how they measured their value to the organization by how they serviced and met customer needs. When they were unable to meet customer needs, some of the participants took it personally and felt that they were not providing value as salespeople. It can be inferred that this personal accountability may lead to episodes of OBSE. Jim notes,

“A lot of time that really gets me down, because I take that to heart and I feel like I really failed the customer. That in turn will knock down my motivation to want to help that customer anymore. It put me in a bad mood for the day.”

When salespeople experience episodes of OBSE, they may devalue their role in the organization. As such, they may feel that they are worthless and that they do not provide value. John described how it could be depressing when assessing the situation and the value of his employment. This is especially fearful when management begins to question whether they want to keep the salesperson on staff. Part of the self-esteem in this instance is not only the perception by the salesperson, but also the fear of how management values them. John discusses in the following passage.

“If you have to deal, not if, but when you have to deal with the situation where expectations are not met, then you have to kind of take your lick, and then apologize and, and commit to making it better, or making it right, so those are the kind of days where it's a little more depressing, where it's a little more fear, I guess, that they assess the situation that makes them question your employment. You know it's just, it's just really makes them go, ‘I don't know if it's worth having this person on staff’.”

Felt Threat

The fourth type of discomfort that emerged from the data is felt threat. Threats can be thought of as events that call into question one's positive self-regard (vanDellen et al. 2011). Threats are particularly salient to insecure individuals (Cameron et al. 2010; Leary and Baumeister 2000). The importance of felt threat here is evident in that secure people tend to remain emotionally stable in the face of threats and calmly and efficiently solve problems (Ein-Dor and Tal 2012;

Rom and Mikulincer 2003). This can be further explained considering the concept of job insecurity. An important element of job insecurity is the perceived threat to the continuity of one's job (Boswell et al. 2014; De Witte 1999). A key characteristic of job insecurity is "the perceived powerlessness to maintain the desired continuity in a threatened job situation" (Cheng et al. 2014; Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt 1984).

This study's analysis revealed that a feeling of control was an important component of felt threat. Perceptions of threat may be associated with fears of losing control of one's life (Wills-Herrera et al. 2011). Here, felt threat was comprised of the salesperson perception of not having control of his or her efforts. This is directly reported by Mary.

"Like you're doing all the right things and yet it's still not getting done. So, it's frustrating to you, it's so frustrating that you have, you almost feel like you have no power, you're powerless you know."

This is especially intriguing, given that effort is usually considered to be under the "control" of the salesperson (Krishnan, Netemeyer, and Boles 2002). Unlike their performance and output of their efforts, salespeople feel that they have much more control of their actual efforts (Ingram, Lee, and Skinner 1989). It becomes evident that having a sense of control is an important aspect to salespeople. In some cases, participants expressed the challenges with circumstances outside of their control. Adam highlights this paradox of control.

"...and you lose because they decide they don't like the company, they don't know enough about it and they want to go with somebody that they like, and that's even more disheartening because you know you've done a great job, you've delivered a great solution but, you know, politically or you know, from a hierarchy stand point, or just structurally, somebody stepped in and made that decision and that's literally out of your control and you can't see it coming, you can't predict it you can't plan for it, it is what it is."

Felt threat was also associated with threats to salespersons credibility. Participants placed a significant emphasis on the importance of their reputation both within and outside of the

organization. In a sense, being a salesperson was part of their identity (Hogg 2000). Indeed, some participants described the tension as consisting of a threat to their self-identities (e.g., Hogg 2007; Petriglieri 2011; Thoits 1983). From this perspective, if one loses a valued identity or a sense of oneself in a social context, then anxiety and depression can result (Brown and Ryan 2003; Flaxman et al. 2012; Mauno et al. 2005). Parker discusses this concern as follows,

“You know fear that I’m not going to be able to sell, fear that the investments that we’re making in our corporation are going to go by the wayside, fear that I’m not going to be able to support my family and keep them in a lifestyle, which they’ve become accustomed to. Fear that how affected am I, as to myself, I guess that would be it. You know when you achieve a certain level of success you want to continue that level and that creates an identity to who I am.”

The Interplay of Multiple Response Components to Tension

As depicted in the model, there exists an interplay of multiple response components to discomfort: affective response, cognitive interpretation, and experienced based beliefs. Examples of each component as reflected in the data will be presented first, followed by examples of the interplay of these response components.

Affective Response

Participants expressed affective response to discomfort in one of two ways: inferred and direct. Some expressed emotion through an inference. This inferred emotional response did not specifically make reference to any particular feelings or affect. Instead, participants used phrases such as “that’s where my headache comes in,” “biggest pain in the butt,” “associated comfort and discomfort,” “brings me down and ruins my day,” “pulling your hair out,” “get in a funk,” “pit in my stomach,” “freaking out,” and “a lot of pressure,” to describe their different job-related aspects and experiences. These particular phrases suggest that there are negative emotions and feelings that are experienced and that salespeople indeed experience an affective response to discomfort. For example, in the following passage Barry insinuates an affective response to the uncertainty that he is experiencing as a result of his job as a salesperson. He

infers the emotional response he experiences by referring to “constant pressure.”

“There's a lot of uncertainty around you know, just my, my position in general so we have to, it's kind of like a basketball coach you're only as good as your last game and so there's a constant pressure virtually daily to perform and so, you know just a lot of uncertainty with my job and I've lived with this for oh golly 35 years or so. A lot of my friends and acquaintances will say I don't know how you do that for a living. Because if you don't perform then your career's over in a hurry. So many uncertainties.”

In addition to an inferred affective response, there was direct evidence of emotional response in the data. In these instances, participants described specific feelings and emotions that they experienced with regards to the discomfort they experienced. Participants used words like anxiety, frustration, anger, tired, impatient, uneasy, uncomfortable, disappointment, upset, regret, sad, embarrassment, fear, confusion and laziness to explain how they felt when they experienced discomfort. In the following excerpt, Addison mentions how these feelings, at times, put a burden on her and how it leaks into her personal life.

“Oh shoot, anger, frustration, I'm always tired, always tired, my patience is usually fried. It affects your personal life as well, because my office is at my house. I work out of my home, so I can work all the time if I choose to and as sales reps, the more you work, typically, means the more money you make so, or the chance to make money is there, so I find that I can't - once my family goes to bed or my kids go to bed, I find myself working till midnight a lot, and so it causes anxiety because I know I'm not hanging out with my husband or watching TV, or you know that kind of thing. And so it causes stresses on relationships, and it causes stress within your family unit and there's anxiety.... so you know just the pressures to make your number are enough to make you lose sleep, have poor health.”

Cognitive Interpretation

The data from this study reflected the existence of one or more cognitive interpretations that resulted from the recognition of experienced discomfort. This recognition refers to a consciousness, which is described as the state of being aware of and attentive to what is taking place in the present (Averill 1992). Here, the salesperson recognizes the imbalance and often forms an initial attribution. Sam stresses, “again, just be cognizant of what's around you and just trying to keep things positive away from the negative and the feelings that could frustrate.” Take

Derek, for instance, who refers implicitly to how he has reflective moments when discomfort is experienced. He talks about how he recognizes the discomfort and how he responds.

“So we're just churning and you know, we'll try to, if things are getting rough, we just try to lubricate it and try to keep going so I guess that that's an analogy so to speak, but at the same time that cog never moves right, it's always there so I always felt like hey this might not be going anywhere.”

This particular process can be considered salesperson self-talk reflecting a cognitive interpretation regarding their situation and experiences. As will be discussed below, this self-talk interacts with one's experience based belief system to alter the cognitive interpretation over time.

Interplay with Experience-based Belief System

When a salesperson enters a state of insecurity, an imbalance in homeostasis is present, and thus it is natural for the system to try to rebalance itself. This occurs through self-regulation, which has a desired end state as a reference value (Carver and Scheier 1990; Higgins 1989; Higgins 1987). When there are inconsistencies between the current perceived actual self-state and the desired end state, a discrepancy-reducing system works to reduce the discrepancies as it attempts to move towards the desired end state. In essence, this system moves towards and approaches a positive self-state. Carver and Scheier (1990) propose another perspective within a self-regulatory system. Under a discrepancy-amplifying system, an undesired state is used as a reference value. Here, the self-regulatory system magnifies the inconsistencies between the current perceived actual self-state and the desired self-state. In this case, the system aims to move the current perceived actual self-state as far away as possible from the undesired self-state. Under this perspective, the system moves from and avoids a negative self-state.

Following an initial negative affective response and the potential for an initial cognitive interpretation, the data reveal an intriguing interplay with an individual's previous or present experiences, most often employed to diminish the negative self-state referred to above. In this

case, changes in cognitive interpretation appear to precede changes in affective response. The salesperson assesses the experienced discomfort cognitively through an interplay with past experience and knowledge. This may also occur as a result of an intervention with a mentor and/or colleague. This iterative cognitive interpretation process will be used by the salesperson to gauge the level of insecurity they experience at that particular point in time. This is exemplified in the following passage from Cecile.

“Every time I have these emotions or feelings about frustration I wish we could have done that, or I wish we could do these things, I'm thinking well we're all doing some things it's all going to help, and we can't do it all. That's impossible. Our competitors can do it all, so, we can only offer what we can offer and do it in the best way that we can possibly do it, and so, you know you're past these feelings when you know that you're having them in the first place, and you realize you're having the frustration, you realize it's part of you and then when you make that realization that you have, you can internally find a way to say okay well I can't change these things, they are happening this way, so let me just focus on the things that I know.”

The importance of cognitive interpretation in the moment is highlighted in the following statement by Sal. He mentions how important it is to be cognizant of the negative influences and how it is crucial to not let them simmer. In this case, a reflective moment occurs where the salesperson realizes an imbalance in their homeostasis that needs to be remedied.

“I mean, it keeps my mind in check, I mean, you get a lot of negative stuff that hits you sometimes and you've got to keep that positive mentality, it keeps you focused on the prize so, if not I mean all that negative influence really drags you away from what your roles are from focusing on them... You know all of those things could, different negative influences can kind of hit you so you got to kind of leave that in check, leave it at home, you know it will still be there at the end of the day, but you know it's not going to help when you're at your bad numbers too, things can go down or spiral real fast.”

There are also times when salespeople referred to situations where they used their experiential based belief system in conjunction with only their level of affective response. Here, participants didn't directly talk about a cognitive reflective moment, but instead they relied on a “feeling.” This feeling was based on past experience and knowledge. The following passage by

Derek exemplifies this.

“I think once you've done it again, you know that's like, if this is the problem, you experienced the problem, you got this feeling. Well once you've done it again, and you had success than that feeling definitely should go away. You know, you can't, you're focusing on the past, understanding the past and learning from the past is one thing, but dwelling on it, you can't move forward that way, you've got to have confidence you know.”

It is interesting to note that salespeople are not always or only using a cognitive interpretation in assessing their experienced discomfort. They may also – and perhaps sometimes through an interplay with cognitive interpretation and their experientially based belief system – experience a certain amount of intermittent affective distress. For instance, Baldwin discusses how the sales profession encompasses a myriad of unstable emotions.

“The emotions run the gambit on down from highs to lows, there's not a profession out there short of sport, an athlete, that provides the amount of emotional roller coaster that a sales professional runs on day in and day out.”

Along these lines, it was interesting to find that participants described these feelings as never going away, and instead would sporadically appear and disappear. Indeed, for several of the participants, the sales profession is a never-ending “emotional roller coaster” that they have accepted and grown accustomed to. Linda very eloquently explains.

“To be honest I'm not sure I ever move past the feelings. I believe that they're like a roller coaster they get suppressed and then they come back up and then they get suppressed and then they come back up. I think dealing with sales, which is very volatile, and dealing with salespeople, which are usually volatile in the sense that they all have very strong or different personalities it's rare that you ever leave those feelings completely behind. They, you just have times where they're stronger and they're weaker and you kind of go up and down.”

To summarize, the data suggest that a salesperson enters a state of insecurity when a discrepancy between a desired state and reality exists. Specifically, insecurity results when the discomforts a salesperson experiences lead to affective responses and cognitive interpretations that they cannot effectively reconcile with their prior beliefs or experiences. It is important to

acknowledge that there is no predefined amount of time that the discrepancy lasts, as the state of insecurity may be brief or enduring.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to gain a better understanding of salesperson insecurity and how it is experienced. By taking into consideration that salespeople operate in a dynamic and unpredictable environment, attention was paid to recent calls in the literature for a richer understanding of the interplay between frontline employees (e.g., salesperson) and their environment (Bowen and Schneider 2014; Yoo and Arnold 2015). Accordingly, building on existing research and relying on a tandem of two well-established interpretive techniques (grounded theory and phenomenology), we discover that insecurity is indeed an important work stressor for salespeople which results from four basic types of discomfort related to uncertainty, doubt, self-esteem, and felt-threat. Moreover, insecurity results when these discomforts lead to cognitive and affective responses that are incongruent with a salesperson's experiential-based belief system. It is important to note that, while not everlasting, these states of felt insecurity vary in time as a result of the interplay between cognitive interpretation, affective response, and the experiential based belief system.

By exploring the notion salesperson insecurity directly (i.e., through qualitative interviews), this research makes several key theoretical contributions. First, a more comprehensive perspective on insecurity is provided, especially as it pertains to the individual salesperson that goes beyond the perceived threat of job loss (i.e. job insecurity). Second, this research advances the notion of salesperson insecurity as a largely unexamined job stressor that may have important implications for the welfare and performance of sales employees. Lastly, this research offers further evidence regarding the role emotional factors play in sales contexts (e.g., Ereveless and Fukawa 2013).

Managerial Implications

By occupying the thoughts of salespeople, insecurity is a potent stressor that may detract from the attention and focus that is necessary to maintain strong customer relationships. Indeed, the state of insecurity can have an impact on salespeople's attitude towards, as well as their response to, others. This concern is succinctly summarized in the following passage. Carter explains,

“Well, if, if you're not excited about what you're doing then you're probably not going to do it real good. You're not going to have the right mental attitude, you're not going to have, I mean, you know people are going to read that, people are going to read that you don't enjoy what you're doing... you, people are going to know this person is not real excited to be here, you know their attitude is not good and therefore in sales, if that's the case, the person you're trying to sell to will know that, they're probably not really going to want to buy it from you.”

This research suggests two avenues for controlling or limiting the amount of insecurity salespeople experience; one focuses on curtailing the discomforts that are the source of insecurity, and the other on helping salespeople cope with the thoughts and feelings that result when such discomforts are experienced. These two avenues for inhibiting salesperson insecurity are discussed next.

Reducing Insecurity by Curtailing Experienced Discomforts

There are several actions managers can take to reduce, if not eliminate, the discomfort related to uncertainty, doubt, self-esteem, and felt-threat that salespeople experience. Two such actions are discussed here. First, it is crucial for management to regularly provide validation and proactive feedback to salespeople. By doing so, managers can ensure that salespeople are proactively receiving the information and confirmation they need in order to not experience the uncertainty or doubts that give rise to insecurity. In this study, participants indicated that it really meant a lot to them when they had managers who respected them and provided them with honest feedback. This assertion is consistent with past research that finds that one of the most important individuals affecting a salesperson's job-related outcomes is their sales manager (Evans et al.

2002; Wotruba and Simpson 1992). Feedback from managers serves as an “internal fire” that excites and reassures the salesperson, and thus helps prevent them from entering a negative state. As Jim mentions, after getting feedback from a supervisor, “I just get excited again, I am almost like a little kid at Christmas, you know, I get real excited.” Furthermore, managerial feedback can help keep salespeople from dipping into a negative state by increasing their sense of worth. In essence, managers can improve the confidence of their salesforce through feedback, thus reducing the incidence of discomfort.

Second, managers can also prevent a salesperson from entering a state of insecurity by changing their perceptions about particular sources of discomfort. For instance, by acknowledging the sources of discomfort that salespeople may experience, managers can frame potential discomforts as potential gains (Piccolo and Colquitt 2006). Specifically, because managers can influence the perceptions that salespeople have of their environments, they can ensure that potential discomforts are not construed as threats to their well-being (i.e., convince salespeople that “this will not affect you”). In essence, managers are in a unique position to alter the feelings and thoughts salespeople may associate with potential discomforts, and by shaping those feeling and perceptions, they can change a salesperson’s mindset. This recommendation is consistent with the finding that managers can enhance the extent to which employees view the positive side of potential stressors (Crum, Salovey, and Achor 2013; LePine et al. 2015).

Reducing Insecurity by Helping Salespeople Cope with Experienced Discomforts

Managers should design targeted training programs and better support systems for the salesforce to help them cope with the discomforts that they do experience. For instance, managers might be wise to develop the emotional intelligence skills of their salespeople through training (Dong, Seo, and Bartol 2014; Goleman 2006; Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee 2013). Emotional intelligence consists of the ability for individuals to identify, use, and understand their emotions

in positive ways. Specifically, emotional intelligence can help relieve moments of felt discomfort by providing salespeople with the tools they need to manage their emotions, and thus diffuse the insecurity that results when felt discomforts occur.

Additionally, managers should be cognizant of the factors that contribute to insecurity so that they can coach and mentor salespeople during times of discomfort (Corcoran 1995). To the extent that managers understand the interplay of the different factors that lead to insecurity, they can develop coaching strategies that are more targeted and effective (e.g., Rich 1998; Shannahan, Bush, and Shannahan 2012; Shannahan, Shannahan, and Bush 2013). Coaching can be particularly helpful when sales managers have a rich understanding of the insecurity process as well as the salesperson's specific job requirements, their performance potential and shortcomings, and how they interact with environmental and situational conditions. In such instances, managers can provide pointed coaching to help salespeople cope with the discrepancy between their experienced discomfort and their past experiences.

In summary, for managers, an understanding of salesperson insecurity as an important job stressor may help them provide their salespeople with a better work experience (Huang et al. 2012; Yen 2014). As a stressor, repeated and compounding effects of salesperson insecurity may eventually impair salesperson well-being, contribute to burnout, and lead to turnover and decreased performance (Singh et al. 1994). This is not meant to suggest that a single episode of salesperson insecurity will directly lead to burnout, but instead that as instances of insecurity accumulate, it is possible that a salesperson reaches a point of "no return." As with other stressors, managers can help curtail the negative effects of insecurity by making themselves more available, being more transparent, and providing social support, especially when experienced discomfort is likely to be heightened.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations worth noting. First, the major limitation is that the study data are retrospective and not real-time. Since this study relied on interviews, the participants had to reflect back on prior experiences and situations where they experienced a state of insecurity. Additionally, some of the interviews were conducted by phone. It would have been ideal for all of the interviews to be face-to-face and take place in the salesperson's natural setting (Morrison et al. 2002). Another limitation is that the sample consisted primarily of US-centric participants. Findings might differ if the sample was more diverse. For example, national cultural factors may influence salespeople differently across regions of the world.

There are several fruitful avenues for future research. In particular, future research can examine in further detail the behavioral consequences of salesperson insecurity. It would be valuable to consider the causes of salesperson insecurity as well. Specifically, what is the nature (e.g., linear or curvilinear) of the relationship between insecurity triggers and the resulting discomfort? Further research can also expand on the different properties and dimensions of the state of salesperson insecurity. Other research can explore the strategies that salespeople employ to move away from a state of insecurity. Moreover, it would be beneficial to examine contextual variables, including moderators that may impact the relationship of the various factors within our model.

This research presents an initial examination into the nature of salesperson insecurity. The data reveal a real world phenomenon, a job stressor, which has the potential for significant negative impact on salesperson and corporate welfare. We hope this research provides the foundation for future research that can contribute fine-grained insights regarding the causes and consequences of, and strategies for mitigating the effects of, salesperson insecurity.

FOOTNOTES

¹ While the work of Cagodan and colleagues was carried out in a sales context, the primary focus of their study is on job insecurity at the team rather than individual salesperson level.

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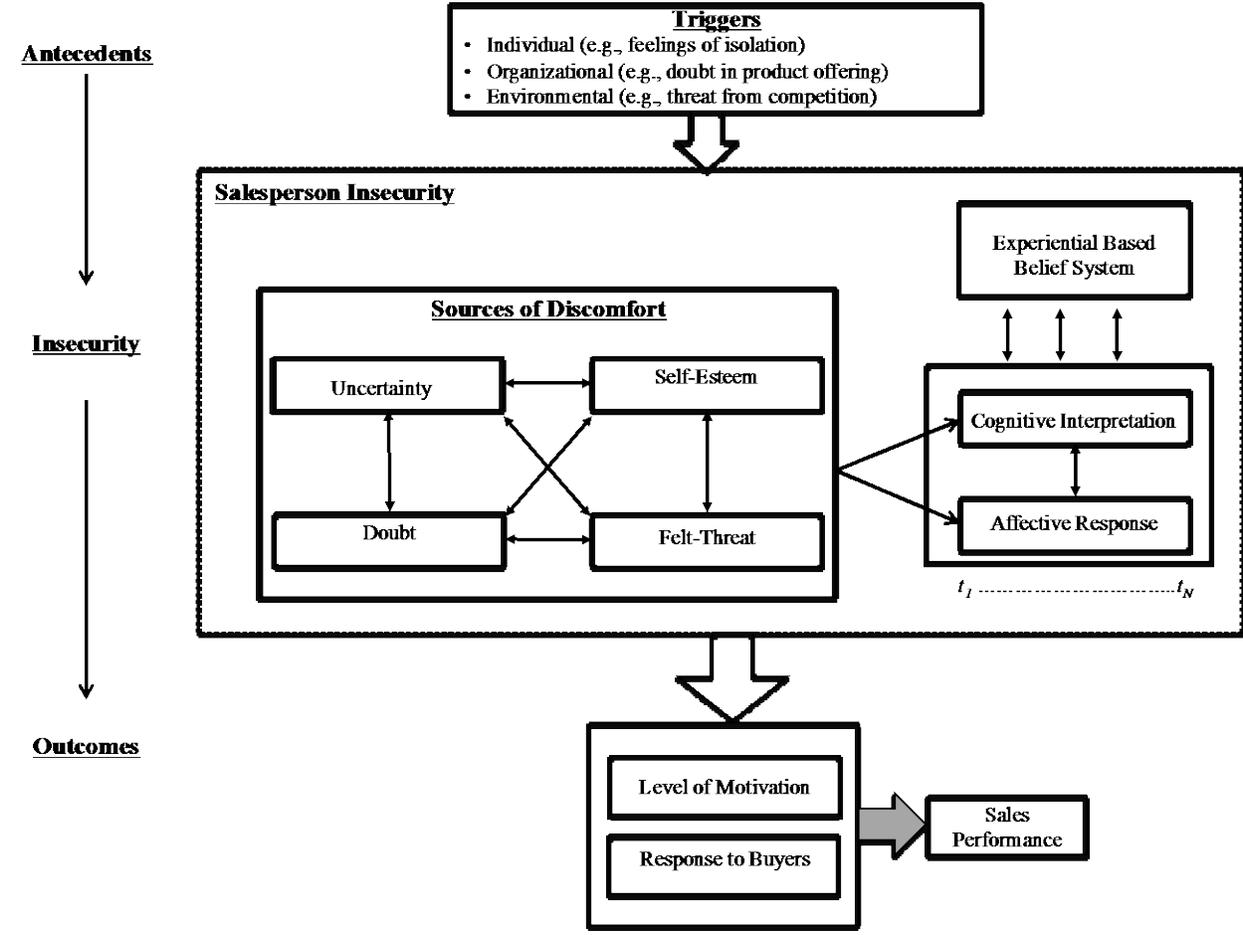
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**Table 1
Profile of Participants**

Name	Gender	Age	Title	Sales Experience (in years)	Industry Experience
Jim	Male	41	Account Manager	18	Grocery, Building Materials, Electronics
Sam	Male	63	Senior Account Manager	35	Electronics, Distribution
Linda	Female	30	National Marketing Director	6	Parking Facilities and Management, Valet Services
Cécile	Female	37	Business Advisor	2	Educational Software, Personal Care
Larry	Male	57	Regional Sales Director	40	Healthcare, Retailing, Consumer Packaged Goods, Commercial Real Estate
Carl	Male	56	Regional Sales Manager	30	Consumer Electronics (Corporate level), Retailing
Mary	Female	29	Sales Manager	4	Transportation
Derek	Male	33	Account Manager/Business Developer	12	Commercial Real Estate, Commercial Cleaning Services
Addison	Female	42	Sales Representative	9	Laboratory Equipment, Chemical, Food
Parker	Male	45	National Sales Account Executive	23	Commercial Printing, Direct Marketing Production
Sal	Male	43	Senior Sales Executive	16	Industrial Printers, Pharmaceutical, Dental
Dan	Male	36	Financial Services Advisor	11	Commercial Insurance, Financial Services
Barry	Male	57	Senior Account Representative	30	Information Technology, Software, Services
Sean	Male	48	Sales Director	5	Healthcare, Biotechnology
Carter	Male	45	Executive Vice President	24	Transportation, Parking Facilities and Management, Retailing, Gaming
Adam	Male	45	Vice President of Sales and Marketing	19	Supply Chain Services, Transportation, Distribution
Santiago	Male	29	Commercial Liaison	4	Metals
Baldwin	Male	56	Regional Business Director	25	Medical Instruments
Wayne	Male	65	Sales Executive	45	Commercial Glass and Insulation
John	Male	38	Sales Engineer	14	Telecommunications, Networking Equipment, Computer
Tom	Male	55	Vice President, Regional Accounts	33	Healthcare, Pharmaceutical, Retail
Calvin	Male	41	Sales Executive	19	Telecommunications, Networking Equipment
Troy	Male	47	Surgical Equipment Specialist	18	Medical Instruments, Insulated Wiring
Cathy	Female	66	Senior Sales Professional	27	Pharmaceutical
Sylvestre	Male	42	Key Account Manager	8	Food, Pet Food, Consumer Packaged Goods

Notes: Names are pseudonyms. Some ages are estimates.

Figure 1
Salesperson Insecurity Model



APPENDIX

Sales Insecurity Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As previously mentioned in our previous conversations, I am currently working on a research project on challenges and uncertainties that salespeople face in a business-to-business context. I am particularly interested your individual behavior, your experiences, and your thoughts as a salesperson. The purpose of the interview is to capture these experiences in your own words. There are no right or wrong answers, and please remember that you are the expert. I am merely interested in having an open discussion about your specific experiences and thoughts as a salesperson.

General Questions:

- 1) How do you view your particular role as a salesperson in this organization?
- 2) What are some of the challenges and uncertainties that you face in your role?
- 3) What do you think are the reasons for these challenges and uncertainties?
- 4) What kind of feelings or emotions do these challenges and uncertainties evoke?
- 5) Are there any particular actions that help you move away from these feelings?
- 6) How do you know that you have moved past these feelings?
- 7) In an ideal world, what kind of changes would you implement to eliminate these challenges and uncertainties?

Specific Experiences and Social Processes

Uncover:

- How they view the industry and recent changes (challenges or opportunities)
- How they view their individual role in the industry and organization
- What they see as threats and risks
- What do they see as uncertainty
- Why, if they do, feel a sense of insecurity?
- How the feeling of insecurity might a negative effect on their role
- How they handle the feelings of insecurity in order to get their job done
- With whom they interact in other organizations, how, when and why

Discussion of process

- Data collection (obtain informed consent to record interview)
- Data analyses
- Data storage and destruction
- Confidentiality
- Right to end interview at any time

Probes

Need to remember to constantly probe for details using active listening cues and using words like:

- Tell me more about that
- What did that mean to you
- Please go on
- Can you please elaborate and give me a scenario of that

Wrap-up

- Do you have anything else you wish to share with us at this time?
- May I contact you in the future if we have other follow-up questions?