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Self-discipline and Protective Self-monitoring in Sales:

A Latent Growth Curve Analysis

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Highlights for review

- We report on a field sales study with 4 waves over 3 years of performance
- Objective archival performance data were used
- The data of 147 salespeople were analyzed with a latent growth curve analysis
- Self-discipline positively moderated the tenure-performance level relation
- Protective self-monitoring moderated by education predicted performance slopes

Self-discipline and Protective Self-monitoring in Sales: A Latent Growth Curve Analysis

Abstract

Field sales jobs receive continued attention in research because of their importance to the success of enterprises. This study aimed to test how self-discipline and protective self-monitoring impact the predicted performance of field salespeople in three consecutive years. Previous research found that organizational tenure is a predictor of the core task performance in a broad variety of jobs. We hypothesized that trait self-discipline will moderate the tenure–performance relation. Furthermore, we hypothesized that the protective self-monitoring personality trait will lead to more other-directed impression management behaviors if this trait is activated by social stress associated with a low-prestige educational background. We predictively assessed the impact of trait self-discipline and protective self-monitoring on objective sales performance data drawn from the archival data of $N = 147$ salespeople (84% males, $M_{age} = 38.9$ years) with a latent growth curve analysis. In line with our hypotheses we found that the higher the self-discipline, the more strongly tenure predicted sales performance. Furthermore, we found that the protective self-monitoring trait predicted increases in sales performance when salespeople had a low prestigious educational background. Unexpectedly, we additionally found that when salespeople had a prestigious educational background, low protective self-monitoring also predicted increases in sales performance.

Keywords: self-discipline, protective self-monitoring, latent growth curve analysis, sales performance

1. Introduction

Field sales jobs receive continued attention in personality, human resource, and marketing research because of their great importance to the success of enterprises (Herjanto & Franklin, 2019). In field sales jobs, workers actively go out and personally contact potential customers; they try to sell them items in personal encounters (Nerdinger, 2001). Field sales

positions demand a particularly high degree of self-discipline as rejection is a common occurrence and new customers need to be identified and sought out. Furthermore, in field sales, contact with potential customers is mostly face to face and with a great variety of encounters. Therefore, a salesperson's concern with the social appropriateness of his or her self-presentation in order to appear likeable and customer-focused may be vital to success in field sales jobs (Moser & Galais, 2007).

2. The Present Study

We contribute to the pertinent research in the following ways: We predictively assess the impact of trait self-discipline (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and protective self-monitoring (Wilmot et al., 2016**)** on objective sales performance data drawn from archival data in three consecutive years with a latent growth curve analysis (Curran et al., 2010). Our research responds to calls for predictive studies which exclude the possibility that the outcome variable influences the predictor variables, thus providing an advantage over cross-sectional studies. We use archival performance data which are objective, reliable, and uncontaminated by performance rater bias (Moser & Galais, 2007). And finally, we respond to calls for the investigation of self-monitoring at the facet level and not at the domain level because protective self-monitoring is orthogonal and has a divergent nomological network (Wilmot et al., 2016).

3. Hypothesis Development

Previous meta-analytic research has found that the human resource variable of organizational tenure is a predictor of the core task performance in a broad variety of jobs; e.g., social, technical, or administrative (Ng & Feldman, 2010). As individuals learn and grow on their jobs, added years of tenure contribute to increased job performance. This has also been supported for field sales jobs (Moser & Galais, 2007; Riemann & Schumacher, 1996), also with reference to objective sales performance.

Field salespeople in the insurance business can improve their performance by tenure because every existing contract with a specific customer offers further opportunities to sell other insurance products to the same customer in the future (Blickle et al., 2012). In addition, with increasing tenure, salespeople will have more opportunities to learn about the customer's specific needs and motives and can offer more individualized proposals. Finally, if salespeople are well connected with their customers, they will get referrals and can sell insurance products to customers' social networks.

In addition, previous research found moderating effects of the tenure–job performance relation. The tenure–performance relation was stronger for young workers, for women, for non-White workers, and for college-educated workers (Ng & Feldman, 2010). However, there is a scarcity of research on the individual difference moderators of the tenure–job performance relation in general and particularly in sales jobs. To the best of our knowledge, there is only one study (Moser & Galais, 2007) which has investigated an individual difference trait as moderator of the tenure–job performance relation in field sales jobs.

Moser and Galais (2007) found that acquisitive self-monitoring, i.e., the propensity to engage in self-directed impression management (e.g., self-promotion) in social interactions (Wilmot et al., 2016), negatively moderated the tenure–job performance relation. Acquisitive self-monitoring was positively correlated with job performance for salespeople with low tenure but negatively for those with high tenure. Hence, those who excel at making good first impressions based on their self-directed impression management in social interactions (Moser, Diemand, & Schuler, 1996) perform lower in the long run in field sales jobs.

This finding underscores the necessity to research stable personality trait moderators of the tenure–job performance relation in order to not only predict job performance after short tenure but also after long tenure. We therefore investigate the role of the personality trait of self-discipline (Costa & McCrae, 1992), which is a facet of the conscientiousness personality domain in moderating the tenure–job performance relation in field sales jobs. Trait self-

discipline is characterized by the ability to begin and carry out tasks, focus on goals (self-motivating), and display persistence even under adverse conditions (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

We expect that trait self-discipline will positively moderate the tenure–job performance relation in field sales jobs. Based on Ng and Feldman (2010) we assume that the higher the level of self-discipline, the more opportunities to accumulate job-related knowledge will be sought and the more opportunities to acquire skills that the organization demands will be used. Individuals with greater self-discipline are the ones who can better adapt to the company's standard operating procedures and perform well enough during their early tenure to survive the dismissal process. Consequently, over time, in the course of their organizational tenure, they will align their work behavior more closely with their company's guidelines, policies, and culture, which will result in higher performance as defined by the company. In sum, more formally:

Hypothesis 1. *The relationship between a salesperson's tenure and his or her job performance level will be moderated by the salesperson's trait self-discipline. The higher the salesperson's trait self-discipline, the more the length of tenure will predict the salesperson's job performance level.*

As we noted above, previous research indicated that acquisitive, *self-directed* impression management (e.g., self-promotion) is not a sustainable interpersonal style in field sales jobs (Moser & Galais, 2007). Meta-analytic research, however, has shown that *other-directed* impression management behavior (ingratiation) has generally positive effects both in laboratory and field studies (Higgins et al., 2003) regarding job interviews and performance assessments. Other-directed impression management behaviors aim at other-enhancement designed to increase the target's liking of the influencer in order to get what the influencer wants (Higgins et al., 2003). This can be done in subtle nonverbal ways and with few words, e.g., by asking questions indicating interest, friendly nonverbal behaviors (e.g., smiling),

maintaining eye contact with the customer, and expressing (nonverbally, i.e., nodding) opinion conformity (Higgins et al., 2003).

We expect that the other-directed influence style is not only successful in career behavior (e.g., job interviews, supervisor performance assessments; Higgins et al., 2003) but also in field sales. A statement from sales practice lends some plausibility to this expectation: Reinhold Wuerth, a German industrialist who turned a small family business into a company with sales of over $15 billion (https://www.forbes.com/profile/reinhold-wuerth/#8a2222520e9c), said in a newspaper interview (Stuttgarter Nachrichten, 2020-04-13): “A sales team accounts for 90% of an entire company’s success.” He expressed the opinion that the best salesman is not the one who talks most but the one who listens best. “In my company, there were many salesmen who were socially insecure, who turned red the moment you looked at them and who were terrified of visiting customers. But some of them became magnificent sellers because they know how to listen,” says Wuerth.

This anxious attention and responsiveness to others are associated with the protective self-monitoring personality trait (Wilmot et al., 2016), which is characterized by a concern with the social appropriateness of one’s self-presentation and a high amount of chameleon-like cross-situational variability (Nowack & Kammer, 1987; Wolf et al., 2009). In order to get along and be liked, people with higher levels of protective self-monitoring tend to display more ingratiatory behaviors. Furthermore, trait activation theory postulates that personality traits are behaviorally inactive until they are activated by contextual factors (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Renner et al. (2004) found that social stress activates protective self-presentation in those high in protective self-monitoring.

Thus, we argue that the trait of protective self-monitoring is activated by social stress, and as a consequence individuals with the propensity to high protective self-monitoring will display more other-directed (i.e., ingratiatory) impression management behavior (e.g., ask more questions, smiling, expressing opinion conformity). Therefore, they will appear more

likeable and customer-focused, which will enhance their success in sales performance. To test this assumption, we compared the performance of those salespeople with high vs. low social stress in a specific group of field sales agents, namely those selling insurance products to medical doctors.

Medical doctors in the general population in Germany have the highest vocational prestige of all professions, which is also high above all other professions (e.g., teachers, vicars, lawyers, managers, or bankers; Allensbach, 2013). For people with no academic education a "doctor" refers to a medical doctor, indicating that the academic education forms part of their high vocational prestige. In contrast, for people with high academic education the title of a medical doctor has no special reputation because it is part of the standard medical education and not part of a special academic program. Thus, for a person with a low educational level, coming into contact with a medical doctor is accompanied by feelings of awe and social stress, whereas for a person with a high educational level (e.g., someone with a doctoral diploma in biology) being in contact with a medical doctor who is a potential customer does not cause high levels of social stress.

Based on our above reasoning we expected that in insurance sales, persons with a high (as opposed to low) propensity for protective self-monitoring and low (as opposed to high) educational level who try to sell insurance products to medical doctors will experience anxious attention (Renner et al., 2004). This evokes concern with the social appropriateness (trait activation) so that they will display more ingratiatory behaviors, which will lead to higher sales performance. At the construct level we expect that the relation between the salesperson's protective self-presentation style and the salesperson's increase in job performance will be moderated by the difference in perceived social prestige of the upward social status comparison. The higher the customer's perceived social prestige is above the salesperson's perceived social prestige, the more the salesperson's protective self-presentation style will predict increases in the salesperson's job performance.

When new salespeople first begin learning how to cope with the social stress resulting from encounters with customers with a superior level of education, their efforts are halting and clumsy. But with practice over the years, their performance becomes smooth and effortless. Their ingratiatory behaviors become automatic. Thus, experienced salespeople handle these encounters as routine activities requiring little conscious attention. Their behavior in most sales situations is guided by unselfconscious habits acquired through painstaking efforts to learn how to cope with interpersonal stress (Johnson & Hogan, 2006). More formally, we expect:

Hypothesis 2. *The relation between the salesperson's protective self-presentation style and the salesperson's increase in job performance will be moderated by the difference between the educational levels of customer and salesperson, indicating differences in perceived social prestige. The higher the customer's educational level is above the salesperson's educational level, the more the salesperson's protective self-presentation style will predict increases in the salesperson's job performance.*

4. Method

4. 1 Participants and Procedure

The study was conducted in a German insurance company specialized in selling insurance products to medical doctors. With the support of the human resources (HR) department we combined self-reported data on self-discipline, protective self-presentation style, and educational level with archival data on organizational tenure and average objective sales performance. The self-report questionnaires were either collected during a training session with those salespeople already working for the insurance company or as part of the assessment center prior to being hired by the company. The company did not base their hiring decisions on the results of this assessment. However, the applicants did not know this, and the assessment appeared to be a regular part of the selection procedure. The assessment of the self-report variables was the first wave of our study, which took place more than one year

before the end of 2014. The HR department provided the exact date of the beginning of the employment as well as the sales performance in three additional, consecutive waves, i.e., in 2014, 2015, and 2016. In 2014, the overall salesforce of the company comprised 384 salespeople (83% male) with an average age of 42.5 years and an average tenure of 11.3 years. Our final sample consisted of 147 salespeople, which is about 38% of the company's salesforce (see Table 1 for socio-demographic information on our sample). The performance level in our final sample was slightly higher (3.04%) than in the overall company salesforce.

4. 2 Measures

Average sales performance. To objectively assess sales revenue, with the consent of the study participants we used the company's sales performance data from 2014, 2015, and 2016. The company's salespeople work in different regional districts, which are segmented in a way to ensure an equal number of potential clients with comparable incomes; all salespeople sell the same products to the same kind of clients in districts of comparable profitability. Consequently, it was possible to directly compare sales performances of salespeople working in different districts. To make different insurance products comparable, the organization applies a points system by awarding points for each product sold. These points are then aggregated for an overall sales index per person, reflecting the commission paid to the agent (see Table 1).

Self-discipline. To assess self-discipline, we used the three self-discipline items from the German version (Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1993) of the NEO-FFI. A sample item is "I'm pretty good about pacing myself so as to get things done on time." We used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree;* CA = .69.

Protective self-presentation style. We assessed the protective self-presentation style with the inconsistencies scale using nine self-report items from the German adaptation (Nowack & Kammer, 1987) of Snyder's (1974) self-monitoring scale. A sample item is "In

order to get along and be liked, I tend to be what people expect me to be rather than anything else." The items were rated as 0 = *false* and 1 = *true;* CA = .67.

Organizational tenure. Organizational tenure was computed as the time between the individual date of the start of employment and the 1st of January 2015.

Educational level. Respondents' educational level was measured as the number of years of education, which characterizes the specific educational level in Germany. It ranged from ''leaving school without a degree" (7 years of education) to ''graduating university with a doctorate" (21 years of education).

Control variables. Since research has shown that age (Blickle et al., 2012) and gender (0 = female, 1 = male; Herjanto & Franklin, 2019) can be related to performance, we included these as control variables. In addition, it is important to demonstrate that the effects of tenure are not confounded with the effects of age (Ng & Feldman, 2010).

3. 3 Statistical Analyses

We tested our hypotheses with a latent growth curve analysis within a structural equation modeling framework using Mplus 7.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). We used the chi-square goodness of fit test, the comparative fit index (CFI), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). We set the intercept at the first measurement point in 2014, and the slope was modeled as linear change from 2014 to 2016. The average sales performance was divided by the constant 10,000 in order to reduce the variance and thereby ensure the model converges. In cases where predictors were correlated, we controlled for the squared terms to counteract negative consequences of multicollinearity (Cortina, 1993). To model, probe, and plot interactions on the growth factor we followed the procedure proposed by Curran, Bauer, and Willoughby (2004) and used the computational online tool suggested by Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006). We set the significance level at $\alpha = .05$ for all hypotheses.

5. Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, correlations, and coefficient alpha (α) estimates of all variables. Before testing Hypotheses 1 and 2, we aimed to identify the best-fitting trajectory of the latent growth curve model by computing and comparing an intercept-only model, a model with linear growth and a non-linear model that leaves one slope factor loading free to vary. We found that the intercept-only model ($\chi^2(4) = 29.89$) had a significantly worse fit ($\chi^2_{diff}(1) = 29.34$, $p < .001$) than the model assuming linear growth ($\chi^2(3) = 0.55$). The same results were found when comparing the non-linear growth model ($\chi^2(2) = 0.166$) with the intercept-only model ($\chi^2_{diff}(2) = 29.73$, $p < .001$). The non-linear growth model did not have a significantly better fit than the linear growth model ($\chi^2_{diff}(1) = 0.39$, $p = .53$). The linear model was therefore retained.

In the unconditional model with linear growth, the correlation between the intercept and slope was not significant ($r = .27$, $p = .15$), showing that an initially high sales performance did not predict a steeper change over time. The slope, however, ($M = .88$, $SE = .19$) was significant ($p < .001$). Overall, the model exhibited good fit (SRMR = .007; RMSEA = .00, 90% CI [.00; .06]; $\chi^2(3) = .55$, $p = .91$; CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.00 Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003).

The results of the hypothesis testing with predictor and control variables can be found in Table 2. The model fitted the data well (SRMR = .008, RMSEA = .00, 90% CI [.00; .07]; $\chi^2(11) = 7.97$, $p = .72$; CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.00). Table 2 shows in line with previous research (Ng & Feldman, 2010) that tenure predicted the performance level (B = 2.90, $p < .01$). Hypothesis 1 assumed that trait self-discipline would moderate the relation between tenure and the sales performance level (the intercept). In line with Hypothesis 1, the interaction between tenure and self-discipline was significant (B = 1.44, $p < .05$). Figure 1 shows the shape of the hypothesized interactions for tenure and self-discipline (both ±1 *SD*). The tenure slope for high self-discipline was significant ($B = 4.33$, $p < .001$), while the tenure slope for

low self-discipline was not (B = 1.46, p = .25). The model explained 17.5% of the criterion variance. Furthermore, the results were substantially (i.e., with reference to the hypothesis) the same without control variables (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that educational level would moderate the relation between protective self-presentation style and increase in sales performance. The results are displayed in Table 2. In line with Hypothesis 2, the interaction of the two variables was significant (B = -.56, p < .05). The change trajectories are shown in Figure 2. As theoretically expected, at a low educational level, the simple slope for high protective self-monitoring was significant (B = 1.52, p < .01) while the simple slope for low protective self-monitoring was not (B = .01, p = .98). The model explained 18.2% of the criterion variance. Again, the results were substantially (i.e., with reference to the hypothesis) the same without control variables.

Unexpectedly, we additionally found that for salespeople with high educational level the simple slope for low protective self-monitoring was significant (B = 1.17, p < .01), whereas the simple slope for high protective self-monitoring was not significant (B = .43, p = .31).

6. Discussion

Our research holds several implications. Based on our findings, practitioners in human resource management now can know which job applicants will make the best use of training and work experience and will best acquire relevant job knowledge, skills, work values, and the company culture. From previous research we already know that it is not the applicant who sells him or herself most impressively, i.e., it is not the applicant who is stage-proof and most effective in self-promotion (Moser & Galais, 2007). The present research found evidence that those applicants who are self-starting, hard-working, and who demonstrate persistence under adverse conditions will profit most from organizational tenure. Obviously, it is not true that those who are selling themselves most impressively to an audience in an assessment center are also those who in the long run will do the best field sales job, but those with high self-discipline will. Future research should study the generalizability of this finding to other jobs,

preferably in the enterprising domain (Holland, 1997), which entails the need to influence other people to get things done.

Previous research has demonstrated the specificity and distinctiveness of the protective self-monitoring construct with reference to other personality constructs in comparison to the acquisitive self-monitoring construct (Nowack & Kammer, 1987; Wilmot et al., 2016; Wolf et al., 2009). These are two orthogonal facets with divergent nomological networks. The present study is among the first to demonstrate substantial effects of the protective self-monitoring scale on an external criterion (i.e., increases in sales performance), which is probably due to the fact that we specified trait-activating contextual factors (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Future research should study the nonverbal and verbal other-enhancing interpersonal behaviors of individuals high in protective self-monitoring under conditions of trait-activation after some years of professional experience. What is the interpersonal style of salespeople who are basically socially insecure like after years of vocational experience? What specifically makes them magnificent sellers? Are they chameleon-like or highly active listeners or both?

Obviously, as our results show, there is no “one best way” in field sales. Sales performance seems to be contingent upon social prestige relationships between customers and salespeople: When salespeople approach potential customers they first present their business card as part of the formal greeting procedure. As usual in Germany, in this insurance company the business card gives the educational level and the academic title of the salesperson. The higher the salesperson’s educational level, the more the social interaction can develop on equal terms with the medical doctors, who perceive salespersons with a high educational level as more similar. And perceived similarity tends to be associated with sympathy, trust, and confidence (Byrne, 1971). Given these preconditions, an authentic self-presentation style (as opposed to an ingratiatory style) generally might improve sales performance. Future research is needed to replicate this effect and study it in closer detail.

Our research is not without limitations. We conducted several statistical tests with the same sample. However, our use of objective performance data should have reduced measurement error and thus also spurious findings. Some processes we described (e.g., social stress) and mechanisms we postulated (trait activation) were not directly measured in the study; instead, outcomes were aggregated yearly. Future research should analyze these phenomena at a more episodic level as well.

Some strengths of our study also contribute to its limitations. All study participants did the same job, under the same conditions, with the same criteria of success, and worked for the same company. As a result, we were able to control for many unknown factors of extraneous influence by holding them constant. The limitation is that we cannot empirically generalize to salespeople working for other companies, in other jobs, and under other conditions. We therefore urge other researchers to constructively replicate and theoretically extend the present study.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliabilities of Study Variables

		M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Gender	.84	.37	-								
2	Age	38.87	10.96	.15	-							
3	Education	15.66	2.99	-.09	-.23**	-						
4	Tenure	9.90	8.78	.10	.41***	-.04	-					
5	Self-discipline	3.91	.65	-.13	-.18**	-.12	-.19**	(.69)				
6	Protective Self-monitoring	.22	.21	.08	-.04	.07	.11	-.18*	(.67)			
7	Sales performance 2014	112,672.86	82,556.36	.19*	.18*	-.13	.21*	-.01	-.08	-		
8	Sales performance 2015	122,027,18	87,452.29	.14	.11	-.09	.16	-.03	-.05	.88***	-	
9	Sales performance 2016	130,304.46	91,996.86	.16	.06	-.07	.09	.02	-.06	.87***	.91***	-

Note: $N = 147$; gender (0 = female, 1 = male); age, education (16 years = bachelor's degree level) and organizational tenure in years; Cronbach's α in brackets in the diagonal.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Table 2

Coefficients within latent growth model predicting the sales performance level (intercept) and the increases in sales (slope)

	Intercept		Slope	
	M = 11.72 *SE* = .95		*M* = .78** *SE* = .27	
	B	*SE*	*B*	*SE*
Gender	1.39*	.65	.05	.19
Age	-.21	.77	-.24	.22
Education	-.72	.67	.02	.19
Tenure	2.90**	1.07	-.58	.31
Self-discipline	.76	.71	-.02	.20
Tenure x Tenure	-.81	.60	.23	.17
Self-discipline x Self-discipline	.73	.48	-.09	.14
Tenure x Self-discipline	1.44*	.66	-.01	.19
Protective Self-monitoring	-.56	.66	.19	.19
Protective Self-monitoring x Education	1.16	.71	-.56*	.20

Note: $N = 147$; *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

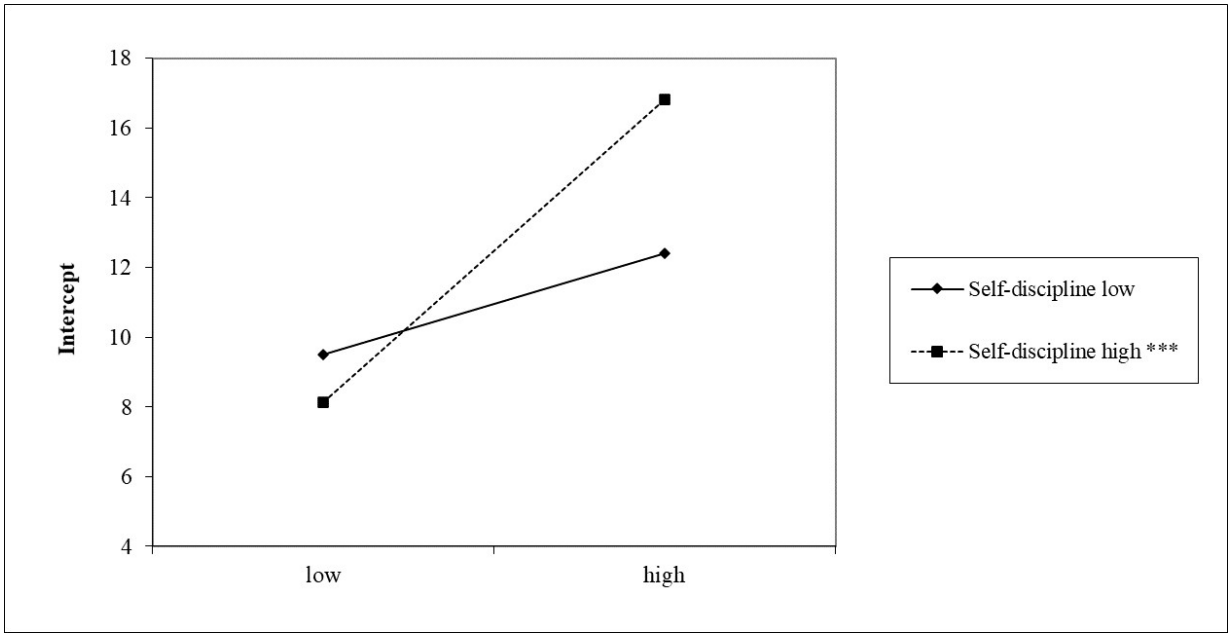

Fig. 1. Interaction of tenure (±1 *SD*) and self-discipline (±1 *SD*) with the initial level of sales performance (intercept). ***$p < .001$.

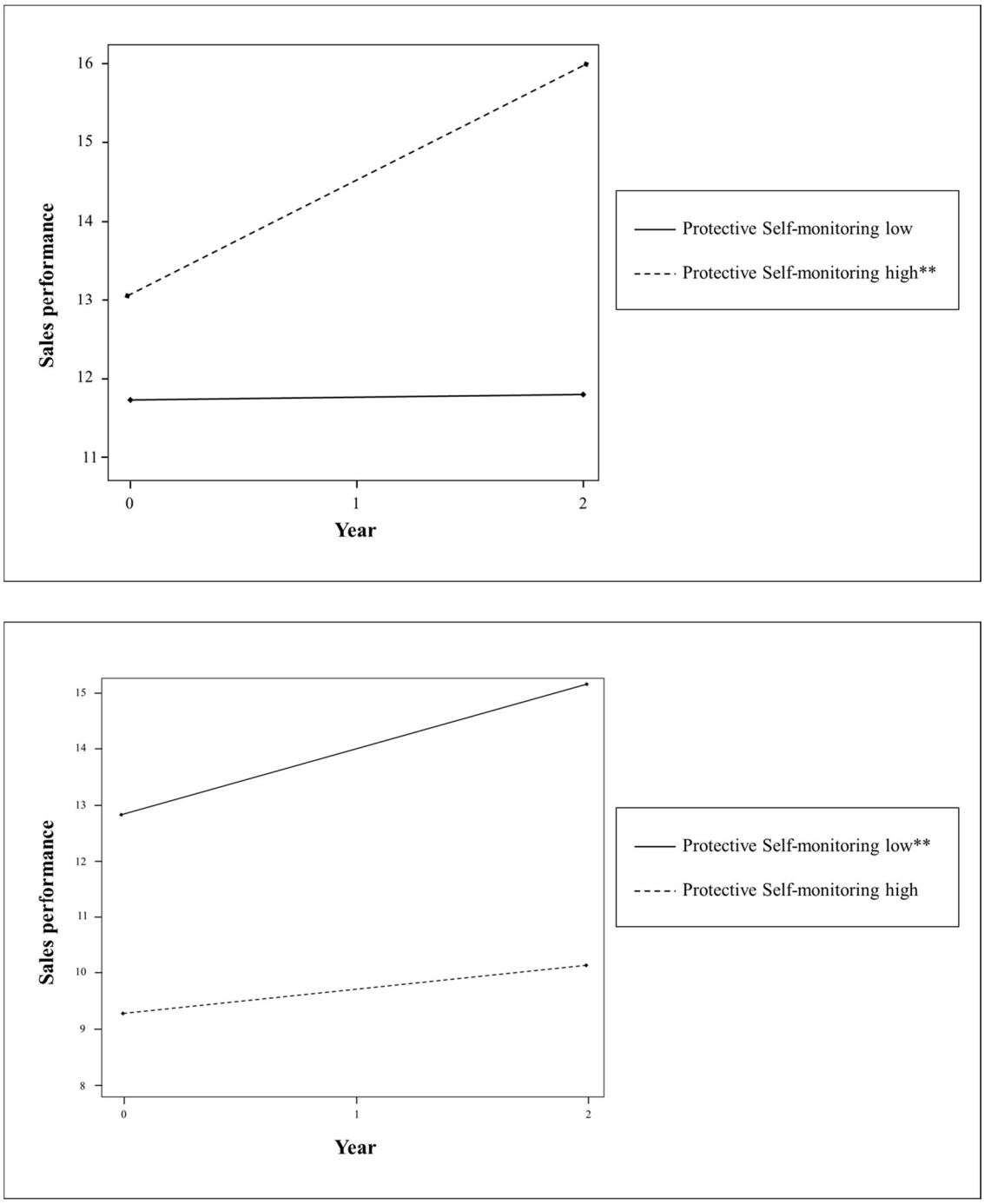

Fig. 2. Interaction of time, protective self-monitoring (±1 *SD*), and educational level with sales performance. The interaction between time and protective self-monitoring is shown for low education (top plot; -1 *SD*) and high education (bottom plot; +1 *SD*). $^{**}p < .01$.