IMPACT OF RELATIONAL INCONGRUITY ON CUSTOMER OWNERSHIP AND SALES OUTCOME PERFORMANCE: A RESOURCE-ADVANTAGE THEORY APPROACH

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There exists heightened research attention afforded to the pivotal demands - both internal and external - that exist within the salesperson role set. Unprecedented pressures on salespersons to acquire, retain, and build enduring customer relationships to enhance the firm's bottom-line performance coincides with increasing complexities within the work environment. This relevant and timely research introduces an original construct derived from the long-standing attention afforded to relationship selling, relational incongruity that exists within the buyer-seller exchange. Relational incongruity, defined, is the relational tension spawned between the salesperson, the customer, and the firm when situational psychological incongruity exists within the buyer-seller exchange itself. Framed in resource-advantage theory, this research investigates divergent demands and the increasing complexity of sales relationships through the lens of relational incongruity. A research program based on minimizing relational incongruity will augment the sales management and B2B literature by looking at how he salesperson and the customer build strong relationships as well as the antecedents that can undermine these relationships by generating relational incongruity.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The criticality of salespeople as linchpins within the buyer-seller relationship cannot be overstated. Given that the development of strong sales representation with customers is key to success for many industrial firms, the unique position of professional salespeople is firmly entrenched within today's global economy. Skilled salespeople are key to nearly every decision and in nearly every industry by helping businesses define their needs, understand and evaluate their options, make effective purchase decisions and forge enduring relationships. According to recent data from the Sales Education Foundation (2017), “nearly 40% of a customer’s decision is based on the added value the salesperson brings to the relationship, far above product quality (21%) and price (18%)”. In today’s ever-changing business-to-business environment, the competitive landscape and salespeople’s role in meeting customer expectations change rapidly.

There exists heightened research attention afforded to the pivotal demands – *both internal and external* – that exist within the salesperson role set. Unprecedented pressures on salespeople to acquire, retain and build enduring customer relationships to enhance the firm’s bottom-line performance coincides with increasing complexities within the work environment (Schmitz and Ganesan 2014). “Managing customer relationships in an ever increasingly complex marketplace with growing evidence of the vital role of customer relationships and solution selling is placing a different set of demands on today’s sales force” (Evans, McFarland, Dietz, and Jaramillo 2012, p. 89).

Evans and colleagues encapsulate the challenges currently faced by both the salesperson and sales firm.

Consistent with the increased attention on the salesperson's linchpin role, marketing researchers have explored extensively an increase in salespersons' job demands and complexity in buyer-seller relationships (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Hunt and Lambe 2000; Morgan and Hunt 1995; Sheth 2017), and the importance of identifying and recruiting salespeople who may attain relationship management skills sets (Cron, Marshall, Singh, Spiro, and Sujan 2005; Sheth and Sharma 2008).

Similarly, the salespeople's role in customer satisfaction and adding value to the exchange relationship (Agnihotri, Gabler, Itani, Jaramillo, and Krush 2017; Liu and Leach 2001) recounts Khan's (1964) characterization of the salesperson as the "man in the middle," bridging the complex customer-salespeople-firm relationship. Moreover, the "tug of war" in buyer-seller exchanges reifies the role of the salesperson as steward of organizational resources. Yet, there is a conspicuous absence of research attention to the singular role set that essentially intermediates human, informational, organizational and relational resources despite the increasing approbation of resource advantage theory in marketing.

Salespeople are the principal sources of informational and relational resources to both the firm and its customers. Liu and Leach (2001, p. 147) stated "as customers place more value on the advice and guidance provided by salespeople, suppliers have quickly recognized the pivotal role their sales force plays in relational exchange" which supports the idea of salespeople as linchpins to successful long-term B2B relationships.

Thus, there is a strong need to further evaluate the role of salespeople in the customer-buyer exchange relationship.

This research introduces an original construct derived from the long-standing attention afforded to relationship selling. Relational incongruity that exists within the buyer-seller exchange. Relational incongruity is defined as the relational tension (as opposed to transactional) spawned between the salesperson, the customer, and the firm when situational, psychological incongruity exists across a buyer-seller exchange connection This research is relevant and timely as it investigates both the divergent demands referenced by Evans et al. (2012) and the increasing complexity of sales relationships referenced by Schmitz and Ganesan (2014) and Evans et al. (2012) through the lens of relational incongruity. A research program based on minimizing relational incongruity will augment the sales management and business-to-business (hereafter, B2B) literature by looking at how the salesperson and the customer can fortify sales relationships as well as the antecedents that can undermine these relationships by generating relational incongruity. In this way, it presumes that there exist managerial mechanisms for both monitoring and adjusting relational incongruity.

Assessment of a nomological model of the complex relationship between salesperson-customer-firm addresses the challenge in Hall, Ahearne, and Sujan (2015) by investigating the impact of the relational incongruity that exists within the buyer-seller exchange. Grounded in resource-advantage theory (Hunt and Morgan 1995) this research illuminates the use of intangible resources (i.e. relational, human, organizational, and informational) within the buyer-seller exchange. R-A theory addresses the inimitable role of human and relational capital, supports the pivotal role their sales force plays in relational exchange, and exemplifies the salespeople's role set as a crucial resource to the firm. Through their boundary-spanning role, salespeople serve not only as a human resource but also act as a relational and informational resource for both their firm and their customers. Zhang, Baxter, and Glynn (2013, p. 1121-1122) position that "salespeople as actors through their selling activities, use both firm and customer resources to enhance the performance of the firm" reifies the role of salespeople between sets of organizational resources.

Salespeople interact within customer and organizational environments improving salesperson-related strategic decisions that are vital to bottom-line performance (Singh, Marinova, and Brown 2012). "Customer selection, customer knowledge, customer access, and customer relationships become part and parcel of the strategy of the firm" (Leigh and Marshall 2001, p. 83). Salespeople are the organizational linchpin to creating better customer knowledge, access, and relationships. Salespeople are the principal sources of informational and relational resources to both the firm and its customers. There is an implicit dependency relative to the explicit information that may foster trust and/or commitment in the buyer-seller relationship. Despite the *prima facie* appeal of empirically assessing the salespeople as a tangible resource consistent with resource-advantage theory, there remains a research void in marketing and the allied social sciences literature.

This study addresses the call for research into divergent demands (Evans, McFarland, Dietz, and Jaramillo. 2012), the increasing complexity of sales relationships (Schmitz and Ganesan 2014), and achieving effective organizational resource alignment while facilitating the efficient allocation of resources (Evans et al. 2012). This research is unique for three major reasons.

At the outset, this research investigation uses the theoretical grounding of resource-advantage theory (Hunt and Morgan 1995) to expand current sales research by demonstrating how firms' can use human capital, i.e. salespeople, as an essential resource to establish a competitive advantage. In this way, it reinforces the intangibility and psychological capital that is conspicuously absent from the firm's balance sheet. Secondly, the author examines the strategic implications of a customer-oriented salesforce. The conceptual model posits how job complexities and relational incongruence relates to customer orientation, customer ownership, and salespeople's performance.

The proposed model is unique in its positioning of independent variables concurrently at the seller-customer and the seller-organizational interaction. Empirical testing of the model supports the impact of relational incongruity on customer ownership and salespeople's performance. Thirdly, this research introduces, defines, and tests the concept of "relational incongruity" and "customer ownership". This research concludes with a discussion of the implications for marketing theory and practice and identifying directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

SALESPEOPLE'S LINCHPIN ROLE

Literature Review

Criticality of Salespeople

Given the ever-increasing dynamics of customer-salesperson relationships, the boundary-spanning role of salespeople positions them in a precarious balance between satisfying the customer and meeting organizations' performance expectations. Cast against an increasingly omnichannel environment in which the customer choice set is expansive, Terho et al. (2015) pointedly note that salespeople remain the "organizations' key actors who implement the firms' sales strategy through their conduct and behavior" (page 9). Salespeople are the informational conduits between the firm and its customers. This study proposes and tests a conceptual model (Figure 1) that critically explores job complexity, relational incongruity and relationship quality relative to customer orientation, salesperson performance, and customer ownership.

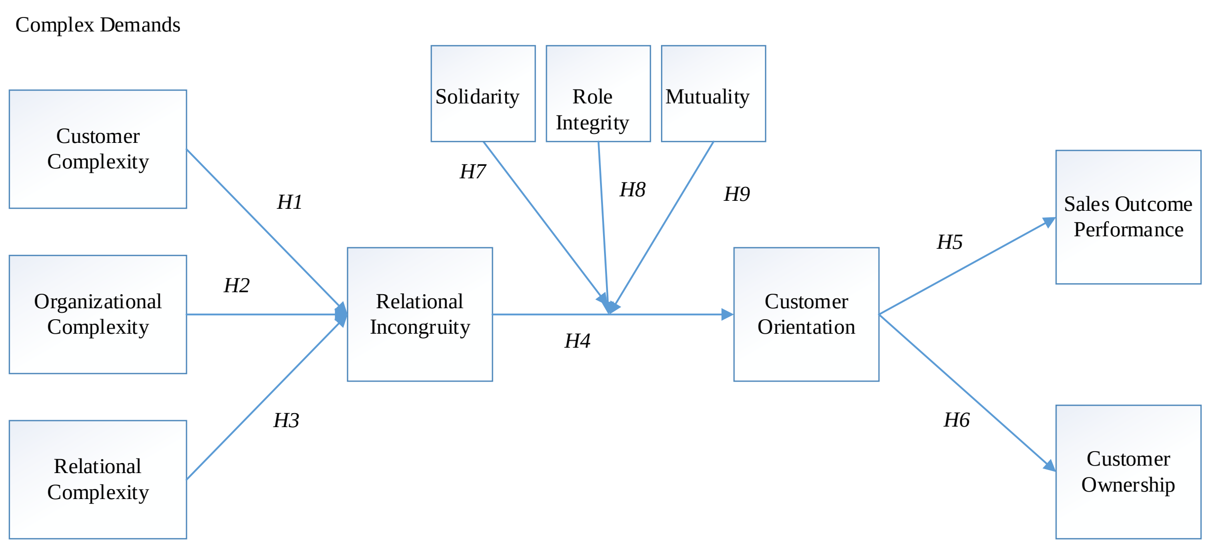

Figure 1: Relational Incongruity Conceptual Model

Based on the criticality of the sales force as a resource, many organizations are shifting resource allocation to the sales function (Miao and Evans 2013; Piercy et al. 2006). Stronger relationships lead to higher levels of trust and information sharing between firms. Increasingly firms have to consider the interactions with customers as part of their supply chain management decisions (Julka et al. 2002). As Krafft (2004) et al. assert “the benefits of effectively managing a salesforce have never been greater” (p. 265). The general perception of salespeople as the bridge between firm-customer is consistent with the resource advantage theory of the firm. Salespeople’s intimate knowledge of the needs of the firm and the customer helps smooth out variables such as customer demand. This ability to gather and disseminate information makes salespeople a valuable resource within the firm.

Resource-Advantage Theory

Resource-advantage theory has received widespread research attention in relationship marketing (Hunt 1997), organizational behavior (Hunt 1995; Hunt and Madhavaram 2012), marketing strategy (Hunt and Morgan 1995; Hunt and Dozier 2004), public policy (Hunt 1999), economics (Hunt 2012), and supply chain management (Hunt and Davis 2012). As noted by Hunt and Madhavaram (2012, p. 583-584),

> R-A theory is interdisciplinary in that it draws on and has affinities with numerous other theories and research traditions, including evolutionary economics, “Austrian” economics, the historical tradition, industrial-organization economics, the resource-based tradition, the competence-based tradition, institutional economics, transaction cost economics, and economic sociology.

This interconnecting development of economic and social science perspectives results in an evolving general theory of competition referred to as resource-advantage theory (Hunt and Morgan 1995) which “provides an integrative, positive, theoretical foundation for business and marketing strategy” (Hunt and Madhavaram 2012, p. 583). It inherently suggests that buyer-seller exchange engages two (or more) sets of resources that compete for market advantage. Table 1 demonstrates the inextricable implication of the salesperson role set in each of the foundational propositions underlying resource-advantage theory.

Foundational Propositions	Resource-Advantage Theory	Salesperson May Be:
P_1. Demand	Heterogeneous across and within industries, and dynamic.	P_1. Heterogeneous and dynamic.
P_2. Customer information is.....	Imperfect and costly.	P_2. Information conduits.
P_3. Human motivation is	Constrained self-interest seeking.	P_3. Motivated by incentive compensation.
P_4. The firm’s objective is	Superior financial performance.	P_4. Linchpin in buyer-seller exchange strategies
P_5. The firm’s information is	Imperfect and costly.	P_5. Source and messenger of information.
P_6. The firm’s resources are....	Human, organizational, informational, and relational.	P_6. Managers of customer acquisition/defection
P_7. Resource characteristics are	Heterogeneous and imperfectly mobile.	P_7. Customer ownership mediator.
P_8. The role of management is	Continuous recognition > implementation of strategy.	P_8. Defenders or defectors of firm strategy.
P_9. Competitive Dynamics are.	Disequilibrium-provoking; innovation endogenous.	P_9. Equilibrium-maintaining

Table 1: Resource Advantage and Salesperson Imbalance (Adapted from Hunt and Morgan 1995).

This theory views firms as combiners of heterogeneous, imperfectly mobile resources that are tangible and intangible entities enabling a firm to produce market offerings of some value for market segments (Hunt and Madhavaram 2012; Hunt 1997;

Hunt 1995). One of the focuses of resource-advantage theory is the importance of a comparative advantage/disadvantage in resources. As every firm should have some unique resources, this uniqueness could lead to a position of advantage in the market through a comparative advantage in resources (Hunt and Madhavaram 2012). “Increasingly, firms are competing through developing relatively long-term relationships with such stakeholders as customers, suppliers, employees, and competitors” (Hunt 1997, p. 431).

These long-term relationships are shared through the sharing of information within firms and between the firm and the customer. As boundary-spanners, salespeople aid in facilitating the exchange of information, strengthening both intra- and inter-organizational relationships. Firms are capable of building a sustainable competitive advantage through relational resources (Hunt 1997). As boundary-spanners, salespeople are the nexus for building these relationships.

Salespeople as a Resource

As postulated by Hunt and Morgan (1995), resource-advantage theory categorizes resources as financial, physical, legal, human, organizational, informational, and relational. For any organization, salespeople can be not only a human resource but are pivotal financial, human, informational, organizational and relational resources through their boundary-spanning role in buyer-seller-exchanges. Each firm – both the buying and selling organization – has a high dependency on leveraging these resources for a sustainable competitive advantage. Dyer and Singh (1998) suggested that “…firms who combine resources in unique ways may realize an advantage over competing firms." Accordingly, the extant sales research supports the relevance of the salesperson among those resources leveraged by the firm for a competitive advantage (p. 660-1).

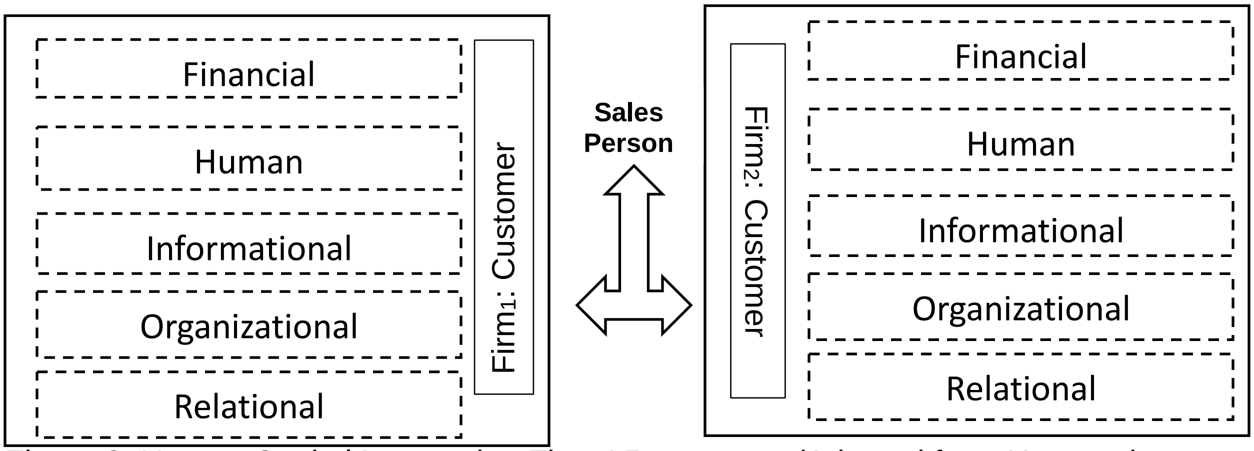

Figure 2: Human Capital Leveraging Firms' Resources. (Adapted from Hunt and Morgan 1995)

As Figure 2 illustrates, these cost-laden, value-producing resources are inextricably linked to the relational complexity in the exchange process.

Salespeople are in a unique position to connect organizational resources between the firm and customer. Salespeople bridge inter-organizational boundaries and increase the connectivity of human resources in each firm. Additionally, the boundary-spanning efforts of salespeople develop a more efficient path for information transfer. Resource advantage-theory highlights that customer information and firm information is imperfect and costly. The ability of salespeople to develop stable long-term relationships with customers allows for firms to not only improve the quality of customer information received but also reduce the cost of obtaining this information.

As previously noted, salespeople are essential to the identification and definition of opportunities for their firms (as well as their customers). Opportunity identification equates to an entrepreneur who is seeking to establish a differential advantage with his or her customer (Evans et al. 2012; Bonney and Williams 2009). This advantage develops through the development of a strong bond with the customer. “The need to establish credibility with buyers as a basis of influence is especially critical today given buyer skepticism and resistance” (Evans et al. 2012, p. 89).

The ability of salespeople to leverage talent throughout an organization creates customer value. As a boundary-spanner, the success of a salesperson relies on coordinating a firm’s internal and external activities (Workman, Homburg, and Jensen 2003). Salespeople are also pivotal to implementing a firm’s customer-oriented sales strategies through these relationships. The ability of a firm to hire and develop quality salespeople provides a unique intangible resource that is difficult to imitate, and competitors cannot purchase it.

Hypotheses

The physiological and behavioral consequences of complexity (Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads 1994) impact the perception of relational incongruity in the sales environment. This paper focuses on this relational incongruity and its relationship to customer orientation and customer ownership.

Complexity

The competitive landscape for salespeople is continually changing. Professional salespeople concurrently must satisfy performance requirements established by their company and those imposed by their customers’ needs. These complex demands create relational incongruity because the salespeople are “caught in a difficult position when they perceive that client demands cannot or will not be met by the organization” (Cordes and Dougherty 1993, p. 644). Relational incongruity, defined, is the relational tension spawned between the salesperson, the customer, and the firm when situational, psychological incongruity exists within the buyer-seller exchange itself. Schmitz and Ganesan (2014) evaluated how the demands of increasingly complex work environments impacted job performance and job satisfaction, concluding that complex demands created by customer and organizational complexity impact performance by reducing job satisfaction and job effort. Organizational, relational, and customer complexities are not static. The rapid and sometimes acute changes in expectations give rise to sudden demand fluctuations. The frequency of these changes impacts the increasing complexity of the sales environment. While not unique to sales, direct customer contact puts salespeople at ground zero for dealing with these rapid changes while facing increasing performance pressures (Ingram 2004). Given that these changes to complexity do not occur in equal predictable intervals, it is reasonable to assume that there exists an incongruity between customer and organizational demands. Increases in customer, relational, or organizational complexity result in an increase in relational congruity. Thus,

H_1: Customer complexity positively affects relational incongruence.

H_2: Organizational complexity positively affects relational incongruence.

H_3: Relational complexity positively affects relational incongruence.

Customer Orientation

Kohli and Jaworski (1990) define market orientation as the implementation of the marketing concept and posit that market orientation is composed of three sets of activities:

1) Organization-wide generation of market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs
2) Dissemination of the intelligence across departments
3) Organization-wide responsiveness to this intelligence

Customer orientation is viewed as applying the marketing concept at the level of individual salespeople and customers (Saxe and Weitz 1982).

The ability to meet customers' needs builds value in the eyes of the customer. Inevitably, the psychological and physical stresses of dealing with relational incongruity will draw salespeople's focus away from customers. "Salespeople undergo continuous direct and often opposing pressures from manager and customers" (Sager and Wilson 1995, 52). The ways in which salespeople respond to this stress can influence their performance. Salespeople may disassociate themselves from sales goals if they feel they cannot reduce the source of the stress (Strutton and Lumpkin 1993). A lack of effective coping mechanisms will lead salespeople to disassociate from their job tasks. This distancing will result in less effort expended to discover and meet customer needs as well as less sharing of information. Thus,

H_4: Relational incongruity negatively affects customer orientation.

Salesperson performance refers to an evaluation of the salesperson's contribution to achieving the organization's objectives (Baldauf, Cravens and Piercy 2001; Churchill et al. 1985). Higher customer orientation leads salespeople to place a higher emphasis on meeting customers' needs. Past research shows that customer orientation is positively related to salesperson performance (Jaramillo et al. 2007; Terho et al. 2015).

H_5: Customer orientation positively affects sales outcome performance.

Customer Ownership

The criticality of salespeople's boundary-spanning position puts them in a position of learning and knowing their customers intimately. While emerging research has examined salesperson-owned loyalty from the perspective of the customer (see Table 2), the literature lacks a contemporary empirically based scale geared toward measuring and identifying customer ownership from the perspective of the salesperson and the firm.

Author(s)	Description of purpose of research
Palmatier et al. (2007)	Measurement of customer-owned loyalty and scale development.
Williams et al. (2009)	Investigate if the relationship selling business model will survive the changes of the twenty-first century.
Blocker et al. (2012)	Examine the role of the sales force in value creation and appropriation.
Guo and Ng (2012)	Examine the driving factors of salespeople's relational behaviors in the B2B marketing context.
Khan (2013)	A review of the concept and definition of customer loyalty.
Chen and Jaramillo (2014)	Effects of emotional intelligence on the adaptive selling-salesperson-owned loyalty relationship.

Table 2: Selected Works on Customer-Owned Loyalty

Firms recognize that the salesperson is also a critical component of the customer-firm relationship. A salesperson's unique position connects organizational resources between the firm and customer. The majority of customer interfaces occurs between the salesperson and the customer, and the firm entrusts this front-line responsibility to sales representatives, especially in B2B channels (Boles, Barksdale, and Johnson, 1997; Zoltners, Sinha, and Lorimer, 2011). The development of this trust and commitment to front-line employees such as salespeople can lead to ownership of the relationship, i.e. customer ownership.

Customer ownership is defined as building a level of rapport, commitment, and trust with a customer that increases dependency on the seller, the firm and potentially third-party providers involved in consummating B2B transactions. Oliver (1999) posited that loyalty develops through a multi-dimensional process and supported not only by performance but by the convergence of personal and social forces, as well. Salespeople that disassociate from their position and draw away from their customers will be less customer oriented. Lowering levels of customer orientation will lead to decreased levels of customer trust and commitment thereby decreasing the level of customer ownership that held. Thus,

H_6: Customer orientation positively affects customer ownership.

Relational Exchange Norms

As previous research has discussed, firms often experience differing levels of conflict as part of the exchange relationship (Kaufmann and Stern 1988). Based on Macneil's Relational Exchange Theory, the type of exchange relationship can vary from a discrete relationship (a one-time transaction with no relationship between the parties) to a relational exchange (continuous, complex, long-term relationships) (Macneil 1980).

The level of conflict can rise as the complexity of the relationship increases due to a growing level of expectations between the two firms. As this level of conflict rises so does the amount of relational incongruity between the firms of the buyer-seller dyad. As previously discussed, this increase in relational incongruity influences the salesperson's level of customer orientation.

Building on Kaufmann and Stern's relational exchange norms, this research examines how these norms can moderate the relationship between relational incongruity and customer orientation. The three most influential relational norms are solidarity, role integrity, and mutuality (Dant and Schul 1992; Kaufmann and Stern 1988). Solidarity is the relational norm that estimates the importance of the relationship itself and is the norm that holds the exchanges together (Dant and Schul 1992; Kaufmann and Stern 1988; Macneil 1980). The focus of solidarity is "on the preservation of the unique and continuing relationship in which the various commercial transactions take place" (Kaufmann and Stern 1988, p. 536). The ability to maintain this continuing exchange relationship is predicated on the ability of the salesperson to be customer oriented. Therefore,

> *H_7: Solidarity influences the effect of relational incongruity on customer orientation.*

Role integrity is the maintenance of roles within the exchange (Macneil 1980). As the exchange relationship becomes more complex, the dimensionality of the roles within the relationship change. As noted by Macneil (1980), roles change from unidimensional to highly complex as transactions move from discrete to relational along the continuum. For a salesperson, as the exchange relationship becomes more complex, the roles they must undertake to handle all issues related to customer transactions increases. Thus,

H_8: Role integrity influences the effect of relational incongruity on customer orientation.

Mutuality relates to the firms' mutual expectations of adequate payoffs from the exchange relationship (Macneill 1980). In an ongoing exchange relationship, there is less rigid monitoring of the individual transaction as the focus is on the overall payoff from the long-term relationship. In order to derive these long-term positive payoffs from the exchange relationship, salespeople must be customer oriented and help minimize the effects of the relational incongruity. Therefore,

H_9: Mutuality influences the effect of relational incongruity on customer orientation.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The data for the study were collected specifically for the purpose of this study via a survey methodology. The data are perceptual and reflect the respondents' interpretations of relational incongruity, customer orientation, relational exchange norms, and customer ownership. Data were collected through a self-administered online survey of B2B salespeople that was administered via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. For this study, data were collected from 710 salespeople. The usable sample was 349 after cleaning the data following the guidelines suggested by Johnson (2005) and Mason and Suri (2012). Data cleaning criteria included: (a) high missing values, (b) very low or zero standard deviation among responses (c) duration to complete the questionnaire is shorter than that a human could do in the allotted time, (d) duplicate responses, as verified by IP address and other demographic data such as age and gender, (e) reporting zero years' sales experience. While the use of Amazon's Mechanical Turk (*aka MTurk*) for data collection still has its critics, Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling (2011) as well as Mason and Suri (2012), demonstrated that (a) MTurk participants are more demographically diverse than standard internet samples and (b) validates the behavior of workers compared to offline behavior.

Demographic variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	156	44.7
	Male	193	55.3
Age Range	18-25	46	13.2
	26-35	180	51.6
	36-45	80	22.9
	46-55	35	10.0
	55+	8	2.3
Years in Sales	1-5	172	49.3
	6-10	114	32.7
	11-15	36	10.3
	16-20	14	4.0
	21-30	10	2.9
	30+	3	.9
Years with current firm	1-5	236	67.6
	6-10	84	24.1
	11-15	19	5.4
	16-20	6	1.7
	21-30	4	1.1

Table 3: Study 1 Demographics

Among the respondents, 44.7% were female and over half (51.6%) were in the 26-35 age range. In regards to sales experience, almost half (49.3%) had less than five years in sales and 81.9% had less than 10 years in sales. In addition, 67.6% had less than five years' experience with their current firm. Table 3 provides the demographic breakdown of the respondents in this study.

Measures

Using Nunnally's (1967) threshold of acceptable reliability coefficients as equal to or greater than 0.50, it is clear that all variables satisfy this requirement. Customer complexity (α = .688) and organizational complexity (α = .569) were adapted from Schmitz and Ganesan (2014). Relational exchange norms of solidarity (α = .653), role integrity (α = .607), and mutuality (α = .584) were adapted from Kaufmann and Stern (1988). Customer orientation (α = .889) was adapted from Saxe and Wietz (1982) and Terho et al. (2015). These scales were measured on a six-point Likert scale with endpoints "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree". Sales outcome performance (α = .906) was adapted from Cravens, Ingram, LaForge, and Young (1993) and was measured on a six-point Likert scale with endpoints "needs improvement" and "outstanding".

Relational complexity (α = .806), relational incongruity (α = .866), and customer ownership (α = .804) were developed for this study through the classical multi-item scale development involving a multi-step process (Churchill 1979). These scales were also measured on a six-point Likert scale with endpoints "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree". To minimize the possibility that respondents might try to create socially desirable responses and skew the results, specific research issues were not revealed, and multi-item measures were mixed up to minimize the opportunity of respondents manipulating the data. The online survey utilized in this study included scales to capture the primary variables.

	No. of items	Possible Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Reliability
Solidarity	3	1-6	3.33	1.04	.653
Role Integrity	3	1-6	3.93	0.91	.607
Mutuality	3	1-6	2.68	0.80	.584

Customer Complexity	5	1-6	4.53	0.74	.688
Organizational Complexity	4	1-6	3.87	0.84	.569
Relational Complexity	5	1-6	4.78	0.79	.806
Customer Orientation	8	1-6	4.91	0.75	.889
Sales Outcomes	9	1-6	4.53	0.78	.906
Customer Ownership	12	1-6	4.37	0.58	.804
Relational Incongruity	8	1-6	3.53	0.95	.866

Table 4: Reliability Coefficients for Scales Used in Conceptual Model

Results

Path Analysis of the Proposed Model

Collectively, the hypotheses in this study formed a basic model involving 10 variables which may directly and/or indirectly affect or be affected by relational incongruity. This model is a simple one which is far from exhaustive in terms of including all potentially relevant independent variables. However, the model did seem to be the best one which existing research insights allowed to be constructed prior to the actual research. The framework of the relationships formed by the suggested hypotheses was tested using path analysis. Path analysis involves the decomposition and interpretation of linear relationships among a set of variables by assuming that a (weak) causal order is known or theoretically postulated. Given that the magnitude of the relationships determines whether the prespecified causal order is justified, this technique is eminently suited to the nature of this research.

The path analysis of the testable model is presented in Figure 3 and shows the path coefficients of the variables affecting relational incongruity as well as affecting each other. All coefficients are statistically significant ($p \leq .05$) with the exception of the relationship between customer complexity and relational incongruity.

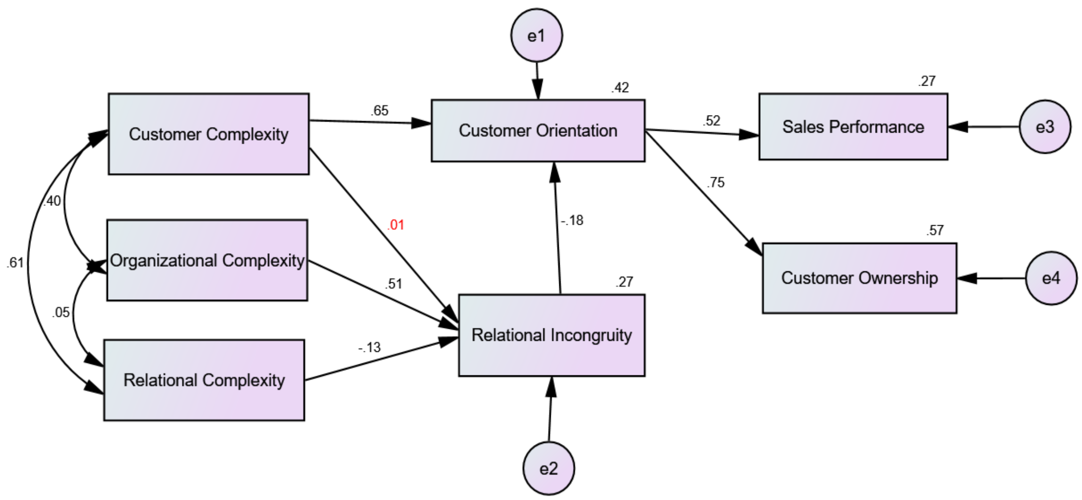

Figure 3: Relational Incongruity Path Analysis

In looking at the path analysis in relation to the proposed hypotheses, H_1 is not supported as this path coefficient is not significant. This indicates that customer complexity does not influence relational incongruity. H_2 is supported by the path coefficient indicating organizational complexity has a positive impact on relational incongruity. Surprisingly, H_3 is also not supported. While the path coefficient is statistically significant, it indicates a negative impact of relational complexity on relational incongruity. This finding is counterintuitive and will need further exploration to determine what is causing this relationship to be negative. H_4, H_5, and H_6 are also supported.

The path analysis results indicate that all of the variables posited as having a causal impact on relational incongruity and customer ownership with the exception of customer complexity not impacting relational incongruity. The model explains 27% of the variance in relational incongruity and 57 % of the variance in customer ownership. While the purpose of path analysis is to determine the existence (in terms of statistical significance) and magnitude of hypothesized effects on the dependent variable rather than measuring explained variance, these figures of explained variance demonstrate that the variables considered are important in influencing relational incongruity and customer ownership.

Tests of the Moderating Effects Hypotheses

To test the moderating effects of the relational exchange norms (solidarity, role integrity, and mutuality), each moderator was evaluated using an ordinary least squares (OLS) analysis in Hayes' (2013) PROCESS. First, the main effects of all predictor and moderating variables involved were entered but not the interaction terms (Model 1). Second, the two-way interactions (Model 2) were added before inserting the three-way interactions (Model 3). To tease out the interaction effect, the effect of relational incongruity on customer orientation was tested conditionally on different levels of each moderator. As per Aiken and West (1991), high and low levels of solidarity, role integrity, and mutuality were defined as one standard deviation above or below the mean.

Although solidarity was proposed to decrease the effect of relational incongruity on customer orientation (H_7), analysis results were not statistically significant and did not support H_7 at either level of solidarity. As for role integrity, H_8 is supported at low levels of role integrity ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .001$) but not at higher levels of role integrity ($\beta = -.08$, *n.s.*). Mutuality, H_9, is supported at both high ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$) and low ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .05$) levels of mutuality.

CHAPTER 3

RELATIONAL INCONGRUITY-A QUALITATIVE UNDERSTANDING

Literature Review

You don't close a sale, you open a relationship

Patricia Fripp

Sales is the engine that powers business throughout the world. In the U.S., 1 in 8 jobs are full-time sales positions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Personal selling performance is critical to firms' financial performance (Hall, Ahearne, and Sujan, 2015). Given the importance of effective selling to firms' success, it is reasonable to assume that customers' interface with a firm is critical to the strength of the customer-firm relationship. The majority of customer interface occurs between the salesperson and the customer, and the firm entrusts this front-line responsibility to sales representatives, especially in B2B channels (Boles, Barksdale, and Johnson, 1997; Zoltners, Sinha, and Lorimer, 2011).

The senior and middle management of organizations that employ salesforces uniformly expect individual salespeople to represent their firm and its values effectively. Similarly, the expectation is for salespeople to establish, strengthen, and grow customer relationships in increasingly demanding and competitive environments. In such settings, the ability to cultivate and maintain harmonious sales relationships has grown - as if this were possible - even more important. Easier said than done, however, because as Jones, Brown, Zoltners, and Weitz (2005, p. 108) suggest, "Salespeople must deal with a greater number and variety of individuals within client organizations" before they can hope "to establish and maintain strong customer relationships."

Firms expect salespeople to build and grow strong customer relationships and rely heavily on information gathered by salespeople in implementing the firm's marketing strategies. Additionally, research suggests that salespeople's performance relies in part on their ability to practice adaptive selling (Sharma and Lambert, 1994; Sujan, Weitz, and Sujan, 1988). For these reasons, it is imperative that salespeople be able to assess and formulate correct perceptions of their customers (Sharma and Lambert, 1994) and the quality of their relationship (Mullins, Ahearne, Lam, Hall, and Boichuk, 2014).

The dominance of sales research is largely quantitative testing hypotheses through empirical validation (Johnson 2005). Consistent with the idiom, "hearing it straight from the horse's mouth," the present research embraces a qualitative inquiry from actual salespersons to either confirm or disconfirm the hypothesized linchpin role, and to garner greater insights in the managerial mechanisms employed by the salesperson in managing the "man in the middle" boundary-spanning role. As Stake (2010) discussed, qualitative research facilitates a discovery-oriented approach that may be informative where there is nascent or underdeveloped understanding of a phenomenon. In fact, Rhodes (2014) argues that that most appropriate analysis is, in part, qualitative analysis, to allow sales (the context of real estate pricing) to guide analysis (p. 294).

Toward conducting a qualitative inquiry into salespersons' potential linchpin roles between their employer firms and customers, the researcher pulled from extensive personal selling experience, informal exchange with experienced salespersons in multiple sectors, and discussions with sales researchers. This initial step sought to identify seminal and relevant issues that could be developed into prompts or discussion platforms for first-level inquiry in a set of in-depth interviews.

There exists a rich tradition in using this qualitative approach in sales research. Some of the notable contributions to qualitative sales research include inquiries into the strategic development and deployment process between organizations' marketing and sales units (Malshe 2012; Malshe 2010; Malshe and Shi 2009); generational differences between relationship selling (Pullins et al 2011; sales presentation efficacy (Cicala, Smith and Bush 2012); and salesperson and customer knowledge exchange (Geiger and Turley 2001; Turley and Geiger 2006). Building on the tradition of grounded theory in qualitative research in sales, the author extends Hunt and Morgan's (1995) resource advantage theory as a conceptual foundation to garner a deeper understanding of the salesperson's linchpin role.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Prior to data collection, each of the seven participants was asked to voluntarily participate in an interview concerning their sales relationships with their customers. The interviewees were informed that participation was totally voluntary and could be withdrawn at any point in the interview.

Participants were purposefully selected from a *Fortune 500* company to increase the likelihood of uncovering important perceptions of sales relationships, which is consistent with prior qualitative approaches (Spiggle 1994). The participants were selected in an effort to capture a broad range of professional backgrounds relating to the length of time in sales and time with their current company. Table 5 indicates these details. There is an inextricable interest in understanding the firm's organizations' strategic orientations toward attracting and retaining customers, and these in-depth interviews from the salespersons' perspectives can enhance the understanding the strategic interplay between organizations I the buyer-seller exchange (Deschpande et al. 1993).

Name	Time in Sales	Time with Company
Bart	11	5
Evan	8	8
Hank	40	30
James	1	1
Jimmy	10	10
LeeAnn	12	2
Sarah	37	27

Table 5: Profile of Interviewees

Prior to the beginning of each interview, the participants were informed that interviews would be recorded and transcribed. The researcher obtained permission from the participants to do so, to which all participants consented. Each interview was approximately 10 to 30 minutes in duration and followed a basic script of questions (Appendix 1). Additionally, the researcher asked relevant follow-up questions as necessary to probe into the interviewee's sales relationships with their customers. Once the interviews were complete, the participants were thanked for their time.

The qualitative research revealed several insights that seemingly supported the linchpin role of the salesperson, and the ensuing mechanisms employed to address this challenge Participant Brad, a sales veteran, articulate:

> I'd be the first to tell you…if I can work on a proposal or information for the customer or I can spend that time working on a report for corporate, I'll do the report for the customer.", and "I've been in a meeting and had a customer send me an email, and I'd walk up to whoever is in charge of the meeting and show them.

He goes on to say that he will convince management that he must deal with the customer rather than a management obligation, and management should be more understanding. Another key informant summarized "I do see myself as a …mediator in between the customers and the service department [of the organization]."

Despite the gender, experience and specific life experiences across all of the key informants, sales representatives provided unconstrained discourse on the challenges that they confront in balancing both customer and organizational demands of their time and energy. As one key informant remarked:

> I think the customer is honestly our bottom-line/. Without customers, we wouldn't exist…I would just reach out to my sales manager and be like "Hey, look, this is what I've got going on. I really think it needs to get taken care of with the customer now."

The overarching commonality across all of the key informants was a shared sense of responsibility to both organizational performance and customer satisfaction.

Analysis and Coding

Upon completion of the interviews, the interviews were transcribed and the transcription was entered into NVIVO 10 for categorization analysis (Spiggle 1994). The word frequency function was utilized in NVIVO 10 to identify common themes among the interviews, focusing on broad conceptual ideas. For example, NVIVO categorized "accommodate," "adapt," and "changing" as belonging to the idea of *change*. The researcher filtered the word frequencies to identify the most common, meaningful themes associated with sales relationships (Figure 4).

Question	Having an understanding of being able to ask questions of the customer to discover their needs.
Customer	Respondents continually re-emphasized the importance of the customer.
Communication	Respondents discussed the importance of open communication with their customers to meet the customers' needs.
Change	Customers are primarily uneasy about change and want consistency in their suppliers. Building a strong relationship helps reduce this anxiety related to changes.
Relationship	Respondents continually discussed the criticality of maintaining a strong relationship with their customers. The respondents also discussed 'going the extra mile' to help sustain that strong relationship.

Figure 4: Qualitative Themes

After the categorization analysis, the researcher engaged in a coding process in which relevant comments from each interview were categorized into the identified themes. Within each theme, sub-themes were identified and categorized. Following categorization and coding, the main themes and codings reviewed by two academics knowledgeable in B2B sales to ensure the accuracy of the coding process.

Results

Based upon the findings of NVIVO10 and the subsequent categorization and coding of responses, the researcher identified five primary themes among the seven interviewees: *customer, relationship, change, communication,* and *question.* Each of these five themes are discussed in Figure 4.

CHAPTER 4

IMPACT OF RELATIONAL INCONGRUITY ON CUSTOMER OWNERSHIP

Literature Review

Resource-Advantage Theory

The interconnecting development of economic and social science perspectives results in an evolving general theory of competition referred to as resource-advantage theory (Hunt and Morgan 1995) which “provides an integrative, positive, theoretical foundation for business and marketing strategy” (Hunt and Madhavaram 2012, p. 583). R-A theory inherently suggests that buyer-seller exchange engages two (or more) sets of resources that compete for market advantage. While R-A theory has received widespread research attention in relationship marketing (Hunt 1997), organizational behavior (Hunt 1995; Hunt and Madhavaram 2012), marketing strategy (Hunt and Morgan 1995; Hunt and Dozier 2004), public policy (Hunt 1999), economics (Hunt 2012), and supply chain management (Hunt and Davis 2012), there exists a deficiency in applying R-A theory to sales research.

According to R-A theory, superior financial performance results from firms occupying marketplace positions of competitive advantage. As a boundary-spanner, the success of salespeople relies on coordinating a firm’s internal and external activities (Workman, Homburg, and Jensen 2003). Implementation of a firm’s customer-oriented sales strategies through these activities is critical to building the value proposition. Seamless organizational processes focused on managing customer relationships strengthen the value proposition (Johnston and Marshall 2016). Increasingly firms have to consider the interactions with customers as part of their supply chain management decisions (Julka, Srinivasan, and Karimi 2002). As Krafft, Albers, and Lai (2004, p. 265) put it, “the benefits of effectively managing a salesforce have never been greater.” The ability of a firm to hire and develop quality salespeople provides a competitive advantage through a unique intangible resource, highly skilled salespeople, that is difficult to imitate, and competitors cannot purchase it. This ability to develop and maintain a competitive advantage is consistent with R-A theory.

Salespeople as a Resource

As postulated by Hunt and Morgan (1995), R-A theory categorizes resources as financial, physical, legal, human, organizational, informational, and relational. For an organization, salespeople can be not only a human resource but can provide informational and relational resources through their boundary-spanning role. Salespeople are in a unique position to connect organizational resources between the firm and customer. Salespeople bridge inter-organizational boundaries and increase the connectivity of human resources in each firm. As boundary spanners, salespeople operate on the periphery of the organization to interpret environmental conditions and relay information to decision makers (Leifer and Huber, 1977).

Salespeople who operating at organizational interfaces are critical to organizational effectiveness due to their informational, relational, and exchange-value contributions (Kusari, Cohen, Singh, and Marinova, 2005). R-A theory highlights that customer information and firm information is imperfect and costly. As an information source, salespeople are the initial source of information that can develop new ideas or make the customer's voice heard.

		Relative Resource-produced Value		
		Lower	***Parity***	***Superior***
Relative Resource Costs	***Lower***	Indeterminate Position	Competitive Advantage	Competitive Advantage
	Parity	Competitive Disadvantage	Parity Position	Competitive Advantage
	Higher	Competitive Disadvantage	Competitive Disadvantage	Indeterminate Position

Figure 5: Comparative Position Matrix (Adapted from Hunt and Morgan 1995)

The marketplace position of competitive advantage identified as Cell 3 results from the firm, relative to its competitors, having a resource assortment that enables it to produce an offering for some market segment(s) that (a) is perceived to be of superior value and (b) is produced at lower costs.

As displayed in Figure 5, firms can operate at positions of competitive advantage through lowering relative costs of resources or increasing relative value added by the resource. This allows a firm to occupy cells 2, 3 or 6 in Hunt and Morgan's (1995) comparative position matrix. The ability of salespeople to develop stable long-term relationships with customers allows for firms to not only improve the quality of customer information received but also reduce the cost of obtaining this information. This cost reduction enables firms to be better equipped to operate at a position of parity or lower cost in regards to relative costs of resources. A firm's ability to adequately train its sales force and minimize turnover also reduces the resource costs associated with salespeople thus improving a firm's positioning within this matrix.

Recent research has put into evidence the growing importance of creating value for the customer and adding value to the buyer-seller exchange relationship (Liu and Leach, 2001; Vargo and Lusch 2004; Haas et al. 2012). While the importance of adding value to the buyer-seller exchange continues to grow in prominence, and understanding of sales' role in creating relationship value is still unclear (Haas et al. 2012). Sheth and Sharma (2008) acknowledged that sales roles will better reflect the relational nature of selling as salespeople become more responsible for directing internal and external resources to meet customer needs. Consistent with R-A theory, the ability to add value imparted to the buyer-seller exchange relationship by salespeople enables firms to improve their ability to operate within cells 2, 3, and 6 shown in Figure 2 above. According to Haas et al. (2012, P. 96), "value originates in the coupling and linking of resources, activities, and actors of the supplier and customer organizations that are parties in the relationship." Salespeople are critical within the buyer-seller relationship due to their ability to link firm and customer resources. This ability to serve as a bridge for the activities of the firm and its customers makes salespeople a pivotal resource within the exchange relationship and is supported by R-A theory.

Relational Incongruity

Relational incongruity, defined, is the relational tension spawned between salespeople, customers, and the firm when situational, psychological incongruity exists within the buyer-seller exchange itself. The continual "tug of war" within the buyer-seller exchange implicitly reifies the role of the salesperson between sets of organizational resources. Due to the ever-changing landscape of the buyer-seller relationship, salespeople are placed in the precarious balance of navigating both sides of the marketing exchange in the face of incongruent firm and buyer objectives.

Existing research has examined the impact of the stressors, i.e. role conflict and role ambiguity, relating to salespeople's performance, propensity to leave, and customer satisfaction (e.g. Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970; Churchill, Ford, and Walker 1974, Sager 1994; Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads 1994; Boles, Wood, and Johnson 2003; Jaramillo, Mulki, and Boles 2011). Yet, there is a conspicuous absence of research attention to the singular role set that essentially intermediates human, informational, organizational and relational resources. The development and testing of the psychometric properties of relational incongruity differentiate it from previously studied stressors.

Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

The physiological and behavioral consequences of complexity (Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads 1994) impact the perception of relational incongruity in the sales environment. This paper focuses on this relational incongruity and its relationship to customer orientation and customer ownership by proposing and testing a conceptual model (Figure 6) that critically explores job complexity, relational incongruity and relationship quality relative to customer orientation, salesperson performance, and customer ownership.

Complexity

The competitive landscape for salespeople is continually changing. Professional salespeople concurrently must satisfy performance requirements established by their company and those imposed by their customers' needs. These complex demands create relational incongruity because the salespeople are “caught in a difficult position when they perceive that client demands cannot or will not be met by the organization” (Cordes and Dougherty 1993, p. 644). Schmitz and Ganesan (2014) evaluated how the demands of increasingly complex work environments impacted job performance and job satisfaction, concluding that complex demands created by customer and organizational complexity impact performance by reducing job satisfaction and job effort.

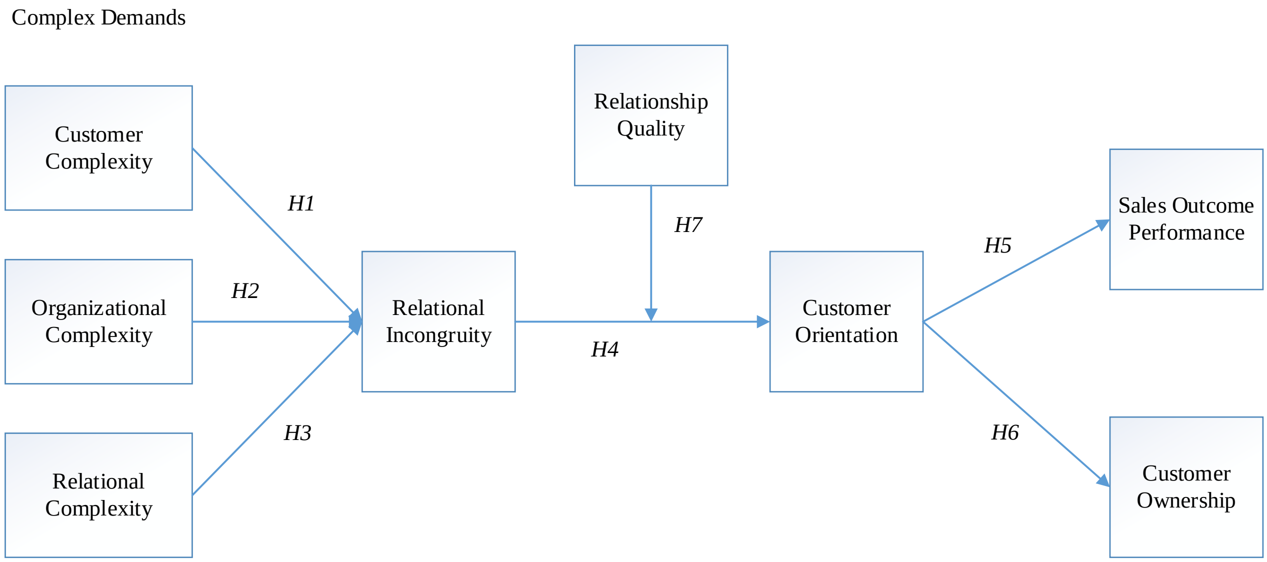

Figure 6: Relational Incongruity Conceptual Model

Organizational, relational, and customer complexities are not static. The rapid and sometimes acute changes in expectations give rise to sudden demand fluctuations. The frequency of these changes impacts the increasing complexity of the sales environment. While not unique to sales, direct customer contact puts salespeople at ground zero for dealing with these rapid changes while facing increasing performance pressures (Ingram 2004). Given that these changes to complexity do not occur in equal predictable intervals, it is reasonable to assume that there exists an incongruity between customer and organizational demands. Increases in customer, relational, or organizational complexity result in an increase in relational congruity. Thus,

H_1: Customer complexity positively affects relational incongruence.

H_2: Organizational complexity positively affects relational incongruence.

H_3: Relational complexity positively affects relational incongruence.

Customer Orientation

Kohli and Jaworski (1990) define market orientation as the implementation of the marketing concept and posit that market orientation is composed of three sets of activities:

1. Organization-wide generation of market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs.
2. Dissemination of the intelligence across departments.
3. Organization-wide responsiveness to this intelligence.

Customer orientation is viewed as applying the marketing concept at the level of individual salespeople and customers (Saxe and Weitz 1982).

The ability to meet customers' needs builds value in the eyes of the customer. Inevitably, the psychological and physical stresses of dealing with relational incongruity will draw salespeople's focus away from customers. "Salespeople undergo continuous direct and often opposing pressures from manager and customers" (Sager and Wilson 1995, p. 52). The ways in which salespeople respond to this stress can influence their performance. Salespeople may disassociate themselves from sales goals if they feel they cannot reduce the source of the stress (Strutton and Lumpkin 1993). A lack of effective coping mechanisms will lead salespeople to disassociate from their job tasks.

This distancing will result in less effort expended to discover and meet customer needs as well as less sharing of information. Thus,

H_4: Relational incongruity negatively affects customer orientation.

Performance refers to an evaluation of salespeople's contribution to achieving the organization's objectives (Baldauf, Cravens and Piercy 2001). Higher customer orientation leads salespeople to place a higher emphasis on meeting customers' needs. Past research shows that customer orientation is positively related to sales performance (Terho, Eggert, Haas, and Ulaga 2015).

H_5: Customer orientation positively affects sales outcome performance.

Customer Ownership

The criticality of salespeople's boundary-spanning position puts them in a position of learning and knowing their customers intimately. The majority of customer interfaces occurs between salespeople and the customer, and the firm entrusts this front-line responsibility to sales representatives, especially in B2B channels (Boles, Barksdale, and Johnson, 1997; Zoltners, Sinha, and Lorimer, 2011). The development of this trust and commitment to front-line employees such as salespeople can lead to ownership of the relationship, i.e. customer ownership. Customer ownership is defined as building a level of rapport, commitment, and trust with a customer that increases dependency on the seller, the firm and potentially third-party providers involved in consummating B2B transactions. Oliver (1999) posited that loyalty develops through a multi-dimensional process and supported not only by performance but by the convergence of personal and social forces, as well. Salespeople that disassociate from their position and draw away from their customers will be less customer oriented. Lowering levels of customer orientation will lead to decreased levels of customer trust and commitment thereby decreasing the level of customer ownership that held. Thus,

H_6: Customer orientation positively affects customer ownership.

Relationship Quality

Relationship quality, as a construct, is grounded in relationship marketing theory. Relationship quality is defined as "the degree to which buyers are satisfied over time with the overall relationship as manifested in product quality, service quality, and the price paid for the value received and the degree to which the relationship functions as a partnership" (Huntley 2006, p. 706). Relationship quality functions as a proxy assessment of the strength of a relationship (Gabarino and Johnson 1999). Relationship quality captures salespeople's perception of the quality of their relationship with the organization that employs them (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990). Is this relationship a thing to be enjoyed or endured? In their boundary-spanning role, a salespeople's interactions within the organization as well as with customers can impact relationship quality. It is reasonable to assume that the strength of these relationships will influence how relational incongruity affects salespeople's customer orientation. Thus,

H_7: Relationship quality influences the effect of relational incongruity on customer orientation.

Analytical Procedures and Results

Sample and Procedure

Table 6 provides the demographic breakdown of the respondents in this study. The data was conducted using a B2B panel of 249 salespeople across several industries within the United States. The data are perceptual and reflect the respondents' interpretations of relational incongruity, customer orientation, relational exchange norms, and customer ownership.

Demographic variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	121	48.4
	Male	129	51.6
Age Range	18-25	7	2.8
	26-35	78	31.2
	36-45	57	22.8
	46-55	53	21.2
	55+	55	22.0
Years in Sales	1-5	61	24.4
	6-10	51	20.4
	11-15	43	17.2
	16-20	35	14.0
	21-30	33	13.2
	30+	27	10.8
Years with current firm	1-5	133	53.2
	6-10	62	24.8
	11-15	22	8.8
	16-20	16	6.4
	21-30	13	5.2
	30+	4	1.6

Table 6: Study 2 Demographics

Among the respondents, the gender distribution was fairly even with 51.6% male and 48.4% female and respondents were fairly evenly distributed across the five age groups. In regards to overall sales experience, the total years in sales were also fairly evenly distributed with the highest being 24.4% with 1-5 years of sales experience. Relating to tenure with their current firm, 53.2% had less than five years' experience with their current firm and 78% had less than ten years with their current firm.

Measures

Correlations among the constructs are shown in Table 7 with the Chronbach's alphas for all measures shown on the diagonal. To enhance the ability compare this study with prior research, all measures in this study have been used in prior organizational research except for "relational incongruity", "relational complexity", and "customer ownership" which were developed for this research. Using Nunnally's (1967) threshold of acceptable reliability coefficients as equal to or greater than 0.50, it is clear that all variables satisfy this requirement.

	Mean	Std. Dev.	1	2	4	5	6	7	8	9
Relational Incongruity	3.18	1.03	**.88**							
Customer Ownership	4.49	.63	.03	**.88**						
Customer Complexity	4.63	.69	.20**	.30**	**.58**					
Organizational Complexity	3.90	.92	.51**	.21**	.45**	**.65**				
Relational Complexity	5.13	.68	-.18**	.57**	.38**	-.03	**.76**			
Customer Orientation	5.29	.60	-.17**	.44**	.42**	-.04	.75**	**.82**		
Sales Performance	4.55	.93	-.22**	.27**	.19**	-.10	.26**	.30**	**.93**	
Relationship Quality	5.16	.62	-.20**	.67**	.35**	-.02	.75**	.72**	.37**	**.88**

Table 7: Construct Correlations

Customer complexity (five items) and organizational complexity (four items) were adapted from Schmitz and Ganesan (2014). Relationship Quality (nine items) was adapted from DeWulf, Oderkerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci (2001) and Huntley (2006). Customer orientation (eight items) was adapted from Saxe and Wietz (1982) and Terho et al. (2015). Role Conflict (13 items) was assessed using the Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) instrument. This measure has been widely accepted as a measure of role conflict. Customer-Owned Loyalty was assessed using the Palmatier, Scheer, and Steenkamp (2207) instrument. These scales were measured on a six-point Likert scale with endpoints “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree”. Sales outcome performance (nine items) was adapted from Cravens, Ingram, LaForge, and Young (1993) and was measured on a six-point Likert scale with endpoints “needs improvement” and “outstanding”.

Relational complexity (five items), relational incongruity (eight items), and customer ownership (19 items) were developed for this study through the classical multi-item scale development involving a multi-step process (Churchill 1979). These scales were also measured on a six-point Likert scale with endpoints “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree”. To minimize the possibility that respondents might try to create socially desirable responses and skew the results, specific research issues were not revealed, and multi-item measures were mixed up to minimize the opportunity of respondents manipulating the data.

Results

Structural equation methodology was used to validate the measurement of theoretical constructs and test hypothesized relationships. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to assess the properties of the latent variables prior to estimating the structural model (Anderson and Gerbing (1988). The measurement model was specified so items loaded on only the construct they were developed to represent. The error variances were set to (1-reliability) standard deviation (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1989). Means, correlations, and standard deviations for the constructs included in the study are presented in Table 7.

Initial CFA results indicated moderate fit, $\chi^2 = 752.70$, df = 333, CFI = .82, GFI = .82, AGFI = .78, TLI = .80, RMSEA = .07, providing support for the relationships between the indicators and their latent constructs. The standardized residual matrix as well as the modification indices were examined in order to ensure unidimensionality and homogeneity of the items measuring each construct. Through this examination, the measurement model was respecified to improve model fit. Fit indices for the final measurement model were marginally acceptable, $\chi^2 = 602.56$, *df* = 301, CFI = .88, GFI = .85, AGFI = .81, TLI = .86, RMSEA = .06 (Hu and Bentler 1998). After an evaluation of the measurement model, a structural model was estimated to examine the hypothesized relationships between latent constructs. This model was also found to have a marginally acceptable fit, $\chi^2 = 602.56$, *df* = 301, CFI = .87, GFI = .84, AGFI = .81, TLI = .85, RMSEA = .07.

Common method bias (CMB) is a serious threat given that it can be one of the main sources of measurement error. CMB can challenge the validity of conclusions about the relationships between measured variables. CMB occurs when a significant portion of the model's variance can be accounted for by a single factor. Harmon's one-factor test was performed in SPSS to assess if CMB threatened the validity of the findings. According to Harmon's one-factor test, the single factor accounted for only 20.2% of the variance thus CMB is not a serious threat to this study.

			Estimate	S.E.	*p*-value	Hypotheses Testing
H_1: Customer Complexity	→	Relational Incongruity	.095	.387	.806	Insignificant
H_2: Organizational Complexity	→	Relational Incongruity	.994	.240	.001	Significant
H_3: Relational Complexity	→	Relational Incongruity	-.648	.329	.049	Significant
H_4: Relational Incongruity	→	Customer Orientation	.017	.067	.793	Insignificant
H_5: Customer Orientation	→	Performance	-.199	.212	.348	Insignificant
H_6: Customer Orientation	→	Customer Ownership	.354	.104	.001	Significant
Organizational Complexity	→	Customer Orientation	-.391	.194	.044	Significant
Relational Complexity	→	Customer Orientation	-.052	.303	.864	Insignificant
Customer Complexity	→	Customer Orientation	1.150	.406	.005	Significant
Customer Ownership	→	Performance	1.515	.567	.008	Significant

Table 8: Hypotheses and Structural Paths

The *p*-values and signs of the standardized coefficients of the structural model indicate partial support for the hypothesized model. As shown in Table 8, results bring support to the notion that organizational complexity (H_2: $\beta = 0.994$, $p < 0.05$) positively influences relational incongruity while customer complexity (H_1: $\beta = 0.095$, *n.s.*) and relational complexity (H_3: $\beta = -.648$, $p < 0.05$) are not supported. It is interesting that the finding of relational complexity had a negative effect on relational incongruity thus not supporting the hypothesized impact. Surprisingly, relational incongruity (H_4: $\beta = 0.017$, *n.s.*) does not impact customer orientation. In regards to the impacts of customer orientation, there is a positive impact on customer ownership (H_6: $\beta = 0.354$, $p < 0.05$) but in contrast to previous studies, customer orientation's impact on sales performance

(H_5: $\beta = -0.0199$, *n.s*) was not significant. An interesting non-hypothesized finding was that customer ownership has a positive impact on sales performance ($\beta = 1.515$, $p < 0.05$).

Moderation effects were assessed using PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes 2013) to establish the influence of relationship quality on the hypothesized relationship between relational incongruity and customer ownership. Although relationship quality was proposed to decrease the effect of relational incongruity on customer orientation (H_7), interaction results were not statistically significant and did not support H_7 ($\beta = 0.049$, *n.s.*). Another interesting non-hypothesized finding arose in the moderation analysis with the direct effect of relationship quality on customer orientation having a significant effect ($\beta = 0.529$, $p < 0.05$).

While similarities will be drawn between relational incongruity and the currently accepted role conflict scale (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970), empirical testing differentiates between the two constructs. Based on the results of the study using Pearson's correlation, relational incongruity is moderately related to role conflict ($r = .61$, $p < 0.05$). In examining the possible correlation between customer ownership and salesperson-owned loyalty (Palmatier, Scheer, and Steenkamp 2007), Pearson's correlation results showed moderate positive results between the two components of customer ownership, customer commitment to salesperson ($r = .79$, $p < 0.05$) and customer-salesperson systemic linkage ($r = .75$, $p < 0.05$).

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Increasing heterogeneity and demands of the sales position make this a challenging time for salespeople. As key informants within the organization, salespeople are critical to the success of the firm's sales strategy. Resource-advantage theory provides a theoretical grounding for sales research that was previously overlooked. Sales organizations possess the unique ability to develop human capital, i.e. salespeople, as a resource to providing a competitive advantage within the marketplace. Working at the periphery of organizations, salespeople are pivotal to developing long-term relationships with customers that inherently build value.

This linchpin role cannot be ignored given the growing research relating to creating value for the customer and adding value to the buyer-seller exchange relationship (Liu and Leach, 2001; Vargo and Lusch 2004; Haas et al. 2012). Recent research (Cron et al. 2005) explored not only the changing dynamics of the sales role, the types of people that firms should select to fill this challenging role, and the changing training demands required to be successful in a sales role. The ability of a firm to hire and develop quality salespeople provides a unique intangible resource that is difficult to imitate and forms the foundation of competitive advantage for the firm which supports R-A theory. This study addresses how internal and external complexities of salespeople's working environment affect relational incongruity, customer orientation, and customer ownership. A clearer understanding of these complexities and their relationships enables sales research to further explore the critical role of salespeople.

Theoretical Implications

This study has three strong theoretical implications that contribute to advancing the knowledge of sales and marketing literature. Firstly, this research clearly and succinctly establishes resource-advantage theory (Hunt and Morgan 1995) as a theoretical grounding for viewing salespeople as human capital. Furthermore, the insights into how customer orientation and customer ownership influences sales performance directly ties the importance of salespeople to a firm's market position and performance.

Secondly, the author examines the strategic implications of a customer-oriented salesforce through a conceptual model that is unique in its positioning of independent variables concurrently at the seller-customer and the seller-organizational interaction. This model, which is supported by the path analysis, extends the study of job complexities (Schmitz and Ganesan 2014) and demonstrates how relational incongruence relates to customer orientation, customer ownership, and salespeople's performance. Moderation analysis also demonstrates how relational exchange norms (Kaufmann and Stern 1988) influences the relationship between relational incongruity and customer orientation.

Thirdly, this research introduces, defines, and tests the concepts of "relational incongruity" and "customer ownership". In addition to defining and testing these two new theoretical concepts, this study begins differentiating "relational incongruity" from "role conflict" (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970) and "customer ownership" from "salesperson-owned loyalty" (Palmatier, Scheer, and Steenkamp 2007).

Managerial Implications

The critical part of this research from the managerial side is that it provides a clear understanding of how salespeople influence the extremely complex and ever-changing firm-salespeople-customer relationship. This clearer understanding helps organizations to understand how their salespeople act as a boundary-spanner and a linchpin resource that provides a competitive advantage within the marketplace. These findings also assist sales organizations' understanding of their unique ability to develop human capital, i.e. salespeople as a resource. The development of these more effective human resources reifies the resource-advantage theory position posited by Hunt and Morgan (1995) regarding how resources can be human, informational, financial, and relational (Figure 2). Additionally, firms gain an understanding of how relational incongruity within the firm-salespeople-customer relationship can negatively influence firm performance. Based on the understanding of this relationship, firms can focus efforts on minimizing relational incongruity and thereby improve overall firm performance.

Future Research and Limitations

While this research does provide insights into the impact of relational incongruity on sales performance and customer ownership, several research limitations must be considered. Firstly, these weaknesses include being a cross-sectional study and the developmental nature of the scales for "customer ownership" and "relational incongruity". These weaknesses pose risks to generalizability without validation and further replications. Although the author attempted to be consistent with the literature and directions from academic experts, the lack of true experimental control over the identified factors is acknowledged.

Secondly, another weakness involves the use of structural equation modeling as a means of analysis. Structural equation models rely on multiple constructs that can have several statistically equivalent models with equal fit (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black 1998). To minimize this weakness, the hypothesized causal links were justified using theory and prior research.

Thirdly, the use of subjective scales and self-reports may inflate constructs' correlations due to common method bias (CMB). To minimize CMB within the study, reversed items were used as well as guaranteeing anonymity. In addition, the data was analyzed using Harmon's one-factor test and found no evidence of CMB. In spite of these efforts, future research is needed to test if the model holds with objective measures of relational incongruity and customer ownership.

Future research could include additional variables in the model to assess their impact on the variables of interest in this study as well as examining the impact of relational incongruity and customer ownership on other outcome variables. A logical extension of this study is further replication with the aim of illustrating the practical value of understanding relational incongruity and customer ownership.

APPENDIX

QUALITATIVE BASE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Follow-up questions were asked based upon responses to these questions:

1. How would you describe the relationship between you and your customers?

2. How do you manage your time to meet both your company's and your customer's demands?

3. What happens when your customer wants terms or conditions that your company is unwilling to give?

4. What situation might arise where you would consider "firing a customer" or "leaving your company" because of your loyalty to one or the other?

5. How sensitive is your company to you having to miss a meeting, training, or other obligation to service a customer's needs?

6. When it comes to managing the relationship between your company and customers, how do you act as a mediator?

7. When "push comes to shove," where are your strongest bonds – with your customer or your company?

    8. Given that your personal compensation is based on a system developed by the company, how do you maximize your bottom-line without losing a customer?

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