

Fearless dominance and performance in field sales: A predictive study

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Accepted for publication by

**International Journal of Selection and Assessment**

(June 13 - 2017)

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Rainer Banse, Hedwig Eisenbarth, Gerald R. Ferris, Rachel Frieder, Alexander Schmidt, Jane Zagorski, and Ingo Zettler for their thorough and insightful comments on a previous draft of this paper. Correspondence concerning this paper should be directed to: Gerhard Blickle, Arbeits-, Organisations- und Wirtschaftspsychologie, Institut für Psychologie, University of Bonn, Kaiser-Karl-Ring 9, 53111 Bonn, Germany, Fon: +49 228 734375, Fax: +49 228 734670 **E-mail:** [gerhard.blickle@uni-bonn.de](mailto:gerhard.blickle@uni-bonn.de)

## **Highlights**

We identify fearless dominance, which is part of trait psychopathy, as a predictor of field sales performance.

We examine this predictor in a prospective design over three years.

We hypothesize and find an inverted U-shaped predictor-performance relation.

We control for tenure, initial sales training quality, and disciplined achievement motivation.

ABSTRACT

In a prospective study of 150 junior salespeople in the same company, we examined the relation between fearless dominance, which is a dimension of trait psychopathy (Lilienfeld & Fowler, 2006), and objective performance in field sales. After controlling for demographic variables, length of job tenure, initial sales training quality, and disciplined achievement motivation, the results supported an inverted U-shaped relation, which showed that, after a certain turning point, increases in fearless dominance resulted in decreases in performance. Thus, the most successful salespeople in our sample possessed moderate levels of fearless dominance. Implications for theory, practice, and future research are provided in light of a number of notable strengths and limitations.

*keywords:* psychopathy, fearless dominance, disciplined achievement motivation, field sales, performance

### **Fearless dominance and performance in field sales: A predictive study**

Psychopathy and its consequences have mesmerized the media and intrigued scholars for many years (Cleckley, 1988; Hare, 1999; Lykken, 1995; Schyns, 2015; Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013). Some people with elevated levels of psychopathy tend to be destructive, impulsive, and emotionally unconcerned about the extent to which their actions might harm others. However, other people with elevated levels of psychopathy are charming, persuasive, self-confident, and composed, and some people with elevated levels of psychopathy encompass both aspects (Hall & Benning, 2006). Therefore, Lilienfeld, Patrick et al. (2012) have called psychopathy a “paradoxical condition” (p. 336). And despite the grossly negative characterization of individuals high on psychopathy in the media (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013), a recent meta-analysis found only weak relations with job performance ( $r = -.08$ ) and counterproductive work behavior ( $r = .06$ ; O’Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012).

Meanwhile, most researchers agree that psychopathy is a personality characteristic that exists on a continuum (Edens, Marcus, Lilienfeld, & Poythress 2006; Lilienfeld & Fowler, 2006; but see Harris, Skilling, & Rice, 2001, for a contrasting view). The personality-based approach to psychopathy suggests that individuals with clinical levels of psychopathy have the same personality profiles as their subclinical counterparts; as such, individuals with clinical versus subclinical levels of psychopathy are distinguished from one another only on the basis of the frequency and degree to which they engage in certain behaviors (LeBreton, Binning, & Adorno, 2006).

In addition, most researchers agree that psychopathy is a multidimensional personality construct (Hall & Benning, 2006; LeBreton et al., 2006). One dimension of psychopathy (Lykken, 1995; Karpman, 1941) is essentially characterized by fearlessness, self-confidence, immunity to stress, and social attention seeking. Another dimension of psychopathy is characterized by a lack of self-control, impulsivity, and irresponsibility (Blackburn, 1975).

These two dimensions of psychopathy have been supported by extensive empirical research (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005; Marcus, Fulton, & Edens, 2013; Miller & Lynam, 2012). In line with Lilienfeld and Widows (2005), we use the term *fearless dominance* to denote the fearlessness dimension of psychopathy. We use the term *self-centered impulsivity* to denote the disinhibition dimension of psychopathy. Whereas these two factors are orthogonal, there is an additional aspect of psychopathy called cold-heartedness, which refers to emotional detachment (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005). Cold-heartedness is characterized by indifference, little guilt, and little concern for others (Cooke & Michie, 2001).

The multidimensional structure of psychopathy and the lack of correlation (orthogonality) between fearless dominance and self-centered impulsivity can explain why some people with elevated levels of psychopathy are charming, self-confident, composed, persuasive, and adept at impression management without acting destructively, impulsively, or irresponsibly. In support, Hall and Benning (2006) noted: “Those individuals who possess elevated trait levels of fearless dominance, but not impulsive antisociality, may be the quintessential high-functioning, noncriminal psychopaths” (p. 474). As such, we suggest that *fearless dominance* might at some level engender “high-functioning” people in specific jobs, for example, the U.S. presidency (Lilienfeld, Waldman et al., 2012).

An incumbent of the U.S. presidency needs to be persuasive, able to manage both crises and economy, and willing to take risks. Lilienfeld, Waldman et al. (2012) reported that overall presidential performance is positively associated with other-ratings of presidential fearless dominance with special strengths in the dimensions of persuasiveness, agenda setting, and crisis management assessed by expert raters. Elevated levels of fearless dominance are associated with extraversion and emotional stability (Miller & Lynam, 2012). From the Big Five perspective and on the basis of their meta-analytic findings, Miller and Lynam (2012) characterized fearless dominance as *stable extraversion*; “high scorers are emotionally stable,

calm, even-tempered, and relaxed (i.e., low in neuroticism). They are also sociable, warm, cheerful, optimistic, dominant, and energetic (i.e., high in extraversion). These two traits by themselves—low neuroticism and high extraversion—are associated with adaptive functioning across a host of life domains” (p. 320). Thus, fearless dominance is a so-called compound trait (i.e., a configuration of separable attributes that merge in a meaningful fashion; Lilienfeld, Patrick et al., 2012; Shoss & Witt, 2013).

Emotional stability and extraversion are also associated with elevated ratings of performance in sales jobs (Vinchur et al., 1998). Sales jobs are characterized by high levels of efforts to persuade others, rejection, and good prospects for financial gain, especially in field sales (Nerdinger, 2001; Vinchur et al., 1998). Thus, these specific job demands and opportunities might demonstrate at least a partial fit with fearless dominance in field sales (Grant, 2013; Hall & Benning, 2006; Kaiser & Hogan, 2011; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). However, the high level of fearless dominance that is positively associated with job performance in the American presidency might be too much of a good thing in a regular field sales job.

The goal of the present study is to contribute to the existing body of trait psychopathy and sales. The relation between a specific facet of psychopathy (i.e., fearless dominance) and performance in specific jobs can help to explain the recent weak findings on the relation between global measures of psychopathy aggregated over a broad variety of jobs such as police officers, doctors, and clergymen (O’Boyle et al. 2012). In addition, in the current study, we investigated the objective monetary success of salespeople instead of using subjective evaluations of salespeople’s job performance. By doing this, we also aimed to enrich the theoretical knowledge on personnel selection in personnel psychology.

### **Field sales performance and fearless dominance**

Applied personality research in vocational psychology has identified several individual differences that predict sales performance, however, without specifically considering the field sales context (Grant, 2013; Vinchur et al., 1998). Field sales are a sales context with special job demands (Blickle et al., 2012). In some sales contexts, salespeople wait in an exhibition space for potential buyers. The potential customer has already selected a certain sales outlet and is attracted to the item. This shop and showroom sales situation is quite different from field sales (Blickle et al., 2012). In field sales, salespeople have to identify other people as potential customers, and they have to contact the customer when the potential customer is not even seeking contact with the salesperson. Therefore, people in field sales must be able to deal with a high rejection rate, and they often must rely only on their powers of persuasion (Vinchur et al., 1998).

In addition, some salespeople do not sell items such as cars or real estate, which potential customers can see and touch, but instead, they sell abstract items such as insurance contracts. Their job is to convince potential customers to think about an abstract need for an insurance policy despite the fact that potential customers often do not feel a concrete need for it. To add to the challenge, even if salespeople are successful at making potential customers aware of the necessity of buying such an insurance policy, these potential customers might ask other insurance companies to provide a better offer.

Thus, in these sales contexts, self-confidence, risk-taking, perseverance, composure under pressure, and the ability to handle rejection in face-to-face interactions are essential (Blickle et al., 2012; Wihler, Meurs, Momm, John, & Blickle, 2017). At the same time, field sales jobs often offer great opportunities for financial gain and economic return. Companies use financial incentives to motivate salespeople (Martocchio, 2011; Nerdinger, 2001). However, another point also warrants closer attention. Given that some sales products are rather abstract and complicated in nature, customers' satisfaction with the sales process rather

than with the product itself is important for a salesperson's success (Eisingerich, Auh, & Merlo, 2014).

For salespeople, high levels of conscientiousness are conducive to performance because successful salespeople must be self-starters, must rely on their own initiative, and must show persistence (Vinchur et al., 1998). For sales jobs, conscientiousness has been meta-analytically demonstrated to be the strongest predictor of performance from the domains of personality. However, specific facets of conscientiousness were even better predictors of sales performance (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Vinchur et al, 1998). Two facets of conscientiousness (i.e., self-discipline and achievement motivation) are contained in the same overarching aspect (i.e., industriousness; DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007) and are most relevant to the field sales context. Wihler et al. (2017) labeled this combination *disciplined achievement motivation*. The self-discipline facet refers to the ability to start and complete tasks (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Also, from work on the O\*NET database (Occupational Information Network; Peterson, Mumford, Borman, Jeanneret, & Fleishman, 2001), Sackett and Walmsley (2014) reported that dependability, conceptually similar to self-discipline, was the highest ranked feature in sales jobs. Achievement motivation reflects the desire to be more competent than others and to compete with them (Baranik, Stanley, Bynum & Lance, 2010). It has been found to be related to career success (Dietl, Meurs, & Blickle, 2017; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012).

Other aspects of personality that predict sales performance besides conscientiousness are extraversion and emotional stability (Vinchur et al., 1998). Fearless dominance is characterized by stress-resistance, fearlessness, low social anxiety, self-confident behavior, and a desire for social attention (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005). Stress-resistance, fearlessness, and a lack of social anxiety are associated with emotional stability; self-confidence and a desire for social attention are associated with fearless dominance (Miller & Lynam, 2012).



Thus, fearless dominance combines high extraversion and emotional stability, both of which are also important traits that predict sales performance in addition to conscientiousness (Vinchur et al., 1998).

In addition, fearless dominance is also positively associated with the behavioral activation system (BAS; Fowles, 1980). The BAS organizes approach behavior and is activated by stimuli associated with reward. Field sales jobs offer ample opportunity for financial gain, which can be a strong reward (Martocchio, 2011; Nerdinger, 2001). Individuals with high levels of fearless dominance are more sensitive to rewards than individuals with low levels of fearless dominance (Miller & Lynam, 2012).

Pierce and Aguinis (2013) argued that inverted U-shaped relations with outcomes should exist when a predictor is an action or a passion (e.g., personality) because elevated levels of a personality trait drive a person to behave in a manner that is inappropriate for the situation (Kaiser & Hogan, 2011; Shoss, Callison, & Witt, 2015); therefore, the middle range of the trait should be optimal for the situation. Thus, on the basis of previous research on personality (Kaiser & Hogan, 2011), psychopathy (Hall & Benning, 2006), and sales (Grant, 2013), we suggest that there is an inverted U-shaped relation between fearless dominance and objective sales performance for people in field sales.

We suggest that at lower levels of fearless dominance, incremental increases in fearless dominance should be functional in sales jobs. However, at higher levels of this trait, incremental increases should be associated with a deceptive, pushy, and egotistical interpersonal style. Therefore, high levels of fearless dominance should be dysfunctional for sales performance because clients' satisfaction with the sales process rather than with the product itself is important for a salesperson's success. High-performing field sales behavior should be predicted by a moderate (as opposed to a high or low) level of fearless dominance.

Finally, previous research has demonstrated that the length of organizational tenure is a positive predictor of sales performance (Blickle et al., 2012; Grant, 2013). This was predicted by human capital theory (Becker, 1964), and Ng and Feldman (2010) found in a meta-analytic study that it generally holds for organizational tenure. In addition, Singh, Manrai, and Manrai (2015) pointed out that sales training in organizations can equip sales personnel with good sales practices if the training is appropriate. Román, Ruiz, and Munuera (2002) showed that high training quality positively impacts sales performance. These variables explain a large amount of variance in sales performance, thereby sometimes obscuring the personality-performance relations, which tend to be small but substantial effects (Vinchur et al., 1998). Therefore, recent sales research has controlled for these kinds of variables before testing the personality-performance relations (Blickle et al., 2012; Grant, 2013). In our research, we followed the approach of previous pertinent research and hypothesized the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* After controlling for length of job tenure, sales training quality, and disciplined achievement motivation, there will be a curvilinear relation between fearless dominance and sales performance. Increases in fearless dominance before the inflection point will be positively related to sales performance, whereas increases in fearless dominance after the inflection point will be negatively related to sales performance.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

We applied a prospective study design that spanned a period of three years. Our study participants were comprised of employees who had been hired after applying for sales positions at a large German insurance company. All job applicants were assessed by the company between 2011 and 2014. During this three-year period, we collected data on our

predictors at the company's assessment center after various company representatives had conducted several preselection screening interviews with each job applicant. As part of the process of enrolling at the assessment center, each applicant had to complete our personality questionnaire. The organization did not base their hiring decisions on the results of this questionnaire. However, the applicants did not know this, and the questionnaire appeared to be a regular part of the assessment procedure. At least six months after each applicant was hired, we collected archival information on the employees' sales performance.

Our sample consisted of 150 junior salespeople (35.7% of those invited to the assessment center). Of these, 106 (71%) were male, and the average age was 29 years ( $SD = 5.6$ ). All had at least a high-school diploma, 33.3% had a bachelor's degree, and 45.3% had a master's degree. Before the applicants were invited to the assessment center, they had to pass several unstructured personal interviews with experienced salespeople from the company. A rigorous assessment of applicants' résumés was also conducted by the company. Thus, due to self- and organizational preselection (Schneider, 1987), the applicants ( $N = 420$ ) at the assessment center displayed higher levels of conscientiousness ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = .35$ ;  $t_{(2530)} = 26.84$ ,  $p < .01$ ) with a smaller range ( $F_{(2111, 419)} = 3.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than a large reference sample ( $N = 2112$ ) from the German population:  $M = 2.53$ ,  $SD = .63$  (Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1993);  $d = 1.43$ ; all computations based on Eid, Gollwitzer, & Schmitt, 2011). Also, before the applicants were officially hired by the organization, they had to submit a clearance certificate of good conduct with regard to their criminal and financial histories.

No incidents of criminal convictions or excessive debt were detected by the company. Over the course of participants' subsequent employment at the company, there were also no criminal convictions that were due to illegal professional misconduct. In Germany, however, sales agents are not obliged to inform their company of minor legal infractions such as the loss of a driver's license. Thus, we could conclude at least that there were no incidents of

severe legal misconduct in our sample. In sum, all participants in our study had successful educational careers, indicating effective socialization (Lykken, 1995), and all were legally unobtrusive.

## Measures

**Disciplined Achievement Motivation (DAM).** To assess DAM, building on Wihler et al. (2017), we used four items from the NEO-FFI's (Costa & McCrae, 1992) conscientiousness scale. These items reflect two facets of conscientiousness: self-discipline and achievement striving. Sample items are "I'm pretty good about pacing myself so as to get things done on time" (self-discipline) and "I strive for excellence in everything I do" (achievement striving). All items are answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha in our main study was  $\alpha = .66$ .

**Fearless dominance (FD-short).** Because we sampled real job applicants, we could not rely on extensive psychopathy questionnaires (e.g., the PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005). More specifically, although the PPI-R is able to detect mild levels of psychopathy in nonforensic samples (Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996), its length (i.e., 154 items) renders it impractical for use in employee selection.

Thus, our intention was to develop a short measure that could tap into the fearless dominance dimension of psychopathy but was unrelated to self-centered impulsivity. In reference to Hall and Benning's (2006) research, it is also important to note that the fearless dominance dimension of psychopathy is uncorrelated with the self-centered impulsivity dimension. These traits are orthogonal (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005; Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009). In addition, high levels of self-centered impulsivity are associated with low levels of conscientiousness (Miller & Lynam, 2012).

We used 20 items from previously validated measures, namely, the self-monitoring social skills facet (sample item: "I would probably be a good actor"; German adaptation and

validation by Nowack & Kammer, 1987), the sociopolitical IQ (Holland, Hogan, & van Landuyt, 2002; German adaptation and validation by Hogan Assessment Systems) facets of social anxiety (sample item: “Many people would say that I am shy – reversed”) and self-confidence (sample item: “I am a very self-confident person”), the emotional stability scale from the short version of the Big Five Inventory (BFI; sample item: “I’m relaxed, handle stress well”; German adaptation and validation by Rammstedt and John, 2005), and the work values scale of economic returns (sample item: “I prefer work in which I can get a raise in income”) from the Work Values Inventory (WVI; Super, 1970; German adaptation and validation by Seifert & Bergmann, 1983) representing trait sensitivity to financial reward at work (Fowles, 1980; Martocchio, 2011; Miller & Lynam, 2012). We combined the  $z$ -standardized scores of these items to create our short measure of fearless dominance.

First, we conducted a validation study with a sample of 193 employees from a broad range of jobs outside the insurance company using the German version of the PPI-R (Alpers & Eisenbarth, 2008) and the counterproductive work behavior scale (CWB; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; German adaptation and validation by Zettler & Hilbig, 2010). To assess relations we calculated both manifest scale ( $r$ ) and latent construct ( $\rho$ ) zero-order correlations. The results of this validation study showed that FD-short (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .80$ ) was positively correlated with the PPI-R’s fearless dominance ( $r = .69, p < .01; \rho = .88, p < .01$ ) and the PPI-R’s cold-heartedness ( $r = .26, p < .01; \rho = .28, p < .01$ ) scales, demonstrating convergent validity. There were no significant correlations between FD-short and the PPI-R’s self-centered impulsivity scale ( $r = -.08$  *ns.*;  $\rho = -.02$ , *ns.*) or CWB ( $r = -.07$ , *ns.*;  $\rho = -.15$ , *ns.*; Schütte et al., 2015). This provided evidence for the FD-short’s discriminant validity.

Thus, we assessed fearless dominance in our main study using the previously validated 20-item scale. We standardized all items using the data from all job applicants ( $N = 420$ ) and

computed the average FD-short score. Cronbach's alpha for FD-short in the sample of 150 participants in our main study was  $\alpha = .76$ .

Using the assessment center personality data, we correlated the FD-short measure with the German short version of the Big Five inventory (Rammstedt & John, 2005) to assess neuroticism, extraversion, openness, and agreeableness. In addition, we used the conscientiousness facet of the NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992). FD-short was significantly correlated with neuroticism ( $r = -.65, p < .01$ ), extraversion ( $r = .56, p < .01$ ), openness ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ), and conscientiousness ( $r = .29, p < .01$ ). However, FD-short was not correlated with agreeableness ( $r = -.01, ns$ ). This pattern of correlations with the Big Five dimensions is in line with the correlations between the fearless dominance factor and the Big Five dimensions reported in the meta-analysis by Miller and Lynam (2012), that is, neuroticism ( $r = -.50$ ), extraversion ( $r = .50$ ), openness ( $r = .25$ ), and agreeableness ( $r = -.10$ ), with the exception of conscientiousness ( $r = .00$ ). Marcus et al. (2013), however, reported a range of the correlations with so-called constraint scales (e.g., the conscientiousness scale from the NEO-FFI, varying between  $r = -.56$  and  $r = .48$ ). Thus, the pattern of correlations of the FD-short scale with the Big Five dimensions also supported the validity of our measure.

**Average monthly sales performance.** The company's salespeople work at different local and regional districts, which are designed in such a way that each district encompasses about the same number of potential clients. Because all salespeople sell the same products to the same kinds of customers in districts with comparable profitability, it was possible to directly compare sales performance. To assess sales performance, we used the company's data from the last 6 to 36 months. In general, insurance products can be divided into two categories: (a) products with a single acquisition commission (e.g., life insurance) and (b) those with a recurring renewal commission (e.g., auto insurance). The organization assigns points to each product sold and aggregates them for an overall sales index/person to make

products (e.g., life & savings, health, property & casualty) with both single acquisition and renewal commission structures comparable between product lines. These points reflect the commission paid to the agent. On the basis of a point system developed by the organization, the sales representatives can be compared directly. Because the cumulated overall performance points vary by the length of employment, we averaged the cumulated sales performance points by dividing by the amount of time that participants had been working for the company. Thus, the average sales performance per month in our sample was 2,532 points ( $SD = 2,287$ ). We compared this value with the performance of senior salespeople that worked for the organization for more than three years. On average, senior salespeople produced an average sales performance per month of 8835.36 ( $SD = 7679.68$ ) with high performers reaching a maximum of 35066 points per month.

**Control variables.** We controlled for organizational tenure because Blickle et al. (2012) and Grant (2013) showed that tenure is positively related to sales performance. In addition, we controlled for *initial sales training quality* because Román, Ruiz, and Munuera (2002) showed that training quality positively impacts sales performance. Training quality was rated by senior staff members. The estimate of interrater agreement,  $r_{wg}$ , can vary between 0 and 1 (LeBreton & Senter, 2008). The mean  $r_{wg}$  of the ratings was .71, which is an acceptable value (Lance, Butts, & Michels, 2006).

To ensure the validity of our findings and to exclude other sources of influence, we controlled for several additional variables that might offer alternative explanations for our findings. We controlled for *sex* because sex was previously shown to affect job performance (Bowen, Swim, & Jacobs, 2000). We also included *age* because Vinchur et al. (1998) found that age influenced sales performance. On the basis of a study by Schmidt and Hunter (1998), who showed that GMA is one of the best predictors of supervisor performance evaluations, we controlled for *educational level* as a proxy for GMA as previously suggested by Blickle et

al. (2012). In the US, the correlation between educational level and intelligence is  $r = .27$  (Wonderlic Inc., 2002, p. 20). Momm et al. (2015) made available their data set to us ( $N = 198$  target employees from Germany) comprising the targets' educational level and targets' intelligence. Educational level was correlated with general intelligence (Wonderlic, 2002) at  $r = .35$  ( $p < .01$ ). While sales job performance ratings by supervisors are positively associated with intelligence objective sales performance is not associated with intelligence (Vinchur et al. (1998).

### **Statistical Analyses**

To test our hypothesis, we computed hierarchical moderated regression analyses to predict average monthly sales performance (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). The predictor variables were z-standardized. In the first step, we entered sex, age, educational level, tenure, and initial sales training quality as predictors. In the second step, we entered disciplined achievement motivation. In the third step, we entered the linear fearless dominance term. In the fourth step, we entered the squared fearless dominance term. Our hypothesis would be confirmed if the squared fearless dominance term was significant and negative (Cortina, 1993). We would then graphically illustrate this effect as recommended by Dawson (2014) and compute the standardized inflection point according to the formulas provided by Le et al. (2011). In the last step, we entered the other control variables. If the squared fearless dominance term was still significant in this step, then we could exclude alternative explanations of the findings involving these control variables.

### **Results**

Prior to our statistical analyses, we evaluated the independence and distinctiveness of our measures of fearless dominance and disciplined achievement motivation using confirmatory factor analysis. We compared two models: In the first, all indicators loaded on their respective factor (i.e., a 2-factor solution). In the second model, all indicators loaded on



one factor. Our results showed, that the first model demonstrated a significantly better fit than the second model:  $\Delta\chi^2 = 81.73$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ . These results supported the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the measures used.

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, correlations, and alpha coefficients ( $\alpha$ ) for all variables. Prior to testing our hypothesis, we evaluated the means and variances of our focal variables for our participants compared with the individuals who were not hired. The results showed that there were no significant differences between the hired and non-hired individuals on the FD-short (Means:  $t_{(461)} = 0.04$ , *ns.*; Variances:  $F_{(149, 267)} = 1.05$ , *ns.*). In addition, the FD-short scores in our main study were approximately normally distributed (skewness =  $-.63$ , kurtosis =  $.53$ ; Curran, West, & Finch, 1996; Gravetter & Wallnau, 2014). Thus, fearless dominance did not implicitly influence the hiring process applied by the assessment center, a point that is important because unrestricted variation provides the best condition for hypothesis testing (Pearlman, Schmidt, & Hunter, 1980). Fearless dominance and disciplined achievement motivation were positively correlated at  $r = .28$  ( $p < .01$ ). This correlation is in line with previous findings (Marcus et al., 2013).

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Table 2 shows the results of our hierarchical moderated regression. In Model 1, our control variables, sex, age, educational level, organizational tenure, and initial training quality explained 46% of the variance in average monthly sales performance. In Model 2, the direct effect of DAM had a significant positive effect on monthly sales performance ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ , one-tailed). In the fourth model, the squared fearless dominance term had a significant negative effect on average monthly sales performance ( $\beta = -.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and explained an additional 2% of the variance in our criterion ( $p < .05$ ).

Figure 1 shows the form of the effect of the squared fearless dominance term. As can be seen, increases in fearless dominance were associated with increases in average monthly sales performance. However, after a certain point, increases in fearless dominance were associated with decreases in average monthly sales performance. The top performers among the junior salespeople attain a performance level that is in the region of the average performance of senior salespeople in this company which is 8835.36 points per months ( $SD = 7679.68$ ). The standardized inflection point (Le et al., 2011) for fearless dominance was  $-.39$ , indicating that individuals with standardized scores of  $-.39$   $SD$ s below the mean of fearless dominance had the highest average monthly sales performance. Overall, these results confirmed our hypothesis that there would be a curvilinear relation between fearless dominance and average monthly sales performance among salespeople.

We found the significant quadratic effect of fearless dominance on job performance only after controlling for job tenure and training quality but not before. This is due to the fact that in line with previous meta-analytic research, effects of personality traits tend to be small albeit substantial, whereas the effects of job tenure and training quality tend to be larger (Blickle et al., 2012; Grant, 2013). Therefore, it is important to first control for these larger effects before testing a predictor that is expected to have a smaller effect.

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Responding to calls (Hall & Benning, 2006; Lilienfeld, Patrick et al., 2012) to investigate the interplay between measures of (dis)inhibition (e.g., DAM) and fearless dominance, we tested the linear interaction of the two constructs post hoc, adding the interaction term in the last model. Results revealed that this interaction was not significant ( $\beta = -.05, ns$ ).

Regarding our predictor measure of fearless dominance, the size of the standard deviation in relation to the mean could indicate outliers in our data. There were seven study participants with predictor scores that were at least 2 *SDs* above or below the mean (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2013). When we analyzed the hierarchical regression models without these scores, the quadratic fearless dominance term was  $\beta = -.16$  ( $p < .05$ ). Thus, we could safely conclude that our findings were not statistical artifacts driven by outliers (Aguinis et al., 2013).

### Discussion

Noncriminal, high-functioning individuals with heightened trait psychopathy have intrigued researchers for a long time (Hall & Benning, 2006; Lilienfeld et al., 2015). In this study, we used a rigorous, objective measure of sales performance. We expected that people with elevated levels of fearless dominance would display high task performance in legally inconspicuous ways (i.e., no fraud, no embezzlement, etc.). Specifically, we hypothesized that field sales performance would be predicted by fearless dominance in an inverted U-shaped relation.

We sampled 150 salespeople from one company working under the same job conditions and collected data on objective sales performance, reflecting their benefit to the organization across a period of six to 36 months. As hypothesized, individuals with moderate levels of fearless dominance exhibited higher field sales performance for the company than individuals with very low or very high levels of fearless dominance after we controlled for organizational tenure and initial sales training quality. In addition, we were able to eliminate effects of sex, age, educational level, and sales-relevant facets of conscientiousness as alternative explanations for our results. Thus, our findings, which were based on a rigorous, objective, vocational performance criterion, support the idea that individuals with moderate levels of a specific psychopathy trait (i.e., fearless dominance) permanently living outside the

confines of prisons in the absence of prominent antisocial behavior provide a benefit for not only the individual who embodies such traits but also the organization. Consequently, in field sales jobs, it is not a maximal level of fearless dominance that is optimal but a moderate one.

### **Contributions to Theory**

In this research, we conceived of psychopathy as a trait. Other researchers have advocated a typological approach to psychopathy (e.g., Harris et al., 2001). The typological approach maintains that a person with clinically relevant levels of psychopathy is characterized by high scores on all three facets (i.e., fearless dominance, self-centered impulsivity, and cold-heartedness). According to this typology, our findings would not seem to support the concept of the “high-functioning psychopath” because self-centered impulsivity is orthogonal to fearless dominance. Nonetheless, consistent with Hall and Benning’s (2006) conception of the high-functioning psychopath, our findings seem to suggest that at least at moderate levels, the fearless dominance personality dimension can be functional in the field sales context when targets’ conscientiousness levels are also high.

Previous research found evidence for an inverted U-shaped relation between dark side personality traits and supervisory/other ratings of leadership performance (Benson & Campbell, 2007). This is the first study to assess the relation between trait psychopathy and job performance in salespeople (O’Boyle et al., 2012). In contrast to previous studies, we did not assess trait psychopathy globally but instead selected fearless dominance. In addition, we did not rely on performance ratings by supervisors or self-reports of status and wealth (Ullrich, Farrington, & Coid, 2008) but drew on objective measures in monetary units—the most valid and rigorous way to measure sales performance (Vinchur et al., 1998). We also posited a curvilinear trait-performance relation rather than a linear one. Consequently, in comparison with the coefficient (Peterson & Brown, 2005) of  $-.08$  ( $p < .05$ ) reported by O’Boyle et al. (2012), it was  $-.16$  ( $p < .05$ ) in this study, an increase of 100%.

In the present context, all study participants displayed high levels of conscientiousness due to the self-selection of applicants and the rigorous personnel selection process that took place in the informal screening interviews that occurred *before* we measured our variables at the assessment center. From the company's point of view, this high level of conscientiousness probably had several positive consequences. First, high conscientiousness is one of the best traits for predicting sales performance (Vinchur et al., 1998). Therefore, the participants each had good potential to exhibit a high sales performance. Next, high conscientiousness is negatively associated with self-centered impulsivity, which is positively associated with counterproductive work behavior and negatively associated with contextual performance (Schütte et al., 2015). Therefore, the complete absence of criminal delinquency in this sample is not surprising. However, in the present study, we assessed only three years of job activity, and white collar crimes, fraud, and embezzlement often occur for quite some time before they are detected (Blickle, Schlegel, Fassbender, & Klein, 2006). Therefore, the short-term and mid-term absence of criminal delinquency does not necessarily imply the long-term avoidance of criminal behavior (Jones, 2014).

Our research also contributes to gains in the theoretical knowledge on personnel selection. First, although fearless dominance provides adaptive features for different kinds of jobs, the kind of relation differs from job to job. Previous research by Lilienfeld, Waldman et al. (2012) demonstrated a positive *linear* association between fearless dominance and success in the U.S. presidency, whereas our study shows that for field sales jobs, the relation is in fact *curvilinear* (i.e., an inverted U-shaped relation). This difference in the kind of relation probably results from a difference in the number of stakeholder groups that have to be addressed by the job incumbents. The salesperson has to address only two stakeholder groups (i.e., the company and the customers), whereas the president has to address the public, press, congress, administration, economy, international relations, lobbyists, and other high-pressure

groups. Thus, very high levels of persuasiveness, risk-taking propensity, energy, and fearlessness are necessary to be successful in the presidential job but are too much of a good thing in one person who has to address only two stakeholder groups in her or his job. This kind of difference between jobs is captured by enterprising job characteristics (i.e., working with and through others to attain organizational or personal goals). Enterprising work environments encourage people to manipulate others to attain organizational or personal goals and to view the world in terms of money, power, status, and responsibility (Holland, 1997). So, the higher the number of enterprising relations with different stakeholder groups, the more linear (as opposed to curvilinear) the fearless dominance-job performance relation will be. Consequently, when selecting candidates for CEO positions, higher levels of fearless dominance are more adaptive than when selecting candidates for field sales positions.

Second, Grant (2013) argued and found empirical support for the idea that in outbound-call-center sales jobs, ambiverts (i.e., individuals with medium levels of extraversion) achieve greater sales productivity than extraverts (i.e., individuals with high levels of extraversion) or introverts (i.e., individuals with low levels of extraversion) do. Our study generalizes these findings to field sales jobs, which demand higher levels of resiliency and adjustment than call-center sales jobs (Hausknecht & Langevin, 2010). Therefore, in field sales jobs, not only the degree of extraversion matters for job performance but also the degree of emotional stability. Consequently, when selecting candidates for field sales positions, higher levels of emotional stability are more adaptive than when selecting candidates for outbound-call-center sales jobs.

Finally, using compound traits is part of the configurational approach to personnel selection (Shoss & Witt, 2013). This approach cautions against examining personality constructs on an individual basis because the way each trait operates may depend on the level(s) of one or more other traits. Currently, the most commonly used compound traits in

personnel selection are integrity and customer service orientation (Ones & Viswesvaran, 2001). Our findings also support the use of compound traits in personnel selection and add a new combination of Big Five personality traits to the theoretical knowledge in personnel psychology. Integrity reflects the combination of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability; customer service orientation reflects the combination of agreeableness, emotional stability, and conscientiousness; fearless dominance, however, reflects a combination of extraversion and emotional stability. Miller and Lynam (2012) argued, on the basis of their meta-analytic findings, that fearless dominance by itself “is not simply benign, but rather appears salutary, generally protecting individuals from psychopathology” (p. 319). Therefore, basing personnel selection decisions on the fearless dominance construct is not a risky but a promising practice.

### **Future Research**

In their meta-analysis on predictors of sales performance in general, Vinchur et al. (1998) found a sample-size-weighted zero-order correlation between conscientiousness and objective sales performance of  $r = .17$ . In the present study in field sales, the beta coefficient of the curvilinear effect of fearless dominance was  $\beta = -.16$ , above and beyond high levels of two facets of conscientiousness, namely disciplined achievement motivation. This comparison (Peterson & Brown, 2005) demonstrates that fearless dominance should be included among the aspects of personality that are substantial predictors of sales performance.

However, having said that, we still highly recommend caution in simply transferring our finding to other sales contexts (e.g., shop and showroom or telephone sales as opposed to field sales; or sales of visible and tangible items as opposed to abstract items). In the field sales context, self-confidence, risk-taking, perseverance, composure under pressure, and the ability to handle rejection in face-to-face interactions are essential, and future research should establish whether the specific sales context (shop and showroom selling vs. telephone vs. field

sales as well as selling tangible and visible items vs. abstract items) moderates the effect of certain personality traits that contribute to sales performance in a certain way (i.e., linear or nonlinear). Another point warrants closer attention. Customers' perceived satisfaction might be a mediator of the fearless-dominance-field-sales-performance relation because a satisfied customer is more likely to recommend a particular salesperson to others (Eisingerich et al., 2014).

In this research, we focused on the fearless-dominance-field-sales-performance relation among junior salespeople in their first three years on the job. Future research should also examine this relation among more experienced field salespeople with five, ten, or even 20 years of job experience. We see two potential outcomes: First, because of a lack of success, individuals with high levels of fearless dominance will eventually leave the field sales job. Thus, the mean of fearless dominance and the variability of fearless dominance among highly experienced field salespeople should gradually decrease. Alternatively, as the field sales job offers very good financial prospects to salespeople, and as individuals with elevated levels of fearless dominance are also characterized by elevated levels of reward sensitivity (Miller & Lynam, 2012) during the course of the vocational socialization process, these people may gradually learn not to behave in a manner that is inappropriate for the sales situation. Thus, there is also the possibility that as the length of time employees spend at a job increases, people with elevated levels of fearless dominance may become more successful in the field sales job. Such an adaptation to the demands of the field sales job should be facilitated by higher levels of conscientiousness and cognitive abilities (Lykken, 1995; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Recent research (Wihler et al., 2017) tends to support this latter view. Thus, future research should look not only at the fearless-dominance-sales-performance relation in experienced field salespeople but also at the interplay between fearless dominance, the facets of conscientiousness, and cognitive abilities among experienced salespeople.



### **Contributions to Practice**

Our findings present practical implications with regard to selecting personnel for field sales jobs. Moderate levels of fearless dominance contribute to additional sales performance above and beyond tenure, initial training quality, and disciplined achievement motivation. In order to increase the reliability and validity of their measures, practitioners in personnel selection might want to consider using the PPI-R's (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005) 55 original items representing fearless dominance. This scale is able to detect mild levels of trait psychopathy in nonforensic samples (Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). However, it is an open question whether it is useful and feasible to use the additional 23 PPI-R items to assess so-called virtuous responding because a recent study showed that high scores on social desirability scales can actually reflect honest rather than dishonest responding (Zettler, Hilbig, Moshagen, & de Vries, 2015), indicating that the validity of these additional 23 PPI-R items is questionable. It is also important to note that in the United States, it is illegal for companies to discriminate against workers on the basis of a disability. Psychopathic personality, however, has never been classified as a disorder (cf. American Psychiatric Association, DSM 5, 2013).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Our findings should be interpreted with respect to the following strengths and weaknesses. In terms of strengths, several aspects warrant trust in the observed findings. First, we employed a multi-source design in which predictor variables were collected from focal individuals, and performance outcomes were collected from objective company data. These objective performance data reflected not only individual success but also the company's success. Thus, the criterion of our study on vocationally successful persons, notwithstanding elevated levels of specific psychopathic personality traits, considered not only the welfare of the individual but also the well-being of the company and society because successful

salespeople pay higher taxes, and their company pays higher taxes and creates new jobs. In addition, this criterion of success is more reliable and valid than previous reputational measures of success (Vinchur et al., 1998). Moreover, all study participants worked under equal conditions (i.e., same job, same types of products, same types of clients, same potential for profitability), thereby reducing extraneous sources of influence. In addition, the study used a prospective design, thereby excluding the possibility that the outcome variable influenced the predictor variable.

Our study also suffered from some limitations: Further research should replicate our findings. Additionally, some researchers caution that psychopaths by their very nature might not provide accurate self-reports (O'Boyle et al, 2012; Wu & LeBreton, 2011). Therefore, future research should also test the convergent validity of the present findings by jointly assessing fearless dominance with both self-report measures and the use of semi-structured expert psychopathy interviews (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010). Next, the amount of variance explained by the quadratic fearless dominance term was small; however, it was comparable to the effects that would be expected (i.e., 1–3%) for nonlinear effects in field studies (Champoux & Peters, 1987; Chaplin, 1991; Grant, 2013). Just as Cortina and Landis (2009) pointed out, in some situations (as in our study), a variable may account for a smaller percentage of the variance but may provide highly relevant new theoretical insights and practical utility. The important theoretical implication of our study is that there are indeed individuals who have elevated levels on one facet of psychopathy but who are nonetheless not only legally inconspicuous (no cases of fraud, embezzlement, etc.) but also high functioning in their job. Finally, the generalizability of these findings to non-Western cultures is tentative pending additional research (Erez, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine how fearless dominance, which is a dimension of trait psychopathy, is related to performance in field sales. We found that moderate levels of fearless dominance in junior salespeople yielded the highest sales performance above and beyond the disciplined achievement motivation facets of conscientiousness. In addition, this relation was found in the absence of criminal behavior. We encourage researchers to continue to assess the different relations between the facets of trait psychopathy and real-world work outcomes (e.g., criminality, counterproductive work behavior, job performance) in combination with other trait predictors (e.g., the facets of conscientiousness, cognitive abilities) in samples of salespeople with many years of job tenure.

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Table 1

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

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Sex	.71	.46							
2 Age	29.39	5.61	.09						
3 Educational level	5.09	1.14	-.02	-.02					
4 Initial sales training quality	3.14	.94	.09	-.16*	.06				
5 Organizational tenure (in years)	19.27	9.88	.08	-.04	-.05	.05			
6 Disciplined achievement motivation	4.27	.44	-.14	-.04	.04	-.11	.03	(.66)	
7 Fearless dominance (FD-short)	.00	.42	.25**	-.03	.06	.01	.02	.28**	(.76)
8 Average monthly sales revenue (in points)	2,532.12	2,286.83	.16	-.04	-.09	.21*	.65**	.10	.06

*Note.*  $N = 150$  salespeople; sex (0 = female; 1 = male); Cronbach's alpha internal consistency values on the diagonal.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 2

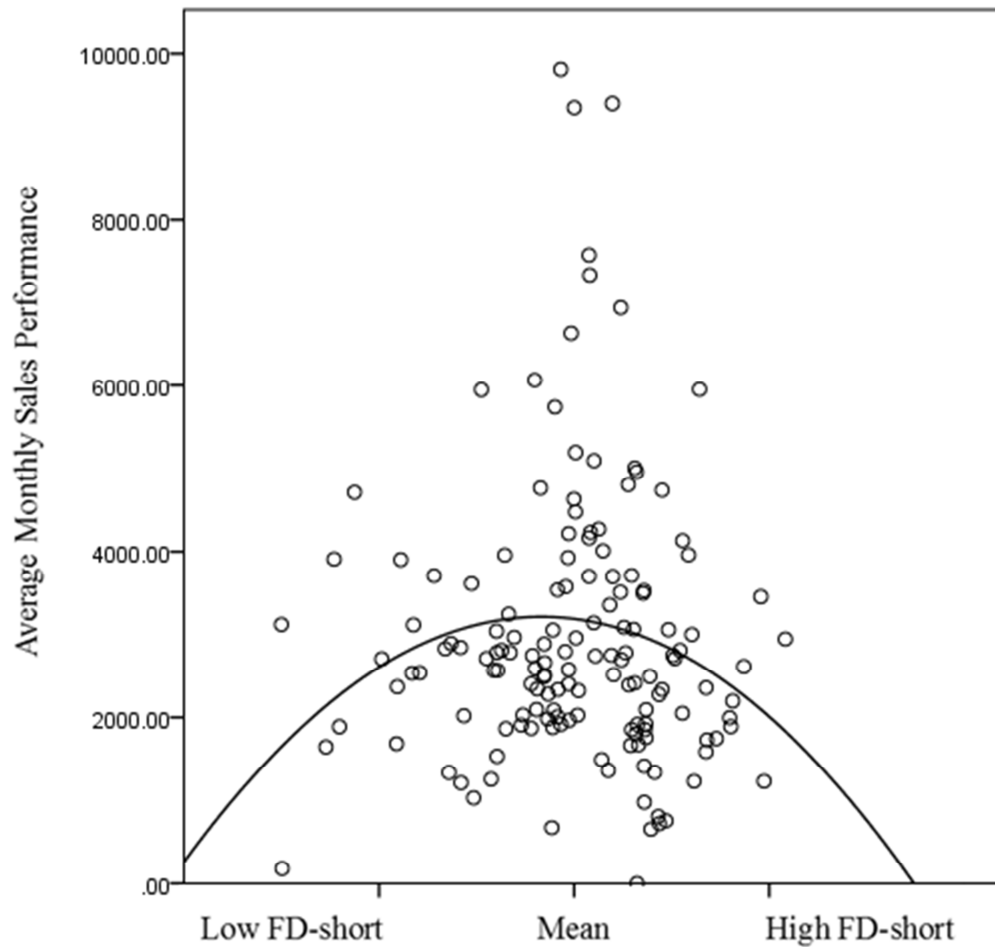
*Hierarchical Regression Analyses predicting Average Monthly Sales Revenue*

	Average monthly sales revenue							
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	B (s.e.)	$\beta$	B (s.e.)	$\beta$	B (s.e.)	$\beta$	B (s.e.)	$\beta$
Intercept	2532.12 (139.04)		2532.12 (137.91)		2532.12 (138.39)		2760.91 (166.94)	
Sex	206.99 (141.24)	.09	240.56 (141.29)	.11	244.69 (149.07)	.11	276.05 (147.30)	.12
Age	10.24 (142.17)	.00	22.72 (141.18)	.01	22.23 (141.77)	.01	23.80 (139.53)	.01
Educational level	-135.77 (140.06)	-.06	-125.82 (139.03)	-.06	-124.80 (139.98)	-.06	-106.94 (137.96)	-.05
Organizational tenure	1442.77 (140.39)	.63**	1432.86 (139.35)	.63**	1432.66 (139.86)	.63**	1473.74 (138.73)	.64**
Initial sales training quality	388.43 (142.50)	.17**	415.56 (142.12)	.18**	415.70 (142.62)	.18**	423.14 (140.39)	.19**
DAM			258.30 (140.81)	.11 <sup>+</sup>	262.86 (150.15)	.12 <sup>+</sup>	312.07 (149.22)	.14*
Fearless dominance (FD-short)					-13.72 (152.91)	-.01	-180.61 (166.14)	-.08
FD-short $\times$ FD-short							-230.32 (97.18)	-.16*
$R^2$		.46**		.48**		.48**		.50**
$F_{(R^2)}$		24.94		21.69		18.46		17.38
( <i>df1</i> , <i>df2</i> )		(5, 144)		(6, 143)		(7, 142)		(8, 141)
$\Delta R^2$				.01		.00		.02*
$F_{\Delta R^2}$				3.37		.01		5.62
( <i>df1</i> , <i>df2</i> )				(1, 143)		(1, 142)		(1, 141)

Note.  $N = 150$  salespeople; sex (0 = female; 1 = male); DAM = disciplined achievement motivation; standardized regression coefficients

are reported; all predictor variables were  $z$ -standardized.

<sup>+</sup> $p < .05$  (one-tailed). \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .



*Figure 1.* The quadratic effect of fearless dominance (FD-short) on sales revenue (in points).

$N = 150$  salespeople; plot is based on curve estimation procedure by SPSS; FD-short = fearless dominance, short version; FD-short low =  $-2 SD$  below mean, FD-short high =  $2 SD$  above mean; average monthly sales revenue in points. Standardized inflection point of FD-short =  $-.39$ .