# Identifying and Closing Gender Gaps in Sales Education

*By Jane Z. Sojka, Corinne A. Novell, and Karen A. Machleit*

A pedagogical innovation to close gender gaps in self-efficacy, fear of failure, avoid goal orientation, and resilience within a university sales education context is presented. The innovation featured a Women in Sales introductory class with a resilience assignment. A quasi-experimental design compared three groups (women in the Women in Sales class, women in the co-ed classes, and males in co-ed classes) at the beginning (T1) and end (T2) of the introductory sales course. Results indicate that the gaps found at T1 were eliminated at T2, and in the case of resilience, the gap was reversed. Further, a persistent gender gap in sales course enrollment was eliminated the year following the introduction of the innovation. The results suggest that this innovation may help women overcome specific challenges in their early professional selling experience, increase their pursuit of a sales career, and promote gender diversity in the sales industry.

## INTRODUCTION

Even though corporate recruiters actively seek women for sales positions, professional selling - especially at the B2B level - remains a field dominated by men (Burdett 2015). According to a recent article in Forbes (Voria 2018), the percentage of women in sales has increased a mere 3% over the last decade, from 36% to 39%. Yet, women often outperform men in sales, and companies with higher gender diversity across positions are 15% more likely to have higher profit and have a 42% higher return on sales (Voria 2018). It is clear that gender diversity is desirable and beneficial in organizations; consequently, it behooves sales organizations to take active steps toward increasing the number of women in their force and closing this lingering gender gap.

Closing this gap first requires an understanding of why the gap exists and persists. One factor may be mere exposure: those who have been exposed to sales may consider such a career due to familiarity (Zajonc 1968). Historically, exposure came from a family member in the profession. Today, however, exposure is increasingly coming from sales education at universities. In fact, university professional selling programs have increased in number from 27 in 2007 to 136 in 2017 (Sales Education Foundation 2018) - a 400% increase. Consistent with the idea of mere exposure, research finds that students who have taken multiple sales courses at universities have a more positive, realistic view of sales careers (Sojka, Gupta, & Hartman 2000) and have greater intent to pursue sales careers (Karakaya, Quigley, & Bingham 2010). However, if women trail men in enrollment in sales classes, women will not gain the exposure - and ensuing positive views toward sales - that will prompt them toward the career itself.

Expanding on the above, another factor perpetuating the sales gender gap may involve a perceptual, self-selection component. Despite an increase in sales education programs over the last decade, many students hold negative and/or misperceptions about salespeople and careers in sales (Ballestra et al. 2017). However, these perceptions may vary across gender and affect women and men asymmetrically (Inks & Avila 2018; Voria 2018), influencing entry into business endeavors (Malach-Pines & Schwartz 2008) and/or intentions to pursue a career in sales (Inks & Avila 2018; Karakaya et al. 2010).

Understanding the concerns and hesitations that female students have about enrolling in sales courses could provide key insights into trying to increase enrollment in these classes and in sales careers overall. If any of these concerns could be addressed through

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sales pedagogy itself, it may help boost female enrollment in sales classes and help close the gender gap in the field of professional selling. Specifically, reducing perceptual barriers for women to enroll in a sales class could be an initial step toward exposure to the sales profession. Furthermore, creating a learning environment that is conducive to success and resilience may increase favorable attitudes towards sales/sales careers, thereby increasing pursuit of sales as a profession (Sojka et al. 2000).

In the current research, the authors a) identified perceptual barriers females had to enrolling in sales courses, b) created and delivered a pedagogical innovation designed to overcome those barriers, and c) empirically assessed what gender gaps exist among students in a university sales program and the effectiveness of the innovation at closing the gaps.

## PRELIMINARY ENROLLMENT GAP ASSESSMENT

As in industry, the authors found that more men than women had enrolled in the Professional Selling course at their university over the previous several years. For example, in the fall of one semester, they observed a 2-to-1 ratio: 65% male students compared with 35% female students. This course enrollment gender gap mimics and could perpetuate the gender gap in the sales field (Voria 2018).

To better understand the possible causes of this gender enrollment gap, the authors conducted a focus group that asked female undergraduates not currently enrolled in a sales course about their interest in sales and reasons they may hesitate to take a sales course. Importantly, the female focus group did not reveal a lack of interest in sales. Rather, the group revealed challenges they perceived about taking on a sales course, including a perceived lack of confidence in their selling ability and their ability to overcome failure, as well as a high fear of failure due to the sales courses' experiential format, and a desire to avoid appearing incapable. Although there may be other challenges females perceive in sales - either in the classroom or in industry - the following literature review focuses on these four areas.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review was conducted in relation to the four primary challenges identified by female students - fear of failure, a desire to avoid appearing incapable (i.e., having an avoid goal orientation), self-efficacy, and resilience - upon which an ensuing pedagogical innovation would be designed.

### Fear of Failure (FoF)

The fear of and motivation to avoid failure can have very different effects on performance (Martin & Marsh 2003); on the one hand, it can lead to increased effort to ensure that failure does not happen. More often, though, when people lack self-efficacy in the performance domain, FoF causes a hindering effect on the necessary efforts to pursue and achieve goals, resulting in an ironic self-fulfilling prophecy. In support of the latter effect, FoF has been negatively associated with confidence in one's abilities and performance (Kumar & Jagacinski 2006; Verbeke & Bagozzi 2000) and likelihood to take risks (Sandberg 2013). Additionally, FoF is positively associated with adoption of (maladaptive) avoidance goals (Kumar & Jagacinski 2006). Based on extant findings, FoF should also likely hinder enrollment in a course that seemed risky or where failure is likely/salient, such as sales.

Importantly, and consistent with the authors' focus group with the female students, research suggests that women may experience greater FoF than men (Clance & O'Toole 1988). For example, women in educational settings report greater fears about failure and being exposed as an imposter (Kumar & Jagacinski 2006). Further, in professional settings, Kay and Shipman (2014) found a sizeable gender discrepancy in perceived alignment with job criteria needed to apply for a position: whereas men said they would apply for a position if they met only 60% of a job's criteria, women said they would only apply if they met 90% of the criteria for the same position. The women's hesitation to apply for the job likely stemmed from fear of failure in a job they did not feel qualified for. Gender discrepancies in FoF may be especially pronounced in field that have historically been male-dominated, such as sales. Specific to the population of interest, FoF could deter females from enrollment in sales courses and from pursuing sales past the initial sales course.

**Resilience**

Resilience, or a person's ability to persevere in the face of challenge or failure (Reivich & Shatte 2002), is viewed as a crucial factor in (eventual) success across performance domains. Considered a positive regulatory coping response, resilience may promote success by restoring a person's confidence (Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester 2006) and yield same or better performance levels following failure (Luthar 1991). Because failure is inevitable in sales, resilience is an important skill for confidence-building, success, and advancement in this field.

Like FoF, and echoing what the focus group voiced, research suggests that females may trail males in resilience following failure, even from an early age (Stipek & Gralinski 1991). This gap may be explained, in part, by the work of Susan Nolen-Hoeksema et al. (2008), who cited women's tendency toward rumination or intensive brooding, and of Kay and Shipman (2014), who noted women's difficulty in letting go of defeat. A prolonged focus on failure or other negative thoughts is likely to hinder resilience-related behaviors among sales representatives (Dixon & Schertzer 2005). Importantly, resilience is a skill that can be increased through training techniques (Luthans et al. 2006).

**Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy, or a person's confidence in their ability to perform specific skills (Bandura 1997), has been long-established as a positive predictor of performance across domains (Krishnan, Netemeyer, & Boles 2002; Stajkovic & Luthans 1998). Although confidence is a key ingredient to success in any career, it should be particularly crucial to sales where failure is likely (Liozu 2015), as it can help a person efficiently navigate challenging arenas and take corrective behaviors when needed. Sales literature also supports a positive relationship between selling confidence and motivation to sell (Fu, et al. 2010), intent to pursue a career in sales (Knight, Mich, & Manion 2014), and performance focus and actual sales performance (Fu et al. 2010; Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar 1994).

However, sales stereotypes and sales cultures (e.g., professional selling is a "man's world") (Lane & Crane 2002; Russ & McNeilly 1988) could make sales an intimidating arena for women to enter, and they may lack sufficient sales self-efficacy to take the risk to do so (Borghans et al. 2009). Even if females do enter the sales arena, lower confidence could translate to lower performance or higher turnover, as found in STEM education (Ellis, Fosdick, & Rasmussen 2016). Research finds women trail men in confidence in a variety of professions (Kumar & Jagacinski 2006; Malach-Pines & Schwartz 2008). If this gender gap in confidence extends to selling ability, it may be a factor in female underrepresentation in sales careers and one that is important to address to help close this industry gender gap.

**Avoid Goal Orientation (AGO)**

Goal orientations are rooted in achievement motivation theory and refer to the goals people set in performance settings (Dweck 1986; McFarland & Kidwell 2006; Sujan et al. 1994). Researchers find that people tend to approach performance-related tasks with one of three goals: a goal to grow in their ability ("learning goal"), prove their ability ("performance-prove goal") (Dweck 1986), or avoid showing a lack of ability ("performance-avoid goal"/AGO) (McFarland & Kidwell 2006; Silver, Dwyer, & Alford 2006; VandeWalle 1997).

Most relevant to the current research, an AGO is loss-frame oriented and grounded in FoF (Silver et al. 2006), and reflects a desire to avoid an unfavorable judgment (VandeWalle 1997). An AGO may motivate people to avoid negative evaluation (De La Ronde and Swann 1993; Kunda 1990) and situations that could threaten positive self-views (Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller, & Shepperd 2010). Furthermore, research finds that the ego-defensive AGO is associated with various "helpless" behaviors including self-sabotage, cheating, quitting, opting for easy tasks, and low resilience (Dweck 2013; Dweck & Leggett 1988). Some sales research has expanded the unfavorable profile of AGOs, finding associations with lower self-efficacy and resilience-related behaviors (Kumar & Jagacinski 2006), avoidance of performance feedback (Novell, Machleit, & Sojka 2016), and lower sales performance (Silver et al. 2006).

Like the other constructs mentioned in the focus group, women have reported higher AGOs in performance settings than men (Kumar & Jagacinski 2006). If this is the case in sales, females would be at increased risk for avoiding sales altogether if they perceive low ability, or quitting the discipline if they encounter challenge (Dweck 2013), which could perpetuate both the gender enrollment gap in sales education and in the professional industry.

In sum, research across a variety of performance domains supports that the factors identified by the students (fear of failure, avoidance goals, self-efficacy, and resilience) may represent gendered perceptual gaps and contribute to the sales program enrollment gap observed. The current effort examines the effectiveness of a pedagogical innovation designed to address these constructs to both increase females' interest in sales classes and close any gaps observed along these and related metrics.

**THE INNOVATION**

A sales course was developed that would address the identified challenges and aim to reduce any gender gaps identified. The innovation, an undergraduate course called Women in Sales, was based upon the existing undergraduate Professional Selling course and targeted female enrollment (although it was not exclusive). It included a special resilience training component to positively promote functional sales constructs (self-efficacy and resilience) and reduce hindering ones (AGO and FoF). Such a recruitment-training combination approach is consistent with recommendations from STEM fields to increase women's success (Malach-Pines & Schwartz 2008). The course was open to both business and non-business majors.

Although a class geared toward women could be viewed as potentially increasing awareness of gender biases, the design of the class factored in several considerations. First, it was evident from the focus group that some females' perceptions proved an otherwise insurmountable obstacle for enrolling in the course to begin with. Delivering resilience training in the regular Professional Selling course would not help females that did not enroll in the first place. The opportunity for resilience training provided in an all-female class would benefit those females who were curious about sales but potentially perceived the (co-ed) class as threatening. Designating and promoting a class that encouraged female enrollment may be critical to initial sales exposure to give them momentum going forward. In addition, delivering the resilience training to only the females in a co-ed class could potentially bring unwanted attention to the females (who had already expressed discomfort with stereotype threat) (Burdett 2015) and introduce distraction/inconsistency within the class. Thus, delivering the resilience training in the Women in Sales class allowed for the specific content to be rolled out within the curriculum to the entire class.

The resilience training assignment (Appendix A) was introduced at the beginning of the semester following a discussion on failure in sales and the importance of resilience for success. The instructor introduced eight positive strategies for overcoming fear of failure and building resilience (Appendix B), which were developed for the class based on literature (Abbott et al. 2009; Brown 2006, 2012; Dweck 2006; Luthans et al. 2006). The instructor demonstrated by giving a personal example of failure (applied for a job and was rejected), and then discussed how each strategy might be applied to move forward after failure. For example, for Strategy #3 ('Reframing Failure as Courage'), the instructor reframed the failure (negative) as having had the courage/chance to apply for the position (positive).

The instructor then assigned a series of resilience reflection papers (Appendix A). Because the papers were supposed to be completed after experiencing a specific failure event, students completed the papers at the relevant times during the semester. The reported failure could be something relatively small (such as earning a B+ on an assignment instead of an A, or not being able to convince a friend to do a desired activity) or something more substantial (not getting a job offer they really wanted). In the assignment, students identified the failure they encountered, identified which of the eight resilience strategies they employed to move forward after failure, and then reflected on the result (i.e., how well the strategy worked in that situation).

## EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT

### Design and Hypotheses

A quasi-experimental design was used to test the effectiveness of the Women in Sales class along the primary constructs of interest: fear of failure, resilience, self-efficacy, and avoid goal orientation. Also included were three measures to forecast future gender gaps in sales: students' own interest in a future sales career, their intention to recommend the course to others, and overall enrollment in the introductory sales course. Based on the literature, the authors hypothesized that there would be gender gaps at Time 1 (T1) along the primary constructs, but possibly limited to the females enrolled in the Women in Sales class. The authors further hypothesized that the innovation would help close these gaps at Time 2 (T2). Consistent with extant literature, the authors also hypothesized a positive correlation between favorable characteristics (self-efficacy and resilience) and between the unfavorable characteristics (FoF and AGO), and a negative relationship between the favorable and unfavorable characteristics. The authors further hypothesized that favorable (unfavorable) characteristics would correlate positively (negatively) with both interest in future sales career and course recommendation.

### Sample and Procedure

The Women in Sales course was introduced as a marketing elective at a large, Mid-western public (co-ed) university. This class was promoted for female students but was open to all undergraduate students across the university, regardless of major. Introductory sales students from three classes (Male coed n = 84; Female coed n = 35) or the Women in Sales classes (n = 53) completed surveys containing the relevant measures at the beginning and end of the semester. In total there were 172 participants who completed the survey at both T1 and T2 ranging in age from 18-31 (age $M$ = 20.68, $SD$ = 1.84).

### Measures

All measures were completed at both T1 and T2 using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*), except where noted. When possible, measures were adapted from existing, validated scales. Other measures were created specifically for this study to best capture the pedagogical innovation used. Construct validity assessment was performed to ensure the appropriateness of these measures, and each set of scale items had acceptable fit in individual confirmatory factor analyses.

*Self-efficacy:* eight items (e.g., "I am confident in my selling ability"). $M$ = 3.60, $SD$ = .77; $\alpha$ = .84.

*Resilience:* three items (e.g., "I can easily bounce back from a selling performance failure"). $M$ = 3.43, $SD$ = .85; $\alpha$ = .68.

*Fear of Failure:* eight items (e.g., "I am afraid of failure"). $M$ = 3.32, $SD$ = .89; $\alpha$ = .87.

Because Self-efficacy, Resilience, and Fear of Failure are conceptually similar, a confirmatory factor analysis was undertaken to ensure discriminant validity of the measures. The three-factor model had an adequate fit ($\chi^2$ = 237, p = .00, 132 d.f., RMSEA = .06, AGFI = .84, CFI = .91). The three measures evidence discriminant validity; the confidence intervals around the correlations does not contain the value 1.0, and the average variance extracted values are higher than the squared correlations between the factors (Machleit 2019).

*Avoid Goal Orientation:* five items were adapted from McFarland and Kidwell (2006) (e.g., " I prefer to avoid situations at work where I might perform poorly) (1 = *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree*). $M$ = 3.20, $SD$ = 1.04; $\alpha$ = .86.

*Future in Sales:* six items (e.g., "It is likely that I would interview for a sales position"). $M$ = 3.24, $SD$ = .99. $\alpha$ = .93.

*Course Recommendation:* one item at T2: "I would recommend this course to others". $M$ = 4.46, $SD$ = .86.

*Enrollment:* gender data were recorded for the year prior to, of, and following the implementation of the innovation for comparison.

## RESULTS

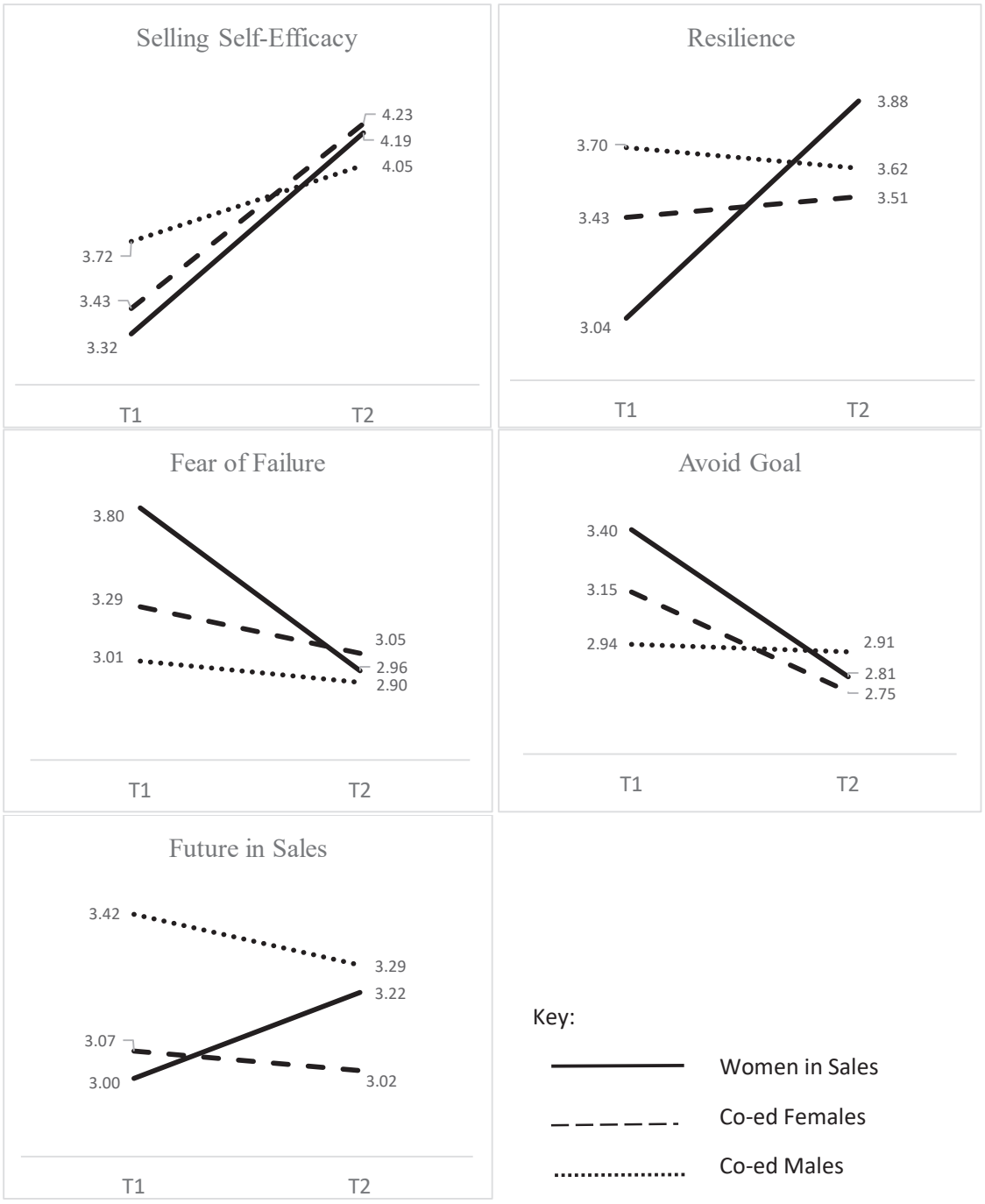
All group means, effect sizes, and outcome variable correlations appear in Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 1 and 2. Group (Women in Sales, Male Co-ed, Female Co-ed classes) x Time (T1, T2) repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted.

**Table 1. Table of Means.**

| | Women in Sales Females (n = 53) M (*SD*) | Co-ed Women (n = 35) M (*SD*) | Co-ed Males (n = 84) M (*SD*) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Selling Self-Efficacy | | | |
| T1 | 3.32[a] (*.72*) | 3.43[ab] (*.81*) | 3.72[b] (*.73*) |
| T2 | **4.19**[a] (*.48*) | **4.23**[a] (*.49*) | **4.05**[a] (*.70*) |
| Resilience | | | |
| T1 | 3.04[a] (*.84*) | 3.43[b] (*.93*) | 3.70[b] (*.73*) |
| T2 | **3.88**[a] (*.72*) | 3.51[b] (*.74*) | 3.62[b] (*.67*) |
| Fear of Failure | | | |
| T1 | 3.80[a] (*.65*) | 3.29[b] (*.91*) | 3.01[b] (*.83*) |
| T2 | **2.96**[a] (*.90*) | 3.05[a] (*.99*) | 2.90[a] (*.82*) |
| Avoid Goal | | | |
| T1 | 3.40[a] (*.77*) | 3.15[ab] (*1.16*) | 2.94[b] (*.94*) |
| T2 | **2.81**[a] (*1.02*) | **2.75**[b] (*1.03*) | 2.91[b] (*1.09*) |
| Future in Sales | | | |
| T1 | 3.00[a] (*1.00*) | 3.07[ab] (*1.06*) | 3.42[b] (*.92*) |
| T2 | **3.22**[a] (*1.08*) | 3.02[a] (*.99*) | 3.29[a] (*1.05*) |
| Course Recommendation | | | |
| T2 | 4.85[a] (*.46*) | 4.20[b] (*1.05*) | 4.37[b] (*.81*) |

*Superscripts within each row denote whether means were statistically equivalent or different by group at that time point.
**Means bolded within a column for a given outcome denote whether means were statistically different across time for that group.

**Figure 1. Mean Values by Group and Time.**



**Selling Self-Efficacy**

The repeated measures ANOVA revealed that there was a significant main effect of time on self-efficacy ($F$[1,170] = 118.02, $p$ <.001), whereas the main effect of group was not significant ($F$[2,170] = .92, $p$ = ns). The main effect of time was qualified by a significant group x time interaction ($F$[2,170] = 9.54, $p$ <.001), meaning that the change in self-efficacy from T1 to T2 significantly differed by group. This significant interaction was broken down by time. First, as evident in Table 1, there was a significant effect of group at T1 ($F$[2,170] = 5.09, $p$ < .01). Pairwise comparisons revealed that at T1, the females in the Women in Sales class ($M$ = 3.32, $SD$ = 0.72) reported significantly lower self-efficacy than males ($M$ = 3.72, $SD$ = 0.73) (t(136) = -3.12; $p$ < .01). Females in the co-ed classes ($M$ = 3.43, $SD$ = 0.81) did not differ significantly from either the males (t(117) = -1.90; $p$ = ns) or the females in the Women in Sales class (t(87) = -.65; $p$ = ns). At T2, however, the gap between the females in the Women in Sales class and males observed at T1 had closed, with no significant differences in selling self-efficacy reported by group ($F$[2,170] = 1.40, $p$ = ns).

**Resilience**

The repeated measures ANOVA revealed that there was a significant main effect of time on resilience ($F$[1,170] = 16.59, $p$ <.001), whereas the main effect of group was not significant ($F$[2,170] = 2.11, $p$ = ns). The main effect of time was qualified by a significant group x time interaction ($F$[2,170] = 20.05, $p$ <.001), meaning that the change in resilience from T1 to T2 significantly differed by group. This significant interaction was broken down by time. First, as evident in Table 1, there was a significant effect of group at T1 ($F$[2,170] = 10.92, $p$ < .001). Pairwise comparisons revealed that at T1, the females in the Women in Sales classes ($M$ = 3.04, $SD$ = 0.84) reported significantly lower resilience than both females in the co-ed classes ($M$ = 3.43, $SD$ = 0.93) (t(87) = -2.03; $p$ < .05) and males ($M$ = 3.70, $SD$ = 0.73) (t(136) = -4.87; $p$ < .001), who did not differ from one another (t(117) = -1.71; $p$ = ns). At T2, there was a significant effect of group again ($F$[2,170] = 3.41, $p$ < .05): however, analyses revealed that females in the Women in Sales now reported significantly higher resilience ($M$ = 3.88, $SD$ = 0.72) than both the females in the co-ed class ($M$ = 3.51, $SD$ = 0.74) (t(87) = 2.28; $p$ < .05) and the males ($M$ = 3.62, $SD$ = 0.67) (t(136) = 2.14; $p$ < .05), who did not differ from one another (t(117) = -.75; $p$ = ns).

**Fear of Failure**

The repeated measures ANOVA revealed that there was a significant main effect of time on FoF ($F$[1,170] = 29.67, $p$ <.001). The main effect of group was also significant ($F$[2,170] = 5.99, $p$ < .01). These main effects were qualified by a significant group x time interaction ($F$[2,170] = 10.93, $p$ <.001), meaning that the change in FoF from T1 to T2 significantly differed by group. This significant interaction was broken down by time. First, as evident in Table 1, there was a significant effect of group at T1 ($F$[2,170] = 15.94, $p$ < .001). Pairwise comparisons revealed that at T1, the females in the Women in Sales classes ($M$ = 3.80, $SD$ = 0.65) reported significantly higher FoF in a selling context than both females in the co-ed classes ($M$ = 3.29, $SD$ = 0.91) (t(87) = 3.06; $p$ < .01) and males ($M$ = 3.01, $SD$ = 0.83) (t(136) = 5.87; $p$ < .001), who did not differ from one another (t(117) = 1.61; $p$ = ns). At T2, however, the gap between the females in the Women in Sales classes and males observed at T1 was eliminated, with no significant differences in FoF in selling reported by group ($F$[2,170] = .39, $p$ = ns).

**Avoid Goal Orientation**

The repeated measures ANOVA revealed that there was a significant main effect of time on the adoption of an AGO ($F$[1,169] = 17.26, $p$ <.001), whereas the main effect of group was not significant ($F$[2,170] = 5.99, $p$ < .01). The main effects of time was qualified by a significant group x time interaction ($F$[2,169] = 5.23, $p$ <.01), meaning that the change in the adoption of an AGO from T1 to T2 significantly differed by group. This significant interaction was broken down by time. First, as evident in Table 1, there was a significant effect of group at T1 ($F$[2,170] = 3.86, $p$ < .05). Pairwise comparisons revealed that at T1, the females in the Women in Sales class ($M$ = 3.40, $SD$ = 0.76) reported significantly higher adoption of avoid goals than males ($M$ = 2.94, $SD$ = 0.94) (t(136) = 3.01; $p$ < .01). Females in the co-ed classes ($M$ = 3.15, $SD$ = 1.16) did not differ significantly from either the males (t(117) = 1.01; $p$ =

ns) or the females in the Women in Sales class (t(87) = 1.25; $p$ = ns). At T2, however, the gap between the females in the Women in Sales classes and males observed at T1 was eliminated, with no significant differences in adoption of an AGO reported by group ($F$[2,169] = .33, $p$ = ns).

**Future in Sales**

The repeated measures ANOVA revealed that there was neither a significant main effect of time on students' intentions to pursue sales in the future (through sales activities at school and professionally) ($F$[1,170] = .30, $p$ = ns), nor a main effect of group ($F$[2,170] = 2.03, $p$ = ns). However, there was a significant group x time interaction ($F$[2,170] = 3.09, $p$ <.05), meaning that the change in their intentions to pursue sales from T1 to T2 significantly differed by group. This significant interaction was broken down by time. First, as evident in Table 1, there was a significant effect of group at T1 ($F$[2,170] = 3.69, $p$ < .05). Pairwise comparisons revealed that at T1, the females in the Women in Sales class ($M$ = 3.00, $SD$ = 1.00) reported significantly lower intentions to pursue sales than males ($M$ = 3.42, $SD$ = 0.92) (t(136) = -2.56; $p$ = .01). Females in the co-ed classes ($M$ = 3.06, $SD$ = 1.06) did not differ significantly from the males (t(117) = -1.86; $p$ = ns) or the females in the Women in Sales class (t(87) = -.29; $p$ = ns). At T2, however, the gap between the females in the Women in Sales classes and males observed at T1 had closed, with no significant differences in intentions to pursue sales reported by group ($F$[2,168] = .82, $p$ = ns).

**Course Recommendation**

An overall ANOVA at T2 was significant ($F$[2,168] = 8.99, $p$ <.001). As evident in Table 1, pairwise comparisons revealed that females in the Women in Sales class ($M$ = 4.85, $SD$ = 0.46), reported significantly higher likelihood to recommend the course to others than both females in the co-ed sections ($M$ = 4.20, $SD$ = 1.05) (t(86) = 3.97; $p$ < .001) or males ($M$ = 4.37, $SD$ = 0.81) (t(134) = 3.91; $p$ < .001), who did not differ significantly from each other (t(116) = -.97; $p$ = ns).

**Course Enrollment**

As evident in Figure 2, female enrollment increased both absolutely and relatively over the three time periods. Specifically, in the year before the Women in Sales section was introduced, 44 females (34.6%) enrolled compared with 83 males (65.4%). In the year the innovation was introduced, 70 females (41.7%) enrolled compared with 98 males (58.3%). In the year after, 105 females (56.2%) enrolled compared with 82 males (43.8%). A chi-square test revealed that these percentages significantly differed across the time periods, $\chi^2$ (3, N = 482) = 15.59; $p$ < .001.

**Figure 2. Gender Percent Enrollment by Year.**

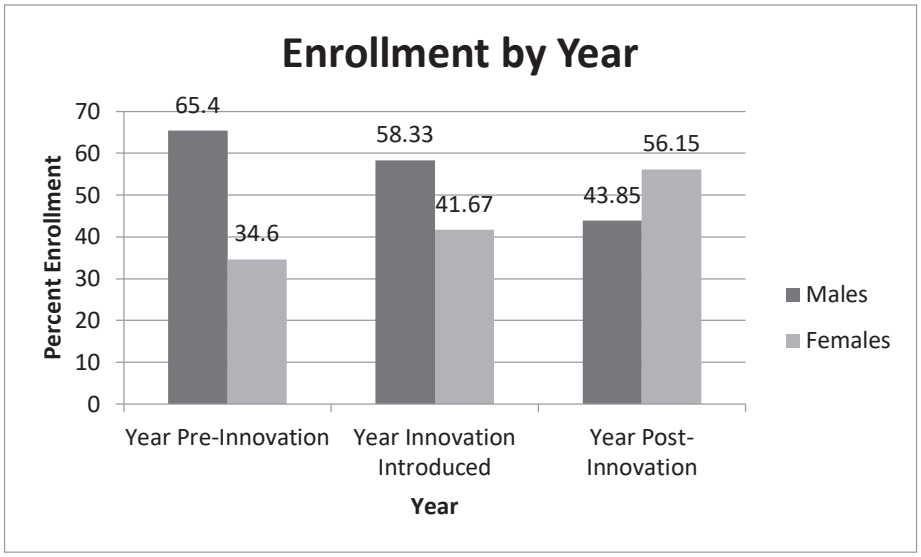


**Table 2. Correlations among Variables at T2.**

| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Selling Self-Efficacy | 1 | - | - | - | - |
| 2. Resilience | .35** | 1 | - | - | - |
| 3. Fear of Failure | -.30** | -.48** | 1 | - | - |
| 4. Avoid Goal | -.34** | -.41** | .53** | 1 | - |
| 5. Future in Sales | .30** | .32** | -.25** | -.08 | 1 |
| 6. Course Recommendation | .18* | .31** | -.15* | -.11 | .37** |

*N* = 179
Significance levels: * ≤ .05; ** ≤ .01

**Other Relationships**

As evident in Table 2 and consistent with hypotheses, the two primary favorable characteristics (resilience and self-efficacy) correlated positively, as did the two primary unfavorable characteristics (Table 2). Further, the primary favorable characteristics correlated negatively with the primary unfavorable characteristics. In addition, the favorable characteristics correlated positively with future in sales and course recommendation. However, whereas FoF correlated negatively with future in sales and course recommendation, the outcomes did not correlate significantly with AGO.

**DISCUSSION**

The present research investigated possible explanations for a gender gap in enrollment in sales courses and in the sales industry. In assessing a pedagogical innovation designed to address these explanations, data at T1 supported prior literature on gender gaps in self-efficacy, resilience, FoF, and an AGO. The data further supported that the Women in Sales course, marked by a predominantly female format and resilience-building assignment, helped close the initial gender gaps observed. Specifically, whereas females in the Women in Sales class trailed males in the four primary constructs at T1, all gaps had closed at T2, and in the case of resilience, the gap was reversed. These metrics, along with a closed gap in 'future in sales' and an elevated course recommendation among Women in Sales female students, may have contributed to the subsequently-observed closing of the gender enrollment gap in the introductory sales course.

Furthermore, there were significant relationships among the outcomes. First, all hypothesized relationships among the primary four constructs were supported: self-efficacy correlated positively with resilience and correlated negatively with both FoF and an AGO. As did the other favorable attribute, resilience correlated negatively with both FoF and an AGO. The two unfavorable attributes correlated positively. Second, both self-efficacy and resilience correlated positively with future in sales and with course recommendation. However, whereas FoF correlated negatively with 'future in sales' and course recommendation, an AGO did not.

The current research made several contributions. First, it identified perceptual barriers females had to enrolling in sales courses, which were substantiated by extant literature. Second, it designed and delivered a pedagogical innovation to close these gaps, which could be replicated in other disciplines. Third, it empirically assessed an initial presence, and subsequent elimination of, gender gaps among sales students in support of the effectiveness of the pedagogical innovation. Fourth, it identified important relationships among the variables, all of which provide additional insight for closing gender gaps in sales education and in sales professions.

**Managerial Implications**

These results hold insights for recruiting and retaining women in sales organizations who see the value in a diverse sales force. Understanding the barriers women may face in the classroom and in sales organizations could play a key role in closing the gender gaps observed in each locale. The Women in Sales innovation

was associated with positive gains on all of the barriers examined, closing each gender gap identified at T1. As such, translating/applying the findings from this study to sales education and sales organizations could help close those gender gaps as well. For instance, word of mouth (here, 'course recommendation') is often an important and effective form of recruiting. Based on the results in this study, salespeople (students) who are confident in their selling abilities, resilient, and unafraid of failure will be more likely to recommend a profession in sales (the course) to others. Further, the strong associations of 'future in sales' and 'course recommendation' with self-efficacy, resilience, and FoF highlight these constructs as ones that educators and sales managers may strive to train, particularly among females.

This research also suggests actionable implications important for organizations wanting to attract and retain women. First, it is important to provide opportunities where women can connect with other women. Some examples include implementing Lean In Circles (promoted by Sheryl Sandberg), membership in The Wing (underwritten by Fran Hauser), or developing in-house programs designed by and for women, where women can connect in meaningful ways. For example, connecting women through mentoring opportunities, as in STEM fields (Malach-Pines & Schwartz 2008), may increase intent to pursue or continue a career in sales.

Second, perceptions that had discouraged women from considering sales could be positively developed by other university sales programs or the sales organization (Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar 1994). For example, a sales organization could sponsor a workshop on campus for women interested in learning to build resilience and move past FoF. Offering a workshop for women on resilience would establish a sales organization as one that promotes opportunities for women. As a recruiting tool that demonstrates the organization's support for promoting women's success, sales organizations could implement training sessions—starting with the eight strategies outlined in Appendix A—where women practice resilience skills.

**Replication**

This pedagogical innovation, comprising an introductory sales class for women and resilience training assignment, can be replicated in other classes either separately or in conjunction. For example, following the success of the Women in Sales innovation, the gender-based class model is currently being rolled out at the university where this research was conducted in the Finance Department, another industry in which women are underrepresented (Voria 2018).

Similarly, as resilience is an essential life-skill for every (sales)person, the resilience activity could be incorporated in a variety of settings. For example, it may be introduced into traditional mixed gender sales classes so that others may also learn the skill for themselves or to support others. The resilience activity may also be incorporated into other contexts or with other groups where fear of failure/lower resilience is pronounced, such as first generation students, who are likely to face daunting challenges as they adapt to college (Soria & Stebleton 2012); female athletes, who often lag behind their male counterparts in resilience (Williams 2017); and medical students, who have been dubbed "fragile perfects" by Angela Duckworth (2016) due to their crippling realization that they may make mistakes. For any of these groups, practicing resilience may help them handle failure and persevere in their respective performance domains.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The current research is not without limitations. First, as random assignment was not possible, there could be individual differences that may have influenced the results that the authors could not account for. Further, there may well have been a selection bias for enrollment in the Women in Sales class, as the gender gaps observed at T1 existed solely between males and females in the Women in Sales class (and not women in the co-ed classes). This incidental finding may shed some light on a more nuanced perspective of prior research that reports gender gaps - it appears the differences exist for perhaps a subset of women rather than all. Based on the findings, this subset may be particularly sensitive to the prospect of competing in a historically male-dominant field due to perceptual variables including FoF, an AGO, self-efficacy, and resilience. However, a selection bias would not detract from - but rather substantiate - the challenges females may perceive and the need for such an innovation to overcome

these challenges. Nonetheless, future research or sales training may choose to incorporate random assignment and additional control variables.

Second, because the innovation differed both in terms of class composition (gender) and content (resilience activities), it is not possible to determine the relative impact each component. However, the innovation was intended as whole and, viewed as such, was associated with positive observations on the outcome variables. Future research may wish to examine these factors individually.

Third, the data from this sample may or may not generalize to other populations or to future time points. It is unknown how long or under what conditions the effects may persist: for example, when females from the Women in Sales class take subsequent co-ed sales classes, or work in a male-dominant work force in the future. As an effort to promote future research on this topic, information provided in the appendices should provide a replicable roadmap for implementing the course elsewhere.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was manifold: to identify challenges women may face in sales that may explain the gender gap in sales education and sales organizations, and to design, deliver, and assess the effectiveness of a pedagogical innovation aimed at closing these gaps. Data along all metrics suggest that the innovation was effective in closing gender gaps in self-efficacy, resilience, FoF, and an AGO. Furthermore, the innovation's associated increase in females' enrollment in sales classes, intention to pursue sales, and recommendation of the course are promising and may provide key insights to close gender gaps in both sales education and sales organizations. Going forward, the identified relationships are important as initial enrollment in a sales class could be a gateway to getting talented students interested in a sales career. The challenges identified and the pedagogical innovation may be considered as part of the effort to help women overcome challenges, achieve success in sales, and promote diversity in the field.

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**Appendix A. Resilience Reflection Assignment**

Contrary to what many of us have been taught, failure is an event, not a person. In sales, as is in life, you will not always succeed in reaching your objectives. Furthermore, fear of failure has been shown to negatively impact confidence levels: a necessary prerequisite for sales success. Therefore, it is imperative that you learn to handle setbacks successfully. To this end, you will keep a "resilience journal" that will record your progress and allow you to make conclusions at the end of the semester. You are to turn in during class, five reports (one-page, double-spaced, typed) which address the following questions.

1. Identify the setback incident: Identify an instance where you didn't get what you wanted (e.g., your restaurant wasn't chosen, you got an A- instead of an A on an exam, the group didn't like your idea, you didn't get the job offer, etc.). The incident can be small or large. All responses are confidential.
2. Pick a coping method: Using one of the coping strategies we discussed in class (and outlined on the handout below), identify the coping method you used and describe how you implemented it. It's OK if you don't want to share details, just provide enough information to know that you attempted to handle the setback.
3. Reflect: How did the coping method work? Was it a good method for you? Was your down time reduced? Did you feel better? If it didn't work, what method might you want to try next time?

**Appendix B. Eight Strategies for Building Resilience and Overcoming Fear of Failure**

| Strategy | Description |
|---|---|
| 1. Change the tape in your head | Instead of negative self-talk (e.g., "I can't believe I was so stupid"), silence it and replace it with positive self-talk, or crowd it out with distractions. |
| 2. Allow yourself to feel devastated for a while | It's OK to feel bad when you fail, but set a time limit on your pity party. Set a timer, then go ahead and cry about not getting your dream internship, grieve the loss of your dream internship, get angry that someone else got your dream internship. When the timer goes off, you're done feeling sorry for yourself. Wipe your eyes, put a smile on your face, walk out the door, and start working on your next application. |
| 3. See failure as courage | When you put yourself out there and become vulnerable, public 'failure' is embarrassing. For example, campaigning for a student government office and not winning the election is embarrassing. Reframe this 'failure' as courage. It's easy to stay on the sidelines and criticize others, but you had the courage to actually be in the ring. |
| 4. Know when to say when | Sometimes, it makes sense to acknowledge defeat and move on. In some competitive industries, failure may be indicative that a career may need to head a different direction. By admitting that, you can change and be successful in a different direction. |
| 5. Failure is an event, not a person | What happens when we receive a 'D' on an exam? The first thing that pops into my head is "I'm a failure." Reframe failure as an event, not a measure of your self-worth. Note that you failed at one exam in one course; you are still a smart, kind, encouraging, generous person. The failure is one event; it does not make you, the person, a failure. |
| 6. Think positively while in the process | Many job interviews require a group session where the job candidates interact. It can be natural to generate unfavorable comparisons and feel inadequate following this type of format. It may be OK to have those thoughts after the interview, but during the interview, you need to think positive. It is far more beneficial during the interview process, and others may be having the same thoughts, so keep your head up during the process. |
| 7. Be patient | In some cases, you did everything right, but for some reason, the timing wasn't right. You aced the interview, but the manager is still waiting on approval. You predicted an outcome, but your colleagues were slow to see your vision. You need to have confidence that you did what you could and wait patiently, for the outcome. |
| 8. Confide in a friend | Confiding in a trusted friend allows you to vent frustration, anger, or disappointment at a failure. A truly good friend will support you, and build you up. Of course, make sure you are confiding in a true friend who will listen to you and support you and comfort you. Also keep in mind that a true friend may be biased. Sometimes, confiding in a friend is for comfort rather than brutal honesty. |