

The effects of subordinates' performance on manager–subordinate conflict under the moderation effect of propensity to trust: an attribution approach

Propensity to trust

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to reveal the role of performance on the likelihood of conflict occurrence and the conditions that affect this relationship. This study measures managers' perceptions about the cause of the subordinate's low-level performance, stability of the performance, propensity to trust of managers and investigate the effects of them on conflict types.

Design/methodology/approach – This study draws on the attribution theory for investigating the effect of the negative performance of subordinates on a conflict between manager and subordinate by using the quantitative research method. A random sample was drawn from 150 Turkish mid-level managers from mid-sized small and medium-sized enterprises companies. The hypotheses are tested by hierarchical linear modeling.

Findings – According to results, negative performance of subordinates may predict the types of conflict depending on the attributions of managers about negative performance. In addition, the manager's attributions to the locus of control or/and to the stability affect the likelihood of conflict types occurrence, between managers and subordinates. Depending on the managers' attributions, the propensity to trust of managers has a significant moderation effect on the relationship between performance of subordinates and the likelihood of conflict types occurrence.

Originality/value – This study advances knowledge on conditions that affect the likelihood of conflict occurrence. It contributes to the literature by suggesting performance as a predictor of conflict instead of an outcome of the conflict. The research is one of the rare studies investigating the relationship between attributions and conflict. In addition, it expands the understanding of personal traits and conflict interaction by testing the moderation effect of propensity to trust.

Keywords Employee performance, Propensity to trust, Attribution theory, Relationship conflict, Task conflict, Manager–subordinate conflict

Paper type Research paper

In certain conditions, conflict leads to positive or negative outcomes at individual, group and organizational levels such as innovation, decision-making, low-level job satisfaction,



organizational commitment, intention to leave, decreased self-efficacy and physical problems (De Wit *et al.*, 2012; Farh *et al.*, 2010; Ren and Gray, 2009). Knowing the conditions that affect the likelihood of conflict occurrence is necessary to understand the conflict and to determine the consequences of the conflict because every conflict arises with these conditions and continues under the influence of them (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003; Pondy, 1967). Thus, for organizations, managing conflict due to its effects on organizational outputs, and understanding the conditions that effects the likelihood of conflict occurrence, is a key issue (Mooney *et al.*, 2007). However, it is not yet possible to say that the antecedents of the conflict have been investigated in every aspect (Camelo-Ordaz *et al.*, 2014).

The interaction of conflict and performance has an important place in the conflict literature (De Wit *et al.*, 2012). However, despite there are researches that point to performance as an antecedent to conflict (Jehn and Mannix, 2001; Murray *et al.*, 2019; Perrigot *et al.*, 2021), a considerable body of conflict literature tends to approach performance as an outcome of conflict instead of as an antecedent (Bai *et al.*, 2015; Wu *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, in the literature, there is a lack of studies that investigate performance as an antecedent of conflict.

Many conflicts begin when an individual does not behave as expected against who they interact with (Barki and Hartwick, 2004; Baron, 1991). An event that violates the expectations of individuals leads them to cognitively evaluate the event (Weiner, 2000). However, individuals may interpret differently the same outcomes depending on the perceived causes behind the behaviors that violate their expectations (Eberly *et al.*, 2011). Besides, interpretations are important determinants of their reactions to the individuals who do not behave as expected (Carnevale and Pruitt, 1992). Understanding the perceptions of individuals about the cause of events provides insights into how and why people show antisocial and pro-social organizational behaviors (Burton *et al.*, 2014; Carnevale and Pruitt, 1992). If we consider this situation in the context of the performance evaluation of subordinates, when a subordinate does not meet the good performance expectation of the manager, it may be considered as a violation of an expectation (Ren and Gray, 2009) and may lead to conflict occurrence (Barki and Hartwick, 2004).

The attribution theory, which has a great potential to predict the organizational outcomes (Harvey *et al.*, 2014), provides an important context to explain individuals' perceptions of the causes for events that violate their expectations, the judgments resulting from these interpretations and the behaviors associated with them (Halperin and Tagar, 2017). Therefore, attribution theory can be helpful in explaining the role that perceptions of the causes of negative performance on conflict (Baron, 1991, 1985; Harvey *et al.*, 2014).

Attribution theory offers that the attributions to the locus of control (LoC) and stability of the cause are the primary determinants of behavioral responses of attributors (Harvey *et al.*, 2014; Jiang *et al.*, 2012; Weiner, 2000). For instance, the violations and unexpected consequences of the subordinate's performance trigger the manager to make attributions to the causes for the subordinate's performance (Weiner, 1985). Managers may or may not decide to blame subordinates for their performance, and depending on their decisions, managers respond with pro-social or antisocial behaviors (Nair, 2008; Rudolph *et al.*, 2004; Weiner, 2000). Thus, depending on the response of the managers to the performance of subordinates may affect the occurrence, type and severity of the conflict (Harvey *et al.*, 2014). In addition, the attribution to the causal stability of an event, affects expectations of individuals, and these expectations may lead to pro-social or anti-social behavioral responses (Harvey *et al.*, 2014), and depending on the responses the conflict level may increase or decrease (Jiang *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, in the study, the effect of managers'

attribution to the stability and to the LoC of the cause of negative performance on the type and the likelihood of conflict occurrence was investigated.

Although personality traits may have significant effects on conflict, the literature does not reach a comprehensive understanding of the interaction of conflict and personality traits yet (Ayub *et al.*, 2017; Keaveney, 2008). Individuals' personal traits may cause them to perceive the same events in a more positive or negative way (De Neve and Cooper, 1998). Attributions are related to individual perceptions, and perceptions are made subjectively by being influenced by individual differences (Carson, 2019; Harvey and Martinko, 2009; Teas and McElroy, 1986; Weiner, 1985). These different attributions affected by personal traits may affect the nature of the conflict (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001; Nair, 2008). The propensity to trust can be considered as an important personal trait that affects individuals' overall evaluation and perception of themselves, others and events (De Neve and Cooper, 1998; Martinko *et al.*, 2006). Thus, in this paper, as a kind of personality trait, the propensity to trust is investigated as a moderator variable.

In this research, it is argued that depending on the attributions of managers to the cause of the negative performance of subordinates may lead to increase or reduce the likelihood of task and relationship conflict occurrence, and propensity to trust of managers may moderate this relationship. This paper makes several contributions to the literature. First, it advances knowledge on conditions that affect the likelihood of conflict occurrence (Barki and Hartwick, 2004). Second, it contributes to the literature of conflict by suggesting performance as an antecedent instead of an outcome of conflict. Third, it expands the understanding of personal traits and conflict interaction by testing the propensity to trust moderation effect (Ayub *et al.*, 2017; Ilies *et al.*, 2011; Jehn and Bendersky, 2003; Ren and Gray, 2009). Despite the predictive power of attribution theory on organizational outcomes, there are limited studies done in organizational literature (Harvey *et al.*, 2014). Thus, fourth, the study empowers the empirical evidence that the attribution theory can predict conflict as an organizational outcome.

Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Attribution theory

Individuals evaluate the events that occur in their daily lives and try to make sense of their environment by making some interpretations and inferences about the causes of these events (Rudolph *et al.*, 2004). The basis of this effort to make sense is the innate desire to understand the important consequences in people's lives (Eberly *et al.*, 2011). People try to gain control over their lives and improve their ability to predict future events through evaluations and inferences they make (Eberly *et al.*, 2011; Kim *et al.*, 2021). By examining the evaluations and inferences of individuals about the causes of events, attribution theory tries to explain this effort (Rudolph *et al.*, 2004).

Regarding attribution theory, individuals act as an observer who evaluates him/herself or another person as an actor regarding the cause of the event. Individuals' evaluations of events affect their emotions, cognitions and behaviors (Badovick *et al.*, 1992; Bell-Dolan and Anderson, 1999; Heider, 1958; Kim *et al.*, 2021; Moore, 2000).

The attributions regarding the causes for personal or impersonal events are mostly based on information obtained from daily events (Barry and Crant, 2000; Heider, 1958). Attributions are subjective, and the information and beliefs on which the attributions are based need not be correct, as the observer's attributions rely on his own cognition, knowledge, motivation, acceptance and belief system to explain the causes behind the event (Barry and Crant, 2000; Bell-Dolan and Anderson, 1999).

Weiner *et al.* (1979) suggested that references to the cause of an event should be grouped under three dimensions, and subsequently, this suggestion was supported by many studies (Weiner, 2000). Weiner classified the attributions under dimensions named “Locus of Control, Stability, and Controllability.”

LoC points to the source of the cause of an event. Does the cause of an event belong to external or internal factors (whether depends on the actor self or the conditions outside the actor)? The answer to this question shows the LoC (Moore, 2000). LoC is the dimension that primarily affects emotions (Weiner, 2000). When an event occurs, the observer feels some emotions depending on the perception of the event as positive or negative, and these emotions, which resemble unconditional reactions and arise directly from the environmental event without interpreting the event, are called primary or general emotions (Bell-Dolan and Anderson, 1999; Moore, 2000). General emotions emerge as basic emotions such as happiness or sadness depending on whether the event is positive or negative (Bell-Dolan and Anderson, 1999). However, some emotions occur with the evaluation of the event, depending on the cause of the event, and these emotions are called distinct emotions (Moore, 2000).

According to attribution theory, emotions play a mediating role between cognition and actions (Rudolph *et al.*, 2004). If the observer considers someone else as an actor in the event that the observer is affected, he/she inferences about the actor responsible for the outcome. If the observer attributes the cause of the event internal factors of the actor, he/she feels anger or sympathy depending on whether the actor has control over the cause of the event (Harvey *et al.*, 2014). If the event affecting the observer is under the control of the actor and especially if this action is committed with the intention of harming the other party, the observer will blame the actor and the observer will be angry with the actor (Weiner, 2000). If the observer blames the actor because of the harm he/she has suffered, he/she will most probably retaliate to the actor by demonstrating hostile behaviors (Rudolph *et al.*, 2004). Conversely, if the observer attributes the event to external causes (outside the actor), the anger disappears completely or partially (Weiner, 2000), and the observer may feel sympathy for the actor, if the actor is harmed by the event, too (Rudolph *et al.*, 2004). This implies that external attributions make people to show less antisocial behaviors regarding negative event (Kim *et al.*, 2021).

Conflict

Conflict is related to the perceptions of the interacting parties, that they have incompatibilities with each other (Jehn, 1995). When conflict arises as a cognitive perception, emotions accompany it because conflict and emotions are closely linked to each other (Nair, 2008). In addition, conflict emerges when the contradiction between interests, opinions or goals of individuals affects at least one parties’ emotions (Kolb and Putnam, 1992). Indeed, Barki and Hartwick (2004) defined the concept of interpersonal conflict as a dynamic process in which interacting individuals experience negative emotions due to the perceived disagreement between them and the interference they are exposed to while reaching their goals.

Conflict is generally considered in two different dimensions as conflict related to the task performed and conflict based on interpersonal relations (Amason and Sapienza, 1997; Jehn, 1995; Lu and Guo, 2019; Konuk and Ataman, 2021; Priem and Price, 1991). Task-related conflicts can often be expressed as perceived disagreements between interacting parties about tasks to be done (Barki and Hartwick, 2004). Relationship conflict can be defined as interpersonal conflicts that can be characterized by negative emotions such as anger and disappointment (Pelled *et al.*, 1999). Relationship conflict is discriminated from task conflict

because of the intensity of negative emotions caused by incompatibilities and disagreement which personalized by individuals (Jehn, 1995, 1994).

If the incompatibilities, disagreements, negative emotions and intervention behaviors that individuals experience are related to the task, most probably there is an existence of task conflict, and if it is related to the relationship, there is an existence of relationship conflict (Barki and Hartwick, 2004). However, it should not be forgotten that disagreement, incompatibility and intervention are subject to perceptions, and if either one party in the relationship perceives one of these three contexts in the context of a relationship, the likelihood of the emergence of relationship conflict between the parties increases (Eberly *et al.*, 2011). In addition, relationship conflict and task conflict can be observed together and can reveal each other, so these two types of conflict are closely related (Amason and Sapienza, 1997; Choi and Cho, 2011; Jehn *et al.*, 2008; Lu and Guo, 2019).

The reaction of individuals to behaviors that violate their own expectations is strongly dependent on the perceived cause of the behavior (Baron, 1988). A relationship violation occurs when one party's behavior prevents another party from meeting a significant need. Perceived violation triggers a negative psychological response arising from threats to individual freedom, and the degree of reaction is positively correlated with the importance and number of freedoms perceived to be under threat (Gordon and Bowlby, 1989). Relationship conflict usually occurs when this situation is accompanied by negative emotions and behaviors (Ren and Gray, 2009). Therefore, in organizations, obstacles that threaten needs based on identity and control of desired results are likely to cause relationship conflict.

Norms determine the appropriate or inappropriate behavior patterns generally accepted by the members of the organization (Sørensen, 2002). Individuals behave intentionally or unintentionally in ways that others perceive the social order as a threat or violation. The negative personal effects of these threats or violations for others may lead to the occurrence of relationship conflict (Ren and Gray, 2009). Striving to fulfill a task is socially considered a moral behavioral norm (Covington and Omelich, 1984).

When failure is attributed to the internal factors of an individual, it is usually attributed to insufficient ability and/or effort (Rudolph *et al.*, 2004; Weiner, 2000). There is strong evidence that failure attributed to low effort is judged more negatively compared to failure attributed to low ability (Rudolph *et al.*, 2004). When the manager evaluates that the employee is preventing the employee from reaching the performance goal by not trying, he evaluates the employee as having committed a crime against him, gets angry and thinks that he has the right to punish the employee (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001). Besides, anger provides motivation to the manager to correct the misbehavior perceived by the manager (Halperin and Tagar, 2017). These behaviors of the manager cause the employee to make attributions to the behaviors of managers and to show rebuffing behaviors (Martinko and Gardner, 1987). These behaviors, which are governed by negative emotions, can cause relationship conflict due to both emotions and the employee's response to the intervention behavior of the manager.

If the observer attributes the cause of the low performance to the actor's low ability, it evokes feelings of shame and humiliation in the actor (Weiner, 2000). The employee who feels shame and humiliation may personalize this attribution made by the manager because being talented is valuable for individuals and being talented is associated with the individuals' self-efficacy (Covington and Omelich, 1984). People who feel their self-efficacy in danger become emotional (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001). Covington and Omelich (1984) showed in their study that when students failed, they preferred to attribute the cause of failure to low effort rather than low ability. This result indicates that associating failure of

individuals with low ability increases the probability of creating feelings of humiliation and shame in individuals (Covington and Omelich, 1984).

Based on the studies of Covington and Omelich (1984), we can examine the manager's attribution of insufficient ability in three contexts from the employee's point of view. If the employee is evaluated as efforting on the part of the manager, the feelings of guilt and regret, which are the moral basis associated with not trying, decrease. Instead, if the manager attributes the failure to the subordinate's low ability, the employee feels humiliation and shame associated with the disclosure of his low ability, regardless of the manager's feelings. In addition, if the manager evaluates that the subordinate is unsuccessful despite his effort, this may indirectly doubt the employee's ability and this situation triggers the feeling of humiliation in the employee. This attribution, which can be considered as an attack on the employee's self-ego, probably causes a destructive conflict as it tends to cause emotional flood (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001). If the employee perceives the manager's blaming himself for the cause of the event as a personal attack (Jehn, 1997), this may cause an employee to violate his expectations of meeting one or more of his basic needs (Ren and Gray, 2009). In addition, employees who are charged with accusations can take extreme attitudes toward managers and personalize the accusation (West, 1975). Thus, if an employee is held responsible for a negative situation such as poor performance (due to low ability or low effort), causes anger, disappointment and blame lead to anti-social behavior that leads to physical attack (Pruitt *et al.*, 1997; Rudolph *et al.*, 2004) and causes relationship conflicts (Barry and Crant, 2000; Jiang *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, In case the manager attribute the cause of subordinates' performance to internal factors, negative effect of performance on likelihood of relationship conflict occurrence is hypothesized as follows:

- H1.* In case the manager attributes the cause of the subordinates' performance to internal factors, an increase in performance negatively affects the likelihood of relationship conflict occurrence between the manager and subordinate.

Studies on attribution theory show that some biases have differentiated individuals' tendency to attributions. The most widely researched attribution biases are self-serving bias and actor-observer bias (Martinko *et al.*, 2007; Teas and McElroy, 1986). Individuals naturally tend to embrace the causes of positive outcomes more than the causes of negative outcomes, and this attribution bias is called self-serving bias (Martinko *et al.*, 2007). Attributions to success tend to be influenced by a motivation to support self-esteem (Abramson *et al.*, 1978). Self-serving bias causes individuals and groups to automatically generate the most appropriate attribution for themselves after their success and failure (Taylor and Tyler, 1986).

Managers tend to attribute the cause of poor performance to external factors if other employees take on the same result in the task if poor performance occurs consistently under similar conditions (e.g. economic crisis), and the unsuccessful employee is successful in previous roles (Carson, 2019). In case the manager attribute cause of the low performance to external factors, and because the employee will most likely attribute the cause of negative performance to the eternal factors due to self-serving bias (Silver *et al.*, 1995), the likelihood of destructive conflict occurrence between the manager and the subordinate will be low (Barry and Crant, 2000).

Emotions such as anger and resentment between the parties may either decrease or disappear when the managers attribute the cause of the employee's low performance to external factors (Baron, 1988). Thus, managers are less likely to punish employees because the manager perceives the failure's cause beyond the control of the employee (Martinko and Gardner, 1987; Mitchell and Wood, 1980). If the manager attributes the cause of failure to

external factors of the employee, he may feel sympathy for the employee because the employee was affected by the failure for causes beyond his or her control. Sympathy causes pro-social responses, including helping (Rudolph *et al.*, 2004).

External attributions tend to be attributed to causes that are not personal, such as task difficulty or luck (Weiner *et al.*, 1979). Generally, negative emotions arise when an individual perceives the intervention or blocking of the other party while trying to reach his expectations or goals (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001). When the manager attributes the low performance to an external cause such as task difficulty or luck, the perception of negative intervention behavior directed toward the employee, and the accompanying negative emotion will not emerge (Rudolph *et al.*, 2004). In this case, discussions with the employee over the task will not be accompanied by intervention behaviors and negative emotions in conflict situations, thus the possibility of encouraging discussion and debate for better solutions will increase (Barki and Hartwick, 2004). Thus, the probability of possible incompatibilities about tasks between the parties to emerge as a task conflict will increase (Barki and Hartwick, 2004). Therefore, in conditions that the managers attribute the cause of subordinates' performance to external factors; a negative relationship between performance and likelihood of task conflict occurrence is hypothesized as follows:

- H2.* In case the manager attributes the cause of the subordinates' performance to external factors, an increase of performance negatively affects the likelihood of task conflict occurrence between the manager and subordinate.

The stability dimension of attributions indicates the continuity of the cause of an event (Vallerand and Richer, 1988). This dimension is generally examined in conjunction with the other two dimensions, and it is generally considered together with the LoC dimension in research on organizational science (Martinko *et al.*, 2006). If the cause of an event is perceived as discontinuous, then the expectations of observers about the cause are unstable (Martinko and Gardner, 1987). If the cause of the event is considered unstable, the emotional and behavioral response to the event will be weaker or softer than the reaction given depending on the attributions to the stable cause (Harvey *et al.*, 2014; Weiner, 1985). Besides, when the cause is associated with chance or an extraordinary effect, the cause is considered temporary and the result is expected to change (Weiner, 1985).

If the actor is stigmatized for the repetition of similar results, the observer's cognition, emotions and behaviors are affected by this continuity (Badovick *et al.*, 1992). If the actor has caused similar events before, if he continues not to make an effort in the face of the negative situation and does so deliberately, the anger of the observer will intensify (Weiner, 2000). On the other hand, if the actor has no control over the causes and this situation is stable, it is possible for the observer to feel sympathy toward the actor (Rudolph *et al.*, 2004). However, if the observer attributes the event to an external stable cause, the observer may feel hopeless (Carson, 2019).

Along with emotions, thoughts about expectations for the future have an important effect on behaviors (Weiner, 2000). Associating the subordinate's negative performance with unstable causes is related to expectations that future performance may change, while attributing failure to stable causes leads to the expectation that failure will continue (Martinko and Gardner, 1987). Besides, attribution to unstable causes acts as a supportive factor in being open to new information, actively searching for new information, thinking creatively about solutions and discussing (Halperin and Tagar, 2017).

In case of external attributions, managers do not hold the subordinates accountable (Jackson and LePine, 2003). If the manager attributes the cause of poor performance to external factors such as task difficulty, he will feel sympathy or empathy toward the

employee (Lepine and Dyne, 2001). The sympathy or empathy emotions of the manager lead her/him to less violent and softer behaviors (Harvey *et al.*, 2014; Martinko and Gardner, 1987; Weiner, 1985). Thus, the manager tends toward behaviors such as help giving to subordinate, training, motivation (Jackson and LePine, 2003), goal re-setting and task redesign (Campbell, 1988). Such behavior may or may not be perceived as a personal attack by subordinates, but most probably it is considered as an uncomfortable, attempting to control behavior (Tidd *et al.*, 2004). Attributions to the task difficulty may cause the task to be redesigned (Lepine and Dyne, 2001), and task redesign can cause disagreements, intervention or goal attainment between the subordinate and the manager. If the interaction remains at the level of disagreements, the likelihood of task conflict occurrence increases (Barki and Hartwick, 2004).

However, the manager's task redesign attempts may cause goal and interest disagreements between manager and subordinate (Konuk *et al.*, 2019; Mitnick, 1973). In addition, help-giving efforts can be evaluated as task intervention behavior by employees. Intervention behaviors and goal and interest disagreements cause relationship conflict (Barki and Hartwick, 2004). Therefore, in case of external attribution to cause of performance, a positive relationship between attribution to the stability of the performance cause and likelihood of relationship conflict occurrence, and negative relationship between stability attribution and likelihood of task conflict occurrence is hypothesized as follows:

- H3. In case the manager attributes the cause of the subordinates' performance to external factors, an increase of the performance stability attribution positively affects relationship conflict level.
- H4. In case the manager attributes the cause of the subordinates' performance to external factors, an increase of the performance stability attribution positively affects task conflict level.

Propensity to trust. One of the researchers who considered trust as a characteristic of the individual, Rotter (1971), associated trust with a stable belief based on predictions obtained from individuals' early life experiences. In support of this view, various researchers associate trust with a personal trait that leads to a generalized expectation about the trustworthiness of others (Mayer *et al.*, 1995; Mooradian *et al.*, 2006; Murphy, 2003). This personal trait that affects everyone's level of trust is called as propensity to trust (Mayer *et al.*, 1995).

The propensity to trust can be defined as the general willingness to trust others (Mayer *et al.*, 1995). The propensity to trust occurs depending on the relationships and experiences that individuals have with their parents, friends and other individuals around them at an early age, temperament and genetic characteristics (Mooradian *et al.*, 2006; Reimann *et al.*, 2017). The propensity to trust has a lifelong effect on individuals to trust others (Bierly and Gallagher, 2007; McKnight *et al.*, 1998; Mooradian *et al.*, 2006).

De Neve and Cooper (1998) basically associate the propensity to trust of individuals with the tendency to attribute actions in an optimistic or pessimistic manner. People with a high propensity to trust are more likely to ignore the negative actions of the other party or rationalize their negative behaviors by attributing positive meanings (Gill *et al.*, 2005). A higher level of propensity to trust causes people to give less importance to negative behaviors in the process that continues after the relationship is established (McKnight *et al.*, 1998). However, people with a lower level of propensity to trust are stronger belief that they will be abused, and they tend to be more cautious of negative behaviors and have less experience of positive interactions with others (Hardin, 1993; McKnight *et al.*, 1998).

Individuals will interpret the information in accordance with their natural orientation, and individuals with a low propensity to trust will be constantly skeptical of the information about the cause of the events (Gill *et al.*, 2005). Thus, a person with a high propensity to trust is more likely to ignore flaws and focus on seeing good points than people with a lower level of propensity to trust (McKnight *et al.*, 1998).

While most individuals make subjective attributions with biases, their personal traits appear as a second factor that affects attributions. For example, although individuals generally have a self-serving bias, people with low self-esteem tend to attribute success to external factors and failure to internal factors (Abramson *et al.*, 1978). Rotter (1966) states that people's beliefs about causality can be arranged in a LoC, leading to "internals" who tend to believe that the results are caused by their own reactions and "externals" who believe that the results are not caused by their own reactions. Subjective attribution tendencies arising from the personal traits of individuals are called "attribution style." Attribution styles are biases toward their explanations of the causes of events, which are stable over time and across situations, and express the tendency of different individuals to explain the causes of the same events differently (Abramson *et al.*, 1978; Harvey and Martinko, 2009).

The most common definition of attribution styles is about the dichotomy between optimistic and pessimistic attribution styles and according to this dichotomy, people with optimistic styles tend to attribute internal factors for success (e.g. high ability) and external attributions for failure (e.g. task difficulty and luck) (Martinko *et al.*, 2007). In contrast, pessimistic individuals tend to internally attribute to failure (e.g. low effort and low ability) and attribute external factors for success (e.g. task difficulty and luck) (Abramson *et al.*, 1978; Martinko *et al.*, 2007; West *et al.*, 2009).

Individuals may differ according to a belief they have generalized about attributing events internal and external LoC (Taylor and Tyler, 1986). De Neve and Cooper (1998) state that the way they interpret the events may be related to the tendency of observer to attribute the causes of the events internal or external factors of the actor. Indeed, Rotter (1966) stated that a generalized attitude, belief or expectation of an individual's explanations about a causal relationship between his own behavior and its consequences can affect various behavior choices in various time scales of his life. Thus, generalized expectations, which also shape the propensity to trust (Mayer *et al.*, 1995; Rotter, 1971), affect the observer's attributions to internal or external factors of an actor when evaluating the cause of an event (Abramson *et al.*, 1978; Sidney, 1966).

Managers with pessimistic attribution style, tend to blame the subordinate as the cause of a negative performance (Harvey and Martinko, 2009). This tendency triggers negative emotions, and negative emotions increase the likelihood of conflict occurrence (Nair, 2008). Attribution styles are subjective, and pessimistic attributions to blame the subordinate may affect the employee's feeling of being victimized, his perception that his self-efficacy being attacked, his attempts to seek remedies that amount to aggression, thus increasing the level of relationship conflict (Martinko *et al.*, 2011). Indeed, studies have shown that attribution styles are related to perceptions such as the quality of the relationship between managers and subordinates, the perception of victimized, aggression and negative self-efficacy perceptions (Martinko *et al.*, 2011). Thus, mutual negative emotions emergence, because of a manager's subjective blames about negative performance, may increase likelihood of relationship conflict occurrence and level (Harvey and Martinko, 2009).

It may be considered as the effect of propensity to trust as a personality trait on perceptions can have an impact on the attributions. Indeed, De Neve and Cooper (1998) showed in their meta-analysis study that the propensity to trust can affect the attributions. In addition, Poon *et al.* (2007) stated that a low or high propensity to trust may affect evaluations in an optimistic or

pessimistic manner. Those with low propensity to trust are more likely to evaluate the cause for performance to pessimistic, malevolently and therefore most likely react negatively to such a situation (Poon *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, individuals with a low propensity to trust tend to attribute the actor's failure to cause such as lack of effort with a subjective assessment (Abramson *et al.*, 1978; Martinko *et al.*, 2007; West *et al.*, 2009). Excessive blame on the subordinate, based on a subjective assessment with regard to disputed internal attributions makes the rise of conflict level inevitable (Bitter and Gardner, 1995). In this case, these attributions without objective basis can be perceived by the subordinate as an attack on his self-efficacy (Covington and Omelich, 1984), so that the actor can feel stronger negative emotions (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001). Thus, in situations where the pessimistic and subjective attributions are pronounced, the likelihood of relationship conflict level may increase (Martinko and Gardner, 1987). Therefore, it is hypothesized that in the case of internal attribution, the effect of attribution to the stability of performance cause to the likelihood of relationship conflict occurrence will be weaker when the propensity to trust of manager is strong rather than weak:

- H5.* In case of, manager attributes the cause of the subordinate's performance to internal factors, the affect of attribution to stability on likelihood of relationship conflict occurrence decreases more when the propensity to trust of managers increase.

A high level of propensity to trust affects managers to interpret events optimistically (Poon *et al.*, 2007). When the cause for the subordinate's performance is attributed to external factors, optimistic approaches encourage the manager to feel sympathy toward the subordinate and attempt to help them (Rudolph *et al.*, 2004) rather than rejecting (Jackson and LePine, 2003). Unrejected and helped subordinates are more likely to voice complaints and concerns; moreover, they are more likely to take action to try to change the situation (Moore, 2000). This situation increases the discussion level between the parties and affects the task conflict level (Gelfand *et al.*, 2006; Lee *et al.*, 2017).

An increase of propensity to trust also increases the trustworthiness of individuals and positively affects the trust level of interacting individuals (Mayer *et al.*, 1995; McKnight *et al.*, 1998). Trust lets the interacting individuals take a risk (e.g. defending ideas, share information) because, trusting individuals believe that their interest will be protected by who they trust (Mayer *et al.*, 1995; Tidd *et al.*, 2004). If task conflict is considered as disagreements in viewpoints, ideas and opinions (Jehn, 1995), the manager attempts to help and the employee's willingness to take risks by defending their views or ideas.

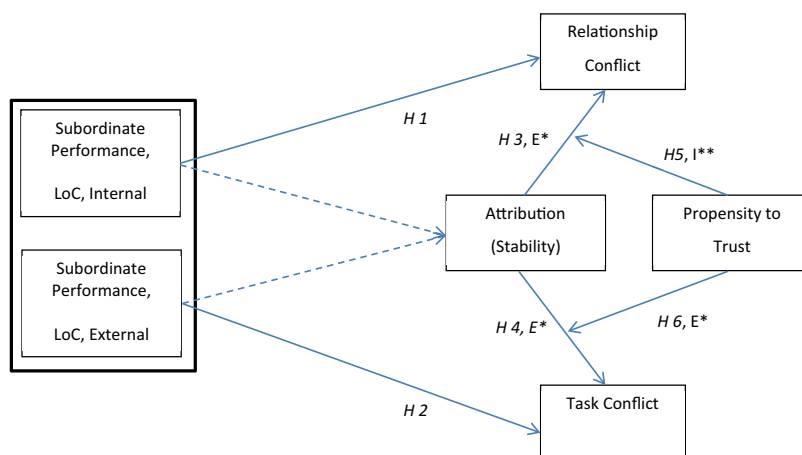
A performance level that does not satisfy the managers indicates that the task to be done is not fulfilled. This situation has conflict potential because task conflict occurs from the requirements of the task being done (Tidd *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, it is hypothesized that in the case of external attribution, the effect of attribution to the instability of performance cause to the likelihood of task conflict occurrence will be strong when the propensity to trust of manager is strong rather than weak:

- H6.* In case of, manager attributes the cause of the subordinate's performance to external factors, the affect of attribution to instability on likelihood of task conflict occurrence increases more when the propensity to trust of managers increase (Figure 1).

Methods

Research setting and sample

In the research, although the conflict which is happening between at least two individuals was investigated, due to the difficulties of investigating both individuals in conflict



Notes: * E: in case of external attribution. **I: in case of internal attribution

Figure 1.
Structural model of the study

(Liu, 2018), Obi *et al.* (2020) was followed and the study was applied one-sidedly. Besides, to increase the sensitivity of the study and reduce the scope of the study due to the small number of research in the field, managers' one-sided attributions to subordinates' performance, and the effects of their attributions on the conflict are investigated.

The surveys were delivered to 524 Turkish citizens, mid-level managers from Small and Medium – Sized Enterprises (SMEs), for-profit institutions, by the random selection method. By the end of 2019, 6,395 midsize SMEs had been operating in the production industry, and 3,354 midsize SMEs had been operating in the service industry in Turkey (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2020). The managers of the SMEs in the sample group were identified from their official website and e-mails were sent to the managers whom declared in the website. A second request letter was sent one month later to those who did not respond for encouraging them. 157 managers who were invited to answer the questions, completed the survey (31% response rate). No incentive for participation was offered. Seven participants were not included in the analysis due to missing answers (final $N = 150$). The positions of participants are deputy manager = 62, manager = 55, director = 7, general manager = 26. The data were collected from midsize SMEs, which are operating in production and service industries; service = 84, production = 66. 41 of the participants are women (*age range* = 24–56 years, *Mage* = 33.87 years, *SD* = 6.33). Of the participants, 109 are men (*age range* = 24–67 years, *Mage* = 39.84 years, *SD* = 7.24).

Selected scales, which are originally developed in English, was translated into Turkish by three independent specialists. The specialists are brilliant in both languages (Chidlow *et al.*, 2014). After the translation process finished, the back translation process was started, and two other specialists back translate the scale into English. The original scale and back translation was compared by two academicians who are fluent in both languages. After the translation process, the pilot survey was applied to 40 participants; then, ensuring the test of a pilot study, the survey was sent to the sample group. At the next stage, all the data were collected and exploratory factor analysis was applied to reveal the underlying factor structure of the statements representing the variables of the scales was examined (Ayaz *et al.*, 2019; Yaslioglu, 2017). Cronbach's alpha value ($\alpha = 0.70$) is considered acceptable (Mahwah, 1998). Hence, based on the analyses below, the constructs and items are satisfying in terms of reliability and validity.

Assessment of common method bias

Researchers suggested that specially in behavioral science self-report questionnaire methods can be exaggerated (Kline *et al.*, 2000). Several researchers (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012) have noted that for avoiding is to minimize their effects through the careful design of the study procedures. To avoid this biases, the questionnaire form was served with some information which includes no pre-existing expectations from the participants. Second, in the questionnaire form, an information was included that there are no right or wrong answers. In addition, the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were warranted. Finally, the survey was designed to order the items randomly, and reverse questions were included throughout the instrument to make it difficult for the respondents to make mental connections between the constructs.

To check if the data are suffering from common method bias (CMB), a sequence of statistical technics is undertaken. In the first stage, Harman's one-factor test was performed (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986) by including all the items. The analysis clearly showed that the single factor variance is 17.56%, which is below the 50% threshold; therefore, depending on Harman's one-factor test, the CMB is not a threat for the study (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

The unmeasured latent method (ULM) is one of the widely used methods for measuring CMB (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). Thus, in the second stage, ULM has been undertaken for empowering first stage findings. For applying the ULM, item loadings with adding Common Latent Factor (CLF) and without adding CLF have been contrasted in order to determine how method effects were spread (Richardson *et al.*, 2009). Findings from the current study revealed that the variance explained by the method factor is low, and correlations among constructs are similar with or without the CLF included, and the differentiation of the correlations did not exceed the threshold level. Thus, the results showed that the variance among items could be attributed to a single CLF. Depending on the results of the two stages, CMB does not have a serious effect on the study.

Measures

The survey began with a note that was written for informing the participants to select one of their subordinate who has the worst performance in the 2019. This ensured that the participants chose only one person to evaluate. A five-point (1–5) Likert scaling (except attribution scale) with two aspects such as *definitely agree* at one side and *definitely disagree* at the opposite side was used in the study.

Conflict. In the study, intragroup conflict scale, which is developed by Jehn *et al.* (2008), was used. The questionnaire items are arranged in such a way that the participant evaluates only one person from her/his subordinates in the business unit. "I and my subordinate often disagreed about work things" is an example for the adaptation of task conflict scale items. "I and my subordinate disagreed about non-work (social or personality) things" is an example for the adaptation of relationship conflict scale items. The Cronbach's alpha value and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) value of task conflict were ($\alpha = 0.828$, $KMO = 0.836$). Relationship conflict Cronbach's alpha and KMO value were computed as ($\alpha = 0.742$, $KMO = 0.635$). The Bartlett's test result is significant for both conflict type ($p = 0.000 < 0.001$).

Propensity to trust. In the study, propensity to trust scale, which is used by Gefen (2000), was preferred. "I generally trust other people unless they give me reason not to" is an example for propensity to trust scale items. The Cronbach's alpha and KMO values of the scale were calculated as ($\alpha = 0.828$, $KMO = 0.759$). The Bartlett's test result is significant at ($p = 0.000 < 0.001$) level.

Attributions. In the study, it is preferred to use the dimensions recommended by Weiner in accordance with the common use in organizational behavior literature (Harvey *et al.*, 2014).

Similar to Islam and Hewstone (1993), the The Revised Causal Dimension Scale (CDSII), a revised version of McAuley *et al.*'s (1992) attribution scale that evaluates individual perceptions about the causes of an event in certain situations, was used.

The three-item LoC scale (one dimension of attribution scale), which was classified according to orthogonal taxonomy, was applied with nine points in the study. Participants were asked to mark the most appropriate value for themselves between the two extremes in each component. The scale was set as the higher score indicates external attribution style. "The cause of your subordinate's performance: reflects an aspect of him/her (internal), The cause of your subordinate's performance: reflects an aspect of the situation (external)" is an example for LoC scale items.

As the other dimension of attribution, stability of cause has been designed as in the dimension of LoC. "The cause of your subordinate's performance: is permanent (stable), The cause of your subordinate's performance: temporary (unstable)" is an example for stability scale items.

Subordinate job performance. In the study "subordinate job performance" scale, which is used by Bommer *et al.* (2007), was preferred. "Adequately completes assigned duties," "Engages in activities that will directly affect his/her performance evaluation" are examples for subordinate job performance scale items. The Cronbach's alpha and KMO values of the scale were calculated as ($\alpha = 0.877$, $KMO = 0.875$). The Bartlett's test result is significant at ($p = 0.000 < 0.001$) level.

Participants were asked to evaluate their subordinates with the lowest performance in 2019 while answering this scale. Therefore, it is assumed that managers evaluate their subordinates who have relatively low performance ($Mean = 3.48$, $Std.Dev. = 0.94$). Assuming that employees with very low performance cannot work for a long time in organizations, the high mean value obtained can be considered as plausible.

Control variables. Individuals may have different belief structures when they have different demographic infrastructures such as tenure, education level and experience (Pelled *et al.*, 1999). Thus, educational level (Edwards *et al.*, 2006), gender, tenure and age are controlled because of their significant association with conflict (Jehn, 1995; Pelled *et al.*, 1999). In addition, because of the significant effect of task type on conflict (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995; Pelled *et al.*, 1999), industry, which reflects task type, is also controlled.

Analysis and results

The correlations and descriptive statistics for the study are provided in Table 1. In the model, relationship conflict and task conflict are structured as independent variables. For this reason, Table 2, which is showing the results of analyses, was prepared according to two dependent variables. In addition, each model is tested for internal attributions and external attributions of LoC dimension. Thus, it is aimed to show the results obtained from the analysis of the model in case the managers attribute the cause of the performance internal or external factors of the subordinate. To test the models in terms of internal and external attribution, LoC dimension data with a mean of less than 5 were classified as internal attribution and LoC dimension data with a mean greater than 5 as an external attribution. After this classification, independent *t*-test was applied to two groups. Levene's test result is insignificant ($F = 0.725$, $p = 0.396 > 0.05$), independent *t*-test result is significant ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$). The number of participants in the internal attribution group is $N=107$ and the number of participants in the external attribution group is $N=43$. Analysis results are presented in Tables 2 and 3 where the task conflict is selected as a dependent variable in even-numbered models and the relationship conflict is selected as the dependent variable in odd-numbered models.

Sq.	Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	Performance	3,480	0.940	1				
2	Relationship conflict	1,810	0.960	-0.219**	1			
3	Task conflict	3,120	0.940	-0.257**	0.420**	1		
4	LoC	3,950	1,820	-0.008	-0.015	0.149	1	
5	Stability	5,180	1,950	0.151	-0.135	-0.009	0.326**	1
6	Propensity to trust	2,960	0.910	-0.006	-0.121	-0.001	0.033	-0.031
7	Gender	1,270	0.450	0.191*	-0.242**	-0.166*	-0.053	0.022
8	Marital status	1,290	0.460	-0.003	-0.115	-0.030	0.005	-0.028
9	Age	38,21	7,48	-0.203*	0.219**	0.181*	0.064	-0.110
10	Education	5,390	0.780	0.046	-0.047	-0.106	-0.124	0.051
11	Tenure	15,66	7,35	-0.194*	0.254**	0.201*	0.107	-0.081
12	Position	6,290	2,04	-0.096	0.195*	0.194*	-0.003	-0.015
13	Industry	3,190	1,79	0.065	-0.051	0.011	-0.048	-0.008
Sq.	Variable	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
7	Gender	0.070	1					
8	Marital status	-0.007	0.196*	1				
9	Age	0.239**	-0.357**	-0.341**	1			
10	Education	-0.083	0.112	0.032	-0.080	1		
11	Tenure	0.227**	-0.405**	-0.278**	0.915**	-0.125	1	
12	Position	0.048	-0.301**	-0.172*	0.377**	0.099	0.421**	1
13	Industry	0.007	0.104	-0.018	0.056	0.072	0.069	0.027

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Variable	Model 1 DV: relational conflict LoC: internal		Model 2 DV: task conflict LoC: external	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Gender	-0.093	0.227	-0.213	0.397
Marital status	-0.106	0.221	-0.038	0.342
Age	-0.214	0.032	0.068	0.049
Education level	-0.008	0.118	0.011	0.231
Tenure	0.365	0.032	-0.248	0.056
Position	0.014	0.052	0.243	0.093
Industry	0.011	0.054	0.134	0.085
H1: performance	-0.152	0.096		
H2: performance			-0.079	0.205
Constant	3.156**	1.159	3.469	2.180
R ²	0.112		0.131	
Adjusted R ²	0.039		-0.074	
F	1.547		0.638	

Table 2.

Summary of analysis results for H1 and H2

Notes: Dependent variable (DV): relational conflict, task conflict. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. $N = 150$, $N_{int} = 107$, $N_{ext} = 43$

In all models, control variables were entered as independent variables (industry, marital status, tenure, education level, age, gender and position). In Models 5 and 6, stability of performance, propensity to trust (the moderator) and the interaction term (stability X propensity to trust) are entered as independent variables. Before testing the models,

variance inflation factors (VIF) was applied to all models, and the VIF values are less than 2; therefore, the possibility of multicollinearity is eliminated in the study (Aiken and West, 1991; Howell, 1994).

In Table 2, model 1 reports the regression analysis results of Hypothesis 1. In case the managers attribute the cause of performance internal factors of subordinate, the interaction between the performance of subordinate and relationship conflict is not significant ($\beta = -0.152, p = 0.130 > 0.05, N = 107$). Therefore hypothesis 1 is not supported.

Model 2 reports the regression analysis results of Hypothesis 2. The results of the analyses indicate that in case the managers attribute the cause of subordinates' performance to external factors, the subordinates' performance do not affect the likelihood of task conflict occurrence. ($\beta = -0.079, p = 0.686 > 0.05, N = 43$). Unexpectedly, the analysis results of *H2* show that in the case of external attribution, performance does not affect the task conflict. Consequently, the results do not support Hypothesis 2.

According to the results which are shown in Table 3, in case the managers attribute the cause of subordinates' performance to external factors, attribution to the stability of performance affects relationship conflict. ($\beta = -0.579, p = 0.000 < 0.001, N = 43$). Thus, Hypothesis 3 supported.

Model 4 reports the regression analysis results of Hypothesis 4. According to the results, in case the managers attribute the cause of subordinates' performance to the external factors, attribution to the stability of performance effect the task conflict level between managers and subordinates. ($\beta = -0.419, p = 0.012 < 0.05, N = 43$). Thus, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

To test *H5*, moderation analysis was applied by following Baron and Kenny (1986). According to the results which are shown in Table 4, the interaction term (stability X propensity to trust) has a significant effect on likelihood of relationship conflict occurrence, in case the managers attribute the cause of subordinates' performance to the internal factors. ($\beta = -0.873, p = 0.003 < 0.01, N = 107$). According to the results, in case the managers attribute the cause of subordinates' performance to the internal factors, while the

Variable	Model 3 DV: relational conflict LoC: external		Model 4 DV: task conflict LoC: external	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Gender	-0.032	0.334	-0.108	0.357
Marital status	-0.127	0.296	-0.124	0.317
Age	-0.110	0.043	-0.151	0.046
Education level	-0.033	0.190	0.025	0.204
Tenure	0.011	0.047	-0.036	0.050
Position	0.479	0.077	0.294	0.082
Industry	-0.414	0.075	0.021	0.080
<i>H3: stability</i>	-0.579***	0.066		
<i>H4: stability</i>			-0.420*	0.071
Constant	4.012*	1.838	4.735*	1.965
R ²	0.511		0.276	
Adjusted R ²	0.396		0.106	
F	4.438		1.624	

Table 3.
Summary of analysis
results for *H3* and
H4

Notes: Dependent variable (DV): relational conflict, task conflict. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. $N = 150$, $N_{int} = 107$, $N_{ext} = 43$

Variable	Model 5 DV: relational conflict LoC: internal		Model 6 DV: task conflict LoC: external	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Gender	-0.047	0.219	-0.163	0.347
Marital status	-0.051	0.208	-0.187	0.302
Age	-0.146	0.029	-0.324	0.045
Education level	-0.042	0.111	0.114	0.201
Tenure	0.382	0.031	0.095	0.048
Position	0.101	0.051	0.152	0.082
Industry	0.032	0.052	0.096	0.081
Stability (S)	-0.041	0.094	-0.515**	0.134
Propensity to trust (PT)	0.595*	0.266	-0.929	0.479
H5: S X PT	-0.873**	0.047		
H6: S X PT			1.225*	0.073
Constant	1.899*	1.043	4,184*	1,805
R ²	0.215		0.398	
Adjusted R ²	0.133		0.209	
F	2.625		2.115	

Table 4.
Summary of analysis
results for H5 and
H6

Notes: Dependent variable (DV): relational conflict, task conflict. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. $N = 150$, $N_{int} = 107$, $N_{ext} = 43$

attribution to the stability of performance level increases, the likelihood of relationship conflict occurrence level increase more in case the propensity to trust of managers decreases. stability of the performance level increase the likelihood of relationship conflict occurrence level more when the propensity to trust of managers decreases.

According to the results, the interaction term (stability X propensity to trust) has a significant effect on likelihood of task conflict occurrence, in case the managers attribute the cause of subordinates' performance to the external factors. ($\beta = 1.225$, $p = 0.035 < 0.05$, $N = 43$). Thus, Hypothesis 6 is supported. According to the results, in case the managers attribute the cause of subordinates' performance to the external factors, while the attribution to the stability of performance level increases, the likelihood of task conflict occurrence level increases more in case the propensity to trust of managers increase.

Discussion

The study was prepared to understand the conditions affecting the likelihood of conflict occurrence between managers and subordinates. In this regard, the authors tried to find answers to three basic questions: "Does performance, which is often considered as the outcome of a conflict, also affect the likelihood of conflict occurrence? Do the manager's attributions to the cause and stability of subordinates' performance affect the likelihood of conflict occurrence between the subordinate and his manager? Does the manager's propensity to trust have a moderating effect on this interaction?"

In this regard, while theorizing the first hypothesis, the reactions of subordinates against the manager's attributions on uncontrollable causes were taken into account. In addition, due to attribution biases, attribution mismatches between subordinate and manager were emphasized. Theorization was based on these two assumptions. However, the results did not support the suggestion of Hypothesis 1. Conversely, the results show that external attributions rather than internal attributions affect relationship conflict.

Managers' attributions on the performance of subordinates may or may not be the same inference that is reached by the subordinate (Weiner, 2000). If the manager attributes the cause of performance to subordinates' internal factors, performance may be ascribed with lack of effort or lack of ability. Lack of effort is regarded as a controllable cause, but lack of ability is regarded as an uncontrollable cause. The causal decision to internal and uncontrollable outcomes gives rise to sympathy and pro-social behaviors (Weiner, 2000). Indeed, Jackson and LePine (2003) in their study showed that the sympathy felt by managers leads them to compensate for the poor performance of the subordinate. Indeed, Homsma *et al.* (2007) state that if the cause of low performance is controllable such as lack of effort, an internal unstable attribution would then lead to an active task approach. In addition, lack of effort is an unstable cause for low performance, because managers may feel hopeful for the future performance of subordinates (Carson, 2019). Hope, as a feeling characterized by the expectation of positive results in the future, is considered an important factor in the reduction of conflicts (Halperin and Tagar, 2017). *H1* and *H2* analysis results may arise from the possibility that when managers attribute the cause of performance to the subordinate, their causal decisions may lead them rather to task- than relationship-oriented behaviors. The study of Moss and Martinko (1998) showed that attributions to low ability resulted in the directive and informational feedback on tasks. Thus, internal attributions may affect task conflict rather than relationship conflict.

In addition, internal attributions of managers may cause the subordinate to adopt defensive behaviors (e.g. apologies and excuses) to protect or repair their image (Bitter and Gardner, 1995). Avoiding conflict by graciously accepting the blame and responsibility for unexpected performance outcomes, even though a subordinate attributes the poor performance causes external factors, is a defensive behavior choice for subordinates (Bitter and Gardner, 1995). In addition, a subordinate may attempt to preserve self-esteem by providing an explanation of his/her poor performance. Such behaviors help managers to restrain negative emotional reactions occurrence (e.g. anger) (Kim *et al.*, 2006; Takaku, 2001); therefore, managers will tend to make functional, performance- and task-oriented interpretations (Homsma *et al.*, 2007).

Despite the unexpected results obtained in *H1* and *H2*, *H5* and *H6* were supported. The propensity to trust of the managers' moderated the effect of attributions on relationship conflict and task conflict.

Results supporting Hypothesis 5 showed that managers with a low-level propensity to trust may tend to attribute the cause for the performance of their subordinates to controllable and sinister reasons such as lack of effort. Managers blaming the subordinate, negative emotions that the subordinate feels because of blaming and disagreement between the subordinate and the manager can trigger the relationship conflict. Propensity to trust, which does not change according to situations, may cause the manager to repeat similar arbitrary behaviors, and these repetitive behaviors may cause the subordinate to respond with destructive behaviors (Martinko and Gardner, 1987). The analysis results provided evidence that low level of propensity to trust moderates the effect of stability expectation of the low performance to relationship conflict.

Martinko and Gardner (1987) proposed that when the attributions for internal factors of subordinates are based on appropriate reasons, it can cause the subordinate adjust their performance attributions. However, if the managers' responses are viewed as inappropriate, the subordinate responses may not be constructive. Analysis results of *H1* and *H5* seem to support the proposal by Martinko and Gardner (1987).

Relationship conflict as the more dysfunctional type of conflict does not serve any beneficial outcomes for organizations (Jehn, 1997; Konuk and Ataman, 2021). Thus,

relationship conflict should be stopped at the earlier stages or prevented before it starts (Jehn and Mannix, 2001). Therefore, it is especially important to manage relationship conflict for organizations (Tang *et al.*, 2020; Xu and Cao, 2019). On the other hand, several researchers argue that task conflict can be functional for organizations. Managing task conflict is also important to manage because task conflict can easily turn into relationship conflict (Choi and Cho, 2011; Lu and Guo, 2019). Therefore, to achieve the expected result from performance evaluation, disagreements should be kept at the task level. The study provides evidence about the conditions that affect task conflict and relationship conflict. Thus, the study provides insight to manage both task and relationship conflict.

This study contributes to the line of research in the management of conflict by analyzing the antecedents that may affect the likelihood of task and relationship conflict occurrence between managers and subordinates and provides insights to resolve or prevent conflict in the early stages.

Understanding the causes of conflicts, the perceptions of the parties regarding the causes of the conflict will make an important contribution to the management of conflicts (Jaffar *et al.*, 2011; Mooney *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, the findings in this study that performance can affect the likelihood of conflict may provide an important context for managing conflicts in the performance evaluation processes.

Second, the results advance the existing literature on the prediction power of attribution theory on organizational outcomes, and it contributes to the enrichment of the conflict literature within the framework of attribution theory regarding the likelihood of conflict occurrence between manager and subordinate. The evidence provided by the study gives insights into the performance evaluation process and management of this process. Especially, in the performance evaluation process, it should be taken into account that the perceptions regarding the cause for the performance are based on personal judgments, and these judgments affect the possibility of the emergence of conflict.

Third, the analysis of personal traits such as propensity to trust and its effect on the likelihood of conflict occurrence has been investigated. The study shows evidence that the propensity to trust of managers seems to have an effect on the likelihood of conflict occurrence. In light of this evidence, personal traits should be taken into account in the performance evaluation process and managing relationship conflict.

Theoretical and practical implications

In an organization, performance evaluation processes are generally considered as activities that aimed to increase performance (Blackman *et al.*, 2015). However, this study shows that the performance evaluation process can create results beyond its aim owing to conflicts that can occur. The research provides an important insight for understanding conflict in the performance evaluation processes. In the light of the study, the researchers can improve research on the interaction between performance and conflict by investigating the variables that moderate or mediate the effect of performance on conflict.

The results of the study provide insights into how the attributions can be used to understand the cause of the events that may affect conflict. Thus, the study encourages the researchers to test the predictive power of attribution theory in the conflict literature.

In addition, researchers carry out various studies based on the attribution theory approach on the repair of expectation violations (Dirks *et al.*, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2006; Takaku, 2001). Considering that attributions can be effective not just in the initial stage but also in later stages of conflicts (Hewstone, 1988), thus, the attribution theory approach can enhance the understanding of conflict management (Baron, 1991).

Research findings show that managers with a high level of propensity to trust are less likely to experience destructive conflicts with their subordinates depending on their performance. Depending on the attributions, a high level of managers' propensity to trust leads to constructive and beneficial conflict between subordinates and managers, but a low level of propensity to trust controversy leads to destructive conflicts. Thus, evidence about the moderation role of propensity to trust on the interaction of performance and conflict gives an insight that the propensity to trust should be considered in conflict management and performance evaluation processes. The results may encourage the researchers to investigate the potential effect of individuals' propensity to trust on the interaction between conflict and other factors affecting the conflict and affected by conflict.

The findings showed that subjective attributions to performance affect the likelihood of conflict occurrence between managers and subordinates. In addition, the biases and attribution styles that are affected by personal traits may lead the managers to unfair decisions and behaviors, and if the attributions of the managers are not perceived as fair by the subordinates, the likelihood of conflicts occurrence may increase and the conflict might be exacerbated. The study provided evidence that the managers' propensity to trust plays a moderating role in these subjective attributions. In this regard, managers should be aware that their perceptions of the cause for performance are subjective, and they should be aware of their own propensity to trust affects their perceptions of the cause of performance.

Researchers have provided evidence to support that in trustworthy work environments, managers may less worry about conflict (Simons and Peterson, 2000; Tidd *et al.*, 2004). In addition to those evidences, this study has provided evidence that managers with a high level of propensity to trust may create environments that encourage the occurrence of task conflict, which contributes to organizational outcomes rather than relationship conflict. To avoid the destructive conflict caused by pessimistic managers, accurate performance evaluation strategies must be developed in an organization (Bitter and Gardner, 1995). For developing objective performance evaluation systems and avoiding destructive conflict, attribution and personal traits training can increase the awareness of attribution biases and reduce evaluation errors (Martinko and Gardner, 1987).

Limitations

First, this study just included Turkish SME organizations and limited industries; thus, the study needs to be expanded on the industry to other countries and larger sized organizations. In addition, the sample group in the study is based on Turkish citizens. Cultures and industry (may affect task type) may affect the attributions (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Liu, 2018; Pelled *et al.*, 1999); thus, the study is stuck because of the lack of cross-cultural comparative study in different industries. In the light of the study, next studies are encouraged to test the proposed interactions at larger organizations, different countries and other industries. Second, the generalization of the results might be influenced by sample size, sample source and the deviation of the homology method. The simple delivery and collection channels of the questionnaires limited the representation of the universe. Third, the conflict between managers and subordinates occurs from the different expectations of the two parties. Thus, measuring the perceptions of both sides makes an important contribution to the results of the research. But in the study, only one side of the relationship was investigated. Although the conflict between manager-subordinate happens at the dyadic level, the data were collected one sided. Therefore, one limitation of this study is that one-sided data. One-sided data may cause a CMB. However, by using standardized and rigorously developed instruments, common method variance may be reduced, and the study was structured with considering this situation. Despite the difficulty of collecting corresponding data sets from pairs of parties, future studies should consider this explorative route.

Conclusion

This study was set up to explore the conditions that increase the likelihood of conflict between the manager and the subordinate. In this context, performance, which is generally researched as an outcome in the literature, is considered as an antecedent that affects the likelihood of conflict occurrence. The perceptions of the manager about the cause of the employee's performance and the effects of these perceptions on the likelihood of conflict occurrence are discussed within the framework of attribution theory. In addition, the moderator effect of the manager's propensity to trust as a personality trait on the relationship between performance and conflict was investigated.

According to the evidence obtained, the negative performance creates different effects on the likelihood of conflict types occurrence, depending on whether managers attribute the causes for a negative performance to the employee him/herself or to external factors. In addition, according to the manager's evaluation of the cause for the performance as stable or unstable, the effect of performance on the likelihood of conflict occurrence may differ.

The research reveals that performance is not only an outcome of conflict but might be an antecedent factor affecting the likelihood of conflict occurrence. As a pioneering study, the research contributes to conflict literature by providing evidence that performance can be considered as an antecedent of conflict occurrence.

The second contribution of the research is that it is one of the rare studies that tries to explain the likelihood of conflict occurrence by using the context of attribution theory. The research provides important evidence that attribution theory can provide a context for explaining the likelihood of conflict occurrence. Thus, the research provides an important context for further research by providing evidence for the potential of attribution theory to predict conflict.

Another contribution of this study is providing evidence that personal traits have a role in the likelihood of conflict occurrence, which is less examined in previous studies. According to the results of the research, the propensity to trust of the managers has a moderating effect on the likelihood of conflict occurrence, according to the attributions on the causes of performance. Depending on the attributions, as the propensity to trust of the manager increases, the likelihood of task conflict occurrence increases, and as the propensity to trust decreases, the likelihood of the relationship conflict occurrence decreases. This finding provides insight into the conditions affecting the likelihood of conflict types occurrence, management of conflict and management of functional or dysfunctional conflict.

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