Abusive supervision and workplace deviance as moderated by spiritual intelligence: An empirical study of Selangor employees

Roshayati Abdul Hamid[1], Noor Hasni Juhdi[1], Md Daud Ismail[1], Nor Atiqah Abdullah[1]

[1]Faculty of Economics and Management, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Correspondence: Roshayati Abdul Hamid (email: wanrose@ukm.edu.my)

Abstract

Abusive supervision is described as subordinates' perception of the extent to which supervisors engage in a sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact. Ample empirical evidence suggested that subordinates respond quite negatively to supervisor's mistreatment by engaging in behaviours that are harmful to the organization and its members. However, little is known about the subordinates' spiritual intelligence responses to abusive supervision. Spiritual intelligence is defined as the ability to apply and embody spiritual resources and qualities to enhance daily functioning and wellbeing. In this light the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between abusive supervision as perceived by subordinates with workplace deviance by investigating how abusive supervision is moderated by spiritual intelligence and influence target-directed deviant acts (interpersonal and organizational deviance). Primary data were gathered from 136 completed questionnaires returned by employees of several manufacturing organizations in Selangor. The results showed that individuals with low spiritual intelligence strongly moderated the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance compared to individuals with high spiritual intelligence.

Keywords: abusive supervision, workplace deviance, spiritual intelligence, spiritual resources, subordinate perception, supervisor's mistreatment

Introduction

The workplace deviant behavior is of a growing concern in organizations globally since it is a pervasive and an expensive problem for the organization (Bennet & Robinson, 2000). This behavior can be detrimental to organizational productivity, financial well-being, image, employees' well-being, and employees' safety and health. Research has focused on negative behaviors that may be considered as deviant such as sabotage, theft, absenteeism, withholding effort, and behaviors that hinder organizational goal accomplishment. Many studies have empirically investigated the antecedents of workplace deviance such as perceptions of the work situation (Colbert, Mount, Harter, Witt, & Barrick, 2004), organizational justice (Aquino, Lewis, & Bradfield, 1999) and abusive supervision (Martinko, Harvey, Brees & Mackey 2013; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008; Thau, Bennett, Mitchell & Marrs, 2008).

The topic of abusive supervision has attracted researchers' attention over the past two decades. Tepper (2000, p. 178) defined abusive supervision as a 'subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact". Examples of behaviors that fall within the domain of abusive supervision include public ridicule (Tepper 2000), invasion of privacy, taking undue credit, inappropriately assigning blame, and rudeness (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lamberts, 2006) as well as yelling, screaming, and humiliating their employees (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). The negative consequences of abusive supervision include higher turnover,

lesser favorable attitudes toward job, life, and organization, greater conflict between work and family life, and greater psychological distress (Tepper, 2000) as well as counterproductive behaviors (Detert, Trevino, Burris & Andiappan, 2007).

It is reasonable to believe that people vary in their propensity to display deviance. That is, individuals differ in their ability to tolerate negative events or antecedents to workplace deviance. Therefore, the degree to which victims of abusive supervision engaged in workplace deviance is likely moderated by numerous factors. For example, Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) found that the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance will be stronger when an individual holds higher negative reciprocity beliefs. Meanwhile, Tepper et al. (2008) argued that when individuals perceive that their coworkers are more approving of organizational deviance, they are likely to be deviant after being abused. The relationship of these two dysfunctional behaviors is moderated by individual and situational factors. In recent study, Hu (2012) found the importance of examining employee emotional intelligence in relation to how it influences perceptions of abusive supervision. There is moderate progress on the individual and situational differences issue; however, little is known about the subordinates' spiritual intelligence responses to abusive supervision. Thus, this study would like to investigate how abusive supervision is moderated by spiritual intelligence and influenced workplace deviance (interpersonal and organizational deviances).

Theoretical background

The following section in this paper will explain further on workplace deviance, abusive supervision, and the conceptual basis for the moderating effect of spiritual intelligence towards workplace deviance.

Workplace deviance

The workplace is a forum where a variety of different behaviors are expressed, each with a different consequence to the individuals within the organization as well as to the entire organization. These behaviors usually fall within the constructs of the norms of the organization. However, when normal work behavior goes outside the norms of the organization, its consequences affect all levels of organization. The abnormal work behaviors have been given different names by researchers such as workplace deviance (Robinson & Bennet, 1995), counterproductive behavior (Spector, Fox, Penney, Bruursema, Goh & Kessler, 2006) and aggression (Neuman & Barron, 1998). In essence, behavior is deemed deviant when it is a "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and, in so doing, threatens the well-being of the organization or its members, or both" (Robinson & Bennet, 1995, p. 556).

According to Robinson and Bennett's (1995) typology of workplace deviance varies along two dimensions; minor versus serious, and interpersonal versus organizational deviance. Organizational deviance is a deviant behavior in which employees engage in acts that are targeted at compromising the organization such as working slowly, damaging company property and sharing confidential company information. On the other hand, interpersonal deviance is a deviant behavior in which employees engage in acts that are targeted toward individuals such as violence, gossip and theft from coworkers (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007). Robinson and Bennett (1995) argued that an important distinction between types of deviance is whether the deviance is directed or targeted either at the organization (organization deviance) or at members of the organization (interpersonal deviance).

There are likely to be a different correlation of individual and organizational targets. A test of a two-model (interpersonal and organizational deviance) by Bennet & Robinson (2000) supported this proposition. The target of deviance is an important element because it is posited that this dimension of deviance identifies an important qualitative difference in the acts of the deviants; individuals prone to deviance directed at other individuals are likely to be different than those individuals prone to deviance directed at an organization. Not only different in the types of deviants' acts, but different predictor is

expected to affect each of these targets differently (Hershcovis, Turner, Barling, Arnold, Dupre, Inness, LeBlanc, & Sivanathan, 2007). Thus, some researches had separated these dimensions (e.g. Diefendorff & Mehta, 2007; Tepper et al., 2008; Thau et al., 2008), whereas others still continue to combine interpersonal and organizational dimensions of workplace deviance (e.g. Detert et al., 2007; Douglas & Martinko, 2001).

Abusive supervision and workplace deviance

Previous researches had examined abusive supervision from the subordinates' perspective (Harvey et al., 2007; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper et al., 2008; Tepper et al., 2007; Thau et al., 2008). Abusive supervision has been defined as the "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). A few aspects of this definition are of specific interest. First, abusive supervision is a subjective assessment, which means that while one subordinate may view a supervisory action as abusive, another may not. Second, abusive supervision refers to a "sustained display" of negative supervisory behaviors, meaning that it is not just a onetime event. Third, abusive supervision refers to both hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, but not physical contact. Finally, abusive supervisory behaviors do not refer to the intentions of the actions, but only to the behaviors themselves (Tepper, 2007).

According to social exchange theory, employees who are treated hostilely by their supervisors are likely to react with unfavorable behavior due to the negative reciprocity norm (Tepper et al., 2009). Previous studies revealed that abusive supervision is a sole predictor to workplace deviance (Detert et al., 2007; Penney & Spector, 2005). Meanwhile, some of the studies have focused on investigating the abusive victims' deviant act that intended to harm organization (organizational deviance) and its employee (interpersonal deviance) separately (Tepper et al., 2008). Abusive supervision is directly related to organizational deviance when employees perceived that deviant acts are normative and abusive supervision indirectly related to organizational deviance when employees perceived that their coworkers approved organizational deviance (normative) (Tepper et al., 2008). According to Thau et al. (2008), organizational deviance is a more relevant form of deviance because from employees' perspective, supervisors act as organizational agents. Therefore, since abusive supervision is done by the supervisor, and employees' considered it as a mistreatment; they hold their organizations accountable for their agents' actions and target their deviant behaviors accordingly (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997).

In addition to the interpersonal and organizational distinction, there is also a difference within the interpersonal dimension: deviant behaviors targeted against supervisors and those targeted at other individuals (Hershcovis et al., 2007; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Abusive supervision relates to interpersonal deviance in two ways (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). First, employees may respond by directly targeting their supervisors, and secondly, employees may engage in deviance by targeting other individuals. The found that abusive supervisory behavior associated with not only harm to the source of the abuse, but also "collateral" damage to others in the workplace. The abused subordinates may express their resentment against the others when the supervisor is not available to be retaliated against or when abused subordinates fear that direct retaliation might evoke further hostility on the supervisor's part (displaced aggression effect).

Thus, when considering employee's reaction to abusive supervision, it is useful to investigate what deviant behaviors targeted most, the organizational deviance or interpersonal deviance. Since there are still few studies that distinguish between targeted deviant behaviors, and based on the above inconsistency as well as the strong argument by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) as well as Thau et al. (2008), this study would like to investigate and predict that abusive supervision has a stronger relationship with organizational deviance rather than interpersonal deviance, though both are expected to be significant.

Hypotheses 1: Abusive supervision will be positively related to organizational deviance and interpersonal deviance, (H1a) and will be more strongly related to the former than the latter (H1b).

Moderating effects of spiritual intelligence

According to Tepper (2000), abusive supervision is not likely to impact all employees in the same way, which suggests the need to test for moderating effects. Abusive supervision is directly related to organizational deviance when employee perceived that acts of deviance are norms in their organization (Tepper et al., 2008). Besides, negative reciprocity beliefs also strengthened the positive relationship between abusive supervision and supervisor-directed deviance (Mitchell & Ambrose 2007). More and more studies suggested that abusive supervision has a different strength of relationship with workplace deviance and other negative outcomes when there is a moderating effect. The moderators that have been used were situational uncertainty (Thau et al., 2008), locus of control (Wei & Si, 2011), emotional intelligence (Hu, 2012), and openness personality (Wu & Hu 2013). Furthermore, researchers also revealed that the counter-productive behavior that victims engage as a result of being treated abusively is through a mediating effect of toxic emotions (Chu, 2013) and emotional exhaustion (Whitman, Halbesleben & Holmes 2014). Emotional components may also influence the unpredictable events such as workplace deviance (Chu, 2013) and job insecurity (Wan Toren et al., 2014)

Based on these studies, researchers have identified that the relationship between abusive supervision and negative outcome can be moderated by either individual or situational factors. Thus, one of the individual factors which may likely to play a role as a moderating effect in the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance is spiritual intelligence. Using the word 'spiritual' in relation to intelligence does not necessarily mean that it is connected with any religion. Spiritual intelligence is a combination of intelligence and spirituality elements (Emmons, 2000). It is the central and most fundamental of all the intelligence because it is the source guidance for the others (Convey, 2004). Spirituality as a form of intelligence means that it is a set of capacities and abilities that enable people to solve problem and attain goals in their everyday lives. It is a kind of intelligence by which human beings are able to lead activities and life in a deeper, richer and more meaningful way (Abdoli & Sheihki, 2013; Jeloudar & Goodarzi, 2012; Zohar & Marshall, 2001).

Emmons (2000) evaluated the five components of spiritual intelligence to prove that spirituality is a form of intelligence. The five components are: (1) the capacity for transcendence; (2) the ability to enter into heightened spiritual states of consciousness; (3) the ability to invest in everyday's activities, events, and relationships with a sense of sacred; (4) the ability to utilize spiritual resources to solve problems in life; and (5) the capacity to engage in virtuous behavior (to show forgiveness, to express gratitude, to be humble, to display compassion). Meanwhile, according to Amram and Dryer (2007), transcendence is a trait of the ability to align with the sacred and transcend the egoistic self with the sense of relatedness and holism in ways that enhance functioning. A consciousness trait is the ability to raise consciousness, to tap intuition and to synthesize multiple viewpoints in ways that will enhance daily functioning and well-being. Grace is a trait that reflects the love for life drawing on the inspiration beauty and joy inherent in each present moment to enhance the functioning and well-being. Further, meaning is a trait of the ability to experience meaning, link activities and experiences to values and construct interpretations in ways that enhance functioning and wellbeing in the face of pain and suffering. Truth is a trait of the ability to be present, to love peacefully and surrender to truth, manifesting open receptivity, presence, humility and trust in ways that enhance daily functioning and well-being.

Zohar and Marshall (2001) stated that when individuals' spiritual intelligence is high, they appear to be intellectual and have proper behavior. However, when spiritual intelligence is low, they appear to have problematic behavior. Spiritual Intelligence will lead to less job erosion (inability to have a good job performance). It has a great impact on mental health; and therefore can be used in confronting with occupational problems (Abdoli & Sheihki, 2013). Spirituality is comprised of meaning, excellence and love, including helping other people and creatures. Thus, a person with high spiritual intelligence does not see others as objects or bugs, instead he loves people and is reluctant to do any damage to them (Abdoli & Sheihki 2013). Spiritual intelligence has been used to examine the direct relationship with certain outcome such as work performance (Rani, Abidin, & Ab Hamid, 2013) and resulted in a positive correlation.

Others examined the significant relationship between spiritual intelligence and mental health (Emmons, 2000), leadership (Amram, 2007), work performance (Rani, Abidin, & Ab Hamid, 2013), job satisfaction (Jeloudar & Goodarzi, 2012), job erosion (Abdoli & Sheihki, 2013) and personality traits (Amrai, Farahani, Ebrahimi & Bagherian, 2011).

Based on the above findings, the reason why spiritual intelligence will make an important contribution in explaining the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance is supported. Therefore, in this study, we predict that spiritual intelligence appears to be an important moderator to the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance (organizational and interpersonal deviance); and the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance (organizational deviance and interpersonal deviance) will be weaker after considering high spiritual intelligence moderating effect rather than low spiritual intelligence.

Hypotheses 2: Spiritual intelligence will moderate the positive relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance in (a) organizational deviance and (b) interpersonal deviance such that the relationship will be weaker when spiritual intelligence is high, rather than low.

Hypotheses model

The preceding arguments produce an integrated framework in which spiritual intelligence moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance (interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance)

Figure 1. *Spiritual intelligence moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance (interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance)*
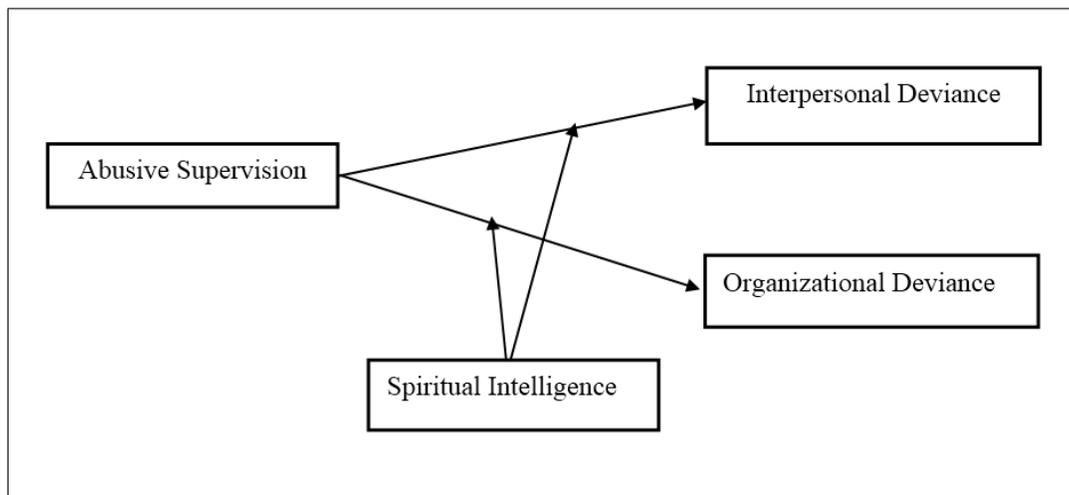
Method

Sample and procedure

A sample of employees of few organizations in Selangor was used in this study. Since sampling frame was available, we used simple random sampling to distribute the questionnaires. A total of 184 self–administered questionnaires were distributed. The questionnaires were personally distributed to the Human Resource Department and were collected after 2 weeks. A total of 136 questionnaires were returned and used for the analysis; equivalent to about 75.5% response rate.

Measures

The major measures for study were abusive supervision, workplace deviance, and spiritual intelligence. Unless stated otherwise, participants responded to all questionnaire items for these measures using a rating scale ranging from 0 (disagree/ never) to 5 (agree/ always).

Abusive supervision. Tepper's (2000) 15-item scale was used to measure abusive supervision. Respondents have to indicate the frequency with which their supervisor engages in the behavior described in each item using 5-point scale: (1) never to (5) always. "My supervisor ridicules me" and "My supervisor puts me down in front of others" are representative items.

Workplace deviance. Workplace deviance was measured using the 12-item scale for organizational deviance and 7-item scale for interpersonal deviance developed by Bennett and Robinson (2000). The response scale ranged from (1) never to (5) always. "Made fun of someone at work" and "Taken property from work without permission" are representative items for the two workplace deviances respectively.

Spiritual Intelligence. Spiritual intelligence was measured based on the Integrated Spiritual Intelligence Scale (ISIS) designed by Amram and Dryer (2007). The ISIS was developed to evaluate the spiritual competence of people. This self-report instrument provides an overall measure of spiritual intelligence. Respondents will be asked to indicate the agreeableness to the given statements. Using a five–point Likert scale ranged from (1) disagreed to (5) agreed. "I felt so disappointed if things do not happen as expected" and "Each action taken is in-line with my own value" are representative items.

Data analysis

We checked the data for violations of the assumptions of normality, linearity, heteroscedasticity, and multicollinearity using SPSS; and there were no significant problem found. Next, we proceed with hierarchical multiple regression to test the study hypothesis, entering the main effect variables (i.e. abusive supervision and workplace deviance) and the multiplicative interaction term (abusive supervision and spiritual intelligence). Before forming the interaction term, we standardized the predictor and moderator variables (i.e. transformed the raw scores into standardized values) to reduce the potential problem of multicollinearity with the interaction term due to scaling (Aiken & West, 1991; Jaccard et al., 1990).

The significance of the interaction was determined by examining the significance of the increment in criterion variance (beyond the variance accounted for by the main effect) that is explained by the interaction term. Only when the interaction is significant, we proceeded with simple slope analysis (http://.jeremydawson.co.uk/slopes.htm) to have a clearer picture of the moderation effect and plotted the interaction graphically. We used values one standard deviation below and above the mean for predictor variable and values one standard deviation below and above the mean for the moderator variable for the plot.

Result

Table I presents the means, standard deviations, and reliability coefficients of the study variables. All the measures had alpha reliability that exceeded 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). On the average, respondents reported

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and scale reliabilities (*n* = 136)

Variables	M	SD	Cronbach α
Abusive Supervision	1.626	0.592	0.910
Interpersonal Deviance	1.814	0.682	0.812
Organizational Deviance	1.631	0.681	0.898
Spiritual Intelligence	3.581	0.263	0.765

experiencing a level of abusive supervision of 1.626, a level of interpersonal deviance of 1.814, a level of organizational deviance of 1.631, and a level of spiritual intelligence of 3.581 (measured on a 5-point scale).

Abusive supervision, interpersonal deviance, organizational deviance and spiritual intelligence were significantly correlated with the each other except for the correlation between spiritual intelligence and interpersonal deviance as shown in Table 2. Meanwhile, there was a negative correlation between abusive supervision and spiritual intelligence.

Table 2. Correlations ($n = 136$)

Variables	Abusive Supervision	Interpersonal Deviance	Organizational Deviance	Spiritual Intelligence
Abusive Supervision	1			
Interpersonal Deviance	0.247**	1		
Organizational Deviance	0.219**	0.755**	1	
Spiritual Intelligence	-0.870**	0.029	0.146**	1

$**p<0.01$

H1a predicted that abusive supervision would be positively related to interpersonal deviance, and H1b predicted that abusive supervision would be positively related to organizational deviance. Multiple regression analyses testing the main effects model yielded significant and positive regression coefficient for abusive supervision on interpersonal deviance ($\beta= 0.25$, $p < 0.01$) and on organizational deviance ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting support for the two hypotheses.

H2a stated that spiritual intelligence would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and interpersonal deviance, and H2b stated that spiritual intelligence would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and organization deviance. The results of H2a shown in Table 3 indicated a significant interaction between spiritual intelligence and abusive supervision on interpersonal deviance that explained variance in the model beyond that due to the main effects ($\Delta R^2 = 0.04$, $p < 0.05$). The interaction term for H2b was also significant for organizational deviance ($\Delta R2 = 0.07$, $p < 0.01$) as shown in Table 4. Thus, both hypotheses H2a and H2b received support.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression results for the effects of abusive supervision and spiritual intelligence on interpersonal deviance ($n = 136$)

Variables	Model 1 B	Model 1 β	Model 2 B	Model 2 β
Step 1: main effects				
Abusive Supervision	0.171**	0.251**	2.473**	3.627**
Spiritual Intelligence	0.035	0.051	0.492*	0.721*
Step 2: interaction effect				
Abusive Supervision x Spiritual Intelligence			-1.095*	-3.390*
R^2		0.063*		0.108*
R^2 Change		0.063*		0.044*

$**p<0.01$
$*p<0.05$

Table 4. Hierarchical regression results for the effects of abusive supervision and spiritual intelligence on organization deviance ($n = 136$)

Variables	Model 1 B	Model 1 β	Model 2 B	Model 2 β
Step 1: main effects				
Abusive Supervision	0.159**	0.234**	2.960**	4.345**
Spiritual Intelligence	0.114*	0.167*	0.670**	0.983**
Step 2: interaction effect				
Abusive Supervision x				
Spiritual Intelligence			-1.333**	-4.130**
R^2		0.076**		0.141**
R^2 Change		0.076**		0.066**

**p<0.01
*p<0.05

A clearer picture of the form of the interaction for H2a and H2b can be obtained by examining the plotted interaction effect in Figure 1 and 2. In general, the regression slope was steeper for employees with low spiritual intelligence than for those with high spiritual intelligence. Together, the above results showed that abusive supervision was positively related to both interpersonal and organization deviance. For both deviances, the relationship was stronger at the lower levels of spiritual intelligence. Therefore, spiritual intelligence moderated the effects of abusive supervision on interpersonal and organizational deviances.
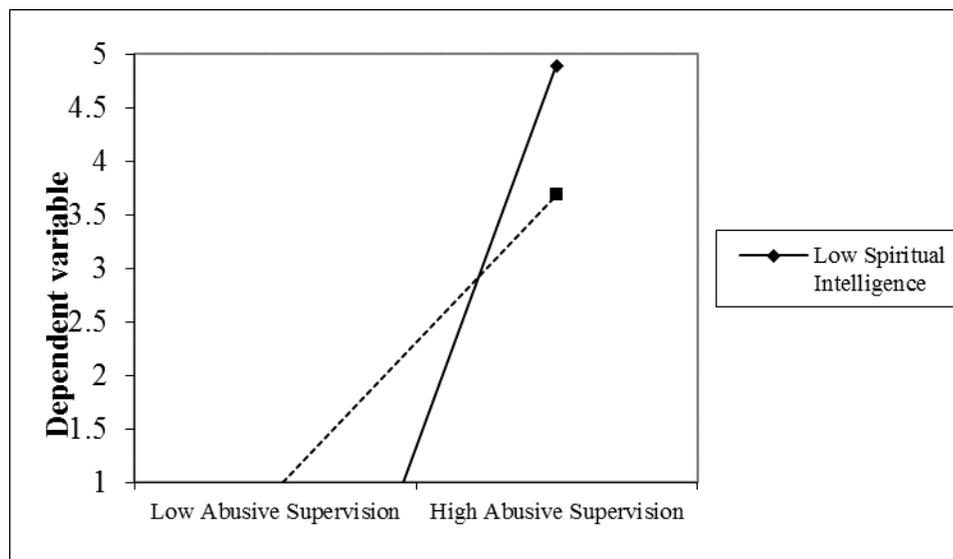

Figure 1. *Graphical representation of spiritual intelligence on the relationship between abusive supervision and interpersonal deviances*
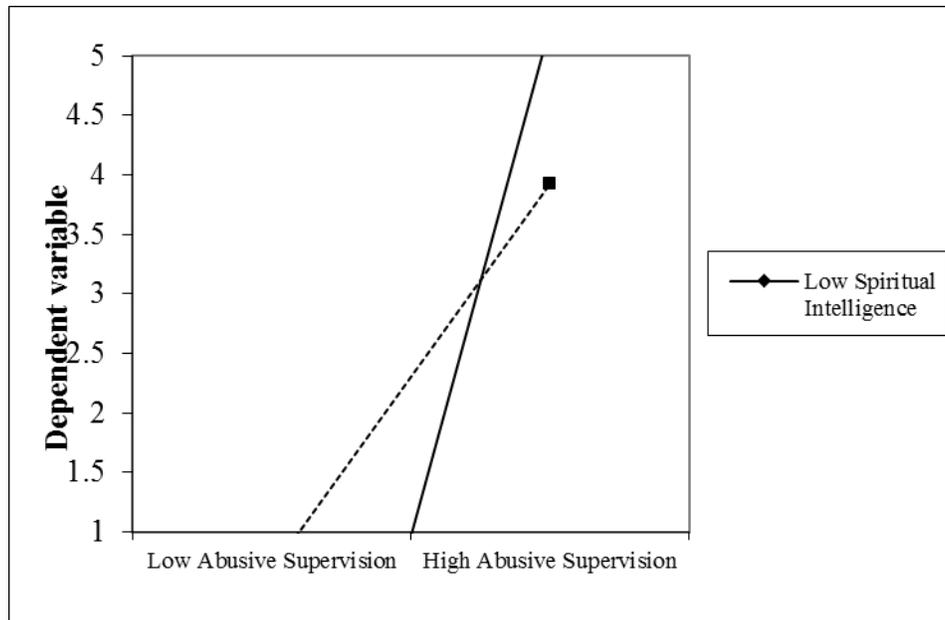
Figure 2. *Graphical representation of spiritual intelligence on the relationship between abusive supervision and organizational deviances*

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to expand our understanding on the effect of abusive supervision on workplace deviance. First, our research examined the direct effect of abusive supervision on two types of workplace deviance, that is, interpersonal and organizational deviances. The result showed that there was a positive relationship between abusive supervision and both interpersonal and organizational deviances. However, the relationship between abusive supervision and interpersonal deviance is stronger compared to the relationship with organizational deviance. This is supported by Robinson and Bennett's (1997) argument that if an individual is the cause of the mistreatment, then deviance will be mostly directed against the individual; if the organization is the cause of the mistreatment, then deviance will most likely be directed against the organization.

Second, we add to the literature on the moderating role of spiritual intelligence and workplace deviance (a) organizational deviance and (b) interpersonal deviance. We found that spiritual intelligence moderated the positive relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance such that the relationship will be weaker when spiritual intelligence is high rather than low. This result is in line with the study related to emotional intelligence whereby an individual with high emotional intelligence manage their emotions well despite strong perceptions of supervisor abuse (Hu, 2012). There is no exclusive research studying the moderating effect of spiritual intelligence. However, prior research on the direct relationship between spiritual intelligence and individual performance outcome revealed that there is a positive relationship; which means the higher the spiritual intelligence, the higher performance attained (Abdoli & Sheihki, 2013).

The first and most obvious implication is that abusive supervision is related to workplace deviance. Thus, all efforts should be made to reduce the likelihood of abusive supervision from occurring. Furthermore, by studying what other factors may contribute to exacerbate this relationship, management needs to take these factors into consideration in order to minimize the deviance. In this study, low spiritual intelligence is an individual factor that predicted to exacerbate the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance. Therefore, human resource's policies and practices, and the culture

of an organization are areas that management might be able to use effectively in minimizing the deviant behavior of low spiritual intelligence individuals.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge by extending the management literature. There are many individual factors and situational factors that can be considered as moderator and mediator to the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance. In this study, we used one of the individual factors, that is, spiritual intelligence as a moderator to that relationship. In doing so, we extend abusive supervision research, which emphasized the potential of moderating effect on abusive supervisory behavior that evokes negative behavior (Thau et al., 2008, Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007).

In conclusion, it is clear that subordinates will respond negatively to supervisor's mistreatment by engaging in behaviors that are harmful to individual and the organization. The research findings also revealed that spiritual intelligence offers the same direction as emotional intelligence in terms of neutralizing the effect of supervisor abuse. However, there was no significant difference between the interaction (abusive supervision x spiritual intelligence) on interpersonal and organizational deviances.

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