

Gender and Organization Rule Abidance

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Bio Statements

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Abstract:

A long-standing contention in the public and private management literatures is that women obey organizational rules more so than their male counterparts. Many of the studies that make this assertion, however, rely on anecdotal evidence rather than theory-guided empirical studies. In this paper we use survey data collected from four cities in a Midwestern state to test empirically gender dimensions of rule abidance. The findings support long-asserted gender differences in rule abidance. But contrary to recent scholarship, the findings suggest that rule abidance among women is inversely related to organizational status, with higher-level women abiding by rules moreso than women lower in the hierarchy. We conclude with the implications of these findings on bureaucratic deregulation and organizational power.

Gender and Organization Rule Abidance

*I want a girl with uninterrupted prosperity
Who uses a machete to cut through red tape*
— Cake, “Short Skirt, Long Jacket”

Introduction

A long-standing contention in the public and private management literatures is that women obey organizational rules more so than their male counterparts. Supporting arguments go something like this: Women tend to have less organizational power than their male counterparts by virtue of their disproportionate occupation of lower organizational positions (Kanter 1993), their status as minority members of male-dominated organizations and their traditionally subordinate position in society (Schaeff 1993). This structural powerlessness is thought to incur insecurity among female employees and hostility from male colleagues (Thompson 1977: 160). In response, women in organizations are thought to “go by the book” (Green and Melnick 1950: 299, Thompson 1977: 160) in order to empower their positions (Kanter 1977: 192) and fit in to the “white male system” (Schaeff 1992).

The studies portraying women as rigid rule-abiders are limited in three ways. First, the rule behavior of women is scrutinized while the rule behavior of men is ignored, partly due to the focus on those perceived as organizationally powerless. As a result, rule abidance among women is associated with rigidity, whereas the rule bending behavior of men is deemed implicitly valid. Second, rule rigidity in these studies is subjectively determined and not measured. Thus, it is unclear if rule rigidity comprises applying rules when they should be broken or simply applying them consistently. Finally, the studies

cited rely heavily on anecdotal evidence and limited case study research that is conducted in the absence of theory-guided empirical testing.

Picking up the intellectual gauntlet thrown down by these studies, this article undertakes four tasks. First, we empirically test the proposition that public servants who are women are more rule-abiding than public servants who are men. Second, we consider the extent to which gender and hierarchy interact to influence rule bending behavior, with the expectation that female public servants lower in the organizational hierarchy will abide by rules more so than their female organizational superiors. Only two empirical studies support the argument that women abide by organizational rules more than men, in mail surveys (Gordon 1970) and experiments (Morrison 2006). However, neither study set out to provide such support. Thus, from a scholarly standpoint, the article provides the first theory-driven test of gender differences in organizational rule abidance.

The data for examining gender differences in rule abidance comes from a study of the employees of four cities in a Midwestern state. The study collected quantitative data from a mail survey of all city employees and yielded a gender-representative sample with responses from all hierarchical levels (n=645). Ordered probit is used to model gender differences in self-reported attitudes towards rule abidance, while employing a range of control variables to account for rival influences.

The article begins with an overview of the literature on gender and rule abidance, on which our hypotheses are based. The second section reports the research design of the study that yielded the data for testing gender dimensions of rule abidance. The third section reports the results of ordered probit modeling, while the fourth and final sections

discuss the implications of the study results for bureaucratic deregulation and organizational power.

Gender and Organizational Rule Abidance

The argument that women are more rule-abiding than men can be traced to an early management case study conducted by Green and Melnick (1950). The authors observed that women in public organizations tend to “go by the book”, a behavior the authors associated with professional insecurity on the part of women and hostility on the part of their male colleagues (299). From Green and Melnick’s perspective, women use rules to justify their place in the organization and exert power over hostile male colleagues. Their argument was reiterated by Thompson (1977), who argued based on anecdotal evidence that women have an “exaggerated dependence” on rules in organizations. Like Green and Melnick (1950) before him, Thompson attributed this behavior to women’s subordinate role in society and the resulting insecurity associated with that status (160). From Thompson’s perspective, invoking rules as a management strategy allows women to blame the “system” and divert negative feelings away from her (160).

In more contemporary evidence for the argument, Kanter’s case study of an industrial firm observed that female employees typically occupied positions of lower power with less possibility of upward mobility than their male counterparts (1993,254). According to Kanter’s interpretation, limited advancement prospects led these women (and others lacking power) to become more rule-minded, with the rules providing “their only safe and sure legitimate authority” (254). From Kanter’s perspective, attempts at

self-empowerment through adherence to rules and procedures backfired. Kanter describes this rule mindedness as producing a vicious cycle, in which powerless employees strictly adhere to rules and become coercive, their subordinates resisting that coercion, prompting the powerless to become more rule abiding and coercive, with subordinates again rebelling. This downward spiral described by Kanter leads to decreased productivity and no increase in power for the powerless (1993: 190-193).

Newman reaches conclusions similar to that of Kanter in her gender analysis of Lowi's typology of federal agency types (1994, 158). Drawing on case study research of women working in Florida state agencies, Newman notes that redistributive agencies employ a higher percentage of women, are more rule-bound than distributive or regulatory agencies, and have a higher percentage of employees that report operating "by the book." These observations lead Newman to suggest that rule-abidance may compensate for the weaker structural power of women in these agencies and that rules may buttress what historically has been viewed as women's incapacity for handling discretionary power.

These studies share an emphasis on women's relative lack of power in explaining organizational rule abidance. Newman (1994) suggests that women may abide by rules to compensate for their relative lack of organizational power. Kanter (1993) depicts rule abidance as a legitimizing strategy for "token" organization members, those who lack other means of organizational power. Green and Melnick (1950), with Thompson (1977), depict rule-abidance by women in decidedly more negative tones, as "professional insecurity," a quest for control over their male colleagues, as a means of "blaming the system," and as "exaggerated" dependence on rules (implying an optimal level of rule

dependence, presumably that held by male organization members). In each of these studies, rule-abidance is a social psychological reaction to a perceived power deficit, one that attempts to level the playing field of traditionally masculine organizations.

Taken together, these studies lay the groundwork for two expectations regarding gender and rule abidance:

H₁: Public servants who are women will be more rule-abiding than public servants who are men.

H₂: Rule abidance among women will be inversely related to their hierarchical position, such that lower-level female employees will be more rule-abiding than higher-level female employees.

The first hypothesis examines the argument that women are generally more rule-abiding than men based on their relatively weaker societal and organizational status. The second hypothesis adds hierarchical status as a consideration, with the expectation that women lower in the organizational hierarchy will be more rule abiding than women above them in the organizational hierarchy. Conversely, women higher in the organizational hierarchy are expected to be less rule abiding than their organizational subordinates.

Research Design

Gender differences in rule perceptions and rule bending behavior are examined using quantitative data gathered from a study of the employees of four cities in a Midwestern U.S. state: a small city with an agricultural economy (City A); a slightly larger, but still small city with a light industrial economic base (City B); a mid-size city located near a military base (City C); and an affluent metropolitan city (City D). Quantitative data were collected by a mail survey distributed to all employees of each city (n=645). The study was conducted between June 2005 and December 2006.

Mail Survey

The mail survey distributed to city employees asked questions related to perceptions of workplace rules, including attitudes towards rule bending. The survey process began with an alert letter to employees from the city manager's office expressing support for the study and encouraging participation. Within two weeks, an envelope was attached to employee paychecks that contained a cover letter from the researcher inviting survey participation and stressing the confidentiality of results; the mail survey; a stamped return envelope addressed to the researcher's university; and a postcard with a survey identification number that employees were asked to return separately from the mail survey. The postcard's purpose was to track responses to the survey without linking survey results to employee identities. This process produced response rates of 61 percent in City A, 83 percent in City B, 43 percent in City C, and 45 percent in City D. The overall response rate was 49 percent (n=645).

Model and Measures

Ordered probit modeling is used to test for gender differences in rule behavior. An extension of logistic regression, ordered probit is appropriate for modeling dependent variables that are ordinal, in which distances between levels of impact are unknown (Long 1997: 7). Three ordered probit models examine rule abidance as a function of gender and hierarchical status. The first ordered probit model tests the relationship between gender and rule abidance. Two additional ordered probit models explore

hierarchical status and rule abidance for female and male city employees, respectively. Model measures are described below.

The central independent variable, gender, is measured with the proxy variable sex. We recognize, along with other social scientists, that the dichotomous variable of sex is a weak proxy for the more complicated concept of gender (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995). We also recognize, however, that gender is a difficult concept to measure empirically and that institutional factors contribute to the acceptable use of sex as a proxy for gender in some public administration contexts (Keiser et al. 2002, 554-555). City management remains a highly gendered profession and municipal organizations are highly gendered workplaces (Fox and Schuhmann 1999), therefore, we believe the institutional context allows for the acceptable use of sex as a proxy measure for gender in this case.

Rule abidance is measured using a scale that sums survey respondents' level of agreement or disagreement with nine statements tapping both attitudes and intentions towards rule abidance. The statements were adapted from studies of bureaucratic orientation by Baker et al. (1973) and Gordon (1970), as well as from patterns of comments made by city employees during the interview process which preceded the creation of the mail survey (Table 1). Responses ranged from 0=Strongly Disagree to 3=Strongly Agree, for a minimum rule abidance score of 0 to a maximum rule abidance score of 36. Cronbach's alpha for the scale is 0.70.

Table 1 Here

Conformity, defined as internal behavior driven by external rather than internal standards (Kohn 1977), is included as a control variable in all models based on its

evidence that it increases rule abidance tendencies (Knapp 1963, 1964; Gordon 1970).

Conformity is measured by summing responses to a survey question that asks city employees to rate themselves on a five-point scale between the following opposite characteristics:

Going Along-Arguing
Accepting the System-Questioning the System
Accepting Authority-Questioning Authority
Conforming-Rebelling

Each item is reversed and summed for a total conformity score. Coding ranged from 0 to 4 for each pair of characteristics, thus the conformity scale can take on values ranging from 0 to 16. The scale is adapted from Child and Ellis' (1973) study of managerial conformity. Cronbach's alpha for the scale is 0.82.

Risk aversion, also included as a control variable in the models, is another established factor in rule abidance (Knapp 1963, Knapp 1964, Mulder 1971, Gordon 1970). Risk propensity is measured as a survey respondents' level of agreement or disagreement (3=Strongly Disagree to 0=Strongly Agree) with the statement "I like taking risks at work," adapted from Child and Ellis (1973).

A third control variable is formalization, the extent of written rules, which has been shown to increase rule abidance (Thomas, Walker and Zelditch, 1986). Formalization is measured using a survey respondent's level of agreement of disagreement with the following statement: *Whatever situation arises, my department has written policies and procedures to follow*. Responses are coded from 0 (Strongly Disagree) to 3 (Strongly Agree). This statement is adapted from Aiken and Hage (1966).

Other control variables included in the study include professional association membership (1=yes, 0=no); length of city employment in years; college education

(1=bachelors degree, some graduate school or graduate degree, otherwise=0); salary (coded 1= less \$20,000, 2= \$20,000-29,000, 3= \$30,000-39,000, 4= \$40,000-49,000, 5- \$50,000-64,900, 6=\$65,000-79,000 and 7=\$80,000+); race (coded 1 for non-white and 0 for white) and city of employment, measured in three dummy variables and ordered by increasing number of employees (City B, City C, City D).

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for the dependent and explanatory variables, respectively. The average rule abidance score resides at the upper end of possible score values, indicating that survey response on the whole are more rule abiding than rule bending. With regards to the independent variables, female employees are slightly overrepresented in the sample, comprising 28 percent of the sample compared with 25 percent of the city employee population. The distribution of respondents by hierarchy mimics a pyramid structure, with descending percentages of front-line workers, supervisors, administrative or policy staff, and department heads. Survey respondents average ten years on the job, with tenures ranging from one to 38 years. Respondents are racially homogenous, with only six percent representing non-white employees, a result which is consistent with the racial composition of the cities studied. The sample appears well-educated, with over half having college degrees and nearly sixty percent indicating membership in a professional association (which for city employees typically indicates union membership). The average annual salary lies between two pay categories of \$30,000 to \$39,999 and \$40,000 to \$49,999, with nearly 30 percent of respondents in the former pay category. Six percent of the sample responses come from City A, 14 percent from City B, 21 percent from City C, and 59 percent from City D.

Results

The first ordered probit model (Table 3) tests the relationship between the gender of the city employees and their rule abidance scale score. The results of this modeling exercise indicate that gender significantly influences rule abidance, with female employees indicating higher rule abidance than their male counterparts ($p < 0.01$). (Statistical results in the text are reported as one-tailed tests.) Conformity, risk aversion, and formalization all increase rule abidance, as expected (all $p < .01$). The remaining control variables are statistically insignificant. McKelvey and Zavoina's 21%.

Table 2 Here

Figure 1 depicts the difference in the probability of registering a given level of rule abidance by gender. Positive numbers indicate differences for which city employees who are women have higher predicted probabilities than city employees who are men. For Rule Abidance scale values up to "12", gender differences in predicted probabilities hovers near zero. Above 12, a pronounced pattern emerges in different predicted probabilities. From the Rule Abidance values of thirteen through twenty-two, city employees who are male are have higher scores, whereas city employees who are female are more likely to have higher rule abidance scores ranging from 23 through 36. The differences in the predicted probabilities of female and male survey respondents for particular rule abidance scores are small – amounting to two percent at most – but are nonetheless pronounced.

Figure 1 Here

The second hypothesis, that female city employees at lower hierarchical levels will be more rule abiding than those at higher levels, is tested by replicating the rule abidance model among female city employees and, as a point of comparison, among male city employees. The results of remodeling among female city employees alone (Table 4) contradict expectation. Specifically, female department heads are more rule abiding than female front-line staff, as are female supervisors and administrative or policy staff (all $p < .05$). By contrast, hierarchical status is not a significant on rule abidance among male city employees (Table 5).

Table 4 Here

Figure 2 depicts the differences in predicted probabilities for varying rule abidance scores of female employees at the three hierarchical levels versus female front-line workers. Differences in predicted probabilities increase with level of hierarchy: female administrative or policy personnel and supervisors have predicted probabilities of rule abidance scores closest to female front-line workers, with slightly higher rule abidance probabilities for supervisors versus front-line workers (all $p < .05$). Differences between predicted probabilities of varying rule abidance scores are greatest between department heads and front-line employees. Predicted rule abidance score differences reach six percent for female department heads versus female front-line workers, whereas the maximum differences for female supervisors and administrators or policy staff reach three percent.

Table 5 Here

Discussion

This article sought to empirically test gender differences in rule abidance. A scattering of literature dating back to the 1950s has asserted but not empirically supported the contention that women will abide by organizational rules more so than men. The theory underlying these contentions holds that rule abidance compensates for the lack of organizational power traditionally experienced by women. Following this line of reasoning, we hypothesized that public employees who are women would be more rule-abiding than public employees who are men. We also expected female city employees at lower organizational levels to be more abiding than female city employees at higher hierarchical levels.

The study's first hypothesis, of general gender differences in rule abidance, is supported. In particular, city employees who are women indicate higher rule abidance tendencies than city employees who are men, accounting for hierarchical status, personality variables, and demographic influences. While our empirical results lend some credence to the assertions of the literature of the past half century, we cannot conclude that women's higher tendency to abide by organizational rules is a result of their lack of power in organizations. It does suggest, however, that there is a specifically gendered element to rule abidance that requires further investigation in organizational contexts.

The study's second hypothesis, that the hierarchical level of female employees influences their rule abidance is also supported, but in the opposite direction expected: female employees who are department heads are more rule abiding than female employees who are front-line workers, as are female supervisors and female

administrative staff. These results contradict the notion that women, as a result of disproportionately occupying positions of less organizational power, use rule abidance as a means of self-empowerment (Green and Melnick 1950; Thompson 1977). Quite the contrary, women at higher organizational levels appear more rule-abiding than their male counterparts and organizational subordinates. This result suggests that the higher organizational echelons, which should empower its occupants to use discretion, do not empower women to the same extent as men.

This finding contradicts much of the taken-for-granted theorizing of the past half century. It suggests that there is more to women's rule abidance than the structural powerlessness suggested by Green and Melnick or Thompson. It also contradicts Kanter's theory of tokens: women higher in the organizational hierarchy are not acting like dominants, otherwise, there would not be gender differences in rule bending. Increased rule abidance by women also suggests that as they enter similar ranks as their male colleagues their management style may be different. This finding is consistent with status expectation theory, which asserts that men may be able to demonstrate rule bending or dominance behavior when women may not because it is consistent with their external social status expectations (Meeker and Weitzel-O'Neill 1977). Status expectation theory also provides a reasonable explanation as to why there is no difference among men and rule abidance regardless of hierarchical status. Differences in rule abidance may be structured by power influences outside of the organization for both men and women, this in turn may affect their behavior within mixed sex groups even in the upper echelons of the organizational hierarchy (Meeker and Weitzel-O'Neill 1977).

This study confirms, in part, assertions made by scholars for over fifty years – women do obey rules more than their male colleagues. It also suggests, however, that the reasoning behind these long made assertions may not be true – as women attain higher ranks within organizations their rule abidance does not decrease, it increases. No definite conclusions as to why women at higher levels of the organization have a higher tendency to abide organizational rules can be drawn at this point. It is important to note that the proportion of women in the city organizations studied is still low relative to the population. Suggestions that as women achieve parity in city organizations their management styles will mimic men’s cannot be dismissed, but this study suggests they should not be taken-for-granted.

Conclusion

Given that rule bending and the exercise of discretion is traditionally an indicator of organizational power, shattered glass ceilings may only superficially measure power for women in organizations. When women ascend in organizations, their exercise of power may be different from their male colleagues and includes rule abidance, rather than rule bending. In a management era that stress flexibility and rule reduction in public organizations, reform may disproportionately affect the management styles of women near the top of organizational hierarchies. Future research should continue to focus on the gendered aspects of organizational rules. There has long been a discussion of gendered aspects of management, but it seems that the discussion needs to broaden to consider why women and men act differently with regard to rules as they ascend within organizations.

Table 1. Rule Abidance Survey Question Items

Scale Item	Source
Even if I dislike a rule, I usually obey it.	Baker et al. 1973
Often, the only thing wrong with breaking rules is getting caught. (Reversed)	Baker et al. 1973
Following the rules is a matter of personal principal.	Gordon 1970
If employees just followed all of the city's rules, we would be a more effective organization.	Gordon 1970
Employees are better off when the city provides a complete set of rules to be followed.	Gordon 1970
I will bend a rule if it helps to make the city a better community. (Reversed)	City employee interviews
When I don't understand a rule's purpose, I question it. (Reversed)	City employee interviews
I will bend a rule if it helps me do a better job for the city. (Reversed)	City employee interviews
I could be more effective in my job if there were fewer policies and procedures. (Reversed)	City employee interviews
If I think a rule is pointless, I will find a way around it. (Reversed)	Baker et al. 1973
I figure that rules are there for a purpose.	Gordon 1970
I will bend a rule if it makes my job easier. (Reversed)	City employee interviews

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Model Variables

	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Rule Abidance	8	36	22.78	4.81
Gender (0=Male, 1=Female)	0	1	0.28	0.45
Department Head	0	1	0.06	0.24
Administrative or Policy Staff	0	1	0.09	0.29
Supervisor	0	1	0.25	0.43
Front-Line Worker	0	1	0.53	0.50
Conformity	0	17	6.66	3.61
Risk Aversion	0	3	1.44	0.87
Formalization	0	3	1.55	0.82
Professional Association				
Membership	0	1	0.58	0.49
Length of City Employment	1	38	10.30	8.28
Salary	0	6	2.76	1.57
Education	0	1	0.53	0.50
Race	0	1	0.06	0.23
City A	0	1	0.06	0.23
City B	0	1	0.14	0.35
City C	0	1	0.21	0.41
City D	0	1	0.59	0.49

Table 3. Ordered Probit Model of Rule Abidance

	Beta	Robust S.E.	z	p(z)
Female	0.30	0.11	2.68	0.01
Department Head	0.18	0.20	0.89	0.38
Supervisor	0.13	0.12	1.07	0.29
Administrative of Policy Staff	0.19	0.15	1.31	0.19
Conformity	0.14	0.02	8.20	***
Risk Aversion	0.16	0.06	2.86	***
Formalization	0.15	0.06	2.60	0.01
			-	
Professional Association Membership	-0.04	0.10	0.42	0.68
Length of City Employment	0.00	0.01	0.47	0.64
			-	
Salary	-0.02	0.04	0.40	0.69
			-	
Education	-0.01	0.10	0.11	0.91
Race	0.15	0.19	0.78	0.44
City B	0.24	0.26	0.90	0.37
City C	0.12	0.24	0.49	0.62
City D	0.24	0.25	0.94	0.35
n		528		
McKelvey and Zavoina's R2		23%		

Notes: White's robust standard errors reported; *** = $p < 0.01$; probabilities reported for a two-tailed test.

Table 4. Ordered Probit Model of Rule Abidance: Female Employees Only

	Beta	Robust S.E.	z	p(z)
Department Head	0.76	0.39	1.92	0.06
Supervisor	0.45	0.23	1.93	0.05
Administrative of Policy Staff	0.40	0.22	1.84	0.07
Conformity	0.13	0.03	3.90	***
Risk Aversion	0.09	0.10	0.92	0.36
Formalization	0.16	0.11	1.48	0.14
Professional Association Membership	-0.04	0.18	-0.21	0.83
Length of City Employment	0.01	0.01	0.72	0.47
Salary	-0.16	0.07	-2.22	0.03
Education	-0.42	0.21	-2.03	0.04
Race	0.20	0.29	0.71	0.48
City B	0.52	0.52	1.00	0.32
City C	0.40	0.42	0.94	0.35
City D	0.92	0.45	2.04	0.04
N		143		
McKelvey and Zavoina's R ²		25%		

Notes: White's robust standard errors reported; *** = $p < 0.01$; probabilities reported for a two-tailed test.

Table 5. Ordered Probit Model of Rule Abidance: Male Employees Only

	Beta	Robust S.E.	z	p(z)
			-	
Department Head	-0.02	0.23	0.07	0.95
Supervisor	0.05	0.15	0.36	0.72
Administrative of Policy Staff	0.02	0.22	0.11	0.91
Conformity	0.15	0.02	7.12	0.00
Risk Aversion	0.18	0.07	2.67	0.01
Formalization	0.13	0.07	1.84	0.07
Professional Association			-	
Membership	-0.05	0.12	0.44	0.66
			-	
Length of City Employment	0.00	0.01	0.09	0.93
Salary	0.04	0.05	0.80	0.43
Education	0.07	0.11	0.64	0.52
Race	0.16	0.24	0.68	0.50
City B	0.14	0.31	0.45	0.65
City C	0.01	0.28	0.05	0.96
			-	
City D	-0.02	0.30	0.06	0.95
N			385	
McKelvey and Zavoina's R ²			21%	

Notes: White's robust standard errors reported; *** = $p < 0.01$; probabilities reported for a two-tailed test.

**Figure 1. Predicted Probability Differences in Rule Abidance
Female vs. Male City Employees**

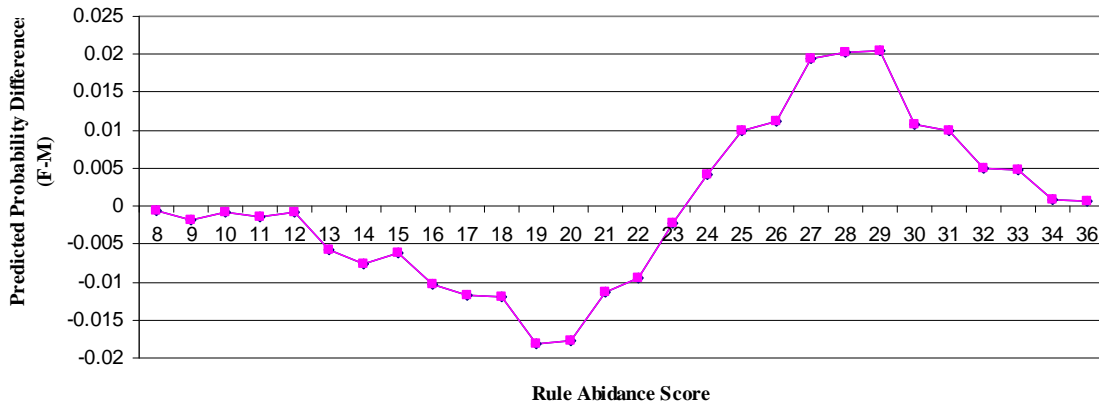
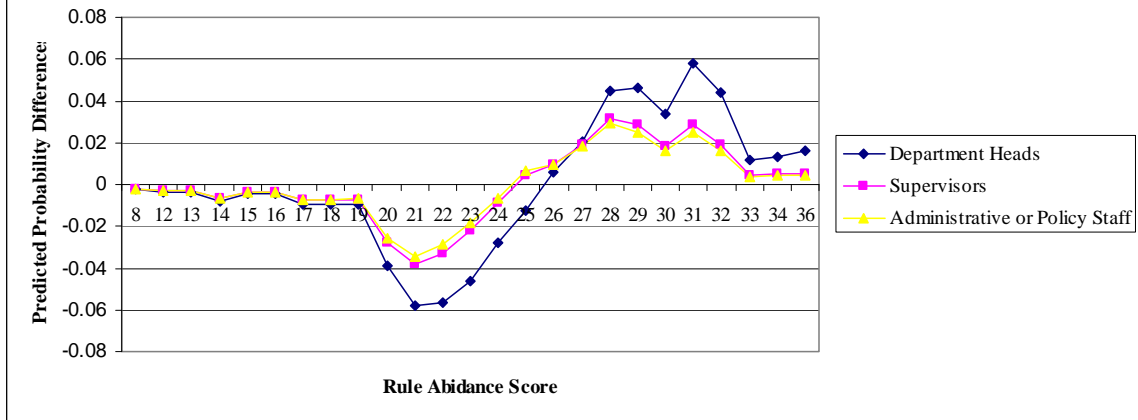


Figure 2. Predicted Probabilities of Rule Abidance: All Female Employees



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