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## **A Feminist Argument for Bureaucracy**

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## **A Feminist Argument for Bureaucracy**

Bureaucracy as a tool for organizational control has received widespread criticism from feminist scholars. These arguments have encompassed a variety of forms but center on the notion that bureaucracy is male dominance in structural form (Ferguson 1984, Ahrens 1980). Specifically, bureaucracy has been contested for mimicking societal gender relationships and “feminizing” subordinates to cater to the whims of superiors and to play subservient roles typically reserved for women in relation to men (Ferguson 1984).

Bureaucracy has also been critiqued for conceptualizing workers as prototypically masculine, capable of complete devotion to the public sphere and constituting an asexual workforce (i.e., only men) (Acker 1990). Another feminist perspective critiques bureaucracy for treating subordinates as incapable of meaningful contribution or valuable perspectives to organizational operations (Stivers 2002).

In response to the theoretical flaws of bureaucracy, some feminist scholars favor decentralizing decisionmaking, reducing rules, and flattening hierarchy (Ferguson 1984, Stivers 2002, Ianello 1992). Such calls to reduce or eliminate bureaucracy are problematic, however, because neither theory nor evidence supports the gender neutrality of unbureaucratic organizations. Consider that voices within the male dominated reinventing government movement call for the same reforms, albeit in the name of culturally masculine constructs such as efficiency and entrepreneurialism (Stivers 2002). Furthermore, there is evidence that organizations with weak bureaucracy are dominated by informal male-dominated structures that disadvantage women (McGuire 2002).

Accordingly, this paper counter-argues that bureaucracy – of the normal and not pathological variety<sup>i</sup> -- can benefit organizational members who are women by buffering

them from informal male-dominated networks and thus leveling the organizational playing field and empowering them as organizational contributors and leaders. This argument builds upon theory and evidence from a range of social science literatures and results in the expectation that organizational women will perceive bureaucracy more favorably than organizational men. Qualitative and quantitative data collected from the employees for four cities in a Midwestern state are used to test this expectation.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section conducts a critical review of feminist arguments against bureaucracy. The second section cites theoretical and empirical evidence in support of bureaucracy's benefits for organizational women, as well as the expectation that women will perceive bureaucracy more favorably than organizational men. The third section examines qualitative evidence that fleshes out dimensions of such benefits and the fourth section analyzes quantitative data that tests the expectation of differential perceptions of bureaucracy by gender. The fourth section summarizes and concludes the paper.

## **Critiques of Feminist Critiques of Bureaucracy (Forthcoming)**

### **Theory and Expectation**

This study argues that normal bureaucracy buffers women from interactions governed by informal organizational structures that are male dominated and disadvantageous.

Freeman's classic essay on *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* provides a starting point for the argument (1970). She bases her observations on the "rap groups" of the women's liberation movement, those small informal groups of women intended to increase the

solidarity and feminist consciousness of participants. The intent of the rap groups was to shed the culturally masculine controls of rules, hierarchy, and leadership, all which were expected to inhibit their goal of female empowerment. Freeman observed, however, the absence of formal structure gave rise to informal groups of women holding power by virtue of their common demographic characteristics. The unstructured nature of these groups made them nontransparent, enabling their members to act capriciously, hold power that was difficult to limit, fail to obligate themselves to the larger group, discriminate and exclude.

The discriminatory character of informal structure is supported by over two decades of research, which emphasizes the adverse effects of informal structure on organizational women. One dimension of this research assumes that men use masculine values to develop informal workplace relationships that exclude women and other men who do not share the same values (Collinson and Hearn 1996). These networks appear particularly exclusive when influential on career advancement (Kanter 1977). The discriminatory power of informal networks is compounded by evidence that women tend to belong to less powerful networks than men (McGuire 2002).

A second dimension of this research examines the representation of women in more vs. less structured labor markets. For example, engineering is argued to have higher proportions of women than the legal profession because promotion and advancement tend to be determined by formal rules. By contrast, fewer women mark the upper ranks of the legal profession, perhaps because promotion is informally determined and advancement depends on subjugation of the private to the public sphere (Cook and Waters 1998). A similar argument has been made regarding the unstructured labor market of television

writing, which lacks bureaucratic promotional structures thought to put women at a cumulative disadvantage that persists over the course of their careers (Bielby and Bielby 1992).

A third dimension of inquiry into the gendered nature of informal networks examines the relationship between formalized personnel policies and career opportunities for organizational women. This line of inquiry includes evidence that women fare better in compensation with formal pay procedures such as merit raises and base salary than informal approaches, such as cash bonuses (Elvira and Graham 2002). There is also evidence that formalized personnel policies favor women in recruitment and hiring, whereas informal personnel practices favor men (Reskin and McBrier 2000). Finally, bureaucratic personnel procedures have been credited with improving the employment prospects for women in core-scientific technical roles within high-tech Silicon Valley companies; by contrast, high-tech firms using personnel procedures that emphasize informal relationships provided fewer career opportunities for the women in their employ (Baron, et al, 2007).

This theory and evidence leads to the proposition that organizational women will perceive bureaucracy more favorably than organizational men. The next section describes the qualitative and quantitative data used to test this hypothesis.

## **Research Design**

The data for this study were provided by the employees of four cities in a Midwestern U.S. state: a small agricultural community (City A); a 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). These cities were included based on their willingness to participate in the study. While the participation of four cities in a single state has implications for the study's external validity, it strengthens internal validity by holding state-level factors constant. The study entailed ninety in-person interviews with city employees from a range of hierarchical levels and departments, and a mail survey distributed to all employees of each city. The study was executed between June 2005 and December 2006.

The interview process was designed to generate qualitative data for a larger research project (a study of workplace rules) and inform development of the mail survey instrument. Within each city, interview invitations were sent to a random sample of employees. Interviews were held in conference rooms located away from employee worksites. At the outset of each interview, the researcher explained the study purposes, the confidentiality of results, and the terms of the interview consent form, and provided the employee time to ask questions about the study. Once the interview consent form was signed by both researcher and employee, the employee was asked semi-structured, open-ended questions about their role in the organization, the type of rules they encountered in the workplace, and their impressions of workplace rules.

The mail survey instrument asked questions about workplace characteristics, personal attributes, and attitudes towards bureaucracy, with an emphasis on organizational rules. The survey process began with an alert letter from the city manager's office to employees expressing support for the study and encouraging participation. Within two weeks, an envelope was attached to employee paychecks that contained a personalized 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. Thus completed surveys were returned anonymously, while the separate postcards enabled survey responses to be tracked.<sup>1</sup> 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). While it is difficult to discern the factors that account for these differential response rates, Cities A and B have fewer employees while Cities C and D have more employees. Consequently, response rates may be a function of the ease of encouraging survey participation.

### **Qualitative Evidence**

Analyses of qualitative interview data support the notion that bureaucratic structure benefits organization members who are women. Specifically, efficiency, equity, and legitimacy are three benefits of bureaucratic structure that surfaced during interviews with city employees who are women. While these attributes have long been associated with bureaucratic values (Weber 1947), their gendered nature has received less attention.

For example, the absence of bureaucratic procedures seems to create inefficiencies absorbed primarily by women in organizational support roles. For example, one public works secretary noted that a lack of standardized procedures resulted in her having to take phone messages in twenty-four different ways to accommodate the unique preferences of the men working in her department. In a similar example, a dispatch operator notes:



Police officers want dispatches read differently. It's supposed to be standard. We deal with five police departments, five fire departments, and three ambulance services. If you've been working days and go to nights, you will be confused by how different things are reported. This is hard on new people. I know what the guys on my shift want. Cops are used to being in charge, having last word.

Despite the existence of standardized procedures for handling reports, the dispatch operators cater to the unique preferences of the protective service workers. The protective service workers to whom dispatch services are provided are mostly men ("...the guys on my shift..."), while the dispatch operators who cater to their unique preferences are mostly women. These men are accustomed to being in control and having "the last word."

Female city employees also placed particular emphasis on the ability of bureaucracy to create equity in organizational interactions. One program coordinator working in a city manager's office referred to bureaucratic rules as "the great equalizer." A human resource technician praised her city's policy that applications not be reviewed before the application deadline because they "give applicants an equal shot at the job." A utility supervisor lauded her city's policy of applying sewer charges to all new residents because "it applies to citizens equally no matter who you are."

One bureaucratic source of perceived organizational inequity was uneven rule enforcement:

One department head was let out of complying with a rule because he had already promised employees that they didn't have to comply with it; he'd known the city manager for a long time. Here's another example: a coworker and I worked out of classification for three months to take over the role of a retiring coworker until she left. We received no compensation, no nothing. Another department is in the process of rewarding pay out of classification retroactively. This is not fair. Reduce department head discretion and hold all employees to the same standards.

This human resource technician's sentiments echo a common refrain heard among other women working in the study cities: that the discretion of mostly male managers needed reigning in because it created an inequitable distribution of organizational resources. In another example of the inequities created by inconsistent rule application, a senior dispatch operator notes:

Our department's procedures are unevenly enforced. For example, during slow times, we are supposed to check warrants. Some do, others don't. Some who don't are written up, others who don't are not. It could be nepotism -- one guy's father is a city official -- or it could be that there are only three guys versus eight women in our unit. One of these guys who gets away with not following the rules, people just say, "Well that's just how he is, he's been here for a long time."

In this example, the perceived organizational inequity does not derive from masculine discretion (the unit head is female), but decidedly favors male unit members, possibly because of their gender. This implication jibes with scholarship indicating the males working in female dominated professions have certain workplace advantages (Williams 2000).

Inconsistent rule application, in addition to undermining organizational inequity, may undercut legitimacy. A female department head illustrates:

I don't like it that departments make up rules by themselves. It makes it hard for me to enforce my own rules. I can't enforce no-smoking while working in the shop because the public works and utility guys are allowed to smoke in their sheds.

From the department head's perspective, the city administrator's delegation of authority to department heads (mostly male) undermined her ability to set and enforce rules that departed from theirs.

Bureaucratic structure also seemed to benefit female city employees by legitimizing their authority. Perhaps the most striking example of this phenomenon

comes from a female chief of police who, at the beginning of her tenure, circulated to her department a list of the actions she was entitled to take as chief of police. Towards the front of the organization, a female plans examiner, who reviews the blueprints of mostly male developers and builders to ensure compliance with city policies, makes the following observation:

Some rules for development are not in writing. The fire chief will tell me one requirement, my co-worker tells me a second, and my boss gives me a third. Enforcing rules is easier when they are in writing; it gives me backbone with builders, residents, homeowners.

Here formalization legitimated the power of the plans examiner to enforce city policies, giving her a “backbone” that she would otherwise not have. By contrast, a parks and recreation department head suggests that her city’s relatively flat organization structure undermined the legitimacy of her authority ():

Here’s how the disciplinary process works: I discuss the issue with the employee that I’m having a problem with. If they disagree, they talk to the city administrator. The three of us get together to communicate how to make things better. This puts me on the same level as them. When I’m trying to resolve the issue, they go over my head. This forces me to change, to communicate better, but to lower my expectations. If employees disagree, they go over my head. I would like my supervisor (the city administrator) to support me more by one-on-one talking with me before adjudicating the problem.

The city administrator in this example has cultivated an atmosphere of “weak hierarchy”, in which the lines between the superiors and subordinates working beneath him are blurred. This blurring undermines the department head’s legitimacy in imposing authoritative actions: if underlings dislike her direction, they simply go around her to the city administrator, the only true superior in the weak hierarchy. Thus the department head

faces two disadvantages: (1) she is a female authority figure in a male-dominated organization that (2) lacks a strong hierarchy to legitimate her authority.

The voices of these organizational women suggest that efficiency, equity and legitimacy are not simply standard values served by bureaucracy, but values that serve to protect and empower the women serving in them. For organizational women – particularly those serving in support positions -- bureaucratic efficiency may preclude the requirement to cater to unique male preferences. Normal bureaucracy produces an equitable distribution of organizational goods and services that may buffer organizational women from informal structure that privileges men. If these assertions are true, then organizational women should perceive bureaucratic structure more positively than organizational men. The next section tests this proposition using mail survey data provided by the employees of four cities in a Midwestern state.

### **Quantitative Evidence**

Mail survey data collected from the employees of the four study cities are used to model gender differences in perceptions of bureaucracy. The dependent variables encompass four survey measures about the normative aspects of bureaucratic rules (Table 1). The explanatory variable is gender (0=Male, 1=Female), with control variables that include hierarchical status (0=front-line worker or administrative staff, 1=supervisor, 2=department head), race (0=white, 1=nonwhite), age, education (0=high school education, 1=some college education or higher), city tenure (number of years), professional association member (0=No, 1=Yes), salary (0=less than \$20,000, 1=\$20,000 to \$29,000, 2=\$30,000 to \$39,000, 3=\$40,000 to \$49,000, 4=\$50,000 to \$64,999,

5=\$65,000 to 79,999, 6=\$80,000 and up), and a dummy variable for Cities B, C, and D.

Ordered probit modeling is applied to the data given the ordinal nature of the survey measures (Long 1997, 114).

Table 2, which reports the results of this exercise, suggests a consistently significant difference in how organizational women and men perceive bureaucracy. Specifically, organizational women perceive less red tape ( $p < 0.05$ ), less burden ( $p < 0.05$ ), less volume ( $p < 0.10$ ) and more necessity ( $p < 0.05$ ) in rules than do organizational men. These patterns are depicted in Figures 1-4, which show the differences in the predicted probabilities for response categories of female and male respondents. While the absolute value of the gender differences in predicted probabilities is small – reaching at most three percent – the differences are significant and the patterns illuminating.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

These results of this study suggest that organizational women place particular value on the equity, efficiency, and authorization power of bureaucracy and perceive bureaucratic rules more favorably than organizational men. The implications of these results are twofold: bureaucracy may differently benefit organizational women, while debureaucratization may be detrimental to organizational women. As a result, government reform efforts -- which tend to favor debureaucratization – merit scrutiny for their potentially adverse gender effects.

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**Table 1. Survey Measures of Bureaucratic Rule Perceptions**

Construct	Survey Item	Response Set	Source	Me
Red Tape	If "red tape" is defined as burdensome administrative	0-10	Rainey, Pandey and	

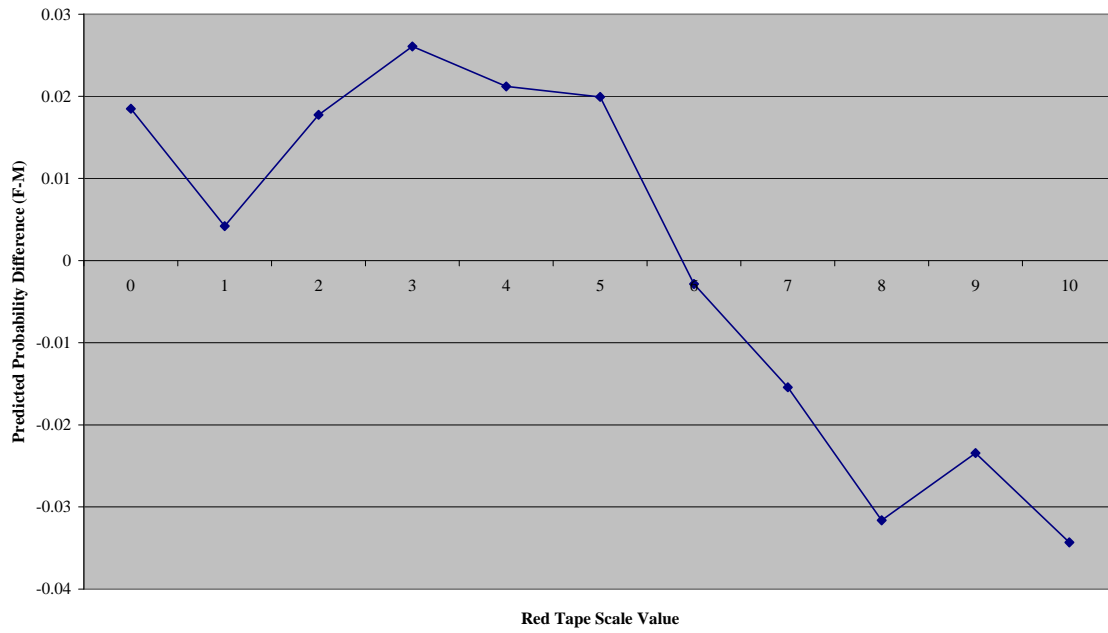
	policies and procedures that have negative effects on the city's performance, please assess the level of red tape in the City of _____. (Please enter a number in the box between 0 and 10, with 0 indicating no red tape and 10 indicating the highest level of red tape)		Bozeman (1995)	
Rule Volume	Are the number of policies and procedures in your department:	0=Far Too Few 1=Too Few 2=About Right 3=Too Many 4=Far Too Many	Bozeman and Rainey 1998	
Burdensome Rules	Problematic nature of burdensome departmental rules (reversed)	0=Major 1=Somewhat 2=Not a Problem	Interview Data	
Unnecessary Rules	Problematic nature of rules that perceived as unnecessary	0=Major 1=Somewhat 2=Not a Problem	Adapted from Bozeman 2000	

**Table 2. Ordered Probit Modeling of Perceived Rule Attributes**

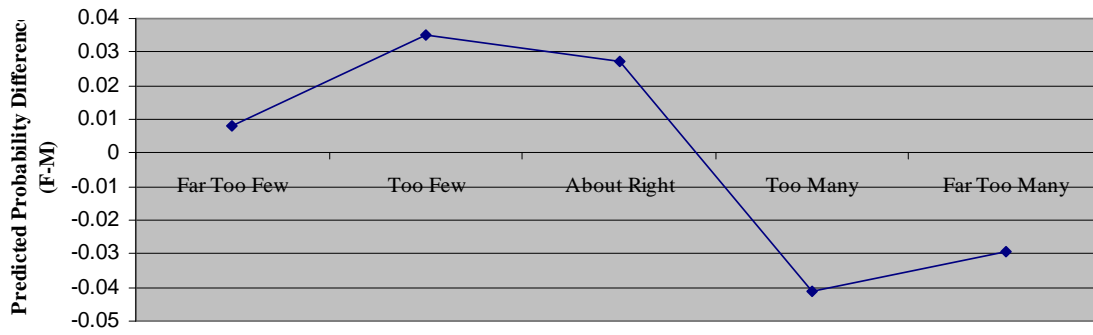
	Red Tape z-score	Rule Volume z-score	Burdensome Rules z-score	Unnecessary Rules z-score
Gender (0=M, 1=F)	-2.40	-1.86	-2.34	-2.37
Hierarchical Status	-3.00	-4.07	-2.33	-0.81
Race	0.21	0.96	0.81	-0.32
Age	-1.84	-1.85	-2.44	-1.68
Education	-0.94	-0.85	-0.59	-1.36
City Tenure	2.02	1.55	1.98	0.94
Professional Association Member	0.93	1.42	1.95	0.21
Salary	1.52	2.20	0.51	1.09
City B	0.68	0.73	0.57	-0.51
City C	0.53	-0.01	0.41	-1.62
City D	-0.54	0.07	0.82	-1.57
McKelvey and Zavoina's R <sup>2</sup>	0.08	0.09	0.09	0.06



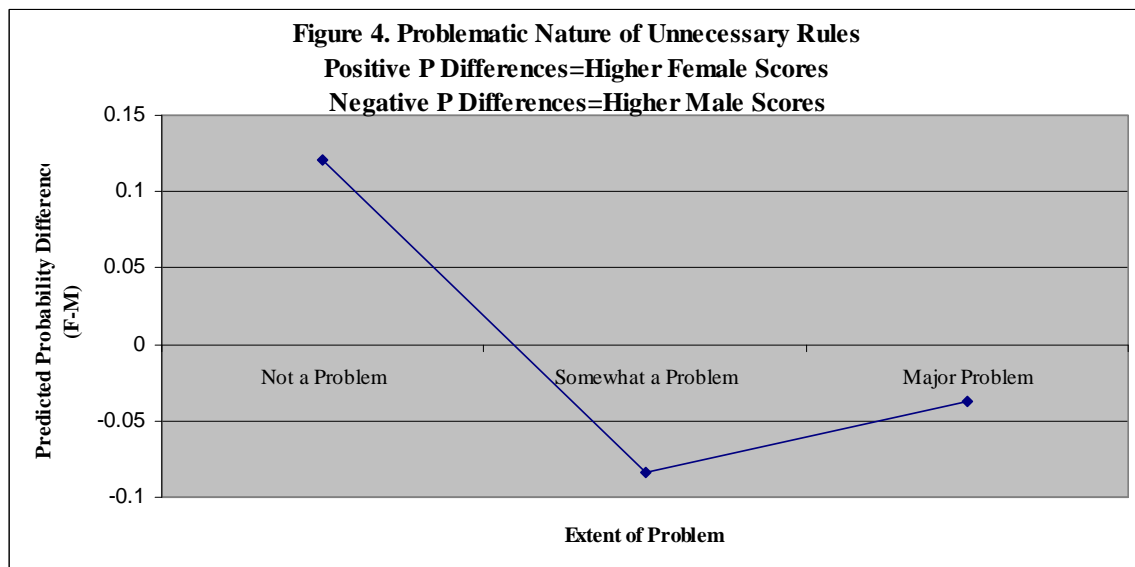
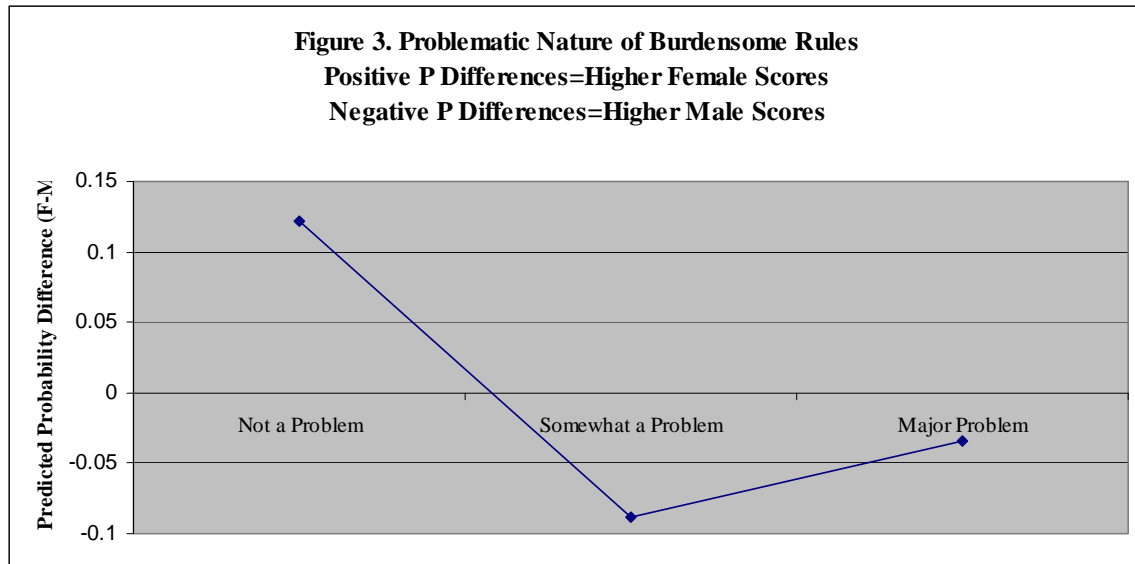
**Figure 1. Gender and Perceived Red Tape**  
**Positive P Differences=Higher Female Scores**  
**Negative P Differences=Higher Male Scores**



**Figure 2. Gender and Perceived Rule Volume**  
**Positive P Differences=Higher Female Scores**  
**Negative P Differences=Higher Male Scores**



**Would you say the rules in your department are:**



<sup>i</sup> Caiden 1991. Normal bureaucracy is gender neutral and functions to deliver traditional bureaucratic values of efficiency, equity and legitimacy. Cite Bozeman.