

**Erika L. Kirgios**  
**Research Statement**

I have frequently been one of very few women in the room—at high-school math competitions, as a computer science major, and as a Ph.D. student at Wharton. While being in the minority is often difficult and isolating, under certain circumstances, the attention I’ve received for standing out has had surprising upsides. A desire to better understand both the harms and benefits of having my identity highlighted in these contexts has helped to inspire and motivate my research.

In my work, I draw on insights from organizational behavior, behavioral economics, and judgment and decision-making to improve our understanding of diversity and inclusion in organizations. More specifically, I have developed theories and conducted empirical investigations into how, when, and why increasing the salience of diversity and identity—as opposed to hiding or obscuring identity—can improve outcomes for women and racial minorities. While organizational diversity and inclusion is my primary focus, I also have secondary interests in encouraging prosocial and health behavior.

I specialize in designing and running field experiments, which I believe can offer a unique window into how psychological effects play out in organizational contexts. During my doctoral training, I have carried out 16 field experiments including as many as 948,000 participants (total N across experiments = 1.3 million). I have partnered with gyms, hospitals, non-profits, technology firms, and governments, and I have also run email audit experiments without partners. I often pair field experiments with laboratory experiments and archival data analyses to explore the mechanisms driving patterns of interest.

**Research on Diversity & Inclusion**

The Benefits of Drawing Attention to Marginalized Identity and Diversity

In my dissertation, I propose that making demographic identity or diversity salient can influence decision-makers to make choices that favor women and racial minorities. People generally want to signal—to themselves and to others—that they’re fair, moral, and believe in equality. Even those who do not endorse egalitarianism may fear social sanction if others judge them to be sexist or racist. Thus, I posit that when concerns about diversity and discrimination are salient, people are more likely to promote the success of marginalized group members in order to avoid feeling or seeming prejudiced. My work highlights the importance of signaling theory in shaping workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) decisions and sheds light on the importance of drawing attention to diversity, equity, and identity during decision-making processes.

In a paper co-authored with Aneesh Rai, Edward Chang, and Katy Milkman, which has been invited for 3<sup>rd</sup> round review at *Nature Human Behaviour*, we test an implication of this theory: women and racial minorities might benefit from deliberately emphasizing their demographic identity when seeking help (e.g., by including statements like “As a Black woman. . .” in their requests). We propose that when a help-seeker highlights their marginalized identity, it draws the

prospective helper's attention to the potential for prejudice to influence their behavior. To avoid feeling or appearing prejudiced, prospective helpers may be more likely to offer their assistance.

We find support for these hypotheses across a pre-registered audit experiment in the field involving 2,476 city councilors, a second field experiment with 1,169 undergraduates, and a pre-registered online experiment. In our first field experiment, we found that White male city councilors were 24.4% more likely to respond to requests for career advice when women and racial minorities with names that clearly signaled their race and gender explicitly mentioned their identity in their asks. Similarly, undergraduates in a second field experiment were 79.6% more likely to volunteer research help to a Black male graduate student when he explicitly mentioned his racial identity in his request. A follow-up online experiment ( $n = 1,500$ ) testing our complete model provided evidence that mentioning identity activates motivations to control prejudice, thus increasing prospective helpers' willingness to provide support to women and racial minorities. While prior literature often characterizes motivation to control prejudice as a static trait, our findings suggest it is dynamic and that drawing timely attention to the potential for bias to affect decision-making can reduce prejudiced behavior.

In my sole-authored dissertation work, I examine another way of drawing attention to demographic identity: through gender-congruent persuasion strategies. Specifically, I explore how an advocate's gender and the persuasion strategies they use influence their ability to inspire support for workplace gender equity initiatives. Extant literature suggests that male allies may be more effective advocates for workplace gender equity than women because men are perceived as less biased. However, I suggest that emotional narratives about gender inequity will draw people's attention to the fact that female advocates are personally affected by gender inequity, while male advocates are not. Consistent with literature on the norm of self-interest, this should lead female advocates to appear more legitimate and sympathetic. Indeed, in a large-scale, pre-registered field experiment ( $n = 70,452$ ) I find that female (but not male) advocates are more likely to spur people to sign a petition for a gender equity initiative when they share emotional narratives about the cause, thereby highlighting their gender.

I've also examined how making diversity more salient affects decision-makers' personnel selection decisions. For example, in a paper with Edward Chang, Aneesh Rai, and Katy Milkman that was published in *Management Science*, we draw on the choice bracketing literature to develop a theory of how narrow versus broad choice sets influence the diversity of hires. Because diversity is a property of groups, not individuals, we theorize that diversity is more likely to be salient—and therefore to be factored into the selection process—when someone makes multiple hiring decisions simultaneously rather than one at a time. Across six pre-registered experiments, we find that people who make sets of hiring decisions (rather than a single hire) construct more gender-diverse groups and that the salience of diversity both moderates and mediates this effect. This work adds to a growing literature on how features of a decision-making environment can be altered to promote greater organizational diversity.

Thinking about how the salience of diversity might affect organizational hiring decisions inspired another project examining how the size of a group influences who people choose to add to it. I'm collaborating on a paper with Aneesh Rai, Edward Chang, and Katy Milkman that was recently invited for revision and resubmission at *Organization Science* in which we theorize that people view groups as a collection of hiring decisions and that, consistent with Bayesian reasoning, people make different inferences about larger versus smaller homogeneous groups. In particular, we propose and find that people are more likely to hire women and racial minorities to join larger, all-male or all-White groups because they think those groups: (1) are less diverse; (2) face more impression management concerns around diversity; and (3) are more likely to be formed via an unfair hiring process than smaller homogeneous groups. We find evidence of this in three pre-registered laboratory experiments and in analyses of S&P 1500 corporate board data. This work offers further evidence that when diversity and diversity-related signaling concerns are more salient, decision-makers are more likely to make choices that increase diversity.

### Marginalized Group Members' Strategic Decision-Making

Across multiple projects described above, I've found that bringing attention to diversity can improve outcomes for marginalized group members. In closely related work, I suggest that women and racial minorities sometimes intuit the benefits of highlighting their identity. In a paper co-authored with Edward Chang and Katy Milkman in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, we identify an important moderator of people's well-established desire for homophily. When people expect to compete against colleagues for scarce resources (e.g., bonuses, promotions), they often seek to differentiate themselves and their work. We propose that this drive to stand out will lead women and racial minorities to be more willing to join groups in which they will be underrepresented because they expect their demographic uniqueness to provide a competitive edge. Indeed, across six pre-registered studies, we find that when facing the prospect of intra-group competition, female and Black participants are more willing to join all-male and all-White groups, respectively, because they believe being a token will help them stand out. This work suggests that, at least in some cases, marginalized group members recognize potential benefits of drawing attention to their identity.

In follow-up work with Ike Silver and Edward Chang, I am examining how organizational statements that make diversity more salient influence marginalized group members' willingness to apply to a job. We propose that women and racial minorities will be more attracted to companies whose job advertisements state specific diversity targets rather than vague diversity commitments because they want to maximize their chances of being hired. Specific targets might repel women and racial minorities concerned about being stigmatized as "diversity hires," but we suggest that because women and racial minorities expect to experience discrimination in most environments, strategic concerns will dominate their decision-making. We find evidence in support of our hypotheses in a pre-registered audit experiment (n = 5,557) conducted with a non-profit seeking part-time employees and a pre-registered online experiment (n = 495). These

findings shed light on how public goal-setting can affect the behavior of relevant third parties. We are preparing this manuscript for submission to the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

### Increasing Organizational Diversity and Inclusion

In another stream of work, I explore when and how organizations tend to become more diverse and inclusive. For example, in a project that was rejected but invited for resubmission at *Management Science*, Edward Chang and I investigate the effects of *impact aversion*, or the desire to minimize changes relative to the status quo, on hiring decisions. We theorize that when tasked with hiring someone to replace a departing group member, people will be disproportionately likely to choose a replacement with the same demographic identity in order to minimize perceived differences between the original and new group. We find evidence of impact aversion in U.S. federal judge appointments over 75 years, in the selection of board members for S&P 1500 companies over five years, and in two pre-registered online experiments. These findings suggest that, along with prejudice and discrimination, decision-making heuristics can influence whether an organization diversifies.

Overall, my work on DEI highlights key ways that basic decision-making processes like attention, Bayesian updating, and self-image maintenance affect organizational diversity and inclusion. Existing diversity research focuses primarily on the harms of emphasizing demographic identity given the prevalence of prejudicial attitudes, so interventions to increase diversity and inclusion tend to focus on obscuring or hiding identity. In contrast, my work identifies the previously unsung benefits of highlighting diversity and identity in some contexts. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of organizational DEI processes and allow me to build theoretically-grounded, targeted interventions that can increase diversity without necessarily eradicating people's (often sticky) biases.

### **Research on Prosocial and Health Behavior Change in Organizations**

Drawing on insights from organizational behavior and behavioral economics, my colleagues and I have conducted large-scale field experiments testing theories about what drives people to donate money to charity, offer help to their colleagues or potential mentees, exercise more regularly, and follow public health guidelines.

### Prosocial Behavior

Like my work on diversity and inclusion, my work on prosocial behavior draws on signaling theory. For example, I have examined how people's behavior shifts when an opportunity to signal authenticity is made salient. An enormous body of research has demonstrated that financial incentives motivate behavior change. But those who receive incentives for "good" behavior like recycling or volunteering tend to view their actions less positively, and as less authentically motivated, due to the perceived incompatibility between incentives and intrinsic motives. In a project recently published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, my colleagues and I theorize that people will seek opportunities to re-interpret the original

motives for their actions even *after* a rewarded behavior has been completed (e.g., after someone has been paid to recycle or exercise). We propose that when the intrinsic rewards of their incentivized behavior are highlighted, people will forgo some or all of their earned incentives to retroactively signal that their motives were authentic. We find evidence of this “motivation laundering” effect in a large-scale field experiment with gym-goers who recently completed an incentivized exercise program (n = 17,968) and are invited to return their earnings, and in an online experiment in which participants (n = 763) were paid \$2 to write letters to hospitalized children and are, again, invited to return their earnings. Our findings suggest that people’s perceptions about the authenticity of their motives are malleable even after they have acted.

In another paper about perceptions of authenticity, Haley Blunden, Aneesh Rai, Edward Chang, Katy Milkman and I build on social exchange theory to examine how a positive signaling behavior can go awry when it is perceived as inauthentic. Flattery is typically seen as a positive action that deserves a positive response in kind. However, we propose that if flattery is deemed inauthentic by the recipient, they will instead respond negatively. We test this hypothesis in a field experiment with U.S. city councilors (n=2,544) and in two follow-up online experiments (total n=2,488). Across our experiments, we find that when people use flattery to convince someone to provide career support, they are *less* likely to receive help. This work is in preparation for submission to the *Academy of Management Journal*.

### Health Behavior Change

I am also interested in using large-scale field experiments to improve our understanding of what causes employees and citizens to engage in healthier behaviors. For example, I build on existing work on temptation bundling to demonstrate that people can self-impose and even spontaneously learn this behavior change strategy in a paper published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* and co-authored with Graelin Mandel (a Penn senior thesis student I helped mentor), Yeji Park, Katy Milkman, Dena Gromet, Joseph Kay, and Angela Duckworth. In another ongoing project with a large team of cross-disciplinary scholars (Katy Milkman, Susan Athey, Angela Duckworth, Heather Graci, Dean Karlan, Michael Luca, Molly Offer-Westort, and Chris Udry), my co-authors and I propose that inducing curiosity increases engagement with health information and leads to greater adherence to public health guidelines. We find evidence consistent with this theorizing across three pre-registered field experiments (total n = 989,213) examining the effectiveness of communications about COVID-19 in the U.S. and Ghana.

### **Conclusion**

In the future, I plan to continue drawing on my interdisciplinary background in organizational behavior, behavioral economics, and judgment and decision-making to develop testable theories about what can help organizations improve their diversity and inclusion efforts, motivate prosocial behavior, and encourage their employees and citizens to live healthier lives.