

Dear Dr. Bicakova,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to evaluate this dissertation on “Essays in Behavioral Economics” by Danijela Vuletić Čugalj’s. The dissertation consists of three essays.

In the first essay, the candidate conducted a field experiment in partnership with a blood bank in Bosnia and Herzegovina to study the effect of reminders and frames on donors’ willingness to give blood. Motivated by theories in behavioral economics, the candidate tested the effect of letters that varied in terms of goal framing. In particular, some of the letters identified a specific beneficiary of blood transfusion. In her experimental design, the effects of the various letters were compared with a control group of donors who did not receive any letter. The essay’s main finding is that letters work as “reminders”, but there was no additional effects of how the letters were framed. The “reminder effect” was large (6.4 percentage point increase in the probability of giving blood, corresponding to a 62% increase relative to the control group) and cost effective. The finding that framing did not have an effect is very interesting. In other contexts, other scholars have found strong framing effects. The fact that the candidate found no effects in her context goes against many readers’ priors, I believe, and that makes the result more interesting (demonstrating the context-specific nature of nudges).

In the second essay, the candidate focused on gender-based favoritism, again in the context of pro-social behavior (blood donation). Once again, the study’s design was motivated by behavioral economics theories according to which “identity” plays an important role in shaping human behavior. In the experiment, the candidate contrasts a standard invitation to give blood with an invitation that included the blood recipient’s name and picture. Her main finding is that the probability of a person giving blood is higher if the potential blood recipient is of the same gender. Once again the effect size was economically important (a donor is, on average, 7.4 percentage points more likely to donate when the recipient is of the same gender). Interestingly, this result was mainly driven by male donors. I found this result very intriguing. I would encourage the candidate to discuss her finding in relation to other work in behavioral economics. In

particular, it would be useful to include a discussion of other contexts in which men have demonstrated (conscious or unconscious) favoritism toward other men.

The third essay, coauthored with Ina Ganguli and Patrick Gaulé, focuses on a different topic, the choice of enrolling in graduate education programs. However, similar to the other essays that form this dissertation, the candidate focuses on a socially relevant phenomenon and on behavioral economics mechanisms. The study consisted of an experimental survey (i.e., a survey that includes an experimental component) conducted on a sample of chemistry graduate students in the United States. The survey measures respondents' beliefs about their academic job market prospects and their likelihood to publish in leading scientific journals. Then, participants are randomly assigned to either a control group or to receiving information about the academic job market. Respondents were surveyed again one year later. This study's main findings are as follows: students are over-optimistic about their academic job market prospects; the information treatments did induce participants to update their beliefs, but they did not affect their likelihood to pursue post-doctoral studies. The authors examine a set of possible explanations for this lack of an effect. A general comment regarding this essay is that I think the authors should motivate their choice to focus on chemistry students. Is there something special about this field that made the authors choose it for their study?

In my view, the three essays demonstrate that the candidate possesses strong research skills and creativity. Moreover, they demonstrate an ability to focus on important research questions, of scholarly and practical relevance, and of relevance for public policy. The research questions are clearly motivated and articulated; rigorous theoretical reasoning and arguments motivate the studies' design; the experiments are carefully designed; and the statistical analyses are appropriate and competently executed. I was particularly impressed by the candidate's ability to execute field experiments in partnership with a blood bank. Embarking in field experimental research is quite challenging and risky. Doing so while being a PhD student is particularly impressive and I think the candidate should be commended for her work and remarkable achievements.

In conclusion, this dissertation clearly demonstrates the candidate's ability to conduct independent and high quality research. In my view, this dissertation satisfies formal and content requirements for a PhD thesis in economics, and I positively recommend the dissertation for a defense.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mario Macis', written in a cursive style.

Mario Macis  
Associate Professor  
Johns Hopkins University  
Carey Business School  
100 International Dr.  
Baltimore, MD 21202  
Telephone: +1-773-817-5801  
E-mail: [mmacis@jhu.edu](mailto:mmacis@jhu.edu)