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1-2020

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#### Citation

Singapore Management University. Three useful things to know about human motivation. (2020).  
Available at: <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/pers/503>

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# Three useful things to know about human motivation

31 Jan 2020

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*Unseen commitments as well as material incentives drive our decisions and play an influential role in human motivation*

Economics has long found common cause with psychology and sociology when it comes to human motivation and seeking explanations for the decisions we make.

A multidisciplinary view of human behaviour is integral to the research of **Gigi Foster**, a professor in the school of economics at UNSW Business School. Here she offers some insights into motivation.

## LOVE AND LOYALTY

Foster points out that unseen commitments underpin many short and long-run economic choices.

“Material incentives are the dominant force in motivating our medium-run choices, such as which profession to pursue, what investment plan to opt for, or which country to settle in.

“But unseen factors – chief among them our loves and loyalties to people, groups and ideals – drive a large share of our short-run and long-run resource-allocation choices, from how we choose to spend our time, to whether we are kind to a homeless person, to what we write into our wills,” she says.

“Love is a powerful force, arguably the one in the world most able to deliver peace and joy at both the individual and the group level, but economics doesn’t yet have a common understanding of how it arises or is sustained; neither do our sister disciplines of psychology or sociology.

This is a major frontier in social science, according to Foster, who says that understanding how unseen motivators such as love and loyalty arise would advance science and also enable governments to better understand how to educate and incentivise people to promote what is arguably the ultimate maximand: human welfare.

## A BIG HONEYPOT

According to Foster, when you reward any behaviour too heavily in the material sphere, non-material ideals that originally drove that behaviour start to get corrupted.

“Basic economics teaches that you get what you pay for – that higher remuneration for a task or an occupation gets you a better-quality job. But this is only part of the story,” she says.

“Sometimes a behaviour being heavily rewarded materially should, from a social-welfare perspective, be driven by non-material motivations. The heavy material rewards can lead to less usefulness to society of the group being rewarded – and in extreme cases, a net social cost.”

“Even academics in social science exemplify this problem. Too much status and money being available to successful people in my profession leads to the selection of people into the profession who are more interested in their own careers than in advancing science.”

At a broader level of human motivation, Foster observes that the existence of a big honeypot which people compete for brings out people's greedy nature.

This is evident in the grey-gifts culture of Australia where people at the top of society collude to siphon off wealth, as documented in *Game of Mates: How Favours Bleed the Nation*, by Paul Frijters and Cameron Murray. "We see it particularly in Australia's oligopolistic industries, which are many in number because we're such a small and isolated nation," says Foster.

"The bottom line is that people are greedy, and if you feed or tempt that beast too much, then people will behave like the animals they are."

## **MENTAL EQUIPMENT**

To understand what motivates people, it is important to look back into the history of when our brains evolved.

"Today's Homo sapiens are the result of tens of thousands of years of evolution, of which somewhere around 90 per cent of time was spent by our ancestors living a hunter-gatherer (or forager) lifestyle," Foster says.

"This means that the mental equipment we have – which carries implications for what is able to motivate us – is the result of the evolution of traits that would be successful in that sort of lifestyle."

In the modern world of great powers, anonymous networks, nation states and complex, formal institutions – not to mention complicated clothing – Foster says this would be beyond the understanding of the hunter-gatherer.

"But our minds, which evolved to succeed in the hunter-gatherer world, must somehow make sense of and guide our actions towards survival in the modern world," says Foster.

## **NATURAL ATTRACTORS**

So, what drew the attention of the forager?

"Danger, for one: to be able to sense and quickly react to danger, in order to survive," Foster says.

"This has given us humans the tendency to react more immediately and viscerally to bad news than to good news, which in turn drives some of the decisions of profit-driven media companies about what material to cover ('If it bleeds, it leads,' as they say).

"Second, the forager had to work on behalf of his 'team' – the others in his band – in order to survive. This has given us our wonderful capacity for bonding with other humans, which in turn drives the strength of the social units that build our society, such as our marriages and friendships, and our pro-social human motivations such as helping others.

"Of course, it can also backfire and lead to corruption among elite groups (see above)," Foster notes.

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