

Acceptance speech

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Elke Weber, awardee in the Humanities and Social Sciences category (16th edition)

I am delighted and humbled to receive the Frontiers of Knowledge Award in the Humanities and Social Sciences for my work on environmental decision making and the factors that motivate action against climate change. I thank the BBVA Foundation and the members of the selection committee for this tremendous honor.

Environmental decision making is a new discipline. It grew out of behavioral decision theory and its acknowledgement that humans (*homo sapiens*, “we”) don’t necessarily make decisions in a purely rational fashion. Present bias, loss aversion, and other systematic deviations from economic rationality often lead to decisions that are not in our best long-term interest. This is true in many domains, from insufficient pension savings to unhealthy eating, where foresightful behavior requires immediate and certain sacrifice for the delayed and often highly uncertain future benefits. This is also true for environmental decisions, including climate action, but here the future benefits do not even come back to us, but to others in far-away places or in future generations. Environmental decisions also involve public goods and common-pool resources that are free for the taking, which makes protective action even more daunting.

But, fortunately, a better understanding of human decision making under risk and uncertainty is not all bad news. It helps to know that people are motivated not only by personal material consequences, but that they also care about their social status, and that they have psychological needs (like feeling safe or being confident in their decisions). This knowledge provides us with a much larger set of incentives to motivate action than those provided by economics and the law. It also helps to know that we make decisions not just with our heads (calculating consequences), but also with our hearts (responding to feelings of guilt or of pride), and by the book (following moral rules of conduct or standard operating procedures). This knowledge allows us to design decision environments that make foresightful decisions more likely.

“It takes a village” is a cliché, but it is also absolutely true when it comes to growing knowledge through research, getting this knowledge applied in real

world settings, and training the next generation of transdisciplinary scientists and enlightened policy makers in both the public and private sector.

Therefore I want to acknowledge some of my mentors over the years, whose ideas inspired and guided my research. Many of them are unfortunately no longer alive, among them my PhD advisor (the Germans would call him my "Doktorvater") and eminent mathematical psychologist Duncan Luce. Duncan got me to think about decision making under risk and uncertainty in psychological, yet mathematically rigorous ways. I also owe a huge debt to Dave Krantz, co-author with Duncan Luce, Patrick Suppes, and Amos Tversky of the 3-volume magnum opus "Foundations of Measurement". With David I founded the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions at Columbia University in 2001, which started the subdiscipline of environmental decision making and trained dozens of excellent PhD students and postdocs. Third among the departed in whose debt I stand is Howard Kunreuther, a behavioral economist at the University of Pennsylvania, who provided "his" chapter on risk management as a platform to introduce nonrational decision processes into the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in the early 2010s.

Now to the living: graduate students, postdocs, colleagues, and collaborators too numerous to mention. Princeton University has been a deeply stimulating intellectual home for the past 8 years, where I founded the Behavioral Science for Policy Lab that spans the Andlinger Center for Energy and the Environment in Engineering, the School for Public and International Affairs, and the Department of Psychology. I would like to thank the two colleagues at Princeton who nominated me for the award, themselves previous recipients of the BBVA Frontiers of Knowledge Award: Susan Fiske, in Psychology, who won the award four years ago in the Humanities and Social Sciences category and Simon Levin, in Evolutionary Biology and Ecology, who won the award two years ago in the Ecology and Conservation Biology category. Finally, I am deeply indebted to my collaborator and husband Eric Johnson of Columbia University. I thank him for his inspiration in 25 joint publications and his unflagging support in 25 fabulous years of marriage.

Let me thank you again for this tremendous honor. The international attention garnered by this prize will help to correct the misperception that the absence of adequate climate action is just an information deficit. Understanding the cognitive, motivational, and political deficits that contribute to inaction is the first step to a better future for our species on this planet.