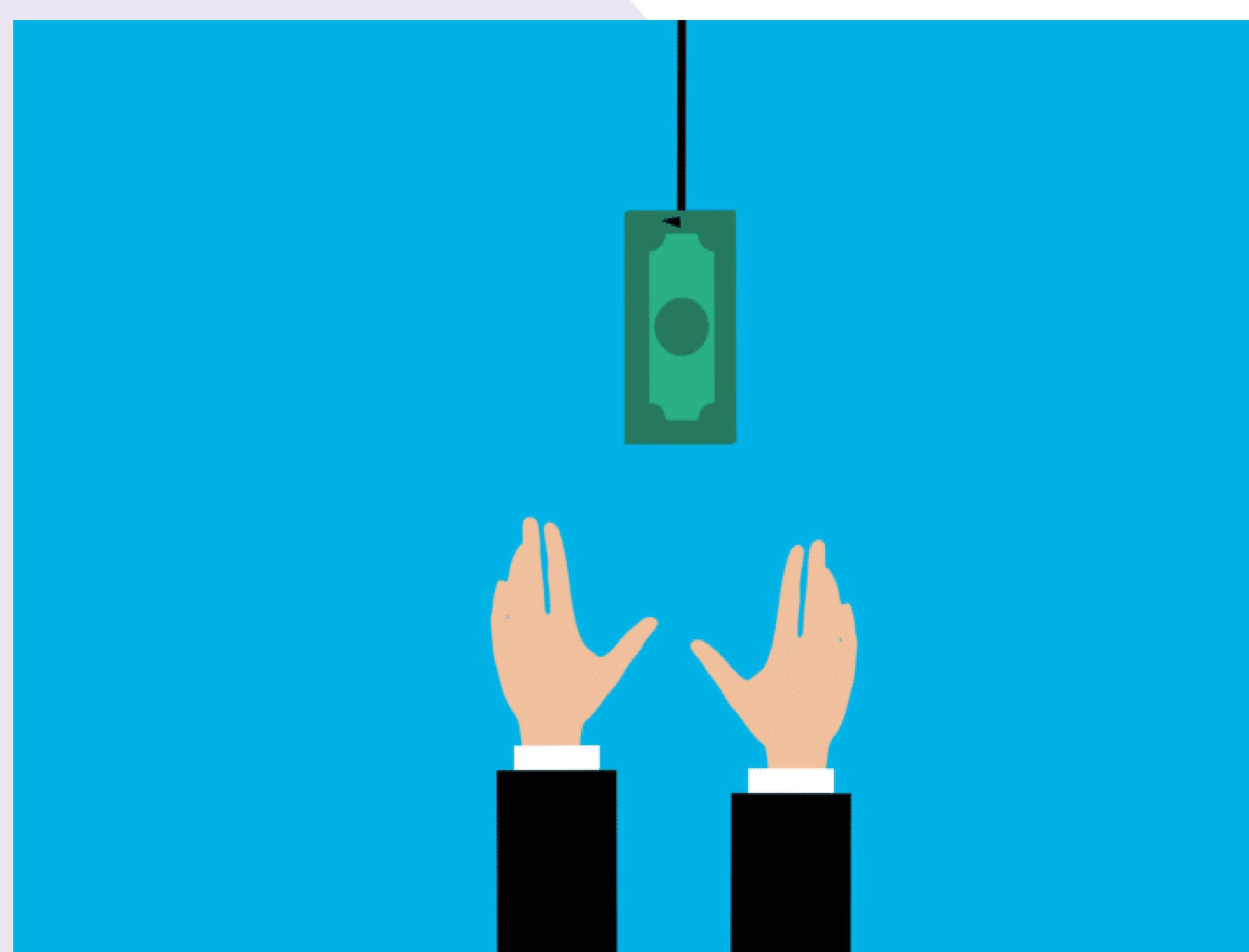


# “It was a game”: Middle managers experience the dark side of incentives

 Prof. Carol Linehan ([carol.linehan@ucc.ie](mailto:carol.linehan@ucc.ie))  
Dr Olive Fives

## WHAT DID WE DO?

This research explores middle managers subjective experience of incentives. It addresses the dearth of research examining employee experience of HR practices (Guest, 2017). Based on 17 interviews with middle managers, we explore the discourses they draw on to make sense of their experiences of incentives. Drawing on a managerialist repertoire of ‘earned entitlement’ alongside a contrasting ‘game’ repertoire the managers emphasise the uncertainty, risk and competition in incentive processes and practices which require ongoing sensemaking work. This research provides insight into how and why incentives affect employees rather than the more instrumental questions of “how and why they work” (Shaw and Gupta, 2015, p. 289). By attending in-depth to employees’ sensemaking, we allow for the possibility of a dark side to incentives to emerge.



*‘we go off like good little worker bees...and we’ll be delighted with ourselves, and...what they’ll do is they’ll put a regime of performance targets in place that cannot be met, just can’t be met and they’ll do it in a very sophisticated way, that will require, you know trigonometry, to figure out how to do it. I said you’re wasting your fucking time!’ Patricia*

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The impact of this research is to uncover the material, emotional and relational dark sides to incentive practices and highlight issues of shifting pay risk, increased competition and uncertainty, and deteriorating relationships. Even for those ‘winning the game’ the stakes are high in terms of expected performance relative to others. The dark sides of incentives are found in appropriated employee generated value, power imbalances and enduring effects on relationships, workload, and wellbeing. This research underscores the need to continue to investigate (i) employees’ experiences of work practices such as incentives and (ii) factor in outcomes/consequences for employees in any ethical evaluation of HR/Organisational practices. Without both these strands of investigation potential dark sides to HR policy and practice will remain in the shadows.

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