

# **Escalation of Darkness by White-Collar Offenders: A Case Study of Environmental Crime Convenience**

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## **Abstract**

Commitment to goals can escalate to such an extent that it encourages deviant behavior even after detection of a crime. A case study illustrates how detection of environmental crime in one country led to environmental crime in another country. The Probo Koala tanker ship was to deliver another shipment of coker gasoline waste to the Ivory Coast, and her sister ship, Probo Emu, both owned by Trafigura, was preparing for the same journey. Trouble started when the illegal waste shipment was detected. Trafigura management quickly found an alternative destination for the waste, where an explosion harming local citizens occurred. The case of redirecting the tanker ship to Norway is studied as a dark project by application of convenience theory, which suggests that offenders have financial motives, organizational opportunities, as well as willingness for deviant behavior caused by escalating commitment to illegal behavior to reach goals such as getting rid of the hazardous waste.

## **Keywords**

Escalation of commitment, deviant behavior, convenience theory, environmental crime, white-collar offender.

## **Introduction**

Escalation of commitment is defined as “decision-making in the face of negative feedback about prior resource allocations, uncertainty surrounding the likelihood of goal attainment, and choice about whether to continue” (Keil et al. 2007: p. 392). While escalation of commitment is a well-known phenomenon, many researchers have focused primarily on studying escalation behavior in laboratory experiments, thereby studying the antecedents or causes of escalation of commitment (e.g. Biyalogorsky et al. 2006; Conlon & Garland 1993; Schmidt and Calantone 2002). Sleesman et al. (2018) state that previous escalation literature focused largely on psychological and individual aspects with only a fraction of the literature highlighting contextual factors. This results in a poor understanding of the rich and complex dynamics underlying escalation behavior in organizations (Sleesman et al. 2018).

As such, existing research offers little to explain how escalation behavior starts, intensifies, and sometimes, spirals out of control. With ‘out of control’ we refer to commitment to a project that drives project managers to intensify illegal behavior (Welsh et al. 2020), i.e. the dark side of organizational leadership (Linstead 2014). When time or costs turn out to be insufficient for the project, escalating unethical or illegal activities may occur in an attempt to attain the project’s goals (e.g. Locatelli et al. 2017; Schweitzer et al. 2004; Welsh et al. 2020).

In this article, we explore what can drive a project beyond the edge, that is: how commitment to a project, over time, can escalate to such a degree that the project engages in further unethical or illegal practices. To analyze this question, we focus on the extreme case of Vest Tank, a so-called dark project: a project that was illegal from the start (Gormley 2009; Gulating 2013, 2015; Maksimentsev & Maksimentseva 2020; Nordhordland 2010; Pedersen 2017).

The increased focus on sustainable development goals and environmental crime has made

handling and disposal of waste more difficult and more expensive than ever before. The potential financial gains for bending the rules or concealing illegal dumping of waste can be substantial (Böhm 2020; Huisman & Erp, 2013; Lynch 2020). As such, this is the right context for examining dark projects. Examining such an extreme case allowed us to discover the dynamic drivers of illegal behavior in dark projects. Based on convenience theory (Braaten & Vaughn 2019; Dearden & Gottschalk, 2020), we will discuss causes for engaging in illegal activities and examine how these causes interact and reinforce each other in system dynamics terms (Sterman 2000). Furthermore, we will propose how these three causes also can explain escalation of commitment in legitimate projects.

In the next sections, we will discuss our theoretical framework that is based on two streams of research, i.e. escalation of commitment and white-collar crime convenience. Then, the case study is described, followed by a case analysis. In the discussion we introduce a dynamic model explaining the drivers of unethical behavior and explain how these drivers interact so that they push a project over to the darker side. Finally, we present managerial and theoretical contributions.

## **Escalation of commitment**

In his seminal study on this phenomenon, Staw (1976: 29) describes escalation behavior as a negative reinforcing process: “due to a need to justify prior behavior, a decision maker may increase his commitment in the face of negative consequences, and this higher level of commitment may, in turn, lead to further negative consequences”. Van de Ven and Poole (1990) find that negative outcomes in an innovation project predicted subsequent expansions of actions.

Thus, instead of accepting an immediate loss and terminating the project, decision makers

may commit new and additional resources in terms of funds, personnel, or time to it. Once investors have made commitments to a project, they are inclined to reinvest later in order to “save” their initial investment (Van de Ven et al. 2008). This could lead to a costly circle of escalation (Staw & Ross 1978). In their meta-analytic review of the determinants of escalation of behavior, Sleesman et al. (2012) describe four sets of antecedents. Project determinants explain that the decision to escalate or de-escalate depends on the highest expected utility. The quality of information available to decision makers is such a project determinant. Biyalogorsky et al. (2006) argue that escalation is caused by the improper use of initial positive beliefs in the face of negative new information, and Keil et al. (2000) remark that negative project status information is sometimes not available or not attended to. Simester and Zhang (2010) describe three ways of responding to unfavorable information in escalation settings: distorting, discrediting, or simply not collecting information that may reveal unfavorable news. Uncertain, ambiguous, or simply the lack of information about the project may increase escalation. Psychological determinants are the second set of antecedents of escalation behavior.

Examples of these determinants are sunk costs, self-efficacy, ego threats, and personal responsibility for the initial decision (Sleesman, et al. 2012). Project managers who are personally responsible for negative outcomes are more inclined to increase investment in resources (Staw 1976). Schmidt and Calantone (2002) argue that managers who initiate a project report a higher level of commitment to it than do those who assume leadership after the start. Social determinants of escalation describe the involvement of other parties (evaluators, commentators, rivals, observers). Decision makers subject to outside evaluation are more likely to escalate in order to save face (Brockner et al. 1981; Sleesman et al. 2012). Finally, structural determinants of escalation describe the structural features of an organization and its interaction

patterns. The principal-agent perspective is part of this category, whereby managerial incentives to escalate diverge from the interests of the organization (Sleesman et al. 2012). This may occur especially in a context that is conducive to adverse selection, as when the manager has private knowledge and so can pursue a personal agenda.

Sleesman et al. (2012) concluded from their literature review of these four sets of determinants that a relative dearth exists of empirical studies examining social and structural determinants. Some years later, a follow-up study was published focusing on the role of context (Sleesman et al. 2018), in particular group, organizational, and external context. The group context captures factors like autonomy and authority. High levels of autonomy may increase escalation of commitment (Sleesman et al. 2018; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2003). Organizational context focuses on organizational factors that contribute to escalation behavior, like decision making processes, organizational identity and culture, corporate governance, and incentives such as bonuses. Finally, the external context describes, for example, the stakeholder environment, and market and industry factors. Sleesman et al. (2018) conclude in their extensive review that escalation research has largely focused on a single context and that little research has explicitly examined the interaction of factors across these three contexts. In addition, besides mentioning how legal commitments may hamper the ability to terminate a project (Sleesman et al. 2018; Walker 2000) the role of illegal and/or unethical practices in escalation of commitment is not mentioned in this review.

Although criminal organizational practices, to the best of our knowledge, have not been analyzed in the context of escalation of commitment, goal-setting offers more insight into these practices. Goalsetting is often perceived in a positive light, meaning that high goals increase performance (Locke & Latham 2013). However, there is also some evidence suggesting that high

goals can lead to unethical and criminal behavior (Schweitzer et al. 2004; Simmons 2018; Welsh & Ordonez, 2014; Welsh et al. 2019). Welsh et al. (2020) argue that this is not only because of rewards associated with goal attainment, but also because of changing moral reasoning processes related to the goal. As such, high goal commitment facilitates unethical behavior by increasing not only the motivation to achieve the goal but also the motivation to justify doing so by any means necessary (Jonnergård et al. 2010). This is also known as state moral disengagement: a process through which individuals justify unethical behavior (Moore 2015).

### **White-collar crime convenience**

Understanding unethical behavior by business enterprises is an important part of research on criminal activities, where the theory of convenience is an emerging new perspective on white-collar crime (Braaten & Vaughn 2019; Chan & Gibbs 2020; Dearden & Gottschalk 2020; Gottschalk 2017, 2019, 2021). White-collar crime is financial crime committed by individuals in privileged positions in business enterprises and public organizations (Sutherland 1983). White-collar crime is unlawful conduct that elites and the powerful commit without fear of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. White-collar offenders commit and conceal their crime in professional settings where they have legitimate access to premises, resources, and systems (Benson & Simpson 2018; Logan et al. 2019).

Convenience is the state of being able to proceed with something with little effort or difficulty thereby saving time and effort (Farquhar & Rowley 2009; Sundström & Radon 2015) and avoiding pain and strain (Engdahl 2015; Higgins 1997; Mai & Olsen 2016). Convenience is an advantage in favor of a specific action to the detriment of alternative actions. White-collar offenders choose the most convenient path to reach their goals (Wikstrom et al. 2018). The

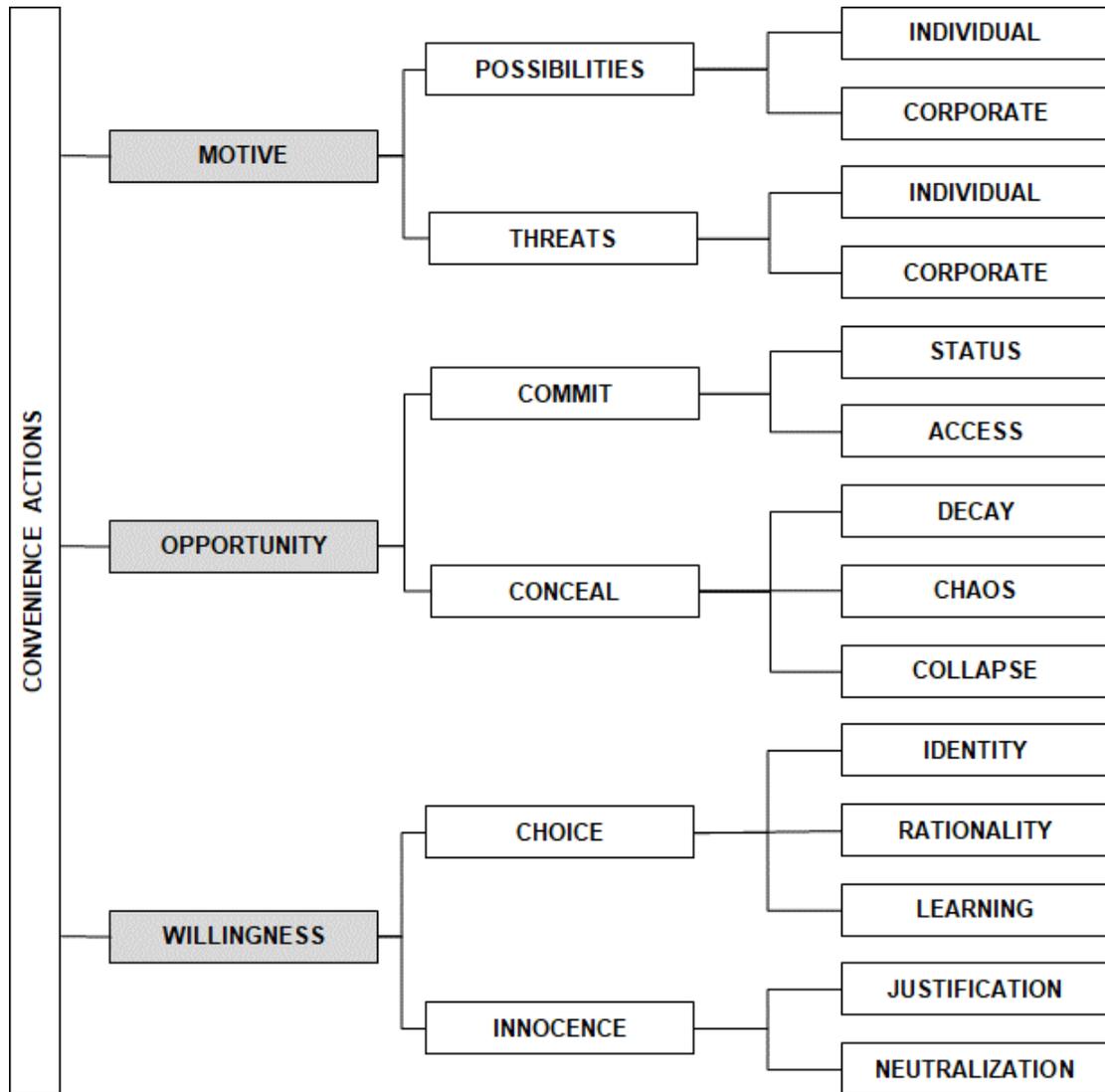
theory of convenience suggests that crime for illegitimate financial gain by white-collar offenders occur because they have an economical motive to explore possibilities and avoid threats, an organizational opportunity to commit and conceal crime, and a personal willingness for deviant behavior (Gottschalk 2019; Sutherland 1983).

Possibilities for the corporation include reaching business objectives by ignoring whether or not means are legitimate or illegitimate (Campbell & Göritz 2014; Jonnergård et al. 2010; Kang & Thosuwanchot 2017). Ends simply justify means that might represent crime. It may be so important to have a bottom line in accounting that satisfies investors and others that crime emerges as potentially acceptable. Dodge (2009: 15) suggests that tough rivalry among executives makes them commit crime to attain goals: “The competitive environment generates pressures on the organization to violate the law in order to attain goals”.

The opportunity to commit and conceal crime in the organizational context depends on the lack of controls, oversight, and guardianship as well as the convenient access to crime resources as illustrated in Figure 1. Legitimate access to premises and systems (Benson & Simpson 2018), specialized access in routine activity (Cohen & Felson 1979), blame game by misleading attribution to others (Eberly et al. 2011), and institutional deterioration (Rodriguez et al. 2005) are some of the perspectives integrated in the opportunity dimension of convenience theory.

The personal willingness for deviant behavior depends on both justification and neutralization as illustrated in Figure 1. A number of factors enhance willingness, such as narcissistic identification (Galvin et al. 2015), acceptable for the elite (Petrocelli et al. 2003), learning from others (Sutherland 1983), negative life events (Engdahl 2015), application of

neutralization techniques (Sykes & Matza 1957), lack of self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), and sliding on the slippery slope (Welsh et al. 2014).



**Figure 1** *Structural model of convenience theory for white-collar crime*

### **Environmental crime case study**

The Vest Tank case that is the subject of our analysis is a case about illegal waste disposal in Norway. Handling and disposal of waste has become more difficult and expensive due to the

increased focus on sustainable development goals and environmental crime. As such, the potential financial gains for bending the rules or concealing illegal dumping of waste can be substantial. Environmental harm and crime has received increased attention in recent years (Böhm 2020; Huisman and Erp 2013; Lynch 2020). Traditionally, white-collar crime cases have focused on non-violent financial crime. Recently, with increased environmentalism, researchers have focused on white-collar crime that can impose physical harm on people (Benson and Simpson 2018: 129):

These offenses are potentially much more serious in that they can and often do impose physical costs on individuals. This is not to say that the perpetrators deliberately set out to harm other people. They do not. The physical harms that they cause are unintended in the sense that they are not what the offender is trying to achieve. The motivation for the offense is not to impose harm on others but rather to gain a financial advantage.

For example, Wingerde and Lord (2020: 478) argue that the waste industry is a criminogenic industry that is vulnerable to environmental crime:

First, this concerns the waste product itself. Waste is a product that has a negative value attached to it (...). Second, the industry in itself also has some characteristics that are considered to be criminogenic.

However, few individuals face convictions for environmental crime. For example, after the British Petroleum (BP) Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, prosecutors brought criminal charges against four British Petroleum executives, but no one ended up in prison (Fowler 2014; Freeh 2013; Thompson 2017). Greife and Maume (2020) found that:

Despite recent attention to multi-billion dollar settlements for environmental violations involving high-profile offenders such as BP and VW, criminal sanctioning of individuals

and organizations for environmental offenses is uncommon.

One exception is the conviction of both the chief executive officer and the chairperson of the board at Vest Tank in Norway, as well as a chemical advisor to the company, who received prison sentences for a tank explosion caused by dangerous waste (Gormley 2009; Gulating 2013, 2015; Nordhordland 2010; Pedersen 2017). Because going to prison is such a serious matter (Dhami 2007; Logan et al. 2019; Stadler et al. 2013), the case of Vest Tank falls into the category of dark projects. The project was concerned with getting rid of the dangerous waste after Trafigura was denied access to waste disposal at the usual site in Africa. The redirection of the Probo Emu tanker to Norway is considered the project, as described below.

The methodology applied in this case study is an archival review by content analysis of court documents (Gulating 2013, 2015; Nordhordland 2010), media reports (Gormley 2009; Knudssøn & Bakke 2009; NRK 2015; Oliver 2010; Pedersen 2017), and published research (Maksimentsev & Maksimentseva 2020). Content analysis is any methodology or procedure that works to identify characteristics within texts attempting to make valid inferences (Bell et al. 2018; Braaten & Vaughn 2019; Saunders et al. 2007). Content analysis assumes that language reflects both how people understand their surroundings and their cognitive processes (Krippendorff 1980; Patrucco et al. 2017). Therefore, content analysis makes it possible to identify and determine relevant issues in a context (McClelland et al. 2010).

### **Environmental crime description**

The Probo Koala tanker ship was to deliver another shipment of coker gasoline waste to the Ivory Coast, and her sister ship, Probo Emu, both owned by Trafigura, was preparing for the same journey. Trouble started when the government of the Ivory Coast detected illegal waste

disposal and threatened to take Trafigura to court for the illegal shipment of coker gasoline waste. The company was later prosecuted and charged for 16 lethal cases and over 100,000 claims of health problems as a result of harm caused by toxic pollution (Maksimentsev & Maksimentseva 2020: 286):

In order to bring the story to a close and release its executives detained in a local prison in expectation of host state court rulings on criminal charges, Trafigura concluded a settlement deal, totaling 100b local francs, with host state government and local victims to pay 95b francs to civil victims and 5b francs to the Côte d'Ivoire state budget in reparation and compensatory payments, at that time an equivalent to approximately USD 198m; it also released its two top managers from the local jail after the deal was properly enacted on 12 February 2007 and countersigned by the government of Côte d'Ivoire. Also, in order to avoid proactive collective lawsuits from the extraterritorial legal attempts of 1,000 victims from the Abidjan community brought overseas to the London courts, Trafigura paid GBP 32m in an out-of-court settlement.

Courts not only in the Ivory Coast and the United Kingdom, but also in the Netherlands later considered Trafigura to be liable for deeply negligent pollution and damage to the safety of the living environment of the host state citizens. The courts found the damage to be a breach of security of industrial operations and transportation of oil products with a heavy impact on human health in Africa. Contact with toxic waste, spills and sludge remaining in the soil and water along oil-transportation pipelines and around onshore and offshore oil-processing sites were considered the responsibility of both Royal Dutch Shell and Trafigura (Maksimentsev & Maksimentseva 2020).

Rather than terminating their detected criminal activities after reactions and controversy

in the West African state, Trafigura instead redirected the Probo Emu tanker ship to the tank facility Vest Tank in Norway (Knudssøn & Bakke 2009; NRK 2015; Oliver 2010). By not telling the whole story about the cargo to executives at Vest Tank in Norway, the waste was accepted and treated by desulphurization, since coker gasoline has low octane and high sulphur content (Gormley 2009).

Vest Tank was selected for two reasons. First, Vest Tank was a company specializing in the receipt and treatment of wash water from the cleaning of empty tanks on oil tankers. The company held the required environmental permits for such activities. For Trafigura, Vest Tank in Norway was in a related business that they could contact when they had trouble. For Vest Tank, Trafigura had a waste disposal problem where Vest Tank could make a profit from cleaning it. Vest Tank had entered into an agreement with Trafigura in 2006 to clean wash water from Trafigura's oil tankers. Thus, there was already a business relationship between the two companies. When Trafigura had a different waste disposal problem, Vest Tank was willing to solve that problem for their customer as well. Six Trafigura vessels arrived with coker gasoline at Vest Tank before the explosion occurred (Knudssøn & Bakke 2009; Pedersen 2017).

The illegal chemical process at Vest Tank started with water and caustic soda being added to the gasoline. Sulfur and some other impurities bind to the caustic soda and precipitate. The mixture is then allowed to stand and separate, and the gasoline that settles on top can be drained. However, some explosive residuals from the coker gasoline accumulated at the bottom of the tank. An attempt was made to neutralize the bottom layer by adding hydrochloric acid. This caused a flammable gas to form, which was ignited by a spark from a coal filter. The pressure from the explosion also caused the neighboring tank to burst, and the waste stored in it flowed down to the explosion site and burned up there. The fire caused a large cloud of poison

that spread along the fjord in several directions. The cloud reached the village of Eivindvik three hours after the explosion. Two weeks later, it was discovered that a large proportion of Eivindvik's one thousand inhabitants were inflicted with disease. Some people developed migraine and other forms of headaches, while others suffered from nausea and vomiting (NRK 2015).

The dark project of illegal waste disposal caused public outrage after the explosion at Vest Tank in Norway. Both the chairperson and the chief executive at Vest Tank as defendants received prison sentences in Norwegian courts (Gulating 2013, 2015; Nordhordland 2010). The commodity trading and logistics company Trafigura avoided the criminal justice system. While Vest Tank white-collar offenders were sentenced to prison in Norway, Trafigura white-collar offenders in the Ivory Coast were released from custody in a settlement deal as explained earlier. Trafigura as a company had to pay fines in the UK, the Netherlands, and the Ivory Coast, but there were never any convictions of Trafigura executives to the best of our knowledge. Trafigura did not stop or alter their waste disposal business, but instead introduced corporate structures with responsibility for potential wrongdoings in local subsidiaries in Africa.

## **Environmental crime analysis**

We apply the structural model of convenience theory shown in Figure 1 to examine Trafigura's motive, opportunity, and willingness in Figure 2 (dark grey boxes). There was a threat to the corporation of not getting rid of the dangerous waste that caused strain, pain, and uncertainty (Langton & Piquero 2007). Surprisingly often, environmental crime and other forms of corporate crime are not caused by the well-known phenomenon of greed (Goldstraw-White 2012). Rather, avoidance of corporate problems is more common (Blickle et al. 2016), as well as adaption to

criminal market forces (Leonard & Weber 1970) and required cooperation with criminal networks and cartels (Goncharov & Peter 2019).

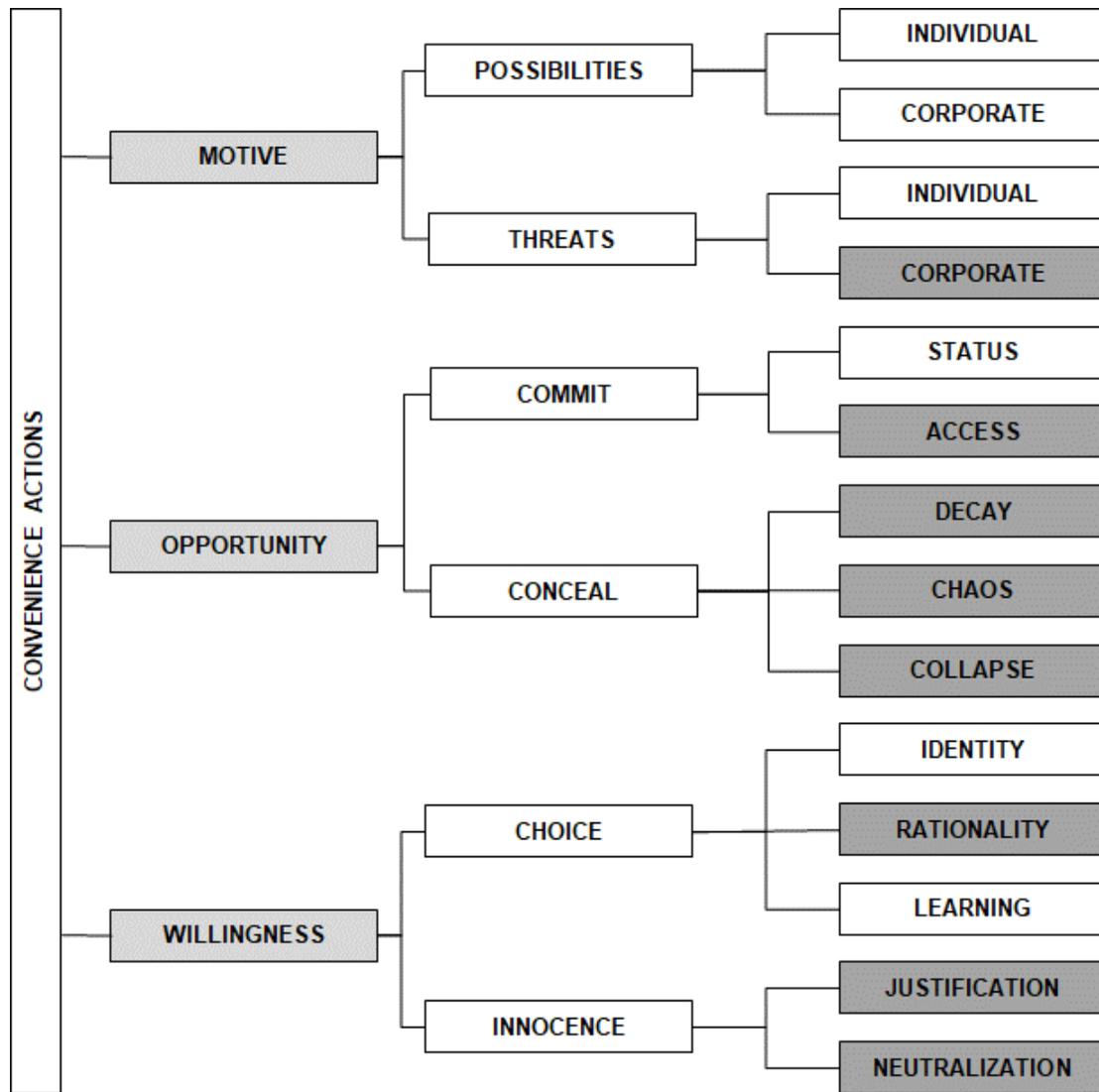
Maksimentsev and Maksimentseva (2020: 285) suggest that executives at Trafigura made a rational judgment to avoid risks of liability in the future by transferring responsibility to local actors in Africa:

The rational judgment from the headquarters was to thus avoid risks related to physical participation in local subsoil use and the environmental impact of criminal extracting and mining operations. This would leave any trouble from host state jurisdictions to locally incorporated special-purpose vehicles (subsidiaries and affiliates), thus anticipating that the corruption and low competencies of local (host state) public officers, prosecution, courts and enforcement agents would limit or mitigate any potential risk and negative impact of environmental crime of transnational corporations, with minimum or no material impact on mother companies, allowing them thus, according to Riley, to ‘evade the risk of liability’.

Trafigura obviously considered it a rational choice to have operations through host state affiliates and subsidiaries under transnational companies holding corporate control. Similarly, they found it convenient to have a shipment destined for Vest Tank.

In the dimension of organizational opportunity of convenience theory, executives at Trafigura had opportunities both to commit and to conceal crime. They created opportunity by entrepreneurship (Ramoglou & Tsang 2016), and they had specialized access in routine activity (Cohen & Felson 1979) to commit crime. They created opportunity by institutional deterioration based on legitimacy (Rodriguez et al. 2005), lack of control in principal-agent relationships (Bosse & Phillips 2016), and rule complexity preventing compliance (Lehman et al. 2020) to

conceal crime.



**Figure 2** Convenience themes in the Trafigura case

Redirecting dangerous waste to a facility that had no state approval for handling it was a rational choice in the motive dimension as well as in the behavioral dimension of convenience theory (Pratt & Cullen 2005). Executives at Trafigura could neutralize their potential guilt by claiming a dilemma had to be solved. Offenders can argue that a dilemma arose whereby they made a

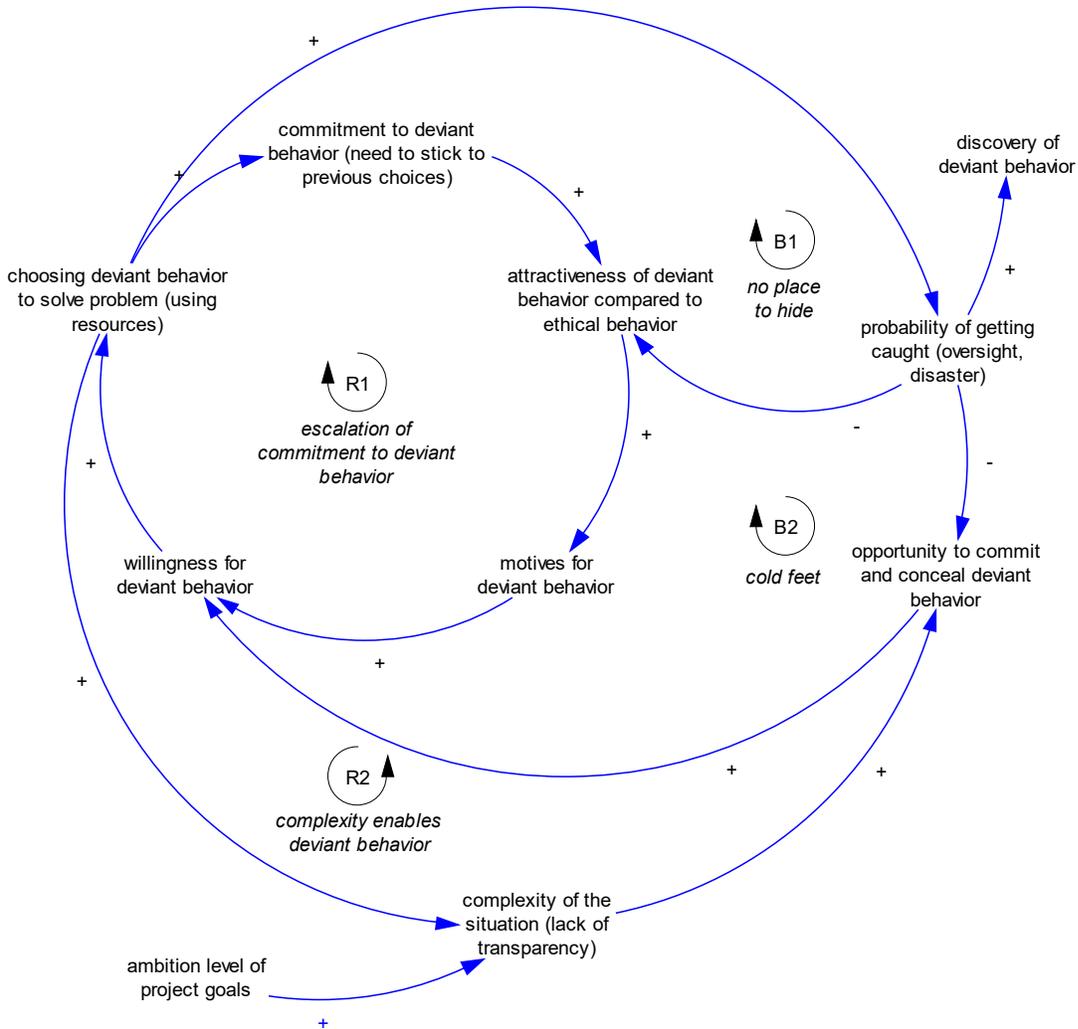
reasonable tradeoff before committing the act (Schnatterly et al. 2018). Tradeoff between many interests therefore resulted in the offense. Dilemma represents a state of mind where it is not obvious what is right and what is wrong to do. For example, the offense might be carried out to prevent a more serious offense from happening, such as dumping the toxic waste in the ocean. Executives might also slide further down the slippery slope, where they had already left the right side for the wrong side of the law (Welsh et al. 2014) while suffering from lack of self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990).

## **Discussion**

Convenience theory explains why people choose deviant behavior over normal (legal, ethical) behavior. While the theory explains that deviant behavior is caused by motive, opportunity, and willingness, the theory is still developing regarding interactions and interdependencies between all three determinants. To analyze how these three determinants may interact over time, we have developed a causal loop diagram, inspired by the Vest Tank case as well as convenience dynamics suggested by Gottschalk (2021). In developing the causal loop diagram, we applied the theoretical perspectives of commitment escalation and crime convenience. The causal loop diagram is depicted in Figure 3.

Starting below in the causal loop diagram, organizations set goals for projects. (Note that we focus on projects and the effect project goals can have on project managers. But goals can of course also be used for departments, groups, or processes, which will influence the behavior of department, group, or process managers. The more ambitious these goals are, the more difficult they are to realize. As such, the ambition level of goals positively influences the complexity of the situation project managers need to deal with. Complex situations are often characterized by a

lack of visibility or transparency (Skilton & Robinson 2009; Sterman 2000).



**Figure 3** *Conceptual model of the convenience theory*<sup>1</sup>

The situation may be ambiguous; information may be distorted or not readily accessible or

<sup>1</sup> The arrows in a causal loop diagram indicate a causal relationship. A positive causal relationship indicates that cause and effect behave in similar directions: when the cause increases (decreases) the effect increases (decreases). A negative causal relationship means that cause and effect behave in opposite directions: when the cause increases (decreases) the effect decreases (increases). Feedback loops can be either balancing (B) or reinforcing (R). Balancing loops are self-stabilizing, they bring equilibrium to the system. Reinforcing loops are amplifying, they spiral out of control. These loops are also known as vicious or virtuous cycles.

observable to every stakeholder in the project. Such a lack of transparency, however, creates opportunities to conceal certain activities, since it is hard for people to understand and evaluate what is going on in those situations. For example, a project manager may deliberately choose to hide negative information about the project or twist the information to the project's advantage without the steering committee or the project owner noticing this. The opportunity for concealing "evidence" positively influences the willingness of the project manager to actually do so. This willingness is also impacted by the motives for deviant behavior. Motives can be diverse, but they are affected by the attractiveness of deviant behavior compared to normal, ethical behavior.

There may be personal financial incentives involved for getting the project to the finish line or a promotion after the project's completion. If, by bending the rules a little, these incentives are easier to reach, one may not be able to resist temptation and actually opt for the deviant behavior to solve a problem, similar to the state of moral disengagement described by Moore (2015). This is a dangerous choice, because it is likely to start a path dependency, or commitment to this kind of behavior. Once the rules are bent, it is more difficult to go back to normal because this may require a confession of the crime of deviant behavior. Commitment to the path chosen leads to an increased attractiveness of deviant behavior, which increases the motives for a continuation of this behavior even more, thereby continuing down the slippery slope (Welsh et al. 2014). We have now described the first loop in our causal loop diagram: the reinforcing loop of *escalation of commitment to deviant behavior*. The loop is reinforcing because it amplifies itself, it is a vicious cycle that may spiral out of control (if nothing else happens to stop this behavior).

A side-effect of actually choosing deviant behavior in a given situation is that the entire situation gets even more complex. The project manager now needs to manage two worlds in one

project: the world that everyone is allowed to see and know about and the secret world where the deviant behavior is hidden. This does not make the situation more transparent, and it may actually make it easier to continue with this kind of behavior. The two worlds make it even more difficult for steering committees or other stakeholders to understand what is going on and as such the opportunity for concealing deviant behavior increases. Now we have a second reinforcing loop of *complexity enabling deviant behavior*.

Although a lot of crime or unethical behavior in projects may remain undiscovered forever, a large number will be discovered eventually. “Limits to growth” is a well-known archetype in system dynamics (Senge 1990) that describes that the growth, represented by reinforcing loops in a system cannot continue forever. Systems reach their limits. These limits are formed by balancing feedback loops. These balancing loops either put a stop to the growth or they may even turn the growth around and cause a decline of behavior. Previously, we discussed that the more often someone bends or breaks a rule and selects deviant behavior, the more complex and the less transparent the situation becomes. But at the same time also more and more people, stakeholders, governance systems etc. are affected. The probability that eventually someone starts to notice something strange or that a warning signal turns red will increase over time. As such, the probability of getting caught increases. When this happens, the attractiveness of deviant behavior is reduced, which in turn decreases the motives for this kind of behavior. We have labeled this the balancing loop of *no place to hide*. The probability of getting caught also reduces the opportunity for concealing deviant behavior, which lowers the willingness for this behavior. We call this the balancing loop of *cold feet*.

Together, these two balancing loops can either force the project manager (or the offender of a crime) to choose legal, normal behavior over deviant behavior, or to come clean and confess

to a crime committed. When this happens early in the project, the project and the project manager may still be spared from disaster. Later in the project, it is more likely that crime is discovered by someone else, which probably puts an immediate stop to the project and the project manager's career. This is what happened in the Vest Tank case when the project literally exploded and revealed the crime committed.

## **Conclusion**

This paper used the example of a waste disposal project to illustrate the relationship between core dimensions of convenience theory and thereby explain the dynamics that can lead to a self-reinforcing cycle in terms of an escalation of deviant behavior. It has highlighted mechanisms that can spiral criminal behavior. The extension to convenience theory and its connection with escalation of commitment is a conceptual contribution to the field of dark projects. Our contribution is in line with previous research on escalation of commitment, dynamics, and self-reinforcing processes by Alvarez et al. (2011), Fleming and Zyglidopoulos (2008), Hällgren (2007), Stingl and Geraldi (2017), and Vaughan (1996). Some researchers make a distinction between commitment toward a task and commitment toward behavior, which might be explored in future research. One line of research is concerned with escalation of commitment by normalization of deviant behavior (Fleming & Zyglidopoulos 2008; Jenkins & Delbridge 2017; Pinto 2014; Vaughan 1996).

The combination of motive, opportunity, and willingness for deviant behavior may drive people to select unethical/illegal activities over ethical/legal activities. The reinforcing loops described in our causal loop diagram in Figure 3 suggest how deviant behavior reinforces itself. There is escalation of commitment to deviant behavior: once you have chosen to go to the dark

side, it is very hard to go back. The causal loop diagram can also be used to explain decision making in projects that do not literally go to the dark side, but nevertheless are running out of control. In these projects, a project manager may have the motive, opportunity and willingness to hide some negative information about the project and to paint a more positive picture of the project to the steering committee. When the steering committee then approves and supports the continuation of the project, it will be more difficult for the project manager to reveal this negative information at a later stage and easier to continue hiding it. As such, our causal loop diagram suggests how escalation of commitment to a certain kind of behavior can lead to projects spiraling out of control. Escalation of commitment *to behavior* is different from escalation of commitment *to a project*, although the results may be the same. Therefore, our findings point to a new avenue for research on escalation of commitment. By combining contextual factors of escalation of commitment (group, organization, external contexts), as suggested by Slesman et al. (2018), goal-setting addition that explains that deviant behavior can be triggered when goals are (too) ambitious (Welsh et al. 2020), and finally the three elements of the theory of convenience (motive, opportunity, and willingness, as described by Gottschalk 2017, 2019, 2021), we show how commitment to deviant behavior can escalate. We also described two ways to break the escalation cycle. An offender may eventually realize that one has pushed the boundaries too far and that there is no way to continue with deviant behavior without getting caught. This reduces opportunity and willingness for deviant behavior. Also, the attractiveness of deviant behavior compared to legal/ethical behavior decreases and that will negatively impact the motivation for deviancy. If it is not too late, this realization may stop deviant behavior in favor of legal/ethical behavior. But if it is too late, deviant behavior will be discovered and offenders will probably get caught.

In addition, our causal loop diagram shows that escalation is not a one-time event. It is a dynamic process that grows over time. The majority of previous research on escalation of commitment has focused on determinants or antecedents, but not so much on the interrelations between determinants and how they can reinforce each other (Sleesman et al. 2018). In fact, our diagram proposes that one can get stuck in a path of deviant behavior down the slippery slope (Welsh et al. 2014).

Our findings also help explain the “sweet spot” in the relationship between motivation and performance that is mentioned in goal-setting research. Ambitious goals increase motivation and as such performance, but goals that are too ambitious may enable state moral disengagement (Welsh et al. 2020). Our model in Figure 3 suggests that when it is not possible to lower the ambition level of goals, deviant behavior can still be avoided when the opportunities for this behavior are reduced. This can be done by increasing governance mechanisms or by removing incentives that increase motivation for deviant behavior. As such, our model contributes to the call for more research on the dynamics between motivation and performance (Welsh et al. 2020).

Finally, our findings also contribute to the convenience theory. This theory explains that motive, opportunity, and willingness cause deviant behavior (Gottschalk 2017, 2019, 2021). But, it is uncertain whether these three determinants are required at the same time and if interdependencies exist between them. Our causal loop diagram in Figure 3 proposes that motive, opportunity, and willingness are interconnected in such a way that they can reinforce each other, which creates an escalation of commitment to deviant behavior. This dynamic perspective contributes to the theory of convenience.

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