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Petter Gottschalk (2020) Convenience in white-collar crime: a case study of corruption among friends in Norway, *Criminal Justice Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/1478601X.2020.1723084](https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601X.2020.1723084)

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Convenience in White-Collar Crime: A Case Study of Corruption among Friends in Norway

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ABSTRACT

The theory of convenience is an emerging approach to explain the occurrence of white-collar crime. Convenience theory suggests that there is a financial motive enabling the offender to exploit possibilities and avoid threats, an organizational opportunity to commit and conceal crime, and a personal willingness for deviant behavior. This article tests the theory by a case study of a logistics manager who entered into corrupt relationships with friends who were suppliers. Among the many themes included in the structural model of convenience theory, the case study illustrates occupational rather than corporate crime that benefitted the offender personally. The motive was greed, while the opportunity was caused by status and lack of oversight and guardianship. His willingness was based on his choice of private relationships where he could justify his actions and neutralize feelings of guilt.

Keywords: White-collar crime; theory of convenience; case study; corruption; financial motive; organizational opportunity; personal willingness.

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INTRODUCTION

On the corruption perception index for 2018 from Transparency International, Norway is among the least corrupt countries as the nation has rank 7 out of 180 countries (Transparency, 2018). This is a relative rank where the magnitude of corruption nevertheless might be formidable, as the detection rate is below one out of ten corruption occurrences (Gottschalk and Gunnesdal, 2018). The various forms of mutual benefits – such as cartels and corruption – tend to surprise the public when they are prosecuted as financial crime cases in Norwegian courts, even though people know it is only the tip of the white-collar crime iceberg that is visible (Gottschalk and Tcherni-Buzzeo, 2016). Norway is a trust-based society where people might suspect and know (Benson and Gottschalk, 2015), but they do not necessarily blow the whistle, since retaliation against whistleblowers is quite common (Bjørkelo et al., 2011; Glasø and Einarsen, 2008; Glasø et al., 2006, 2010; Gottschalk, 2018; Miceli and Near, 2013).

This article presents a case study of two friends where one was convicted for being a briber while the other was convicted of being bribed (Olsen, 2018; Siem, 2019). In a court of appeals in Norway, the briber was sentenced to one year and four months in jail, while the bribed received a sentence of two years and six months (Frostating, 2019). Bribed individuals are sentenced slightly more severely than bribers in Norwegian courts, where the former group receives a sentence of two years, while the latter group receives a sentence of two years and two months on average (Gottschalk, 2017, 2019).

The case study in this article applies the theory of convenience to the bribed person. The theory suggests that receiving bribes might be a convenient option when there is a financial motive, an organizational opportunity, and a personal willingness for deviant behavior (Gottschalk, 2019; Vasiu and Podgor, 2019).

The contribution of this study is twofold. Firstly, both briber and bribed are interested in keeping their corruption secret and confidential, and detection and prosecution of cases is thus quite rare (Gottschalk and Gunnesdal, 2018; Gottschalk and Tcherni-Buzzeo, 2016).

Secondly, the theory of convenience provides insights into how it became convenient to be a bribed person (Gottschalk, 2017, 2019; Vasiu and Podgor, 2019).

The case study of corruption applies the concept of white-collar crime, which has its origin in the work of Sutherland (1939, 1983). He defined white-collar crime based on the social and occupational status of the offender as crime committed by a person of respectability and high social status in the course of the offender's occupation (Friedrichs et al., 2018).

WHITE-COLLAR CONVENIENCE

Convenience is the state of being able to proceed with something with little effort or difficulty, avoiding pain and strain (Mai and Olsen, 2016). Convenience is savings in time and effort (Farquhar and Rowley, 2009), as well as avoidance of pain and obstacles (Higgins, 1997). Convenience is a relative concept concerned with the efficiency in time and effort as well as reduction in pain and solution to problems (Engdahl, 2015). 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).

White-collar crime is non-violent crime committed by individuals in competent positions (Piquero, 2018). White-collar offenders commit and conceal their crime in a professional setting where they have legitimate access to premises, resources and systems (Logan et al., 2017). The benefit from white-collar crime might be financial gain, personal adventure or some other desired outcome (Craig and Piquero, 2017; Jordanoska, 2018; Sutherland, 1939, 1983; Williams et al., 2019).

Offenders have an economic motivation and opportunity (Huisman and Erp, 2013). Dodge (2009: 15) argues that it is tough rivalry making executives in the organization commit crime to attain goals:

The competitive environment generates pressures on the organization to violate the law in order to attain goals.

The theory of convenience suggests that white-collar misconduct and crime occurs when there is a motive benefitting an individual or an organization, professional opportunity to commit and conceal crime, and personal willingness for deviant behavior (Gottschalk, 2017, 2019; Vasiu and Podgor, 2019). The theory of convenience is an umbrella term for many well-known perspectives from criminology, strategy, psychology, and other schools of thought. Motive, opportunity and willingness are the three dimensions in convenience theory. Since convenience is a relative concept, convenience theory is a crime-as-choice theory. Shover et al. (2012) suggest that it is a conscious choice among alternatives that leads to law violation. Figure 1 illustrates the structure of white-collar convenience. The extent of white-collar crime convenience manifests itself by motive, opportunity and willingness.

The ability of white-collar offenders to commit and conceal crime links to their privileged position, the social structure, and their orientation to legitimate and respectable careers (Friedrichs et al., 2018). The personal willingness for deviant behavior manifests itself by offender choice and perceived innocence. The choice of crime can be caused by deviant identity, rational consideration, or learning from others. The perceived innocence at crime manifests itself by justification and neutralization. Identity, rationality, learning, justification, neutralization, and lack of self-control all contribute to making white-collar crime action a convenient behavior for offenders (Craig and Piquero, 2016, 2017; Engdahl, 2015; Holtfreter et al., 2010; Sutherland, 1983; Sykes and Matza, 1957).

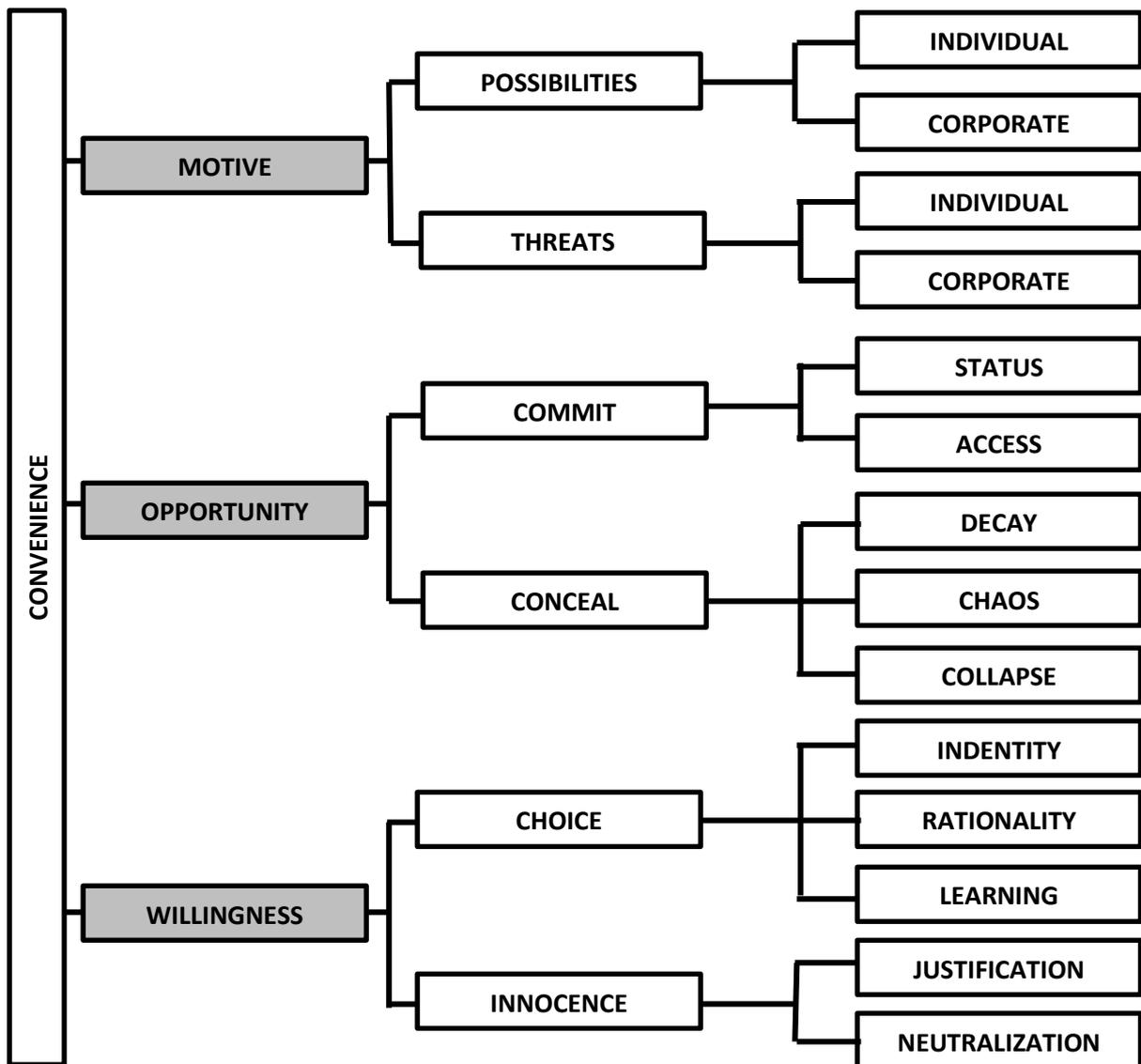


Figure 1 *Structural model of convenience theory*

CORRUPTION CASE

Gunnar Ole Lidahl and Ove Nikolai Vilnes were friends who helped each other (Siem, 2019). When Vilnes wanted to sell his vacation home in Spain, Lidahl helped him with the sale, as Lidahl lived in the neighboring vacation home. When Lidahl wanted to buy a family boat in Polen, Vilnes joined him on the trip, since Vilnes was an experienced boat man. They helped each other out, also in financial matters (Frostating, 2019). The problem was though that Lidahl was employed in a company that bought services from a firm owned

by Vilnes. Lidahl was logistics manager at Ewos, a company specializing in aquaculture nutrition. Ewos is one of the world's largest suppliers of food for farmed fish. Ewos companies operate in Norway, Canada, Chile, and Scotland. Lidahl was logistics manager in Norway, where he hired shipping companies to provide services to transport food onshore to fish farms offshore. Vilnes had such a shipping company.

According to the court document from Frostating (2019) court of appeals, Lidahl received from firms controlled by Vilnes more than the equivalent of USD 200,000 in bribes. Most of it was paid in cash, but the vendor also helped Lidahl with a flybridge and other equipment on his new boat. The vendor covered plane expenses for Lidahl and his wife on several occasions. Lidahl's son also benefitted from the vendor's generosity by receiving a boat far below market price.

Lidahl and his defense attorney argued in court that the benefits he had obtained had nothing to do with his position at Ewos. He claimed it all had to do with his friendship with Vilnes. The court did not believe him, and the judges found that Ewos had suffered from being a victim of Lidahl's actions.

The Norwegian penal code defines corruption as demanding, receiving, or accepting an offer for himself or someone else, for an undue advantage in connection with a position, office, or assignment, or giving or offering an undue advantage in said connection. Position, office or assignment includes public officials and employees in private companies, whether in Norway or in other countries. The rule applies to acts in Norway and to acts in other countries when the perpetrator is a Norwegian citizen.

Lindal did not only receive bribes from Vilnes. He also received undue advantages from Kjetil Rimolsrønning who was a shipbroker. Rimolsrønning had already the previous year admitted to corruption in a plea bargain case and received a jail sentence in a district court.

Frostating (2019: 7) wrote about the corrupt relationship between Lidahl and Rimolsrønning's company Rimship:

Lidahl has acknowledged to have received from Rimship a total amount of NOK 691,100. As to the background of the case and the execution of individual money transfers, the court of appeals will refer to the district court's judgment on page 33, which is in accordance with the court of appeals' view: "The reason for this first indictment point is that Lidahl in the late 1990s, and through his job as head of logistics at Ewos, became acquainted with shipbroker Kjetil Rimolsrønning, who brokered charters for Ewos. His business was run through the brokerage firm Rimship in Trondheim. Rimolsrønning was chairperson, general manager and main owner with 65% of the shares. He was also the company's only freight broker, while two other employees followed up broker assignments he obtained.

Rimolsrønning said as a witness in the case against Lidahl that Lidahl had asked for money by presenting invoices to be paid to his personal bank account. It was not at all agreed that Lidahl should have payments. The reason for the payments was that Lidahl meant Rimship gradually began to make a lot of money on the assignments for Ewos. Lidahl therefore thought it was right that he also got a share of the profits.

Rimolsrønning said in court that he felt he had no choice but to pay Lidahl (Frostating, 2019: 9):

Rimship risked losing contracts with Ewos if he did not pay the invoices from Lidahl.

In Frostating (2019) court of appeals in Norway, the briber Vilnes was sentenced to one year and four months in jail, while the bribed Lidahl received a sentence of two years and six months for corruption with both Vilnes and Rimolsrønning. This was a reduction

penalty for both of them, as the district court had sentenced them to three and a half years and four years in jail respectively. Olsen (2018) reported after the district court hearings:

A 63-year-old has been convicted of five cases of corruption during the period 2003-2015 after receiving EUR 256 thousand from various suppliers, Økokrim Norway's white-collar crimes unit, reported in a press release. EWOS or EWOS Group was one of the world's largest suppliers of feed and nutrition for farmed fish before it was taken over by US giant Cargill (..) In the same trial, a 56-year-old and a 58-year-old were convicted of bribery of NOK 1.5 million (EUR 153.3 thousand) and NOK 850,000 (EUR 87 thousand) respectively.

The third person, who was convicted in the district court, was acquitted in the court of appeals.

CONVENIENCE CASE STUDY

The case study is concerned with occupational rather than corporate white-collar crime, where the illegal gain benefits an individual in the organization. Self-interested individuals commit occupational crime in their profession against their employers (e.g., embezzlement or receipt of bribes) and other victims (Shepherd and Button, 2019). The motive is either threats or possibilities. A negative life event can represent a threat (Engdahl, 2015), but the case indicates no threat that might potentially be avoided by illegal gain. Rather, the traditional motive of greed is visible in the case (Haynes et al., 2015), as the offender bought expensive boats for his personal enjoyment. A joke about boat owners is that some people want to have three floors so that they can look down when they say hello to people on passing boats with only two floors.

Lidahl was able to climb in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs by showing off his improved standard of living including an apartment in Spain. As indicated in Figure 2, the motive is the

possibility for the offender as an individual to improve his standard of living conveniently by white-collar crime.

Greed is the most acknowledged motive for financial crime by white-collar offenders.

Goldstraw-White (2012) defines greed as socially constructed needs and desires that can never be completely covered or contended. Greed can be a very strong quest to get more and more of something, and there is a strong preference to maximize wealth. To outsiders it may seem strange that even rich people have such a strong desire to become even richer that they are willing to violate the law. However, as the definition indicates, greedy individuals are never happy with what they have, as they desperately want more all the time. Prosperity is not a means, but an end for greedy individuals. Greed can grow when the organization does not have an adequate reaction to expectations (Haynes et al., 2015). Greed is a typical motive for occupational crime where individuals enrich themselves. Greed implies that some people never become satisfied with what they earn or what they own. There is a lack of satisfaction with whatever one has. Greed can be a strong quest to get more and more of something, and there is a strong preference to maximize wealth, as wealth is also a symbol of success according to the American dream (Schoepfer and Piquero, 2006). Greed leads to a need for an increasingly larger home, several chalets and summerhouses, bigger boat, luxurious vacations, and ownership in various enterprises. Greed is a desire among all sorts of people. When there are convenient possibilities for financial gain to enjoy prosperity, then economic crime can be a convenient action. Both Bucy et al. (2008) and Hamilton and Micklethwait (2006) emphasize greed as the most common cause of criminal acts by white-collar offenders.

The hierarchy of needs is another well-known motive for financial crime by white-collar offenders. Needs start at the bottom with physiological needs, needs for security, social needs, and needs for respect and self-realization. When basic needs such as food and shelter are satisfied, then the person moves up the pyramid to satisfy needs for safety and control over

own life situation. Higher up in the pyramid, the person strives for self-respect, status, and recognition (Maslow, 1943). While street crime is often concerned with the lower levels, white-collar crime is often concerned with the upper levels in terms of status and success.

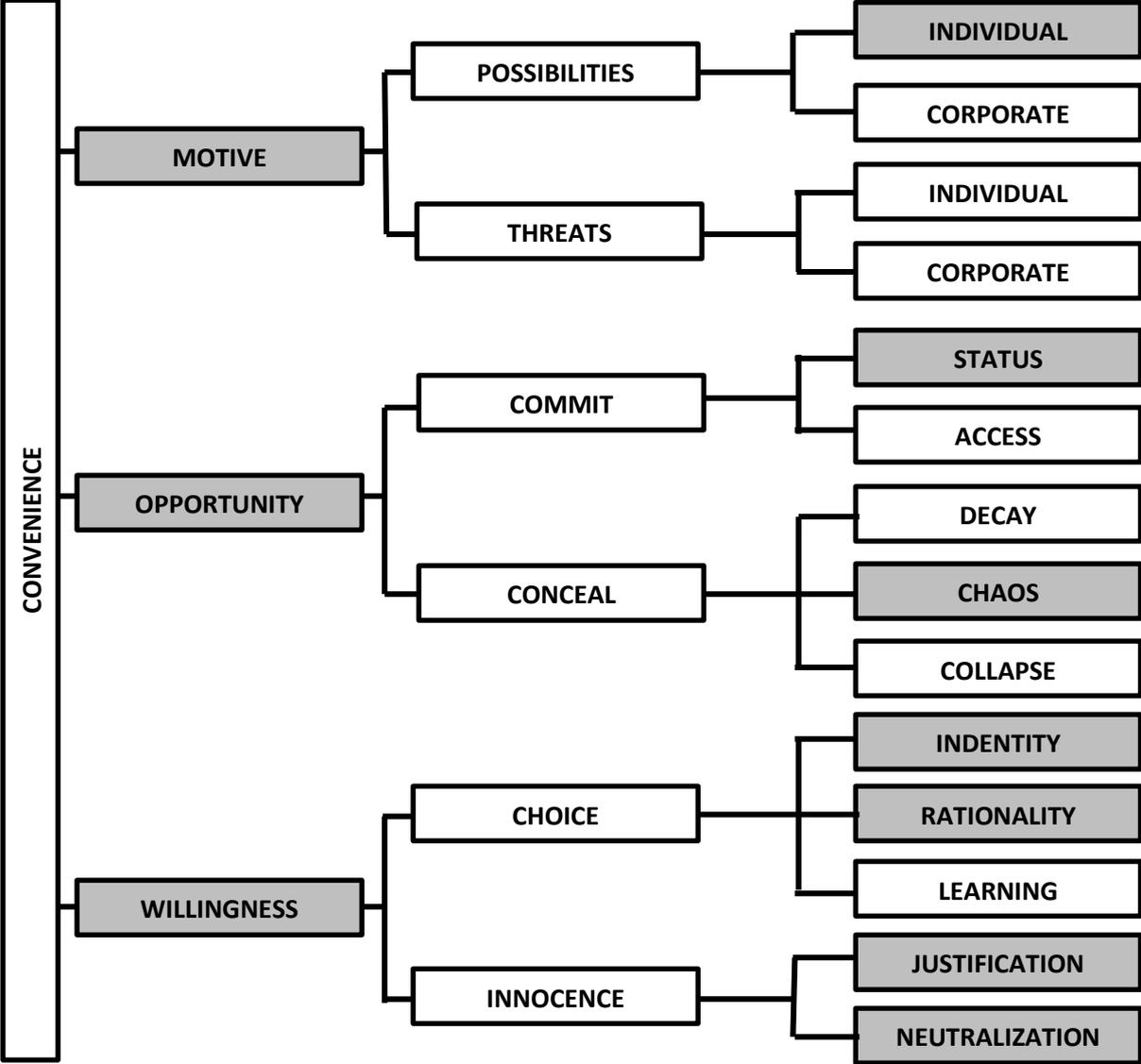


Figure 2 Convenience themes in the case study

Most individuals will want to move higher up in the pyramid when needs below are satisfied. As far as money or other valuable items can help climbing higher in the pyramid, potential offenders may find white-collar crime convenient if other options to achieve success are more

stressful and require more resources. Whether the offender wants more at a certain level or wants to climb to higher levels in the pyramid, financial crime can be a means to that end. For some white-collar criminals, money is the goal of crime. For other white-collar criminals, money is a means to a goal of acceptance, influence and fame. Admiration and respect in the elite is a desirable goal for many individuals. If it seems difficult and full of strain and pain to reach such a goal by legal means, illegal means represent an alternative. High-status individuals strive for fulfillment, self-esteem and esteem from others. As Agnew (2014: 2) formulates it: “crime is often the most expedient way to get what you want” and “fraud is often easier, simpler, faster, more exciting, and more certain than other means of securing one’s ends”.

Esteem for others is evident as a motive in this case. Lidahl was active in helping his son acquire a boat at a cost far below market price. Agnew (2014) introduced the motive of social concern and crime, where there is a desire to help others, and thus moving beyond the assumption of simple self-interest. However, as argued by Paternoster et al. (2018), helping others can be a self-interested, rational action. The self-interest or self-regarding preference and that rationality can imply interest in other’s materialism. While the economic model of rational self-interest focuses on incentives and detection risks and associated costs (Welsh et al., 2014), Agnew (2014) suggests that economic crime can also be committed when individuals think more of others than of themselves. An entrepreneur can commit financial crime to ensure that all employees have a job where they can return. A trusted employee can pay bribes to make sure that the company will have new orders to survive in the future. An executive may commit embezzlement to be able to help his adult children to recover after personal bankruptcy. Agnew (2014) believes that social concern consists of four elements, namely that 1) individuals care about the welfare of others, 2) they want close ties with others, 3) they are likely to follow moral guidelines such as innocent people should not suffer harm,

and 4) they tend to seek confirmation through other people's actions and norms. That a person puts others before oneself will initially lead to less crime. However, economic crime may be committed where the welfare of others and their success is the motive.

The second dimension in the theory of convenience is the opportunity structure in the organization where the white-collar offender is employed. Lidahl had at Ewos a privileged position that he abused for personal illegal benefit. The privileged position resulted from his involvement in innovative projects in cooperation with shipping firms, where they created optimal flows of feed supplies to offshore fish farms (Frostating, 2019: 12):

In addition, Lidahl was central as a liaison to ensure that the factory facilities on land were adapted to the newly developed boats, so that the supply of fish feed from the factories to the boats worked optimally.

Ewos-owner Cargill emphasizes the innovative features of Ewos on their website (www.cargill.com):

You can boost your efficiency and reduce your environmental impact with nutrition solutions built from Ewos focus on feed production technology.

The entrepreneurship perspective as well as the status perspective is relevant here to explain the convenient organizational opportunity for Lidahl. Entrepreneurship is associated with risk willingness, as emphasized by Berghoff and Spiekermann (2018: 293):

Risk-averse people seldom, if ever, violate criminal laws. On the other hand, those who are risk-tolerant or even risk-seeking, i.e. who display fundamental characteristics of entrepreneurial personalities, are much more likely to become criminals.

Status-related factors such as influential positions, upper-class family ties, and community roles often preclude perceptions of blameworthiness (Slyke and Bales, 2012). White-collar offenders "are now regarded as the untouchables, too well-heeled and powerful to lock up" (Hausman, 2018: 381).

Lidahl's private relationships with bribers in terms of vacation homes and family boats enabled him to conceal corruption in the chaos perspective in Figure 2. Chaos results from lack of oversight and guardianship. In the perspective of principal and agent, where Lidahl was an agent for Ewos, the interests of principal and agent diverge (Pillay and Kluvers, 2014), and the principal has imperfect information about the agent's contribution (Bosse and Phillips, 2016), thus lacking oversight and guardianship.

Lidahl's corruption scheme was not detected by any control function internal or external to the Ewos organization. It was a completely different investigation by the police that happened to discover irregularities. Detectives from Økokrim were in the process of checking value-added tax fraud related to diesel oil consumption. Økokrim detected that Ewos was involved in VAT fraud, and Økokrim prosecuted both Ewos and Lidahl (Frostating, 2019: 32):

A search was carried out in Lidahl's home on March 11, 2015 in connection with Økokrim conducting investigations against Ewos on suspicion of evasion of VAT (the diesel oil case). Lidahl was also charged. After the search, Lidahl was questioned by the police. The court of appeals has listened to audio recordings from the police interrogation. The audio recording shows that Lidahl, on his own initiative, provided information that he had cash in the safe at home. He indicated that there were around 200,000 kroner in Norwegian bank notes. He also stated that there were also some Euro banknotes in the safe.

Lidahl was taken to the police station, arrested and held in police custody until March 12. He was questioned in interrogations on March 11, 12, and 13, 2015. In questioning he explained that he had received money as a "gift" from Vilnes, and stated that this had nothing to do with the diesel oil case.

The third and final dimension of convenience theory is the personal willingness for deviant behavior to commit white-collar crime that is illustrated at the bottom of Figure 2. Receiving

bribes was a choice based on Lidahl's identity and rationality. The identity was a personal friend rather than a logistics manager. The private rather than the professional identity caused Lidahl to ask for bribes. The identity perspective suggests that individuals develop identities where they commit to a chosen identity (Obodaru, 2017). It is a process of generating possible selves, selecting one, and discarding the others. Professional identity is how an individual sees himself or herself in relation to work. The self-concept is a complex cognitive structure containing all of a person's self-representations. According to the identity perspective, roles and identities are interdependent concepts. Identity enactment refers to acting out an identity, or claiming the identity by engaging in behaviors that conform to role expectations and that allow the identity to become manifest. Deviant behavior finds an anchor in a person's identity that might be stronger by deviant identity labeling from others (Crank, 2018; Hayes, 2010; Mingus and Burchfield, 2012).

Rationality is about weighing up the pros and cons of alternative courses of actions (Pillay and Kluvers, 2014). The rational self-interested offender considers incentives and probability of detection (Welsh et al., 2014). Human behavior finds motivation in the self-centered quest for satisfaction and avoidance of suffering (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1987). Rational choice theorists have taken a position that assumes that the standard economic theory of individual preferences will determine whether crime is committed. The greater benefits of crime and the less costs of crime, the more attractive it is to commit criminal acts (Blickle et al., 2006; Hefendehl, 2010; Pratt and Cullen, 2005).

The personal willingness is concerned with the impression that surprisingly few white-collar criminals think they have done anything wrong. Most of them feel innocent and victims of injustice when indicted, prosecuted, convicted, and imprisoned (Cohen, 2001; Jordanoska, 2018; Kaptein and Helvoort, 2019; Siponen and Vance, 2010; Sykes and Matza, 1957). Lidahl claimed innocence in court (Frostating, 2019: 8):

Lidahl claims that he has done and the income that he has received and accounted for in his personal company are not related to his position at Ewos.

When offenders think they have done nothing wrong, they tend to apply neutralization techniques to reduce and remove any feelings of guilt. A number of well-known neutralization techniques from Sykes and Matza (1957) do not apply to the case of Lidahl, such as denial of responsibility, denial of damage, and denial of victim – simply because in his mind he committed no crime. Rather, he condemns those who criticize him for not understanding his behavior. The offender tries to accuse his or her critics of questionable motives for criticizing him or her. According to this technique of condemning the condemners, one neutralizes own actions by blaming those who were the target of the misconduct. The offender deflects moral condemnation onto those ridiculing the misbehavior by pointing out that they engage in similar disapproved behavior. In addition, the offender condemns procedures of the criminal justice system, especially police investigation with interrogation, as well as media coverage of the case.

CONCLUSION

The theory of convenience is an emerging approach to explain the occurrence of white-collar crime. This article tested the theory by a case study of a convicted logistics manager in Norway. Among the many themes included in the theory of convenience, the case study illustrated that some themes are relevant for the case while other themes are not.

It was occupational crime rather than corporate crime. The offender had only a slightly privileged position to commit crime, but more convenient ways to conceal crime as a friend in a corrupt relationship with suppliers. The friendship led to an identity where the offender perceived illegitimate financial transactions as personal rather than work-related matters.

There are some interesting avenues for future research. First, it would be interesting – though empirically challenging – to study the extent of convenience orientation among convicted white-collar offenders compared to law-abiding members of the elite in society. Next, it would be interesting to test the relative importance of the different themes for the extent of criminogenicity. Finally, the organizational opportunity structure is dependent on lack of oversight and guardianship that might be reversed to prevent crime from happening.

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