

## Reasoning on aggression: concepts for modelling the collapse of a criminal network

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### Data and Methodology

The following phenomenology of the collapse of a gang of criminals is based on a group of criminals involved in drug trafficking and laundering the illegal money. The description concentrates on the relation between the black and white collar criminals meaning that the production and distribution drugs; i.e. the source of the illegal money is not taken into account. The groups was formed presumably in the early 1990s and collapsed around 10 to 15 years later in the mid 2000s. Essential for the breakdown of the group is a collapse of trust. In case of money laundering black collar criminals need to hand over the money to their partners and trust that they will get the return of investment back from the trustee. In a covert organisation this cannot be secured by formal contracts. Once trust is corrupted the business relation breaks apart. This collapse of the group turned out to produce massive violence, including a large number of assassinations. For instance, three murders happened within one week. The escalation of violence has been described by involved persons as a 'corrupt chaos' governed by a 'rule of terror'. The notion of a 'chaos' indicates that seemingly the 'terror' was not governed by an individual such as Nero burning Rome but - from the perspective from inside - by an invisible hand. Thus they could no longer keep track of the complexity of incidences. This is an emergent phenomenon in which the macro level of the situational complexity generates a perception of the situation as a 'corrupt chaos' on the micro of the involved individuals. This motivates the research question of the data analysis: dissecting the mechanisms of the chaos generation on a level of fine grained individual interactions. For this purpose a phenomenological description is applied.

The analysis is based on several police investigations in which numerous interrogations are documented. Police interrogations can be described as situations of dialogical conversation. An in-depth analysis of subjective meaning attributed to certain situations brings the empirical analysis very close to the subjective perception of the actors. This enables to analyse the cognition of a certain situation as 'corrupt chaos'. The aim is to infer hypothetical, *unobservable* cognitive elements from *observable* actions and statements to analyse cognitive mechanisms that motivates action in very confused and opaque situations. For this purpose the research draws methodologically upon a Grounded Theory approach. In a first step the data was loaded into MaxQDA as a tool for qualitative text analysis and text passages were annotated which then were summarised into codes deriving concepts from data. Concepts stand for classes of object, events or actions which have some major properties in common. This is a classical open coding of a Grounded Theory (see Corbin and Strauss 2008). However, in a second step the research diverged from classical Grounded Theory. The coding derived with MaxQDA served as the basis for concept relation identification with the CCD tool which is software for creating a conceptual model of the process (Scherer et al. 2013). While parallels to axial coding exist, it departs from a classical Grounded Theory approach by making use of an abstract framework of condition-action sequences (Lotzmann and Wimmer 2013). The web of interrelated sequences is denoted as action diagram. The concept of condition-action sequences is an a-priori methodological device to identify social mechanisms on a micro level of individual (inter-)action. Any

process is initiated by a certain condition which triggers a certain action. This action in turn generates a new state of the world which is again a condition for further action. Broadly speaking a mechanism is a relation that transforms an input X into an output Y. A further condition is a certain degree of abstraction which becomes evident in a certain degree of regularity, i.e. that under similar circumstances a similar input X\* reveals similar outputs Y\*. In the social world it is typically an action which relates X and Y (Hedström & Ylcoski 2010). This is assured by the concept of event action sequences. Whereas the data describes individual instantiations the condition-action sequences represent general event classes. For instance, in our case one condition is denoted as 'return of investment available'. This triggers the action to 'distribute return of investment'. Obviously this describes classes of events. Return of investment might be rental income as well as e.g. purchasing of companies. However, empirical validity is ensured by tracing the individual condition-action sequences back to the coding derived with MaxQDA (Neumann and Lotzmann 2014). This methodology enables controlled generalisation from the case which provides a proof of existence of the inferred mechanisms.

Note, that the data basis of interrogations allows including cognitive conditions (such as 'fear for life') and actions (such as 'member X interprets aggressive action'). This is an important feature to achieving a thick description from a situational phenomenology as derived from the police interrogation. For understanding the chaotic terror it is essential to retrieve the meaning attributed to particular situations, observable at a phenomenological level.

### **Conceptual model**

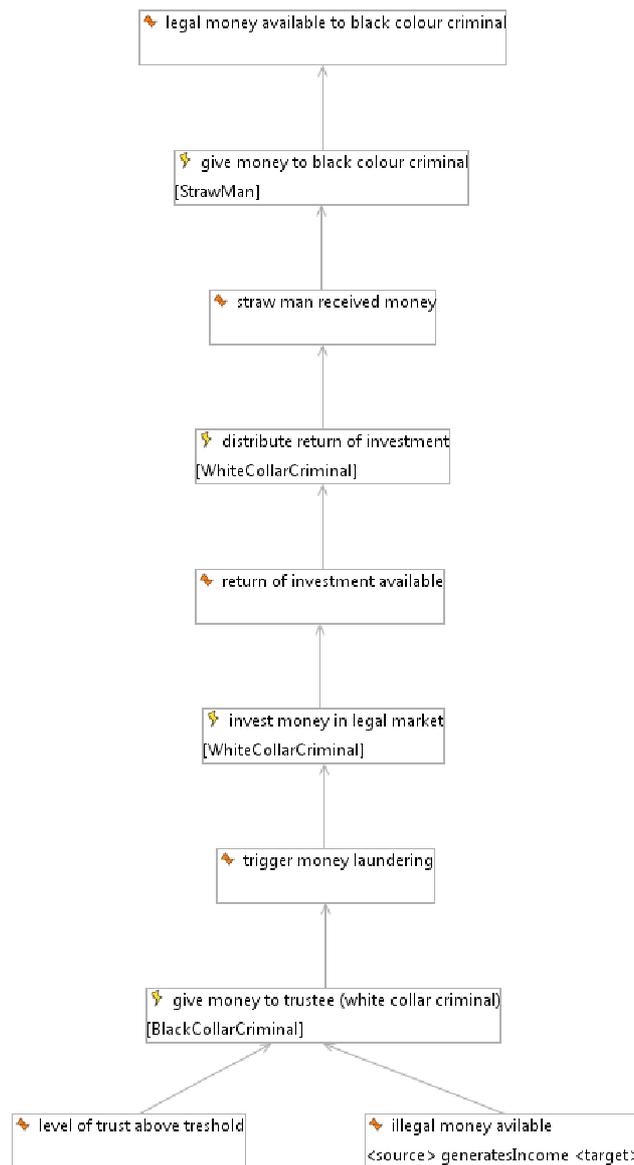
In this section the conceptual model of the data will be presented and its empirical trace elaborated. The conceptual model is realised in the action diagram of the web of condition-action sequences. Thus in this section the mechanisms of the collapse at micro level of single actions are investigated. In the next section a theoretical analysis of the conceptual model will dissect the mechanisms on the macro level of the structural properties of the web of interrelations of actions and actors which can be revealed from the micro level analysis. First it has to be noted that in the investigated relations three kinds of actors are involved:

- Black collar criminals who gained illegal money in the drug business.
- White collar criminals with a good reputation in the legal society in order to be able to invest the money in the legal market.
- So-called 'straw men' which played a decisive role in concealing the source and target of the money flow.

Once the data has been transformed in an action diagram 5 phases in the process of the collapse can be distinguished in the analysis of the action diagram:

- a) *Ordinary business* of money laundering: This is the status quo before the collapse took place. Note, that production and distribution of drugs is not investigated.
- b) *A crystallising kernel of mistrust* disturbing the ordinary business, initiating the collapse.
- c) If the mistrust cannot be encapsulated a spreading of mistrust through the group generates a *conflict escalation* which finally leads to what has been denoted in terms of witnesses as a:





**Figure 2: money laundering**

The process starts with two conditions: Obviously, illegal money must be available. However, black collar criminals invest a huge amount of money in the business of white collar criminals. In the absence of formal contracts which are secured by the possibility that claims can be enforced by legal action, also trust is required in order to trigger a process of money laundering. These two conditions are inferred from statements in the police interrogation, for which the following two citations are exemplary<sup>1</sup>. The level of trust is expressed in the following statement of a witness, in which O1 is a black collar and V01 a white collar criminal<sup>2</sup>, that money was available is documented in the second report:

- O1 and V01 seem to be friends for me.

<sup>1</sup> These are open codings derived with MaxQDA which are then inserted in the CCD framework.

<sup>2</sup> For reasons of protection of private data, names are anonymous and no reference to the source in the police interrogations is provided.

- In the period between 1990 and Feb 14, 1992 police investigations had been undertaken. These revealed a criminal organisation concerned with drug trafficking. The report from June 1992 estimated the income and the costs. It is estimated a transaction volume of nearly 300 million.

If these two conditions are fulfilled a process of money laundering is triggered. In this case illegal money is given to a trustee with a legal business who invests the money in the legal market. The trustee is the link between the illegal and the legal world. That illegal money has been available is testified by the following statement:

- ... inserted a significant value of black money in the structure of the company of V01.

The money that had been inserted in the company of V01 has been invested in the legal market, as testified in the following statement:

- At the moment I paid 800 000 in the firm which are now worth several millions through legal trade.

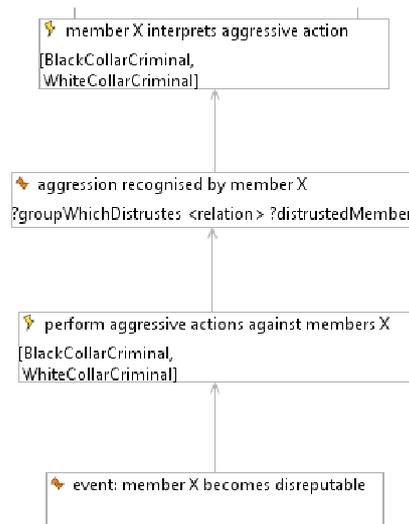
The investment of the money triggers the redistribution of the now legal money back to the black collar criminals. However, it turned out that for the concealment of source and target of the money third parties had extensively been used. These need to be individuals which are not in the first instance visible parts of the criminal group but nevertheless are trusted by them. We call them strawmen.

- Finally, V01 paid 59 million. The cash money had been invested through a construction in Curacao. Here the brother of V01 played a decisive role.

The brother is but one example. Another one had been e.g. the girl friend of a criminal. However, this example makes clear the two functions of a) not being visible as part of the group but nevertheless, b) being highly trusted by group members. Here the family ties play a decisive role.

#### *A crystallising kernel of mistrust*

This process could have gone on without any specific terminal point. However, factually at some point in time a crystallising kernel of mistrust invaded the group. Obviously, this is a contingency of the group that had been investigated in the data: The interrogations are based on the fact that the group became visible and factually the group became visible only in and through the process of its collapse. This is a kind of happenstance. In particular the individual events remain contingent. The story of this particular case will be developed in the textual annotations below. These gave rise to the identification of the mechanisms of the decline of the group. However, it has to be noted that it is rather likely that in the course of time some such events happen that trigger follow-up actions. For this reason the conditions have been specified in the condition-action sequences in a very general way: It is simply stated that some member of the group becomes disreputable. In the first instance, this is due to the limits of the data. In the interrogation it cannot be identified unequivocally why and how this happened. In the data only the follow-up steps can be found; i.e. it is a theoretical inference that someone became disreputable. However, first, this is a very general condition which makes it rather likely that some point of time it will occur. Second, in a group some form of conflict resolution is needed. The crucial question is how the group handles conflicts. This is a critical juncture for the stability of the group.



**Figure 3:** Crystallising kernel of mistrust

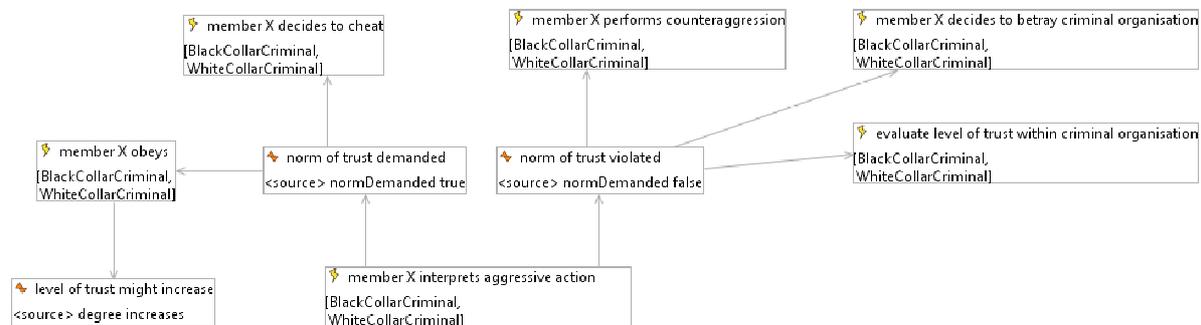
As justified above, the starting point for the analysis is treated as an external event, namely that a member of the group becomes disreputable. This may be due to several reasons: for example a member may become too greedy. Once this event happened it calls for a mechanism of conflict resolution. Conflict resolution might trigger an act of aggression against this member. This might be an attempt to sanction this member or motivated by some causes such as, for instance, simply anger or irritation about him or her. However, it may also be the case that mistrust is based on other reasons or that the motivation is based on self interest or simply remains unclear. In the following some examples of how an aggression might look like in the context of a criminal group are provided:

- An attack to the life of M.
- O1 had V01 in his grip. He shall do as told otherwise his family would have a problem.
- ... O5 came to my house in order to say that at 8 in the evening I should come to the forest. This is standard: intimidate and request for money.

The aggression in these examples is of very different severity. Obviously murder is a severe aggression. It shall be noted that assassination might be motivated by several reasons, ranging from greediness to death-penalty. In fact, M. survived the attack but had been killed some years later because he had been accused of stealing drugs. This can be interpreted as execution of a death-penalty. In the other two examples the objective of the action is not the liquidation of the victim. If effective the aggression is recognized by the victim, this triggers reasoning on the aggression. In contrast to (successful) murder, the aggression in the two other cases is intended to initiate certain behavior or behavior change respectively. In the second example O1 ‘shall do as told’, whereas in the third one the objective of the intimidation is a ‘request for money’. This triggers a crucial cognitive process: namely, interpreting the possible motivation of the aggressive act. It is the intention of the aggressive act to stimulate reasoning on aggression.

The objective of the abstract condition-action sequences is not to tell the story of a particular case but rather to infer general social mechanisms. For this reason, the reasoning is described in a most general way. Two options had been identified which are characteristic for all cases in the data: to interpret the aggression as norm enforcement or norm violation. Norm enforcement is denoted as

‘norm of trust demanded’, i.e. as a form of punishment, typically without informing victim that he is being punished because of the violation of a certain norm. Norm violation is denoted as ‘norm of trust violated’, i.e. as violation of the informal code of conduct within the criminal group. Obviously, this broad characterization covers a number of concrete interpretations. For instance, norm violation might be some kind of self-interested action which can be due to an infinite number of intentions.



**Figure 4:** Reasoning on aggression

Dependent on the interpretation of the aggression different behavioural options are triggered. Obviously the reasoning is not documented in the data. However, what can be found is the reaction on the aggression. In the case of interpretation as norm enforcement, the victim may either obey or deliberately decide to cheat. Obedience may restore the trust in the organization, or at least ensure that the code of conduct in the group is respected. In this case mistrust may fade away or at least remain encapsulated. Obedience is shown at the example of the reaction to the ‘request for money’:

- I paid but I’m alive

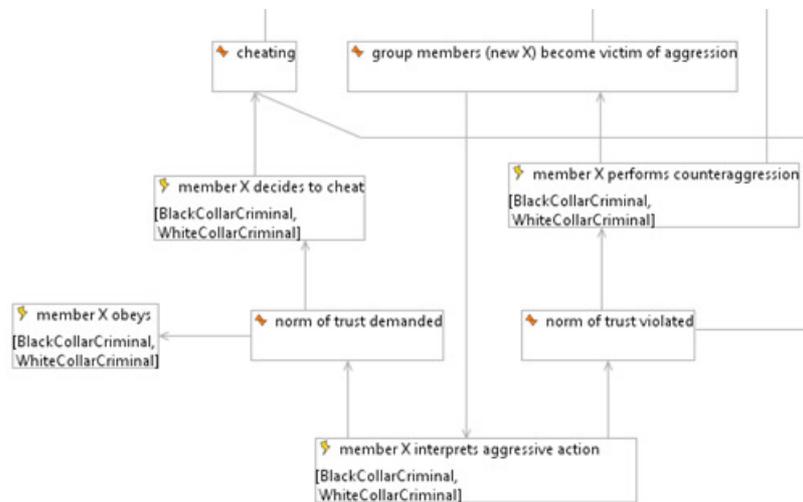
#### *Conflict escalation*

In the case of interpreting aggression as norm violation the victim decides about the reaction by either betray the organization or performing an act of counter-aggression. This can be shown by the first example: the failed assassination. This is a more intricate case, demonstrating the pathway to the diverging interpretation, ‘norm of trust violated’. Two action classes had been identified in this case, denoted as counter-aggression and betrayal. After M. survived the attack on his life, it is plausible that he lost trust in his business-partners. The reaction was as following:

- M. told the newspapers ‘about my role in the network’ because he thought that I wanted to kill him to get the money.

This reaction is instructive: It allows reconstructing how he interpreted the aggression. M. interpreted the attack on his life not as a penalty (i.e. death-penalty as in his later assassination for being accused of stealing drugs) for deviant behaviour from his side. Instead he concluded that the cause of the attack was based on self-interest (the other criminal ‘wanted his money’). Thus he interpreted the attack as norm deviation rather than enforcement. Next, he attributed the aggression to an individual person and started a counter-reaction against this particular person by betraying ‘his role in the network’, i.e. it is an example of betrayal. An example for counter-aggression will be provided when the escalation of the conflicts to a ‘corrupt chaos’ is discussed. First, it shall be noted that this reaction caused another member of the group to become victim of an act of aggression. While it remains unknown who was responsible for the assassination, it was not

this individual. However, the betrayal indeed had severe consequences for this individual. Thus a new member of the group faced an act of aggression which further caused the need of interpretation. This induces a positive feedback loop as outlined in figure X.



**Figure 5:** positive feedback loop

### *A corrupt chaos*

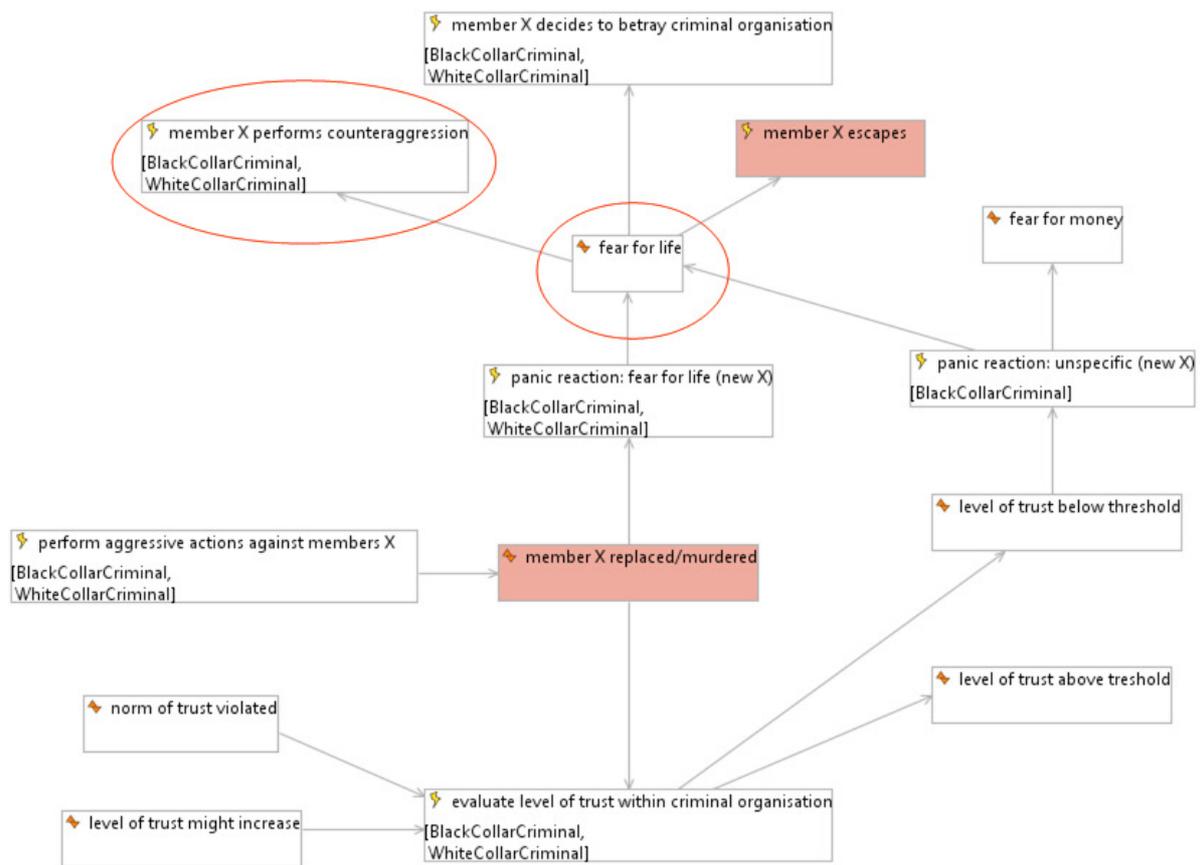
Positive feedback loops generate unstable systemic behaviour. This systemic property caused a spreading of mistrust throughout the group. It generated a cycle of revenge and counter-revenge, making the situation uncontrollable, as documented below:

- There is a rule of terror in the town.

The feedback cycle generates a complexity that from the perspective of the people involved in the situation could not be attributed to a particular individual anymore.

- There is a corrupt chaos behind it.

In the following the condition-action sequences of this segment of the process of disintegration of the group are displayed in which the trust required for the covert activities breaks down. Not the overall diagram will be substantiated by textual annotations from the data. Instead only two elements, denoted as fear for live and counter-aggression, will be highlighted.



**Figure 6:** corrupt chaos

Fear for life is proven the following testimony of a witness:

- V01 was in great fear of O1. When he had an appointment with O1 he was wearing a bulletproof jacket.

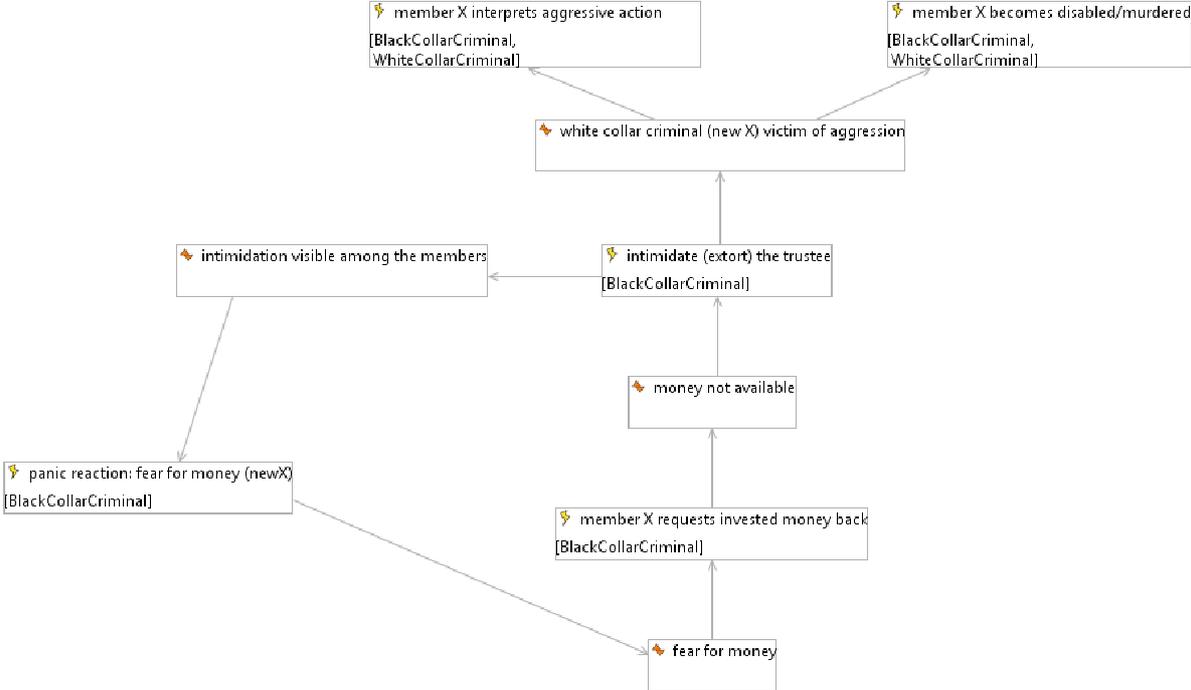
However, being thrown in a situation of existential threat is likely to initiate attempts of counter-aggression:

- He was at a point in which he was in a totally despaired situation. HLJ had several times tried to counteract. He had a plan to approach O1 with a weapon. However, in the last moment he didn't dare. At a different time he had two pistols with him. He planned to shoot O1 to death and to pass the other weapon in his hand in order that it appeared as if he had shot in self-defence.
- Presumably V01 asked the [Motorcycling gang] to make an operation against O1 in return for a huge amount of money.

### *Run on the bank*

Existential threats are likely to induce unpredictable behaviour. However, in the ordinary business of money laundering a huge amount of illegal money had been invested in the legal market through the white collar criminals. In a criminal, covert organisation the investment could not be ensured by legal contracts. The black collar criminals needed to trust that they will get the return of investment back from the white collar criminal. In case of the breakdown of trust a well known mechanisms from legal

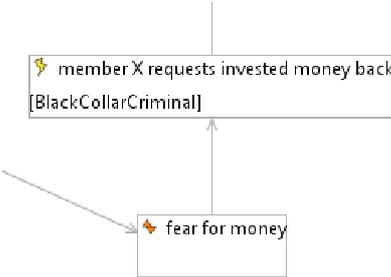
financial markets becomes effective: fear for money provides an incentive to get as much money out of the investment as soon as possible. Moreover, if it becomes visible that one member attempts to get the money out, the classical mechanism of a self fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1968) initiates a 'run on the bank'. It is known from legal world that this has a destructive effect on the market. In the following a detailed overview of the single elements of this process is provided.



**Figure 7: run on the bank**

The overall process will now be documented following instantiations of single condition-action sequences. As approved by the following testimony fear for money initiated attempts to get money out of the investment:

- Starting from Oct. 2003 S.K. came in the office. She told the employees that she needed to talk to me because her former man (who died) had 7 million active debts.



**Figure 8: fear for money**

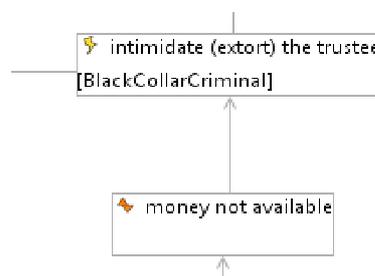
However, once money is invested in legal market such as e.g. constructions, the money is no longer immediately available. This is indicated by the condition 'money not available', which is testified by several witnesses:

- At a certain point he had problems with his liquidity.

- There is a considerable backlog demand in the back-payment. The reason is twofold: first, it's becoming difficult to gain new funding because of the negative reports in the media and second much of our liquidity has been lost in payments to O1.

Since financial claims cannot be enforced by recourse to the court in case of an illegal covert organisation a run on the bank has the additional effect that the use of violence becomes likely to force the passing over of the money. An attempt to get the money back nevertheless might trigger intimidation of the trustee (the white collar criminal) who now becomes victim of aggression of his business partners. This results in extortion of the trustee to enforce the claim as testified below:

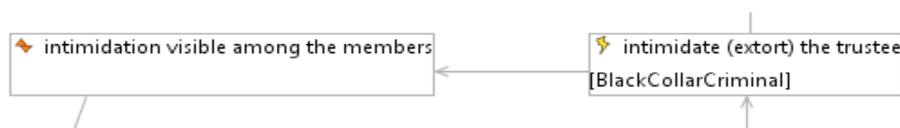
- In the last year he was strongly under pressure because he had been extorted. That's what he said to me.
- If I don't pay, her Yugoslav friend O6 would kill me.



**Figure 9:** Extortion of the white collar criminal

It is unlikely that intimidation remains secret. Rather rumors might easily spread in the group. Once attempts to get money out of the investment become visible a new stage of the run on the bank is reached. Additional monetary claims generate a cycle of extortion in order to get the money back.

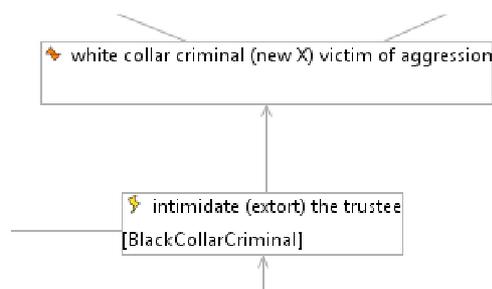
- Soon after his death the widow of K had an affair with O1. She extorted 7 million from V01. Contrary to the claim of M. his entitlements had not been captured by this deal.



**Figure 10:** positive feedback of fear for money

Thus intimidation stimulates further intimidation, making the white collar criminal victim of aggression of his business partners and turning a formerly symbiotic into a parasitic relationship (see Transcrime 2008). An example of how payment had been enforced is provided below:

- V01 was ordered to the office of his lawyer. However, when he entered the office the lawyer was not there. Instead O1 and seemingly 3 Yugoslavs were there. These ordered him to go on his knees and hold a machine gun in his stomach.

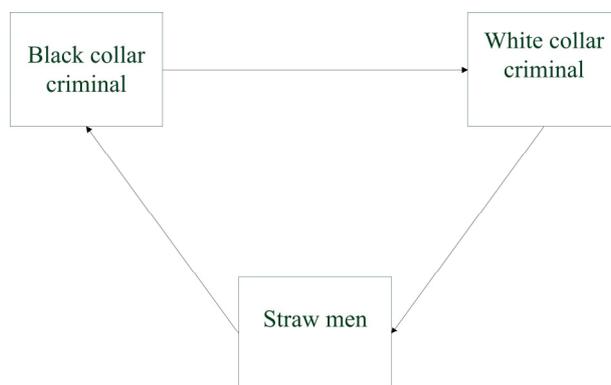


**Figure 11:** vicimization of white collar criminal

### Structural Insights of the conceptual model

The thick description on the micro level of the *process* of the escalation of violence provides insights in the macro level of the *structural* properties of the group that reveal reasons which triggered that the situation finally has been perceived as a ‘corrupt chaos’. In abstract terms, the conceptual model describes a cascading effect: mistrust generated violence which in turn enforced mistrust in the overall group. That such a cascading effect was possible can be ascribed to the organisational structure of the group. Since the group could not rely on formal procedures of conflict regulation, no mechanisms existed to encapsulated the mistrust. This was due to some characteristic features of the group structure which will be described in more detail below.

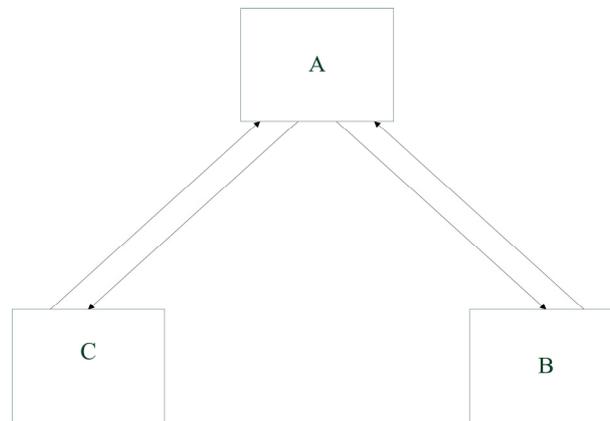
First it shall be noted that the ordinary business of money laundering reveals a triadic communication structure (see Simmel 1908), consisting of black collar criminals, white collar criminals and straw men. Money is passed from the black collar criminals to the white collar criminals which transfer it back to the white collar criminals via the straw men. In such a situation it is likely that misunderstandings and misperceptions take place. The structure of the relations is a crucial trigger for the spreading of mistrust in the group, once initialised. For instance, if money (or drugs) get lost, the responsibility remains uncertain. The black collar criminal may accuse the white collar criminal or the straw men and both may put the blame on the other. Note that later M. had been killed in such a situation, when he was accused of stealing drugs. Whereas it remains unknown (at least for the ‘official world’) who was responsible that drugs got lost, execution of a death penalty is an ultimate solution to resolve ambiguity. Thus a triade remains a fragile and unstable organisational structure.



**Figure 12:** triadic structure of group relations

As it is known from Simmel (1908) (see also Sofsky and Paris 1994), one solution to re-establish stability of social relations is to decompose a triad into a hierarchy. A hierarchy resolves the indecisiveness of the social situation by cutting certain lines of relations. If relations between group

members are controlled by a central node in the relational structure (i.e. the top person in the hierarchy) the definition of a situation remains unambiguous. The situation is simply defined by the top person. For instance, the top guy (say A) might convict e.g. B (see figure 12) for being guilty of violating code of conduct. This provides a mechanism of conflict regulation which preserves the secrecy of the group by keeping relations inside the organisational structure. For this reason Simmel (1908) assumed that covert organisations tend to be hierarchically organised.



**Figure 13:** hierarchic dissolution of triadic relations

However, this is exactly what not happened in this case. The group had no formal structures such as a hierarchy or any formal rules of conduct which provides a guideline to handle crisis situations. The structure of the situation was characterised by the following elements:

- The group had a flat social structure. Some informal hubs existed which characterise people involved in many of the actions which had been subject of police investigations. However, while the hubs might have had a certain prestige all members were equal insofar as no individual had a right of command.
- As consequence of the flat structure of the group trust was not secured by formal authority but simply based on interpersonal relations. Some individuals knew each other for quite a long time, whereas others such as e.g. straw men had been involved in the activities through a referee. An example is the brother of V01.
- This entails that the norms of conduct remained only implicit.

However, once an initial element of mistrust was intruded the crisis was characterised by a highly unstructured situation. Moreover, individuals could not rely on formal rules of crisis management. They had to improvise ad-hoc to react to unanticipated situations such as an attempt of an assassination or reading their names in the newspapers, even betrayed by a criminal comrade. The reaction had to rely on interpretations of the situation. Since the interpretation could not be guided by a formal code of conduct, it remained fallible. Factually the conflict escalation was characterised by misperceptions and diverging interpretations of the situation. The likelihood of such misunderstandings can be traced back to the organisational structure, characterised by a lack of authority which could reduce contingency by providing an unequivocal definition of a situation, simply by its normative power.

As a consequence of the organisational structure differentiation of punishment and revenge remained blurred. In behavioural terms both actions can be described as an act of aggression. However, both terms constitute social concepts with essential differences with regard to potential follow-up actions: Whereas in case of punishment the aggression might stop once the punishment has been applied, revenge might lead to endless circle. For instance, if wrong parking is sanctioned by a fee, the violation of the parking norms is compensated once the fee is payed. As endless cycles of blood revenge in traditional cultures demonstrate, the situation is different in case that the social concept of revenge is activated. If somebody becomes victim of aggression it is legitimate and sometimes even prescribed to counter-react with an aggressive act to take revenge. Since in behavioural terms both punishment and revenge are an act of aggression, interpretation is needed to decide about how to react once an individual member of the organisation becomes victim of an aggression. Indeed, the data reveals hints to both interpretations. This is dependent on the subjective perception of the situation. Note that even in case of revenge the individual might be aware that he or she had been subject of aggression because of norm violation. One might recall blood revenge as a paradigmatic example in which people clearly know that they commit a crime which will cause another crime. However, in contrast to an interpretation as punishment the subject does not accept the normative authority of the aggressor.

The identification of the role of a normative authority on the level of the subjective meaning attributed to a certain situation refers back again to structural properties of the organisation. Namely, the validity of norms need to be secured by certain form of authority, may this be a formal hierarchy or the authority legitimate reason (Bicchieri 2006). First and foremost the acceptance of aggressions as legitimate punishment implies that it is possible to identify (legitimate) reasons for the aggression. In a highly unstructured situation as outlined in the escalation of the corrupt chaos the identification for reasons becomes increasingly difficult and fallible. In such a case, namely if recourse to legitimate reasons for aggression becomes precarious, a formal authority of organisational hierarchies may serve as a substitute of the authority of reason. This role of authority can be illustrated at the example of the relation between parents and their children: At least for children in a certain age who are too young to be able for normative reasoning, it is likely that the child perceives aggression of the parents as a punishment. Even if they might be wrong or psychopathic alcoholics, children cannot judge if the parents are right or wrong. Conflicts between parents and children are asymmetric. For children parents are the normative power which defines the rules of the world. In other words the family represents a basic social structure. Thus typically aggression is interpreted as punishment. In contrast, in a quarrel between child peers aggression is likely to stimulate revenge since peers are not a normative authority. In abstract terms punishment refers to higher level in a hierarchy or at least in abstract terms to some kind of superior interests. Neither do subordinates punish their boss nor do children punish their parents. While certainly aggression both of children against their parents as well as subordinates against their boss exist, this is not punishment. Punishment is sanction for norm violation. In contrast, aggression from e.g. subordinates against their boss is a violation of the norm of respect to the hierarchy. Thus reasoning on aggression implies reasoning on social structure.

The criminal group had no social structure, except of being a group of peers. Certainly, they were aware of the necessity of commitment to group. This was in their own interest of making money. The group was based on self-interest and not (as in terrorist groups) on a kind 'moral commitment' based on a certain ideology, may it be marxism, religion or the nation. Ideologies can provide legitimate reason. This can stimulate a commitment to an abstract higher level authority even in the

absence of a formal, real life hierarchical structure. The absence of any formal or ideological authority makes it likely that aggression is countered by revenge rather than interpreting it as legitimate punishment. As organisational science pointed out a flat social structure has many benefits in terms of reducing transaction costs by providing quick and easy access to information. However, in particular in covert organisations organizational growth might lead to situations in which interpersonal trust is no longer appropriate as organisational structure. Relations of interactions become too complex to be overseen any more. For this reason it becomes increasingly unlikely that possible conflicts could be solved e.g. by a mediator to which a) both conflicting parties have a relation of personal trust and b) which second could give a 'wise' judgement which can be appreciated by both parties even if this is not secured by a formal authority. Such a mediating process could encapsulate the cascading effect of counter-revenge. Thus at a certain point informal conflict regulation becomes unlikely. In consequence organisational growth might reach a situation at which a flat structure becomes risky in times of crisis. Even more the structural risk of a triadic structure makes it likely that at some time something goes wrong. Examples from the case are aggression applied to the wrong person, when the reason is clearly not evident. Thus growth calls either for organizational innovation or might entail a risk of organisational failure.

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