Interviewing People Who Pose a Threat: Counter-Interview Strategies Examined

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Abstract

Interviewing to assess the risk for violence has received little attention in the literature on threats. Threat managers—who aim to identify potential danger—typically collect information from sources *around* persons who pose a threat rather than questioning the threateners themselves. To elicit valuable information from threateners, it is important to understand the strategies they use to withstand the interview (i.e., counter-interview strategies). In the experiment, participants ($N = 179$) communicated a threat that they intended to actualize (actualizers) or not (bluffers), and were subsequently questioned about the threat using an interview protocol intended to communicate high or low suspicion. The findings showed that threatening required self-regulation. Participants were forthcoming, yet strategic and adaptive to the targets' response. Actualizers provided fewer details on how to implement the threat than did bluffers, and, when subjected to specific questions, bluffers provided more information overall than did actualizers. Knowledge on counter-interview strategies of threateners may contribute to the development of interview protocols that can be used to assess the risk for violence.

Keywords: threat assessment, counter-interview strategy, investigative interviewing, true and false intent.

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Interpersonal threats imply that a person might cause harm to themselves or others. Such harm can be physical (e.g., murder), but also psychological (e.g., stalking), or financial (e.g., company shaming). As the future is unknown, threats come with great uncertainty. The person who knows most about the posed threat is the threatener him/herself, yet little is known about how to elicit information from people who threaten. The current study focusses on collecting information from threateners via interviewing. Their information can be of great value for threat managers who need to assess and manage the risk for harmful behavior. A problem may be, however, that threateners behave differently when they know they are being examined (Meloy, Hart, & Hoffmann, 2013). They might exaggerate or downplay their intentions and might conceal or lie about their plans. Such behaviors, aimed to withstand the interview, have previously been studied in research on suspect interviewing and are commonly referred to as counter-interview strategies (Granhag, Clemens, & Strömwall, 2009). Understanding the information-management strategies of interviewees has proven to be beneficial in several areas of investigative interviewing. Techniques have been developed that successfully elicit cues to deceit in liars (Granhag & Hartwig, 2015), admissions from guilty suspects (Tekin et al., 2015), and information from sources who hold knowledge about an upcoming crime (Oleszkiewicz, Granhag, & Cancino Montecinos, 2014). The commonality in these techniques is that they are developed from the perspective of the interviewee. In this paper we argue that in order to elicit valuable information from threateners it is important to understand their information-management strategies and their counter-interview strategies used when being questioned. Studying counter-interview strategies reflects a new line of research in the field of threat assessment. An experimental paradigm was developed for this purpose.

Suspects' Counter-Interview Strategies

Research has shown that counter-interview strategies reflect self-regulation (Granhag & Hartwig, 2008; Granhag, Hartwig, Mac Giolla, & Clemens, 2015; Hartwig, Granhag, Strömwall, & Doering, 2010). This means that when suspects are interrogated, they regulate their behavior to make a credible impression. Research has shown that guilty and innocent suspects are equally motivated to be perceived as truthful in interrogations (Hartwig et al., 2010). However, guilty suspects need to conceal the truth, while innocent suspects can freely reveal the truth. This difference is presumed to result in avoidant versus forthcoming counter-interview strategies. Guilty suspects are found to be more concerned with maintaining control and more often adapt avoidant strategies (e.g. *avoid incriminating details, keep it simple*), whereas innocent suspects were more concerned with providing correct information and more often adapt forthcoming strategies (e.g. *tell the truth like it happened*; Hines et al., 2010; Strömwall, Hartwig, & Granhag, 2006). Comparable outcomes were found in a study on criminal intentions (Clemens, Granhag, & Strömwall, 2013). Participants who lied about their criminal intent, tried to convince the interviewer of their innocence by avoiding lies and by staying close to their prepared cover story. The majority of the truth-telling suspects, on the other hand, tried to be honest. Furthermore, it has been found that guilty suspects use more, and more diverse strategies than innocent suspects (Hartwig, Granhag, & Strömwall, 2007), are more aware of the risk of not being believed (Hartwig et al., 2010), and react comparatively stronger to the possibility that there might be evidence against them (Luke, Dawson, Hartwig, & Granhag, 2014).

Threateners' Counter-Interview Strategies

A threat is ineffective if the target person does not believe the threat. Just like suspects, threateners thus need to be convincing. We suggest that threateners might use different counter-interview strategies than suspects of a crime. As it is difficult to be convincing by being avoidant, it is presumed that threateners—regardless of whether or not

they bluff— need to be forthcoming. Complete honesty, however, is not possible either. Those with no intent to actualize their plans need to conceal that they are bluffing, whereas those with the intent to enact their plans might want to conceal information that can cause interference with the implementation of their plan, such as the exact time or place for the attack. Although intentions may typically range from mild to moderate and strong intent, this paper just distinguishes between the presence and absence of implementation intentions.

Information on how to implement the threat can be referred to as ‘*how*’ information, as opposed to ‘*why*’ information specifying why one threatens. This distinction stems from research on action identification (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987) and reflects levels of abstractness at which people mentally represent past and future situations such as memories, speculations or plans (Soderberg, Callahan, Kochersberger, Amit, & Ledgerwood, 2015). A recent study showed that actualizers provided less ‘*how*’ information than bluffers when communicating their threat, whereas the two groups provided a comparable amount of ‘*why*’ information (Geurts, Granhag, Ask, & Vrij, 2016).

It is furthermore theorized that the need to be believed is more urgent for bluffers than for actualizers. Actualizers have a follow-up plan in case the threat does not pay off (they can implement the threat), whereas bluffers have not. Bluffers thus depend entirely on the target’s conviction and willingness to meet their demands. This could make bluffers more sensitive to the response of the target, for example when the target raises suspicion towards them.

In the present study, we examined verbal threat strategies by interviewing participants who express a threat that they intend to actualize (*actualizers*) or not (*bluffers*). Participants were given the opportunity to express a threat over the phone (*free-statement phase*), and were then asked questions about the expressed threat (*specific-questions phase*). These questions were meant to induce different levels of perceived interviewer suspicion. Half of the participants were asked questions/prompts suggesting that the interviewer wanted to

assess the veracity of the threat (*high-suspicion protocol*), whereas the other half were asked questions/prompts suggesting that the interviewer wanted to better understand the threat (*low-suspicion protocol*).

Both bluffers and actualizers are theorized to be forthcoming when making a threat and we have no reason to expect differences in their statements during the free-statement phase. However, we propose that it is of more importance to bluffers than actualizers to convince their target, which will make bluffers comparatively more sensitive to questioning. We therefore predicted an interaction effect between interview phase and threat veracity on the amount of information provided, with bluffers becoming relatively more forthcoming than actualizers when being subjected to specific questions (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, we propose that bluffers are more attentive to suspicion against them. Therefore, we predicted that differences between bluffers and actualizers become larger when they are faced with the high-suspicion protocol compared to the low-suspicion protocol, with bluffers displaying greater increases in perceived suspicion (Hypothesis 2) and information provided (Hypothesis 3) from the free-statement phase to the specific-questions phase. Furthermore, we theorize that actualizers experience a need to secure a successful implementation of the threat. As revealing implementation details might increase the risk of getting caught, we predicted that actualizers are more reluctant than bluffers to share implementation aspects of the threat (i.e. ‘how’ information; Hypothesis 4). Finally, we sought to explore whether participants changed their threat strategies during the interview and, if so, why.

Method

Participants and Design

A total of 195 participants, mainly undergraduate university students, took part in the study (134 women, 46 men, 3 other, 12 missing; $M_{age} = 26.60$ years, $SD = 7.38$ years) in which they made a threat via a phone call. They participated on a voluntary basis and

received a movie ticket worth approximately €12 in return. Participants were recruited to participate in a study on campaigning strategies used by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), and they were asked to make a threatening phone call on behalf of the NGO. Fifteen participants did not make the call because they (a) felt uncomfortable doing so ($n = 13$), (b) had participated in a similar study before ($n = 1$), or (c) due to a technical failure ($n = 1$). Their data were excluded from further analysis. Hence, a sample of 179 participants remained (130 women, 46 men, 3 other; $M_{age} = 26.60$ years, $SD = 7.35$ years). Participants were randomly assigned as bluffers ($n = 90$) or actualizers ($n = 89$). Furthermore, a random half of the bluffers and actualizers were assigned to be questioned with the high-suspicion protocol ($n = 91$), and the other half were assigned to be questioned with the low-suspicion protocol ($n = 88$).

Procedure

The procedure largely resembled the threat paradigm developed by Geurts and colleagues (2016). Participants were presented with a case that reflected a moral conflict between a fictive Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) named Aweare and a fictive clothing company named Vera. Participants read how Aweare was dedicated to improving working conditions in low-wage countries and how Vera was known as being socially engaged in the local communities in the countries where they outsource their production. Vera had recently released a commercial in which they drew attention to violence against women. Meanwhile, Aweare got hold of video recordings showing how Vera exploited women in factories in Cambodia. Aweare considered it hypocritical that Vera raised public awareness about violence against women while simultaneously exploiting them for their own profit. Aweare therefore decided to take action against Vera. Participants were instructed to imagine being part of Aweare and to represent Aweare in this action.

All participants were instructed to call a representative of Vera. They were instructed to threaten to leak the video recordings containing evidence of Vera's malpractice to the media, unless the company withdrew their commercial from television. Participants were either instructed to bluff when making this claim and thus not truly leak the recordings (bluffers), or to do as they claimed and leak the recordings right after the call (actualizers). All participants were given 15 minutes to prepare for their task(s) and all had access to the same background materials (e.g., information about Aware, working conditions in Cambodia, route to the delivery location for the recordings).

Next, the participants phoned the representative of Vera. The recipient of the call was a confederate who responded to the threats according to structured interview protocols, displayed in Table 1. Each participant was initially invited to speak freely (free-statement phase) and was then questioned about the threat he or she made (specific-questions phase). Half of the participants were asked high-suspicion questions/prompts, suggesting that the interviewer aimed to assess the truthfulness of the threat (high-suspicion protocol; e.g., "How do I know that what you are saying is true?"). The other half were asked low-suspicion questions/prompts, suggesting that the interviewer aimed to better understand the threat (low-suspicion protocol; e.g., "To make sure that I get you right, I need to know more").

After the call, the experimenter informed the participants that the Vera representative thought they were bluffing and therefore decided to ignore the threat. They were then instructed to proceed with their task according to the instructions. Bluffers were supposed to do nothing, whereas actualizers were supposed to provide their media contact with a USB stick containing the video recordings. They were intercepted immediately after starting the implementation (e.g., walked towards the door).

Each participant was then asked to answer closed and open-ended questions about the strategies they had used in their communication with Vera. They were asked whether or not

they had used any particular strategy (if so, to describe this strategy) and whether they had changed their strategy during the call (if so, to explain why).

Next, each participant completed the perceived suspicion scale by rating three items; "Vera believed me", "Vera trusted me", and "Vera was suspicious of me" (Buller, Strzyzewski, & Comstock, 1991; $\alpha = .68$). To compute an overall measure of perceived suspicion, the average score on the three items was calculated after reversing two of the three items (belief, trust) so that a higher score on the items reflected a higher level of perceived suspicion. Each participant further rated nine statements related to their involvement in the case (e.g., "It is important that action is taken against Vera"; $\alpha = .74$), their belief in the authenticity of the case, how difficult they had found the instructions and their task, how nervous they had been for their task, how sufficient the time for preparation had been, and how willing they had been to give Vera information. All scales ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Participants were then thoroughly debriefed, thanked for their participation, and handed the movie ticket.

Codings

Provided information. Two trained coders coded the transcribed calls. Each transcript was coded for (a) the total amount information revealed, which was further broken down into the amount of (b) 'why' and (c) 'how' information, reflecting Vallacher and Wegner's (1987) distinction between 'why' aspects (why to threaten) and 'how' aspects of an action (how to enact the threat). An existing coding scheme was used, developed for a previous study (Geurts et al., 2016). The scheme included 76 pieces of information in the background materials to which the participants had access to while preparing the call. Of this total, 44 pieces were classified as 'why' information, and 32 pieces were classified as 'how' information. For instance, explanations about the poor conditions in Cambodia, the malpractice of Vera, or the vision of Aweare were classified as 'why' information. Moreover,

details such as the delivery location or the name of the media contact were classified as ‘how’ information. Each transcript was coded for unique pieces of information. A piece of information was considered unique when mentioned for the first time by the participant. Repetitions were thus not taken into account. Two coders coded 20% of the transcripts, resulting in agreement on 92% of the decisions made (Cohen’s $\kappa = .77$). One of the coders completed the remaining 80% of the transcripts. The coders were blind to the condition of the participants and the hypotheses of the study.

Reported strategies. Two coders coded the answers provided for the strategy question (i.e., “Describe the strategy you used during your communication with Vera”). Reported strategies were divided into two categories, mirroring the previously described ‘how’ versus ‘why’ division. Strategies focused on the implementation of the threat were classified as ‘how’ strategies (e.g., “My strategy was to convince Vera that I really had the material, and that giving it to my contact would be problematic for them”). Strategies focused on motivating the threat were classified as ‘why’ strategies (e.g., “I tried to make Vera realize that their business operation is hypocrite”). When participants reported both type of strategies, only the main strategy was coded. When both types of strategies were equally prevalent, it was coded as “both”. Strategies that fitted neither one of the two categories or could not be comprehended were classified as “other”. After the coders coded 20% of the answers and reached an interrater agreement of 86% (Cohen’s $\kappa = .70$), one coder proceeded with the remaining material. Again, the coders were unaware of the conditions and hypotheses.

Change of strategies. The open-ended question on strategy change (i.e., “Explain why you changed strategy during the communication with Vera”) was included for exploratory purposes. Hence, a data-driven scheme was used to code the participants’ answers, meaning that one individual, blind to the conditions, used the answers to identify

broader categories in the data. Four reasons for strategy change were identified: (1) The participant did not get the response that they had wanted/expected, (2) the participant was asked to provide more information, (3) the participant was asked to prove their point, and/or (4) the end of the conversation was closing in. It was possible for participants to report more than one reason. Reasons that fitted neither one of the four mentioned categories or could not be comprehended were classified as 'other'. Two individuals coded 20% of the material. After calculating the interrater agreement (93%, Cohen's $\kappa = .73$), one coder completed the remaining material.

Results

Manipulation Checks

The descriptive statistics of the participants' self-ratings are displayed in Table 2. The table reveals that participants assessed the case as authentic, rated high involvement with Aware's case against Vera, understood the instructions, and reported that they had sufficient time to prepare their tasks. Yet, participants found their tasks demanding and were nervous about completing them. This was true for both making the threat call and for delivering the USB stick (the latter was rated by actualizers only). Independent t-tests showed that none of these measures differed significantly between actualizers and bluffers, all t 's (177) < 1.81 , p 's $> .07$.

Actualizers and bluffers were supposed to have different intentions with regard to delivering the USB stick. Actualizers were supposed to deliver the stick immediately after making the threat call, whereas bluffers were not. To check if all participants acted accordingly, the experimenter waited for the participants to initiate or not initiate the first move towards delivery (e.g., walk towards the door). All actualizers started the implementation, whereas none of the bluffers did. Hence, the manipulation of intent was considered successful.

Perceived suspicion

A 2 (threat: bluff vs. actualize) $\times$ 2 (protocol: high suspicion vs. low suspicion) between subjects ANOVA on the level of perceived suspicion, revealed a main effect of protocol, $F(1, 175) = 11.53, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$. The participants who were questioned with the high-suspicion protocol reported to have experienced more suspicion directed towards them ($M = 5.44, SD = 1.00$) than the participants questioned with the low-suspicion protocol ($M = 4.93, SD = 1.03$), which supports the effectiveness of the protocols. Note that both protocols induced suspicion awareness, and the low-suspicion protocol thus refers to *lower* (rather than low) suspicion induction compared to the high-suspicion protocol. Furthermore, there was no main effect of threat, $F(1, 175) = 2.90, p = .090, \eta_p^2 = .02$. In contrast to Hypotheses 2, no significant interaction was found between threat and protocol, $F(1, 175) = 0.83, p = .364, \eta_p^2 = .01$. Bluffers and actualizers experienced similar levels of suspicion in the low-suspicion protocol ($M_{\text{bluff}} = 4.73, SD = 1.00; M_{\text{actualize}} = 5.13, SD = 1.03$), as well as in the high-suspicion protocol ($M_{\text{bluff}} = 5.38, SD = 1.07; M_{\text{actualize}} = 5.50, SD = 0.92$). Thus, the highly suspicious questions affected bluffers' and actualizers' perceived suspicion to the same extent.

Provided information

It was found that all participants were fairly forthcoming in the free-statement phase. About half of the total amount of information given by bluffers and actualizers was provided during the free-statement phase (bluffers 47%, actualizers 54%). This finding was further supported by the participants' self-rated willingness to share information, showing that bluffers ($M = 5.02, SD = 1.57$) and actualizers ($M = 5.40, SD = 1.39$) were willing to share information, $t(177) = -1.72, p = .086, d = .26, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.551, .038]$. The willingness rating was significantly related to the actual amount of information provided in the interview, $r = .20, 95\% \text{ CI } [.059, .353], p = .008$.

To test the hypotheses with respect to the provided information, a 2 (threat: bluff vs. actualize) $\times$ 2 (phase: free-statement vs. specific-questions) $\times$ 2 (protocol: high suspicion vs. low suspicion) $\times$ 2 (information: how vs. why) mixed ANOVA was performed on the amount of details provided in the statements, with Threat and Protocol as between-subjects factors, and Phase and Information as within-subjects factors. The descriptive and inferential statistics are displayed in Table 3 and Table 4, respectively.

The analysis revealed a significant Threat $\times$ Protocol $\times$ Phase interaction, $F(1, 175) = 4.23, p = .041, \eta_p^2 = .02$. The mean values are plotted in Figure 1. In line with Hypothesis 1, bluffers provided more information in the specific-questions phase than actualizers did. However, in contrast to Hypothesis 3, simple effects tests showed that the effect of questioning was only significant for the low-suspicion protocol, $F(1, 175) = 8.47, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .05$, but not for the high-suspicion protocol, $F(1, 175) = 0.00, p = .979, \eta_p^2 = .00$. For the low-suspicion protocol, bluffers provided significantly more information than actualizers in the specific-questions phase, $F(1, 175) = 7.48, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .04$, whereas they provided significantly less information than actualizers in the free-statement phase, $F(1, 175) = 4.52, p = .035, \eta_p^2 = .03$.

The finding that the amount of provided information differed between bluffers and actualizers in the free-statement phase of the low-suspicion protocol, but not in the free-statement phase of the high-suspicion protocol, is remarkable considering that the free-statement phases were identical across protocols. A correlation analysis was performed to investigate the relationship between the information provision in the free-statement phase and the information provision in the specific-questions phase. It was found that the more information participants revealed in the free-statement phase, the less information they revealed in the specific-questions phase, $r = -.409, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.581, -.287], p < .001$. Hence, the fact that the observed difference between bluffers and actualizers changed direction from

the free-statement phase to the specific-questions phase in the low-suspicion protocol may reflect a “regression-to-the-mean” phenomenon (see Discussion).

Furthermore, there was a significant Threat $\times$ Information interaction, $F(1, 175) = 5.23, p = .023, \eta_p^2 = .03$, supporting Hypothesis 4. Bluffers provided significantly more ‘how’ details throughout their statement ($M = 9.33, SD = 3.59$) than actualizers ($M = 8.28, SD = 3.33$), $F(177) = 4.14, p = .043, \eta_p^2 = .02$, whereas no significant difference was found for the amount of ‘why’ details provided, $F(1, 177) = 0.73, p = .400, \eta_p^2 = .00$. Thus, although actualizers and bluffers were equally informative explaining why they threatened, actualizers elaborated less on how they were going to implement their threat. This effect was not further qualified in a three-way interaction with Protocol or Phase ($F > 2$).

Predictions were only made for differences between bluffers and actualizers. Nonetheless, a significant Phase $\times$ Information $\times$ Protocol interaction was found, $F(1, 175) = 12.61, p = .000, \eta_p^2 = .07$. Follow-up analyses indicated that the effect of the interview phase on the type of information provided was significant for the high-suspicion protocol, $F(1, 177) = 20.01, p = .000, \eta_p^2 = .10$, but not for the low-suspicion protocol, $F(1, 177) = 1.03, p = .313, \eta_p^2 = .01$. When interviewed with the high-suspicion protocol, participants provided significantly more ‘why’ than ‘how’ information in the free-statement phase, $F(1, 177) = 18.85, p = .000, \eta_p^2 = .10$, and significantly more ‘how’ than ‘why’ information in the specific-questions phase, $F(1, 177) = 68.49, p = .000, \eta_p^2 = .28$. Thus, when stating their threats, participants initially focused on explaining *why* they threatened, but they shifted to explaining *how* they would enact the threat when confronted with highly suspicious questions.

Strategies

Nearly all participants reported to have used some strategy when communicating the threat (94%). The vast majority of the reported strategies (78%) could be classified as a ‘how’

(35%), 'why' (35%) or 'both' (8%). Chi-square analyses revealed that bluffers and actualizers reported to have used 'how' and 'why' strategies to an equal extent (see Table 5). Hence, the findings on reported strategies lend no further support to Hypothesis 3.

Participants were asked if they changed their strategies during the conversation, and if so, why they changed strategy. Out of 164 participants who reported to have had a strategy, 82 (50%) reported to have changed strategy during the conversation. Participants reported to have changed strategy (a) because the response from Vera differed from what they had wanted/expected (42%; e.g., "When I noticed a lack of moral response, I tried to instill fear"), (b) because they were asked to provide more information (29%; e.g., "When I suddenly was asked to clarify my point, I tried to explain how they violate human rights"), (c) because they were asked to prove their point (17%; e.g., "When Vera wanted me to show that I was telling the truth, I tried to rethink and express myself differently"), (d) because the end of the conversation was approaching (10%; e.g., "Towards the end, when Vera did not sound convinced, I tried to push more towards the fact that it was in their own interest"), and/or (e) for other reasons (6%; e.g., "I lost what I was going to say and strayed away from my strategy"). Seven participants (9%) did not report the reason for their change of strategy. Chi-square analysis revealed no significant differences between bluffers and actualizers for the number of strategy changes or for the type of reasons reported ($X^2 < 3.84$).

Discussion

Our findings suggest that people avail of self-regulative mechanisms when communicating threats. Threatening participants were found to be forthcoming, strategic and adaptive to the target's response. Both bluffers and actualizers were willing to share information, which fits well with the experience of professionals who report that threateners are typically eager to discuss their case (Van der Meer & Diekhuis, 2013; White, 2013). Furthermore, almost all participants (94%) reported to have used a strategy in their

communication with the target. Half of these participants changed their strategy during the communication, thereby adapting to the situation. It is worth noting that threatening participants combined a typical innocent-suspect attitude (*being forthcoming*, e.g., Strömwall et al., 2006) with a typical guilty-suspect attitude (*being strategic*, e.g., Hartwig et al., 2007). This might be the result of the confounding of guilt and innocence when stating a threat. Bluffers may have no intent to cause harm, yet they are guilty of lying about their intentions (i.e., innocent liars). In contrast, actualizers intimidate the target with truthful intentions but they are honest in their claim (i.e., guilty truth-tellers).

It was predicted and found that bluffers provided more information than actualizers when being questioned about the threat. In contrast to our prediction, the effect was found for the low-suspicion protocol but not for the high-suspicion protocol. In other words, asking highly suspicious questions affected the statements of actualizers and bluffers similarly. This might be the result of bluffers and actualizers reporting to have experienced similar levels of perceived suspicion. Thus, bluffers were not particularly receptive to suspicion, neither were they more affected by it. The findings contradict previous studies in which lying interviewees (which bluffers can be considered to be) were found to be more aware of the risk for not being believed (Hartwig et al., 2010), more attentive to the interviewer's suspicion (Vrij, Fisher, Mann, & Leal, 2008), and more forthcoming when asked critical questions, compared to truth-telling interviewees (Geurts et al., 2016). Overall, the low-suspicion protocol showed to be most effective at creating differences between bluffers' and actualizers' threat statements. However, this result might have been an artefact due to a "regression-to-the-mean" phenomenon (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002) as information provision in the free-statement phase and the specific-questions phase was found to correlate negatively. In other words, the fact that bluffers in the low-suspicion protocol started out by providing relatively

little information, left them with more new information to provide later on in the interview, and vice versa for actualizers.

Consistent with our hypothesis, actualizers revealed less information about the implementation of the threat ('how' information) compared with bluffers. This finding might seem counter-intuitive at first as it could be reasoned that the more implementation details specified in a threat statement, the higher the risk is for actual implementation. Previous research has supported this logic. It has been found that people tend to give more concrete accounts when describing near future events (Wakslak, Trope, Liberman, & Alony, 2006) and true intentions (Mac Giolla, Granhag, & Vrij, 2015). However, the opposite was found in a recent study on threats where actualizers provided less 'how' details than did bluffers (Geurts et al., 2016). It was suggested that actualizers might have had many 'how' details in mind, but decided to keep this information to themselves to prevent the risk of getting caught. The current finding lends further support to this idea, although this conclusion should be drawn with caution for a number of reasons. First, it is unclear how many 'how' or 'why' details the participants kept in mind without telling. It is only known how many details they had access to and how many details they revealed. Second, risk perception was not measured in this study. That is, participants did not rate how risky they thought it was to reveal certain details. Third, the difference in provided 'how' information was not reflected in the participant's self-reported strategies. Strategies meant to explain the motives behind the threat (i.e., 'why' strategies) and strategies meant to prove the capacity to implement the threat (i.e., 'how' strategies) were reported as often by bluffers as by actualizers. Thus, the current study provides partial support for the hypothesis that actualizers are more reluctant than bluffers to share implementation details. Looking at the threat statements, actualizers indeed placed less emphasis on implementation details, but their self-reported strategies did not show evidence that this was the result of a conscious decision.

Aside from the hypotheses, it was found that participants started the threat statements by explaining their motivation, but that they then—when questioned—switched to providing implementation details. Such a switch did not occur when participants were asked for more information so that the target would understand them better. These findings indicate that trying to understand threateners may trigger them to provide a rationale for their behavior, whereas trying to assess threateners may trigger them to prove their claim.

Conclusions

The current findings support the proposition that threatening is a deliberate act, for which people prepare themselves strategically, regardless of whether or not they intend to enact the threat. The predicted differences between bluffers and actualizers were partly confirmed. Bluffers increased their information supply when questioned and actualizers were less generous with respect to providing implementation details. However, the processes causing those differences are less clear. Some possible mediators were not explicitly measured (e.g., actualizers find implementation details risky to reveal; bluffers are more concerned about their credibility), others were not proven (e.g., bluffers perceive more suspicion directed towards them; actualizers intentionally conceal ‘how’ details), or provided an alternative explanation (e.g., regression to the mean). Future research ought to explore such mediating processes. Making participants more aware of the dilemmas they have to face (e.g., “Be aware that revealing some details might increase the risk of getting caught”) might further enhance differences between bluffers and actualizers.

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Table 1

Interview Protocols That Were Used to Answer the Participants' Threat Calls

Free-statement phase	
Hello, my name is Caroline. I'm the head of public relations at Vera's and I expected your call. You initiated this conversation, so please go ahead.	
Specific-questions phase	
Low-suspicion protocol	High-suspicion protocol
The reason that I take this call is because it is my responsibility <i>to understand you correctly</i> . Therefore I would like to ask you to provide me more information.	The reason that I take this call is because it is my responsibility <i>to find out whether or not you are telling the truth</i> . Therefore I would like to ask you to provide me more information.
Thank you. But this is not yet enough for me <i>to draw the entire picture. To complete my task and make sure that I get you right, I need to know more</i> .	Thank you. But this is not yet enough for me <i>to make a proper judgement. How do I know that what you are saying is true?</i>
Before we finish this conversation, is there anything else that <i>I should know of?</i>	Before we finish this conversation, is there anything else that <i>could further convince me?</i>

Note: Italics indicate words that differed between the interview protocols.

Table 2

Mean Values (and Standard Deviations) of Bluffers' and Actualizers' Involvement with the Case, Experienced Difficulty to Comply with the Instructions, and Nervousness about Performing the Tasks

Rating	Bluffer	Actualizer
Involvement with case	5.52 (0.77)	5.66 (0.77)
Belief that case rested on authentic facts	5.69 (1.36)	5.94 (1.04)
Understanding of instructions	5.92 (1.03)	5.89 (1.12)
Sufficiency of preparation time	4.81 (1.79)	4.31 (1.80)
Difficulty making call	4.82 (1.51)	4.67 (1.75)
Difficulty preparing delivery	N/A	2.86 (1.62)
Nervousness about making call	5.13 (1.65)	5.28 (1.69)
Nervousness about delivering	N/A	2.94 (1.87)

Note: There were no significant differences between bluffers and actualizers on the reported ratings ($p > .05$). All ratings were made on 7-point Likert scales (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

Table 3

Mean Values (and Standard Deviations) for the Amount Of Information Provided in Threat Statements by Protocol, Phase, Information, and Threat

	Low-suspicion protocol			
	Free-statement phase		Specific-questions phase	
	How	Why	How	Why
Bluffer	3.52 (3.02)	4.05 (2.50)	5.43 (3.83)	4.41 (2.46)
Actualizer	4.09 (3.42)	5.64 (3.16)	3.82 (3.67)	3.30 (2.09)
	High-suspicion protocol			
	Free-statement phase		Specific-questions phase	
	How	Why	How	Why
Bluffer	3.78 (2.73)	4.57 (2.94)	5.91 (3.54)	2.61 (2.09)
Actualizer	2.84 (2.89)	5.18 (2.57)	5.80 (3.81)	2.36 (2.10)

Table 4

Results of the Mixed Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on the Amount of Information Provided in the Threat Statements

Effect	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
Main effects			
Threat	0.65	.420	.00
Protocol	0.60	.441	.00
Phase	0.00	.989	.00
Information	5.88	.016	.03
Two-way interactions			
Threat $\times$ Protocol	0.01	.937	.00
Threat $\times$ Phase	4.38	.038	.02
Threat $\times$ Information	5.23	.023	.03
Protocol $\times$ Phase	0.08	.783	.00
Protocol $\times$ Information	10.49	.001	.06
Phase $\times$ Information	58.60	.000	.25
Three-way interactions			
Threat $\times$ Protocol $\times$ Phase	4.23	.041	.02
Threat $\times$ Protocol $\times$ Information	0.01	.930	.00
Threat $\times$ Phase $\times$ Information	1.58	.210	.01
Phase $\times$ Protocol $\times$ Information	12.61	.000	.07
Four-way interaction			
Threat $\times$ Protocol $\times$ Phase $\times$ Information	0.44	.508	.00

Note. Degrees of freedom_{effect} = 1, degrees of freedom_{error} = 175.

Table 5

Reported Strategies by Bluffers and Actualizers

Strategy	Bluffers	Actualizers	X^2	p	ϕ
Why (focus on explaining the threat)	29 (32%)	33 (37%)	0.47	.495	.05
How (focus on implementing the threat)	32 (36%)	31 (35%)	0.01	.919	.01
Both ('how'/'why' to an equal extent)	5 (6%)	9 (10%)	1.29	.256	.08
Other	16 (18%)	13 (15%)	0.33	.565	.04
No strategy	8 (9%)	3 (3%)	2.36	.124	.11

Note. Error bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 1. Average amount of 'how' and 'why' information provided by bluffers and actualizers in the free-statement phase and in the specific-questions phase, for the low-suspicion interview protocol and the high-suspicion interview protocol