

Taking Threats to the Lab: Introducing an Experimental Paradigm for Studying Verbal Threats

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Abstract

People who threaten to cause harm may actualize their threat or bluff. To manage the risk that harmful acts will be perpetrated, it is of great importance to recognize differences between threatening behavior that will and will not be actualized. In this paper we present what is, to our knowledge, the first study in which verbal threats are examined experimentally. We theorize that threats reflecting actual intentions come with implementation details (*how* one will actualize the threat), whereas bluffs linger in the formation of ideas (reasons *why* one poses a threat). In a mock-paradigm, participants ($N = 181$) were instructed to threaten a company over the phone and were questioned about their threat during the call. Participants were either instructed not to actualize the threat (bluffers), to actualize it only if the company would not meet their demands (conditional actualizers) or to always actualize the threat (decisive actualizers). It was found that bluffers and actualizers differed in the amount of ‘how’ details they provided. In contrast to our prediction, bluffers provided comparatively more details on implementation. Possible explanations for this result are discussed.

Keywords: threat assessment, true and false intent, construal level theory, investigative interviewing

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On August 15, 1998, a car bomb exploded in the shopping center of Omagh, Northern Ireland. The explosion killed 29 people and injured another 220. The Real Irish Republican Army (Real IRA), a splinter group of the IRA, claimed responsibility for the attack. It was the deadliest attack in the Northern Ireland conflict. Strikingly, a warrant preceded the bombing. Half an hour before the explosion a man called the Irish television station and stated: “Martha Pope, bomb, Omagh town, 15 minutes”. At the time, the Real IRA used the code “Martha Pope” when warning the police in order to distinguish themselves from those who threatened with fake attacks impersonating the IRA. In the Omagh-case the perpetrators thus explicitly revealed their true intentions. However, usually, the receiver does not know whether or not the threatener will do harm. Hence, threats come with great uncertainty (Meloy, Hart, & Hoffmann, 2013a). To assess potential risks, it is important to detect markers of actual threats and bluffs.

An actual threat is defined as a stated intention to cause harm that the threatener genuinely intends to carry out. We call people who express such threats *actualizers*. In contrast, a bluff is a stated intention to cause harm that the threatener does not intend to carry out. We call people who express such threats *bluffers*. In the present paper we introduce a paradigm to study threats experimentally. Using this paradigm we examine whether, and if so how, intentions to actualize threats manifest in the verbal content of threats. In other words, do actualizers verbalize themselves differently than bluffers do?

Threat assessments

The contemporary research on threats is dominated by case studies. Most of these studies identify warning behaviors or risk factors associated with (threats to commit) targeted violence

(Meloy, Hoffmann, Roshdi, Glaz-Ocik, & Guldemann, 2013b). Targeted violence concerns incidents where the perpetrator selects a target prior to his violent attack (Fein, Vossekuil, & Holden, 1995). Examples of targeted violence are stalking, acts of terrorism, school shootings or workplace violence. Warning behaviors and risk factors are markers that relate to, and in certain cases predict, targeted violence (Meloy & OToole, 2011). Factors found to increase the risk of violence committed by threateners are prior violence, substance abuse, limited education (specifically verbal skill deficits), untreated mental disorders, and hostile/suspicious interaction styles (Warren, Mullen, & Ogloff, 2011; Warren, Ogloff, & Mullen, 2013). These predictors largely resemble the risk factors that are common to non-threatening perpetrators of violence (Yang, Wong, & Coid, 2010).

In addition to these general and clinical characteristics, specific risk factors have been identified for separate domains of targeted violence. Directly communicated threats, for instance, have been found to be a rather robust predictor of violence in cases of stalking (Mullen, et al., 2006), whereas many school shooters have been found to reveal their violent plans indirectly to a third party (e.g., friend, classmate) prior to the attack (i.e. *leakage*, OToole, 2000). Furthermore, psychotic symptoms such as delusional beliefs and disordered communication are strongly associated with persons who threaten and attack royal figures, politicians and celebrities (Dietz, et al., 1991; James et al., 2007, 2008). Especially persons with intense preoccupations with an individual, activity or idea, appear to be overrepresented in statistics on the harassment of public figures (i.e. *fixation*; Hoffmann, 2009). Actual attacks of public figures are often preceded by approaches in the form of inappropriate letters or visits (James, Farnham, & Wilson, 2013). Other suggested warning behaviors are acts of planning and preparation (Calhoun & Weston, 2003), identification with military and weapons (Hempel, Meloy, & Richards, 1999), and an

increase in attempts to pursue the objective (i.e. *intensity of pursuit*; Hoffmann, Meloy, & Sheridan, 2013). For an overview of warning behaviors, see Meloy and colleagues (2013b).

Two prominent insights have emerged from the work reviewed above. First, the likelihood of actualizing a threat of violence appears to be dependent on the situation and circumstances, rather than on the threatener's personality (Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, & Berglund, 1999). Second, most attacks are of a deliberate nature (Borum et al., 1999). Perpetrators form ideas, calculate, plan, prepare and try out along their way to actual violence. When such behaviors follow a sequential structure it is sometimes referred to as a *pathway to violence* (for specific stages along this pathway, see Calhoun & Weston, 2003). This concept illustrates that targeted violence is the result of elaborate processes rather than impulses. Recognizing pre-attack behavior in an early stage is key to assessing threats (Fein et al., 1995). The prevailing approach to threat assessment is therefore to monitor patterns of thinking and behavior of those individuals who come to the attention of professionals (Meloy et al., 2013a). However, this individualized approach rests mainly on research examining cases that have gone wrong. This begs the question: how many individuals with similar behavior never caused harm? The answer to this question is important for assigning diagnostic value to warning behaviors. Furthermore, cases are generally analyzed in hindsight, and the findings are *described* rather than *predicted* from theory. We therefore argue that experimental research is needed to identify discriminative markers of actual threats and bluffs and, if possible, to provide a theoretical framework which may accommodate previous findings.

Construal Level Theory

One theory that may be particularly relevant to understanding threats is the Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010). CLT was originally developed to explain how people

mentally represent past and future situations such as memories, speculations or plans. These mental representations are called construals. Construals vary in abstractness depending on the psychological distance to the self. Psychological distance is the subjective experience of something being close or far away from the self, the here, and the now (Trope & Liberman, 2010). An event is psychologically distant when it transcends one's immediate experience. That is, when the event is supposed to take place in the distant future, at a distant location, applies to other people and/or is uncertain to happen. For instance, the seminar your friend might attend next year in Dubai is more psychologically distant than the seminar you will attend tomorrow in your hometown. The CLT holds that construals become more concrete as psychological distance to an event decreases and, as a consequence, affect peoples' thoughts and behavior in relation to that specific event (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). This hypothesis has been supported in numerous studies and the results seem robust across different types of psychological distance, settings, and samples (Soderberg, Callahan, Kochersberger, Amit, & Ledgerwood, 2014).

The key difference between actualizers and bluffers is that the former intend to carry out their threat, whereas the latter do not. Although there is no clear line between actualizers and bluffers in reality (e.g., some might not have made up their mind yet), the literature suggests that all threateners find themselves on a pathway between an idea to cause harm and the actual implementation (Calhoun & Weston, 2003; Fein & Vossekuil, 1997). Their position on this pathway can change over time and situation (Meloy et al., 2013b). For instance, a man who stalks his ex-wife and plans to set her house on fire might refrain from doing so when he gets a new girlfriend. Thus, threateners vary in their psychological distance to an attack. According to CLT, actualizers should have more concrete mind-sets compared with those who are indecisive

or bluff. The question is then, how -if at all- does the level of mental abstraction manifest itself in verbal threatening behavior?

One possibility is that actualizers and bluffers value the *desirability* and *feasibility* of their threat differently. Desirability concerns the valence of an action's end state, whereas feasibility refers to the ease or difficulty of reaching the end state (Liberman & Trope, 1998). For example, one's wish to live in a just world reflects desirability, whereas all actions taken to create a just world reflect feasibility. The distinction between desirability and feasibility corresponds with the distinction between 'why' and 'how' aspects of an event. These aspects have been examined in research on how people think about what they are doing, so-called action identification (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). 'How' aspects are concrete and specify *how* one will act ("I will disgrace the company's image by leaking sensitive information to the media"). 'Why' aspects are more abstract and specify *why* one will act ("I will shame the company's image because they treat their employers badly"). It has been theorized that people generally prefer to describe activities in terms of 'why', but shift to 'how' descriptions when 'why' information fails to guide subsequent action (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). Specifically, research shows that people describe activities in more concrete, 'how' related terms when these activities are soon to happen (Liberman & Trope, 1998) and/or more likely to occur (Wakslak, Trope, Liberman, & Alony, 2006). The role of 'how' and 'why' representations have also been examined in relation to true and false intent (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006; MacGiolla, Granhag, & Liu-Jönsson, 2013; Sooniste, Granhag, Strömwall, & Vrij, 2014). These studies are of particular relevance for the current context since threats can be seen as a specific form of intent.

True and false intent

Gollwitzer (1999) proposed that ‘how’ thinking is crucial for achieving goals. He suggested that the mere act of goal setting (“I want to shame the image of the company”) is not enough to realize the goal. People also need *if-then* plans that specify when, where, and how the goal should be realized (“If they don’t change their policy immediately, I will contact the media and leak sensitive information”). Such if-then plans are called *implementation intentions* and can be seen as the operationalization of the desired outcome, the goal intention (Gollwitzer, 1999). Research shows that individuals who form implementation intentions more often initiate goal striving and achieve their goals (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). Furthermore, individuals who have no goal intention are unlikely to form implementation intentions (Sheeran, Milne, Webb, & Gollwitzer, 2005). Implementation intentions might thus be unique for true intentions. To examine this hypothesis, Sooniste and colleagues (2014), instructed truth tellers to plan and carry out a neutral task (grocery shopping), whereas liars were told to plan and carry out a mock crime (hiding a USB in the shopping center). The latter group was further instructed to lie about their true intentions in case they were intercepted, and to use a cover story to withstand the interview. When questioned about their intentions, truth tellers provided more ‘how’ information than liars, and liars provided more ‘why’ information than truth tellers. These findings were replicated in a subsequent study using a similar paradigm (MacGiolla et al., 2013; see also Granhag & MacGiolla, 2014).

Although threats essentially reflect intent, the results from past research cannot be directly applied to threats. Threats differ from the type of intentions studied so far in at least four critical aspects. First, the truth (not the lie) reflects higher criminal involvement. That is, actualizers have criminal plans whereas bluffers have less malicious intentions. In previous studies on true and false intentions, liars typically held criminal plans and truth tellers were

innocent. Second, threateners emphasize their harmful intentions, whereas suspects commonly downplay or hide past actions. Third, no threatener is completely innocent. Making a threat (even with no intention to act upon it) is already harmful and sometimes criminal, depending on the severity of the threat and national legislation. The distinction between innocence and guilt is thus less sharp than in earlier intention studies. Fourth, implementation intentions are typically examined in social cognitive research as a condition that is either present or absent. This dichotomy might not hold for situations where intentions to implement violence may range from mild to moderate and strong intent. Hence, a new strand of research is needed to examine true and false intentions in relation to threats.

The present study

In the present study we examined how actualizers and bluffers verbalize threats. Participants were presented with a case involving a non-governmental organization (NGO) and a clothing company, and were then asked to represent the NGO when making a threatening phone call to the company. Participants were either instructed not to actualize their threat (*bluffers*), to actualize the threat only if the company would not agree to meet the participants' conditions (*conditional actualizers*), or to actualize the threat no matter how the company would respond (*decisive actualizers*). A confederate answered the phone calls always using four different questions (see below).

The likelihood that an event will happen affects how people think and talk about it (Wakslak et al., 2006). Specifically, 'how' representations of events become more prominent when events are more likely to happen, for instance, in near future plans (Liberman & Trope, 1998) true intentions (MacGiolla et al., 2013; Sooniste et al., 2014) and implementation intentions (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). The likelihood of actualizing the threat was therefore

manipulated across the three experimental conditions: bluffers (low likelihood), conditional actualizers (medium likelihood) and decisive actualizers (high likelihood). It was predicted that decisive actualizers would provide the most ‘how’ information during the threat calls, followed by conditional actualizers, with bluffers providing the least ‘how’ information. Given Vallacher’s and Wegner’s (1987) theoretical notion that we are all sensitive to the larger meanings and reasons for what we are doing, no differences were expected with respect to the amount of ‘why’ information disclosed.

Furthermore, interview tactics may affect how much and what type of information threateners provide. The questions asked during the phone call in the present study can be divided into two categories: information-seeking (e.g., *Can you please give me more information?*) and challenging (e.g., *How do I know that you are telling me the truth?*). No specific predictions were formulated for the effect of the specific questions on information disclosure, but the response patterns to the questions were examined for exploratory purposes.

Method

Participants and design

One hundred and eighty one students (128 women, 53 men; $M_{age} = 28.31$ years, $SD = 10.05$ years) at the University of Gothenburg (Sweden) participated in the study. Participants were recruited via the university participant pool. This pool consists of both students and non-students who have signed up for participation in psychological research. Participants were approached via email and asked to take part in a study on campaigning strategies used by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). They received a cinema ticket for participation (worth approximately €11). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental

conditions: bluffers, conditional actualizers and decisive actualizers. Seven persons felt uncomfortable making a threat and withdrew from the study. Seventeen participants did not correctly follow the instruction to act or not to act on their threat. Eleven of these had misunderstood or forgot this part of the instruction, and six did not believe that they were truly supposed to follow through with the threat. Their scores were excluded from further analysis. A total of 157 participants thus remained: 54 bluffers, 51 conditional actualizers and, 52 decisive actualizers (108 women, 49 men; $M_{age} = 28.10$ years, $SD = 9.67$ years).

Procedure

Participants were tested individually. The same case was presented to all participants. This case reflected a moral conflict between a fictive Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) named Aware and a fictive clothing company named Vera. Participants read how Aware 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 to which they outsource their production. Vera had recently released a commercial in which they drew attention to violence against women. Meanwhile, Aware got hold of video recordings showing how Vera exploited women in factories in Cambodia. Aware considered it to be hypocritical that Vera raised public awareness about violence against women while simultaneously exploiting them for their own profit. Aware therefore decided to take action against Vera. Participants were instructed to imagine being part of Aware and to represent Aware in this action.

All participants were instructed to call a representative of Vera and to threaten that they would leak the video recordings with evidence of Vera's malpractice to a Swedish television program for investigative journalism, if the company would not withdraw their commercial from television. Participants were either instructed not to leak the recordings (bluffers), to leak the

recordings only if the company would not agree to withdraw their commercial (conditional actualizers) or to leak the recordings no matter how the company would respond to their threat (decisive actualizers). All participants were left alone for 15 minutes to prepare for their task(s) and all had access to the same background materials. These materials included both ‘why’ related information (e.g., visions of Aware, working conditions in Cambodia) and ‘how’ related information (e.g., delivery location for the recordings, name of the media contact).

Next, the participants called the representative of Vera. They were led to believe that the person on the other end was another participant instructed to play the role as the representative. In reality, however, the recipient of the call was a confederate, who responded to the threats in the exact same manner, using four different questions/prompts:

Q1. Hello, this is Caroline. I'm the head of Public Relations at Vera and I expected your call. You initiated this conversation, so please go ahead.

Q2: I'm not sure I fully understand what you mean; can you please give me more information?

Q3: How do I know that what you are telling me is true?

Q4: Is there anything else I should know about before ending the conversation?

Okay, let me think about this. Thank you for your input. Bye.

After the conversation, 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 both conditional and decisive 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., put on their coat, walked towards the door).

Before the participants made the call, they rated nine statements on their involvement with the case (e.g., “I consider women rights and poverty reduction to be two of the most important priorities for NGO’s to focus on”, 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) and their motivation to perform their task (e.g., “I want Vera to believe that my threat is real”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) using Likert scales. After the call and the interception, the participants rated the clarity of the instructions (“How easy/difficult did you find the instructions?”; 1 = *very difficult*, 7 = *very easy*), their satisfaction with the preparation time (1 = *not at all sufficient*, 7 = *very sufficient*), the amount of preparation time spent on preparing for the call (1 = *no time at all*, 5 = *all the time*), the amount of preparation time spent on preparing for the delivery (1 = *no time at all*, 5 = *all the time*) and the credibility of the set up (e.g., “To what extent did you believe that you would deliver the USB stick to a contact person”; 1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*). Participants were then thoroughly debriefed, thanked and paid for their participation.

Codings and data preparation

All calls were transcribed verbatim and coding was conducted on these transcriptions. Two coders, blind to the conditions and the hypotheses, first identified ‘how’ and ‘why’ information in the background materials that participants had access to while preparing the call. The coders relied on Liberman and Trope’s (1998) distinction between desirability (why) and feasibility (how). All information that related to the operations of Vera, the operations of Aware, the released commercial, and human rights in general was identified as ‘why’ information. All information that related to the video recordings, the delivery procedure, the

deliver location, and the possibilities to successfully implement the threat via investigative journalism or Aware, was identified as ‘how’ information. In total, 44 pieces of ‘why’ information and 32 pieces of ‘how’ information were identified in the background materials. Each transcript was then coded for the amount of unique pieces of ‘how’ information (range: 32) and ‘why’ information (range: 44). Each piece of information was counted only the first time it was mentioned by the participant and repetitions were thus not taken into account. To assess the interrater reliability, one coder coded all the transcripts and the other coder coded 20% of the transcripts. The interrater agreement was 90 % (Cohen’s $\kappa = .71$).

To explore at which point in time during the interview participants disclosed their information, a new dependent measure was computed for ‘how’ and ‘why’ information, respectively, using the following equation:

$$T_{av} = \frac{n_1(1) + n_2(2) + n_3(3) + n_4(4)}{N}$$

where T_{av} = the average time (within the interval ranging from Question 1 to 4) when the information was reported, n_i = the number of pieces of information revealed at the i th question, and N = the total number of pieces of information revealed across all for questions. The measure could thus range from 1 (all information revealed at Q1) to 4 (all information revealed at Q4).

Results

Self-ratings

Self-ratings on 7-point Likert scales showed that the participants believed in the setup ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.07$), were involved with the case ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 0.77$), and were highly

motivated to make a convincing threat ($M = 6.25$, $SD = 0.92$). Moreover, they did not find it overly difficult to comply with the instructions ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.47$), experienced sufficient time to prepare for their tasks ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.72$), which they had largely spent preparing for the threat call ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.79$, rated on a 5-point scale). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no significant differences between conditions on the above measures. The only pre-threat measure that showed differences between the conditions was the reported time spent on preparing for the delivery of the USB stick, $F(2, 146) = 16.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$. A post hoc test, using Bonferroni-corrected alpha levels, revealed that bluffers reported significantly less preparation time spent on the delivery ($M = 1.20$, $SD = 0.06$) compared with both conditional actualizers ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.14$, $p < .001$) and decisive actualizers ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 0.13$, $p < .001$). This finding can be seen as an additional manipulation check, as bluffers were not supposed to deliver the USB stick. When participants were asked in the debriefing to express their thoughts about the study, a substantial part spontaneously mentioned that they were nervous to make the call (48%), that the task was demanding (34%), and that the set-up felt real (26%).

Hypothesis testing

The distributions of both ‘how’ and ‘why’ scores were negatively skewed ($skewness_{\text{how}} = 0.70$, $SE = 0.19$; $skewness_{\text{why}} = 1.63$, $SE = 0.19$) and leptokurtic ($kurtosis_{\text{how}} = 0.64$, $SE = 0.39$; $kurtosis_{\text{why}} = 5.53$, $SE = 0.39$). Hence, we conducted non-parametric analyses to test our hypothesis. The descriptive statistics for each of the experimental groups are reported in Table 1 (top panel).

To test for the predicted trend across conditions, individual scores were ranked and analyzed using the Jonckheere test. A significant trend in the ‘how’ data was found. However, the conditions were ranked in opposite direction to what was predicted. The highest group

median was found for bluffers, followed by conditional actualizers and decisive actualizers, $J = 3300$, $z = -2.61$, $p = .009$, $r = -.21$. In other words, the group that was least likely to actualize the threat (bluffers), was found to provide the most ‘how’ information. Follow-up analysis, using Mann-Whitney tests with a Bonferroni correction, showed that bluffers provided significantly more ‘how’ information during the threat call than did decisive actualizers, $U = 971$, $z = -2.75$, $p = .006$, $r = -.27$. No significant difference was found between bluffers and conditional actualizers ($U = 1162$, $z = -1.38$, $p = .167$, $r = -.13$) or between decisive and conditional actualizers ($U = 1166.5$, $z = -1.06$, $p = .290$, $r = -.10$). With regard to the amount of ‘why’ information provided during the threat calls, no significant difference between conditions was found using the Kruskal-Wallis test, $X^2(2, N = 157) = 0.56$, $p = .76$, $\eta^2 = .00$.

Exploratory analyses

To examine the point in time during the interview at which participants disclosed their information, we conducted a Kruskal-Wallis analysis on the average timing of information disclosure. To understand how this dependent measure was conducted, see “Codings and data preparation”. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1 (bottom panel). The analysis revealed that the timing of disclosure of ‘how’ information differed between the conditions, $X^2(2, N = 157) = 8.85$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Pairwise Mann-Whitney comparisons, using Bonferroni-corrected alpha levels, revealed that bluffers disclosed ‘how’ information significantly later in the interview than did decisive actualizers, $U = 944.5$, $z = -2.91$, $p = .004$, $r = -.28$. No significant differences were found between bluffers and conditional actualizers ($U = 1127$, $z = -1.60$, $p = .109$, $r = -.15$) and between conditional and decisive actualizers ($U = 1104$, $z = -1.47$, $p = .143$, $r = -.15$). A similar pattern was observed for the timing of ‘why’ information. The point in time during the interview at which participants disclosed ‘why’ information differed between

conditions, $X^2(2, N = 157) = 11.58, p = .003, \eta^2 = .07$. Bluffers disclosed ‘why’ information significant later in the interview than did conditional actualizers ($U = 917, z = -2.95, p = .003, r = -.29$) and decisive actualizers ($U = 943.5, z = -2.91, p = .004, r = -.28$). No significant difference was found between conditional and decisive actualizers ($U = 1346, z = .13, p = .895, r = .01$).

All interviews started with two information-seeking questions/prompts (Q1: “Please go ahead” and Q2: “Can you please give me more information”), followed by two challenging question (Q3: “How do I know that what you are telling me is true?” and Q4: “Is there anything else I should know about before ending the conversation?”). The patterns of change in responses from the information-seeking phase (Q1 and Q2) to the challenging phase (Q3 and Q4) differed significantly between the experimental conditions. More specifically, 44% of the bluffers revealed more ‘how’ information in the challenging phase than in the information-seeking phase, compared with 23% of the conditional actualizers, and 17% of the decisive actualizers, $X^2(2, N = 157) = 9.67, p = .008, \eta^2 = .06$. Again, pairwise comparisons only revealed significant differences between bluffers and decisive actualizers ($p = .007, r = .30$). No difference was found with respect to ‘why’ information. Participants in all conditions showed similar patterns of change in their ‘why’ response. Only 2% of the bluffers, 2% of the conditional actualizers, and 2% of the decisive actualizers revealed more ‘why’ information in the challenging phase than in the information-seeking phase, $X^2(2, N = 157) = 0.35, p = .839, \eta^2 = .00$.

Discussion

Major findings

We introduced a paradigm for studying threats using an experimental method and we reported the results of the very first study drawing on this new paradigm. The study provided

some support for the hypothesis that actualizers and bluffers use ‘how’ information differently when they threaten. Opposite to the predicted direction, bluffers revealed more details on *how* they would implement their threat, compared to those who were truly determined to act. This difference became particularly pronounced when participants were challenged. That is, when they were critically questioned (“How do I know that what you are telling me is true?”) or given a last opportunity to talk (“Is there anything more I should know about before ending this conversation?”). Overall, bluffers revealed more information later in the interview compared with the actualizers. The combined findings indicate that bluffers (vs. actualizers) more often resort to ‘how’ details when challenged. The results contradict previous studies in which detailed accounts on planning and implementation are generally associated with true intent (MacGiolla et al., 2013; Sooniste et al., 2014) and executing threats (Calhoun & Weston, 2003). The findings also conflict with the notion derived from the Construal Level Theory that the more likely it is that an event will happen in the near future, the more concrete (‘how’ related) this event will be construed and described (Wakslak et al., 2006).

One explanation for the current results could be that the mental construals of threateners are overshadowed by strategic considerations. The hypotheses were based on the theoretical notion that people describe future plans in accordance with their mental representations of these plans. In other words, the more concrete the plans, the more concrete the descriptions of these plans. What we failed to consider, was how people choose to reveal or conceal information. Milburn and Watman (1981) proposed that threatening behavior is a social construct and that people rationally choose the content of threats in order to gain control in unpredictable situations. Hence, people might have deliberate ideas about *when* to provide *what* piece of information when they are questioned about threats. In other words, stated threats might be more colored by

what is *best* to say, rather than what is *possible* to say. As a result, participants that intended to actualize their threat might have had more ‘how’ details in mind compared to bluffing participants (as predicted in present study) but, more often than bluffers, chose to keep those details for themselves (as found in the present study).

This explanation finds support in the literature on suspect interviewing. It has been found that guilty and innocent suspects differ both with respect to the degree to which they apply strategies during interviews, and the type of strategies they report to use (Hartwig, Granhag, & Strömwall, 2007). Guilty suspects generally balance the risk of revealing incriminating details (Granhag & Hartwig, 2008) and tend to avoid to reveal information about criminal activities (Hartwig et al., 2007). Since the actualizing participants in the present study had intent to do harm, they might have adopted a guilty-suspect strategy. That is, withholding ‘how’ details to prevent being exposed. Bluffers, on the other hand, might not have worried too much about a successful implementation of their threat. Instead, the interviewer’s perception of their truthfulness may have mattered more. As liars typically do not take their credibility for granted (Vrij, Fisher, Mann, & Leal, 2008), bluffers are likely to fear not being believed. Recent research shows that deceptive interviewees tend to alter their verbal strategies when they become aware of the possibility that there is evidence speaking to their guilt (Luke, Dawson, Hartwig, & Granhag, 2014; Tekin et al., 2015). This threat to their credibility makes them either very forthcoming or very withholding. Hence, similar credibility concerns might have caused the bluffing threateners in the present study to become more forthcoming as the interview became more critical.

Although we found significant differences with respect to verbal behavior of bluffers and decisive actualizers, the two groups did not differ from the conditional actualizers. This might have been due to our manipulation: The likelihood to *actualize* the threat (deliver USB-stick)

was manipulated between conditions. However, the likelihood to *make* the threat was the same for all three conditions (all participants had to make the phone call). Because participants were generally nervous for making the call and spent most of the preparation time preparing for this, less thoughts and effort might have gone to the actual manipulation (i.e. delivering the USB stick or not). If this was the case, the conditions did not differ too much from each other and we failed to manipulate the participants' construals and subsequent behavior. To our defense though, differences between bluffers and actualizers might be small in real life too. Making a threat is probably demanding and nerve-racking regardless of the intention to follow it through or not. Differently put, if the mere act of threatening affects bluffers and actualizers to a similar extent, they might not differ markedly at first sight. Traditional deception research shows that people behave very similarly when lying and when telling the truth (Bond & DePaulo, 2006). Hence, several lie-detection researchers now advocate developing interview techniques that elicit and enhance cues to deceit, rather than assuming that cues are present at face value (Vrij & Granhag, 2012). The same reasoning might apply to research on threats.

Further research

The results of the present study cannot test the abovementioned assumptions on counter-interview strategies of threateners. Hence, further research is needed to explore these theoretical notions. Interview tactics that challenge the threatener's credibility, or interfere with successful implementation, might magnify differences in verbal behavior between actualizers and bluffers. Interviewing to elicit and enhance cues to deception is viewed as a promising strand of research (Vrij & Granhag, 2012). However, when applying traditional deception detection strategies to threats, a different interplay between interviewer and interviewee might arise. Key concepts such as guilt, innocence, truth and lies are cross-paired within threateners. In other words, threateners

are either innocent liars or guilty truth tellers. This is different than the typical lie detection paradigm in which the truth teller is innocent and the liar is guilty.

Aside from interview tactics that may assist risk assessment, future research should also focus on interview tactics that may effectuate de-escalation. Today, threat assessment interviewing is primarily focused on information gathering, specifically, on the identification of risk factors (Van der Meer & Diekhuis, 2013). However, research on re-offending supports the view that violence risk is best managed when controlling for risk factors *and* when focusing on fulfilling the personal needs of the offender, for instance to arrange work that they enjoy (Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2011). Such a combined approach is arguably relevant to the field of threat assessment as ignored desires (or at least desires experienced by the threatener as being ignored) often grounds threatening behavior (Calhoun & Weston, 2003). Ideally, the threat assessment interview offers an opportunity to reach out to the subject of concern. The importance of stabilizing the situation and creating a fruitful interview climate has been acknowledged in the field of threat assessment (Van der Meer & Diekhuis, 2013). However, evidence-based interview tactics to arrive at these conditions are currently lacking. Future research may profit from developing interview tactics that combine (a) the aim to gather information and (b) the aim to de-escalate the threat.

Generalizability & practical applications

The generalizability of the current findings might be limited by the overrepresentation of females in the tested sample. This ratio contrasts the samples in previous case studies where the threats were almost always made by males (e.g. Warren et al., 2011). As the case studies relied on actual data, the overrepresentation of males in the studied samples plausibly reflects a gender

asymmetry in the underlying population. It is therefore recommended to include more male participants in future experimental studies on threats.

A second limitation for the generalization of the findings is the limited personal involvement in the threats made. Although participants in the current study reported that they felt involved in the case, that they were motivated to perform well, and that they experienced participation as real and demanding, an experimental setting remains artificial. Such setting obviously differs from the more complex circumstances in which threatening behavior commonly occurs (e.g., hostile world views, untreated mental illness, intense preoccupations; Warren et al., 2013). However, an exact resemblance of the real-world is not always needed to gain insight into a phenomenon. The experimental paradigm allowed us to examine the basic characteristics in statements of persons who threaten. Moreover, such a setting creates the opportunity to investigate what can be made to occur. That is, what can be said or done by a threat assessor to elicit more information from a subject of concern. This knowledge could then be used to develop interview tactics for threat assessors. Strategic interviewing has proven to be beneficial in other areas of investigative interviewing. Tactics were developed that successfully elicited cues to deceit in liars (Granhag & Hartwig, 2015), admissions from guilty suspects (Tekin et al., 2015) and information from sources who held knowledge about an upcoming crime (Oleszkiewicz, Granhag, & Cancino Montecinos, 2014). Thus, research on threat assessment interviewing may lead to protocols and tactics that help the threat assessor to elicit more, or more relevant, information.

Furthermore, a better understanding of the communication of threateners and their counter-interview strategies may shed new light on current concerns for interviewing them, such as the subjects' lack of insight into their own plans, their unwillingness to talk about their

situation (Meloy et al., 2013a), and judicial or practical difficulties (Van der Meer & Diekhuis, 2013). However, before developing interview protocols for threat assessors, several protocols and tactics need to be tested under different conditions and in different contexts.

Conclusions

Taken together, this study is one of the first to address verbal threats experimentally. Its contribution is threefold; first, a new paradigm was presented in which the interaction between the threatener and the receiver could be examined. Although ecological concerns will always remain, this study showed that the basic aspects of threatening communication can be mirrored in a controlled setting. Second, our predictions were guided by theories on social cognition. Translating research from social cognition to threatening behavior could strengthen the theoretical base underlying the field of threat assessment (Milburn & Watman, 1981). Such a contribution should not be underestimated, considering that this field is currently short of theoretically driven predictions. Third, the results indicate that ‘how’ information may be of diagnostic value when assessing statements expressing threats. We did not directly test the effects of different interview protocols on threateners’ verbal behavior. However, our data suggest that differences between bluffers and actualizers may further increase as challenging questions are asked. This tendency could be the result of the threateners’ strategic concerns. Future research should therefore address i) what verbal strategies actualizers and bluffers adopt and ii) how different interview protocols (and tactics) may affect their strategies and verbal behavior.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Amount (Top Panel) and Timing (Bottom Panel) of 'Why' and 'How' Information Revealed by Bluffers, Conditional Actualizers, and Decisive Actualizers.

Condition	Why			How		
	<i>M (SD)</i>	95% CI	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	95% CI	<i>Mdn</i>
Amount						
Bluffers	8.31 (3.29)	[7.42, 9.21]	8.00	8.80 (3.18)	[7.93, 9.66]	9.00
Conditional	8.18 (3.74)	[7.13, 9.23]	8.00	8.35 (4.07)	[7.21, 9.50]	7.00
Decisive	8.35 (4.86)	[6.99, 9.70]	7.00	7.25 (3.17)	[6.37, 8.13]	7.00
Time						
Bluffers	1.81 (0.40)	[1.70, 1.92]	1.80	2.40 (0.78)	[2.19, 2.62]	2.33
Conditional	1.58 (0.45)	[1.46, 1.71]	1.50	2.17 (0.74)	[1.97, 2.38]	2.10
Decisive	1.58 (0.42)	[1.46, 1.70]	1.50	1.98 (0.76)	[1.77, 2.19]	1.85

Note. The time variables correspond to the average point in time during the interview at which the information was revealed (1 = all information revealed at Question 1, 4 = all information revealed at Question 4).