

Interviewing to Manage Threats: Exploring the Effects of Interview Style on Information Gain  
and Threateners' Counter-Interview Strategies

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Phone: +31643719685 This work was supported by the Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctoral program in Legal Psychology (EMJD-LP) under Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) 2013-0036 and Specific Grant Agreement (SGA) 2014-0678.

### **Abstract**

There is consensus about the importance to engage with, and if possible interview, individuals who threaten to cause harm. However, there exist little research on how to conduct such interviews. This paper contributes with an experimental approach on threat management interviewing. We explored what types of counter-interview strategies threateners employ, and we tested the efficacy of two common interview styles (direct interviewing vs. rapport-based interviewing). Participants ( $N = 120$ ) were interviewed about a non-violent threat they had made (to press charges against their former employer) and reported what strategies they had used during the interview. No differences were found between the interview protocols for threat management outcomes (i.e., information gain, use of counter-interview strategies, and willingness to discuss or enact the threat). However, the study showed how threateners struck a deliberate balance between proving their stand and disguising implementation details. Critically, individuals with more serious intentions to enact the threat were more inclined to hide information from the interviewer. We argue that it is vital for threat management interviewers to i) understand what behaviors can be expected from the interviewee, and ii) learn about interview methods that can steer these behaviors towards information gain (which is beneficial to threat assessment) and towards de-escalation (which is the purpose of threat management).

*Public Significance Statement:* This experimental study suggests that people who make or pose a threat behave semi-cooperative in threat assessment interviews: They provide information to explain or proof their case, but they conceal information on how they may implement the threat. The interview style (direct questioning vs. rapport-based questioning) had no effect on the amount of information they provided or on the number of counter-interview strategies they used.

*Keywords:* threat management, threat assessment, investigative interviewing, counter-interview strategy

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Most threats of violence will never be enacted (Warren, Mullen, & McEwan, 2014), but the threats that are enacted often come with high costs (e.g., human lives, financial damage). This warrants a careful assessment of each individual threat. Violence can be defined as actual, attempted, or threatened physical or serious psychological harm that a person deliberately directs without consent towards another person(s) (e.g. Douglas et al., 2014). According to this definition, all communicated threats should be considered violence, as well as all harm that one threatens to inflict. This can be physical, emotional, or financial harm, disturbance of peace, or persistent harassing behaviour. Professionals that assess and manage threats of violence typically do not aim to predict who will or will not commit harm. Instead, they first triage among a number of worrisome cases to identify the cases to prioritize (Gill, 2015; James & Farnham, 2016). This relatively quick triage process precedes a more comprehensive threat assessment, which in turn can inform what interventions are needed to mitigate the risks for the individual case (Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldemann, & James, 2012).

To reach a threat assessment or a threat management plan, information is needed about the subject of concern. For instance, threat managers must find out about the subject's motivation, intentions, mental health, and his or her capability to cause harm (Vossekuil, Fein, & Berglund, 2015). In part this information can be extracted from databases (e.g., police, social services), but the most direct source of information is the subject him or herself. The importance of interviewing subjects of concern has been widely acknowledged in the literature on threat assessment and management (Calhoun & Weston, 2015; Fein & Vossekuil, 1998; van der Meer & Diekhuis, 2014). It is therefore surprising that there is hardly any research on how to conduct such interviews. The few publications that do exist on the theme draw largely on the authors'

professional experiences (e.g., Meloy & Mohandie, 2014; van der Meer & Diekhuis, 2014). This paper contributes with an experimental approach to threat management interviewing. We present a study on how to elicit valuable information from people who pose a threat—in this paper referred to as *threateners*. Specifically, the current study examines the efficacy of two general interview styles applied in law enforcement and intelligence contexts: *direct interviewing* and *rappport-based interviewing* (Alison et al., 2013; Justice, Bhatt, Brandon, & Kleinman, 2010). These two techniques are explained below.

### **Counter-Interview Strategies**

It could be argued that successful interviewing starts with understanding the interviewee's perspective (Granhag & Hartwig, 2008). Perspective taking allows the interviewer to adapt to the strategies and the needs of the interviewee (Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008). Many interviewees in legal contexts are semi-cooperative, meaning that the interviewee benefits from revealing some, but not all, information they hold. For instance, guilty suspects want to be perceived as truthful without disclosing incriminating details (Hartwig, Granhag, Strömwall, & Doering, 2010; Tekin et al., 2015). Moreover, sources who hold information about an upcoming crime may want to warn the police without revealing that their friends are involved (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013; Granhag, Kleinman, & Oleszkiewicz, 2016). Threateners arguably face a similar dilemma; they need to make sure that they are taken seriously without being too specific about their intentions (Geurts, Ask, Granhag, & Vrij, 2016). Many interviewees must thus decide what information to reveal and manage the impression they make (Hartwig et al., 2010). Such management efforts are referred to as *counter-interview strategies* (Granhag, Clemens, & Strömwall, 2009).

Interview techniques that build on the counter-interview strategies of interviewees have proven to be effective in suspect and source interviewing. One such technique is to withhold

evidence from the suspect, so that guilty suspects (who wish to conceal incriminating details) produce more inconsistencies in their statements compared to innocent suspects (who wish to reveal what they know). This technique is referred to as the Strategic Use of Evidence (SUE) technique (Granhag & Hartwig, 2015). Another way to anticipate the interviewees' concern of revealing too much information is by creating the illusion that the information they hold is already known by the interviewer (Toliver, 1997). The 'illusion of knowing it all' is intended to elicit new information from the interviewee, while letting them believe they contributed with little or nothing. Recent empirical work has provided support for the efficacy of this tactic (Granhag et al., 2016; Oleszkiewicz, 2016; Oleszkiewicz, Granhag, & Kleinman, 2017).

In order to develop such techniques for threat management purposes, we must first understand what counter-interview strategies threateners employ. A recent study on this topic showed that threateners were forthcoming, yet strategic (Geurts et al., 2016). When interviewed about the threat they had made, threateners were willing to share information but presented their case in a considered manner (e.g., 'I tried to show I was serious by pointing out that [..]'). This finding implies that individuals who pose a threat —just like suspects and sources— use self-regulative mechanisms during interviews. The present study advances this line of work by exploring what *type* of counter-interview strategies threateners employ.

### **Direct vs. Rapport-Based Interviewing**

The purpose of investigative interviewing is to obtain a reliable and complete account (Evans, Meissner, Brandon, Russano, & Kleinman, 2010). This purpose may be achieved by asking questions directly, an interview style that is sometimes referred to as *direct interviewing* (Justice, Bhatt, Brandon, & Kleinman, 2010). Direct interviewing is a straightforward way of searching for answers and has been found to be a commonly used approach in the interrogation and intelligence community (Redlich, Kelly, & Miller, 2011). However, direct interviewing

leaves little room for building rapport—an aspect of interviewing that is considered important for gathering information (Milne, Shaw, & Bull, 2007; Meissner et al., 2014). A clear-cut definition of rapport is difficult to provide, but *rapport-based interviewing* is often explained as a friendly interview style that is characterized by acceptance, empathy, and respect for the interviewee's autonomy (Saywitz, Larson, Hobbs, & Wells, 2015; Alison et al., 2014).

A recent literature review on effective interviewing concludes that the best information gatherers are those who can establish and maintain rapport throughout the interview (Bull, 2013). A meta-analysis provides support for this conclusion, demonstrating that information-gathering methods in which rapport is established are more successful in eliciting true confessions (while reducing the likelihood of false confessions), compared to accusatorial questioning methods (Meissner et al., 2014). In addition, rapport-based interviewing has been found to increase the amount of useful information obtained from suspects (Alison, Alison, Noone, Elntib, & Christiansen, 2013), and to reduce the suspects' use of counter-interview strategies (Alison et al., 2014). These findings fit well with field research showing that offenders report to be more willing to provide a truthful account in response to humane, honest, non-dominant, and respectful interviewing (O Connor & Carson, 2005; Kebbell, Hurren, & Mazerolle, 2006).

As rapport-based interviewing is an information-gathering method that is grounded in psychological theory and research on memory and communication (Hartwig, Luke, & Skerker, 2016), it is here presumed that such a method is applicable to a wide variety of interview settings, including threat management interviewing.

### **The Present Study**

The first objective of this study was to explore the counter-interview strategies of persons who pose a threat. We argue that learning about interviewees' counter-interview strategies is a necessary starting point for developing interview techniques for threat management. The second

objective was to test the comparative efficacy of direct interviewing and rapport-based interviewing. Based on the findings discussed above that interviewees are more cooperative and willing to be truthful in information-gathering interviews, we predicted that participants interviewed with a rapport-based interview protocol would use fewer counter-interview strategies (Hypothesis 1), provide more information (Hypothesis 2), display a lower willingness to enact the threat (Hypothesis 3), and display a higher willingness to interact (meet) with the conflicting party again (Hypothesis 4), compared to participants interviewed with a direct interview protocol.

## Method

### Participants and Design

One hundred and twenty students at a Swedish university (33 men, 83 women, 4 other,  $M_{age} = 27.38$  years,  $SD = 8.83$  years) participated in the experiment on a voluntary basis. The gender category “other” consisted of participants who categorized themselves as neither man nor woman. Participation took approximately 40 minutes and participants were compensated with 100 SEK (approx. 11 USD). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two interview conditions: direct interviewing ( $n = 60$ ) or rapport-based interviewing ( $n = 60$ ). Approval for the study was obtained from the Regional Ethical Review Board at the university where the study was conducted.

### Interview Protocols

**Protocol development.** Two interview protocols were developed: one direct interview protocol and one rapport-based interview protocol (See Appendix B). Both protocols consisted of 11 questions/prompts. These questions tapped into topics that are considered vital when assessing and managing threats of violence, such as the threateners’ motivations and goals, their intentions, or their ability to plan and enact the threat (Vossekuil et al., 2015).

In the *direct interview protocol*, a combination of open-ended and explicit questions was

posed straightforwardly. The protocol was inspired by the U.S Army Field Manual in which interrogators are instructed to approach the interviewee with direct questions, phrased in a business-like manner (i.e., the Direct Approach; Justice et al., 2010). The Direct Approach has been used as a point of comparison in previous studies on investigative interviewing (e.g., Oleszkiewicz, Granhag, & Cancino Montecinos, 2014).

The questions/prompts in *rapport-based interview protocol* were phrased in a manner that was supposed to communicate an empathic, respectful, and nonjudgmental atmosphere. The questions/prompts incorporated elements of rapport defined by Alison and colleagues (2013) in a field study on terrorist suspect interrogations. These elements were, *autonomy* (e.g., presenting information so that the suspect can choose to respond), *empathy* (e.g., showing an understanding of the interviewee's perspective), *reflective listening* (e.g., accurately reflecting what the interviewee has said to encourage further discussion or clarification), *developing discrepancies* (e.g., presenting inconsistencies or challenges without passing judgment), and *rapport and resistance* (e.g., responding to resistance by reflecting on both sides, presenting positive and negative content, and shifting to an area of less resistance).

To illustrate, the rapport-based interview protocol opens with: "I would like to ask you a few questions, but of course it is your choice whether or not you prefer to answer those questions". This prompt was supposed to reflect the rapport-element "Autonomy". See Appendix B for the operationalization of the other elements in the rapport-based interview protocol.

**Protocol pretesting.** The interview protocols were pretested in a separate study. A total of 141 participants (80 men, 61 women) judged to what extent the interview protocols were rapport-promoting. Participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and they were compensated 50 dollar cents (0.50 USD). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two interview protocols; the direct interview protocol ( $n = 73$ ) or the rapport-based interview protocol



( $n = 68$ ). First, participants read the fictitious case about the work conflict between the consultancy company and the former employee (see Appendix A) so that they would understand the context of the interview questions. Next, they listened to the interview questions as if they were the interviewee. Finally, participants rated 13 items reflecting elements of rapport (e.g., ‘The interviewer understands the difficult situation that I am in’, see for all items Appendix C). The items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .83$ ). The items that were negatively phrased were reversed scored for analyses.

In support of the design, participants exposed to the rapport-based interview protocol reported significantly higher ratings of rapport ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) than participants exposed to the direct interview protocol ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ),  $t(139) = 3.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.58$ , 95% CI [0.24, 0.91].

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited for what was advertised as a study on ‘career challenges’. Upon arrival, they read a fictitious case about a work conflict between a consultancy company and a former employee. The case file revealed how the company had allegedly tricked recent graduates into unpaid internships by promising them a permanent position. After the internship, however, their contract was ended and the company had profited from free labor. A duped employee wrote a letter to the company in which s/he threatened to press charges against this malpractice, unless the company would financially compensate her/him for the work carried out. Participants were asked to imagine being this employee. See Appendix A for the full background story and the instructions to the participants.

First, participants were asked to list up to five reasons for why they would press charges at this point in time, as well as reasons for why they would *not* press charges at this point in time. This task was meant to stimulate the participants to think carefully about the case before rating

four items about their *willingness to enact the threat* (i.e., to press charges). Participants rated the extent to which (i) they believed they could win the case in a court of law, (ii) they thought the case was worth pursuing, even if it would be rather expensive, (iii) they thought the case was worth pursuing even if it would take time, and (iv) they were likely to press charges (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*;  $\alpha = .85$ ). The procedure was repeated for the participants' *willingness to interact* with the company about their case; participants were first asked to list reasons for and against interacting with them at this point in time, and then rated the extent to which (i) they would be willing to communicate with the company if the company would contact them about their case, (ii) they would seek contact with the company to provide the company with information about their case, and (iii) they would seek contact with the company to gather information about their case (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*;  $\alpha = .64$ ).

Next, participants were informed that an employee of the internal security unit from the company would discuss the case with them. Participants were then given 10 minutes to prepare themselves for this meeting and they received additional information about their case (e.g., an overview of the hours they had worked for the company, the contact details of a counsellor). Furthermore, participants were told to keep in mind that 'If you tell too much, the company might take advantage of the information you provide. If you tell too little, the company might not take you seriously'. This was supposed to reflect the information-management dilemma that interviewees in the legal arena typically face (Hartwig et al., 2010; Granhag et al., 2016).

Immediately after the preparation phase, participants were brought to the meeting room. The role of the interviewer was played by one of two research assistants (man and woman) who were blind to the hypotheses of the study. The interviewers conducted an equal number of interviews across conditions. The interviewers were instructed to strictly follow the interview protocols. All participants received the same 11 questions/prompts. Half of the participants were

approached with the direct interview protocol; the other half were approached with the rapport-based interview protocol.

After the interview, participants rated the same seven items as they had rated before the interview, about their willingness to enact the threat at this point in time (four items,  $\alpha = .89$ ), and about their willingness to interact with the company in the future (three items,  $\alpha = .73$ ). In addition, the participants were asked to report if they had used a particular strategy when interacting with the interviewer (and if so, to describe this strategy). Finally, participants reported their age, gender, and current occupation.

### **Coding**

**Strategy use.** The strategies that the participants reported to have used were divided into six categories; *prove capability*, *explain*, *disguise*, *self-presentation*, *negotiate*, and *other*. Two categories, *disguise* and *self-presentation*, were drawn from previous research on counter-interview strategies of suspects (Hartwig et al., 2010) and two categories, *prove capability* and *explain*, were drawn from previous research on counter-interview strategies of threateners (Geurts et al., 2016). The category *negotiate* was added because of the business-like nature of the case (i.e., work conflict, financial request). Strategies that did not fit any of these five categories were coded as *other*. The participants could report more than one strategy. Two coders, both blind to the hypotheses of the study, categorized the strategies. The interrater agreement was established based on 20% of the material (Cohen's  $\kappa = .65$ ). The disagreements were settled in a discussion between the coders after the  $\kappa$  had been calculated. One coder coded the remaining 80% of the material.

**Information provision.** All interviews were transcribed and coded for the amount and type of information disclosed. The background story given to the participants consisted of 45 pieces of information (see Appendix A). The information pieces in the background story were

selected so that they suited the interview questions (see Appendix B). That is, the participants could use the background information to answer all the questions that they were about to receive. For instance, the information piece ‘You kept track of your working hours while working for the company’ could be used to answer the question ‘Why do you think that your case is a strong case?’ Again, two coders, unaware of the hypotheses, coded 20% of the material. The coders counted which information pieces were present in each transcript and reached an interrater agreement of 89% (Cohen’s  $\kappa = .73$ ). One coder continued coding the rest of the material.

## Results

### Interviewer effects

To test for interviewer effects, 2 (Interviewer: interviewer 1 vs. interviewer 2)  $\times$  2 (Protocol: direct vs. rapport-based) between-subject ANOVAs were performed on the dependent measures. A main effect of interviewer was found for the reported number of strategies,  $F(1, 116) = 6.45, p = .012, \eta_p^2 = 0.053, 90\% \text{ CI } [0.006; 0.130]$ . Participants reported a higher number of strategies when questioned by interviewer 1 (male;  $M = 1.81, SD = 1.04$ ), compared to participants questioned by interviewer 2 (female;  $M = 1.38, SD = 0.77$ ). No main effects were found for the amount of information provided ( $p = .204$ ), the willingness to enact the threat after the interview ( $p = .287$ ), or the willingness to interact with the conflicting party after the interview ( $p = .863$ ). Furthermore, no significant Interviewer  $\times$  Protocol interactions were found for the number of strategies reported,  $F(1, 116) = 0.83, p = .365, \eta_p^2 = 0.007, 90\% \text{ CI } [0.000, 0.052]$ , the amount of information provided,  $F(1, 116) = 1.27, p = .261, \eta_p^2 = 0.011, 90\% \text{ CI } [0.000, 0.061]$ , the willingness to enact the threat after the interview,  $F(1, 116) = 0.11, p = .744, \eta_p^2 = 0.001, 90\% \text{ CI } [0.000, 0.028]$ , or the willingness to interact with the conflicting party after the interview,  $F(1, 116) = 0.83, p = .364, \eta_p^2 = 0.007, 90\% \text{ CI } [0.000, 0.052]$ .

## Hypotheses Testing

**Strategy use.** Nearly all participants ( $n = 108$ , 90%) reported to have used a strategy during the interview. Almost half of them ( $n = 49$ , 45.4%) reported a single strategy, while the majority ( $N = 59$ , 55.6%) stated to have used a combination of two to four different strategies. As can be seen in Table 1, the most frequently reported strategies were *prove capability* ('Show them that my evidence would hold in court') and *disguise* ('Answer as vaguely as possible'). Other reported strategies were *self-presentation* ('Appear professional and credible'), *explain* ('Make them understand my difficult situation'), *negotiate* ('Show willingness to reach an agreement'), and *other* ('Take over control by asking questions back'). The two strategies that were most often used in combination were *prove capacity* and *disguise* ( $n = 32$ ).

The number of participants who claimed to have used a strategy was the same across interview conditions ( $n = 54$  [90%] in both conditions). Chi-square tests did not reveal any significant differences with respect to the extent to which participants in the rapport-based interview condition and the direct interview condition reported to have used the different type of strategies, all  $ps < .343$  (Bonferroni corrected). Thus, there was no effect of interview protocol on reported strategy use, meaning that Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

**Information provision.** Participants were found to be moderately forthcoming, with an average disclosure of 12.74 ( $SD = 4.67$ ) information pieces per person out of the total of 45 pieces (i.e., 28.3%). An independent  $t$ -test revealed that participants in the rapport-based interview condition ( $M = 13.45$ ,  $SD = 4.93$ ) and direct interview condition ( $M = 12.05$ ,  $SD = 4.37$ ) did not differ significantly with respect to the amount of information provided,  $t(118) = 1.63$ ,  $p = .106$ ,  $d = 0.30$ , 95% CI [-0.06, 0.66]. This means that Hypothesis 2 did not receive support.

**Willingness to enact.** To test the effect of the interview protocol on willingness to enact the threat, a 2 (Protocol: direct vs. rapport-based)  $\times$  2 (Time: before interview vs. after interview) mixed ANOVA was performed with participants' willingness ratings as the dependent measure. Cell means are reported in Table 2. No main effect of interview protocol was found,  $F(1, 118) = 0.69, p = .407, \eta_p^2 = 0.006, 90\% \text{ CI } [.000, .048]$ . However, the analysis revealed a main effect of time,  $F(1, 118) = 12.79, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .098, 90\% \text{ CI } [.029, .187]$ , indicating that participants were significantly more willing to enact the threat after ( $M = 6.35, SD = 1.81$ ) than before the interview ( $M = 5.84, SD = 1.76$ ),  $d = .65$ . A Cohen's  $d$  value of .65 reflects a medium effect size meaning that this effect exists in the real world but it might only be visible in research findings. There was no significant Protocol  $\times$  Time interaction,  $F(1, 118) = 1.42, p = .236, \eta_p^2 = .012, 90\% \text{ CI } [.000, .063]$ . Thus, the amount of change between before- and after-interview ratings did not differ significantly between the two interview protocols, failing to support Hypothesis 3.

**Willingness to interact.** To test the effect of the type of interview on participants' willingness to interact with the company, a 2 (Protocol)  $\times$  2 (Time) mixed ANOVA was performed (for cell means, see Table 2). No main effect of interview protocol was found,  $F(1, 118) = 0.07, p = .794, \eta_p^2 = .001, 90\% \text{ CI } [.000, .024]$ . However, the analysis again revealed a main effect of time,  $F(1, 118) = 30.06, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .203, 90\% \text{ CI } [.104, .303]$ , showing that participants were significantly less willing to interact with the company after ( $M = 5.29, SD = 2.10$ ) than before the interview ( $M = 6.16, SD = 1.78$ ),  $d = 1.00$ . A Cohen's  $d$  value of 1 reflects a large effect size meaning that this effect is big and/or consistent enough to detect in the real world. There was no significant Protocol  $\times$  Time interaction,  $F(1, 118) = 2.39, p = .626, \eta_p^2 = .020, 90\% \text{ CI } [.000, .078]$ . Thus, the rate of decline of willingness to interact with the company did not differ between the two interview protocols, rejecting Hypothesis 4.

### **Exploratory Analyses**

The main analyses were conducted for the overall amount of information provided. However, from an applied perspective, some information might be more critical than other information. Hence, 12 raters were asked to read the case and to select the pieces of information that they considered to be the most critical for assessing the risk that the main character in the case would cause harm. An independent *t*-test was conducted with the information pieces that were selected by five or more raters ( $n = 15$ ). On average, participants revealed 5.80 ( $SD = 2.19$ ) out of 15 pieces of this critical information. No significant difference was found between participants in the rapport-based interview condition ( $M = 6.07$ ,  $SD = 2.36$ ) and participants in the direct interview condition ( $M = 5.53$ ,  $SD = 2.67$ ),  $t(118) = 1.16$ ,  $p = .248$ ,  $d = 0.21$ , 95% CI [-0.15, 0.57].

To examine whether strategy choice influenced the amount and type of information provided, independent *t*-tests were conducted with respect to the two most frequently reported strategies—*prove capability* and *disguise*. First, participants with the strategy *prove capability* did not provide a significantly different amount of details on the implementation of the threat ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 2.94$ ) than did participants who did not employ this particular strategy ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 2.57$ ),  $t(118) = 1.07$ ,  $p = .288$ ,  $d = 0.19$ , 95% CI [-0.16, 0.55]. Second, the participants who reported to have used the strategy *disguise* provided on average about two details less ( $M = 11.64$ ,  $SD = 5.12$ ) than did participants who did not use this particular strategy ( $M = 13.70$ ,  $SD = 4.09$ ),  $t(118) = 2.45$ ,  $p = .016$ ,  $d = 0.45$ , 95% CI [0.09, 0.81].

In total, 56 participants reported to have used the strategy *disguise*. Some of these participants ( $n = 33$ ) were vague in their descriptions about what information they withheld (e.g., ‘I left out the important details’), whereas others ( $n = 23$ ) specified which type of information they concealed. The latter group reported to have concealed three types of information: (i) information about persons that could help them implement the threat (e.g., the names of a

potential witness, companion, or legal counselor;  $n = 18$ ), (ii) information on their own vulnerability (e.g., emotional or financial problems;  $n = 7$ ), and (iii) specific pieces of evidence (e.g., documentation that proved their argument;  $n = 5$ ). Participants could report to have concealed more than one type of information—seven participants did so.

Moreover, the participants who reported to have used the strategy *disguise* were found to be significantly more willing to enact the threat before the interview ( $M = 6.29$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) than were the participants who did not report to have used this particular strategy ( $M = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ),  $t(118) = 2.69$ ,  $p = .008$ ,  $d = 0.49$ , 95% CI [0.13, 0.86]. This finding might imply that those with more serious implementation intentions more often chose to conceal information. However, no correlation was found between willingness to enact the threat and the amount of information provided,  $r = .069$ ,  $p = .455$ , 95% CI [-.112, .245].

Finally, we examined to what extent participants' initial attitudes toward enacting the threat and attitudes toward interacting with the conflicting party (before-interview ratings) correlated with their attitudes after the interview. Positive correlations were found between before- and after-interview ratings for willingness to enact the threat,  $r = .604$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.476, .707], and willingness to interact with the conflicting party,  $r = .609$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.482, .711]. In a similar vein, only 21 participants (17.5%) changed the direction of their willingness to enact the threat ( $n = 7$  willing to unwilling;  $n = 14$  unwilling to willing) after the interview compared to before, and only 29 (24.2%) of the participants changed the direction of their willingness to interact with the conflicting party ( $n = 23$  willing to unwilling;  $n = 6$  unwilling to willing). A change in direction was counted when participants rated an average value greater than 5 (on a 9-point Likert scale) before the interview, and an average value lower than 5 after the interview—and vice versa. Two 3 (Change: unwilling to willing; willing to unwilling; no directional change)  $\times$  2 (Protocol: direct vs. rapport-based) chi-square tests revealed no



significant differences between interview conditions for the number of participants that changed the direction of their willingness to enact the threat,  $\chi^2(2, N = 120) = 0.52, p = .771, \phi = .07$ , or to interact with the conflicting party,  $\chi^2(2, N = 120) = 0.05, p = .973, \phi = .02$ .

## Discussion

### Main Findings

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, to learn about threateners' strategies, attitudes, and actual verbal behaviours when being interviewed about their intentions. Second, to examine how different interview styles (direct vs. rapport-based interviewing) may steer these behaviours towards successful interview outcomes. Threatening participants were found to be semi-cooperative. That is, prior to the interview they reported to be willing to discuss their case and provided almost one third of the information they held (and approximately 40% of the critical information they held). In addition to being forthcoming, almost all threateners (90%) reported to have presented their case strategically. The reported use of counter-interview strategies was higher than what is known from research on suspect interviewing (37% - 60%; Hartwig, Granhag, & Strömwall, 2007), but fits well with previous findings on counter-interview strategy use in threat management interviews (Geurts et al., 2016).

The most frequently used strategies were to emphasize one's capability to enact the threat and to hide information for the interviewer. This finding indicates that threat managers may benefit from interviewing subjects of concern. That is, people who wish to prove their capability need to reveal some information about their planning or preparations. Moreover, people who conceal information by definition withhold knowledge—knowledge that may be elicited by means of skilled interviewing. It is possible that the reported strategies reflected the information-management dilemma that the participants had to navigate (i.e., 'If you tell too much, the company might take advantage of the information you provide. If you tell too little, the company

might not take you seriously'). In defense of the paradigm, though, this is a dilemma that real-life threateners often face.

Contrary to the expectations, the study did not support the relative superiority of rapport-based interviewing. No differences were found between interview protocols for the threateners' strategy use, their information provision, or for their willingness to pursue or discuss the case. These outcomes contrast previous research supporting the efficacy of rapport-based interviewing over accusatorial or direct interviewing (Meissner et al., 2014; Bull, 2013). We offer two possible explanations for these findings. The first is that the manipulation of rapport might not have been powerful enough to cause the predicted effects. The second is that rapport-building approaches might not be better than direct approaches in instrumental conflicts, such as the case scenario that was used in the present study (See also Limitations and Future Research).

The initial attitudes of the interviewees were found to be predictive for the interview outcomes. Interviewees who were relatively more eager to implement the threat (or to interact with the conflicting party) before the interview, were also relatively more eager to do so after the interview. This finding matches a scientific review on motivational interviewing in clinical contexts, showing that the client's attitude (e.g., motivation to change) is a stronger predictor of therapeutic outcomes than the therapist's spirit as such (e.g., empathy or acceptance; Apodaca & Longabaugh, 2009).

Importantly, participants who were initially more positive towards implementing the threat, more often chose to disguise information, and especially information on the actual implementation of the threat (e.g., names of contact persons, specific pieces of evidence). Placing the finding in a broader perspective, threateners with serious intentions may employ more avoidant strategies than bluffers. This notion fits well with research on suspect interviewing, where guilty interviewees were found to adopt avoidant strategies (e.g., *avoid incriminating*

*details, keep it simple*) more often than innocent interviewees (Hines et al., 2010; Strömwall, Hartwig, & Granhag, 2006). Differences in counter-interview strategies are presumed to result from different information management needs (i.e., the guilty must conceal the truth, whereas the innocent must reveal the truth), and strategic interview techniques draw on such differences (Granhag & Hartwig, 2008).

Furthermore, it was found that regardless of interview style, interviewing had an escalating, rather than a de-escalating, effect. Threatening participants were more willing to enact the threat after the interview compared to before, and also, they were less willing to interact with the conflicting party after the interview compared to before. Reasonably, these attitude changes may have been a response to interviewers' rejection of the threateners' demand at the very end of the interview (i.e., 'the company will not pay you'). The impact of the rejection may have overshadowed the nuances of the interview, implying that the mere effect of interview styles are best tested without such a rejection. Realistically, though, rejections are likely to occur during interactions with people who threaten because their demands or behaviors are often unacceptable. The challenge in crisis communication is therefore to reduce tension, gather information, and work towards a solution, while simultaneously restraining unwanted behavior (Giebels & Taylor, 2010; van der Meer & Diekhuis, 2014). Thus, we argue that any valuable interview methods for threat management need to be effective despite a possible rejection or restraint that is communicated to the threatener.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The null findings that were observed when comparing the two interview styles may have been due to methodological limitations. First, the rapport-promoting elements in the rapport-based interview protocol may have been too weak. The pilot study revealed that the rapport-based interview protocol was perceived as more rapport-promoting, compared to the direct interview

protocol. Although this difference was significant (with a medium effect size), the ratings did not differ much in absolute terms (i.e., the rapport-based and direct protocols received average ratings of 4.05 and 3.55 on a 7-point scale, respectively). Moreover, the average score suggests that the rapport-based protocol was rapport-promoting only to a moderate extent. This fact, plus the finding that initial counter-interview strategies are difficult to change (Alison et al., 2013; Apodaca & Longabaugh, 2009), suggest that profound means are needed to steer interviewees' behavior. One way forward may be to focus on specific interview techniques (e.g., strategic interview techniques) rather than general interview styles.

Second, the case scenario concerned a work conflict and the interview aim was instrumental (i.e., financial compensation). It has been suggested that instrumental crises, with a typical win-lose structure, are best encountered with rational arguments rather than relational approaches (e.g., being kind, showing empathy; Giebels & Taylor, 2010). A future challenge in experimental research on threat dynamics is to build a paradigm that matches both the reality of the participant as well as the charged nature of threat cases.

On a more general note, it could be argued that one specific type of interviewing—whether it is rapport-based, direct, or strategic—may not be effective in all threat management contexts. This study rested on the assumption that interview styles grounded in basic theories of human dynamics are broadly applicable. However, threat managers must deal with a variety of motives, cultures, and mental conditions. Arguably, such background variables should inform the (combination of) interview methods used in a particular case. For instance, communication with stalkers should perhaps focus on restraining the perpetrators' behaviors (Kropp, Hart, Lyon, & Storey, 2011), whereas business-like conflicts are better solved by a rational discussion on the content of the conflict (Giebels & Taylor, 2010). Moreover, building trust may be critical in communication with persons with personality disorders (Bender, 2005), whereas repairing loss of

face may be particularly important when interviewing persons from collectivistic cultures (Giebels & Taylor, 2012). In other words, the success of threat management interviewing may depend on the extent to which the interview method fits the case characteristics.

### **Generalizability of the findings**

This study reflects a novel experimental approach with respect to TAM interviewing. Experimental research is uncommon in the field of threat assessment and management as planned acts of violence are extreme behaviours that occur infrequently. It may be argued that such a topic cannot be investigated in a laboratory since artificial setups would limit the generalizability of the results. We acknowledge this potential limitation. Threatening typically involves strong emotions and the type of threats within the field of threat assessment are mostly violent threats. These conditions were not fully mirrored in the design of this study. The scenario that was used concerned a non-violent threat and may have been too instrumental rather than emotional. It has been suggested that instrumental crises with a typical win-lose structure are best confronted with rational arguments as opposed to rapport-building approaches (Giebels & Taylor, 2010). Moreover, known risk factors in the field of threat assessment (e.g., substance abuse and mental illness) were probably underrepresented in the studied sample. The question therefore remains whether real-world threateners would respond similarly as compared to the participants in this study. With that said, we would like to explain how issues of generalizability were addressed in the design of this study, and more generally, why an experimental approach was chosen in an attempt to contribute to existing knowledge on threats of violence.

Several measures were taken to maximize external validity when developing the paradigm of the study. First, the act the participants threatened to commit may not have been physically violent (for obvious ethical reasons) but was still damaging. Second, real-world threateners commit deviant behaviour, but literature indicates that threateners themselves may find their

behaviour legitimate (e.g., “I have no other choice” or “I must fight injustice”; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). Therefore, the case given to participants in which they represented the party that was morally right, threatening a party that was morally wrong, may have reflected a real-world mindset. Third, emotional involvement was established via the content of the case (i.e., fighting injustice) and via the nature of the task (i.e., performing the fairly nerve wracking act of interacting with an unknown person about conflicting interests). Fourth, the dependent measures of the study were selected based on their practical value to threat assessment and management. Measures included for threat-assessment purposes were the type and amount of the information provided by threateners during the interviews as well as their use of counter-interview strategies. As pertains to threat management, the threateners’ willingness to carry out a threat was measured as well as their willingness to communicate with professionals about the threat.

On a more general note, the aim of this study was to examine the process of human intelligence gathering to assess and manage threats, rather than investigating individual characteristics of threat cases. As human intelligence gathering is nothing more than collecting information through interactions with people, it can be viewed in the context of social and cognitive psychology (Justice et al., 2010; Evans et al., 2010). It is safe to assume that fundamental social and cognitive processes function similarly across populations. For instance, the approach–avoidance motivation (i.e., the motivation to approach positive stimuli and avoid negative stimuli) is central to human functioning and relates to important dilemmas and decisions that threateners face, such as to accept or reject a loss, to reveal or conceal information, and to follow through on a threat or not (Eliot, 2008). Furthermore, several negotiation strategies that were developed for solving instrumental conflicts may be applicable to emotional and potentially violent conflicts too (e.g., seeking for mutual gain; Shapiro, 2006). In the literature on threat management, it was found that extremists commonly leave violence behind for very ordinary

reasons such as burnout, feelings of guilt, missing loved ones, or longing for a normal life (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). Even when dealing with threateners with mental illnesses, it was found that simple matters such as helping them obtain social security benefits were effective in reducing risk (James & Farnham, 2016). These findings indicate that despite deviant behaviours and thoughts, the *needs* and *drives* of those who pose a threat might not differ from others.

Addressing these basic needs and drives in interviews may therefore be as effective among threateners as among other populations. This presumption, among other things, merits laboratory studies on threat management using a normal population.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The current findings suggest that threateners are semi-cooperative, which speaks to the importance of skilled interviewing in the field of threat management. No differences in threat management outcomes (i.e., information gain, counter-interview strategies, de-escalation) were found when comparing direct interviewing with rapport-based interviewing. However, the study showed how threatening interviewees struck a deliberate balance between proving their stand and disguising implementation details. Especially those with more serious intentions to enact the threat were restrictive in terms of providing information during the interview. Current knowledge on threat management interviewing rests on best practices rather than science. To strengthen the foundation of threat management interviewing, we argue, more experimental research is needed on behaviors that can be expected from the interviewee, and on interview techniques that can exploit these behaviors.

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Table 1

*Frequencies of Threateners' Self-Reported Counter-Interview Strategies*

Strategy	Total	Interview protocol		$\chi^2$
		Direct	Rapport	
Prove capability	59 (49.2%)	34 (56.7%)	25 (41.7%)	2.70
Disguise	56 (46.7%)	32 (53.3%)	24 (40.0%)	2.14
Self-presentation	27 (22.5%)	9 (15.0%)	18 (30.0%)	3.87
Explain	21 (17.5%)	8 (13.3%)	13 (21.7%)	1.44
Negotiate	9 (7.5%)	5 (8.3%)	4 (6.7%)	0.12
Other	18 (15.0%)	10 (16.7%)	8 (13.3%)	0.26
No strategy	12 (10.0%)	6 (10.0%)	6 (10.0%)	0.00

*Note.* Threateners could report more than one strategy; thus, percentages do not add up to 100%. The  $\chi^2$  values refer to the difference between the direct and rapport-based interview conditions in the proportion of participants who reported the strategy. None of these tests were statistically significant at  $p < .05$  (Bonferroni corrected).

Table 2

*Means of Before- and After-Interview Ratings as a Function of Interview Protocol*

Interview protocol	Willingness to enact		Willingness to interact	
	Before	After	Before	After
Direct	5.87 (1.74)	6.56 (1.68)	6.24 (1.81)	5.29 (2.14)
Rapport	5.80 (1.79)	6.15 (1.93)	6.08 (1.75)	5.28 (2.08)

*Note.* Both *willingness to enact* and *willingness to interact* were rated on a 9-point Likert scale. Values in parentheses represent standard deviations.

## Appendix A

### Instructions to the participant

#### Background

Imagine the following scenario. You recently graduated from university and Boston & Company—a leading company in your field— offered you a job. You happily accepted the offer and signed a contract stating that the first half year would be an unpaid internship and after this period, by mutual consent, the contract would be changed into a paid and permanent position.

The internship was demanding and you had worked hard during weekdays, evenings, weekends, and holidays. Your colleagues and the manager appreciated your work. However, to your surprise, the company decided to end your contract after half a year because, according to them, you did not live up to the company's standards in terms of effort and quality of work.

The decision of the company shocked you. Not only did it affect your self-esteem but it also caused you financial problems. You had taken a bank loan to cover your life expenses during the unpaid period. You had never worried about this loan because the company gave you the impression that the permanent contract was just a formality. Suddenly you were unemployed and jobs in your field are scarce.

Now, five months later, you found out via friends that two other young professionals experienced exactly the same at Boston & Company. This information strengthened your idea that the company had mistreated you. As you were newly graduated with little experience of contracts and careers, you felt they tricked you with a false promise and profited from half a year of free labor, while you were left with debts.

You decided to claim a salary for the period that you worked for the company. However, you realize that simply asking for money won't work. You thought that there are two ways to get



compensated for your work: i) you press charges with the hope that the court forces the company to pay you, or ii) you make the company believe that you have a strong case, and that they will be willing to pay you the money in order to prevent you from pressing charges.

Additional information concerning your case: i) You kept track of your working hours while you were working for the company. You still have these notes and you calculated that you had worked an average of 60 hours per week, ii) A former colleague from the company told you that she has access to internal documentation showing that the work you delivered was of excellent quality, iii) Your friend gave you the names of two other persons with similar experiences working for the company, and iv) You have the contact details of a legal counsellor who is specialized in corporate law.

### **Instructions**

You have written a letter to Boston & Company in which you made clear that if they don't retrospectively pay you a salary, you will press charges against them. Boston & Company have received the letter and consulted Robin—an employee working for the Security Unit of Boston & Company—to talk with you about this matter.

You have now 10 minutes to prepare yourself for the talk with Robin. Your ultimate goal is to get your salary paid retrospectively (either by pressing charges or by making them believe that you will press charges), use the interview to achieve this goal. Keep this in mind when talking to Robin; *if you tell too much, the company might use this information against you. If you tell too little, the company might not take you seriously.*

## Appendix B

### Interview protocols

#### Direct

[1] My name is Robin. Boston & Company asked me to talk with you about the letter that you have sent us. I would like to ask you a few questions. [2] Could you explain to me how the company decision to end your contract has affected you? [3] Why did you decide to take action now, 5 months later? [4] What do you seek to achieve with this? [5] What exactly are you planning to do? [6] Proceeding with this case will be difficult. How have you prepared for this? [7] Why do you think your case is strong? [8] What will you do if we don't pay you the money? [9] What will you do if you don't win the case in court? [10] I already know that the company will not pay you a salary in retrospect. My advice is to drop the case and accept the situation. [11] I will be your contact person on this matter (business card is offered). You can call me if you have more information or questions concerning your case.

#### Rapport-based

[1. Autonomy] My name is Robin. Boston & Company asked me to talk with you about the letter that you have sent us. I would like to ask you a few questions *but of course it is your choice whether or not you want to answer those questions*. [2. Reflective listening] *I have understood from your letter that you have worked for Boston & Company during a six months internship in which you devoted much time and energy to the company. You were promised a paid and permanent position after the internship but the company ended your contract. Could you explain to me how this decision has affected you?* [3. Empathy] *The sudden ending of the contract must have come as a surprise for you back then. I understand that you may have felt defeated at first but why did you decide to take action now, 5 months later?* [4. Reflective listening] *Just to make sure that I understand you correct, what is it that you seek to achieve with*

this? [5. Autonomy] *You don't have to tell me this of course but what exactly are you planning to do?* [6. Developing discrepancies] *I know from my experience working for security units of different companies, that proceeding cases like these can be difficult for the plaintiff, which you are in this case. May I ask you how you have prepared for this?* [7. Developing discrepancies] *I believe that you are a reasonable person. Still, we have to look at the facts, why do you think that your case is a strong case?* [8] What will you do if we don't pay you the money? [9] What will you do if you don't win the case in court? [10. Rapport and Resistance] *I have heard your side of the story and I will report this to the company. But I have to be honest with you. I already know that the company will not pay you a salary in retrospect because the contract that you signed doesn't allow for that. My advice to you is to drop the case and to accept the situation. As I see it, you are still young and I'm sure that you will face plenty of great career opportunities in the future.* [11] I will be your contact person on this matter (business card is offered). You can call me if you have more information or questions concerning your case.

*Note:* The Italic phrasings indicate differences between protocols.

**Appendix C****Questionnaire protocol pretesting**

In your role as interviewee, rate your agreement with the following statements (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*)

1. The interviewer's approach is friendly
2. The interviewer wants to know what I have to say
3. The interviewer is confrontational\*
4. The interviewer understands the difficult situation that I am in
5. The interviewer is trying to get the best outcome for both of us
6. I can chose not to answer a question and the interviewer would respect that
7. The interviewer is judgmental\*
8. I can share the problems I have with my former employer and the interviewer would want to listen to this
9. The interviewer lacks understanding of my situation\*
10. The interviewer would accept my answers even if he would disagree with them
11. I think that the interviewer is able to see the situation from my point of view
12. The interviewer fails to take my perspective\*
13. The interviewer wants to help me out of this difficult situation

\*items that were reversed scored for analyses