PhD Abstract

From violent words to violent deeds? Assessing risk from threatening communications

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Individuals, corporations, and buildings are all targets of written, telephone, email, and personal threats every day. Threats can be a factor in many categories of crimes, such as product tampering, extortion, bombing, domestic violence, stalking, and murder. Law enforcement agencies and security agencies that investigate these cases face three major challenges: (1) assessing threatener characteristics that relate to dangerousness; (2) predicting whether or not targeted violence is likely to occur; and (3) using those reliable and valid predictors as an aid in identifying and apprehending the threatener. Once investigators make these predictions and assessments, they must decide how best to protect potential targets. The consequences of their decisions may involve injury

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or even death and may require extensive personnel resources and monetary expenditures; therefore it is critical that assessments and predictions be as accurate as possible.

As law enforcement, security consultants, and behavioral science professionals have become increasingly aware of and involved in threat cases, they have begun designing research for identifying salient factors for risk of targeted violence and offender psychopathological and dispositional characteristics (Baumgartner et al. 2001). The relevance of discussing links between offenders' characteristics and violence for this research is found in the degree to which the analysis of language use can predict risk of violent behavior. In a threat case, the threatening communication is often one of the few sources of information, or the only source of information, from which investigators must expeditiously make decisions during the initial phase of an investigation. Consequently, researchers have begun to question whether or not characteristics of threatening communications can provide clues about threateners' psychopathology and intentions (Dietz et al. 1991, Fein and Vossekuil 1999, Meloy et al. 2004). The present study was designed to further that knowledge.

The research database consisted of 96 threatening communication cases analyzed by agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC). A threatening communication was defined as any written information which implies or explicitly states the potential of harm delivered to targets/victims or agents acting on their behalf. The threatener's use of telephone calls and any electronic or other means of communication were coded as other methods of contacting the target/victim.

Categories of actions considered to be threats consisted of burning, bombing, defacing or damaging property, disrupting events, extorting, kidnapping, murdering, physically assaulting or harming, product-tampering, revealing detrimental information whether that information was true or false, sabotaging, sexually assaulting, stalking, taunting (including harassing or intimidating), using weapons of mass destruction, and 'other', e.g., poisoning.

This research used a correlational design that compared variables gathered through an interview questionnaire and two computer content analysis systems (Young 2001; Gottschalk and Bechtel 2001). The purpose of the design was to measure the interrelationships between the action taken by a threatener and features of the threatening communication. Logistical regression analysis was used to develop an equation to assist investigators in predicting when threateners are more likely to harm versus simply threaten. The resulting equation successfully differentiated between threateners who attempted or committed harmful actions and those who simply threatened, but did not act. This equation accurately predicted 70.8% of case outcomes in the overall sample. Threats were then classified into one of three broad categories – high, medium or

low risk, based on their predictive equation scores. The equation accurately predicted 93% of the outcomes in the low (.00-.19) and high (.50 – 1.0) ranges of prediction scores. The cases that fell in the medium range of .20 to .49 could not be predicted. Grouping cases into three broad probability groups is consistent with the classification system utilized by the FBI to assess the seriousness of threats and the likelihood offenders will attempt to stalk or commit other harmful actions. Because threats vary significantly in terms of their seriousness, investigating agencies confronted with limited resources must have a method by which they can prioritize their investigations.

Consistent findings across studies indicate that threats typically do not presage an approach or attack (Calhoun 1998; Baumgartner et al. 2001); however, this research may assist threat assessors in making the distinction between threateners who only howl and those who may eventually hunt.

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