

THE MANIPULATIVE PRESENTATION TECHNIQUES OF CONTROL AND COERCIVE OFFENDERS: WHAT ARE THEY AND HOW CAN INTERVIEWERS BEST DEAL WITH THEM?

Legislation has recognised control and coercion of another as a criminal offence. In Cheshire Constabulary, officers are conducting many interviews with a view of prosecuting for coercive control. The current study is an exploratory piece of research that aims to identify common manipulative behaviours used by coercive control suspects during investigative interviews. Results from this study will help inform the basis of a catalogue of the influencing techniques used by coercive control suspects to help interviewers recognise such behaviours.

KEY FINDINGS

- Goal of the current study was to provide interviewers with a catalogue of common influencing techniques exhibited by coercive control suspects;
- A coding guide was developed to examine the influencing techniques of coercive control suspects in a sample of 29 anonymised interviews provided by Cheshire Constabulary;
- Whilst suspects used a wide range of strategies during interviews, they tended to rely mainly on a few primary techniques;
- The most common influencing techniques exhibited by suspects included: Rational Persuasion, Denial of Victim, Denial of Injury, Complete Denials, and Supplication;
- Informing interviewers of the most commonly used influencing techniques and providing examples of such behaviours is a potential strategy to guard against the potential influencing power of such manipulative behaviours.

INTRODUCTION

Investigative interviews are integral to the successful resolution of criminal investigations. Interviewers were likely not present during the commission of a crime and therefore must interview witnesses, victims, and suspects to learn the details of what happened. Interviews with suspects are complex, especially when verifiable evidence is scarce, such as in cases of coercive control (control and coercion of another in intimate or familial relationships was established as a criminal offence in November 2015). In Cheshire Constabulary, domestic abuse interviews make up the majority of the Interview Custody Unit's workload, and officers are now conducting many interviews with a view of prosecuting for coercive control. One difficulty expressed is that the suspects appear to be using a number of manipulative techniques during the interviews. Thus, the goal of this research is to conduct an exploratory examination of the manipulative behaviours, or influencing techniques, exhibited by coercive control suspects during interviews. There is limited published research on suspect influencing techniques, and no published data examining the behaviours of coercive control suspects. The current study is a unique and important examination of such behaviours using real-world data.

METHODS

Sample. A purposive sample (i.e., diverse interviews based on various factors such as case outcome and relationship category) of 29 anonymised police interviews with 25 coercive control suspects was provided by Cheshire Constabulary (*Note:* as the interviews were anonymised prior to coding, information such as interviewer and suspect demographics were unavailable). The interviews were conducted between January 2016 and May 2017. Of the 25 suspects, seven (28%) were convicted of coercive control, six (24%) were found not guilty/dismissed, six (24%) were classified as No Further Action (NFA) before trial, 5 (20%) were convicted/charged with other crimes, and one (4%) is awaiting trial.

Procedure. We used an approach based upon Framework Analysis¹ to develop a coding framework and categorise the suspects' manipulative behaviours into relevant themes and subthemes. To develop this framework for coding behaviours and influence tactics, we investigated previous research that examined actual suspect interview strategies, as well as existing theories from the wider literature (e.g., Table of Ten from negotiation research).² Coding the suspect behaviours for the current study was completed by SW, with KL measuring coding reliability; average overall agreement was substantial between the coders ($\kappa = .75$).

RESULTS

1. The apparent motive of the influence strategies (i.e., themes and subthemes of the coding framework) were analysed and mapped (**see Figure 1**). The aims of the influencing techniques exhibited by suspects appear to fall across two key dimensions: *Power* and *Interpersonal Framing* (the relative position of each influence strategy theme and sub-theme in relation to *Power* and *Interpersonal Framing* is also shown in Figure 1). *Power*-based techniques vary in motivation from alleviating investigative pressure to imposing control over the interviewer and/or asserting authority. *Interpersonal Framing*-based techniques vary in motivation from seeking to argue against evidential claims to manipulating the suspect-interviewer relationship to alter the perception of evidence against them.

2. The frequency of the influence strategies used by suspects were analysed (**see Figure 2**). *Rational Persuasion* (using logical arguments), *Denial of Victim* (victim deserved it/victim's actions caused the suspect's negative behaviours), *Denial of Injury* (suspect's actions caused no actual harm), *Complete Denials* (accusation claimed to be entirely false), and *Supplication* (suspect appears weak, in need of pity, or else as though they were actually the victim of their accusers) accounted for the vast majority of influencing techniques exhibited by suspects across all interviews (75%).

3. A proximity analysis⁴ was conducted to identify the common behavioural themes of suspects; the proximity analysis was represented visually using a Smallest Space Analysis (SSA; **see Figure 3**).⁵ For the SSA, each influence strategy is represented by a labelled point – the closer together two points are, the greater their co-occurrence within interviews. Thus, strategies that are used together regularly appear close together in Figure 3, and those that appear far apart seldom co-occur in Figure 3. A visual examination of Figure 3 enables a number of interesting observations about the use of influence strategies in the interviews – for example: (a) *Rational Persuasion* occurs highly with *Admissions*, which itself occurs highly with *Imposing Restrictions* (deliberately providing minimal information). Collectively, these behaviours suggest an instrumental negotiation of facts between suspect and interviewer, which occasionally leads to an admission. (b) There are some co-occurrences that inform the apparent motives of the influence strategies. In particular, it appears that the *Denial*

of Responsibility (suspect claims they are not responsible for their actions; e.g., mental health is to blame) strategy is being used as a *Trustworthiness* display rather than a *Justification* as it appears toward the top of the trustworthy-based behaviours. Similarly, the *Complete Denial* strategy appears alongside *Dominance* strategies, implying that such categorical denunciation of responsibility may be a power play instead of an effort to avoid culpability. (c) The strategies associated with *Deflections* show no evidence of high co-occurrence, which suggests these behaviours may not be a qualitatively different type of strategy, but rather different examples of the *Emotional Influence* and *Justification* approaches.

SHORT CONCLUSION

While coercive control suspects used a wide range of strategies, they tended to focus mainly on a few techniques during their interactions. The most prevalent of these techniques are *Rational Persuasion*, *Denial of Victim*, *Denial of Injury*, *Complete Denials*, and *Supplication*. The aforementioned influencing techniques are focused around dealing directly with evidence, claiming the victim is deserving of actions, minimising the harm of the offence, or claiming that the suspect is actually the victim.

Research informing how to guard against the potential influencing power of such strategies is limited. However, one promising approach is inoculation theory – a technique for maintaining your attitudes in the face of resistance.⁶ Work on inoculation theory identified that exposure to arguments meant to persuade are more easily resisted with practiced exposure to such arguments. Thus, by providing examples of common influence techniques that will be encountered (i.e., the catalogue developed from the current study) has the potential to reduce the impact of these influencing strategies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are two limitations of the current study which provide important insights to inform future research. The first is that a purposive sample of interviews was used. Although a random sample is preferable in scientific research, this is only achievable when large samples from multiple constabularies are available. The current research was a preliminary and exploratory study to identify influencing strategies, and the ideas generated from this study should be tested on a wider scale and include different types of crimes to increase generalisability of the results. The second limitation is that transcribed interviews were analysed. Reading transcribed interviews eliminates the context provided by many verbal and physical cues (e.g., intonation). Analysing transcripts is often necessary in field studies such as this due to issues of confidentiality.

Overall, this research provides important insights into the behaviours that coercive control suspects may use to influence interviewers. The results of this project provides the basis for a substantial programme of research examining suspect behaviours in more depth. We recommend that future studies examine the effect that the identified suspect behaviours may have on interviewer behaviour, and how interviewers can develop defensive strategies to protect against such influencing behaviours.

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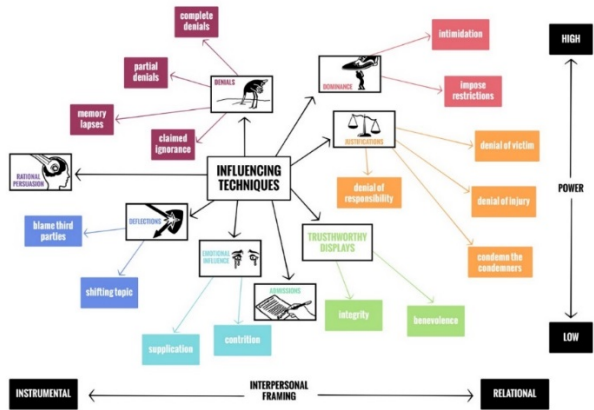


Figure 1. The influencing techniques used by coercive control suspects mapped according to their relation to *Power* and *Interpersonal Framing*.

Figure 2. The frequency of the influencing techniques used by coercive control suspects across all interviews.

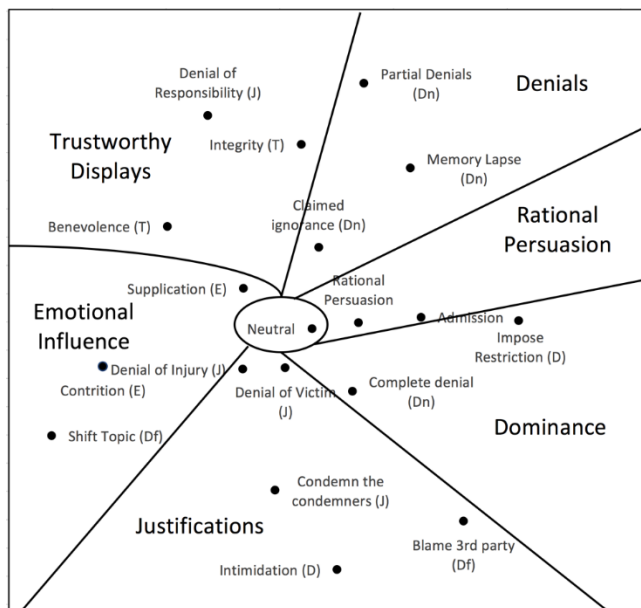
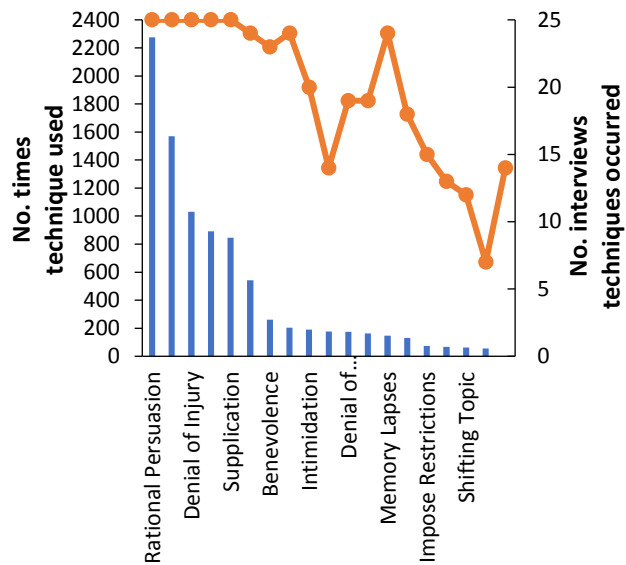


Figure 3. Two-dimensional Smallest Space Analysis (SSA) of the coded interactions. Letters in parentheses relate to the analysis presented in *Figure 1*. Specifically, J = Justifications; T = Trustworthy displays; Dn = Denials; D = Dominance; Df = Deflection; and E = Emotional influence.