Public support for Vigilantism

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Public support for vigilantism: Two hypotheses

Why have otherwise respectable citizens chosen to reject the standard response to the vigilante that the punishment of wrongdoers is to be left to the institutions of the state and that the ordinary citizen must not take the law into his own hands? Do they fail to appreciate that there is much to be lost by our civilization if we fall away from the rule of law? No, Goetz supporters, like myself, have a deep and real affection for the civilized life afforded by the rule of law. When, however, the state abdicates its proper role and does not provide an adequate system of criminal justice, the political and moral obligations to defer the state are no longer operative. (Cohen, 1989, p.1272)

2.1 Introduction

In the literature there exist two main hypotheses on why citizens might support vigilantism. The first hypothesis focuses on people's perspective of the criminal justice system, while the second one emphasizes the role of situational characteristics. They each offer a different view on support for vigilantism, yet are not necessarily incompatible. We will describe both perspectives in detail, and subsequently examine to what extent they are substantiated by the empirical literature. We first present a number of single- and multiple-item survey studies, followed by quasi-experimental research. It will become clear that current findings are limited and do not provide a straightforward picture of why people support vigilantism. The described studies do nevertheless provide us with useful insights regarding the operationalization of support for vigilantism. We conclude by outlining the steps that will be taken in the next two chapters to prepare for our own empirical research on support for vigilantism.

2.2 Two rival hypotheses

In the literature, reasons for *supporting* vigilantism are often thought to be similar to reasons for *consorting* to vigilantism. In other words, an understanding of why people might choose to take the law into their own hands is assumed to also provide insights into why such behavior might be endorsed by the public. As vigilantism is commonly seen as being the result of a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system (Abrahams, 2002; Goldstein, 2003), support for vigilantism is also often taken to mean that the legitimacy of the criminal justice system is at stake. This theoretical perspective will from now on be referred to as the 'confidence hypothesis'.

Secondly, we will present a view on support for vigilantism which is not related to general perceptions of law enforcement. Instead, this approach emphasizes the importance of situational characteristics in shaping reactions to vigilantism, and will thus be labeled the 'situation hypothesis'. Social justice research shows that people's judgments on issues such as fairness, justice and deservingness at least partially depend on contextual factors (Tyler & Smith, 1997). Public reactions to vigilantism may thus also be influenced by the setting in which an act occurs. Part of the empirical literature is therefore aimed at studying the effects of situational characteristics on support for vigilantism.

2.2.1 The confidence hypothesis

According to the confidence hypothesis, support for vigilantism is caused by a lack (or low level) of confidence in the criminal justice system. Linking motives of (support for) vigilantism to perceptions of formal law enforcement makes intuitive sense, as the existence of a state is crucial to the whole concept of vigilantism. In fact, vigilantism has been said to be impossible when "there is no recognized 'establishment,' where conditions of internal war exist, or where there are no rules governing the application of coercion" (Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1974, p.570). Stated differently, when there is

no law to turn to, one cannot 'take the law into one's own hands'. So even though many scholars maintain that the prevention of vigilantism forms an important justification for the existence of a criminal justice system (e.g. Corstens, 2005; Gardner, 1998; Van Koppen, 2003), the establishment of such a formal system paradoxically creates opportunities for vigilantism by providing people with both legitimate and illegitimate alternatives to deal with crime.

Citizens are often assumed to consort to vigilantism when they are dissatisfied about how the law is enforced (e.g. Grayson, 1992). Vigilantism is said to illustrate what can happen when citizens, from whom authorities are supposed to derive their legitimacy, believe that the system is inadequate (Robinson & Darley, 1995). More specifically, vigilantism is assumed to emerge when the criminal justice system is perceived to fail in the provision of a satisfactory level of security to its citizens (Abrahams, 2002; Benesh & Howell, 2001; Goldstein, 2003). Vigilantism, in other words, can be seen as a direct result of:

> the ineffectiveness, perceived or actual, of our criminal justice agencies. Vigilantes exist for they believe that justice is far better served by their methods as opposed to the formal processes of government….As a result they sense a moral obligation 'to take the law in their own hands' thus circumventing all of the established legal bodies. (Ward, 1974 as cited in Cohen, 1989, p.1273)

Vigilantism can thus occur when citizens have low or no confidence in the formal authorities and therefore want to deal with a crime themselves. However, people can also take the law into their own hands when the legal authorities *have* been involved at first, but not to the satisfaction of the affected party. Thus, even though the justice system is meant to curb emotional excesses, it can sometimes actually be the cause for emotional reactions, including vigilantism. Examples include victims or their relatives who physically attack defendants upon finding out that they are acquitted by a judge or given 'too lenient' a sentence (Weber, 2000). Similarly, in South Africa there are reports of citizens who, due to dissatisfaction with the formal response to crime, collectively pay bail of jailed convicts and subsequently kill them (Minnaar, 2001).

A lack of confidence in the criminal justice system is thus often seen as a reason to consort to vigilantism, and also to *support* it. In other words, when people do not have much confidence in law enforcement in general, they are expected to be more likely to support an act of vigilantism. However, this hypothesis does not pertain to situation-specific perceptions of the criminal justice system. In other words, it does not include the influence of a criminal justice agency's response in a *specific* vigilantism situation on support for vigilantism. Instead, such situational aspects are part of the situation hypothesis: the idea that support for vigilantism is affected by aspects of the vigilantism situation itself. The main ideas behind this hypothesis are discussed next.

2.2.2 The situation hypothesis

The situation hypothesis maintains that support for vigilantism is shaped by aspects of the vigilantism situation itself. As we mentioned in the introduction, this does not imply that confidence does not play a role. Rather, this hypothesis simply points to another determinant of support for vigilantism. From the literature we know that situational characteristics can have a strong influence on judgments of crime and punishment. Warr (1989) for instance demonstrated that the perceived seriousness of crime is affected by aspects such as whether the offender and victim knew each other beforehand. Likewise, a study on public views on punishment preferences reveals an important role of characteristics related to the offenders and victims, as well as crime consequences (Rossi, Simpson, & Miller, 1985).

If public opinion about crime and punishment is indeed affected by situational characteristics, it makes sense to take this into account when examining public support for vigilantism. After all, such support can include judgments of crime seriousness and punishment. Is the act of vigilantism judged as a severe crime? Is the victim of vigilantism perceived as deserving his 'punishment' as carried out by the vigilante? Is the vigilante deemed to deserve punishment for his criminal behavior? We expect that the responses to these and other support-related questions will indeed be influenced by aspects of the vigilantism situation itself.

In summary, we propose that if confidence in the criminal justice system does play a role in shaping support for vigilantism, it is not the only determinant. More specifically, we expect that situational factors of a vigilantism case also have an impact on how the public views vigilantism. If this is true, it would imply that citizens who approve of an act of vigilantism have not necessarily lost their faith in the criminal justice system. In line with this, the case of Marianne Bachmeier that was presented in Chapter 1 also suggests that public opinion about a vigilante can shift in response to new information about the context in which the act has taken place.

2.3 Empirical findings on support for vigilantism

Above we introduced two main explanations for why citizens may support those who take the law into their own hands. The confidence hypothesis focuses on perceptions of law enforcement; the situation hypothesis emphasizes contextual aspects. We will now examine the empirical literature on support for vigilantism to see what evidence it provides for these two hypotheses. Importantly, this research overview is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, we describe a selection of studies with the aim of presenting what explanations the literature has to offer, finding out how support for vigilantism has been conceptualized, and illustrating some of the existing approaches for studying public support for vigilantism. The overview is structured by the type of methodology that is used in the studies, but reference will be made to the two main hypotheses where relevant.

2.3.1 Single-item measures

In public opinion polls, support for vigilantism is often assessed using single-item measures. Table A1 in Appendix 1 presents ten such items, which mostly originate from surveys that were conducted in the United States. Importantly, single-item measures can be useful for behavioral or observable attributes, such as age and gender, but are usually not appropriate for assessing more complex constructs (Loo, 2001). They are not suitable either for examining the situation and confidence hypotheses, as the methodology does not allow for tests of causality. However, as these items do provide us with insights on how (support for) vigilantism can be conceptualized, we will briefly discuss them nonetheless.

A first observation regarding the items in Table A1 is that the conceptualization of *support* for vigilantism differs greatly between the studies. In some surveys, support is measured by presenting an item about the perceived helpfulness of vigilantes, while others ask respondents to judge the justifiability of certain acts, or to indicate whether they would like to have a specific group of vigilantes in their neighborhood. The conceptualization of *vigilantism* is similarly ambiguous. Some items provide a definition of vigilantism, while others simply refer to 'vigilantes' or do not mention vigilantism at all. Needless to say, these variations in the concept of both vigilantism and support make generalizations challenging, as well as comparisons between surveys.

Item-specificity is another concern regarding the majority of items in Table A1. Many of the items appeared in response to actual cases of vigilantism and intend to measure people's opinion about those specific cases or groups. Items 2 and 3 for instance ask about well-known vigilante groups that were present in the United States at the time, while other items relate to the famous subway vigilante and the Guardian Angels. Although such survey items may be interesting from a local or historic perspective, the findings are less appropriate for drawing conclusions about more general support for vigilantism. The table does include a number of items that have been formulated in broader terms. Ter Voert (1997) for instance used the following item to measure support for vigilantism: "If crime control by the government is inadequate, citizens are justified to take the law into their own hands". Nevertheless, there also lies a danger in using more ambiguous wording, as it leaves room for a variety of interpretations. In this item it is for instance not specified what "inadequate" crime control means, or what type of behavior would qualify as "taking the law into their own hands". It thus appears challenging to find an appropriate level of item specificity, which is especially problematic when only one item is used to measure support for vigilantism.

Explaining support for vigilantism

On the whole we do not consider the presented single-item measures suitable for drawing reliable conclusions about levels of support for vigilantism, nor about its determinants. In other words, they cannot provide us with reliable information about the confidence and situation hypotheses. Despite this, two of these items have been used in the literature in an attempt to *explain* support for vigilantism. Grayson (1992)

used items 5 and 9 (Table A1) to evaluate the confidence hypothesis. More specifically, he studied the effect of confidence in the criminal justice system on support for vigilantism in the United States and Canada. Grayson based his analysis on two comparable vigilantism cases, Goetz (1985) and Kesler (1987), and compared response rates to the corresponding Gallup Poll question: "Do you feel that incidents like these – taking the law into one's own hands – often called vigilantism, are sometimes justified because of the circumstances, or are never justified?" It was hypothesized that support for vigilantism would be lowest in Canada due to lower crime rates and a relatively high level of confidence in police. Despite this, findings showed Americans and Canadians to be equally supportive of the presented case of vigilantism. Importantly, this suggests that factors *other* than confidence in the criminal justice system may affect support for vigilantism. However, due to the nature of the study, no causal relations could be tested. Moreover, the single-item measures of support for vigilantism make generalizations challenging. Additionally, it should be taken into account that the indicators of the (perceived) performance of the criminal justice system are based on national averages. No conclusions can thus be drawn about the actual levels of confidence of those respondents who expressed support for vigilantism in the survey. Lastly, the two presented vigilantism cases are similar but not identical, which may have distorted the results. In spite of these limitations, the findings at least do suggest that the confidence hypothesis may not necessarily tell the whole story.

Another perspective on the confidence and situation hypothesis is provided by findings from a survey by Schulman et al. (in Zimring, 2003). Support for vigilantism was measured by asking about the *justifiability* of a certain act (item 6 in Table A1). The 33 percent of the sample who felt that vigilantism can indeed be justified was subsequently presented with a follow-up question: "What might justify people taking the law into their own hands?" (Multiple answers possible). This open question resulted in a total of 20 different answer categories. Table 2.1 shows the four most mentioned justifications of vigilantism and the corresponding percentages (Zimring, 2003, p.233).

Table 2.1 Most popular vigilantism justifications (N = 330)

When the criminal justice system doesn't work/fails to give equal justice/ bureaucracy doesn't work (unspecified)	30 %
When the criminal goes free/free on a technicality/gets a lenient sentence	17 %
Being present at the crime/self-defense/protection	12 %
When the police/law enforcement don't do their job (unspecified)	10 %

Interestingly, three out of the four most popular justifications relate to a perceived lack of performance of (agencies of) the criminal justice system. Of these three, two relate to evaluations of the authorities *in general*, thus providing evidence for the confidence hypothesis. The other one, however, refers to *situation-specific* performance: acquittal or a lenient sentence for the perpetrator. This justification of vigilantism thus corresponds with the situation hypothesis. People may have confidence in the

criminal justice system in general but still express support for vigilantism due to the perceived failure of authorities in a specific situation. In line with this, some of the *least* popular justifications of vigilantism concern devastating events that are unrelated to performance of the criminal justice system, such as "When a child is murdered" and "When an adult family member is murdered" (both three percent; not in the table). This implies that a serious crime in itself is not necessarily seen as a sufficient justification for taking the law into one's own hands: the criminal justice response to the precipitating crime plays a fundamental role. This notion is in line with what was suggested by Cohen (1989) at the beginning of the chapter, and will be empirically tested in our own studies on support for vigilantism.

2.3.2 Multiple-item measures

In this section we will present three multiple-item measures of support for vigilantism from the literature, and discuss the findings in light of the two main hypotheses. As has been illustrated in the previous section, both 'support' and 'vigilantism' can be conceptualized and interpreted in a variety of ways. Multiple-item measures are therefore highly recommendable for the current context. The advantages of using multiple items include an increased reliability and construct validity, a greater breadth of measurement and an increased variability of scores (Jordan & Turner, 2008). Methodological issues related to single items, such as ambiguity in terminology, are not as problematic when the items are combined into a multiple-item measure.

The items and corresponding findings are presented in Table A2 in Appendix 1. The first study in the table was carried out by Tankebe (2009). Survey data were used to test the confidence hypothesis by examining the effect of police-related attitudes on public support for vigilantism in Ghana. The operationalization of *vigilantism* in this study is broad, ranging from attitudes toward beating up or killing crime suspects to ones about vigilantism in response to (perceived) police malfunctioning. Moreover, the items address different types of *support*, ranging from finding certain acts acceptable to whether the perpetrators should be blamed. In our view, this approach provides a much more informative way of measuring support for vigilantism than the single-item measures above. Nevertheless, one of the items seems out of place, as it appears to measure confidence in police rather than support for vigilantism: "It is pointless to hand over a suspected criminal to the police because they won't bring the offender to justice" (Tankebe, 2009, p.265).

The separate ratings per item were not reported in the article. The author did construct an index of support for vigilantism, which has a mean score of 3.15 (SD = 0.85) and a satisfactory reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$). Assuming that the items were rated on a 5-point response scale (this is not explicitly mentioned, but it is the scale used for all other items), the mean score indicates that respondents were neutral about vigilantism overall. In order to explain support for vigilantism, the support index was used as the dependent variable in four different regression models. The model with the highest explained variance (20 percent) was the one that included the variable

police trustworthiness. Perceived police trustworthiness was the strongest predictor of support ($\beta = .36$, $p < 0.01$): those who saw the police as less trustworthy were more likely to support vigilantism. This thus provides evidence for the confidence hypothesis. However, this finding may partially be due to the police item that is included in the support for vigilantism measure, as mentioned above. The only other significant determinants of support in this model were age ($\beta = .12$, $p < 0.05$) and education ($\beta = -.22$, $p < 0.01$). Older and less educated people were more likely to express support for vigilantism. Police effectiveness in dealing with crime and respondents' experience of police corruption did *not* influence public support for vigilantism. The author concludes that support for vigilantism is rooted in normative evaluations of policing (can they be trusted?), rather than instrumental ones (do they perform well?). We will further address this distinction in Chapter 4, in our conceptualization of confidence.

The second study in Table A2 does not specifically aim to test the situation or confidence hypothesis, but we included it in our review because it does provide a number of relevant insights. Five items about vigilantism were presented to 10,821 respondents from seven Latin American cities (ratings averaged in the table) and Madrid (Briceño-Léon, Camardiel, & Avila, 2006). For comparative purposes, it is important to take into account that not all items were rated on the same response scale. The first two items were rated on a five-point agreement scale and concern the perceived right to kill. It should be noted that killing in defense of one's family or property is not necessarily an act of vigilantism. In the article, the 'strongly (dis)agree' and '(dis)agree' percentages were summated and reported as combined responses rates (Briceño-Léon et al., 2006). The latter three items concern killing for other reasons, and are more likely to constitute an act of vigilantism. The scale for these three items consists of three answer categories: 'approve', 'disapprove but understand', and 'neither approve nor understand'. Especially the middle category of this scale is an interesting way to measure support, as it seems to pertain to a form of understanding or empathy with the vigilante. Using the findings in the article we deduced the response percentages for this specific category, and reported them in the 'understand' column in Table A2. The authors did not calculate summated scales for the two sets of items, so reliability ratings are not available.

The level of support for vigilantism overall was found to be much lower in Madrid than in the surveyed Latin American cities (Briceño-Léon et al., 2006). The highest level of support was expressed in Caracas, Venezuela, where 70 percent (strongly) agreed with the right to kill to defend one's family. The lowest level of support was found in Madrid for the item on 'social purge' killings, which was rejected ('neither approve nor understand') by 80 percent of the sample. Additionally, less people were found to agree with the right to kill to defend one's property than to defend one's family. This points to the importance of situational characteristics, in line with the situation hypothesis. In Madrid, most understanding was found for a father killing his daughter's rapist; in the Latin American cities more respondents expressed an understanding for the lynching of someone who terrorizes the community.

Using odds-ratios, Briceño-Léon et al. (2006) additionally analyzed the role of demographic variables and found a clear gender effect, with males being generally more supportive of vigilantism. One exception was a high level of approval by women in San José, Costa Rica, of a father killing his daughter's rapist. Another important variable was religion: Catholics were most prone to support the right to kill. With regards to education, the least educated were most keen of vigilantism in Madrid, while the opposite pattern emerged in Latin America. Lastly, those who watched more violent television approved more of vigilantism, as did heavy drinkers. It is mentioned in the article that the questionnaire also included sections about the perceived efficacy of the police and other criminal justice institutions. Findings regarding these perceptions are unfortunately not reported, so the confidence hypothesis cannot be tested. Another limitation to the study is ambiguity in terminology. If a respondent for instance agrees with the notion that someone has a right to kill to defend his or her *property* (Briceño-Léon et al., 2006), it remains unclear whether this would extend to agreement with killing in defense of a trivial possession.

The final study in Table A2 was conducted by Schadt and DeLisi (2007). This study aims to explain support for the death penalty through attitudes toward vigilantism. Determinants of support for vigilantism are not examined, so the findings are not necessarily relevant for the confidence and situation hypothesis. However, the study does provide us with useful ideas regarding the operationalization of support for vigilantism. The six items that were used to measure support for vigilantism together form a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$). Four of the items regard the respondent's perceived temptation to hurt or kill someone who victimized his or her family. The latter two items concern the wrongfulness and justifiability of (revenge) killing. The table reveals that the levels of support for vigilantism vary considerably depending on the item used, which is consistent with the point made earlier about the risk of drawing conclusions based on single-item measurements. It also points to the role of contextual characteristics, in line with the situation hypothesis. One important factor for instance seems to be whether respondents are asked about *hurting* a perpetrator who victimizes their family, or about *killing* him. It also matters whether people express being *tempted* to take the law into their own hands, or whether they say they actually *would* do so. This implies that even if respondents would feel inclined to do something, they realize that they may not consort to such behavior in reality due to moral – or other – considerations. With regards to demographic variables, only a gender effect was found, with males once again being more supportive of vigilantism.

A limitation to Schadt & DeLisi's (2007) study is that four out of six items limit vigilantism to the act of killing. As a result of this, the findings are not necessarily generalizable to less severe acts of vigilantism. Additionally, it is not entirely clear whether the acts qualify as vigilantism and not as self-defense. Another methodological drawback, as acknowledged by the authors, is that respondents are asked to say what they *think they would do*, which may not be a proper reflection of what they *actually would do* in real life (see DeLisi, 2001; but also Kraus, 1995). This idea is further illustrated by

the fact that 36 percent of respondents (strongly) agree that they would kill someone for hurting their family, which is hardly likely to be the case in reality. Another limitation to the study is that the measure contains rather indefinite expressions, such as "hurt my family", which leaves a lot of room for interpretation on part of the respondent. Lastly, due to the design of the study, no reliable conclusions can be drawn about the situation and confidence hypothesis.

2.3.3 Quasi-experimental studies

In the previous sections we presented both single- and multiple-item measures of support for vigilantism. Studies that use multiple items appear to be more reliable, although some limitations still remain. Conceptualizations of support and of vigilantism vary considerably between surveys, which makes it challenging to draw valid conclusions. The findings nonetheless suggest that support for taking the law into one's own hands at least partially depends on the situational context provided to respondents, in line with the situation hypothesis. Likewise, support was also found for the confidence hypothesis. In order to test the two more hypotheses more directly, quasi-experimental designs are commonly used. In this section, two studies will be discussed in which this methodology has been applied.

The first quasi-experimental study on reactions to vigilantism to be discussed was carried out in the United States by Skitka and Houston (2001). Vignettes, or case studies, were used to examine the relation between people's moral values and their perceptions of fairness and justice in a vigilantism context. The authors varied two situational characteristics, thereby testing the situation hypothesis. Six different versions of a ficticious newspaper description were used, detailing the murder of a young couple during a burglary. The murder suspect ("Smith") is subsequently killed, either through capital punishment or by a vigilante (the father of the male murder victim) on the way to trial. The other experimental factor was the murder suspect's apparent guilt (guilty, innocent or ambiguous). Participants were asked to rate their perception of both procedural and outcome fairness, on a scale from -4 (strongly disagree) to +4 (strongly agree). Procedural fairness was assessed using two items (Cronbach's α = 0.86), including "Justice was served because the process by which Smith was judged was fair". Outcome fairness was measured using three items (Cronbach's α = 0.93), including "Smith deserved what happened to him". The latter scale thus pertains to a sense of deservingness: the victim of vigilantism 'got what he deserved'.

Findings show that putting a guilty murder suspect to death was seen as fair, and that of an innocent murder suspect as unfair, *regardless* of whether it was the result of a formal trial or of vigilantism. When subjects were confident about Smith's guilt or innocence, the perceived fairness of the outcome depended only on whether it matched participants' moral values that the guilty should be punished and the innocent should be set free. In other words, what mattered in the case of a guilty murderer was *whether* he got punished (he was killed), not *by whom* (killed by legal authorities or by a vigilante). How the murder suspect was killed only made a difference if his guilt was ambiguous, in

which case the legal punishment was perceived as a more fair outcome than vigilantism. This suggests that people find an act of vigilantism fair if they believe the precipitating offender deserves to be punished, without caring about the legality of the execution of this punishment. These findings suggest that situational characteristics indeed affect how people view a specific case of vigilantism. Unfortunately, confidence in the criminal justice system was not assessed, so the two hypotheses could not be contrasted with one another. The study nicely illustrates the added value of using vignettes, as it allows for a systematic analysis of various determinants of support for vigilantism.

Another quasi-experimental study on support for vigilantism was conducted by Cook (2006). The effect of two experimental factors, seriousness of the precipitating event and confidence in the legal system, was studied in a 2x2 between-subjects design with vignettes. This study thus aims to test both the situation and confidence hypothesis, but treats confidence as an experimental factor rather than as a stable, personal attitude. Confidence was manipulated by providing subjects with a fictitious positive or negative article about the US justice system. This manipulation was successful: people in the negative article condition expressed less confidence in the justice system and vice versa.

The four versions of the vignette were formatted to look like a police report, and were presented in a between-subjects design. The vigilantism act consisted of a father ("Smith") avenging the death of his daughter by following the suspect ("Collins") home one night and killing him. Seriousness of the precipitating event was manipulated by having the father kill a man who raped and murdered his daughter (high seriousness) or a man who caused her accidental death by reckless driving ('low' seriousness). Support for vigilantism was assessed using the items that are presented in Table 2.2, which together form a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$). As the table shows, the support measure is composed of various dimensions, including sympathy with both parties as well as outrage at the precipitating crime and at the subsequent act of vigilantism. Interestingly, the measure also includes items about the perceived recidivism risk of the vigilante and the danger he poses to society.

Table 2.2 Items to measure support for vigilantism

How much do you sympathize with the victim, Kevin Collins?
How much do you sympathize with the defendant, Jack Smith?
How serious is the crime with which Jack Smith is accused?
How outraged are you by Kevin Collin's murder?
How responsible for this murder is Jack Smith?
Is Jack Smith a danger to society?
What is the likelihood of Jack Smith repeating this crime?

A main effect was found for the seriousness of the precipitating event: support for vigilantism was higher when it was in response to rape and murder rather than in response to an accidental death. Importantly, this provides more evidence for the situation hypothesis. No main effect was found for confidence in the justice system,

which led the author to conclude that the confidence manipulation was not strong enough to affect subsequent judgments of vigilantism.[3] Confidence did affect support in interaction with personal attitudes, such as right wing authoritarianism and belief in a just world.[4] However, as confidence was not treated as an attitude in this study, the two hypotheses could not be contrasted with one another.

2.4 Two rival hypotheses: Conclusions

In this chapter we presented two main hypotheses on why people support vigilantism. The *confidence hypothesis* posits that support for vigilantism is caused by a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system. Alternatively, the *situation hypothesis* proposes that characteristics of the vigilantism situation affect how people view a case of vigilantism. By reviewing a selection of studies on public support for vigilantism, we examined to what extent the empirical literature supports either or both of these two hypotheses. Additionally, we examined how support for vigilantism has been operationalized in the empirical literature.

We started out by describing a number of single-item measures which have been used in poll research to assess support for vigilantism. Although these measures were limited in their reliability, they did provide a number of useful concepts that can be used in our own operationalization of support. Notably, none of the described studies measured support with a straight-forward yes-or-no question, such as 'Do you support vigilantism?' Instead, items pertain to the justifiability and approval of vigilantism, victim deservingness, perceived seriousness of the vigilantism act, sympathy and understanding for the vigilante, blameworthiness of the vigilante, and so on. Support for vigilantism appears to be a multifaceted construct, which makes multiple-item measures much more appropriate than the single-item ones that are commonly used. In our own empirical research we will combine a number of these concepts in order to construct an elaborate, multiple-item measure of support for vigilantism.

With regards to the two hypotheses, support was found for both in the empirical literature. However, this evidence is mostly based on straight-forward survey studies, in which causality cannot be assessed. In order to further disentangle the effects of situational characteristics and confidence on support, we believe that quasi-experimental research with vignettes can prove to be very valuable. Such methodology allows for a systematic study of the influence of multiple determinants of support for vigilantism. Although we included two quasi-experimental studies on support in the current review, neither of these measured the impact of situational characteristics and confidence simultaneously.[5] In other words, we still do not know anything about the *relative* impact of these factors on support for vigilantism. Does confidence for instance still play a role when situational characteristics are accounted for, or vice versa?

3 The author did construct an improvised personal confidence measure using responses to the questions about the fictitious US justice article. Using this measure, confidence again was not found to affect support.

4 For more information about belief in a just world (BJW), please refer to Chapter 6.

5 Cook (2006) did measure both, but treated confidence as an experimental factor rather than as an attitude.

Another important conclusion to be drawn from the literature review is that conceptualizations of *vigilantism* vary considerably between the surveys. Related concepts such as self-defense are for instance at times mistaken for vigilantism. In order to conduct a meaningful study on support for vigilantism, it is therefore crucial to first be clear on what vigilantism actually entails. In the next chapter we will therefore review the literature on the concept of vigilantism, provide a working definition of vigilantism, and identify its situational dimensions in a typology. This conceptual analysis will allow for a systematic investigation of the effects of situational characteristics on support for vigilantism, so that the situation hypothesis can be tested. In order to test the confidence hypothesis, we will devote the subsequent chapter to the conceptualization of confidence. We will discuss the literature on confidence in the criminal justice system and use it to construct a reliable instrument to measure confidence. The next two chapters, in combination with the current one, will thus provide us with the tools necessary to test the two main hypotheses in an empirical investigation of public support for vigilantism.