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Public support for Vigilantism

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An explorative study on public support for vigilantism

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter we present an explorative study on support for vigilantism. As previously indicated, we suggest that confidence in the criminal justice system may not be the only determinant of public support for vigilantism. More specifically, in line with the situation hypothesis, characteristics of the vigilantism context are expected to also affect how people evaluate an act of vigilantism. The main aim of this study is therefore to take a first look at the absolute and relative influence of confidence in the criminal justice system, and situational characteristics, on public support for vigilantism. Respondents will be presented with vignettes that are varied along characteristics from the vigilantism typology (cf. Chapter 3). This will be followed by a measure of respondents' support for vigilantism (cf. Chapter 2) as well as their confidence in the criminal justice system (cf. Chapter 4). This explorative study thereby also allows us to pretest the various measurement instruments that were introduced in the previous chapters.

5.2 Method

In this explorative study on support for vigilantism, we will measure support for a *specific case* of vigilantism.¹² In other words, rather than asking people about their support for vigilantism in general, we will assess their response to a vignette in which a case of vigilantism is described. One of the main advantages of using vignettes, or case descriptions, is that it allows for a systematic variation of specific characteristics within a 'story'. This manipulation makes it possible to study the effect of these characteristics on the dependent variable in isolation from other effects (Rossi & Nock, 1982). More specifically, we can manipulate situational characteristics of a vigilantism case to study their effect on support. Vignettes are also useful for dealing with the fact that people are not always aware of their own attitudes or actual reasons that lie behind their decisions. Clear discrepancies have for instance been found between people's justifications for sentencing and their actual punishment behavior (Carlsmith, 2008; De Keijser, 2001; Roberts & Stalans, 1997). Vignette studies can deal with this issue by not asking people to explain their judgments, but rather by comparing judgments between experimental conditions. Lastly, vignettes provide the opportunity to measure attitudes that are related to concrete situations, rather than on a more abstract level. Literature on sentencing attitudes suggests that people's response is dependent on the specificity of the questions that are posed (cf. Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; De Keijser, Van Koppen, & Elffers, 2007; Hutton, 2005; St Amand & Zamble, 2001). General survey questions result in a different and usually more punitive response than questions related to specific case studies.

Although experiments with vignettes generally have a high internal validity, they are often judged to lose considerably on external validity (e.g. Konecni & Ebbesen, 1992). After all, they involve highly specified case descriptions with a very small selection of

12 We thank Hester van Eeren, Jessica de Jong, Eva Lambooi, Brooke van der Meer and Sylvia Schot for their efforts in this research, which was part of the BA Criminology at Leiden University.

carefully manipulated characteristics, which can be seen as being too far removed from reality. However, with regards to vigilantism, it is common for citizens to be informed about a case of vigilantism through newspaper articles or television news items. Citizens in that case evaluate the vigilantism act as outsiders, based on minimal information, similar to the hypothetical situation of a vignette. We therefore expect the vignette method to be particularly suitable for studying public support for vigilantism.

Choice for crimes in vignettes

Our vignettes describe two criminal acts: a precipitating event and a subsequent act of vigilantism. The precipitating event is shoplifting, which was chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, some of the most famous Dutch examples of vigilantism took place in response to theft in stores, such as the cases of the Amsterdam supermarket and the Tilburg jeweler that were briefly mentioned in the introductory chapter. The media at the time gave the impression of substantial public support for these vigilantes. By presenting a comparable case, we will be able to get an empirical assessment of such reactions. Secondly, shoplifting is a relatively common crime in the Netherlands, which should make it easy for different types of people to relate to. We chose not to present an actual vigilantism case in order to prevent possible effects of media coverage on respondents' judgments.

The vigilantism act itself consists of violence, which is carried out by the victim of the precipitating event against the alleged precipitating offender. The act of vigilantism matches our definition (cf. Chapter 3). We purposely created a time lapse between the precipitating event and the subsequent act of vigilantism in order to clearly distinguish the latter from self-defense and citizen's arrest. For this reason the vigilante happens to meet the alleged thief one day after the shoplifting.

Design

A between-subjects experiment was carried out, in which the vignette varied systematically on two situational characteristics: 1) responsiveness of police to the precipitating event and 2) violence of the vigilantism act (see Appendix 2 for the vignette). The reasons for choosing these experimental manipulations are addressed in the next section. Both factors consisted of two levels (low and high), resulting in a 2x2 design.

Vignette contents

The central story, which is identical in all four conditions, concerns a store owner (Ann) who is under the impression that a particular female customer has been stealing clothes from her store. Ann's suspicion is corroborated by evidence from surveillance tapes. She sends the video footage to the police, in the hope that they will undertake some action. A few days later, Ann sees the notorious customer enter the store again. This time the woman steals a t-shirt, but upon realizing that she has been caught, she manages to escape. The next day, Ann is downtown on a day off when she suddenly catches sight of the shoplifter. She forcefully grabs the woman's arm and physically assaults her.

Figure 5.1 shows the two selected situational characteristics within the vigilantism typology (cf. Chapter 3). Formal response to the precipitating event is the second component of the typology. In the vignette this is operationalized as police responsiveness to the crime reported by Ann. Vigilantism violence belongs to characteristic 3.2: the type and amount of violence used by the vigilante. In the vignette, this concerns the violence used by the store owner against the shoplifter.

We chose to vary *police responsiveness* to the precipitating crime in order to study the effect of situation-specific performance of legal authorities on support for vigilantism. As may be recalled from Chapter 3, formal response to a crime was introduced as one the three main events in the vigilantism event sequence. Responsiveness of legal authorities also surfaced as a possible justification for vigilantism in our literature review on support for vigilantism (Chapter 2). If the authorities do not respond to a crime, people might find it more acceptable for a citizen to subsequently deal with the crime or criminal himself. By including police responsiveness as an experimental manipulation, we can test whether the way in which the police respond to the precipitating event affects support for a subsequent act of vigilantism. Additionally, using the instrument from Chapter 4, we will also measure the effect of *general confidence* in the criminal justice system on support.



Figure 5.1 Experimental variation (underlined and starred)

Police responsiveness was varied by either having the police respond actively to the tapes that Ann sends them, or having them fail to respond. In the active response condition, a police officer shows up in Ann's store to ask her some questions about the shoplifting. He promises to guard the store more frequently, and gives her a phone number on which he can always be reached. In the alternative condition, Ann does not hear back from the police after sending the tapes. Upon contacting the police again herself, she is told that they do not have time to deal with the crime.

Vigilantism violence was varied because it is precisely the use of violence that often characterizes vigilantism: going against the state monopoly on legitimate violence. Additionally, vigilantes are often critiqued for their excessive use of violence. By varying the amount of violence used by the vigilante in the vignette, we are able to study whether this is an important consideration when people judge vigilantism. Vigilantism violence was manipulated by varying Ann's attacks against the alleged thief, including the resulting injuries. In the version of low violence, she hits the thief, who consequently suffers from a black eye and a headache. In the high violence condition, the woman first falls to the ground after being hit. Ann then goes on to kick her in the head, leaving the victim with a broken jaw and a heavy concussion.

Measures

Respondents were asked to read the vignette and indicate their agreement with corresponding survey items on a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire consisted of two main parts: a measure of support for vigilantism and a measure of confidence in the criminal justice system. The order in which these two parts were presented to respondents was varied at random, which allowed us to control for possible order effects of the vignette on the evaluation of the confidence items and vice versa.

The support measure consists of 17 items about the vigilantism case in the vignette (see Table 5.2). The items pertain to a number of different concepts that have been used in the literature to measure support for vigilantism (cf. Chapter 2). They include *empathy* with the vigilante and his victim, *approval* of vigilantism, *punishment deservingness* and *blame*. By presenting a mix of different items, we aimed to establish an elaborate and reliable measure of support for vigilantism. Some of these items were piloted in an earlier study that we conducted on this topic (Haas, De Keijser, & Vanderveen, 2007).

The measure of confidence in the criminal justice system consists of 27 items (see Table 5.3). These items were presented in Chapter 4 as an operationalization of our integrated model of confidence. In addition to measuring confidence in the criminal justice system, we included three items to assess people's general worry about crime (see Table 5.4). Given that vigilantism is a response to crime, we expected that people's general view about crime in society might also affect support for vigilantism. We used three (slightly adapted) items from a measure that has been described in the literature as the General Concern over Crime (GCC) factor (De Keijser et al., 2007). The GCC items were presented along with the confidence items; all were evaluated using the same five-point response scale.

Hypotheses

We start by formulating expectations regarding the effect of situational characteristics on support for vigilantism, i.e. the situation hypothesis. The first characteristic that was varied is police responsiveness to the precipitating event. We expect people to be less forgiving toward the vigilante when she was taken seriously by the police but resorted to vigilantism nonetheless. This results in the following hypothesis:

H1: The higher police responsiveness to the reporting of the precipitating crime, the less support for vigilantism in the vignette.

The second situational variation is the extent to which the vigilante uses violence against the alleged shoplifter. We expect that some amount of violence against a precipitating offender may be seen as justified, but if it becomes too severe it will probably lead to less supportive reactions. We therefore formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: The more violence is used by the vigilante against the (alleged) shoplifter, the less support for vigilantism in the vignette.

We next present our predictions regarding the effect of general confidence in the criminal justice system on support for vigilantism in the vignette. Given that vigilantes deal with crime themselves in spite of legal alternatives, we expect more support for their behavior among those who have a negative perception of the legal system. In line with the confidence hypothesis, we thus formulate the following expectation:

H3: The more confidence in the criminal justice system, the less support for vigilantism in the vignette.

As the vigilante in the vignette responds to a criminal act, we expect that people who are more concerned about crime will be more supportive of this act. When crime is perceived to be on the rise and formal sentencing as being too lenient, vigilantism may be seen as an appropriate alternative. The hypothesis is thus as follows:

H4: The more general concern over crime, the more support for vigilantism in the vignette.

Sample

Data were collected in April 2007 by handing out questionnaires to 390 train passengers in the Netherlands.¹³ Travelers in both first and second class compartments were approached, and each participant randomly received one of four versions of the questionnaire. The response level for all passengers was 70 percent; non-response mainly consisted of people who did not speak Dutch or who said to be occupied. Five of the questionnaires were excluded from data analysis due to too many missings, which

¹³ We hereby would like to express our gratitude to the Dutch Railways (NS) for granting us permission to conduct a survey among their passengers.

resulted in a final sample of 385 people. Table 5.1 shows the respondent distribution over the four conditions. Mean age was 35 years ($SD = 15.96$); 55 percent was male. A total of 62 percent indicated being highly educated, which is above the national average of 30 percent (Sanderse & Harbers, 2008).

Table 5.1 Distribution of respondents over conditions

		Police responsiveness		total (N)
		low	high	
Seriousness vigilantism	low	93	97	190
	high	96	99	195
	total (N)	189	196	385

5.3 Scale construction

Prior to testing our hypotheses, summated scales were constructed based on responses to the questionnaire items. First, a principal components analysis (PCA) was carried out on all items measuring support for vigilantism in the vignette, resulting in a two-factor solution.¹⁴ Based on the scree plot and interpretability, we repeated the PCA while forcing a one-factor solution. This resulted in the loadings that are presented in Table 5.2.¹⁵ The total explained variance is 51 percent, with an Eigen value of 8.6. Analogous to this structure, a summated scale was constructed which will be used as the dependent variable *Support for vigilantism*. It has a Cronbach's alpha of .93, which indicates a good internal consistency. The mean score is 2.66 ($SD = .87$) on a five-point scale, with higher values indicating more support. This means that on average, across conditions, people were not very supportive of the vigilantism act.

A PCA was also carried out on the 27 confidence items, using an oblique rotation of components. Table 5.3 shows the two resulting components and their corresponding item loadings.¹⁶ Together they explain 54 percent of total variance.¹⁷ All seven items related to police collapse into one component: *Confidence in police*. The component additionally contains an item about the effectiveness of the Dutch justice system in combating crime, which suggests that respondents associate police with the effectiveness of fighting crime.

14 No distinction was made between the vignette types (analyses per version gave comparable results). The PCA was rotated obliquely for theoretical reasons; the orthogonal solution was similar. The first factor (14 items) contributed to 50.6 percent of the explained variance, with an Eigen value of 8.6. The second factor (3 items) had an explained variance of 7.6 percent, with an Eigen value of 1.3. (Explained variances refer to the unrotated solution.)

15 Due to the high kurtosis and skewness of some variables, all analyses were also run with log-transformed variables. This led to comparable results.

16 One item was removed due to a low loading (.27): "Citizens should do what the police tell them to do, even if they disagree with it".

17 Eigen values: 12.03 and 1.90. Explained variance refers to the unrotated solution. A PCA using orthogonal (varimax) rotation of components resulted in the same structure and interpretation. Oblique rotation was preferred considering meaningful interpretation of component correlations ($r = .59$).

Table 5.2 One-factor solution of *Support for vigilantism* ($N = 385$, $k = 17$)

Item	Loading
Ann deserves punishment for what she did	-.85
If Ann gets punished, she gets what she deserves	-.83
Ann should be criminally prosecuted	-.81
Ann cannot be blamed for anything	.79
Ann should do penance for her behavior	-.79
Ann's behavior should absolutely not be tolerated	-.79
The authorities should turn a blind eye to Ann's behavior	.77
What Ann did is justified	.75
Given the situation, Ann's behavior is appropriate	.78
Ann's behavior is completely out of proportion	-.75
Thanks to people like Ann at least something is done against crime	.73
Ann should have looked for another solution	-.70
Behavior like that of Ann forms a threat to the legal system	-.62
The woman has herself to blame for Ann's reaction	.56
Ann's reaction is understandable	.54
I pity the woman who was targeted by Ann	-.49
Ann should have handed the woman over to the police	-.35

The second component can be described as *Confidence in courts & CJS*. It includes all 15 items related to judges and prosecutors. This suggests that these actors are closely related in the eyes of respondents, which may partially be explained by a lack of knowledge about their specific roles within the justice system. Also included in this component is an item about the maintenance of laws in general and two about the proper functioning of the overall justice system. The fact that these items form part of this component likely reflects the role of the courts as perceived by respondents.

Based on the PCA solution, two summated scales were created. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale on confidence in police is 0.89, with a mean rating of 3.07 (SD = .74).¹⁸ The mean score of the scale on confidence in courts & CJS is 3.44 (SD = .68), with a reliability of 0.94. These scales thus have high internal consistencies. The mean rating of the police is lower than that of the rest of the justice system, contrary to what is generally found in the literature (cf. Roberts & Hough, 2005a). It does nevertheless match previous findings within the Dutch context (Elffers & De Keijser, 2004; Koomen, 2006; Ter Voert, 1997). Interestingly, the distinction between procedural justice and effectiveness was not visible in the data. It did nevertheless help us to construct a rich measure of confidence (cf. Chapter 4).

¹⁸ The means refer to the 5-point scale that was used, with lower values indicating less confidence.

Table 5.3 *Components of Confidence after oblique rotation (N = 385, k = 26)*

Items	Confidence in police	Confidence in courts & CJS
The police are doing a good job	.87	-.13
The police are there when you need them	.82	-.05
The police care about the well-being of the everyday citizen	.72	.05
I respect the police	.71	.03
You can count on the police to take decisions that are best for society	.63	.20
Citizens' rights are well-protected by the police	.63	.24
The police are honest and trustworthy	.57	.30
The Dutch justice system is effective in combating crime	.48	.19
Judges are honest and trustworthy	-.19	.88
The Public Prosecution is honest and trustworthy	-.12	.87
Judges do their job well	-.06	.86
Judges are impartial	-.15	.78
I respect the judiciary	-.06	.77
Judges' verdicts are well deliberated	-.01	.77
Citizens' rights are well-protected by the Public Prosecution	.11	.69
You can count on judges to take decisions that are best for society	.06	.68
The Public Prosecution does its job well	.21	.67
Citizens' rights are well-protected by judges	.06	.65
The Dutch criminal justice system functions properly	.12	.64
You can count on the Public Prosecution to take decisions that are best for society	.15	.63
I respect the Public Prosecution	.12	.63
I trust the way in which laws in the Netherlands are maintained	.21	.60
The Public Prosecution deserves respect among citizens	.01	.60
Citizens can count on it that their case is properly dealt with in the Dutch CJS	.22	.56
Sentence recommendations are well-deliberated by the Public Prosecution	.23	.48
Citizens should accept the judge's verdict, even if they disagree with it	.08	.40

Three items were used to assess respondents' General concern over crime (see Table 5.4), which together form a reliable scale. The PCA that was carried out resulted in an explained variance of 56 percent. The mean score is 3.63 (SD = .85) on a five-point response scale, which indicates that our respondents on average were slightly concerned about crime. This may be partially due to the relatively high educational level of our sample (cf. Allen, 2006).

Table 5.4 *General concern over crime (GCC) scale*

Scale	Item	Loading
GCC Eigen value = 1.68 Cronbach's $\alpha = .60$	Total volume of crime in the Netherlands has, over the past years, increased strongly.	.79
	Crime is a problem that causes me great concern.	.77
	In general, sentences for crimes in the Netherlands are too lenient.	.68

We lastly carried out independent samples t-tests to check whether the vigilantism vignette affected people's attitudes toward the criminal justice system and vice versa. No order effects were found for support for vigilantism, $t(378) = 1.46, p = .14$, nor for general concern over crime, $t(380) = .56, p = .58$. No order effects were found either for confidence in police, $t(381) = -.86, p = .39$, nor for confidence in courts and CJS, $t(377) = -1.33, p = .18$.

5.4 Results

To examine the absolute and relative impact of the independent variables on support for vigilantism, we carried out an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis (see Table 5.5). In preparation of this regression, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to separately examine whether there were any interaction effects between the two experimental factors (police responsiveness and vigilante violence). No interaction was found, $F(2, 376) = .32, p = .57$. The situational characteristics thus affected support independently of one another.

Table 5.5 *Determinants of support for vigilantism in vignette (N = 374)*

Independent variables			
	b	SE	β
Experimental factors			
Police responsiveness	-.22	.08	-.13**
Vigilantism violence	-.46	.08	-.27***
Attitudes			
Confidence in police	-.04	.07	-.03
Confidence in courts & CJS	-.47	.08	-.38***
General concern over crime	.12	.05	.12*
Control variables			
Age	.00	.00	.08
Gender	.11	.08	.06
$R^2 (R^2_{adj}) = .29 (.27)$			
$F = 20.91***$			

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

A main effect was found for police responsiveness. The more actively the police reacted after receiving the footage of the shoplifting, the less the subsequent vigilantism act was supported, thereby confirming hypothesis 1. The performance of police on the micro-level thus affected people's response to a subsequent act of vigilantism. Secondly, a main effect was found for the violence used by the vigilante. A more violent act led to less support, in line with hypothesis 2. Interestingly, the impact of vigilantism violence on support was more than twice as large as that of police responsiveness. Respondents were thus much more sensitive to the amount of violence used by the vigilante than to whether or not the police had responded to the report of theft. In sum, these findings confirm the *situation hypothesis*.

We next examined the effects of general attitudes. Interestingly, respondents' confidence in police did not influence their support for vigilantism, while confidence in the courts and CJS had the largest effect of all independent variables. Hypothesis 3, or the *confidence hypothesis*, was therefore partially confirmed. These results imply that it is indeed important to differentiate between the different criminal justice agencies, at least when examining the effect of confidence on support for vigilantism. In correspondence with hypothesis 4, people who are more worried about crime were more supportive of vigilantism in the vignette. This finding suggests that vigilantism is indeed seen as a favorable way of dealing with the crimes about which one is concerned. This also suggests that these respondents are not as concerned about the crimes that are committed by vigilantes. Two control variables, age and gender, did not affect support for vigilantism in any significant way. Table 5.6 shows the mean ratings on support for vigilantism per level of the two experimental factors for a further illustration of the main effects.

Table 5.6 Mean scores (scale 1-5) on support per characteristic level ($N = 380$)

Scale (mean)	Situational characteristic	Mean (SD)
Support for vigilantism (2.66)	Police responsiveness	Low = 2.78 (.92)
		High = 2.54 (.80)
	Vigilantism violence	Low = 2.87 (.81)
		High = 2.45 (.87)

5.5 Discussion

In this chapter we presented our first empirical study on public support for vigilantism. Since the justice system aims to prevent vigilantism, it seems reasonable that public support for such behavior is often interpreted as a sign that confidence in the system is lacking: the *confidence hypothesis*. However, we introduced a second hypothesis which posits that situational characteristics may also affect support for vigilantism: the *situation hypothesis*. Both hypotheses were tested in an experimental study with vignettes in which characteristics of the vigilantism situation were systematically varied between different versions. Support for the act of vigilantism was measured by presenting respondents

with a wide variety of items on topics such as justifiability and deservingness. Confidence was assessed using the tool that was developed in Chapter 4.

Results of the study confirm the situation hypothesis: situational characteristics affect support for vigilantism. Violence used by the vigilante and police responsiveness independently affected respondents' reactions to vigilantism. When citizens openly support those who take the law into their own hands, this thus cannot automatically be interpreted as a sign that confidence in the criminal justice system is lacking. People may simply react to situational aspects, without their attitude toward the legal system necessarily playing a role.

Aside from evidence for the situation hypothesis, we also found a partial confirmation of the confidence hypothesis. More confidence in the courts and CJS led to less support for vigilantism, but confidence in police did not influence support. General concern over crime did affect support for vigilantism, in the expected direction: more concern about crime led to more support for vigilantism.

The police responsiveness dimension allowed us to test whether performance of a criminal justice agency on a situation-specific level (rather than on a general level) affects support for vigilantism. Vigilantism in reaction to a 'failing' legal authority was predicted to lead to more support for the vigilante than in the situation where the authorities do undertake action to help the store owner. As this expectation was confirmed, it suggests that the role of authorities in the event leading up to vigilantism can influence public reactions. Confidence in police *in general* did not at all affect ratings in this study; effects were only found on the situation-specific level. This implies that people do consider the conditions leading up to an act of vigilantism, but do not necessarily take into account how they generally view the criminal justice system and its agencies.

Notably, the level of support for the vigilantism was low no matter what condition people were assigned to. Even in the conditions where police responded passively to the store theft or where the vigilantism act was relatively mild, our respondents did not show much support for the vigilante. This may partially be due to the educational level of respondents, which is considerably higher than that of the average population. By repeating these measures with other vigilantism vignettes, and a more representative sample, it will be possible to examine the robustness of these findings.

This study gave us a chance to pretest a number of measurement instruments. We succeeded in constructing a reliable measure of support for vigilantism, as well as of confidence in the criminal justice system. Moreover, the results show that the differentiation between the police and the courts was a meaningful one, as confidence in these agencies had distinct effects on support for vigilantism. Lastly, the vignette methodology proved to be useful for identifying determinants of support for vigilantism. It should nevertheless be noted that respondents were not told that the vigilantism cases were real, nor were the vignettes presented to look like real newspaper articles. To increase the external validity, the vignettes should be made to appear more realistic in future studies.

In conclusion, this explorative study allowed us to test the confidence and situation hypothesis simultaneously, and to determine their absolute and relative effects. Based on the findings we conclude that confidence is not the only determinant of public support for vigilantism. Specific characteristics of the vigilantism situation were found to play an essential role in predicting people's reactions to a vigilantism case. This brings us to an important next step: to explain *why* these situational factors affect people's reactions to vigilantism. To this end we will introduce a theoretical framework in the next chapter: just-world theory (Lerner, 1965, 1980). This theory will be presented as a tool for predicting and measuring public reactions to vigilantism.