Public support for Vigilantism

Haas, N.E.

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Just-world theory and support for vigilantism

If the victim had herself committed horrible crimes in the past, I might be able to live with her fate. Especially if additional 'fairy tale' elements were added, so that the 'criminal' had been the husband or father of one of her victims, and had been driven insane by the tragedy she had inflicted on him. And thus the evil that was done generated its own punishment. (Lerner, 1980, p.127)

6.1 Introduction

In our first empirical study we demonstrated that public support for vigilantism can be influenced by factors apart from confidence in the criminal justice system. More specifically, situational characteristics, such as the use of violence by a vigilante, were found to be important determinants of how an act of vigilantism is perceived by an outsider. These results raise a fundamental question: what causes people to judge an act of vigilantism as justified under given situational circumstances? In search of an answer to this question, we draw on social justice research, which focuses on the mechanism underlying people's judgments about justice and injustice (Tyler & Smith, 1997). One of the main lessons from this field is that justice is in the eye of the beholder: "the notion of justice is a subjective construction that is formulated by individuals according to their expectations and feelings of righteousness and 'deservingness'" (Fischer & Skitka, 2006, p.86).

An important theory on the formation of justice perceptions is just-world theory (Lerner, 1965, 1980). This theory proposes that people's reactions to victimization can be understood as attempts to preserve a belief in a just world (BJW): the belief that the world is a place where individuals get what they deserve and deserve what they get. People are said to be keen on protecting their BJW. When confronted with an injustice, i.e. an indication that the world is not just, they will experience an aversive state. As will be explained in more detail below, they will try to reduce this unpleasant state by using strategies to protect their BJW. Such strategies can include denial of the injustice, for instance by blaming the victim, or attempts to restore the injustice, for example by seeking punishment for the offender.

We will argue in this chapter that the victimizations that occur in the vigilantism event sequence can also pose a threat to people's BJW. In this light, public reactions which are commonly labeled as 'support for vigilantism' can actually be interpreted as BJW reactions to vigilantism: aversive states and people's attempts to protect their BJW. An example of the latter is when people blame the victim of vigilantism for his fate: he 'got what he deserved'.

We start by explaining the main ideas of just-world theory, followed by a description of related empirical research. We subsequently present a theoretical model which applies just-world theory to the vigilantism event sequence. Just-world theory will provide us with useful vocabulary as well as a structure for predicting the influence of situational characteristics (from the typology) on support for vigilantism.

6.2 Just-world theory

In essence, support for vigilantism is a reaction to two instances of criminal victimization. The public makes a judgment about a vigilante who uses criminal victimization in

response to (the threat of) criminal victimization.[19] Below we will describe how just-world theory aims to explain reactions to victimization in general, and will then apply it to the specific context of vigilantism.

According to just-world theory, people have a strong need to believe that the world is a just place in which people generally get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Lerner, 1965, 1980). Good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. People tend to construe events in such a way that positive events, traits and attributes are causally connected to positive outcomes, as are negative cognitions to negative outcomes (Lerner, 1980). This is how our brains try to reach harmony among cognitive components, thereby constructing a relatively stable world for ourselves.[20] In fact, these perceived causal relations are so strong that the presence of one component frequently leads to the assumption of the other (Heider, 1958). For instance, if someone has been unemployed for an extended period of time, people will tend to assume that he must be lazy or that his search for a job was inadequate. If someone wins a price, it is assumed that the winner must be a nice person or must have accomplished something that makes him deserve it.

People have a need to believe in a just world so that they can commit to their so-called personal contract (Lerner, Miller, & Holmes, 1976). This personal contract is developed in childhood when a child moves from the 'pleasure principle' to the 'reality principle'. The child learns that it is in his long-term benefit to give up immediate gratification in order to get a more desirable outcome in the future (Lerner, 1977). The child makes the 'deal' that in return for holding back his immediate impulses, he is owed anticipated outcomes. Investing such efforts are believed to pay off in the future: he will get the outcome that he deserves or is entitled to (Lerner et al., 1976). The *need* to believe in a just world is said to motivate most people to form a *belief in a just world* (BJW) and to behave accordingly, even if they are not explicitly aware of endorsing this belief (Hafer & Bègue, 2005).[21] Although Lerner (1965) assumed that BJW is a uniform phenomenon, it is worth noting that individual differences in BJW have been found (Furnham, 2003). We will return to this point shortly.

The BJW serves an important adaptive function, as it enables one to pursue long-term goals (Lerner & Miller, 1978). It provides people with a sense of predictability and assures them that their behavior and attributes entitle them to certain outcomes (Lerner, 1980). Believing that the world is just makes people feel less vulnerable to negative outcomes when they have done nothing to deserve them (Furnham, 2003). Only in a just world is it sensible to engage in long-term goal-oriented behavior in order to achieve positive outcomes and avoid negative ones (Hagedoorn, Buunk, & Van de Vliert, 2002). People who behave appropriately according to society's standards, for

19 In Chapter 2 we defined vigilantism as "a planned criminal act carried out by one or more private citizens in response to (the perceived threat of) a crime committed by one or more private citizens, targeting the (alleged) perpetrator(s) of that crime".

20 For more information about this tendency of individuals to seek consistency between attitudes and behavior, see cognitive dissonance theory by Festinger (1957).

21 Even though we recognize this difference between a *need* to believe in a just world and the actual *belief* in a just world (BJW), we will commonly only refer to the latter for clarity purposes.

instance by working hard and taking care of their family, can expect to be rewarded accordingly. On the other hand, those who fail to make a contribution to society, for instance by refusing to go to work for no apparent reason, are thought to be entitled to negative consequences such as failure. The same can be said about people's personal characteristics: if someone is perceived as kind and gentle, he will be entitled to desirable consequences such as respect, whereas people with negative attributes such as dishonesty will be seen to deserve a negative fate. All in all, believing that the world is a just place allows people to expect that their lives are orderly, meaningful and controllable (Sutton & Douglas, 2005).

Importantly, the personal contract is only valid to the extent that the individual lives in an environment where people indeed get what they deserve (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). This is part of the reason why people are concerned with the fate of others around them. If someone else suffers undeservedly, the individual will realize that this fate could befall him too. Evidence of innocent suffering therefore casts doubts on how 'just' the world really is. This injustice constitutes a threat to the viability of the personal contract, as it is useless to make an effort if it is uncertain or unlikely that this will lead to the desired outcome. In other words, the injustice threatens the notion of a just world. As a consequence, people are left in an *aversive state*, which is an unpleasant state of mind that they will be motivated to reduce. One way of doing so is by giving up their BJW altogether, i.e. accepting that the world is not a just place. However, this option is not viable because it is presumably advantageous for people to stay committed to their personal contract. Given its important adaptive utility, individuals are quite reluctant to abandon their BJW (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Instead, people will be motivated to reduce the aversive state so that they can maintain their BJW. This can either be achieved by convincing oneself that there was no injustice in the first place because the victim did deserve to suffer, or by restoring the injustice (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Lerner (1980) proposed nine distinct strategies for coping with threats to the need to believe in a just world. The literature mainly focuses on the following four (Hafer & Bègue, 2005):

Cognitive strategies:

1. *reinterpretation of the cause* – blaming the victim by attributing his fate to something he did or failed to do
2. *reinterpretation of character* – derogating the victim as a person ('bad' people deserve bad outcomes)
3. *reinterpretation of the outcome* – making the injustice 'disappear', for instance by reasoning that the suffering made the victim a better person

Behavioral strategy:

4. *restitution* – restoring justice to unjust situations that do occur by helping or compensating the victim, or by punishing the offender

The aim of the three *cognitive* strategies, first of all, is to reinterpret the unjust event rather than accepting its occurrence (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). In other words, people try to psychologically rationalize the victim's fate (Fischer & Skitka, 2006). These strategies are also referred to as non-rational strategies, as they involve a refusal to accept the presence of injustice. People in effect construe the event in such a way that it fits their belief in a just world: they try to persuade themselves that the victim 'deserves' to suffer (Lerner, 1980). This can be seen as a rather disturbing phenomenon, as the victims are derogated and blamed for their own suffering. *Behavioral* strategies, such as restitution, involve accepting the presence of injustice, and are usually seen as a more rational response. Instead of denying that victimization has taken place, people try to restore justice through their behavior.

Research suggests that, when dealing with an injustice, people will first apply the cognitive strategies (such as blaming the victim) before trying to restore justice (such as helping the victim) (Lodewijkx, De Kwaadsteniet, & Nijstad, 2005). The reason for this is said to be that *restoring* justice involves larger costs. So even if people are motivated to help the victim or punish the offender, they will first attempt to reinterpret the injustice in a cognitive way. According to this idea, the more observers apply the cognitive strategies, the more the aversive state will be reduced, and the less need there will be for behavioral restitution. In a study on the labeling of violent incidents by outsiders, subjects who had *no* opportunity to blame the victim were indeed found to be more keen on punishment of the perpetrator (Lodewijkx, De Kwaadsteniet, & Nijstad, 2005). However, we question this supposed evidence for the proposed hierarchy of strategies. In our view, a desire for punishment does not qualify as a behavioral strategy because it does not involve actual behavior. Rather, it belongs to the category of cognitive strategies, as people do not actually restore the justice but only express the intention to do so. Although it makes sense from an ethical point of view that respondents are not asked to punish the offender themselves, we do find it important to make a clear theoretical distinction between these strategies. We therefore propose to classify behavioral *intentions* (such as a desire for punishment, help or compensation) as cognitive strategies. We will call these *cognitive restitutions*, thereby distinguishing them from the behavioral type (*restitution*; strategy 4 above). Importantly, cognitive restitution differs from other cognitive strategies in that it involves an acceptance of the victimization, rather than a denial of it (such as in the case of blame and derogation). So even though cognitive restitution is meant to cognitively reduce the aversive state, it does so by showing the intention to restore justice, rather than pretending that there is no injustice to begin with.

6.3 Just-world theory research

It has been nearly 45 years since Lerner and Simmons (1966) first introduced the notion of a need to believe in a just world. Just-world theory has resulted in a substantial body of research. Recently it was estimated that there exist over 80 peer-reviewed journal

articles on just-world theory in addition to more than a dozen book chapters (Bennet, 2008). Within this field, two main approaches can be identified:

1) Experimental research on the *BJW mechanism*
2) Research on *individual differences in BJW* and its correlates

In the literature there exists disagreement with regards to the appropriateness of these two perspectives. Some scholars for instance argue that research on individual differences is too far removed from the original theory (Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner, 1980, 1998, 2003), while others say that it should be seen as a fundamental advancement of just-world research (Furnham, 2003; Maes, 1998). It has nevertheless also been recognized that it is possible to combine the two approaches (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). Measures of individual differences in BJW can for instance be used to garner support for findings in experimental research. As will become clear later on, this is precisely what we intend to do in the next study. We will examine support for vigilantism in a just world context within an experimental setting, while including a measure of individual levels of belief in a just world. The underlying assumption is that if people's need to believe in a just world affects their responses to vigilantism in various experimental conditions, this will be most evident for those who more strongly endorse the BJW. In other words, an interaction is expected between the individual-difference measure and the experimental manipulations. As we will combine the two approaches in our study, each is discussed in more detail below.

6.3.1 Experimental research on BJW

Within the experimental approach, there exist two types of manipulations that have been used most commonly to test just-world hypotheses. The first one consists of presenting subjects with a scenario and manipulating variables that are expected to affect the aversive state that is induced by the scenario (e.g. a manipulation of victim innocence). The second type consists of presenting subjects with a scenario that is designed to induce an aversive state, while manipulating the opportunity to use certain strategies to protect one's BJW (e.g. by giving participants the chance to actually help a victim or not) (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). In our study, we will employ the first type of manipulation, as we are currently interested in studying the impact of characteristics of the vigilantism situation on a threat to people's BJW and their resulting response. We will not investigate the effect of situational characteristics on the appropriateness of different strategies to protect the BJW after exposure to vigilantism.

In reviewing experimental research on BJW, Lerner (1980; 2003) highlights the importance of stimulus impact. He suggests that, depending on how emotionally engaging a stimulus is, people will respond in one of two rather distinct ways. A stimulus with an emotional impact will likely prime an automatic, pre-conscious need to believe in a just world, which will motivate attempts to defend one's BJW or restore justice. This emotional state is a rather primitive and intuitive assessment of the situation. However, a stimulus which is not emotionally engaging may not actually threaten a participant's need to believe in a just world. The response to this type of stimulus is unlikely to reflect

attempts to preserve a sense of justice, and will instead lead to a deliberative, thoughtful response (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). This type of reaction is much more vulnerable to social desirability, as the respondent is likely to be guided by a motivation to adhere to social norms on how an injustice should be responded to (i.e. not by blaming the victim).

In the current study, we are interested in the first type of response: intuitive, emotional reactions to victimization. As such, we will present participants with stimuli that are designed to be emotionally engaging and are likely to pose a threat to their BJW. As will be explained in more detail in the next chapter, we aspire to accomplish this by making use of a realistic looking newspaper article that includes a picture of a crime scene. Additionally, we will tell respondents that it concerns a real article about an actual crime situation, under the assumption that this will make an aversive state more likely to occur.

After having outlined some of the important aspects of experimental research on BJW, we next turn to measures of individual levels of BJW. We will describe some of the scales that have been developed over the years, and will explain our choice with regards to the measurement scale used in our own study. This will be followed by a section in which we turn to the specific application of just-world theory to our research on support for vigilantism.

6.3.2. Individual levels of BJW

Even though Lerner (1965) in his original theory assumed that all people would react to cases of injustice in a rather uniform way, a more recent body of research has revealed that people differ in the extent to which they believe in a just world (see Furnham, 2003). Several questionnaires have been developed to measure individual levels of BJW. The most well-known one is the 20-item "Belief in a Just World Scale" (BJWS) that was introduced by Rubin and Peplau (1975). A selection of items from this scale is presented in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Selected items from Rubin and Peplau's Belief in a Just World Scale

People who get "lucky breaks" have usually earned their good fortune
Men who keep in shape have little chance of suffering a heart attack
It is rare for an innocent person to be wrongly sent to jail
By and large, people get what they deserve
Good deeds often go unnoticed and unrewarded

Using the BJWS, it has been demonstrated repeatedly that strong just-world believers tend to respond to victims with more derogation, blame and compensation than weak believers (for reviews, see Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Montada & Lerner, 1998). Presumably, they are more likely to use such strategies because the threat to their BJW is larger. Nevertheless, although the Rubin and Peplau (1975) scale has been used extensively and is still the most popular one in contemporary studies, it has

been heavily criticized (Furnham, 2003). Mainly, the scale has been found to have a low internal consistency and has been argued to be multi- rather than one-dimensional. Not surprisingly, there have been many efforts to develop psychometrically more valid self-report BJW scales. One example is the more robust 8-item "Global Belief in a Just World" scale (Lipkus, 1991); see Table 6.2.

Table 6.2 Lipkus (1991) Global Belief in a Just World Scale

I feel that people get what they are entitled to have
I feel that a person's efforts are noticed and rewarded
I feel that people earn the rewards and punishments they get
I feel that people who meet with misfortune have brought it on themselves
I feel that people get what they deserve
I feel that rewards and punishments are fairly given
I basically feel that the world is a fair place

A few years after its original appearance, the Global Belief in a Just World Scale was improved by making a distinction between BJW for the Self (BJW-S) and that for Others (BJW-O) (Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996). An example of a BJW-S item is "I feel that the world treats me fairly", whereas the BJW-O version reads as follows: "I feel that the world treats people fairly". The relevance of this bi-dimensionality of BJW has been verified in several studies (cf. Bègue & Bastounis, 2003; Lipkus et al., 1996; Sutton & Douglas, 2005). Although moderate positive correlations have been found between the two scales, each is uniquely related to different indices (Sutton et al., 2008).

BJW-S is commonly associated with measures of subjective well-being, including sleep quality, stress, loneliness, feelings of personal control, life satisfaction and judgments of marital relations (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003; Sutton & Douglas, 2005). BJW-O, on the other hand, is generally connected to harsh attitudes toward disadvantaged groups like the poor, the ill and the elderly (Sutton & Douglas, 2005). Most interesting for current purposes, BJW-O has also been linked to desired punishment for perpetrators, and attributions of responsibility and blame. People who have strong beliefs about a just world for others are generally more concerned with chaos in the world, which in turn leads to more blame and derogation of victims of injustice (Bennet, 2008). In line with this, people who score higher on BJW-O tend to be more punitive in matters of criminal justice (Carroll, Perkowitz, Lurigio, & Weaver, 1987; Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2004).

In summary, BJW-S is related to indices of subjective wellbeing, while BJW-O is associated with negative social outcomes such as prejudiced attitudes. In the current study, we chose to include a measure of BJW-O, as we are interested in linking it to people's reactions toward the criminal victimization of others in a vigilantism situation. Most Dutch citizens fortunately do not personally become victims of vigilantism, so it makes sense to measure their attitudes toward others who do. In the next section, we will address in more detail how just-world theory can aid us in understanding public support for vigilantism.

6.4 Just-world theory and support for vigilantism

It has been proposed in the literature that just world theory can be applied to a large variety of social relations and phenomena (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). We are interested in using the theory to predict and explain reactions to both victims and offenders in a vigilantism context. Although the just-world literature largely focuses on reactions to recipients of injustice (cf. Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Miller & Vidmar, 1981), it can also be applied in research on people's response to perpetrators of injustice. The role of just-world processes has for instance been studied in research on sentencing goals of laypeople (e.g. Bègue & Bastounis, 2003; Carroll et al., 1987; Kleinke & Meyer, 1990; Wyer, Bodenhausen, & Gorman, 1985). What makes vigilantism a particularly interesting phenomenon is that the roles of the victim and offender are often exchanged: the victim becomes an offender, and the offender becomes a victim.

Just-world theory can be said to equate justice with deservingness, as a just world is a place where people get what they deserve (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). Interestingly, the notion of deservingness regularly surfaces in the context of public support for vigilantism. Supporters of vigilantism often make reference to notions of deservingness, for instance by saying that the victim of vigilantism got what he deserved (e.g. in Fletcher, 1988). Despite the fact that vigilantism is usually not preceded by a formal trial, there seems to be a tendency of outsiders to assume that the vigilantism victim was not innocent and must have done something wrong to deserve his fate (Hine, 1998). On the other hand, there are people who applaud the prosecution of vigilantes and who are convinced about their deservingness of punishment. Either way, deservingness seems to be a central feature of reactions to vigilantism, implying that just-world theory can provide a useful framework for research on this topic.

Research outside of the just-world domain also suggests an important role for deservingness in how people view issues of justice and injustice. The general conclusion to be drawn from research on sentencing preferences, for instance, is that *retribution* is one of the main criteria that is used by laypeople to determine appropriate punishments (Carlsmith, 2008; Darley & Pittman, 2003; De Keijser, 2001; Lambert, Clarke, & Lambert, 2004). The importance of retribution makes perfect sense from the just-world perspective, as it can be seen as an effective way to restore justice (Lerner, 1980; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). A preference for retribution as compared to alternative sentencing goals, such as rehabilitation or deterrence, may even stem from people's underlying need to believe in a just world (Hafer & Bègue, 2005).

In light of earlier empirical studies on support for vigilantism, including our own (cf. Chapter 5), it also makes sense to use the BJW approach. Many of the items that were for instance presented in the literature review in Chapter 2 pertain to concepts such as blame, justifiability and deservingness. Some of the items in which such BJW concepts (in italics) are evident are as follows: "People who kill armed robbers should not be *blamed*" (Tankebe, 2009), "If someone were to rape your mother then you would be *morally justified* in killing the perpetrator" (Schadt & DeLisi, 2007) "Smith *deserved* what happened to him" (Skitka & Houston, 2001). In essence, just-world theory

provides a theoretical basis for using such concepts to measure support for vigilantism. Additionally, the theory provides useful vocabulary for distinguishing between different types of reactions to vigilantism. In the next section, we will explain in more detail how just-world theory and notions of deservingness can be applied to the vigilantism context.

6.5 The vigilantism event sequence and BJW

Just-world theory proposes that people's reactions to an injustice can be understood by taking into account the threat posed to their need to believe in a just world. In this section we will explain how to apply this theoretical perspective to understand reactions to both victims and perpetrators of vigilantism. In Chapter 3 we defined vigilantism as "a planned criminal act carried out by one or more private citizens in response to (the perceived threat of) a crime committed by one or more private citizens, targeting the (alleged) perpetrator(s) of that crime". In other words, after a criminal act takes place, someone takes the law into his or her own hands against the alleged perpetrator of that crime. To further disentangle the events that take place in a vigilantism situation, we presented the vigilantism event sequence. This sequence consists of three main events: the precipitating event, the formal response to the precipitating event, and the act of vigilantism itself. We will now integrate insights from the BJW literature to this chain of events, as can be seen in Figure 6.1. Each of the three events is followed by three BJW reactions. The various stages eventually result in the main outcome: public support for vigilantism (see rectangular frame in the diagram). In other words, support for vigilantism in our model consists of people's aversive state in response to the act of vigilantism and their subsequent use of cognitive strategies. As will be explained in more detail later on, the aversive state can for instance be assessed by measuring people's outrage toward the vigilante, as well as their feelings of empathy toward the vigilantism victim. Cognitive strategies can for example include blame and derogation of the vigilantism victim, as well as a desire for punishment of the vigilante.

The idea behind the presented sequence of events is that characteristics of one event can affect reactions to a subsequent event. In other words, it will be possible to make predictions about situational characteristics and their influence on BJW-reactions within the context of vigilantism.When the precipitating event is for instance particularly heinous, and the formal authorities do not respond to it at all, we can expect people to experience a relatively high aversive state. When this is followed by an act of vigilantism, this may function as a cognitive strategy ('justice' after all), thereby reducing the aversive state. Someone's aversive state can thus actually be envisioned as a type of 'liquid', of which the volume increases and decreases depending on the threat that is posed to one's belief in a just world and the use of cognitive and behavioral strategies.

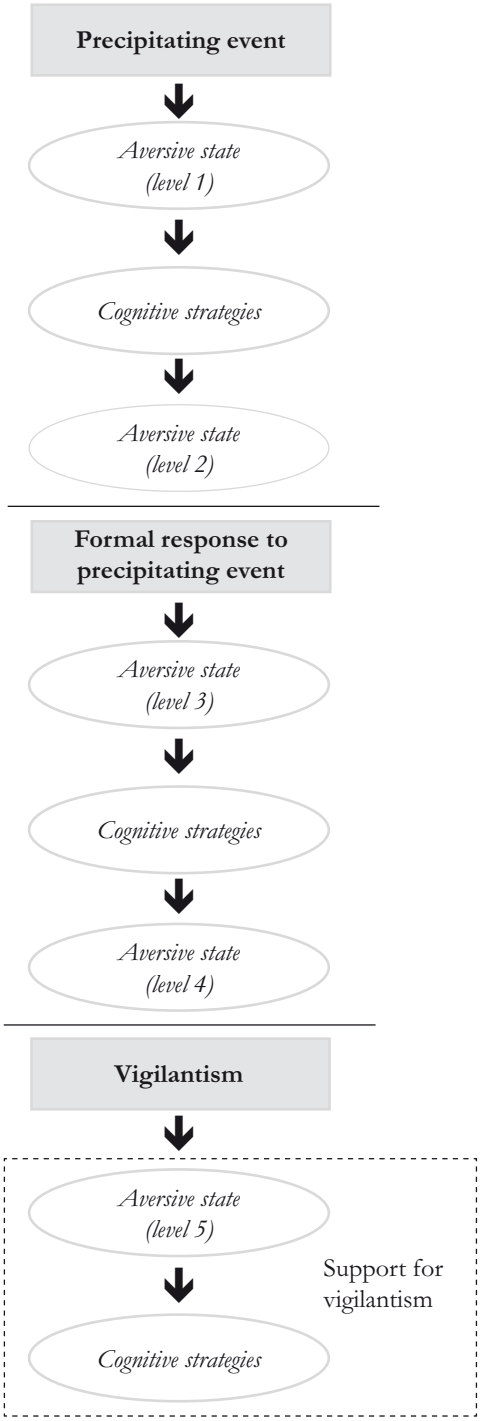

Figure 6.1 BJW vigilantism event sequence

Precipitating event

The first component of the BJW vigilantism event sequence is the precipitating event, which by definition can be any type of crime as long as a vigilantism act occurs in reaction to it. When people find out about this precipitating event, they can experience an aversive state. As can be seen in Figure 6.1, the aversive state starts at level 1, and people try to decrease it by applying cognitive strategies. After these strategies have been used, the aversive state will be at level 2. The more successfully the strategies are applied, the lower the resulting aversive state. The aversive state can also remain unchanged; this is true for all phases in the model. People can technically also use behavioral strategies, such as helping a victim, but we have not included this option in the current model. In real life, people tend to be informed about crimes through the media, which does not usually give them a chance to behaviorally interact with the actual victims or perpetrators.[22] They *can* use cognitive strategies, for instance by blaming the victim for his fate or by desiring punishment for the offender.

Formal response to precipitating event

The next step in the sequence occurs when people are told about the response of formal authorities (e.g. police or judges) to the precipitating event. This information can once again influence their aversive state (level 3). Finding out about the formal response can first of all *decrease* their aversive state, when the offender is for instance perceived to have been appropriately sentenced by a judge. Conversely, information about the legal response can also *increase* their aversive state. When an alleged offender is for instance not arrested or punished, this can further threaten rather than protect people's BJW. Research indeed suggests that when an offender is not punished, this can cause a threat to people's belief in a just world (Correia & Vala, 2003; Lodewijkx, Kersten, & Zomeren, 2008). A 'bad' person who does not suffer can threaten one's belief in a just world in a similar way as when a 'good' person does suffer. To deal with this, people will again consort to cognitive strategies, resulting in aversive state level 4. Presumably, those people who, for instance, mainly rely on a strategy of desiring punishment for the precipitating offender will be most affected by information about the lack of an 'appropriate' legal response.

Vigilantism

The next event in the vigilantism sequence is the vigilantism act itself. Finding out about the vigilantism act will result in aversive state level 5. The severity of the formal response to the precipitating offender will affect the aversive state in response to the act of vigilantism. When the offender is for instance acquitted by a judge, vigilantism can be seen as an alternative means to restore one's BJW: a replacement of the punishment that was supposed to be carried out by the criminal justice system. The precipitating offender 'gets what he deserves' by becoming a victim of vigilantism, thereby reinforcing the

22 We recognize that some citizens, such as Maarten 't Hart and Maurice de Hond in the Netherlands, do get publicly involved in cases of perceived injustice.

belief that 'bad things happen to bad people'. The fact that the punishment is carried out by a vigilante instead of by authorities may not be relevant from this perspective: it has been argued to be mostly the outcome (punishment) that matters.[23] The aversive state as a result of vigilantism is therefore likely to be relatively low. If, on the other hand, the precipitating offender did receive a 'proper' sentence, the aversive state at vigilantism is predicted to be relatively high. From this perspective, the victim of vigilantism does not get what he deserves: he was already punished by the authorities.

Another way in which a vigilantism act can lead to a relatively high aversive state is when it is considered disproportional to the original crime. There are presumably limits to the extent to which a vigilantism act is perceived as fair, despite certain situational circumstances in favor of the vigilante. So if an act of vigilantism lacks proportionality, it can result in a high aversive state, even when the formal response to the precipitating offender was weak or absent. This idea is supported by research on observers' judgments on revenge (Tripp, Bies, & Aquino, 2002). Tripp and associates argue that it is not the amount of harm itself that determines reactions, but the proportionality of the harm. Approval of revenge is said to depend on whether the consequences of the revenge act are proportional to the harm caused by the original harmdoer's act.

Whatever the height of the aversive state as a result of vigilantism (level 5) may be, people will apply cognitive strategies to lower it. It will probably be relatively easy to for instance blame and derogate the victim of vigilantism, as he is a former offender, which facilitates attributing his negative fate to his character and/or behavior. In line with this, the need to additionally consort to a desire for punishment for the vigilante, as an alternative strategy, will be relatively low. Some people might even find it unnecessary to punish the vigilante at all. This may explain why the prosecution of vigilantes can lead to public outrage.

The sequence can be expanded by adding information about aversive state level 6 (after applying the cognitive strategies), about the formal sentence of the vigilante, and so on. We nevertheless choose to end here, as our interest lies in understanding reactions to vigilantism itself: the last section of the current model.

6.6 Conclusion

Some vigilantism cases result in support for the vigilante and a lack of compassion for the victim. This can be taken as an indication that the victim of vigilantism is perceived to deserve his fate. Moreover, it is not uncommon for the prosecution of vigilantes to cause public outrage. This disagreement with the legal response to vigilantism can be interpreted as a sign that the public does not deem the vigilante deserving of punishment. In this chapter, we have argued that just-world theory (Lerner, 1965, 1980) can help us understand such reactions. According to just-world theory, people generally

23 Support for this idea was found in an American vignette study (Skitka & Houston, 2001). Perceived fairness of a defendant's fate (death) was solely determined by his guilt, and was not influenced by the procedure (vigilantism or capital punishment). See Chapter 2 for more details on this study.

have a need to believe in a just world. When confronted with evidence of the contrary, such as the suffering of someone innocent, they will experience an aversive state. They are subsequently motivated to reduce this aversive state through the use of cognitive and behavioral strategies.

During the sequence of events in a vigilantism situation, there are three main moments at which people can be confronted with a threat to their need to believe in a just world: the precipitating event, the formal response to the precipitating event, and the act of vigilantism. We argue that what is commonly referred to as support for vigilantism, actually consists of BJW reactions to events within the vigilantism event sequence. When someone is for instance not very upset about an act of vigilantism, this can be viewed as a form of support for vigilantism. Likewise, when someone blames the vigilantism victim for his fate, this can be seen as a cognitive strategy for dealing with the threat posed by the act of vigilantism, but also as a type of support for vigilantism. In other words, we propose that public reactions to vigilantism at least partially depend on the extent to which it is perceived as a threat to people's need to believe in a just world. Importantly, in line with the situation hypothesis, the amount of threat to BJW and subsequent reactions are expected to be influenced by features of the vigilantism situation itself. Situational characteristics from the typology (see Chapter 3) are predicted to affect how upset people are by an act of vigilantism, and to what extent they cognitively try to deal with the injustice. When the victim of vigilantism has for instance previously committed a particularly horrible crime, it will be relatively easier to blame and derogate him for his fate than in case of a minor misdemeanor.

In the next chapter we will explain how our application of just-world theory to the context of support for vigilantism can be tested in an experimental setting. A simplified version of the model will be operationalized in an empirical study to examine its use in predicting and explaining reactions to vigilantism. Characteristics of the vigilantism case will be varied in order to test the situation hypothesis. Respondents' BJW reactions to a specific case of vigilantism will be assessed by measuring their aversive state in response to vigilantism as well as their use of cognitive strategies to reduce this aversive state. These responses to an act of vigilantism will together form our measure of support for vigilantism.