Public support for Vigilantism

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7

Study design and pilot

7.1 Introduction

This chapter prepares us for a second empirical study, in which just-world theory will be used as a theoretical framework for studying public support for vigilantism. Earlier on we presented a vigilantism event sequence that consists of three main events: a precipitating crime, a formal response to the precipitating event, and vigilantism. In the previous chapter, we expanded the theoretical model with belief in a just world (BJW) reactions by adding a number of aversive states and uses of cognitive strategies. The next step is to empirically determine whether this model can help us to predict, measure and explain public support for vigilantism. With this goal in mind, we will present the design of an empirical study in the current chapter. The findings of the actual data collection are described in Chapter 8.

Some of the main components of the design were pretested in a pilot study. We will briefly report the results and implications of this study at the end of the chapter. In response to the pilot study, several adjustments were made to the original study design before carrying out the final data collection. The design as presented below is the final (adjusted) one.

7.2 BJW vigilantism event sequence – A simplified version

In an elaborate test of the BJW vigilantism event sequence model, participants would be presented with three main events, and all in-between aversive state levels and uses of cognitive strategies would be assessed. In practice, however, it is difficult to measure all of these responses without interfering with naturally occurring processes. If participants are for instance asked about the level of their aversive state at five different instances, this can influence their actual aversive state due to their increased awareness of it. The same is true for the cognitive strategies that are used to reduce aversive states: asking people to use these strategies overtly on three different occasions may affect the use of strategies itself. Another concern is that asking people about these techniques, especially about blaming or derogating a victim, will make responses vulnerable to social desirability bias. To deal with all of these issues, we simplified the model for our empirical study by combining some of the intermediate steps. The original model is presented in Figure 7.1, and can be compared to its simplified version in Figure 7.2. The components from the original model that are included in the simplified version have been shaded in both figures.

The first part of the original model remains intact in the adapted version. Respondents are presented with a precipitating event that is expected to induce an aversive state (level 1), which is subsequently assessed. We will also measure the extent to which respondents use cognitive strategies to reduce their aversive state. The phase of measuring the success of these strategies (aversive state level 2 in original model) is skipped. Next, subjects are presented with a vignette in which information about the formal response to the precipitating event and the subsequent act of vigilantism is combined. People's aversive state after finding out about the formal response (level 3

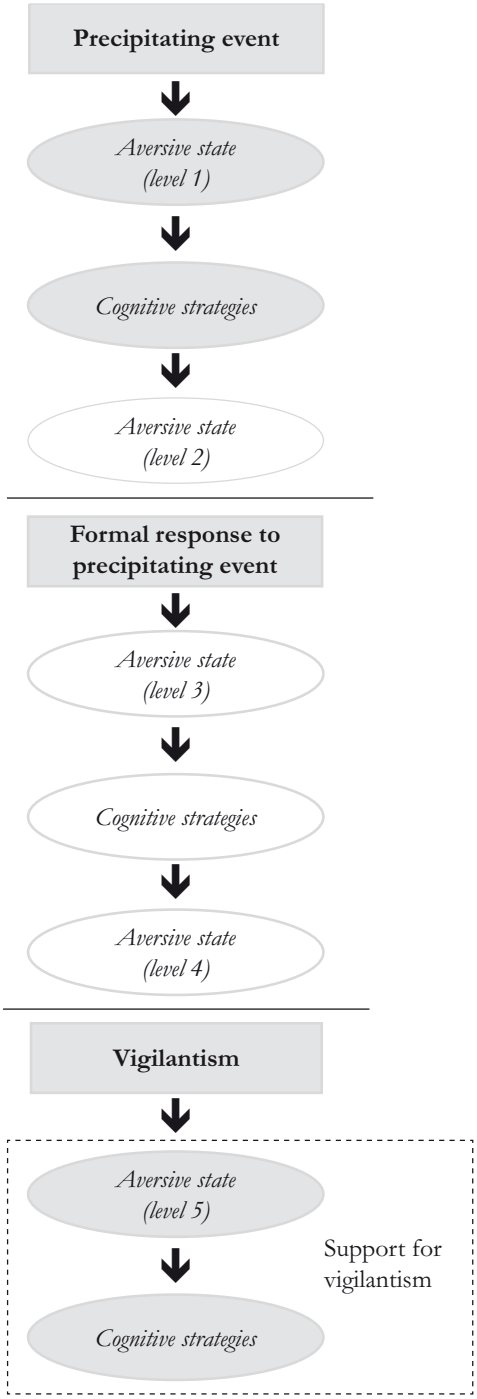

Figure 7.1 BJW vigilantism event sequence ***(original)***

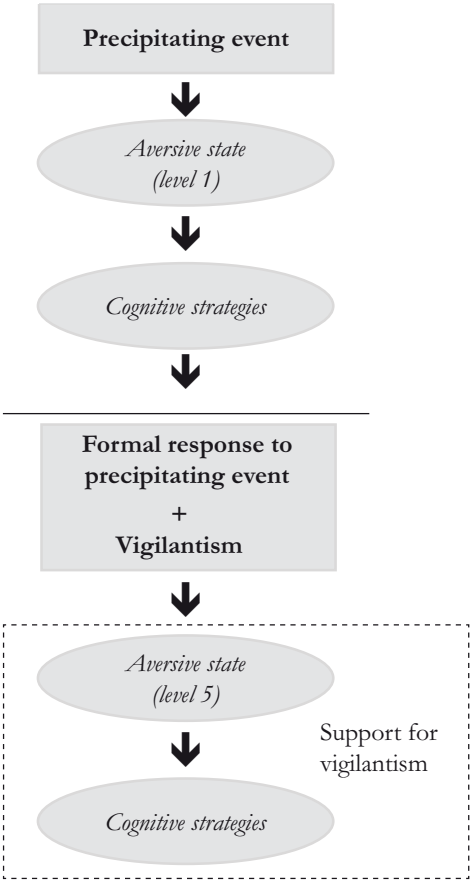

Figure 7.2 BJW vigilantism event sequence ***(simplified)***

in original model) is not measured, nor the subsequent use of strategies and its effect on their aversive state (level 4 in original model). The next measurement that takes place is people's aversive state at level 5, after the vigilantism act. Lastly, we again assess the extent to which respondents use cognitive strategies to reduce their aversive state, this time in response to vigilantism. These last two measures together constitute our assessment of support for vigilantism.

The first measures, i.e. aversive state (level 1) and the use of cognitive strategies after the first vignette, function as a manipulation check. Assessing people's response to the precipitating event gives an indication of the extent to which it evokes an aversive state. If our methodology is successful, people should experience an aversive state after reading about the precipitating event, and will be motivated to reduce it by applying cognitive strategies. We chose to include this in-between measure as it allows us to separate the aversive state after vigilantism from the one in response to the precipitating event. This differentiation makes it possible to test whether reactions to the first crime affect reactions further down the sequence.

7.3 The situation hypothesis and confidence hypothesis

Response patterns within the BJW vigilantism event sequence are expected to be similar for all respondents, but the level of responses is likely to vary between respondents. For instance, the description of a precipitating crime will probably induce an aversive state in most (if not all) people, but the extent to which it does is expected to differ between individuals. The central question is how these differences can be predicted. We propose that responses will be affected by factors related to the vigilantism situation as well as by attitudes (including confidence in the criminal justice system) of respondents themselves.

In correspondence with the *situation hypothesis*, predictions can be made using the vigilantism typology that was presented in Chapter 3. The characteristics that are identified in the typology are expected to affect aversive states as well as people's resulting use of cognitive strategies. Research for instance reveals the role of victim innocence: the less innocent a victim is perceived to be, the easier it is to blame and derogate him (Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2007; Hafer & Bègue, 2005). In the first part of the current study (Part I), two of the situational characteristics will be varied to examine their impact on reactions in the BJW vigilantism event sequence. The reasons for choosing these characteristics will be presented below.

In line with the *confidence hypothesis,* people's confidence in the criminal justice system is also expected to influence reactions to the vigilantism event sequence. In the second part of the study (Part II) we will therefore assess people's confidence, in addition to several other attitudes.

As will be described in more detail in the next chapter, all material was presented to respondents online. In order to reduce possible effects of the vignettes on the attitude measures, a time lapse of one month was maintained between the two parts of the

study. Thus, in Part I respondents were asked to read a number of vignettes and answer the corresponding questions. One month later, the same respondents were presented with a number of attitude measures in Part II. Participants were not told that Parts I and II belonged to the same study. Both parts are described in detail below.

7.4 Method – Part I

7.4.1 Design

In Part I of the study, vignettes are used to induce aversive states and subsequent applications of cognitive strategies. The design is between-subjects. Each respondent is presented with two vignettes that together present information about all three events from the BJW vigilantism event sequence. Vignette 1 describes the precipitating event, which is followed by a first set of questions. Participants are subsequently presented with Vignette 2, which describes the formal response to the precipitating crime and an act of vigilantism. Vignette 2 is followed by a second set of questions.

The contents of the vignettes vary in correspondence with the experimental variation of two situational characteristics. Experimental factor 1 is the *type of precipitating event*, which is described in Vignette 1 (three versions). Factor 2 is the *formal response to the precipitating event*, and is presented in Vignette 2 (four versions). Figure 7.3 shows the two characteristics within the vigilantism typology; they are both described in detail below.

7.4.2 Vignette 1: precipitating event

The first experimental factor is the *type of precipitating event*. By varying this first event in the BJW vigilantism event sequence, and comparing subsequent responses of participants, underlying theoretical assumptions about BJW processes can be tested. We can examine whether different precipitating crimes lead to different levels of aversive state, and whether this affects reactions to vigilantism down the line. We specifically decided to vary the *type* of precipitating event because research shows that crime type can have a major impact on how a crime situation and the people involved are judged by outsiders (e.g. Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Rossi et al., 1985; Warr, 1989).

The experimental manipulation was operationalized by constructing three versions of Vignette 1: (A) traffic aggression, (B) a pedestrian crash and (C) a sex offense. These three versions of the precipitating event are described below, after which we will elucidate the choices that we made in this regard. The corresponding vignettes can be found in Appendix 3; Appendix 4 provides their English translation.

In precipitating event vignette A, a 39-year old male cyclist (Alan) is cut off in traffic by a car driver (Dave).[24] Alan reacts to this by raising his fists to Dave, after which the driver purposely forces the cyclist off the road. This causes Alan to fall off his bicycle, resulting in a broken arm, a broken leg, bruised ribs and a concussion. He is taken to a

24 The variation in names is introduced here to make the different versions more easily distinguishable. In the original vignettes, each precipitating offender (and later vigilantism victim) was named Ruben, and each vigilante was named Frank. The precipitating crime victim in versions B and C was labeled 'nine-year old girl'.

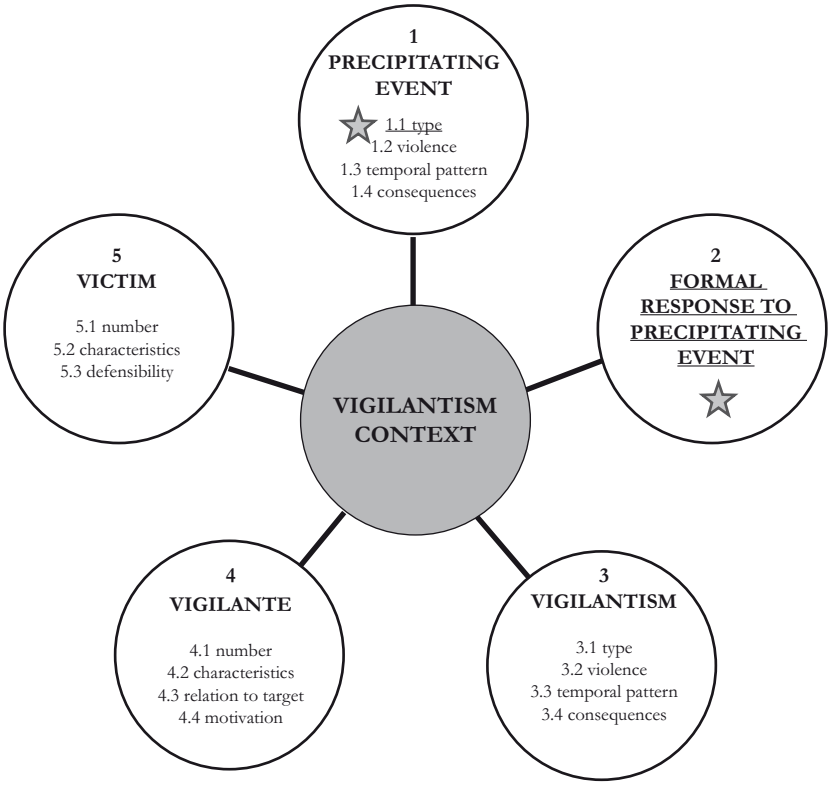

Figure 7.3 Experimental variation (underlined and starred)

hospital. Dave is apprehended by the police and found to have a blood-alcohol level of twice the legal limit.

Version B of the precipitating event vignette describes a 9-year old girl (Betty), who is hit by a speeding car while walking with her bicycle on a pedestrian crossing. The car driver (Ethan) is apprehended by the police and is found to be intoxicated at the same level as Dave in version A. Betty's injuries are exactly the same as those suffered by Alan in version A, and she is also taken to a hospital.

Precipitating event vignette C depicts a sex offense against a child. The victim is a 9-year old girl (Cynthia) who is pulled off her bicycle while on her way home from school. After she falls to the ground, a man (Fred) sexually assaults her. In the struggle that follows, Cynthia is able to get away, and Fred is later apprehended by the police.

All three precipitating event vignettes are intended to induce a considerable aversive state in our respondents. In line with recommendations from the literature on stimulus impact (Hafer & Bègue, 2005), we describe acts that are obviously criminal and which have serious consequences for the victims. The injuries are nevertheless not fatal in order to avoid ceiling effects in the responses. We additionally portray the offenders as being clearly responsible for their act. Intoxication of the drivers is for instance added

to emphasize the blameworthiness of the offenders in the first two versions. In version A we also make it clear that the driver purposely forces the cyclist off the road. The particular nature of the third offense, namely a sex crime by an adult against a child, is also expected to bring about a clear perception of responsibility. We also aim to emphasize the innocence of the victims, for instance by including young girls in two of the vignettes, and by having one of them get hit on a cross walk. The innocence of the victims is expected to make it relatively difficult to blame or derogate them (see Correia et al., 2007), which will likely cause respondents to mostly rely on a punishment desire strategy. This will be further addressed in the next section.

Apart from the type of precipitating event, details are held constant between the three vignettes where possible in order to avoid interference with the experimental manipulation. Such details include the age, gender and place of residence of the precipitating offender, and the time of day and location of the incident. However, it is challenging to vary crime type without varying other situational aspects. The sex offender is for instance not intoxicated, while the two traffic offenders are. Likewise, the sex offense victim does not suffer the same physical consequences as the other two victims. The victims themselves also differ, as two of them are 9-year old girls, while the third one is an adult male. We will discuss possible implications of these differences in the discussion section.

All vignettes were made as realistic as possible by making them appear like articles from a popular Dutch news website: www.nu.nl.[25] By using the same format, font type and colors, the articles were constructed to look as genuine as possible (see Appendix 3). Moreover, a real crime scene picture from the website was added to Vignette 1 to make the precipitating event more easily imaginable, with the intention of increasing the resulting aversive state.[26] Each precipitating event vignette contains the same picture of a damaged bicycle lying in a grassy area between a road and a bicycle path. The picture matches all three precipitating events, as they all involve a bicycle.

7.4.3 Vignette 2: sentence + vigilantism

The second experimental factor concerns the formal response to the precipitating event, which is presented in Vignette 2. We operationalized this manipulation by varying the *sentence for the precipitating offender*, as passed by a criminal judge. We thus chose to vary the second main event of the BJW vigilantism event sequence. This once again allows us to test whether variation in one of the events of the chain affects reactions further down. Instead of varying the police response, as we did in our first study, we now decided to focus on formal sentencing. The public tends to feel strong about sentencing, and often perceives it to be too lenient (e.g. De Keijser et al., 2007, regarding the Dutch). We therefore expect that a variation in sentencing might affect how people feel about a subsequent act of vigilantism. In our study, we specify four versions of

25 Similarly, in a study on senseless violence and BJW in the Netherlands, respondents were told that a fictitious newspaper article originated from this same website (Van Zomeren & Lodewijkx, 2009).

26 The editors of www.nu.nl gave written permission to use the nu.nl format and picture, provided that subjects would be informed about the fictitious nature of the articles. A disclaimer was given at the end of Part I.

the precipitating offender's sentence: acquittal, a lenient sentence, a normal sentence and a severe sentence (see Table 7.1).[27] In the sex offense condition, there are only two sentencing variations, a lenient and a severe one, which differ slightly from the other sentences. The reason for this exception will be provided in Section 7.6.2, in our discussion of the pilot study.

Table 7.1 Sentences for the precipitating offender (experimental factor 2) [28]

Version	Sentencing level	
A1 B1	acquittal	
A2 B2	lenient:	100 euro fine 2 months suspended driver's license
A3 B3	normal:	180 hours community service 2 months suspended prison sentence 1 year suspended driver's license
A4 B4	severe:	240 hours community service 4 months suspended prison sentence 2 years suspended driver's license
C2	lenient:	40 hours community service 100 euro compensation to victim
C4	severe:	240 hours community service 4 months suspended prison sentence 400 euro compensation to victim

In the acquittal version, the precipitating offender is acquitted by the judge due to a technicality (the wrong date) in the summons. Importantly, it is made clear that the precipitating offender is not released because of a lack of evidence: he is found guilty of the crime. In order to reinforce the suggestion of a lenient, normal or severe sentence, the vignettes also report what sentence the Public Prosecutor had demanded for the precipitating offender. In the normal sentence conditions, the sentence is said to match the prosecutor's demand. In case of the lenient and severe sentences, the demand of the Public Prosecution is 180 hours of community service, a two-month suspended prison sentence and a suspended driver's license for one year. This demand thus equals the sentence given in the normal sentencing condition. In the sex crime versions, the demanded sentence of the Public Prosecution is 180 hours of community service, a two-month suspended prison sentence and 250 euro compensation to the victim.

27 The version labels in Table 7.1, such as 'A1', refer to the versions that are presented in Table 7.2.

28 We consulted a Dutch criminal judge to get an indication of realistic sentences in the given criminal cases.

All versions of Vignette 2 start off with a description of the sentence passed by the judge to the precipitating offender. Following this information, the vignette reports that the sentenced precipitating offender has been attacked by a vigilante. The *vigilantism act* is identical in all conditions: the vigilante goes to the house of the precipitating offender and throws a brick through the front window. Following this, the precipitating offender walks out his front door and gets beaten up by the vigilante. The resulting injuries of the vigilantism victim (i.e. the precipitating offender) are two broken teeth, a broken nose and contusions. This act of vigilantism matches our definition (cf. Chapter 3). The violence does not qualify as self-defense or citizen's arrest, as it is not a reaction to an immediate threat.

Table 7.2 provides a concise overview of the ten experimental conditions. The three versions of the precipitating event are presented on the left (A, B and C). The ten versions of the corresponding vigilantism vignettes are located on the right section of the table, and are labeled A1 – A4, B1 – B4, C2 and C4.

Table 7.2 Overview of Vignettes 1 and 2 and the corresponding experimental versions

Vignette 1: precipitating event				**Vignette 2: sentence + vigilantism**				
	Precipitating event	Victim	Offender	Precipitating offender's sentence		Vigilantism	Offender *(vigilante)*	Victim
A	Traffic aggression	Alan	Dave	**A1** **A2** **A3** **A4**	acquittal lenient normal severe	vandalism & assault	Alan	Dave
B	Pedestrian crash	Betty	Ethan	**B1** **B2** **B3** **B4**	acquittal lenient normal severe	vandalism & assault	George	Ethan
C	Sex offense	Cathy	Fred	**C2** **C4**	lenient severe	vandalism & assault	Henry	Fred

The identity of the vigilante differs slightly between the conditions due to differences in the precipitating event. In the vigilantism vignettes that follow precipitating event vignette A, the victim of traffic aggression (Alan) consorts to vigilantism against the traffic aggression offender (Dave). By allowing four months between the occurrence of the precipitating crime and the vigilantism act, it is made plausible that Alan recovered sufficiently from his injuries to be able to use violence. In the vignettes that relate to precipitating event B (pedestrian crash), the vigilante (George) is the *father* of the precipitating crime victim: the young girl (Betty) who was hit as a pedestrian. In other words, not the victim of the precipitating event but her father becomes the vigilante. The victim of vigilantism is once again the precipitating offender: the driver (Dave) who drove into Betty on the cross walk. In the C versions, the vigilante (Henry) is also the father of the precipitating crime victim (Cathy): he attacks the sex offender (Fred).

7.4.4 Control groups

Even though our operationalizion allows us to partially deal with the concern of overtly asking about aversive states and uses of cognitive strategies, interference with some of these BJW processes is still possible. After all, people's aversive state and their use of cognitive strategies are still assessed at two different instances. Additionally, in real life the public will usually be informed about a vigilantism case by the media, who will commonly present information about a vigilantism case all at once.[29] The aversive states and resultant uses of cognitive strategies in that case occur in a natural fashion, without being interrupted by questionnaire items in between. We therefore aimed to a) check for possible interference and b) test whether the vignette study is a good replication of the processes that would occur in a real setting. To this end, control groups were created for experimental conditions B2 (pedestrian crash + lenient sentence) and C2 (sex offense and lenient sentence). In the two control conditions, called B2X and C2X, respondents are presented with just one vignette in which all information about the precipitating event, the precipitating offender's sentence and the vigilantism act is combined. These respondents only answer questions after having been exposed to all of the information, and are therefore not interrupted by in-between measures of aversive states or uses of cognitive strategies. They are presented with the same set of questions that respondents in the experimental conditions receive after reading Vignette 2. Responses will be compared between B2 and B2X, and between C2 and C2X. The more similar the responses in the control conditions are to those in the experimental conditions, the higher the validity of the experimental manipulation. Appendix 3 provides an example of a control condition vignette.

7.4.5 Measures

In this section we describe the survey items that are used to measure the various BJW reactions to the vignettes. After reading Vignette 1, respondents are presented with a set of 21 items about the precipitating event (see Appendix 5). Several of these items are similar to those used in our first empirical study to measure support. To phrase the current items as neutrally as possible, the persons in the vignette are referred to by their names instead of labeling them as 'victims' or 'perpetrators'. Unless otherwise specified, respondents indicate their agreement with the items on a 7-point scale (1 = fully disagree; 7 = fully agree).

The first nine items aim to measure respondents' aversive state due to the precipitating event. The literature is ambiguous regarding the concept of aversive state and how it can be assessed. Given that we intend to get an indication of respondents' emotional reactions to the precipitating crime, we decided to present items about moral outrage, empathy with the victim and sympathy for the offender. In past research, similar emotions have been measured to assess the impact of a threat to BJW (e.g. Cook, 2006; Hagedoorn et al., 2002; Lodewijkx, De Kwaadsteniet, & Nijstad, 2005).

29 The media are likely to report about vigilantism while also providing information about the precipitating event and other situational aspects, because it is precisely this context which makes it an act of vigilantism.

We subsequently measure to what extent subjects apply cognitive strategies to deal with their aversive state. The order in which these cognitive strategies are presented is not varied, as previous research shows that the choice for strategies does not depend on whichever one is first available (Haynes & Olson, 2006). We first present three items that concern derogation of the victim. Similarly to what has been done in the literature (e.g. Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2001), people are for instance asked to indicate how 'stupid' the precipitating crime victim is. In the subsequent three items, people are asked to indicate to what extent the precipitating offender and the victim are each to blame for what happened on a 7-point scale: 1 = not to blame; 7 = completely to blame. By including a blame assessment of both the victim and the offender, as has been recommended in the literature (Maes, 1994), we measure both absolute and relative perceptions of blame.

Respondents are next presented with five items that measure their desire for punishment of the precipitating offender. They first respond to three items about the extent to which the criminal justice system should punish the offender for his act (see Appendix 5). Respondents are additionally given a more direct question about whether he deserves to be punished (yes or no). In order to get an indication of the severity of the sanction that respondents have in mind, they are also asked to express their desired punishment in penalty points (0 = no points; 20 = maximum points).

The first set of questions is followed by a presentation of Vignette 2, which describes the formal sentence for the precipitating offender and the act of vigilantism. Respondents are subsequently asked to respond to a set of 24 items (see Appendix 5). These items are almost identical to the ones posed in relation to Vignette 1, except that they are now associated with different acts and actors. Blaming the victim, for instance, now concerns the victim of vigilantism (instead of the precipitating crime victim). The same is true for the items about deserved punishment for the perpetrator (now the vigilante instead of the intoxicated drivers or the sex offender). The actors in the vignette are again referred to by their names rather than by their 'role' as a victim or perpetrator. A new item is included about seeing the vigilante as a victim in this situation, rather than a perpetrator. Just like in the first set of questions, two additional items ask respondents to indicate relative blame of the (vigilantism) victim and the perpetrator (the vigilante). Next, participants indicate whether the perpetrator (the vigilante) deserves punishment (yes or no) and how many penalty points they consider appropriate.

Lastly, we assess whether respondents see the vigilantism act as an appropriate replacement of a formal sentence. In other words, do they feel that the precipitating offender has been punished sufficiently by the vigilante, thereby making formal punishment unnecessary? To this end, respondents are first reminded of the number of penalty points that they gave the *precipitating offender* after reading Vignette 1. They are subsequently asked to indicate whether they, after having read about vigilantism, now want to give the precipitating offender the same punishment as before, more, less or none at all. After answering the last question, participants are informed about the fictitious nature of the newspaper articles.

7.4.6 General predictions

We will now present some of our general expectations. More detailed hypotheses are formulated in Chapter 8, after constructing the specific dependent variables. We will refer to the original model so that all intermediate effects can be discussed. Not all of these predictions can be tested directly because we use a simplified model in the study, as explained in Section 7.2. We will only assess level 1 and 5 of people's aversive state, and the corresponding uses of cognitive strategies.

Based on the original model (see Figure 7.4), we first predict that the precipitating event will lead to an aversive state (level 1), which people will be motivated to reduce through cognitive strategies to reach level 2. Following this, people find out about the formal sentence for the precipitating offender. We expect that the more severe this formal sentence is considered to be, the more their aversive state will be further reduced (from level 2 to 3). After all, one way of restoring justice is by punishing the person who is responsible for the victimization. Moreover, making the precipitating event victims in Vignette 1 appear innocent is meant to make it more difficult for respondents to apply the cognitive techniques of blame and derogation. In an attempt to protect their BJW they are thus expected to mostly rely on the cognitive strategy of assigning punishment to the precipitating offender.[30] If they then go on to read that the precipitating offender was appropriately sentenced by a judge, this should help them to further reduce their aversive state. Alternatively, if people are informed that the precipitating offender is acquitted or sentenced leniently, their aversive state will increase.

In addition to finding out about the precipitating offender's sentence, respondents are informed that he has become the victim of a vigilantism act. We predict that the more severely the precipitating offender is sentenced by the criminal justice system prior to becoming a victim of vigilantism, the more of a threat vigilantism will pose to people's BJW, and the higher the aversive state at level 5 will be. After all, if the precipitating offender was formally sentenced, he already had to 'pay' duly for his crime, making his punishment as carried out by the vigilante seem less justifiable.

Of the strategies that will be used to reduce aversive state level 5, blame and derogation will be the most difficult when the precipitating offender was already sentenced severely by a judge. As a result, respondents in those cases will rely more on the strategy of desiring punishment for the vigilante. Alternatively, if the precipitating offender was acquitted before being attacked by a vigilante, it will be easier to blame and derogate him for his fate. In fact, vigilantism may have a smaller impact on the aversive state if the act is perceived as a suitable replacement for the lack of a formal sentence.

30 This is thus a *cognitive* strategy, as people express their wish for the offender to be punished, rather than actually (*behaviorally*) punishing him. See Chapter 6 for a more detailed explanation of this distinction.

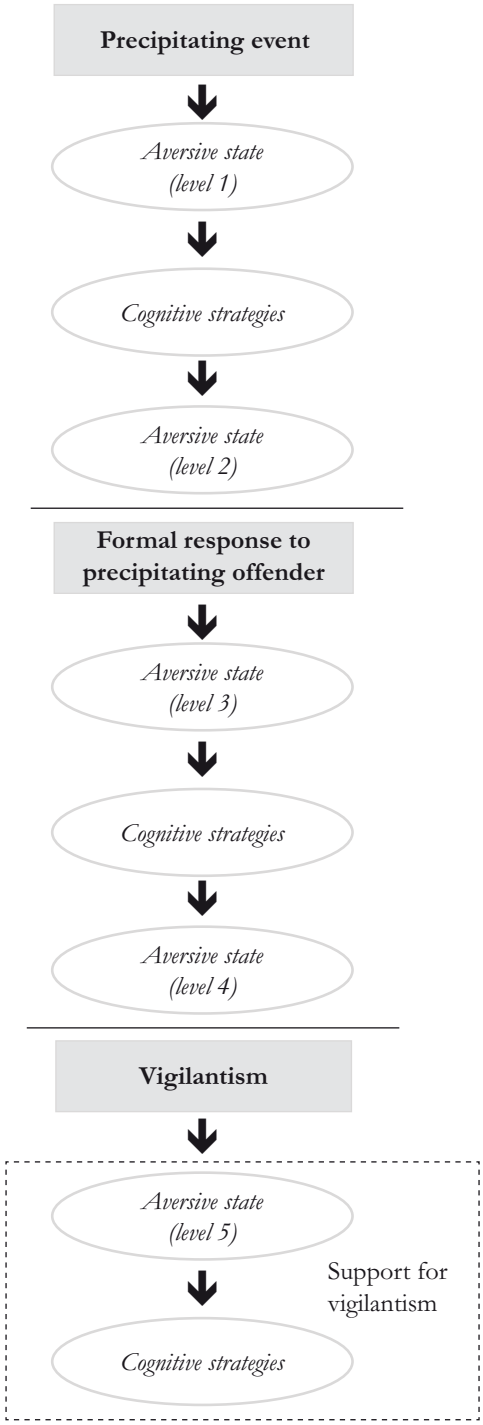

Figure 7.4 BJW vigilantism event sequence (original)

7.5 Method – Part II

One month after responding to questions about the vignettes (Part I), the same participants were requested to participate in another survey (Part II). This part of the study consists of 67 items intended to measure: a) confidence in the criminal justice system, b) general concern over crime, c) general support for vigilantism and d) belief in a just world for others (BJW-O). These four attitudes are discussed in further detail below. All items are evaluated on a 7-point scale that ranges from 1 (fully disagree) to 7 (fully agree). To control for possible order effects, the presentation order of the attitude question sets was varied.[31]

Confidence in the criminal justice system

One of the main aims of our research is to study the influence of confidence in the criminal justice system, aside from situational characteristics, on public support for vigilantism. To this end, we developed an integrated measurement tool of confidence (see Chapter 4). The main theoretical and empirical distinctions that were presented are between procedural justice and effectiveness, and between various criminal justice agencies. In our first vignette study, as described in Chapter 5, we employed a 27-item version of the tool. For the current study, we used 44 items for the measurement of confidence (see Appendix 6). One of the reasons for using this more elaborate measure is that we wanted to present more items on the overall criminal justice system than was done in the previous version. Additionally, we want to achieve a better balance between items about effectiveness and those on procedural justice. The resulting items are evenly divided over police, the prosecutors, judges and the overall criminal justice system.[32] Respondents who are not familiar with the tasks of the criminal court are given the option to click on a pop-up screen for more information (see Appendix 6).

General concern over crime

Four items were used to measure general concern over crime (GCC) (De Keijser et al., 2007). In our first vignette study (Chapter 5), people who were more worried about crime were found to be more supportive of vigilantism. To examine whether this is also the case in the current sample and study, four items on GCC were included in the questionnaire (see Appendix 7). Three of these items were also used in our previous study; an extra one was added in order to reach a higher internal consistency. The GCC items were mixed in with the 44 items on confidence in the criminal justice system, as the contents are similar. This should additionally help to reduce response pattern bias, as the GCC items are worded in a different direction than most of the confidence items.

31 Half of the respondents first responded to the confidence items (including the GCC items), followed by BJW-O items, and lastly the items on general support for vigilantism. The other half received this order in reverse.

32 Respondents were presented with nine confidence items at a time, consisting of three items about one criminal justice agency (e.g. police), followed by three items about another agency, and so on. Within these sets, we also mixed the effectiveness and procedural justice items as much as possible.

General support for vigilantism
People's reactions to a specific case of vigilantism (such as in a vignette) is expected to be influenced by how they view vigilantism in general. Eight items that aim to measure general support for vigilantism were therefore included (see Appendix 7). We decided to present a mix of items that touch upon various aspects of support for vigilantism, including the desire to prosecute vigilantes as well as approval of vigilantism. One of the items stems from a Dutch study (Ter Voert, 1997); the others are new.

Belief in a just world for others
Research suggests that people tend to differ in the extent to which they believe in a just world (see Chapter 6). We expect that the individual level of belief in a just world, particularly belief in a just world for others (BJW-O), will influence reactions to vigilantism in the BJW vigilantism event sequence. This scale has been associated with punitive attitudes and harsh reactions to the suffering of others (Sutton & Douglas, 2005). We constructed a BJW-O scale based on a Dutch translation (Lodewijkx, De Kwaadsteniet, Zomeren, & Petterson, 2005) of the original Belief in a Just World for Self (BJW-S) scale (Lipkus et al., 1996). As the reliability of the Dutch BJW-S scale was modest ($\alpha = 0.63$), we added three new items to the BJW-O measure. The final set of items can be found in Appendix 7.

7.6 Pilot study

The original set-up of the study was tested in a pilot study; the set-up that was described in the previous sections is the final set-up. In the next sections, the goals and main findings of the pilot study are presented. For current purposes, only those aspects of the pilot study that were relevant for choices about the final set-up of the final study are addressed. We therefore refrain from a detailed discussion of the hypotheses and findings.

7.6.1 Goals

The purpose of the pilot study was to pretest four main aspects of the study design. First, the reliability of the measures was examined. Although many of the vignette-related items were also used in our previous vignette study, there are also novel items related to just-world theory. The pilot was used to test these new items, in combination with the ones that were used before. Confidence in the criminal justice system and general concern over crime were not measured in the pilot study, as they were already tested in our first study (see Chapter 5).

A second goal of the pilot study was to check whether the newspaper article vignettes, presented in the www.nu.nl format, are realistic and severe enough to induce aversive states in our respondents and a subsequent use of cognitive strategies. Furthermore, we were able to test whether the aversive state resulting from reading the first vignette affects reactions to the second vignette. The pilot also made it possible to observe the

effects of adding a picture to Vignette 1. A picture of the crime scene was expected to make the precipitating crime more easily imaginable, leading to a higher aversive state. To test this, a no-picture variation was included in the pilot study for two of the conditions (B + B1; B + B3). This way it could also be ensured that the picture was not too shocking, resulting in missing answers or a respondent drop-out.

The pilot study also provided a chance to test the effects of the main experimental manipulations. The first experimental factor, type of precipitating event, had two variations in the pilot study: version A (traffic aggression) and version B (pedestrian crash). Version C was created only after the pilot study, as will be detailed in the next section. The effects of the second experimental factor (precipitating offender's sentence) on reactions to vigilantism were also pretested. To keep the pilot feasible, we decided against operationalizing all four sentencing types for Vignette 2. Table 7.3 gives an overview of the vignettes that were selected for the pilot study, and the respondent distribution. For version A, the acquittal, lenient and severe sentences were included; for version B the normal sentence and acquittal. Each of the four sentences was therefore incorporated at least once. One of the sentences (acquittal) was operationalized in both versions A and B, so that the effect of the precipitating event on support for vigilantism could be compared while holding the sentence constant.

The pilot study was furthermore used to test whether measuring people's aversive state and threat-reducing strategies on two occasions interferes with natural processes. One group of respondents was therefore presented with a control vignette (B2X), as described above in Section 7.4.4, in which all information was combined and followed by questions about the vigilantism act only.

Table 7.3 Selected vignettes (shaded) and respondent distribution

Version	Type of precipitating event	Precipitating offender sentence	N
Experimental vignettes			
A + A1	Traffic aggression	acquittal	40
A + A2	Traffic aggression	lenient	43
A + A3	Traffic aggression	normal	
A + A4	Traffic aggression	severe	42
B + B1	Pedestrian crash	acquittal	41
B + B1 (no picture)	Pedestrian crash	acquittal	42
B + B2	Pedestrian crash	lenient	
B + B3	Pedestrian crash	normal	44
B + B3 (no picture)	Pedestrian crash	normal	40
B + B4	Pedestrian crash	severe	
Control vignette			
B2X	Traffic aggression	lenient	42
Total			**334**

7.6.2 Data, results, implications

The sample for the pilot study consisted of 334 bachelor students who attended lectures at various departments of VU University Amsterdam in June 2009.[33] The mean age was 21 years; 40 percent of the sample was male. They were randomly allocated to one of the eight conditions.

Measures

The items measuring reactions to the precipitating event all formed reliable scales, ranging from .59 to .80 (Cronbach's α). The lowest Cronbach's α (.59) was found for the outrage at the precipitating offender, so an extra item was added to this set in the final study. The scales measuring reactions to vigilantism were also reliable, as they ranged from Cronbach's α = .80 to .86. The two piloted attitude scales, BJW-O (Cronbach's α = .84) and general support for vigilantism (Cronbach's α = 79), were also reliable and judged suitable for further use.

Reactions to Vignette 1

Both types of precipitating events resulted in high levels of outrage and victim empathy among our respondents. This suggests that the fictitious newspaper articles successfully induced an aversive state. Additionally, respondents were found to apply cognitive strategies in all conditions, with the expected preference for the punishment desire technique. This suggests that the victims were indeed perceived as innocent and that it was difficult to blame and derogate them. The presence or absence of a picture (in version B) did not affect these responses. As we deem that the picture at least adds to the credibility of the article, it was included for all the precipitating event vignettes in the final study (see Chapter 8).

Reactions to Vignette 2

In response to all versions of Vignette 2, respondents expressed outrage at vigilantism as well as empathy with its victim, albeit less than in the case of the precipitating event (Vignette 1). This matches our predictions. Blame and derogation was used more than was the case with the precipitating event vignette. This was also expected, as the victim of vigilantism is easier to blame and derogate due to his previous role as an offender. The experimental manipulation in the vigilantism vignettes did not affect the dependent variables as strongly as predicted. The sentence of the precipitating offender (experimental factor 2) did for instance influence outrage at vigilantism, as well as blame and derogation, but only in response to the traffic aggression precipitating event (A), and only when comparing the lenient sentence with the severe one. Furthermore, there were no effects on empathy with the victim of vigilantism in any of the conditions. In response to the vigilantism vignettes following version B (pedestrian crash), none of the dependent variables differed between the two sentencing variations (acquittal and

33 We would like to thank the VU University students who participated in this study, as well as the teachers who gave us permission to approach the students during their lectures.

normal). One explanation for these results is that differences between the sentences of the precipitating offender were not large enough. For the main study we therefore increased the sentences and made them more distinguishable from each other.[34]

A surprising finding is that outrage at vigilantism was relatively high in all conditions, even if the precipitating offender had previously been acquitted by the judge. A conceivable explanation for this is that the precipitating offense was not experienced as severe enough to justify a subsequent vigilantism act. To test whether this is the case, an extra precipitating crime was included in the main study that tends to evoke very emotional reactions: the sexual assault of a child (version C). Vigilantism in response to such a heinous crime was expected to lead to less outrage at the vigilante. To test this prediction in combination with the other experimental manipulation, both a lenient and a severe sentence condition were included in the main study. Only two out of four sentences were operationalized, as the extra precipitating event was mainly meant as an extra check of the influence of BJW responses to the precipitating event on support for vigilantism. It should be noted that it was not possible to present the exact same sentences as those given to the other two precipitating offenders, as a suspended driver's license was for instance not applicable for a sex offender. We nevertheless tried to make the severity of the sentencing levels as comparable as possible.

Control group

A comparison of the control condition (B2X) with its experimental counterpart (B2) revealed no differences for any of the reactions to vigilantism between those conditions. This suggests that our study design did not interfere with the naturally occurring BJW processes. To check for this in the main study, control groups were included there too.

7.7 Conclusion

In this chapter we presented a simplified BJW vigilantism event sequence, and subsequently operationalized it in an empirical study. We introduced a quasi-experimental design with two manipulations: the type of precipitating event and the formal sentence for the precipitating offender. We additionally presented the measures related to the vignettes in Part I of the study. Support for vigilantism was operationalized by measuring emotional reactions to vigilantism (e.g. outrage), the use of blame and derogation techniques (e.g. blaming the vigilantism victim), as well as desired punishment for the vigilante. We also introduced the attitude measures that make up Part II of the study, including an assessment of confidence in the criminal justice system.

After explaining the study design, we conducted a pilot study to pretest some of the main components. All in all, the findings of this pilot study suggest that our study design is suitable for current purposes. After making a few minor adjustments, the final study was carried out. In the next chapter we will present the sample, data collection and findings.

34 The sentences that are presented in Table 7.1, and the corresponding vignettes in Appendix 3, are those that were used in the final study (Chapter 8).