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Public support for Vigilantism

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Discussion

Meanwhile populist politicians pander to retaliatory instincts by threatening to publish names and addresses of ex-offenders, to force ex-offenders to reveal old criminal records, even to license vigilantes in the form of private security guards - all in order 'to hand justice back to the people'. What they do not appear to appreciate is that all of this makes the justification for the criminal law less stable, not more so. For if the criminal law cannot successfully displace retaliation against wrong-doers, but instead collaborates with it, then a central pillar of its justification has collapsed... That victims do not try, convict, sentence, or punish criminal offenders, and have no official part in the trial, conviction, sentencing, and punishment of criminal offenders, is not an accident of procedural history. It is, on the contrary, one of the main objects of the whole exercise.

(Gardner, 1998, pp. 51-52)

9.1 Introduction

After having been missing for a week in March of 2010, a Dutch girl named Milly was found dead in the backyard of a policeman who lived across the street from her (“Milly Boele dood gevonden,” 2010). Shortly after her death, thousands of people participated in a silent march in remembrance of Milly, and a few weeks later more than 22.000 messages had been left on a condolences website (“Massale belangstelling stille tocht Milly,” 2010). Even complete strangers expressed their sincere sympathy with Milly’s family, showed their outrage at her death, and called for a severe punishment of her alleged murderer.

Crimes can evoke a whole range of emotional reactions, of which a common one is to call for punishment of the offender (Tyler & Smith, 1995). Wanting to punish those who do harm appears to be a universal, intuitive response. This is nevertheless not always the case in situations of vigilantism. There exist numerous examples of public outrage when vigilantes are prosecuted and sentenced for their crimes. Rather than applauding the criminal justice response to vigilantism, some citizens show admiration for the vigilantes and express the wish that they go unpunished. At first glance, such public support for vigilantism thus seems inconsistent with common reactions to crime. However, as we have shown in this thesis, this is not necessarily the case. People do not express support for vigilantism because they appreciate vigilante crime, but because the vigilante made sure that another offender ‘got what he deserved’. In other words, support for vigilantism can match the idea of wanting to punish wrongdoers. It concerns endorsement of a wrongdoer’s punishment as carried out by a vigilante instead of by the criminal justice system, or in addition to it. And if such an act of vigilantism is not seen as wrongful, it is comprehensible that the public does not always find it necessary to prosecute the vigilante for his crime.

Support for vigilantism is an intriguing topic, as it can potentially have considerable consequences for the functioning and legitimacy of the criminal justice system. After all, it concerns support for those who deal with crime in spite of the criminal law. What do such reactions tell us about the perceived legitimacy of the formal ways of handling crime? Do people support vigilantism because they have lost their faith in the criminal justice system? Despite its relevance, support for vigilantism has been an understudied subject in the criminological literature. Not much is known about why some citizens express support for those who take the law into their own hands, or whether it reveals anything about their views of the criminal justice system. Furthermore, the meaning of ‘supporting’ vigilantism has remained ambiguous up to now. What does it mean to support a vigilante? Does it imply complete approbation of his or her behavior? By answering these and other questions in the current study, we aim to reach a better understanding of support for vigilantism.

Two theoretical views on determinants of support for vigilantism are central to this thesis: the *confidence hypothesis* and the *situation hypothesis*. The former states that support for vigilantism is caused by a lack (or low level) of confidence in the criminal justice system. As vigilantes deal with crime in spite of the law, it is assumed that their ‘supporters’ are

also not keen of the justice system. Alternatively, the situation hypothesis focuses on the influence of situational characteristics on support for vigilantism. In other words, aspects of the situation surrounding an act of vigilantism are assumed to affect public reactions to it. One of the main contributions of this thesis is that both hypotheses are tested in conjunction, which (to our knowledge) has not been done before.

The main components of the thesis are reiterated below, including a brief summary of the findings of the two empirical studies that were carried out. This is followed by a discussion of implications and methodological considerations. We conclude the chapter by offering suggestions for future research on public support for vigilantism.

9.2 Summary

We reviewed the literature on support for vigilantism in Chapter 2 to see whether we could find any empirical evidence to corroborate the confidence and situational hypothesis. The methodology of most studies was limited, but the findings did provide some evidence for both hypotheses. However, none of the described studies investigated the role of confidence and situational characteristics jointly. In order to reliably assess their absolute and *relative* impact on support for vigilantism, we developed new measurement tools and used them to test both hypotheses in our own research.

Measuring support for vigilantism

The literature review in Chapter 2 additionally provided us with useful insights regarding operationalizations of support for vigilantism. Notably, none of the described studies asked people directly whether they support vigilantism or not. Instead, some studies presented respondents with items about the justifiability of vigilantism, while others for instance focused on sympathy with the victim or blameworthiness of the vigilante. We concluded that support is a multifaceted construct which can only be measured reliably using multiple-item measures. In our empirical studies, as further discussed below, we therefore introduced new measures of support that integrate a variety of reactions to vigilantism.

Defining vigilantism

Chapter 3 was dedicated to the conceptualization of vigilantism. Our literature review shows that there is no consensus on what vigilantism constitutes, as the term is used to describe a large variety of behaviors. In order to conduct meaningful research on support for vigilantism, a clear definition of vigilantism is indispensable. We therefore provided the following definition of vigilantism for current research purposes:

“Vigilantism is 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”.

Apart from defining vigilantism, we also introduced a typology of vigilantism in which characteristics of vigilantism itself as well as its context are identified. The typology consists of two person-related components (the vigilante and his victim), and three components that together make up the so-called vigilantism event sequence: the precipitating event, the formal response to the precipitating event, and the vigilantism act. Characteristics that are related to these five components can be varied in research in order to study their impact on support for vigilantism, thereby testing the situation hypothesis.

Measuring confidence

To prepare for an empirical test of the confidence hypothesis, we next presented a conceptual framework of confidence in the criminal justice system (CJS) in Chapter 4. Theoretical and empirical insights from the literature were used to build a conceptual model of confidence, which was subsequently operationalized into a measurement tool. This operationalization of confidence includes procedural justice and effectiveness, and differentiates between various criminal justice agencies and the system as a whole.

Study 1

After conceptualizing support, vigilantism as well as confidence, we presented our first empirical study on support for vigilantism in Chapter 5. Four versions of a vignette about vigilantism were constructed, based on a systematic variation of two characteristics from the vigilantism typology: police responsiveness to the precipitating event and vigilantism violence. Support was measured by assessing a variety of reactions, including the justifiability of the vigilantism act and desired punishment for the vigilante. Both situational characteristics were found to affect support, thus providing evidence for the situational hypothesis. Additionally, confidence in the courts and CJS was a predictor of support for vigilantism, with more confidence resulting in less support. Confidence in police did not have any impact, so the confidence hypothesis was only partially confirmed. General concern over crime also affected support: the more worried people were about crime, the more supportive they were of vigilantism in the vignette.

Just-world theory

After having explored a number of determinants of support for vigilantism in our first study, we presented a theoretical framework in Chapter 6. Just-world theory (Lerner, 1980) was introduced as a basis for reaching a further understanding of the causal mechanism behind support. In other words, it adds to our understanding of why and how people are affected by situational aspects of a vigilantism case, aside from the role of confidence. In short, just-world theory proposes that people like to believe that the world is a just place where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. When such a belief in a just world (BJW) is threatened through a confrontation with someone's undeserved victimization, people are motivated to use cognitive and behavioral strategies to protect their BJW. Such strategies include victim blaming and a desire of punishment

for offenders. The relevance of the theory within the context of support for vigilantism lies in the fact that there exist at least two instances of victimization within the common vigilantism event sequence. The first one occurs as a result of the precipitating event, i.e. the criminal act that precedes vigilantism. The second instance is the act of vigilantism itself: the victimization that is caused by the vigilante and directed at the precipitating offender. In our view, what is commonly labeled as support for vigilantism can thus actually be interpreted as a BJW-reaction to a vigilantism situation.

Study 2

We applied ideas from just-world theory in our second empirical study to predict and measure reactions to a precipitating crime and a subsequent act of vigilantism. After describing the study design and a pilot study in Chapter 7, we presented the findings of the final study in Chapter 8. Respondents were presented with two fictitious articles from a news website. The first one concerned the precipitating event, while the second one described the formal sentence for the precipitating offender and a subsequent act of vigilantism. The articles were varied along two characteristics from the vigilantism typology: the type of precipitating event and the formal sentence for the precipitating offender. Concepts from just-world theory were operationalized into four measures of support for vigilantism: *empathy* with the victim of vigilantism, *outrage* at the vigilante, *blame and derogation* of the vigilantism victim, and *desired punishment* for the vigilante. One month after responding to the vignettes, the same respondents were presented with a number of attitude measures, including confidence in the criminal justice system.

The main conclusions match those of the first study: support for vigilantism is not just affected by confidence in the criminal justice system, but also by situational characteristics. More confidence in the courts and criminal justice system led to less support, while confidence in police did not have an impact. Just like in our first study, the confidence hypothesis was thereby partially confirmed. We also found new evidence for the situation hypothesis, as both manipulated situational characteristics affected support for vigilantism. The type of precipitating event especially had a strong influence. Empathy with the victim of vigilantism was for instance much lower when he was a sex offender than when he had committed a traffic offense. In line with this, desire for punishment of the vigilante who assaulted the sex offender was also relatively low: 41 percent of respondents did not find it necessary to punish him at all. Regarding the sentencing manipulation, differences in support were mainly found when comparing the acquittal condition to the other three sentencing levels. Outrage at the vigilante was for instance lowest when the precipitating offender had previously been acquitted by a judge. However, in the conditions where he *had* been sentenced, the level of the sentence in general did not affect responses to the act of vigilantism. Respondents were thus mostly influenced by whether the precipitating offender had been acquitted or sentenced before becoming a victim of vigilantism, and not necessarily by the level of sentencing. As long as the offender was not acquitted, people seemed to accept the judge's verdict, even if the sentence was mild.

9.3 Explaining support for vigilantism

Our findings reveal that public reactions to those who take the law into their own hands are not necessarily rooted in a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system: characteristics of the vigilantism situation have an independent influence. We found strong empirical evidence for the *situation hypothesis* in both studies. People do not appear to have a straight-forward positive or negative reaction to a case of vigilantism depending on how much confidence they have in the formal justice system. Instead, people's support for vigilantism can at least partially be understood as a reaction to deal with the threat it poses to their belief in a just world. The extent of such a threat, and the corresponding use of cognitive strategies to reduce the resulting aversive state, is strongly influenced by characteristics of the vigilantism act and its context. These situational characteristics affect perceptions of deservingness and justice: in essence what support for vigilantism is all about. When the victim of vigilantism had previously sexually molested a child, our respondents for instance saw his fate as more deserving than in the case of a traffic offender. People are thus not necessarily thinking about the criminal justice system when they react to vigilantism. People are sensitive to the situational context of vigilantism and as such support for vigilantism should not be interpreted as a rational reaction that is simply a result of a lack of confidence in the legal authorities.

Apart from the influence of situational characteristics, we found a partial confirmation of the *confidence hypothesis*. In both studies, confidence in the courts and the criminal justice system predicted support for vigilantism, while confidence in police did not have any impact. We propose that this may have to do with the distinct functions of these agencies within the criminal justice system. When citizens take the law into their own hands, they tend to 'take over' duties that are specifically reserved for the courts, such as making sentencing decisions. In fact, vigilantes take these duties even further by actually carrying out the punishment against (alleged) offenders. Their actions can thus be seen as a threat to those who have confidence in court agencies. While these results reveal the importance of using a differentiated measure of confidence, we deem it necessary to further test the robustness of these findings in future research. We especially recommend a replication of our study in countries where confidence in the criminal justice system is generally lower than in the Netherlands. Such research can potentially provide insights regarding the relative impact of confidence and situational characteristics on support for vigilantism in those places where citizens cannot rely (as much) on the state to deal with crime.

Even though our research was mainly focused on testing the situation and confidence hypothesis, one of the main predictors of public support for vigilantism turned out to be a different factor: *general support for vigilantism*. In other words, how people generally view vigilantism is a strong predictor of how they will react to a specific case of vigilantism. Although the relation between specific and general support makes intuitive sense, we were rather surprised by the size of the attitude's impact as compared to that of the other factors. A possible explanation for this is that our measure of general

support for vigilantism captures a *moral mandate* about vigilantism: an attitude that is rooted in a moral conviction (Skitka, 2002). Moral mandates are strong beliefs about the rightfulness or wrongfulness of something, or about its (im)moral character (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). Moral mandates are said to result from strongly internalized norms such as “thou shalt not kill” (Skitka, 2002). Examples include strong attitudes toward abortion and cannibalism. According to the so-called moral mandate hypothesis, attitudes that are based on moral convictions have a stronger impact on people’s judgments of people or situations than nonmoral attitudes (Skitka et al., 2005). If our measure of general support for vigilantism indeed reflects a moral mandate about the rightfulness or wrongfulness of taking the law into one’s own hands, this can explain why it transcended the effects of other factors in most of our analyses. It is apparently so strong that it affected respondents’ aversive states as a result of vigilantism, as well as their uses of cognitive strategies (blame and derogation and punishment).

If our measure of general support for vigilantism can be interpreted as a moral mandate, this does not imply that other factors have no influence on how people react to a case of vigilantism. After all, we did find a substantial impact of situational characteristics and attitudes other than general support for vigilantism. With regards to the former, we suspect that certain situational aspects, if they are sufficiently impressive, can ‘overrule’ people’s moral mandate about an issue. If the precipitating crime is for instance particularly appalling, people may support vigilantism against the precipitating offender even if they are generally against taking the law into one’s own hands. Evidence for this argument is provided by the fact that the sex crime conditions in our study had a larger impact on some of the specific support measures than did general support for vigilantism.

The impact of general support for vigilantism was larger than that of confidence in the courts and CJS on all four measures of vignette-related support (confidence in police had no effect). This means that the general support for vigilantism scale captures a certain sentiment which is not automatically related to confidence. As a moral mandate it may simply pertain to a sense of wrongfulness (or rightfulness) of taking the law into one’s own hands, which is at least partially independent of how ‘the law’ is perceived. In any case we did find a significant correlation of $-.46$ between general support for vigilantism and confidence in the courts and CJS, which reveals at least some overlap between the scales.

In order to further investigate whether our measure of general support for vigilantism indeed reflects a moral mandate on vigilantism, it is important to critically review the items that we used (see Table A4 in Appendix 8). Our scale includes a number of ‘moral mandate’-like statements, such as “Citizens who take the law into their own hands should always be prosecuted” and “Under no condition do I approve of people who take the law into their own hands”. However, it also includes more ‘conditional support’ items, such as “If the government is not successful in their fight against crime, citizens are justified to take the law into their own hands”. For future research in this domain, it is advisable to construct a more ‘pure’ measure of this moral mandate.

9.4 Implications for the criminal justice system

A noteworthy observation regarding confidence as a determinant of support, is the difference between confidence on a situation-specific level and a more general level. As mentioned in the previous section, confidence in police on a general level did not affect support for vigilantism. However, when police responsiveness was varied in the first vignette study, it did have an impact on support. In other words, how criminal justice authorities are perceived to deal with a precipitating crime *can* play an important role in determining how people react to a subsequent act of vigilantism, even if confidence in such authorities on a general level does not. This conclusion can prove to be valuable for criminal justice agencies, as it underlines the impact of their situation-specific response to a precipitating crime on how a vigilantism case is viewed by the public. We deem it important for the criminal justice authorities to communicate to the public what their role has been in the events leading up to the vigilantism act. Given the demonstrated influence of perceived deservingness in people's judgments of a case, it is for instance important to explain the formal response or lack thereof in response to the precipitating crime, especially if the precipitating offender was not arrested or prosecuted prior to the act of vigilantism. Similarly, it is recommendable for the authorities to convey why a particular vigilante is subjected to a criminal investigation. When communicating about a vigilantism case, the ambiguity of distinguishing between victims and offenders needs to be taken into account.

In the Amsterdam supermarket case that was mentioned in earlier chapters, communication on part of the prosecutors may have actually led to more public support for the act of vigilantism (Althoff, 2010). The decision to prosecute the two supermarket employees for their use of disproportionate violence against a thief was announced right after the death of 22-year-old René Steegmans. The latter criticized two youngsters for their antisocial behavior against an old lady, in response to which they beat him up. None of the bystanders helped René during this fight, and he died from his injuries two days later. People were upset about the fact that no one intervened, which caused all the more outrage when two men who did intervene (the supermarket employees) were prosecuted. The case evoked a heated debate about the state's expectations of citizen involvement in crime control on one hand, and their prosecution of those who do so (disproportionately) on the other.⁵⁴ In this particular situation, it would have been wise for the Public Prosecution to communicate more clearly that the supermarket employees were not prosecuted because of the fact *that* they intervened, but because of their use of violence after the thief had already surrendered. In other words, they should have more clearly conveyed why the prosecution was justified in their view. In order to appeal to the public's sense of justice and deservingness, they could have also placed more emphasis on their prosecution of the thief: the 'real' offender.

54 For a detailed analysis of this debate in the Netherlands, see the report by Stichting Maatschappij, Veiligheid en Politie (2007).

9.5 Theoretical implications

The literature provides numerous examples of how just-world theory can be used to explain social reactions to victimization. In this thesis, we applied just-world theory to predict and explain reactions to victimization within the context of vigilantism. With regards to measurement, first of all, the concepts ‘aversive state’ and ‘cognitive strategies’ proved to be very useful. By gauging respondents’ emotional reactions to vigilantism, as well as their ways of dealing with these emotions, we were able to construct elaborate and reliable measures of support for vigilantism. Secondly, insights from the BJW literature were successfully used to predict the effects of situational characteristics on support for vigilantism. Variation of the type of precipitating event, for instance, affected responses further down the vigilantism event sequence. Thirdly, putting public support for vigilantism in the context of BJW-reactions has increased our understanding of the support phenomenon. We discovered that when someone supports vigilantism, this is (partially) an indirect effect from the aversive state that was induced by the precipitating crime. If this aversive state is not successfully eliminated by sentencing of the precipitating offender, support for vigilantism becomes an alternative threat-reducing strategy. Lastly, we investigated reactions to offenders as well as victims in our study, which has not been done very frequently in just-world research (Hafer & Bègue, 2005).

Despite the fact that just-world theory proved to be a useful framework for studying support for vigilantism, individual differences in belief in a just world (i.e. BJW-O) did not predict many of respondents’ reactions to the vignettes. It was expected that the injustice as portrayed in the newspaper articles would present a greater threat to people who strongly believe in a just world, and would lead to a higher motivation to engage in cognitive strategies. In other words, we assumed that the individual difference measure BJW-O would corroborate the existence of the processes assumed to underlie the effects of our two experimental manipulations. These expectations were rejected for all but one of the four dependent variables (desired punishment for the vigilante). One reason for this is that people may not always be aware of their need to believe in a just world, making self-reports an unsuitable method for measuring individual levels of BJW (cf. Hafer & Bègue, 2005). Our findings in any case do not form an exception to the literature, as interactions between just-world manipulations and individual difference-scales have often been found to be elusive. Dalbert (2001) has proposed that the implicit and explicit versions of BJW may explain the sporadic support for individual scales as predictors of reactions in experimental studies. Within experiments, people’s judgments are likely to be rather intuitive, whereas self-report measures are likely to be more cognitive. We used realistic and engaging stimuli in order to induce automatic, emotional reactions rather than deliberated, socially-desirable responses. The BJW-O items, on the other hand, form a rather straight-forward, conscious measure. This may thus explain why BJW-O is not strongly related to the emotional reactions that were induced by the vignettes.

9.6 Methodological considerations

Our findings demonstrate that it is important to treat support for vigilantism as a multifaceted concept. We for instance established that low empathy with the vigilantism victim does not necessarily imply that the public is against formal sentencing of the vigilante. Additionally, our analyses revealed that the role of determinants depends on which support measure is examined (see Table 8.18 in the previous chapter). General concern over crime for instance predicted blame and derogation of the vigilantism victim, while it did not affect the other three support measures. These findings stress the importance of assessing a number of different sentiments, rather than simply asking people whether they support vigilantism or not. This is true for measures of support for a specific vigilantism act, as well as for an assessment of how people view vigilantism in general. The same can be said about the measurement of confidence in the criminal justice system. As stated earlier, not all types of confidence affected support for vigilantism, which points to the importance of using elaborate and multiple-item instruments of confidence in this context. The measures of support and confidence that were developed and tested in this thesis are examples of such a differentiated approach.

We now turn to our use of vignettes. In both of our empirical studies, respondents were presented with information about cases of vigilantism in the form of vignettes. Although the vignettes in the second study were made to look more authentic than those in the first study, respondents may not have believed that the articles were real. As such, their resulting reactions may not have been as strong as would have been the case with actual newspaper articles. Another point of criticism that is often raised in the context of vignette studies is that this methodology tends to lose on external validity (Konecni & Ebbesen, 1992). Respondents are commonly presented with highly specific case descriptions in which a number of characteristics have been manipulated. Such stimuli have been criticized for being unrealistic and overly simplistic. However, we feel that this applies less to the current context, as vignettes are very similar to how the public is normally informed about crime, including vigilantism. After all, they tend to read about criminal cases in (online) news articles, or through brief news items on television. In those cases citizens also form an opinion based on minimal information. Research indeed confirms the validity of vignettes in such contexts, and suggests that vignettes can be especially useful when examining the reactions of observers to situations such as violent incidents (Robinson & Clore, 2001; Van Zomeren & Lodewijkx, 2005).

With regards to the operationalization of the crimes in our vignettes, we realize that we only included crimes that had no fatal consequences for their victims. We can imagine that support for vigilantism would have been higher if it had been in response to even more severe criminal acts. However, we were interested in the effects of situational manipulations on support for vigilantism, and expected that we would find ceiling effects if death or very severe injuries were involved in either the precipitating crime or the subsequent act of vigilantism. We also wanted to include vigilantes who acted in response to their own victimization, and this would obviously not have been possible if the precipitating acts had caused their death or severe, permanent injury. Lastly, we

wanted to include an acquittal condition in the second study, and felt that this would not be credible in a case where the precipitating crime caused someone's death. In any case we did vary the crime types in our studies, thereby increasing the generalizability of our findings.

Another issue concerning the vignettes in the second study is that some of the crimes differ on aspects that are not necessarily related to the experimental variation. We aimed to only vary the precipitating crime type, but this also resulted in variations regarding the consequences for the victim. The victim of the sex crime for instance did not suffer from the same injuries as did the two traffic victims. This difference is inherent to the crime type, but should nevertheless be taken into account when interpreting the findings. Similarly, the perceived responsibility of the sex offender may have been higher than that of the two intoxicated drivers. As respondents probably regarded the sex crime as more deliberate, this may have added to the relatively strong emotional reactions to the sex offender. Another inconsistency is that the precipitating crime victim himself was the vigilante in one of the vignettes, while the father of the victim was the vigilante in the other two cases. Even though these aspects have no consequences for our main conclusion, namely that situational characteristics affect support for vigilantism, it is advisable to pay special attention to this matter in the design of future studies.

Within the sex offense conditions, it was noticeable that the level of sentencing had no impact whatsoever on the support for vigilantism ratings. The results might have been different had we included a condition in which the sex offender was acquitted, as it was precisely the acquittal version that led to different responses for the other two precipitating crimes. We can also speculate about what the findings would have been like if the 'severe' sentencing level had been even more severe than the current one (a combination of community service, a suspended prison sentence and victim compensation). Would a lengthy, unsuspended prison sentence have led to different results? We suspect that for some crime types, people are not easily satisfied with any type of formal sentence, for which reason they might 'appreciate' the extra punishment by a vigilante no matter what.

9.7 Future research

In our studies several situational characteristics were varied to measure their impact on support for vigilantism. Naturally, this research can be extended by varying other characteristics from the typology. Of these, vigilante motive may especially be an interesting one. If support for vigilantism can indeed be interpreted as a just-world based reaction, it may be especially affected by deservingness-related vigilante motives such as retribution. Moreover, how respondents themselves view punishment goals in general may also play a role. If someone attaches particular value to deterrence, rather than retribution, would this change his or her view of a retribution-driven act of vigilantism?

Many cases of vigilantism, including those in our research, involve violence. Most Western countries have abolished corporal punishment. In other words, when a vigilante beats up an offender, he accomplishes a type of punishment which cannot be realized through the criminal justice system. Imaginably, this facet of vigilantism can cause outrage, but it may also lead to support for vigilantism. Especially in response to a heinous crime, people may prefer for an offender to be punished corporally rather than through community service or a prison sentence. Sentiments such as ‘eye for an eye’ may play a role here: if an offender used violence against his victim, some might find that he should suffer a similar form of violence as a punishment, and not ‘get away with it’ through a nonviolent type of sentence. Such emotions might be interesting to explore in future research on vigilantism. Similarly, we wonder what would happen if the vigilante *did* accomplish a type of sentence that could also be the outcome of a criminal justice procedure, such as compensation for the victim of the precipitating crime. Would it in that case still matter to people that the procedure is illegitimate, or would the outcome be dominant in determining their response? Research from the United States on death through capital punishment versus death through vigilantism (Skitka & Houston, 2001), as briefly described in Chapter 2, suggests that it may be the outcome that matters more than the procedure.

In our second study we tested a simplified version of the BJW vigilantism event sequence model. For fear of interfering with natural reactions to the vignettes, we for instance did not assess people’s opinions about the sentencing of the precipitating offender. Even though the study design allowed us to indirectly measure the effects of the legal response, it might be interesting in future research to further investigate such sentiments. Furthermore, respondents’ views on policies and practices of the criminal justice system regarding specific crime types may also be assessed. If people for instance have confidence in the legal authorities overall, but are dissatisfied with their specific approach to sex offenders, this may also affect their views on vigilantism against such perpetrators.

We chose to study support for acts of vigilantism that clearly do not qualify as cases of self-defense or other legally justifiable behavior. The reason for this, as explained before, is that for now we were mostly interested in public reactions to those who deliberately deal with alleged criminals in spite of the law. In other words, we did not examine public opinion regarding immediate, emotional reactions to crime that turn into vigilantism. Recent qualitative research suggests that public opinion regarding the latter type of violence might be similar to what we found in our studies (Althoff, 2010). Respondents were presented with two vignettes based on the case of the Tilburg jeweler who shot a robber, and the case of the lady who chased the thieves of her purse (see Chapter 1). Interviews for instance showed that respondents disapproved of the vigilantism acts, while at the same time expressing an understanding for the vigilante. Additionally, they seemed keen on blaming the victim of vigilantism for his fate (death in both cases), which parallels our findings on deservingness and just-world sentiments. Althoff and colleagues (2010) furthermore conclude that their respondents

did not express support for vigilantism because they lack confidence in the criminal justice system, or out of disrespect for the state's monopoly on violence. Instead, respondents felt that citizens sometimes need to take responsibility in a crime situation as enforcement of the law, and not in spite of it. In future studies it might be interesting to compare such sentiments between self-defense related vigilantism and more planned types.⁵⁵

Lastly, as just-world theory proved to be a useful framework for studying public support for vigilantism, we propose that it may also help to reach a better understanding of why people might *consort* to vigilantism. In other words, what is it that drives people to take the law into their own hands? As addressed in Chapter 3, it is commonly assumed that vigilantism, as well as support for it, is rooted in a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system. However, the current literature does not provide many empirical insights into vigilante motives. Based on our findings we would expect people's general support for vigilantism (or moral mandate on vigilantism) to play an important role. Additionally, given that situational factors were found to be important determinants of support for vigilantism in our study, they may also aid in explaining the occurrence of vigilantism itself. Vigilantes, just like supporters of vigilantism, are probably motivated by situational aspects in addition to a possible lack of confidence in the criminal justice system. It is probable that their reasons to take the law into their own hands can (at least partially) be explained as just-world reactions to an injustice. Retributive reactions such as the illegal punishment of an alleged offender are likely based on feelings of deservingness, and can thus be expected to be affected by situational factors. Likewise, the situation-specific reactions of the criminal justice authorities to the precipitating crime are also likely to play an important role in the events leading up to a case of vigilantism. Even if someone generally has a high level of confidence in the criminal justice system, he may resort to vigilantism when he perceives the authorities to have failed in a specific crime situation. In order to prevent vigilantism, the criminal justice authorities may be advised to put substantial effort into explaining their response to a precipitating crime, or lack thereof, to those involved. This is purely speculative, as we have not studied vigilantes and their motivations, but our current findings do point to the importance of the formal response to the precipitating crime.

9.8 Conclusion

In the introduction to this thesis we wondered whether the existence of support for vigilantism suggests that there is something peculiar about vigilantism that causes the public to make an exception to the general rule of punishing harm doers. After all, when the public supports vigilantism, this seems to go against general notions of how crime and criminals should be responded to. We conclude by saying that this reaction is not necessarily an exception to the rule. Vigilantes can be seen as the ones who make

55 In an earlier study, we found that more planning led to less support for vigilantism, but the presented case was not a self-defense situation (Haas et al., 2007).

sure that harm doers ‘get what they deserve’. For this reason vigilantism may not always lead to public outrage, and empathy with its victims may be low. However, our research has revealed that this does not necessarily imply that people want the vigilante to go unpunished. Furthermore, we have demonstrated that such reactions are not necessarily caused by a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system, as they are also affected by situational characteristics and by people’s general views on vigilantism.

If we had found substantial public support for vigilantism, would this constitute a call for change of the criminal justice system and the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence? Would we need to consider expanding citizens’ rights when responding to criminal acts, as has for instance been proposed by some Dutch politicians (e.g. Teeven, 2010)? Would the state have to refrain from prosecuting citizens who take the law into their own hands? Would judges have to be milder in their sentencing of vigilantes, simply because there is an understanding for their behavior in society? In our opinion, support for vigilantism would never form grounds for changing the status quo. Even if the criminal justice system fails at times, we would much prefer an imperfect system over a society in which the formal distinctions between right and wrong fade. We are strongly convinced of the importance of the state’s displacement of retaliation, and do not wish to go toward a situation of random and disproportional punishment. Although the current criminal justice system may sometimes cause disappointment and outrage on the part of those who are directly or indirectly affected by crime, we believe that this is incomparable to the detrimental effects vigilante justice would have if it were to become a regular part of our society.