

Box 2.1 Is Impartial Empiricism in the Study of Intimate Violence Possible?

The scientific method, we are told, is supposed to be “value-free.” Empiricists report what they see, not what they hope to see. Given the passions that many bring to the study of VMIR, however, a truly value-free approach is likely impossible—nor, frankly, is it desirable. Many professionals in the field want to make the world a safer place for victims and do not want their research and writing to be completely void of that passion. At the same time, however, one must be careful not to discard the scientific method in favor of an advocacy-driven approach to knowledge. How do we, and how should we, balance advocacy and research? (See Perrin & Miller-Perrin, 2011, for a more detailed discussion of the ideas presented in this section.)

We would argue that advocacy, absent scientific objectivity, is inherently problematic and may do more harm than good. To consider why, we must briefly revisit the social constructionist perspective on social problems, as discussed in Chapter 1. Social conditions become social problems when claims makers successfully define them as such. Claims makers may employ many strategies for raising awareness, including the use—and sometimes misuse—of statistical facts and dramatic rhetoric. Because social conditions essentially compete for attention, claims makers will inevitably be drawn to larger numbers and the dramatic rhetoric (Best, 2001).

Why is this a potential problem? Consider the debate between Dianna Russell and Neil Gilbert. Gilbert (1997) is critical of Russell’s (1984) claim that 54 percent of children are victims of sexual abuse. This estimate from Russell, Gilbert argues, is an exaggerated “advocacy statistic.” In fairness, Russell is clear that the 54 percent figure is based on a very broad definition of sexual abuse that includes unwanted kisses and nongenital sexual touching as well as exposure to exhibitionism (Russell & Bolen, 2000). However, it is also fair to remind the reader that Russell, like advocates more generally, likely assumes that broad definitions and large numbers will further her cause.

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