"Everybody Makes Choices": Victim Advocates and the Social Construction of Battered Women's Victimization and Agency

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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN 2007; 13; 977
DOI: 10.1177/1077801207305932

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://vaw.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/13/10/977
“Everybody Makes Choices”

Victim Advocates and the Social Construction of Battered Women’s Victimization and Agency

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Semistructured interviews with 32 domestic violence victim advocates illuminate how advocates explain “battered women who stay.” The interviews show that this behavior is a source of great frustration for advocates, who struggle to simultaneously conceive of battered women as victims trapped by social, psychological, and interactional forces and as agents whose choices must be respected. The authors argue that their organizational subculture and the culture of individualism in the contemporary United States do not provide the ideological and linguistic resources necessary for managing this dilemma. This results in a tendency to overemphasize battered women’s choice and thereby diminish the constraints they face.

Keywords: agency; social constructionism; victimization

Recently, scholarship on and activism for battered women has developed conceptualizations that transcend notions that battered women are either victims or agents but not “both/and,” the “pernicious dichotomies” (Picart, 2003) of agency and victimization that are so abundant in previous research and popular culture. More nuanced framings point to how even battered women who remain in or return to violent relationships exercise agency, resisting violence within their relationships in multiple and strategic ways (Baker, 1997; Bowker, 1983; Jenkins, 1996; Lempert, 1996). Researchers have thus called for “empowering” battered women who stay (Peled, Eizikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000), have emphasized safety planning for this population (Davies, Lyon, & Monti-Catania, 1998), and have characterized them as “survivors” (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Hoff, 1990).

We will show that in practice, despite training specifically designed to recognize battered women’s agency and to honor all the choices they make (including “staying”),...
victim advocates have considerable difficulty doing this. This is partly because of the strong emotional responses that they have toward women they observe repeatedly battered, among which are feelings of helplessness and frustration. Our findings also suggest more sociological influences: The ideology of victimization current in the organizations in which the advocates work may have the latent consequence of overemphasizing choice at the expense of recognition of the profound social–structural and interactional constraints that battered women face. Furthermore, our analysis supports the conclusion that a culture of individualism in the contemporary United States creates a forced dichotomy for understanding victimization; that is, it provides little or no space for understanding and negotiating the complexity of battered women’s lives or for conceptualizing agency as a continuum. As a consequence, when victim advocates talk about their work and their clients, they lack a vocabulary of motive (Mills, 1940) that fully incorporates and engages victimization as constraint. And as empathetic toward battered women as advocates clearly are, the language available to them ultimately constructs the former in less-than-sympathetic terms. This has both theoretical and policy implications.

Domestic violence victim advocacy in community-based organizations, such as battered women’s shelters, and in the criminal justice system has recently become a profession in addition to a calling. Paid staff have increasingly replaced activists and volunteers, and certification has become more common. Advocates in this field counsel battered women, provide legal assistance and court accompaniment, and make referrals to various social services such as those related to housing, medical, and employment needs (Crowell & Burgess, 1996). As workers in this “troubled persons industry” (Loseke, 2003), advocates face particular challenges unique to their profession and directly related to their clientele. We will show how advocates routinely struggle to bring the individual battered women whom they encounter into conformity with the images of battered women created by the battered women’s movement, in what Holstein and Miller (1993) have called the “social problems work” of constructing domestic violence in everyday life. A problem is that advocates’ clients do not always neatly conform to collective representations of this social problem (Loseke, 1989, 1992). Importantly, when they return to or remain in violent relationships, they violate pervasive and persistent cultural codes for understanding victimization as a lack of agency or choice (Dunn, 2005). The dilemma for advocates is how to interpret and classify these women as victims given everyday assumptions that rational people do not willingly subject themselves to violence (Straus, 1992).

We examine how advocates explain this “staying” and its variants to themselves, to victims, and to imagined and real audiences. We show how victimization and agency are constructed and interpenetrate in social problems work in everyday life and how domestic violence victim advocacy is the “local articulation” (Holstein & Miller, 1993, p. 136) of the widespread victim ideology (Best, 1997) of the battered women’s movement, even as it “combines with more general vocabularies” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 287). When advocates express their frustration with their clients,
they struggle to maintain their understanding of them as simultaneously choosing to return, an action that they are taught to “respect,” and as having little or no choice, a “fact” that has been ingrained in their more general understanding. The words and examples that they provide underscore their difficulties, as neither their occupational subculture nor the cultural feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979) that govern sympathy and victimization help them out of their dilemma.

Previously, scholars have researched the social construction of battered women by shelter workers (Kendrick, 1998; Loseke, 1992), “experts” (Jenkins, 1996; Loseke & Cahill, 1984), activists (Davies et al., 1998; Dunn, 2005; Rothenberg, 2002), the law (Mahoney, 1991, 1994), social scientists (Dunn, 2005; Peled et al., 2000), and media (Berns, 2004; Loseke, 1992). Within these varied domains, images of battered women are relatively consistent and have focused on accounting for why battered women stay in abusive relationships. According to these “social problems formula stories” (Loseke, 2000), battered women return to or stay in violent relationships because of profound constraints on leaving, which may be internal, external, or both.

Early typifications of battered women beginning in the 1970s (e.g., Martin, 1976; Pagelow, 1981; Walker, 1979) almost invariably portrayed them as suffering from repeated and extreme violence at the hands of batterers who never willingly change but only escalate their violent tactics over time. Repeated violence and threats produce fear and result in long-term psychological damage. Most well-known, perhaps, is the idea that this damage takes the form of learned helplessness that prevents women from leaving even when they have the opportunity (Walker, 1979). Women are also trapped in violent relationships by social–structural constraints, particularly gender inequality and a patriarchal criminal justice system that does not respond to them and, like the larger culture, blames them for their own victimization. Women’s gender-role socialization additionally keeps them prisoners in heterosexual relationships when they feel obligated to make their marriages work or emotionally responsible for their violent partners (Davies et al., 1998; Dunn, 2005; Loseke & Cahill, 1984; Peled et al., 2000; Rothenberg, 2002). More recently, battered women have been increasingly portrayed less as helpless victims and more often as heroic survivors, for whom the behavior of staying becomes a rational coping strategy under their constraining circumstances (Dunn, 2005).

Scholars and activists have brought attention to problems with typifications of battered women, especially those that construct the latter as “pure victims” or in ways that dichotomize victimization and agency. Loseke (1989, 1992) was among the first to point out that shelter workers’ and public policy makers’ collective representations of battered women failed to capture their heterogeneous lived experience. Rothenberg (2002, p. 209), who echoed this argument, has asserted that because the stories that activists tell must present “few moral ambiguities,” they necessarily simplify the complexity of domestic violence as they bring it into conformity with its social movement framing. Critics have argued that psychological and individualistic constructions of entrapment divert attention from the social–structural constraints
that battered women face (Berns, 2004; Kendrick, 1998). Others have pointed out that constructing battered women as pure or ideal victims fails to recognize the ways in which they are also agents making choices (Barry, 1979; Davies et al., 1998; Dunn, 2005; Rothenberg, 2002). This has led to the aforementioned tension between victimization and agency in representations of battered women (Dunn, 2004, 2005).

This tension is central to our analysis and, we argue, any understanding of the social construction of victims in social problems work. It is significant in the macro-level realm of social movement collective representation and in micro-level interactions in agencies such as the ones in which the advocates we interviewed interpret the behavior of their clients. It is firmly and seemingly inextricably linked to cultural norms governing how victimization is “interactionally constituted” (Holstein & Miller, 1997a). In what follows, we explore how this tension and its inherent contradictions play out in domestic violence victim advocacy. We examine the ways in which advocates construct battered women as victims and agents as they interpret the problematic behavior of returning to or staying in violent relationships. As we will show, not all constructions bear equal weight, and those that prevail have perhaps unintended consequences.

Theoretical Considerations: Social Problems Work in Context

By “agency,” we refer to the making of choices, sometimes called “free will.” The analysis that follows posits that the idea of agency is so entrenched in the sea of American culture that it cannot be submerged no matter the rhetorical circumstance but keeps bobbing to the surface like a buoy that guides and channels interpretative processes. That this occurs even when agency is an attribute that must be denied to define a situation—as in the case of victimization—is notable and suggests the power of agency as a “cultural code” (Loseke, 2003). This argument depends on a view of victimization and agency as qualities that are produced in interaction as part of the everyday “accomplishment” (Holstein & Miller, 1997b) of social problems. They are “talked into being” (Miller, 1991) rather than inherent in actors or behaviors. Furthermore, these social constructions are not idiosyncratic nor randomly produced but are patterned in ways that suggest conformity to cultural expectations. Particularly important are the norms governing the telling of (literally) moving stories (Dunn, 2004; Loseke, 2000) and “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 1979) dictating emotional responses to the characters that populate these narratives. The feeling rules that influence sympathy for victims of social problems generally require lack of agency on the part of those harmed (Clark, 1997; Dunn, 2004, 2005; Loseke, 2003). The pervasiveness of agency as a cultural code has made and continues to make the typification of victims problematic (Dunn, 2005; Lamb, 1996; Mahoney, 1991), yet it persists even in the face of these rules. Before turning to the data that support our central claims, these ideas merit further development.
The first important consideration is that we conceive of human attributes as the product of consequential definitional processes. Drawing on an interactionist social psychology, a body of literature has emerged that examines the ways in which social actors jointly construct reality, imputing qualities and attributes to each other and the people that they encounter as part of their ongoing relationships and, in many cases, their occupations. Starting from the premise that attributes such as mind (Mead, 1934) emerge and are located in social interaction rather than in social actors themselves, scholars have explored what Holstein and Gubrium (2003) have called the “collaborative accomplishment” of these qualities, arguing that “characteristics like mind, maturity, and competence are pervasively dialogic—interactionally constructed, sustained, and preserved” (p. 281). In some cases, whether people actually possess the characteristics imputed to them is arguable or unknowable, so that only the collaboration is empirically available to scholars, as in caregivers’ construction of humanness in the severely disabled (Bogdan & Taylor, 1989) or “preservation” of mind in Alzheimer’s patients (Gubrium, 2003). Of the latter, Gubrium (2003) has argued, “Mind experientially persists to the extent that some agent preserves it, be the agent the one whose mind is at stake or some other” (p. 185). In the case of domestic violence victims, we will show that their agency, as well as their victimization, is “interactionally constituted” (Holstein & Miller, 1997a). Moreover, victim advocates construct agency and victimization in ways more related to advocates’ organizationally situated experience and constraints and the pervasive influence in the larger culture of both “victim ideology” (Best, 1997), and what we might term “agent ideology,” than to victims’ lived reality or the obstacles that they face.

Organizations play a significant role in the construction of the characteristics of persons. Indeed, these reality-construction processes are frequently “organizationally embedded” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994, 2003). Organizations have “local cultures” (Gubrium, 1989) that provide a context for imputation. Gubrium (1989) has shown how different family therapy programs interpret the same “signs” of trouble in families very differently, but within organizations, Holstein and Gubrium (2003) have argued that “local interpretive cultures and practical goals and orientations influence the assignment of meaning; context delimits the diversity of interpretation” (p. 287). In their analysis of the collaborative accomplishment of competence in various settings, Holstein and Gubrium (2003) have shown that competence and other qualities (e.g., maturity, wisdom, and ability) make up what they call a “constitutive vocabulary” for assignations of human developmental capabilities but that this vocabulary “takes its specific content and relevance from concrete settings and situations” (p. 271). When considering the social problems work of domestic violence victim advocates, we will take note of the ways in which the social construction of victims, victimization, and agency is situated in the community-based and criminal-justice-system organizations to which advocates must answer.

One important arena for the accomplishment of attributes is social problems claims-making. The activity of social problems claims-makers is not confined to
social movement activists and others at the macro-level of cultural production. It also occurs in everyday life when ordinary people seek to align particular, concrete instances of social problems with the images or typifications that activists and others have produced. This aligning process is called “social problems work” and takes place when people “communicate about, categorize, organize, argue, and persuade one another that social problems really do exist” (Holstein & Miller, 1997b, p. ix). Our interviews with domestic violence victim advocates encourage them to engage in social problems work, and we will show their efforts to articulate the battered women they encounter with their understandings and “mundane theories” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 282) of the problem of domestic violence.

The social problems work of victimization is both illustrative and particularly relevant for our purposes. In their “rethinking” of victimization, Holstein and Miller (1997a) have argued that victims are created in definitional processes that dramatize victims’ “injury and innocence” while “deflecting responsibility, assigning causes, specifying responses and remedies, and accounting for failure” (p. 31). Like competence, then, victimization is a vocabulary or rhetoric to be drawn on in social problems work in everyday life, imputed to rather than residing within the people to whom it is assigned. And central to this vocabulary is the removal of agency.

Exoneration from responsibility accompanies victimization. The essence of being a “victim” resides in a person’s perceived lack of control over the harm that he or she has experienced. Thus, to “victimize” someone instructs others to understand the person as a rather passive, indeed helpless, recipient of injury or injustice. (Holstein & Miller, 1997a, p. 43, emphasis in original)

In what follows, we will show how domestic violence victim advocates work to “accomplish” victimization in their interviews with us, seeking to exonerate and make explicable the actions of battered women.

In addition, deflection of responsibility, virtually the defining characteristic of victimization, is consistent with feeling rules governing sympathy, as a number of scholars have argued. Following Hochschild’s (1979) conceptualization of the feeling and expression of emotions as socially determined by culturally derived normative expectations, Clark (1997) has shown the circumstances under which sympathy is directed toward people experiencing troubles. Chief among these is “blamelessness,” which is inversely related to the extent to which people can be deemed responsible for their problems. Loseke (2000) similarly asserted that in order for victims to be perceived as such, they cannot be thought to have precipitated their own victimization, and she finds that this is so critical to the definitional processes associated with victimization that she goes on to claim that the “cultural coherence system producing ‘victims’ is the same as the feeling rules producing ‘sympathy’” (p. 49). The advocates we interviewed worked hard to engender our sympathy for their clients precisely through the mechanism of victimization.
Finally, there remains another set of considerations that shapes our view of these data. If agency and victimization are commonly understood in everyday life as a binary, but the lived experience of real people is far too complicated to be captured in such a dichotomous fashion, social problems work is also complicated. Domestic-violence-victim advocacy poses an “ideological dilemma” (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, & Radley, 1988). Confounding this dilemma, although the accomplishment of victimization has its rewards, it is not the case that agency and victimization are equally valued in American culture. Dunn’s (2004, 2005) historical examination of the social construction of battered women by activists and social scientists suggests that when claims-makers create images of people that completely deny their agency, not only do these images fail to capture the complex experience of real battered women, but they also produce a new kind of deviance in the form of pathetic victims. Audiences may feel sympathetic toward these typifications, but victims themselves resist being classified in ways that are so stigmatizing and disempowering (Gordon, 1993; Leisenring, in press; Reissman, 1992).

Dunn argues that the response of claims-makers has been to “empower” the image of battered women by reinvesting it with agency via a reconstruction of victims as “survivors.” When battered women are framed as making rational and even heroic choices—including the decision to return to or remain in violent relationships—their depictions account for problematic behavior and constitute images that are consonant with the value Americans place on individualism, autonomy, and agency (Dunn, 2004, 2005). Given the “cultural coherences” that Loseke (2003) posits, however, the consequences of this reframing may themselves be problematic. They may reduce the resources offered to victims (Loseke, 2003), minimize the effects of the forces arrayed against victims (Dunn, 2005), and potentially lead to an overemphasis on “victim accountability” (McDermott & Garofalo, 2004). When we discuss victim advocates’ accomplishment of victimization and agency, we will attend to these latent consequences in addition to the significance of our findings for understanding victim advocacy. We turn now to our data, first describing how we obtained and organized it, followed by its presentation and analysis.

Method

The study was designed as exploratory research and a pilot for a national survey. We conducted 32 in-depth interviews with domestic violence victim advocates working in shelters and in criminal justice settings, including prosecutors’ offices, a police department, and a sheriff’s office in a large midwestern state. In an attempt to obtain a diverse and representative sample of advocacy, participants in the study came from geographically dispersed counties in rural, suburban, and urban areas. All of the advocates interviewed were female; 4 were African American, 1 Mexican American, and the remaining 27 were White. The age of participants ranged from 23
to 69 years, and the level of work experience in advocacy varied considerably, from a minimum of 6 months through 25 years. Fourteen of the advocates worked in shelters, 16 in the criminal justice system, and 2 in both.

We began with a list of organizations participating in a statewide domestic violence coalition offering required training and certification. We initially contacted shelter coordinators and victim advocates in criminal justice settings by phone, inviting them to be interviewed for a study focusing on the unique rewards and challenges of victim advocacy. Shelter coordinators provided contact numbers for advocates willing and able to be interviewed, and arrangements with advocates in criminal justice settings were made directly with them. Although we are unable to know how many advocates in shelters refused to participate, we were able to interview advocates in all but one of the 17 organizations we contacted. We arranged semistructured interviews ranging from 60 to 90 minutes in length. Although we used a guideline, the questions we asked were open-ended and designed to elicit what participants thought was important about their work. Advocates were eager to discuss their work and candid and forthcoming about the character of their profession and the nature of their everyday experiences. We transcribed the interviews, and we looked for the ways in which advocates talked about battered women.

We asked about their experience with advocacy, including their perceptions of their clients, their frustrations as advocates for victims of violence, and their experience with institutional responses to domestic violence. The preliminary coding process was grounded in our previous experience as researchers in the field of domestic violence victim advocacy and as a victim advocate (one author has been a victim advocate for more than 4 years), and in our interest in the accomplishment of victimization as social problems work. This is an inductive form of coding in which Strauss (1987) has argued that researchers necessarily bring their personal and professional experience into the research process. The latter includes both previous research and “theoretical sensitivity” derived from knowledge of related literature (Strauss, 1987, p. 12). In earlier research on intimate stalking (Dunn, 2002), the first author became aware of some ways that advocates construct the social problem of domestic violence. For this study, we particularly wanted to know whether domestic violence victim advocates tell the “formula story” of battered women (Loseke, 2000) and draw on victim ideology (Best, 1997)—that together constitute a cultural narrative that constructs victimization as the opposite of agency in dramatic and morally unambiguous terms. If the violence is as severe, the batterers as villainous, and the victims as helpless as the story tells us, why would victims go back?

Our preliminary sensitizing concepts thus focused on the social construction of victims and victimization, including barriers to leaving violent relationships. The language of agency quickly emerged as a salient theme, and we returned to the data to search for accounts of victim behavior, the role of advocates in victim decision making and empowering victims, and the discussion of choice. The final coding phase emphasized stories of entrapment and complex language and accounts that simultaneously constructed agency and victimization. In the section that follows, we
narrow these interpretive frames in our discussion first of advocates’ narratives of victimization, then of agency, and last, of both at once.

Accomplishing Victimization and Agency: Advocates’ Accounts

In this interview excerpt, Kelly, a domestic violence victim advocate, is explaining returning to violent relationships as a problematic behavior of some of the battered women with whom she works:

Why does she keep choosing these men? Because it’s a pattern and…where she is in the pattern you know, maybe she gets out of an abusive relationship, maybe she gets right back into it, because she doesn’t identify the things in the pattern and that’s, again, what we need to do. That’s why sometimes it takes so long.

Kelly’s description reveals how she makes sense of the behavior of these clients, explains their actions in the language of popular and organizational understandings of domestic violence victimization, and touches on her own role in what she sees as a process. It also reveals a certain tension between her training (described below) to see her clients as victims and a powerful cultural tendency to frame even the most helpless among us as freely making choices. Her perspective mediates her subjective experiences, organizational subculture, and the larger culture within which they are situated. Battered women choose to return to or remain in violent relationships because they are unaware that they have other choices. This is an articulation of victimization and agency that makes it possible for Kelly and other advocates to understand the battered women they encounter in terms of the images of battered women they have learned. They continue to construct them as victims even in the face of their apparent agency. As they do their jobs, Kelly and the other advocates we interviewed attempt to manage multiple contradictory realities. Among them is the pervasive phenomenon of “battered women who stay,” a focus of concern in academia and the battered woman’s shelter for as long as battering has been defined as a social problem.

Victim advocates were most likely to talk about their clients in the context of their frustrations—that is, when asked about the challenges that they faced more generally and aspects of their jobs related to clients and clients’ behavior. The behavior that was far and away the most likely to be discussed in this regard was staying in and/or returning to violent relationships; 22 out of the 28 advocates who discussed frustrations mentioned this as a source. Verna, an advocate in a Sheriff’s department, described it as follows:

I’m going to tell you that this job puts you on an emotional rollercoaster, and it really does. There are days that I could be doing just fine and then, you know, get a call from the advocate over there that so-and-so that I’ve helped 4 days ago to get this emergency
order of protection and they got it, and then they just came in over there and signed the requests for dismissal... it’s frustrating in that respect. And I do, I try to stay level-headed... But sometimes I guess I am just human and I just can’t understand, but I try... and I don’t—I just try not to let that aggravation show toward a victim.

Like Verna, Maureen, an advocate in a prosecutor’s office, was concerned that she not reveal her strong feelings to her client but felt them nonetheless:

You don’t know how many times we have sat down, and, um, [I say], “Aw, she’s driving me crazy—I can’t handle this anymore!” Um, never to her, but there has been plenty of times when I have just had it. I have just—what are you gonna do? You know he’s gonna kill her before she ever gets it. What the hell do we have to do to get her out of here?... I mean, you get to that point where you’re beyond patience and you’re, um, on the professional side, you’ll always be professional but when you walk out that door, you’re ready to rip somebody’s head off. I mean, you are just—you have done everything feasible: stayed up late, been paged out, been to the hospital 18,000 times, and [the client says], “It’s going to be okay.”

Both Verna and Maureen reveal their distress at working with women who have become involved with the criminal justice system but who also remain involved with their abusive partners. In the first case, they ask that charges be dropped, and in the second, they minimize the violence. These and other forms of “recidivism” are the behaviors that upset advocates the most and the behaviors that they were most likely to attempt to explain to us (and simultaneously to themselves), implicitly recognizing the “deviance” this represents in popular perceptions. As Melissa, a court advocate, put it, victim blaming was “very common” and “random people will make a comment.” She then gave the following example:

There was a woman that I ran into in the hallway who was a construction worker, and she asked me, “Do you work here?” I said, “Yeah,” and she said, “I was wondering, you know,” she had all these questions, and she had all these ideas that “Well, women who go back to them are stupid, and...,” and I find that happens. I mean, so many people think that.

In this excerpt, Melissa gives a specific example to illustrate what she sees as an attitude common to the general public about women who appear to choose to be victimized by “going back.” She characterizes this as “victim blaming,” a designation that implicitly deflects blame from victims in its use as a pejorative. Throughout our interviews, we see advocates struggling to account for this behavior, even as they, too, find it problematic. Intellectually, they are able to delineate multiple constraints in their clients’ lives. Emotionally, they have a much harder time accepting these as sufficient reasons for returning. Linguistically, they slip seemingly inevitably into ways of accounting that emphasize choice. Below, we illustrate accounts that accomplish...
victimization and, alternately, those that emphasize agency and even victimization and agency simultaneously.

**Constructing Victimization: “So Many Barriers”**

We wanted to know the extent to which the stories of victim advocates were reflective of claims-making in the battered women’s movement (Dunn, 2005; Rothenberg, 2002), and if they were in fact like the “social problems formula stories” that Loseke (2000) found women learning to tell in support groups under the coaching of group facilitators. If so, these stories would account for the problem of “staying” by deflecting responsibility from women who, through this definitional process, become accepted as victims. Not surprisingly, the stories that advocates told took much the same form and had similar content to movement claims-making; advocates portrayed battered women as trapped in violent relationships by both external and internal forces. In addition, advocates drew on a vocabulary of process to explain both entrapment and the ability to leave.

*External barriers: “How am I going to feed my kids?”* Victim advocates primarily discussed external barriers to women leaving in economic terms and as a function of an unresponsive criminal justice system. Often without explicitly mentioning women’s structural disadvantages based on their gender, advocates portrayed battered women as isolated, unemployed, and responsible for the care of their children. Verna said,

> They literally have nowhere else to go. They literally have no job, no money, no funds. “I don’t have a job, I don’t have any money—how am I going to live? And how am I going to feed my kids?”

Karen, a court advocate, put it similarly: Battered women return “if they don’t have food, if they don’t have groceries, if they are unable to pay rent. If that person that is in jail is the main breadwinner.” Alice, a shelter coordinator, also says,

Victims have so many barriers between them and their freedom, and for them to be violence-free, . . . it’s so easy to say that “I would not put up with that, I’d throw his butt in jail.” But when you are talking about the breadwinner or you’re talking about the consequences when he gets out . . . it just, it didn’t take a long time for me to realize that they don’t have many choices.

Here, Alice implicitly recognizes the evaluative inquiry (Scott & Lyman, 1968) to which her clients are subjected by multiple audiences, when she refers to things that are “so easy to say” and claims that battered women have many reasons to stay or to return. Like others, she refers to the male partner as the “breadwinner” and brings
in, also implicitly, the idea of “consequences when he gets out,” suggesting that her clients’ situation may be worsened in more than one way by arresting the batterer. She also uses the language of choice—in this case, to deflect responsibility as she argues its absence. By saying that it didn’t take her long to realize this, she implies that it is an easily knowable facticity, and by coupling this statement with her quoting of an ignorant generalized other, she relieves victims of blame.

Advocates were also quick to frame the criminal justice system as a contributor to their clients’ difficulties in this regard. Verna described a judge who “makes extreme, extreme moral judgments on people” that discourage women from pursuing prosecution: “So there are some victims that leave that courtroom crying because they have absolutely been raked over the coals,” she said. How do clients respond? According to Verna, “And then they’re like, ‘I’m not coming back. I am not coming back, I’m not going through that again.’” Police officers can also be unsympathetic. Sue, a court advocate working in a shelter, discussed how “dual arrest” policies inhibit battered women from calling police. Sue also talked about judges, including one who would ask women, “What did you do to provoke this?” and another who tells clients, “You know, this is only a piece of paper—it’s not going to stop a bullet, it’s not going to keep you safe.” Sue added, “I think to myself: These people think ‘I got an order of protection,’ and then a judge tells them this? It’s got to make ’em feel less protected.” By pointing to these kinds of attitudes and policies in the criminal justice system, both Verna and Sue suggest reasons why women might return to or remain in violent relationships, further absolving their clients of responsibility.

Interestingly, however, some of the criticisms that advocates have of the criminal justice system reveal the behaviors of battered women most likely to discredit them. This shows how agency, like competence (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003), is accomplished by law enforcement actors. Felicia, a shelter coordinator, described a judge who told a client, “Well, if you wouldn’t have moved out six times, this wouldn’t have happened to you!” and another who admonished a victim, “Well, you keep going back for more, don’t ya? Are you really going to leave this time? Or [if you are not] I’m not granting this order.” Similarly, Alice reported a prosecutor that “scorns a woman for coming in and asking to press charges” and tells her clients, “If you keep this order of protection, then you keep it through the plenary, then I’ll consider pressing charges at that time, but I know that you will turn around, kiss and make up, everything’s going to be fine.” And consider the following statement by Felicia:

If this has gone on time and time again, law enforcement doesn’t really respond all that well, um, [they think], “Just those two fighting again,” and if it is that one time when she’s really going to leave, she doesn’t have any protection.

Even as Felicia explains why women might not leave, she characterizes the situation as one that repeats “time and time again,” a framing that implicitly suggests that
it could be otherwise, especially when contrasted with “that one time” when a woman is making a legitimate call. This is an account for battered women’s behavior that constructs agency as well as victimization, and it is a kind of typification to which we will devote significant attention. First, however, we discuss additional categories of constructed victimization, the “internal barriers” constituted by victims’ personal histories, emotions, “denial,” and the “cycle of violence.”

**Internal barriers:** “It’s a cycle, it’s a cycle.” The internal barriers that advocates describe, like the external barriers, mirror the claims of activists and bring in some factors less well-discussed. Advocates accounted for their clients’ behavior by drawing on their personal histories, for example. Felicia said some of her clients have “been messed up from things that happen to them when they were a child,” and Latonya, a shelter supervisor, explained that being a victim was “I guess you’d call a learned behavior, you know,” adding that battered women “grow up in it . . . and the first person that they go to find is just like their father or the mother’s boyfriend . . . and then they see themselves as their mother, in the same situation their mothers were in.” Melissa claimed that most of her clients had been abused as children, so that “their self esteem is already about that big when they get into a relationship.”

Although Rothenberg (2002) did not find mention of love in social movement accounts, Dunn (2004) did find this as one of the emotions activists described, and this is reflected in our interviews with victim advocates. Melissa said that “a lot of times . . . the victim has stayed with him as long as they have because they usually feel sorry for them in some way.” She also included feelings of guilt and disloyalty as emotions that inhibited leaving or seeking legal remedies. Heather, a court advocate, said, “Victims feel guilty; they feel guilty that this person is going to jail. Even though they may beat them for years, they do feel guilty about that, they don’t want to hurt that person.” She added, “Sometimes they miss that person, that’s why they go back. . . . Love is also a reason, that’s also, um, an obstacle to leaving.”

Advocates also mention the phenomenon of “denial,” a social construction that is particularly significant because it implicitly and sometimes explicitly presumes that there is a reality that advocates have access to but of which victims are unaware, thereby creating a role for the advocate whose job becomes “breaking through.” Sylvia, an advocate in a prosecutors’ office, said that her clients would explain why they wanted to drop charges (a behavior that advocates associate with staying in violent relationships) by saying, “Nothing really happened” or “He didn’t mean to do it. It’s the first time it has happened; I think he needs counseling.” Felicia drew on multiple vocabularies of motive, arguing that, “There’s a lot of shame for being in that situation, a lot of denial . . . there is a lot of denial that goes along with being a victim. Nobody wants to be a victim of anything.” Similarly, Heather said,
It’s also hard because they love this person and they trusted this person... and they don’t want to believe that this is their life... that this person that they love is capable of doing this. And I think that is why denial happens... there’s also this sort of issue of, you know, you believe the best in the person you love.

By casting their clients’ beliefs as “denial,” advocates both explain victims’ problematic behavior yet discount their lived experience, a feature of reality construction that becomes even more salient when advocates discuss how they “empower” victims, as we shall see. This is because “denial” is part of a process of entrapment, according to an understanding of domestic violence that has its roots in the influential claims of Lenore Walker (1979) and that is part of the local culture of every advocate we interviewed. Walker (1979) explained domestic violence as a cyclical process in which there is a tension-building stage, followed by violence, followed by a “honeymoon stage,” in which the repentant and/or manipulative abuser apologizes to the victim, promises never to be violent again, and showers her with affection. This confuses women and contributes to their “learned helplessness” (Walker, 1979), and our interviews are laden with this imagery.

Sylvia said battered women stay “because they are in a cycle and it’s almost as though, I mean, that’s a way of living for them and they have to break the cycle.” Heather suggested that this process continues even after intervention: “Batterers are manipulative... it is part of the cycle that is going on here... just because she has an order of protection doesn’t mean that she is all of a sudden completely autonomous and empowered to start making her own decisions.” Felicia said, “A lot of times they’re sweet-talked back, [in] the honeymoon phase... the whole honeymoon phase is wonderful.” When Verna gets upset with her clients who request dismissals, she said, “I try to stay level headed, like ‘Now Verna, remember this, it’s a cycle, it’s a cycle.’” Sylvia’s comment is very similar when she said, “It gets frustrating to me sometimes to see a woman being manipulated so much that I have to remind myself of the cycle of violence all the time.” She said that she tells victims, “Don’t you see what he’s doing?... He held you in a house for 4 hours and he’s in jail and he’s tired and wants to get out. He wants to come home, [and] that’s why he’s saying he’s sorry.” By framing victimization as a process, advocates account to themselves as well as to others for battered women who “stay.” That they draw on this typification when they find the behavior most upsetting suggests the power of this collaborative accomplishment as well as its ubiquity.

Constructing Agency: “Can You Own What You Did?”

Thus far we have shown how victim advocates accomplish victimization for their clients. They align the battered women with whom they interact with social movement and popular typifications of this social problem as they attempt to account for the behavior of returning to violent relationships, particularly problematic after
Interventions have begun. We have seen that advocates do, in fact, do this kind of “social problems work,” and that it is much like the claims-making of activists, media, and social scientists (Dunn, 2004, 2005; Loseke, 1992; Rothenberg, 2002). Importantly, advocates are just as likely to talk in ways that frame their clients as agents, and they do so by drawing on the language of choice. Here we examine advocates’ interactional constitution of agency as they describe victims as unaware of the choices they have, as making bad choices, and as capable (with the help of advocates) of coming to recognize their choices in a process of recovery. These images of battered women, like the accounts we have already described, may similarly seek to explain their returning or staying. But they do so in ways that not only fail to deflect responsibility from victims but rather attribute it to them. These attributions are unlike a vocabulary of victimization, which is entirely consistent with claims-makers’ historical efforts to explain staying in ways that deflect blame. They are also unlike more recent attempts by both scholars and practitioners to recognize the many alternatives to leaving that are yet resistant and agentic. Instead, these typifications reflect a very different orientation to battered women. This orientation conforms to a more dualistic conception of people as either victims or agents but not both.

Central to advocates’ accomplishment of agency is characterizing victims as simply failing to recognize that they do, in fact, have choices. This framing simultaneously establishes the role of advocates as revealers of these choices. Sylvia explained battered women who returned as follows: “I don’t think it’s so much that they don’t want to do anything; it is they don’t realize they have options with this.” She also sees herself as implicated in the process; even if clients are successful in leaving, “their next relationship will probably be abusive, too, unless we can change that mindset, build that self-esteem, let them know that they can make decisions on their own.” Many advocates see revealing choices as a defining characteristic of their work, in keeping with the “woman-centered” ideology of advocacy in which they have been trained (a subject for which we will provide more detail in our concluding remarks). Claire, a shelter director, said that it is “part and parcel in trying to help” clients, and that she tries to help women “be stronger, feel okay, and be able to have control over things in her own life . . . [and] at least learn a little bit and identify, ‘Why am I doing some of this stuff if it’s not working?’” She tells clients, “You don’t have to keep doing it,” and said that her role is to “at least break it down where people see they have choices. That choices exist.” Michelle said that battered women “need somebody to help them understand that, they need somebody to tell them that they can do it, they can do it [leave].”

Here is an excerpt from our interview with Bessy, a shelter caseworker, whose discussion closely mirrors her training, as seen in the following:

It’s a lot about . . . encouraging the clients to make their own choices . . . to really encourage them more that they can make their own choices, that they can work on their own goals . . . a lot of them when they come in are very defeated. They don’t think they have anything they can do themselves . . . [we] help them self-determine, make their
own choices, be responsible for their own actions and get the focus off the abuser and get the focus on themselves.

This is a particularly telling characterization. In it, like the other advocates, Bessy depicts battered women as having choices and advocates as helping: in this case, “encouraging” women who do not think that they have any choices or “anything they can do themselves.” Women who listen to the advocates are able to “self-determine,” a terminology that suggests freedom from batterers as well as the dictates of advocates. But even more important, Bessy explicitly places responsibility on battered women in her injunction to “get the focus off the abuser.” This is very different from what is typical of the accomplishment of victimization. Rather, it is a social construction of agency.

Advocates also discussed clients as women who make “bad choices,” another typification in which they often make a role for themselves as well as for battered women. Sometimes they do this in the context of explaining clients’ discrepant actions to themselves; Kelly, an assistant director at a shelter, said that advocates have to accept that if you do everything you possibly can do and she still decides to go back and still decides to make a bad choice, it’s not about you and you need to separate from it’s about her making a bad choice.

Most advocates see themselves as showing women the difference between good and bad choices. Bessy, in part of her discussion of getting the “focus off the abuser,” said of “a lot of clients” that “she needs to get the focus on who she is and why she is making these choices. Why is she attracted to somebody who doesn’t respect her?” Michelle brought herself into the equation when she said of battered women, They’re just normal. They got involved in a situation that is detrimental for their lives. But they’re not crazy—it is about choices. That’s what I tell them all the time. I think the other part of what I think my job is, is to help explore choices with them. We’ve all made bad ones, does that mean that we have to go on forever making bad ones? Absolutely not.

This excerpt accounts for battered women’s behavior as just one of multiple possibilities and clearly frames clients as having the ability to refrain from making “bad ones” once the advocate has illuminated the difference. Sylvia implied that battered women are agents making questionable decisions when she said,

I let people make their own choices. You know, if they want to stay in the relationship, I’ll just—I’m an option giver. I tell everybody options and everybody makes choices, but they have to deal with the consequences.

Like Michelle, Sylvia constructed herself as an “option giver,” and her use of the term “consequences” suggests that these choices are not all equally privileged. Claire was much less neutral in her couching of the issue.
What we are trying to intervene and help with is really intimate stuff about how accountable are people, and what are your values: Can you own what you did? Clean up your own mess? Or are you going to play games and shoot your mouth and keep being an asshole?

Although this excerpt perhaps reveals mostly Claire’s frustrations with certain victims, the use of phrases such as “own what you did” and of words like “accountable” clearly constructs victims as anything but “a rather passive, indeed helpless recipient of injury or injustice” (Holstein & Miller, 1997a, p. 43, emphasis in original). This illustrates the tensions that the advocates routinely face as they struggle to reconcile victim ideology with victim behavior that they perceive as problematic.

Yet another way in which advocates accomplish agency is in their constructions of battered women as going through a process of recovery. Unlike the circular “cycle of violence” that keeps victims trapped in violent relationships, this process is more linear and constitutes victims, often with the help of advocates, as coming to recognize their options and choosing to leave. Like the typifications of agency we have already discussed, these formulations invest women with choices and shift responsibility back to them. Bessy described one of the rewards of her job as “seeing something click in a client’s head... like a light bulb comes on, like they finally see that there are other possibilities out there... [then] you say, ‘Oh my goodness, what a turnaround in this person’ and that keeps you going.” Karen was similarly encouraged by seeing a battered woman “go through the order, watching her make the changes, watching her stick with it even in the arrests... [and] become independent.” Melissa described her feelings as follows:

The women who come into here to the shelter and after a few days get angry, angry at him, angry at themselves, and then after that anger goes away, they say, “You know what, we can make a better life, there are opportunities, there are things we can do out there,” and that’s exciting, that’s exciting for me, to watch those women emerge.

In each of these excerpts, despite their pervasive comprehension of the constraints battered women face, the language the advocates use inevitably places decision-making in the hands of their clients. It is the women, not their abusers, whom they seem to expect to “turn around,” “make the changes,” and “make a better life.” And importantly, the only choice the advocates see as appropriate, the only acceptable agency, is leaving the violent relationship.

Constructing Victimization and Agency Simultaneously: “Why They Are Picking These Men”

In the preceding discussion, we have shown that although victim advocates tell stories about battered women that construct them as victims, they also constitute them as women making choices, an “agent ideology” that we believe is at least as pervasive in contemporary U.S. culture as “victim ideology” (Best, 1997). To further illustrate this,
we present one final set of excerpts from our interviews, in which advocates accomplish agency even as they create victimization. When Bessy said, “It’s not just the abuser. There [are] some reasons why they are picking these men—most of them have low self-esteem or they have drug or alcohol problems or have been abused themselves as a kid,” she invests in battered women the power to choose (“picking”) even as she attempts to deflect responsibility for choosing badly. Melissa couples agency and victimization in the same sentence: A battered woman is simply “a woman who made a bad choice, and probably she didn’t have enough information up front to make the right choice.” Kelly typified battered women as women who “might have a lifetime of scarring” from childhood sexual abuse and who has left “everything she has earned, everything she has left dear to her” as nonetheless “frustrating” and “exasperating” when she “makes a really poor choice.” And consider the following story that Meg, an advocate in a prosecutors’ office, told:

This one woman was talking about how her husband had kept her kidnapped for like 3 days and had beaten her so severely and shoved aerosol cans up her, just horrible things. And then she went and had his name tattooed on her hip and wouldn’t testify and was just mad at everybody. . . . Fortunately, [prosecutors] were able to get the testimony in or have witnesses come in outside of her, [and] they were able to get a conviction on him. Of course, she was really mad at them.

In this “horror story” (Johnson, 1995), Meg constructs a victim of extreme violence only to then constitute her as a woman who not only returns but who does so in a very dramatic fashion. In spite of the abuse that the woman has experienced, she commits herself permanently to the relationship—the tattoo symbolizing this for the advocate as well as her client. The story constructs “ironic incongruity” (Johnson, 1995), rather than suggesting that the violence may have led to the returning. This foregrounds the woman’s agency and glosses her victimization. Perhaps, then, we can see this story as a quintessential representation of the tension between victimization and agency in our culture and one that hints at the outcome when the two contest one another. Below, we take up this thread as well as other possibilities that emerge from this study.

Constructing and Constraining Choice: “Crap, Crappier, and Crappiest”

We began this inquiry by wondering whether domestic violence victim advocates tell the “social problems formula story” (Loseke, 2000) of domestic violence in ways that deflect responsibility from battered women, as Holstein and Miller (1997a) suggest that the collaborative accomplishment of victimization must. Did their accounts conform to the feeling rules governing sympathy (Clark, 1997; Dunn,
2004, 2005; Loseke, 2000)? Did they draw on tenets of what Best (1997) has called “victim ideology,” which defines victimization as “morally unambiguous” and “delegitimizes doubts about victims’ claims” (p. 13)? Previous research suggests that all these are true of the claims of activists in the battered women’s movement, much social science research, and of the “official reality” of shelter workers (Dunn, 2004; Loseke, 1992). The phenomenon of returning briefly or repeatedly to violent relationships is ubiquitous in the literature on battered women and in the lived experience of the advocates whom we interviewed, so we also questioned whether advocates’ stories reconciled this clearly discrepant “heterogeneity” (Loseke, 1992) with these cultural victimization narratives.

As we have shown, our findings are decidedly mixed. Victim advocates certainly seek to absolve battered women of responsibility for their own victimization and talk a great deal about the constraints on leaving that their clients face. We found quite interesting, however, the myriad ways in which advocates diverge from traditional constructions of victimization. They do so in a manner that dramatically reinforces the “rules” that dictate a dichotomous relationship between victimization and agency. Not only do the advocates assign responsibility to victims for making “choices” (among which is returning to a violent relationship after being offered assistance and guidance), but in doing so, they “shift the focus” away from the batterer and from the very constraints that, they have argued, their clients face. These stories, in their telling, construct more ambiguity than not. Moreover, they raise the question of whether there are perhaps insurmountable difficulties inherent in conforming to the ideology that “claims of victims must be respected” (Best, 1997, p. 13). This is an issue with implications that we shall address as we conclude. First, however, we want to consider some sources of these apparent contradictions.

There are a number of possibilities, one of which may be that agency is like competence, a quality that is so “fundamental to human interaction [that] it is part of ensuring smooth interaction and therefore ubiquitous” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 281). In this reading, our sociability inclines us to find qualities whose existence may be objectively uncertain, like the caregivers in Gubrium’s (2003) study of Alzheimer’s patients. This could account for the pervasiveness of agentic constructions in a case in which one would expect accountability to be submerged, rather than highlighted, particularly when advocates refer to their interactions with their clients.

Another possibility may spring from a function of the “local cultures” (Gubrium, 1989) of the agencies employing the advocates whom we interviewed. All of the advocates in this study were required to receive certification through completion of a statewide training program primarily focused on the dynamics of domestic violence and the fostering of a “victim-centered” approach to counseling and advocacy. Victim-centered advocacy, feminist in its origins (Davies et al., 1998), requires that at all times women seeking services be encouraged to make their own decisions regarding what is best for them individually. Among the victim “rights” listed in the widely circulated Handbook for Domestic Violence Victims,¹ published by the statewide coalition in 2004 are these (emphases in original):
You are not alone.
You are not the cause of someone else’s violent behavior.
You do not deserve to be abused.
You have the right to expect and demand help and respect!
You have the right to make your own choices.

These five statements summarize the core principles of the victim-centered approach, and most of the advocates indicated that they were guides to interaction between advocates and battered women to which they attempted to adhere. Advocates accepted that their role consisted of assisting battered women by encouraging their independence while suspending their own judgment or personal biases. Notable in the statements above is the simultaneity of victimization and agency; victims do not cause their victimization, and they can choose not to be victimized. Moreover, the very term “victim-centered” suggests the primacy of victims’ choices in the therapeutic and legal processes with which advocates assist; it is victims’ choices that must be privileged, regardless of how advocates might assess them. Thus, advocacy is imbued with the language of choice in the shelters and the law enforcement organizations via the intervention of the state and influenced by feminism. The interpretive processes in which advocates engage at the local level “combine with more general vocabularies” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 287).

This raises another consideration and signals a contribution that this study makes to our understanding of these more general vocabularies. We believe that a therapeutic vocabulary of motive combines with popular understandings of domestic violence, fueled perhaps by the battered women’s movement, but inadvertently redefining victimization in the process. The result is an individualistic typification of battered women that constructs them as the agents of their own liberation and, by implication, their imprisonment as well. In Kendrick’s (1998) research with shelter workers, she found a persistent tendency to explain battered women’s “staying” in psychological terms, similar to the “internal barriers” that the advocates we interviewed describe. She concluded that “the contemporary dominant discourse on domestic violence relies on therapeutic vocabularies” (p. 170) that shift attention away from social-structural and political factors and toward individuals. Similarly, Berns (2004) has asserted, based on her analysis of the social construction of domestic violence in women’s magazines, that mass media literally “frame the victim” in ways that are “ignoring the political and social dimensions of power” (p. 156).

Of particular interest are the “my problem and how I solved it” stories that Berns found throughout the magazines she reviewed. In these stories, which rely on what Berns (2004) has called the “victim empowerment frame”:

The message is that the victims are responsible for ending the abuse. Authors give advice on how to leave and encourage victims to take control of their lives and get out.
Victims are told explicitly that it is up to them to take responsibility for their own lives. (pp. 156-157)

These stories are very much like the stories advocates told us, as we have seen. Ultimately, the power of this combination, of psychological explanation and individual accountability, may reside in their elective affinity. The “psy” disciplines, as Rose (1996) has called them, spring from and contribute to a now “fundamental” notion of a “free, autonomous self” (p. 1). The psychological paradigm is so potent, Rose (1996) has argued, that in Western cultures “it has become impossible to conceive of personhood, to experience one’s own or another’s personhood, or to govern oneself or others without psy” (p. 34). Our argument here is that it is, as a result, equally impossible to conceive of “personhood” without agency. It is what Billig et al. (1988) have called an “ideological dilemma.” These are the foundational contradictions embedded in understandings of everyday life that enable thinking and debate. Like teachers’ argument for the merits of the “opposed” educational ideologies of authority and equality, the tension between victimization and agency “rather than stemming from two distinct and opposed ideological bases . . . may well be alternate expressions of a single, though dilemmatic, ideology” (Billig et al., 1988, p. 54). Agency has no meaning without victimization and vice versa, but the reality of battered women who stay produces a “full-scale dilemma, when a choice has to be made” (Billig et al., 1988, p. 55). We assert that agency is the default resolution to the dilemma. No matter how strong the reasons for its rhetorical oppression, it emerges triumphant in the end.

What does this mean for our understanding of victim advocacy, of the social construction of victimization, and of the social construction of reality? To answer these questions, we need to grapple with the implications of reality construction for the objective world. The victim advocates whom we interviewed are caught on the horns of the ideological dilemma. Because they are taught through their organizational socialization into their profession to empower battered women by revealing and providing them with choices, there is a powerful tendency to persist in “putting the focus on the victim.” Thus, no matter how well this is couched in terms of a “victim-centered approach,” advocates may thereby inadvertently diminish the constraints that battered women face (not all of which are psychological). At the same time, the rules of the larger culture force an understanding of victims as only those who are helpless and powerless, making it ultimately as challenging for the advocates to manage this apparent contradiction as it is for the general public, despite all their experience and best efforts.

It is remarkable, in addition, that choosing to stay or return, although consistently and insistently framed as a battered woman’s choice, is not something that the advocates ever acceded the status of a valid choice. Even as the advocates attempt to neutralize this “deviance” (Sykes & Matza, 1957), they reinforce what Baker (1997, p. 56) has called the “dominant cultural script” provided by social and police services for battered women, the script that includes “edicts” to leave their abusers. As Baker and
others (Bowker, 1983, Lempert, 1996, 1997) have pointed out, leaving may not be the best choice, and some women may empower themselves more by staying. This may be a point both intellectually and emotionally impossible for advocates to concede. Loseke (1992) has argued that because the social problem of battered women was constructed as severe and always escalating, shelters and leaving home became the only solution. So long as advocates understand violence in this way, it does not make sense to them to see solutions in staying. Coupled with their exposure to the horrific consequences for many women who do return, it is no wonder that advocates’ emotional response to this is so strong and so negative. What is problematic is that what may, in some cases, be a real “option” for battered women is systematically, if subtly, discounted. In the statewide certification training to which all advocates are exposed, more extensive consideration of this choice might be mandated. “Staying” necessitates more than a safety plan, and battered women can possibly be empowered within their violent relationships (Peled et al., 2000). The inherent tendency toward victim blaming that we found in victim-centered approaches that emphasize “choice” could also be a topic of discussion. Finally, shifting emphasis toward the behavior and treatment of batterers could increase the visibility of the constraints that battered women face.

In the realm of social problems theory, we are suggesting here that agency is as “pervasively dialogic” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 281) as victimization, mindedness, competence, or any other socially significant human characteristic. However, the dialogue in question, in this case, is not that which arises in advocacy in action, in the conference rooms and courtrooms, and at the crime scenes in which the advocates advocate for their clients. Rather, the advocates have socially constructed their work and their clients in conversations with researchers, albeit that in the majority of the interviews, we were perceived as fellow advocates. The data, then, do not tell us the circumstances under which advocates construct clients as victims rather than agents. We note that it appears that victim constructions predominate when the audience is hostile or comprised of “outsiders,” such as the unsympathetic law enforcement personnel that advocates discussed. We also believe that because agent constructions emerged in the context of advocates’ frustrations, and that advocates are most likely to be candid about their feelings with fellow advocates, that these images are probably more visible when the audience is one of “insiders.”

We conclude by reminding ourselves of the larger context of these interviews specifically and the problems of violence against women and victim advocacy more generally. Our culture is not only individualistic, but it also remains sexist ideologically, politically, and economically. It is not just victims who are not “supposed” to act as agents but also women who are the vast majority of people who are battered. Advocates struggle to make sense out of clients’ behavior and must do so in organizations and communities that inadequately value and support the work that they are doing. The contradictions with which the advocates grapple mirror persistent ways of talking about images of agency and victimization, despite advocates’ in-depth experience with real battered women. Victimization becomes a fragile typification in the face
of contradictory lived experience and an overarching cultural predisposition to see this experience in terms of choice. In a “victim contest” (Holstein & Miller, 1997a), what we have termed “agent ideology” likely trumps “victim ideology” (Best, 1997).

Finally, as for clients’ presumed ability to exercise agency by leaving, in some circumstances, to speak of choice at all is to obscure and gloss, as Lisa Sanchez (1999, p. 41) has argued happens, under what she calls “conditions of excessive constraint.” An advocate (Felicia) put it more succinctly, saying, “Your choices are crap, crappier, and crappiest. So what are you going to choose?” In situations such as these, which are all too familiar to the advocates, their own efforts to grasp at solutions intensely mirror those of their clients.

Note

1. The authors have requested that the state where they conducted their research not be named to further protect the anonymity of the respondents. This is why no reference appears for the Handbook. For more information, please contact the lead author.

References


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