

Between a Rock and a Soft Place: Developmental Research and the Child Advocacy Process

Thomas Grisso

Department of Psychiatry, University of Massachusetts Medical School

Laurence Steinberg

Department of Psychology, Temple University

Developmental researchers face a perilous path as they set out to perform research with child advocacy potential. We offer our observations regarding how researchers can navigate the path between science (the “rock”) and advocacy (the “soft place”), based on our recent experience as directors of the MacArthur Juvenile Adjudicative Competence Study. Scientific research can be extraordinarily effective in the child advocacy process, but science and advocacy are very different endeavors. Scientific credibility demands impartiality, whereas advocacy is never impartial. For psychological scientists to be effective in conducting research relevant to child advocacy, it is important to maintain our identity as scientists and resist any efforts on the part of others to label this work as advocacy.

Since 1997 we have directed the Juvenile Adjudicative Competence Study, an investigation of the MacArthur Foundation’s Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, which examined the capacities of adolescents to participate as defendants in their own trial (Grisso et al., 2003). The study used developmental psychology principles and research methods to assist society in addressing questions of policy, law, and practice regarding youths’ competence to stand trial, without which their adjudication is unconstitutional. The study asked three basic questions: (a) Do youths differ from adults in their understanding of the adjudicative process, ability to assist counsel in their defense, and ability to make decisions about constitutional rights afforded all delinquency and criminal defendants? (b) If they do differ, what

ages or developmental characteristics best define youths with lesser capacities as defendants? (c) What are the implications of the answers to these questions for law, policy, and practice in an era when youths are more frequently faced with adjudications involving substantial penalties?

This applied developmental research effort provided us an opportunity to experience and examine the nature of child advocacy based on developmental research, and especially the conflicts that developmental scientists face at various stages of the research and advocacy process. We offer here a commentary based on that experience. One of the chief lessons we learned was that, ironically, to be effective in conducting research relevant to child advocacy, it was important to maintain our identity as scientists and resist efforts on the part of others to label our work as advocacy. Scientific credibility demands impartiality; advocacy, by its very definition, is never impartial. One must not confuse the conduct of the research with the conduct of advocacy, yet projects like ours—aimed at producing information for the policy arena—inevitably challenge that distinction.

The Juvenile Adjudicative Competence Study occurred in three phases. In the first, we sought to crystallize the social problem and conceptualize the developmental psychological perspective in addressing it. Applied researchers are familiar with this process, intended to assure that the research they contemplate is designed with a clear notion of the social problem they hope to address. The second phase involved the design and conduct of the study. The third phase consisted of interpreting, packaging, reporting, and announcing the

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Correspondence should be addressed to Thomas Grisso, University of Massachusetts Medical School, Department of Psychiatry, Worcester, MA 01655. E-mail: thomas.grisso@umassmed.edu

results in a manner designed to influence policy and assist legal and clinical practice.

This third phase of most projects is the time for dissemination. In contrast, we began dissemination in the first phase. Even before we performed our study, we took our developmental conceptualization of the problem to the public to stimulate others to think about the issue of youths' capacities in the legal context, thus preparing them to consider our future results. We continued dissemination during data collection, informing developmental researchers and potential consumers of the study results about the design itself and our progress. In the third phase—which is not concluded at this writing—we launched a series of efforts designed to have maximum and rapid impact on decision makers in policy, law, and practice regarding the question of youths' competence to stand trial.

As Urie Bronfenbrenner (1974) once wrote, developmental scientists who conduct applied research often find themselves between a rock¹ (science) and a soft place (advocacy). With regard to the "rock," the advocacy nature of this effort received quiet but substantial criticism from some of our scientist colleagues. This was not the way to do applied science, they said. Who will believe your results when they are released, given that you have worn your advocacy intentions so brightly on your sleeve before ever having begun? At this moment, we cannot say that their warnings were not correct, because the third phase of our effort has not yet been played through to its conclusion.

With regard to the soft place, our colleagues concerned with advocating for children could not understand our caution about commenting on the issue before the study had actually been conducted. Their view was that the science would ultimately turn out to be on their side of the issue—after all, everyone "knew" that children were not as competent as adults—and there was no reason to hold back when asked to anticipate the outcome of the empirical study.

What we offer here is an explanation of our efforts to navigate a reasonable path through this perilous terrain, describing what we experienced, learned, and decided as we made the journey. We suspect that the nature of the conflicts we experienced and the decisions we made are not specific to developmental research and child advocacy, but can be found in any psychological, sociological, or medical research that has potential for advocacy regarding human welfare. We do not attempt that translation, but we invite other researchers in the biological, behavioral, and social sciences to do so.

¹We like Bronfenbrenner's (1974) creative phrase—casting science as "hard" evidence and advocacy as belief guided by "soft" emotions—but the analogy should not be carried too far. What passes as science can sometimes be quite soft, and one encounters principled advocacy that is as solid as a rock.

Principles to Guide the Science and Advocacy Process

When developmental scientists choose what they will study about children and their welfare, they are often motivated by personal beliefs and values about the importance of child protection. Their concern about children's potential suffering or victimization by social injustices properly draws and compels them to apply their science to achieve some end that will produce the conditions they desire or change the conditions they abhor.

However, once having applied personal values to choose a course of scientific research, scientists wanting to contribute to child advocacy must operate with guiding principles that are synonymous with the purpose of the behavioral sciences—to produce reliable information about the human condition. The heart of that endeavor is a commitment to impartiality of method and a willingness to share the results of the work with the public in ways that reflect the research findings fairly and thoroughly.

Scientists' authority to enter the arena of social change rests on the way they discover and report information that may influence change. This begins with the critical and cautious way they put together what is already known in child development to formulate hypotheses and make assertions about the probable relevance of developmental information for social problems. It continues with the construction of a research design that offers an unbiased test of hypotheses about children and their development. Scientists need not be impartial in their motives for seeking reliable information—and the truth of the matter is that usually they hope for certain outcomes over others—but the information that they create is bankrupt if it is the product of a stacked deck. They will utterly fail if their *motives* drive their *methods*.

Therein lies one of the important struggles for applied developmental researchers. To truly advocate for children, researchers must proceed to design their studies *as if they do not care* whether their beliefs and intuitions about what is best for children are borne out by their research. They must formulate their hypotheses on the basis of existing developmental research findings and relevant theories, constructing their research methods as though they hope to prove themselves wrong.

If they obtain results consistent with their expectations (or even if they do not), their struggle as researchers continues during the process of dissemination, when they must report their findings honestly and straightforwardly. Scientists may point out what their findings imply for child advocates, but they cannot "spin" the findings in a way that makes them appear more conclusive than they are or bury the findings that conflict with the scientist's values. Moreover, when

they set out to produce scientific information that is relevant for a social issue, scientists have a responsibility to facilitate its application in the real world. All research results have limitations in their application to real-world problems. All research results can be misapplied, misinterpreted, and misconstrued as they make their way into social policy arenas. All research results that pertain to a truly important social problem will be severely challenged and the studies that produced them placed under a microscope of criticism. In the context of these dynamics, researchers must struggle with the question of impartiality, remaining alert to when they are properly advocating for the quality of their findings and when their concern for the social issue threatens to carry them beyond the credible value of their results.

As we conducted the MacArthur Juvenile Adjudicative Competence Study, these principles provided a context in which we could meet many challenges in our effort, as scientists interested in contributing to child advocacy, to conduct research intended to have an impact on policy and practice in the adjudication of delinquent youths. We organize our observations about this process chronologically according to general stages in the research program

Phase I: Advocacy in Conceptualization

As we began to conceptualize the study, we gave much thought to how we would frame the research so that it simultaneously would be useful to advocates and scientifically honest. At the most fundamental level was the need to recognize that our purpose was to answer a question—the proper role of science—rather than to make a point—the proper role of advocacy. We were not trying to “prove” that adolescents are less competent than adults. We were trying to learn whether, and in what ways, they might be. A well-designed study leaves open the possibility that the hypothesis will not be confirmed. We had no problem making a commitment to full and honest disclosure if the study findings suggested that juveniles were at greater risk than adults for incompetence. However, were we willing to be just as forthcoming if our results were different, knowing that the research might then be used to argue in favor of policies that exposed relatively more juveniles to adult court procedures and adult criminal sanctions? We made a decision that, as scientists, we were obligated to publicize the findings of the study regardless of the results and that any special cautions we might want to raise would have to be done as part of the public dissemination of the findings.

This tension between wanting to help those who advocate for children and needing to uphold standards of scientific integrity pervaded the study throughout its

conceptualization phase. For scientists concerned with advocacy, one of the hardest things to do is to say, “We don’t know the answer to that,” when our gut says that erring on the side of caution might end up hurting children’s interests. In the end, however, the scientific basis for advocacy depends entirely on scientists being scrupulously honest about what they do and do not know.

One example illustrates this point. Almost everyone will recall a tragic school shooting that took place a few years ago in Jonesboro, Arkansas, when an 11-year-old and a 13-year-old shot and killed several classmates. Soon after that, a state legislator introduced a bill to lower the age from 14 to 10 for allowing juveniles accused of murder to be transferred to adult court for trial. In an effort to stem the understandable tide of anguish that had swelled in the aftermath of the shootings, the public defender’s office in Little Rock asked both of us to come to Arkansas to meet with key players and testify before a governor’s commission on youth violence and a legislative subcommittee of the Arkansas House of Representatives. One of the issues raised in the course of these presentations was whether individuals younger than 14 were likely to be competent to stand trial as adults. The stance that we took in our respective testimonies was that we did not know whether individuals of this age were likely to be competent to stand trial and that this was a question we were investigating. However, we also noted that, given extant developmental research on the cognitive and psychosocial capacities of this age group (which we described), we thought it prudent to make sure that any adolescent of the age in question in Arkansas’s debate who was a candidate for transfer was evaluated for competence before the transfer decision was made. In the end, as reported in *The New York Times* (Firestone, 1999), our testimony persuaded legislators to amend the proposed legislation with this provision.

The trip to Arkansas had put both of us in a somewhat awkward position. We were called in as science experts, not advocates. At the same time, we both believed it unlikely that many adolescents under 14 would be competent to stand trial—a belief now confirmed by our research (Grisso et al., 2003). We also believed that laws permitting the transfer of younger juveniles to adult court without sufficient protections for incompetent youth were probably a bad idea. Yet, had we testified to these beliefs as facts before our study had been launched (much less completed), we would have threatened the credibility of the research when it was finished. Our answer—“We don’t know but we have reason to suspect”—permitted us to speak in a way that advocated for children while maintaining our credibility as scientists.

As noted earlier, many of our communication and dissemination activities actually preceded the start of the study. Even before data collection had begun, our

MacArthur Foundation Research Network had completed work on *Youth on Trial* (Grisso & Schwartz, 2000), a book that raised questions about age differences in adjudicative competence and criminal blameworthiness. Media inquiries about the issue, therefore, began even as our study was being launched. Members of our research team frequently received calls from the press when high-profile cases involving adolescents tried as adults came into the public eye, and, not surprisingly, we were often asked to weigh in on the debate over the developmental appropriateness of trying an adolescent in criminal court.

Because the study had just begun, the most we could say in response to journalists' inquiries was that we believed that it was reasonable to raise questions about the competence of adolescents to stand trial, that the answers to these questions awaited empirical examination, and that we were in the process of conducting the relevant research. Many social scientists would not venture even this far, assuming that, in the absence of data, they had little to contribute to the discussion. However, our willingness to respond to press inquiries at this point was focused on raising questions, rather than providing answers.

This approach had significant value, in that it prepared the press to understand and communicate our results when they were released. Talking to the press while performing the study not only raised public awareness of the issue but also provided us an opportunity to help the press frame the questions for the public. For example, we spent considerable time during these prestudy media sessions dealing with national reporters' initial tendency to confuse juveniles' "competence" (their capacities to participate meaningfully in their trials and the focus of our study) with their "culpability" (whether youthful offenders should be held as responsible as adults, which we were not studying). By the time the study was done, reporters seemed to have far greater understanding of the legal and developmental concepts than if there had been no prior discussions. Our audience was ready to hear the message at the point we were ready to release it.

Phase II: Advocacy in Design and Data Collection

From the outset, the way we designed the MacArthur Juvenile Adjudicative Competence Study differed from the usual course of research design, even for projects designed to contribute to child advocacy efforts. Usually social scientists work by themselves at the design phase and consult policymakers and practitioners only at study completion to develop dissemination plans for publicizing the results to relevant audiences. We took a different approach, however, by including practitioners at the table as we conceptualized the

study and mapped out the research design. The development of an interdisciplinary team, working together for several years, was possible because we were well funded. However modest, no-cost versions of this approach (e.g., involving occasional consultation with policymakers and legal practitioners) could be implemented even by graduate students doing dissertation research.

The MacArthur Juvenile Adjudicative Competence Study is one of several efforts sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, a network that includes social scientists, legal scholars, and justice system practitioners, including the director of a nonprofit organization that advocates on behalf of youth in the justice system, a public defender, a district attorney, and a former juvenile court judge. Although not all members of the Network were active participants in carrying out the study, our research team made frequent presentations about the proposed study design to the entire Network before data collection began, and we solicited recommendations from both the scientists and the nonscientists in the group.

The role of nonscientists in the design of our research was fascinating, evolving and changing over time. At the beginning, they anticipated that scientific studies could be crafted to achieve certain outcomes. For the public defenders—who never hid their interest in using incompetence to stand trial as a way to reduce the impact of recent, punitive changes in juvenile law—this sometimes led to suggestions about the research design that could have stacked the deck toward finding juveniles less competent than adults. For example, the study could have included disproportionately more young juveniles, likely lowering the average competence of the juvenile participants relative to the adults. For the district attorney and judge, the same understanding of ways a research design can predetermine study findings led to more cynical questioning about whether our design provided a genuinely fair test of our hypothesis or favored findings of greater incompetence among juveniles than was really the case.

An important realization grew out of these discussions, one that influenced the project for the duration. We recognized that if the study design had the slightest taint of potential bias, anyone who did not share whatever view the results might support would easily dismiss them. To create scientific evidence that could ultimately be useful to advocates, we needed to produce science with internal validity that would hold up to those whose politics placed them at the other end of the spectrum. In practice, this means that in designing policy-relevant work, it is just as important—perhaps even more so—to involve at least some individuals who oppose the policy that may be promoted by a study's potential results as it is to include those who are hoping for those results. In our case, it was important to em-

phasize to defense attorneys that unless the study design was scrupulously fair—which might chance proving their beliefs wrong—the study had no chance of producing information they could use. In other words, advocates must risk getting bad news for any good news the study might produce to have value.

Questions about the external validity of the study were also debated during this phase of the work. For individuals who disagree with a study's findings, one of the easiest ways to dismiss the results is to suggest that the study sample was somehow unique and its findings are therefore not generalizable to the relevant population. We had anticipated this issue and made two decisions to head off this criticism. First, we decided to conduct the study at multiple locations nationally that varied in demographics, so as to ensure adequate representation of participants from different ethnic groups and different regions of the country. Regional diversity is especially important in studies that have implications for policies and practices implemented not nationally but at the state or local level, as with juvenile justice policy. In the case at hand, it was important to demonstrate that the research results held across jurisdictions with very different practices for the treatment of juvenile offenders.

Second, we decided to include not only individuals in the justice system (adolescents in pretrial detention and adults awaiting trial in jail) but also those in the community. If we included only the former, policymakers could criticize the results on the grounds that any observed age differences in competence might be unique to a justice system sample and therefore less relevant to broader policy discussions about youth in general. On the other hand, if we included only a community sample, the study might be challenged for not demonstrating that age differences in competence-relevant abilities actually existed within the population whose competence is in question: those facing adjudication for a crime. Accordingly, we included both community and justice system samples of adolescents and adults.

Deciding the age range for the juvenile and adult samples was another choice informed by the inclusion of practitioners in the design phase of the research. The age range for the juvenile sample (ultimately including 11- through 17-year-olds) was chosen because it mapped onto the age range of juveniles who realistically face prosecution in juvenile court or who are transferred to criminal court in many jurisdictions. Deciding the age of a comparison group was trickier. We anticipated that one important potential use of our findings would be to inform policy debates about where to draw the line between juveniles and adults with respect to their likely competence to stand trial in criminal court (as adults). It seemed to us that the most compelling case would derive from a comparison of juveniles with individuals who were only slightly older. After

all, it would be far more persuasive to show, for example, that 15-year-olds were less competent than 18-year-olds than to show them less competent than 40-year-olds. Moreover, we recognized we were better off with any perception of bias being *against* finding age differences (by comparing juveniles with individuals nearly the same age but considered adults for purposes of adjudication) than risking such a perception in the other direction (by choosing a comparison group so much older they would almost surely appear more competent than the youth). This decision satisfied the prosecutors at our design table, but it did not sit well with the defense attorneys. As we noted earlier, though, we came to understand that it was prosecutors, not defenders, whose opinion ultimately was the most important to influence.

Other design issues were informed by discussions with the practitioners on the Network. We began to see that beyond standard psychometric requirements for research measures, our instruments needed face validity. Measuring a psychological construct in a way that was several steps removed from the way it played out in the real world would lead nonscientists to raise questions about the relevance of the work. For example, although we were interested in age differences in the ability to think about future consequences of decisions, the practitioners led us to understand the need for evidence on the ability to think about future consequences of legal decisions, not decisions in general. Practitioners would not be satisfied with evidence of age differences on a psychological test of general ability to weigh future consequences. At the same time, however, as scientists we knew that those reading the research report (and not simply relying on the press release) would want to know whether performance on measures of youths' decision making about legal matters was related to performance on more general indicators of decision making, so we included the latter as well.

A final consideration at this stage of the research was our data analytic plan. We recognized that our choices at several points in data analysis could influence our results. Decisions about which variables to control, whether to treat variables as continuous or categorical, whether to transform the data before analysis, and how to form comparison groups—to name only a few of the choices we faced—can affect study findings. The problem is that often there is no single correct way to analyze data. Scientists make decisions about data analytic techniques based on common sense and prior experience, and, in advocacy-related science, the decisions require special attention to the integrity of the research because the hypothesis being tested in such endeavors is often related to closely held values or beliefs.

In the competence study, this issue surfaced when our research group considered how best to divide the

youth sample to examine competence-related capacities at the different ages. We had sampled youngsters from 11 to 17 but had insufficient numbers for analysis at each discrete age and had to combine the age groups in some way. On what basis would we draw these lines? We looked first to the cognitive developmental literature for guidance but found little information specific enough to guide our particular question. One suggestion put forth by the youth advocates on the team was that we analyze the age data grouped in multiple ways and select the grouping scheme that yielded results most favorable to children. Although this would certainly yield results that were “true” in some sense, the scientists on the team balked at allowing results to influence the choice of the analytic strategy.

To protect against this, we decided to adopt a “no peeking” rule and create the age categories based on policy and practice information. We reviewed the statutes from many states, and it became apparent that some age distinctions were widely used to draw boundaries under the law (e.g., between 13 and 14), whereas others rarely surfaced (e.g., between 12 and 13). It made sense to use age categories that would make sense to practitioners and policymakers (e.g., “below age 14”). Finding differences between two ages that were indistinguishable under the law would likely have less impact than uncovering differences between ages that existing laws treated as different.

Phase III: Advocacy in Interpretation

The most fundamental posture for interpreting data in the child advocacy arena combines (a) aggressiveness in asserting the findings and (b) modesty in addressing questions of specific policy changes in response to the findings. The first of these attitudes requires special attention to creating the context of credibility of the findings, and the second requires an understanding of the role of scientific data in the policy arena.

Regarding the first, the scientists’ authority to enter the policy arena rests largely on the credibility of their research findings. Reputation may help, but—in our opinion—it should not. In our study of juveniles’ competence to stand trial, we resolved not to thrust the findings into the public limelight or policy debate until our method, results, and interpretation had withstood peer review in a respected scholarly journal.

It was tempting to do otherwise. As we were finishing our analyses late in 2001, the issue of youths’ competence to stand trial was hot. It was the focus of active legislative debate, and more and more defense attorneys across the country were raising the issue. Forensic mental health professionals were struggling with unprecedented numbers of requests for evaluations of youths’ competence to stand trial. Lawyers and clini-

cians alike besieged us with requests for information that would assist them. Still, it was not until more than a year later, early in 2003, that we could meet their requests. During that interim year, we described our study and findings to our peers at a limited number of professional meetings to obtain feedback on our work and then submitted the primary report (Grisso et al., eventually published late in 2003) to a journal with high peer-review standards. We did not distribute the results of the study to the press or provide handouts to participants at professional meetings (which might end up in the hands of the press). The peer review process often takes 6 to 12 months. Frustrating as such delays are, the peer review process is essential before venturing into the policy arena. The process is more than a formality. What is learned in that process often leads to changes in the final product (e.g., suggesting additional or different statistical analyses) and to clearer exposition of the study’s strengths and limitations.

The time required for completing the peer review was not spent merely waiting, however. One of the most critical aspects of interpreting data for the policy arena is “packaging” the information in a way that assures it will not only be clearly understood but also perceived as undeniably relevant by people in the social institutions that can use the information. We found that one of the most valuable ways to learn how to package the study was to convene small groups to review and discuss the findings—in our case, groups of lawyers and judges—some of whom would welcome our data and some of whom would challenge it. By opening ourselves to those who would be our most strident critics in the policy arena, we were able to prepare ourselves for the toughest questions we would encounter when we finally released our results.

It is important to distinguish between spinning the results to appeal to particular audiences, which we did not do, and packaging the results in ways to make them accessible to these audiences, which we did do. Making the findings of a research study accessible—non-technical, straightforward, and using a vocabulary familiar to the targeted audience—is not the same as making the results palatable. We knew, for example, that defense attorneys and prosecutors would have different reactions to our findings, but it was essential to ensure that both groups had an opportunity to react to the very same results.

The pressure to spin the results to promote a particular message arose frequently in our meetings with attorneys, whom we consulted for their reactions to the results. For example, we had found significant differences between youths younger than 16 and adults (and even greater differences between adults and juveniles younger than 14) in abilities related to legal competence. By and large, however, 16- and 17-year-olds did not perform differently than the adults in our study. Juvenile defense attorneys were at first dismayed, envi-

sioning that district attorneys would use these results to justify trying 16-year-old defendants as adults in criminal court. We heard subtle suggestions that we might somehow avoid drawing attention to those data or engage in damage control by finding some reasons not to trust the results for that particular age group. However we insisted on full disclosure in all presentations of our findings. (Moreover, in some presentations, we pointed out that although one in three youths under 14 manifest impaired performance, the same finding means that two in three do not.) We suspect that in the end our resistance to spinning interpretations to favor defense attorneys' views worked to their advantage, in that our unvarnished reporting of the nonsignificant difference for older adolescents probably made our significant findings for younger adolescents seem all the more credible.

Engaging policy and practice professionals in our interpretive process sometimes did influence our message, but it was to counteract ways in which our results might be misinterpreted. For example, defense attorneys had hoped the study would allow them to argue against the transfer of juveniles to adult criminal courts for trial on the grounds that they were less likely to be competent. Prosecutors who reviewed our study, however, gave us a loud and very clear message. They themselves had concerns about youths' competence to stand trial, they said, but they would resist the results entirely if we intended to use them to try to do away with transfer to criminal court altogether.

We addressed the concerns of both the defense attorneys and prosecutors in the same way. We told them that our study said nothing about whether youths should be transferred to criminal court. We had studied developmental and cognitive capacities of youths to participate in their defense—their competence to stand trial—not whether juveniles should be tried as adults. Whether some youths should be tried in criminal court is a far broader and more complicated matter, because not only does it raise the question of juveniles' competence to stand trial, it also raises questions about their criminal culpability (i.e., their degree of responsibility for their offense) and their amenability to treatment (i.e., their likelihood of profiting from the rehabilitative services of the juvenile system). Some defense attorneys did not like our reluctance to use our findings to recommend that juveniles' transfer to adult court be prohibited. Others recognized, however, that to do so would mean that our study "supported" transferring 16- to 17-year-olds to criminal court (inasmuch as our results found little difference in competency abilities between them and adults). Our position remained steadfast: Our results said nothing about whether youths of any age should or should not be tried as adults.

Our intensive consultation with professionals who would be using our results was probably more ardent

than is necessary for most studies that have child advocacy implications. However it was necessary in our case because we knew the scope of our communication strategy would not be ordinary. For example, when it came time to announce our results, the date and time of a national press release was set. We participated in a conference call with journalists representing all of the major news agencies in the country and granted radio interviews to major news networks, all with the understanding that any announcement of the study findings would be embargoed until the set date and time of the press release. Each and every reporter cooperated with this request. Three days after the conference call, newspapers in every major city in the United States carried a story on the juvenile competence study, and two long news pieces aired on National Public Radio. We settled in for several weeks of telephone talk show interviews.

Without doubt, that stage of the process confronts the researcher with the greatest risk of slippage in the role of scientist in the child advocacy arena. Armed with good data, the researcher needs to be appropriately aggressive in advocating the quality and importance of the study results for a policy question. However inevitably the reporters (or lawyers, or policymakers) want more. They want you to "solve the problem." "Okay," they say, "let's suppose we believe your data. What, then, should we do?"

Here is where the second attitude—modesty—must kick in. Scientific studies can never tell us what we ought to do. Policy-relevant research on child development has the capacity to challenge current policies, identify the need for different ones, and describe conditions that new and better policies must be able to accommodate. However rarely does research provide evidence that a particular policy is "right."

For example, our study of youths' capacities as trial defendants established that the risk of incompetent participation in a trial is considerably greater for youths 15 and younger than for adults. That finding suggests the need for special provisions to protect adolescents from that risk. However we did not feel it was our role to make pronouncements on specific policy changes that should occur to meet that need, because our study did not provide evidence on the proper social response to our findings. There are many alternatives, such as banning the adult trial of all youths below a certain age, requiring competency evaluations of all youth meeting certain age or mental status criteria before adjudication in adult court, or creating a lower threshold for competence to stand trial in juvenile court hearings on minor charges. However nothing in our role as scientists or in our data speaks to the virtues of any one of these options more than the others. In fact, in our small group meetings with attorneys and judges and in presentations to practitioner organizations representing defenders, prosecutors, and judges, we learned that the

results of our study were rendered more credible, even in the eyes of those who were not pleased by what we found, when we stopped short of telling policymakers or practitioners what they should do. As a scientist, it is fine to tell others about new facts they should consider, but how they should respond to those findings is their decision, and one that often must be tailored to local conditions and politics.

Our role has been to advocate for our data, aggressively disseminating it and driving home the message that the relative incapacities of youths as defendants can no longer be ignored. We have advocated data-driven policy change, and we have identified policies that seem to ignore the evidence we produced. However several policy solutions are possible in response to our data, and we have not used our entrée into the policy arena to make recommendations from among them. That would be going well beyond our research-based evidence to matters of law, morality, economics, and pragmatics.

Advocating for one's data to drive child advocacy debates also means identifying and challenging its misuses. Once research results become tools in the hands of others in the policy arena, they tend to be refashioned to better fit the arguments of advocates or their detractors. It is not ethical, in our view, for scientists to throw up their hands and take the stance that because what others do with their findings is out of their control, it need not be the scientist's concern. We have an obligation to be unequivocally loud in our correction of misinterpretations when we hear about them, even at the expense of weakening the position of child advocates with whom we might otherwise agree. For example, it took no more than a few weeks after the release of our study to begin hearing that our results were being interpreted by some defense attorneys to mean that "all kids under 16 are incompetent to stand trial." Our results and published interpretations did not even remotely suggest this. In this particular instance, we decided that one way to counteract overzealous child advocacy interpretations of our data was to visit with a national prosecutor's organization and provide information that would allow prosecutors to challenge courtroom interpretations of our results that were clearly wrong.

The Lesson: Science and Advocacy— Distinct and Related

One of the most satisfying experiences that a scientist interested in the well-being of children can have over the course of a career is to produce a credible empirical study that is useful to those who advocate improving the lives of children. This experience is even more gratifying when dissemination efforts are successful and the research actually makes it out of the

scholarly journals and into the hands of policymakers and practitioners who use it for this purpose. It is too early to render a final verdict, but by all indicators, the MacArthur Juvenile Adjudicative Competence Study may be successful in both respects. The fact that many young people under 15 are at risk for being incompetent to stand trial is now a fact well known within the legal community, and several states have begun the process of changing legislation in response to the study findings.

The successful impact of this study was the result of many factors, including the careful planning and hard work of the entire research team, the development of an extensive and ongoing dissemination and communications plan, and the involvement from the first stages of study conceptualization of individuals who represented the audiences we ultimately wanted to reach. However an additional factor that contributed to the impact of this study, we believe, was our insistence on maintaining the distinction between science and advocacy. Once that distinction is blurred, it is impossible to be successful in either enterprise. Toward maintaining that distinction, we offer an appendix to this article summarizing some of the lessons we have described.

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Appendix Twelve Lessons for the Journey Between a Rock (Science) and a Soft Place (Advocacy)

Conceptualizing Your Research

1. Frame the problem in a way that will facilitate policymakers' understanding and will lead to policy-relevant research questions.
2. Begin communicating with practitioners, policymakers, and journalists about the problem (but not your beliefs or expectancies) while you are conceptualizing your study. Create the public policy "box" into which your results eventually will go.

3. Maintain your identity as a scientist. Your purpose is to produce reliable information about the human condition, not to prove a point.
4. Be committed from the beginning to full and honest disclosure, even if your results end up contrary to that which child advocates would wish.

Designing Your Study and Collecting Data

5. Do not let your advocacy drive your methods.
6. Design your study (a) as if you do not care how it turns out or (b) as though you wish to prove your beliefs are wrong.
7. Expose the research design to persons with opposing perspectives and modify it in response to their claims that any part of it is biased to produce a preconceived belief.
8. Inform people about what you are doing while you are collecting data, but do not say what you hope or expect to find.

Interpreting, Disseminating, and Applying Your Results

9. Package your results for clarity and public accessibility, using the vocabulary of your target audiences, but do not spin them. Tell the whole story, even if parts of it will be worrisome to child advocates.
10. To package your results most effectively, consult with persons who will welcome your results and with persons who will represent your most strident critics.
11. If the results suggest the need for changes in policy and practice, aggressively assert your findings, but do not assert that your findings require a specific policy change. When possible, lay out a range of policy options that are consistent with the research findings.
12. Be prepared to challenge misuses of your results—by child advocates or by others—as they begin to be applied in the policy arena.

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