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Thomas Grisso
University of Massachusetts Medical School

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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.

Psychology has so much knowledge to offer to society through a multitude of services and practice efforts. But it will take carefully orchestrated advocacy to ensure that our knowledge and services reach those who need it. We hope this special issue contributes meaningfully to dialogue about the challenges and opportunities of translating research into policy across a number of key domains relevant to children, youth, and their families.

Developmental Research and the Child Advocacy Process*

Thomas Grisso, Ph.D.
Department of Psychiatry
University of Massachusetts Medical School
Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D.
Temple University
Philadelphia, PA


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 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
developmental scientists face at various stages of the research and advocacy process. In this column, we share some of what we learned from this experience.

Advocacy in Conceptualization
As we began to conceptualize the study, we gave much thought to how we would frame the research. 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. But 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.

Advocacy in Design and Data Collection
Usually, social scientists work by themselves at the design phase and consult policy-makers 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 several practitioners at the table as we conceptualized the study and mapped out the research design -- a public defender, a district attorney, a judge, and a youth advocate.

The role of non-scientists in the design of our research was fascinating and evolved over time. At the beginning, they anticipated that scientific studies could be crafted to achieve certain outcomes. For the defender and the advocate -- who never hid their interest in using incompetence to stand trial as a way to reduce the impact of 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 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. 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 emphasize 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 in order for any good news the study might produce to have value.

We recognized that our choices at several points in data analysis could influence our results. All scientists know that 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. 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? One suggestion put forth by the youth advocate 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 a priori, based on policy and practice information.

**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. 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. This decision slowed the release of the study down by more than a year but it was the right thing to do.

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. 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. 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 engaged policy and practice professionals in our interpretive process, and while this sometimes did influence our message, 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 mes-

sage. They themselves had concerns about youths’

competence to stand trial, they said, but they would re-

sist 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 at-
torneys 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 devel-
opmental and cognitive capacities of youths to partici-
pate in their defense -- their competence to stand trial --
not whether juveniles should be tried as adults. Despite
considerable pressure to take a stand on this issue, 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 especially necessary
because we knew the scope of our communication strat-
gety would not be ordinary given the media’s interest in
juvenile crime. A few days before the study was re-
leased, we organized a conference call with journalists
representing all of the major news agencies in the coun-
try and granted radio interviews to major news net-
works, all with the understanding that any announce-
ment of the study findings would be embargoed until
the set date and time of the press release. The day of
the release, newspapers in every major city in the U.S.
carried a story on the study, and two long news pieces
aired on National Public Radio. We settled in for sev-
eral 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. But inevitably
the reporters (or lawyers, or policy makers) 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 develop-
ment has the capacity to challenge current policies,
identify the need for different ones, and describe condi-
tions that new and better policies must be able to ac-
commodate. But rarely does research provide evidence
that a particular policy is “right.” 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 which often must be tailored to local
conditions and politics.

Our role has been to advocate for our data, aggres-
sively disseminating it, and driving home the message
that the relative incapacities of youths as defendants can
no longer be ignored. Advocating for one’s data in or-
der to drive child advocacy debates also means identify-
ing 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 for scien-
tists 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 advoca-
cates with whom we might otherwise agree.

Science and Advocacy: Distinct and Related

One of the most satisfying experiences that a scien-
tist interested in the well-being of children can have
over the course of a career is to produce a credible em-
pirical study that is useful to those who advocate im-
proving the lives of children. This experience is even
more gratifying when dissemination efforts are success-
ful and the research actually makes it out of the schol-
arly journals and into the hands of policy-makers and
practitioners who use it for this purpose. By all indica-
tors, the MacArthur Juvenile Adjudicative Competence
Study has been 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 be-
gun 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 communica-
tions plan, and the involvement from the first stages of
study conceptualization of individuals who represented
the audiences we ultimately wanted to reach. But 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.

References


Thomas Grisso, Ph.D. is Professor of Psychiatry, Coordinator of the Law and Psychiatry Program, and Director of the Law and Mental Health Core of the Center for Mental Health Services Research at University of Massachusetts Medical School. Dr. Grisso is one of the nation’s leading researchers in forensic psychology. In recognition of outstanding contributions to forensic psychiatry and the psychiatric aspects of jurisprudence, Dr. Grisso received the 2005 Isaac Ray Award, the American Psychiatric Association’s highest recognition for distinguished careers in forensic mental health. He also is the recipient of APA’s 1995 Award for Distinguished Contributions to Research in Public Policy, the American Academy of Forensic Psychology’s 1987 Award for Outstanding Achievement in Forensic Psychology, and an honorary Doctor of Law degree from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in 1998.

Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D. is the Distinguished University Professor and Laura H. Carnell Professor of Psychology at Temple University. He is a fellow of APA and Director of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice. He is President-elect of APA Division 7, and in 2005, he will be one of APA’s Distinguished Scientist Lecturers. Dr. Steinberg is a nationally recognized expert on psychological development during adolescence and is a frequent consultant to state and federal agencies and lawmakers on child labor, secondary education, and juvenile justice policy.

Social Policy and Child Witnesses

Gail S. Goodman, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology
University of California, Davis

When I was asked to speak at the Division 37 Presidential Cross-Cutting Symposium, “Psychology and Children: Translating Research into Better Policy and Services,” at the 2005 American Psychological Association Convention, I asked myself: “Has child witness research had an impact?” The answer is clearly “yes.” In fact, even in the beginning, the impact of research in this area on the courts and on social policy was nearly immediate. In this paper, as in my talk at the APA convention, I would like to discuss: a) the extent of the problem of child maltreatment and the demands this places on child protective services (CPS) to investigate abuse reports; b) research on child witnesses; and c) ways in which psychologists have in the past, and can in the future, influence social policy and practice concerning child witnesses.

Reports Involving Child Witnesses to CPS and the Criminal Justice System

Sacramento County, California, near where I live, is a largely metropolitan area of about 1 million people. In this one county alone, every 9 minutes CPS receives a call to its Child Abuse Hot Line. Every 27 minutes, a social worker hears a new allegation of child maltreatment. Every 2 hours, a child is removed from home, totaling about 200 to 300 child protective custody actions a month. Nationally, CPS receives about 3 million referrals a year, regarding about 5 million children (DHHS, 2004). About 63% of these cases involve neglect, 19% concern physical abuse, 10% are for alleged sexual abuse, and 8% are about psychological abuse. (Of course, many of these cases actually involve more than one form of maltreatment.) Approximately 62% of these referrals will result in investigations. When an investigation is conducted, typically, a social worker