

# The Impact of Juveniles' Ages and Levels of Psychosocial Maturity on Judges' Opinions About Adjudicative Competence

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This study investigated whether defendants' ages and levels of psychosocial maturity would affect judges' ratings of juveniles' adjudicative competence in juvenile and criminal court. Three hundred forty two judges reviewed a forensic psychological report about a hypothetical defendant; only the defendant's age (12–17) and maturity level (mature, immature) varied across reports. Results revealed a main effect of age, with older juveniles generally deemed more competent, and a main effect of maturity, with mature juveniles generally deemed more competent. No interaction was found. Results suggest that age and maturity play major roles in judicial determinations of juvenile competency.

*Keywords:* juvenile, competence, trial, forensic

Although juveniles are increasingly faced with adult criminal adjudications and punishments (Grisso, 2005b; Schetky, 2003; Scott & Grisso, 2004), the psychological literature raises serious concerns about juveniles' competence to be adjudicated in the adult criminal justice system. Juveniles often lack the requisite functional capacities associated with the *Dusky* standard of adjudicative competence (Scott & Grisso, 2004). Juveniles demonstrate deficits in the capacities to understand the trial process, understand the role of trial participants, accurately conceptualize the notion of a legal right, appreciate how legal concepts apply to their personal situations, communicate effectively with counsel, and make well-reasoned and mature judgments (Grisso, 1997; Grisso et al., 2003; Schmidt, Reppucci, & Woolard, 2003). Youths in preadolescence and early adolescence are at heightened risk of demonstrating such deficits (Oberlander, Goldstein, & Ho, 2001). In addition, deficits in adjudicative capacities are typically exacerbated by lower intellectual functioning, mental illness, and lower socioeconomic status (SES) (Grisso, 1997), characteristics common among youths involved with the juvenile justice system (Grisso, 2000b).

Although juveniles' adjudicative capacities tend to increase substantially over the course of adolescence, a significant portion of older adolescents (16 and 17 year olds) may exhibit mild-to-significant impairments in their adjudicative capacities (Grisso et al., 2003). Juveniles also face distinct challenges that can impact adjudicative capacities that cannot be fully accounted for by factors such as age, IQ, low SES, or serious mental illness. Developmental limitations associated with youth, such as psychosocial immaturity, can have serious adverse effects on juveniles' adjudicative capacities.

Psychosocial maturity consists of several factors, including perception of risk, future orientation, and susceptibility to the influence of peers and adults (Steinberg & Scott, 2003), which can influence juveniles' decision-making processes and outcomes (Scott & Grisso, 2004). Adolescents are less likely to identify the potential risks in a given situation, more likely to underestimate "the likelihood that possible negative consequences might occur," and less likely to appreciate how serious the negative consequences would be if they did occur (Woolard, Reppucci, Steinberg, Grisso, & Scott, 2003, p. 10). In addition, juveniles tend to weigh risks and rewards in a different manner than do adults, maximizing the weight given to rewards and minimizing the weight given to risks (risk perception) (Scott, Reppucci, & Woolard, 1995). Adolescents also tend to be less risk averse and engage in more risky behaviors than do adults (Scott & Grisso, 2004). As a result, when making decisions, adolescents "appear to focus less on protection against losses than on opportunities for gains" (Scott et al., 1995, p. 231). In addition, in contemplating risky decisions, juveniles tend to discount the future more and emphasize short-term risks and benefits more than long-term risks and benefits (future orientation) (Scott et al., 1995). Adolescents' limited life experience may make it more difficult for them to project the consequences of their decisions into the distant future (Scott & Grisso, 2004). Consequently, adolescents may not fully appreciate that a choice they make today may have consequences for them 5 years in the future (Scott et al., 1995). Furthermore, compared with adults, adult and peer influence play much stronger roles in juveniles' judgment and decision-making processes (susceptibility to influence) (Scott et al., 1995). For example, adolescents may base decisions on their desire for peer approval rather than on their best interests.

Psychosocial immaturity can negatively impact juveniles' factual understanding of the trial process, abilities to assist counsel, and decisional competence (Grisso, 2000b). Adolescents' tendencies to misperceive risk can adversely affect their abilities to appreciate the significance of the legal circumstances of their own cases. As a result, psychosocially immature adolescents may be

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less likely to identify or appreciate the potential risks associated with the adjudication process, or may value the obtainment of a reward in preference to averting a risk.

Juveniles' skewed time perspective can adversely affect their understanding of the possible consequences of criminal charges and case-related decisions. For example, younger youths may not appreciate the concept of long-term consequences and may, therefore, think that being found guilty of an offense results in punishment that is equivalent to being grounded at home for the weekend (Oberlander et al., 2001). In addition, because adolescents may weigh potential short-term gains more heavily than long-term risks, they may make poor decisions to receive immediate benefits. For example, a juvenile may decide to plead guilty to a sex offense so that he can go home quickly, rather than considering the long-term consequence of having to register as a sex offender (Grisso et al., 2003).

Owing to their susceptibility to adults' influence, juveniles may be more likely to acquiesce to authority figures, such as their attorneys, rather than assert their own opinions. Such acquiescence can result in following an attorney's advice about a case to the exclusion of sharing important information that may be inconsistent with counsel's conceptualization—or a juvenile may reject a plea bargain because his/her mother does not want him/her to accept it.

Despite the mounting psychological literature warning of the many potential maturity-related deficits in juvenile defendants' adjudicative capacities, it is unclear whether and to what extent judges consider psychosocial maturity as a factor when making determinations about juveniles' competence to stand trial. To date, there is little research that has directly addressed this question. A related study analyzed various factors that juvenile court judges considered in making decisions about transferring juveniles to adult court (Salekin, Neumann, Yff, Leistico, & Zalot, 2002). Results indicated that judges rated the factors of sophistication and maturity as being *moderately* important to the waiver decision, though less important than the factors of dangerousness and amenability to treatment. In addition, the judges that answered the survey based on real-life cases indicated their beliefs that nearly all of the juveniles they had transferred were competent to stand trial.

Psychological research has generally supported the idea that psychosocial immaturity can affect juveniles' adjudicative competence in many ways. However, it remains unclear as to what extent this knowledge may be influencing actual legal practice. Current statutory guidelines and case law regarding the placement or transfer of juveniles into the adult criminal court system often fail to recognize the potentially significant impact of developmental limitations on juveniles' competence to stand trial. In jurisdictions in which judges have discretion to decide whether a juvenile should be transferred to adult court, preliminary research evidence has suggested that judges do consider issues of maturity to be at least moderately important to the transfer decision (Salekin et al., 2002). However, it is still unclear whether and to what extent judges consider maturity as a factor separate from age, IQ, and serious mental illness.

The purpose of this study was to begin examining whether judges consider issues of psychosocial immaturity when determining juveniles' adjudicative competence and whether they consider it separately from factors such as age, IQ, and serious mental illness. A hypothetical, psychological report format was used to

hold constant all case-related factors (e.g., IQ, mental health, offense severity), varying only the age and level of psychosocial maturity of the juvenile defendant.

It was hypothesized that there would be a main effect of age (judges would deem younger juveniles less competent than older juveniles), a main effect of maturity (judges would deem "immature" juveniles less competent than "mature" juveniles), and an interaction between age and immaturity (judges would be most influenced by maturity for defendants in mid-adolescence).

## Method

### Participants

Prior survey research indicated that a 20–35% response rate should be anticipated for judges (Redding, Floyd, & Hawk, 2001; Redding & Reppucci, 1999). Using a conservative estimate of a 20% response rate, 1,200 surveys were mailed to judges to achieve the desired sample size. A 28.5% response rate was achieved, with 342 judges responding to the survey.

We mailed study materials to 48 judges from each of 25 states. To achieve a geographically diverse sample, states were randomly selected in equal numbers from each of the four geographical regions of the continental United States (Northeast, South, Midwest, and West); New Jersey judges were not eligible for recruitment because of a state restriction on judges' participation in research. Potential participants were identified through judicial directories and state court websites. An attempt was made to identify those judges who only adjudicated criminal court cases and/or juvenile delinquency cases. Initial investigation revealed that this information could often not be determined from the judicial directories. When this information could be determined, these potential participants were included in the mailing list. When this information could not be determined, potential participants were randomly selected from the pool of judges from each state. In cases in which a state did not have more than 48 judges, all judges were recruited for participation.

Of the 342 participants (73.4% men, 26.6% women), 86% were White, 3.2% Hispanic, 1.2% African-American/Black, 0.9% Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.6% American Indian, 0.3% identified as Other, and 5.6% indicated that they preferred not to answer. The number of years of judicial experience ranged from 4 months to 43 years ( $M = 12.46$ ,  $SD = 7.87$ ). Approximately 23% of responding judges were from urban areas, 15% were from suburban areas, and 56% were from rural areas, with the remaining judges practicing in more than one setting (e.g., presiding over two different courts, one in a rural setting, one in a suburban setting).

With respect to positions held before becoming a judge, approximately 45% had been civil trial lawyers, 34% prosecutors, 29% private criminal defense attorneys, 13% public defenders, 9% transactional lawyers, and 25% had engaged in other types of legal work, including appellate trial law, real estate law, in-house counsel, general practice, magistrate, mediator, law professor, juvenile defender, and domestic relations law (the sum of the frequencies exceeds 100% because many judges held multiple positions prior to their judgeship).

Eighteen percent of judges presided over courts that solely dealt with adult criminal matters, and 16% of judges presided over courts that solely dealt with juvenile criminal matters. Forty-six

percent of judges reported presiding over a court other than a solely criminal or juvenile court (e.g., general jurisdiction, appellate court, family law court, domestic relations court, probate court, drug court, or mixed criminal and juvenile court). Judges reported that, in the previous year, the number of juvenile transfer or reverse transfer cases they had reviewed ranged from zero to “over 100” ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = 8.9$ ) and, throughout the course of their careers, from zero to “several thousand” ( $M = 53.4$ ,  $SD = 192.8$ ). A total of 63 judges (19%) had never heard a juvenile transfer or reverse transfer case.

## Materials

A packet of study materials was mailed to each recruited judge. Each packet contained (a) a cover letter with consent information and general study completion instructions; (b) a hypothetical psychologist’s competence evaluation report of a juvenile defendant; (c) a set of questions regarding the case, including ratings of the juvenile’s competence to stand trial in criminal court and juvenile court; (d) questions about factors thought to be important to juveniles’ competence to stand trial; (e) questions about participants’ professional experiences with juvenile criminal cases; and (f) demographic questions.

The hypothetical reports were modeled on the juvenile competence to stand trial evaluations presented by Heilbrun, Marczyk, and DeMatteo (2002). Each hypothetical report included identical descriptions of the juvenile’s charge, background history (e.g., family life; academic performance), mental health history, and IQ. For the purposes of this study, maturity was dichotomized (mature/immature). Maturity was operationally defined by the degree to which the juvenile maximized the weight given to rewards and minimized the weight given to risks, emphasized short-term risks and benefits more than long-term risks and benefits, and was susceptible to the influence of peers or adults. This information was conveyed through descriptions of the youth’s hypothetical responses to competence-related questions. The language used to convey maturity level was based on research by Woolard et al. (2003) and by Grisso (2005a). For each vignette type (mature or immature), we varied the juvenile’s age from 12 through 17, resulting in 12 versions of the survey, 6 versions for each of the 2 levels of maturity.

The questionnaire asked judges to identify which forum they believed appropriate for adjudicating the juvenile’s case, criminal court or juvenile court. Judges also were asked to consider five separate component capacities associated with competence (i.e., knowledge of charges, knowledge of the role of trial participants, understanding of pleas, understanding of consequences of pleas, and ability to assist counsel) and rate how sufficient they believed the described juvenile to be with regard to each component. Judges rated the youth’s capacities on a 5-point scale, from “not at all sufficient” to “completely sufficient.” Judges also rated the degree to which they believed the described juvenile was competent to stand trial in criminal court and juvenile court, based on a 5-point scale, from “not at all competent” to “completely competent.”

Another set of questions asked judges which factors they considered important in determining the described juvenile’s level of competence. Judges were asked to use a 5-point scale to rate the factors of IQ, mental health, age, academic performance, seriousness of the crime, and maturity, from “not at all important” to

“very important.” Space also was provided for judges to write in any other factors they deemed important to their decision-making process about the juvenile in the hypothetical report. Later in the questionnaire, using the same format, judges were asked to rate factors they considered to be important to decisions about juveniles’ competence to stand trial in general, rather than just to the particular juvenile described in the study’s hypothetical report.

To assess the perceived maturity level of the juveniles described in the vignettes, judges were asked to rate three separate component factors related to psychosocial maturity. On a 5-point scale, judges were asked to rate the extent to which the described juvenile maximized the weight given to rewards and minimized the weight given to risks, emphasized short-term risks and benefits more than long-term risks and benefits, and was susceptible to the influence of peers or adults, from “not at all” to “completely.” Then, judges were asked how old the described juvenile appeared to be, regardless of stated age.

## Design and Procedure

This study used a 2 (level of maturity: mature or immature)  $\times$  6 (age: 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17) between subjects design. The primary dependent variables were the judges’ ratings of the juvenile’s competence to stand trial in criminal court and in juvenile court and the judges’ choice of appropriate forum (juvenile or criminal court) for the adjudication of the juvenile’s case.

Each participant was randomly assigned to 1 of 12 conditions and received only the one hypothetical report associated with that condition. Response rates did not differ significantly across conditions,  $\chi^2 = 11.39$ ,  $p = .41$ . Twelve hundred potential respondents were each sent a copy of the study materials, along with a stamped return envelope. Judges were not asked any identifying information and were instructed not to provide identifying information on any materials. To increase response rates, 2 weeks after the initial mailing, all potential participants were sent a second copy of the study materials and return envelope. All potential participants received a second mailing because there was no way to track who had responded because of the completely anonymous nature of the research procedures. To reduce the likelihood of duplicate responses, a letter was included in the second mailing instructing participants not to complete the survey a second time.

A power analysis revealed that, for a 2  $\times$  6 between factors MANOVA, with an alpha of .05, medium effect sizes ( $f = .25$ ) for maturity level and age, and a medium effect size ( $f = .25$ ) for the interaction between age and maturity, 342 participants would produce power greater than .95 to detect each of the significant main effects and the interaction.

## Results

Judges were initially asked to indicate the appropriate forum for the juvenile’s case and their confidence in that decision. Overwhelmingly, participating judges indicated that the juvenile’s case should be heard in juvenile court, rather than in criminal court (94% vs. 6%). In addition, judges generally expressed high degrees of confidence in their decisions regarding the appropriate forum,  $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = .88$ . Judges also rated the extent to which the juvenile in the hypothetical report was competent to stand trial in both criminal court and juvenile court. On average, judges rated

youths as moderately competent to stand trial in criminal court,  $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ , and mostly competent to stand trial in juvenile court,  $M = 4.4$ ,  $SD = .86$ .

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the effects of defendant's age and maturity level on judges' ratings of the defendant's competence to stand trial in criminal court and juvenile court. No significant interaction was detected,  $F(10, 648) = .49$ ,  $p = .89$ ; Wilks'  $\Lambda = .99$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ;  $r = .40$  (criminal court competence), 95% CI [.31, .49];  $r = .44$  (juvenile court competence), 95% CI [.35, .52]; therefore, all main effects could be interpreted directly.

## Age

A one-way between-groups MANOVA was performed to investigate the effects of the defendant's age on judges' competence ratings. Judges' ratings of the juvenile's competence to stand trial in criminal court and judges' ratings of the juvenile's competence to stand trial in juvenile court served as the dependent variables. Judges' ratings differed significantly by defendant's age in the overall model, using the combined dependent variables,  $F(10, 648) = 3.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Wilks'  $\Lambda = .91$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ ;  $r = .28$  (criminal court competence), 95% CI [.18, .38];  $r = .10$  (juvenile court competence), 95% CI [-.01, .21],<sup>1</sup> with judges rating younger juveniles as less competent than older juveniles (see Figure 1). Consistent results were produced when judges without experience hearing juvenile transfer or reverse transfer cases were excluded from the analysis,  $F(10, 492) = 2.58$ ,  $p < .01$ , Wilks'  $\Lambda = .91$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ ;  $r = .28$  (criminal court competence), 95% CI [.16, .39];  $r = .10$  (juvenile court competence), 95% CI [-.02, .22]. However, the effects of age depended on the type of court for adjudication; defendant's age affected judges' competence ratings in criminal court  $F(5, 325) = 5.81$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .08$ , but not in juvenile court,  $F(5, 325) = .74$ ,  $p = .59$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ . In addition, consistent results were observed when the juvenile's age was categorized into

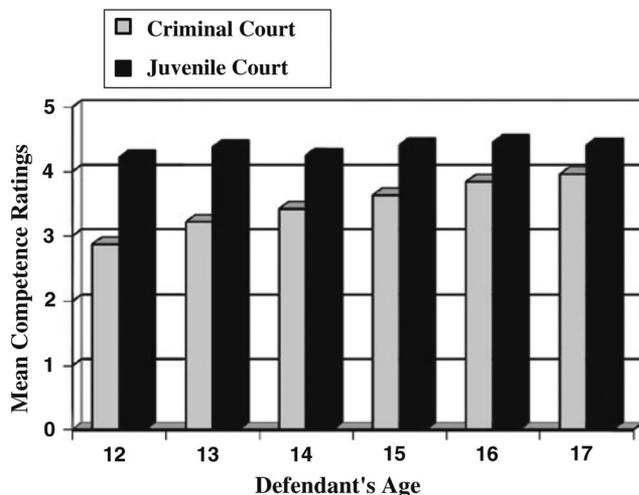


Figure 1. Judges' mean competence ratings by defendant's age. Mean competence ratings for criminal court were age 12: 2.87, age 13: 3.22, age 14: 3.42, age 15: 3.63, age 16: 3.84, age 17: 3.96. Mean competence ratings in juvenile court were age 12: 4.22, age 13: 4.38, age 14: 4.25, age 15: 4.42, age 16: 4.46, age 17: 4.41.

early, middle, and late adolescence,  $F(10, 648) = 6.93$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Wilks'  $\Lambda = .92$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ;  $r = .27$  (criminal court competence), 95% CI [.17, .37];  $r = .06$  (juvenile court competence), 95% CI [-.05, .17]. The defendant's age affected judges' competence ratings in criminal court,  $F(2, 334) = 12.86$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ , but not in juvenile court,  $F(2, 334) = .74$ ,  $p = .48$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ .

Post hoc analyses examined judges' competence ratings by age in criminal court. A Bonferroni correction accounted for family wise error rates (.05 divided by 15), resulting in a corrected alpha of .003. Using this conservative alpha level, 12 year olds differed significantly from 16 and 17 year olds on competence ratings in criminal court. Notably, although not significant, there were medium effect size differences observed when comparing 12 and 15 year olds ( $d = .49$ ) and 13 and 17 year olds ( $d = .47$ ).<sup>2</sup>

## Maturity

A manipulation check was performed to determine whether the independent variable of psychosocial maturity was effectively manipulated in the hypothetical reports. Multiple one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) examined whether the description of the juvenile as being psychosocially mature or immature differentially affected the ratings on the three constituent components of psychosocial maturity (risk perception, future orientation, and susceptibility to the influence of peers or adults). Results indicated that, as intended, level of maturity significantly affected ratings of all three components; compared to juveniles described as being mature, those described as being immature were rated as more likely to maximize the weight given to rewards and minimize the weight given to risks (risk perception),  $F(1, 315) = 27.86$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .08$ ;  $r = .28$ , 95% CI [.18, .38], emphasize short-term risks and benefits more than long-term risks and benefits (future orientation),  $F(1, 323) = 96.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .23$ ;  $r = .48$ , 95% CI [.39, .56], and be more susceptible to the influence of peers or adults,  $F(1, 296) = 170.71$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .34$ ;  $r = .59$ , 95% CI [.51, .66].

A one-way between-groups MANOVA was performed to investigate the effects of the defendant's maturity on judges' competence ratings. Again, judges' ratings of the juvenile's competence to stand trial in criminal court and in juvenile court served as the dependent variables. As predicted, results demonstrated a main effect of the defendant's maturity on judges' competence ratings,  $F(2, 324) = 34.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Wilks'  $\Lambda = .82$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .18$ ;  $r = .26$  (criminal court competence), 95% CI [.16, .36];  $r = .42$  (juvenile court competence), 95% CI [.33, .50], with immature juveniles deemed less competent than mature juveniles in the context of both criminal court,  $F(1, 325) = 25.39$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ , and juvenile court,  $F(1, 325) = 71.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .18$  (see Figure 2). Consistent results were observed when judges without experience hearing juvenile transfer or reverse transfer cases were excluded from the analysis,  $F(2, 246) = 33.35$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Wilks'  $\Lambda = .79$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .21$ ;  $r = .27$  (criminal court competence), 95% CI [.15, .38];  $r = .45$  (juvenile court competence), 95% CI [.35, .54].

<sup>1</sup> Confidence intervals were calculated with the square root of  $R^2$  for the model and threshold values.

<sup>2</sup> By convention, effect sizes of  $d = .2$ ,  $.5$ , and  $.8$  are considered small, medium, and large, respectively (Cohen, 1992).

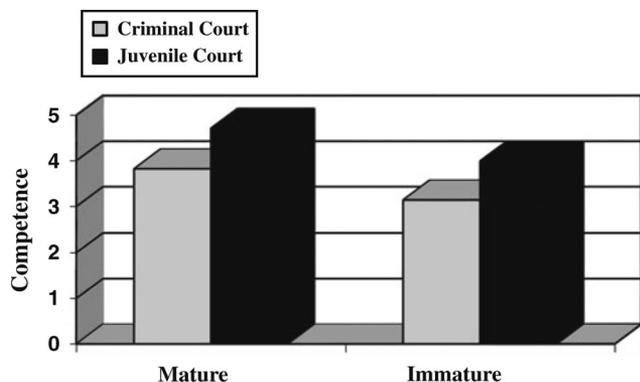


Figure 2. Judges' mean competence ratings by defendant's maturity level. Mean competence ratings in criminal court were mature: 3.82, immature: 3.14. Mean competence ratings in juvenile court were mature: 4.71, immature: 3.99.

## Discussion

This study examined the impact of juveniles' ages and levels of psychosocial maturity on judges' ratings of juvenile defendants' competence to stand trial. Overall, judges believed that older and more mature youths were more competent to stand trial, but the impact of defendants' ages on judges' competence ratings did not depend on the youths' maturity level.

### Age

The finding that juvenile defendants' ages affected judges' ratings of juveniles' competence to stand trial is consistent with previous research indicating that juveniles' competence-related capacities increase with age and competence-related deficits decrease with age (Grisso et al., 2003; Viljoen & Roesch, 2005). Previous findings also have indicated that youths below the age of 14 are especially likely to demonstrate significant deficits in their adjudicative abilities (Grisso et al., 2003). Juveniles above the age of 15 demonstrate few, if any, differences in competence-related capacities from young adults (Grisso et al., 2003; Poythress, Lexcen, Grisso, & Steinberg, 2006). Our results support these previous findings; judges in our study viewed the 12-year-old defendant as significantly less competent to stand trial than the 16- and 17-year-old defendants.

Notably, these ratings were entirely based on age-related differences and not on variations in competence-related capacities. Specifically, judges made age-related distinctions in juveniles' competence-related capacities even though the description of juveniles' capacities was identical across ages, within each maturity level. For example, although the descriptions of competence-related capacities were identical for the mature 16-year-old defendant and the mature 12-year-old defendant, judges rated the 16 years old as more competent to stand trial. This result likely reflects the "common sense" or "common experience" heuristic that older juveniles, generally, are more competent to stand trial than are younger juveniles. It also suggests that judges may be heavily influenced by chronological age, despite an emphasis on competence-related abilities described in psychological evaluations. Despite judges' reliance on age, research cautions against

using age as a proxy for competence, in light of numerous individual characteristics that may impact juveniles' competence-related capacities, such as IQ, mental health, and maturity level (Grisso, 1997; LaVelle Ficke, Hart, & Deardorff, 2006; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1999).

### Maturity

Defendants' levels of psychosocial maturity affected judges' ratings of juveniles' competence to stand trial. The more mature juvenile was rated as more competent to stand trial. Prior research has suggested that psychosocial maturity can affect juveniles' competence-related capacities by impacting their decision-making processes (Cauffman & Steinberg, 1995). The psychosocial information provided in the hypothetical reports was designed to reflect the fictional juvenile's maturity of judgment and decision making. It is likely that judges in this study rated immature juveniles as less competent because of this perceived immaturity of judgment and decision making.

Judges indicated that the issue of maturity was of moderately high importance to their decisions about the juveniles' competence to stand trial. These results are in line with previous research revealing that legal professionals (judges and defense attorneys) considered developmental immaturity to be relevant and moderately important to juveniles' adjudicative competence (Viljoen & Wingrove, 2008). In addition, judges have considered sophistication and maturity to be moderately important to their decisions about whether to transfer a hypothetical juvenile to adult court (Salekin et al., 2002). Though judges have been noted to acknowledge the importance of psychosocial maturity in juveniles' legal decision making (Viljoen & Wingrove, 2008), research also has indicated that a majority of legal professionals believe that psychosocial immaturity should not be considered as an independent basis for incompetence to stand trial (Viljoen & Wingrove, 2008). Currently, few statutes governing the standards for rulings of incompetence to stand trial recognize immaturity as an independent basis for incompetence (Redding & Frost, 2001). However, previous research has suggested that a juvenile defendant may have deficits in competence-related abilities based solely or primarily on psychosocial immaturity, though he or she may not have significant intellectual deficits or serious mental health symptoms (Grisso, 2000a). Perhaps, as empirical evidence on the impact of psychosocial maturity on juveniles' adjudicative capacities accrues, legal guidelines will reflect these findings.

Though this study suggests that judges take the issue of psychosocial maturity into consideration when provided with such information, it remains unclear to what extent psychosocial maturity is assessed and reported in psychological evaluations of juveniles' competence to stand trial. Given the importance of this factor to juveniles' adjudicative capacities and judges' reported willingness to consider this information, evaluators should think about assessing and reporting information about psychosocial maturity and its impact on competence-related abilities in cases involving juveniles.

### Interaction Between Age and Maturity

Contrary to initial expectations, age and maturity separately affected competence ratings; the two factors did not interact. The

older a juvenile, the more competent judges rated him, and, within each age group, the mature juvenile was rated as more competent. The lack of interaction may be attributable to the clear maturity distinctions in the hypothetical reports. Without the ambiguity present in actual cases with real, complex defendants, judges may not have needed to rely on age in considering the relationship between maturity and competence.

Another possible reason that judges may have rated psychosocially mature juveniles as more competent was because of their reliance on written information alone. Judges were told the age of the juvenile but were not provided with visual or auditory information that would differ across age groups, thereby decreasing the salience of chronological age, and, potentially, increasing the relative salience of maturity. For example, when a judge sees a 12-year-old defendant in the courtroom, he or she may look “immature,” despite actual psychosocial characteristics. In contrast, a 17-year-old defendant may look “mature,” despite actual psychosocial characteristics. The physical impressions might be so powerful that they could outweigh psychologists’ descriptions of juvenile defendants’ maturity levels. As a result, in real cases, age might have a much greater influence than maturity on judges’ competence ratings, particularly when the juvenile is very young (i.e., under age 13) or is an older adolescent (i.e., over age 16). When the juvenile’s age is less clear from physical appearances (i.e., in the middle age range), the impact of maturity might be far greater.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Results must be interpreted within the context of the study’s limitations. First, this study has the same limitations inherent in most survey/vignette-based research. To create an instrument that was user-friendly, succinct, and minimally time consuming (i.e., that judges would complete), both the breadth and depth of the depicted case had to be artificially limited. A few judges commented that the information provided was not sufficiently detailed, and this attempt at conciseness may have impacted ratings. In the future, the use of longer vignettes that incorporate more information upon which to make decisions may better approximate real-life scenarios.

Similarly, judges may have reacted differently to fictional case descriptions than they would have to actual defendants. Consequently, although judges’ responses in this study suggested that they consider the issue of psychosocial maturity when determining a juvenile’s competence, these results may not generalize directly to real cases. The generalizability of the current results also may be limited by the fact that we did not incorporate any visual or other cues that might convey information about a juvenile’s age or level of maturity. In real-world cases, such cues may influence judges’ decisions regarding juveniles’ competence to stand trial. However, holding constant other visual variables while changing the age of the individual would require technology, such as morphing, which was beyond the scope of the current study.

This study was designed to assess the unique and combined roles of psychosocial maturity and age in judges’ perceptions of juveniles’ adjudicative competence. To create a “clean” design, only age and maturity levels were manipulated. As a result, some important factors related to juveniles’ adjudicative competence were not examined in this study, such as gender, ethnicity, intel-

ligence, and mental illness. Nonetheless, we believe that the interpretability of a clean design outweighed the drawbacks of holding these variables constant. However, future research should consider varying these factors.

Additional limitations of this research are related to the sample. In this study, judges were chosen as participants because they, ultimately, are responsible for making decisions about whether defendants are competent to stand trial. However, a number of other players inform this decision, including attorneys and mental health professionals. These other players may have a great deal of influence on the process of determining which defendants may or may not be competent to stand trial, as lawyers are typically the ones who decide when to raise the question of competence, and mental health professionals provide evaluations and opinions about juveniles’ competence-related capacities. Research should explore whether attorneys are aware of how the issue of psychosocial maturity impacts their juvenile clients’ competence to stand trial. In addition, future research might seek to evaluate the reports of mental health professionals to determine if and how they assess and communicate information about juveniles’ psychosocial maturity and its impact on adjudicative competence abilities. A topic of related interest may be exploring the most effective ways to evaluate and communicate such information to judges and lawyers in forensic reports.

Another limitation results from the fact that a portion of responding judges did not have any experience hearing juvenile transfer or reverse transfer cases. However, there were no significant differences in results between judges with and without this experience. Similarly, it may have been useful to collect data about judges’ experiences with criminal cases and juvenile competency hearings, in particular. Although over 80% of the sample reported experience with juvenile transfer or reverse transfer hearings, most states do not require a finding of adjudicative competence as a prerequisite to transferring a juvenile to criminal court (Poythress et al., 2006). There may also be selection bias, with differences between those judges that did and did not respond. Given the 28.5% response rate, responses might not represent the larger population of judges. However, attempts were made to make the sample as representative as possible by obtaining a national sample and encouraging response through duplicate mailings. Furthermore, the participation rate was consistent with most previous research with this population (Redding & Reppucci, 1999).

There also are limitations associated with the use of manipulated vignettes, particularly with the descriptions of psychosocially mature and immature juveniles. Specifically, dichotomizing maturity into “mature” and “immature” reflects an artificial categorization; clearly, maturity exists along a continuum, and, from a theoretical perspective, it would have been ideal to present maturity as a continuous variable in the vignettes. However, use of the maturity descriptions was a novel approach, with no previous research vignettes on which to base them [notably, though, the language used to convey maturity level was based on research presented by Grisso (2005a) and Woo-lard et al. (2003)]. Therefore, with the goal of creating a clean and effective research design, it seemed more appropriate to include only two levels of the maturity variable to increase the likelihood that it would be manipulated successfully; fidelity checks did suggest that attempts to vary maturity levels were successful. Nonetheless, there may be more effective, realistic ways to communicate information about psychosocial

maturity. In addition, the described capacities of the juveniles in the vignettes resulted in judges' competence ratings that clustered around the middle to high end of the scale, restricting variability (i.e., few judges rated the juveniles as "not at all" or "minimally" competent). Although this is a statistical limitation, it probably reflects the common assumption that most defendants are competent to stand trial.

Despite these limitations, this study focused on the role of psychosocial maturity in the context of juvenile competence to stand trial. To our knowledge, few studies have addressed judges' decision making in the context of juveniles' adjudicative competence, and none have examined the impact of psychosocial maturity on judges' decisions about juveniles' adjudicative competence. Further, this study used an experimental design to disentangle the impact of age and maturity on judges' competence decisions. In addition to using a clean experimental design, the study used real-world competence evaluations as models for the vignettes, thereby increasing the content validity of the study. Future research should attempt to broaden the external validity of the study through examination of real cases.

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