

**PREDICTORS OF OUTCOME FOR SEVERELY
EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED CHILDREN IN TREATMENT**

H. G. LUIKER

A thesis submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Psychology
University of Sydney

March 2007

Acknowledgements

The project from which this thesis arises – the Arndell Evaluative Research Program - was conducted by the candidate following his appointment (1990 – 2001) to the new position of clinician/clinical researcher at the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Royal North Shore Hospital, St Leonards, NSW.

This unusual and innovative hybrid position was created by Dr Ken Nunn, then head of department and also director of Arndell Child and Adolescent Unit. While his departure from Australia soon afterwards meant that he was unable to participate in the research, it is a measure of the endurance of Dr Nunn's authority that the project - and my half-time clinical research position - was allowed to continue for over ten years by succeeding directors and heads of department.

The costs of the project other than my salary were met by a series of grants obtained by the candidate as chief investigator. The following financial support is gratefully acknowledged.

1992	Special Limited Research Grant, NSW Institute of Psychiatry (\$5000)
1993	Mental Health Services Research and Evaluation Grant, NSW Department of Health (\$30,000)
1994	The Financial Markets Foundation for Children (\$9,495)
1995	The Financial Markets Foundation for Children (\$7,894)
1995 - 1998	Health and Human Services Research and Development Grant (RADGAC) under the National Mental Health Strategy, Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health (\$63,362)

This funding allowed, most importantly, Mrs Daphne Lupton, a part-time receptionist/administrative officer at Arndell, to take on additional part-time duties as a research assistant to the project. I am grateful to Mrs Lupton for the diligence she brought to the tasks of data collection and entry, and the good humour she brought to her role as second member of what was essentially a two person research team.

Some of the material in this thesis has been previously presented at conferences and in workshops.

An evaluation of the therapeutic impact of Arndell Children's Unit on children's problem behaviour, social competence, and academic performance, and on family functioning (*co-presenters: Nicholas Kowalenko & Michael Gliksman*). Annual Meeting of the Faculty of Child Psychiatry, Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, Katoomba, 1992.

Some early results of the Arndell Evaluative Research Programme: 6 and 12 month follow-up (*co-presenter: Nicholas Kowalenko*). Rivendell Conference, Concord, 1993.

Pragmatic and methodological considerations in conducting evaluative research (workshop) (*co-presenter: Bill MacDonald*). Rivendell Conference, Concord, 1993.

Clinical and socio-demographic predictors of outcome in a population of emotionally disturbed children and adolescents following intensive psycho-social treatment. Annual Congress of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatry, Launceston, 1994.

Predictors of outcome in a population of severely emotionally disturbed children & adolescents following intensive psycho-social treatment. The Second National Conference on Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Melbourne, 1996.

Pragmatic and methodological issues in conducting evaluative research in child and family mental health settings (workshop). The Second National Conference on Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Melbourne, 1996

Other than the workshop of 1993 with Mr Bill MacDonald, which involved some of our shared experiences, the other co-presentations involved separate presentations by individual speakers rather than a jointly authored paper. I am grateful to my co-presenters, who by allying themselves with the project for a time – and in the case of Mr MacDonald by collecting his own additional data and completing independent research work – enhanced the viability of the project in the early years.

Dr Joan Symington, encouraged us to step up to difficult tasks during the period she provided clinical supervision at Arndell unit, overlapping the period during which the research project was conducted. This encouraged me to step up to the difficult tasks in my research role.

I acknowledge the direct suggestions offered by my thesis supervisors - Dr Stevie Whitmont (1993 – 1996), Dr Ros Griffiths (1999) and Dr Deborah Erickson (1999 – 2000) – on one hand, and the teaching by example of my associate supervisor Associate Professor Joel Michell, on the other.

However, the data analysis (and the thesis) owes its completion to Associate Professor (Quantitative Methods) Dave Grayson, who inherited the supervisorship in 2000 at year ten of the project. It was my very good fortune that he returned to the Department of Psychology at the University of Sydney at this time.

Otherwise, the work presented here is my own. The work embodied in this thesis is the result of my original research, no part of it has been submitted for any degree or diploma of any other university or institution and no material published or written by another person has been included except where due acknowledgement has been indicated.

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Abstract

Despite general agreement that severely emotionally disturbed children and adolescents are an "at risk" group, and that ongoing evaluation and research into the effectiveness of services provided for them is important, very little outcome evaluation actually takes place. The absence of well-conducted and appropriately interpreted studies is particularly notable for day or residential treatment programs, which cater for the most severely emotionally disturbed youths.

This thesis outlines the main areas of conceptual, pragmatic and methodological confusion and neglect which impede progress in research in this area. It argues for plurality of data analytic strategies and research designs. It then critically reviews the reported findings about the effectiveness of day and residential treatment in specialist facilities, and the predictors of good outcomes for this treatment type. This review confirms that there is very little to guide practice.

Having argued for the legitimacy of its methods and the necessity to address basic questions, the thesis reports the results of a naturalistic study based on data accumulated during a decade-long evaluative research program taking place at Arndell Child and Adolescent Unit, Sydney. The study addresses the question of what child, family and treatment variables predict outcome for 159 children and adolescents treated at this facility from 1990 to 1999.

Statistically significant results with large effect size were obtained. Among the most disturbed subgroup of forty three children, (a) psychodynamic milieu-based treatment was shown to be more effective than the "empirically-validated" cognitive-behavioural treatment

which superseded it in 1996, and (b) children from step-families showed better outcome than those from other family structures. Furthermore, it was found for the study sample as a whole that severe school-based problem behaviours were associated with a limited trajectory of improvement in home-based problem behaviour.

These results are discussed with regard to implications for treatment, research methodology, policy and further studies.