

Research at Wediko Children's Services

Wediko's commitment to improving the lives of vulnerable youth is illustrated not only in its direct service programs, but also in its continuing investment in basic and applied research. A wide range of publications, dissertations, and presentations have been based on studies at Wediko, reaching researchers in personality, developmental, and clinical psychology, as well as practitioners in school and mental health settings. Recent publications have been reprinted in the *Year Book of Psychiatry and Applied Mental Health* (2003) and *The Reference Guide to Counseling Children and Adolescents: Prevention, treatment, outcomes* (2000). Others have appeared in flagship American Psychological Association journals, including the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, and the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Research at Wediko can be traced to the work of those who helped create the program. Robert Young and colleagues evaluated treatment techniques in the summer program (Young, Miller, & Verven, 1951). Howard J. Parad examined the need for uniform recording and reporting practices (Parad & Young, 1953). The early 1980s signaled the emergence of a research program with a dual emphasis on evaluating behavior change (H. W. Parad, 1983) and on basic processes in personality and social development (Wright, 1983). Under the research directorship of Jack Wright of Brown University, research at Wediko has examined issues of central importance to understanding children's psycho-social adjustment. Specific topics have included the cross-situational organization of children's prosocial and problem behaviors, social status in children's peer groups, gender differences in aggression and adaptive behaviors, and how people's concepts of psychopathology change with age and clinical expertise.

A central theme of the research is that children's behaviors, and more broadly their personalities, cannot be understood without attention to the interpersonal contexts in which they are embedded. Research at Wediko beginning in the late 1980s led investigators to advance a "contextual" model of traits that conceptualizes personality as patterns of *if...then* links between social contexts and children's responses to them (Wright & Mischel, 1987; 1988; Wright & Dawson, 1989; Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1989; 1993a,b, 1994; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). This model continues to shape how researchers think about complex individual differences in behaviors such as anxiety, hostility, aggression, and prosocial behavior (see Van Mechlen & Kiers, 1999; Vansteelandt, 1999).

In the last decade, Audrey Zakriski at Connecticut

College and other collaborators have played increasingly important research roles, in part by expanding a contextual view of personality into a model of child clinical assessment (Wright, Lindgren & Zakriski, 2001; Wright & Zakriski, 2001; 2003; Wright, Zakriski, & Drinkwater, 1999; Zakriski, Wright & Underwood, in press). This approach raises questions about dominant assessment practices that broadly summarize children's behavior problems over contexts. It also offers methods for studying the variability in children's behavior problems that can identify children with distinct psychosocial profiles and treatment needs. Currently, this contextual framework is being extended to the study of treatment outcomes. Rather than focusing on the overall "amount" of change, as is common in outcome research, ongoing Wediko research emphasizes the need to understand the interpersonal dynamics of how change occurs. Accumulating evidence (Zakriski, Wright, & Parad, 2005) suggests that only by distinguishing between multiple change pathways is it possible to interpret what overall change means or predict whether it will transfer to other settings.

Federal and state guidelines call for functional analysis of behavior and empirically-based educational planning, but assessment methods have not kept pace with policy mandates. One key goal for Wediko is to make empirical data more clinically useful within the setting; another is to make methods we have developed more widely available to other professionals. For many years, the Wediko Behavior Observation System (WBOS) enabled staff to provide extensive field data needed to assess children's social interactional patterns (Wright et al., 1999; Zakriski et al., in press). In the near future, the WBOS will be redesigned so that field data can be collected more efficiently using handheld computers. This will give researchers and clinical staff immediate access to empirical data on children's social adjustment, data that can then be used in clinical supervision, family consultations, and end-of-summer reports. By developing methods for studying behavior that are both efficient and contextually sensitive, Wediko research should also help professionals in other settings respond to mandates for empirically-based assessment and planning.

Much as Howard Parad and Robert Young emphasized over 50 years ago, Wediko remains committed to the systematic study of troubled youths. In the decades to come, Wediko will continue to be a model of clinical-research integration—by serving the immediate needs of children in treatment, by helping professionals evaluate the services they provide, and by contributing to basic research on children's socio-emotional development.

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