

THE WALDEN FELLOWSHIP EXPERIMENTS

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ABSTRACT: In this paper the authors report on the early development of a cultural entity—Walden Fellowship, Inc.—which was established "to explore and encourage the development of behavior and cultural practices which maximize reinforcement and minimize coercion over the long term for all persons in a manner consistent with the survival of the human and other species." This voluntary organization maintains three primary streams of activity: self-education, consultation services, and cultural design research in the wider community. A major goal toward which involvement in all of these converge is the development of a mutually reinforcing social and verbal community among participants. Unlike an earlier paper in which this organization was conceptualized, this article is not fictional.

Key words: cultural design, Walden Two.

We are approaching the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Walden Two* (Skinner, 1948), regarded by Skinner as his most important book. Walden Two was a fictional, **relatively** self-contained **community**, founded on the **principles** of the science of behavior. It is, in some ways, one in a long list of American **Utopian novels**, but Skinner also viewed it as qualitatively different, as far more realistic than **Utopian notions** not based on empirically-derived **principles**. Walden Two was a community of about a thousand members, largely economically self-sufficient, that maintained a culture deeply rooted in constant experimentation rather than religious or other pre-conceived belief **systems** or charismatic personal leadership—in fact, the precise opposite of cult communities.

Several attempts to actualize Skinner's vision have been made, including Los Horcones in Sonora, Mexico, and Twin Oaks in Louisa, Virginia. These attempts are instructive, both in terms of what has worked well and what has not. Los Horcones (Comunidad Los Horcones, 1986) has proven a satisfactory place to live and work for over two decades; it has not yet discovered ways to reach the size the founders regard as optimal, but continues to experiment to find ways to do so. This community is "revisionist" in at least one important way. Rather than being economically and culturally isolated from the surrounding environment, core community members provide special education services to persons from the surrounding area. This work provides economic support as well as linking Los Horcones organically to the broader community. Twin Oaks followed a different path (Kinkade, 1973). While experiencing little difficulty in maintaining

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Table 1.

Walden Fellowship, Inc. Mission Statement

Walden Fellowship exists to explore and encourage the development of behavior and cultural practices which maximize reinforcement and minimize coercion over the long term for all persons in a manner consistent with the survival of the human and other species. The Fellowship was formed to provide a model of interlocking contingencies resulting in a high level of reciprocal reinforcement among its members ("mutual support"), and a locus from which such practices may be extended into the larger society ("service").

Guided by the principles elaborated in the Behavior Code, the Fellowship may:

- organize regular gatherings which prompt and reinforce self-management and effective cultural practices among members;
- design and implement service programs and activities which extend positive cultural practices into the community;
- educate members and others about the science and practice of behavior analysis;
- conduct experimental, applied and conceptual analyses of behavior and cultural practices to discover, test and refine more effective practices; and
- engage in other activities consistent with its overall mission.

membership, after several years the underlying principles of the community gradually shifted; there was increasingly more reliance on group consensus and less on an explicit acceptance of science as its foundation.

Of course, Skinner never expected, nor wanted, a community to blindly follow the structure described in the novel. The underlying principles were what mattered to him: a belief that the science of behavior could help in the construction of satisfying and reinforcing lives and cultures; an ultimate reliance on experimentation and data to shape cultural practices; disconnection from exploitive and coercive contingencies characteristic of the larger culture. There may be many ways to operationalize these constructs and thereby to improve human life. The central message of *Walden Two* was Skinner's belief in the need to construct new cultural entities that establish new cultures (systems of social reinforcement), that shape and maintain new cultural practices, and that produce greater aggregate reinforcement and less aggregate coercion and pain.

In the broadest of terms, this is the vision of Walden Fellowship. (The complete mission statement is shown in Table 1) The Walden Fellowship, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation located in New York City (just how revisionist this is, is discussed below). Its overall goal is the extension of the science of behavior more widely into the fabric of society. It is the result of a five year planning process, initiated in 1991 with a fictional paper outlining the basic notion (Mattaini, 1991). The image of the pond, into which multiple pebbles are thrown (see Figure 1) is the

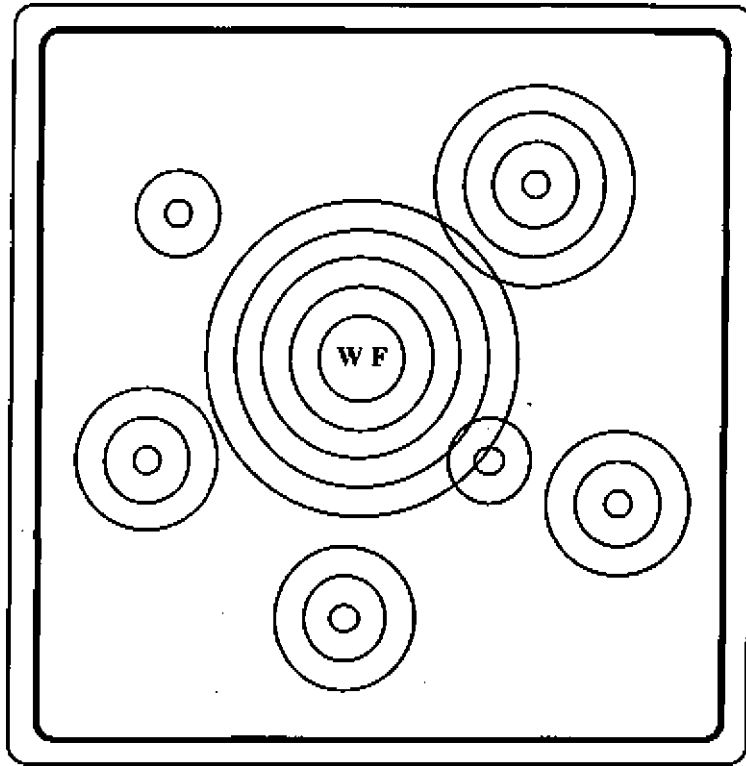


Figure 1. The metaphor of the pond.

metaphor around which the organization operates; by implementing behavior analytic processes in many places at once, even if some are small efforts, we hope to have a meaningful aggregate impact.

The organization currently has multiple activity streams in operation, including: monthly self-education workshops, the publication of self-education modules, a self-management group, a personal and family consultation service, organizational consultation, and cultural design research/community service projects in the areas of violence prevention, women's issues, increasing respect and appreciation for diversity, and child maltreatment. Nearly all of these activities are conducted by volunteers (with the exception that the professionals providing personal and family consultation typically receive modest financial compensation due to the large and regular time commitment involved), often in concert with a major university or private organizations. Each of these activities will be discussed below or in other papers (to be published in *Behavior and Social Issues*).

Walden Fellowship is not, and does not attempt to be, Walden Two. Rather than being a self-contained rural community, it is firmly embedded in the matrix of one of the largest and most complex cities in the world. Everyone participating in Walden Fellowship has a "day job" as well, and is connected with many other cultural entities (work, school, family, etc.). There is not now, nor is it clear that there

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Table 2.

Walden Fellowship, Inc. Behavior Code.

The following principles provide the basic framework for internal and external actions of members of the Walden Fellowship:

- 1) People's actions are shaped by current conditions, personal history and biology; all persons, therefore, deserve equal respect regardless of behavior. This is true regardless of race, sex, age, ethnicity, class, religious or sexual preferences, educational level, or disability.
- 2) Creative experiments, carefully monitored, provide the best information on which to base important decisions.
- 3) Positive reinforcement is preferable to coercion* and is the primary principle underlying effective cultural practices.
- 4) Coercion should be eliminated to the extent possible, consistent with achieving primary goods.
- 5) The survival of the human and other species is a primary good.
- 6) Life, health, and the basic resources necessary to maintain them, as well as opportunities for all persons to act to obtain adequate levels of reinforcement are primary goods.
- 7) Maximizing one's own reinforcement and that experienced by others, consistent with the long-term well-being of self, others, and the environment, is a primary good.
- 8) Acquiring the skills to maximize long-term reinforcement by being aware of and managing the contingencies shaping one's behavior (empowerment) is a primary good.
- 9) Cultural practices emphasizing mutual respect and cooperation generally produce greater overall reinforcement than do those based in oppression, competition or coercion; therefore acting for the common welfare is generally valued.
- 10) Education and increases in the common knowledge base lead to increases in reinforcement, and are therefore generally valued.
- 11) Cultural practices grounded in the above principles, and shared among persons, groups, and generations, should be preferred.
- 12) Our own behavior is shaped by our evolutionary and personal history and current conditions. The possibility of bias should therefore always be recognized.

* According to Murray Sidman, coercion refers to "punishment and the threat of punishment... and ... rewarding people just by letting them escape from our punishments and threats." (Sidman, 1989, p. 1)

ever will be, a residential component of the organization. On the other hand, the members of Walden Fellowship do see themselves as engaged in the construction of a new form of cultural entity: a community rooted in the science of behavior. As in Walden Two, Walden Fellowship has a Board of Planners, consisting almost entirely of behaviorists, which elects its successors. As in Walden Two, it has a Behavior Code (see Table 2) which members attempt to operationalize in their personal and professional lives.

Crucially important from the organization's perspective is the development of a verbal community (compare the Sunday meetings held in Walden Two), a cultural entity that speaks a common language. The monthly workshops and self-education modules have this as a central goal. A conscious effort is also made to develop a culture based in positive reinforcement rather than coercion within a group of people who have frequent contact with each other and constitute an important part of each other's lives, thus becoming a genuine community. Every effort is made to make Walden activities as reinforcing as possible, since the matching law predicts that more behavior will be allocated to the more reinforcing choices (McDowell, 1988). The material that follows briefly describes many of these activities in more detail. It is important to see these activities in their overall context—as efforts to develop a richly interconnected community, a cultural entity maintained by a network of interlocking contingencies.

Activity Streams

The three major activity streams currently in operation (self-education, consultation, and cultural design service research) will each, in turn, be described briefly. For further detail about each, refer to the subsequent articles.

Self-education and self-management

On the first Thursday evening of each month, Walden Fellowship conducts a monthly workshop designed to bring together as many of the members as possible. These workshops will be described in more detail in a subsequent paper (Mattaini & Williams, in press). These workshops have evolved considerably over time based on experimentation and data. The original concept was borrowed from the Sunday meetings held in Walden Two, which brought members of the community together to "inspire group loyalty and strengthen the observance of the Code" (Skinner, 1948, p. 185). We strive to have members leave each workshop with specific new skills which they can apply in their lives elsewhere, with new knowledge about applications of the science of behavior, with more fluent verbal behavior about the science, and with deepened commitment to the community. We are particularly interested in shaping new behaviorists interested in cultural design and involving them in the workshops and other Walden Fellowship and behavior analytic activities. One approach has been to offer a course with a heavy emphasis on behavior analysis and cultural design at the Columbia University School of Social Work (Mattaini, 1995).

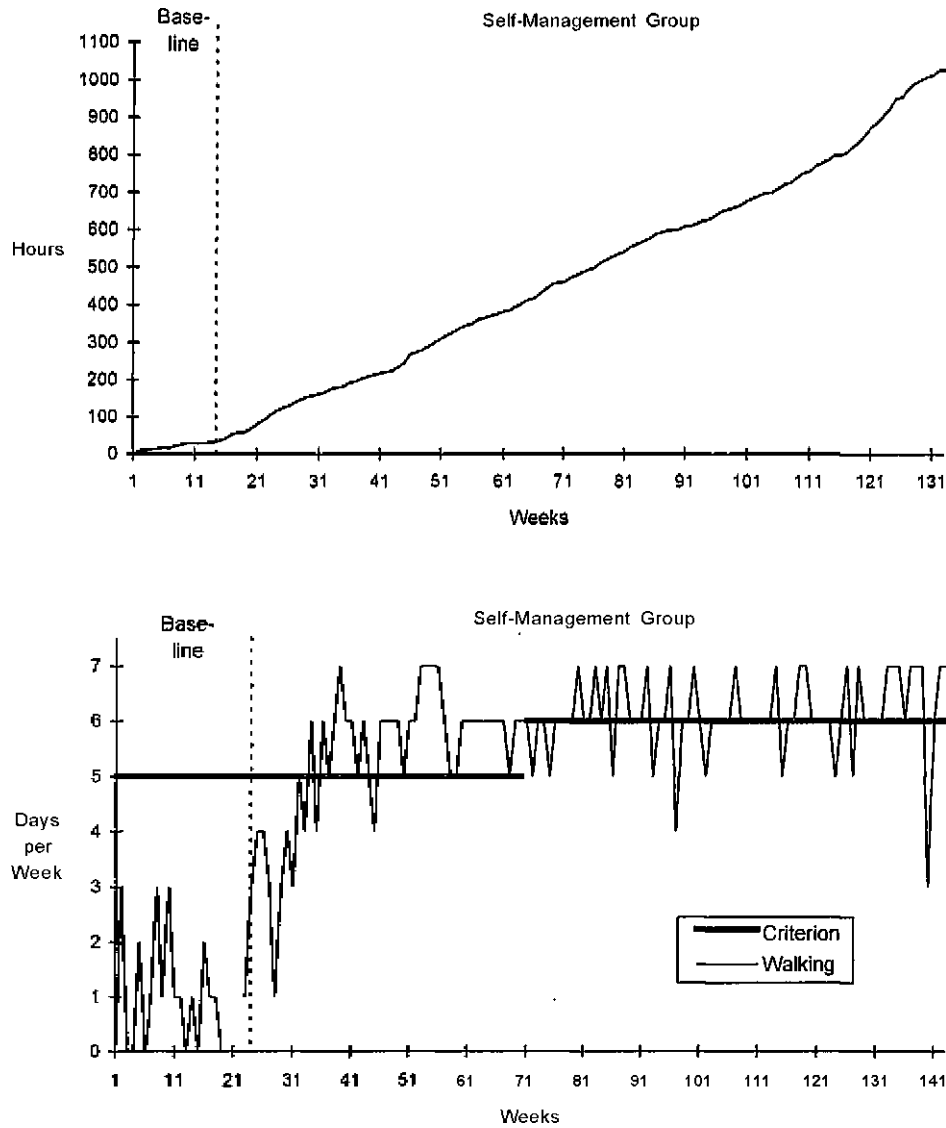


Figure 2. Representative self-management data. Upper panel depicts hours spent in research and professional writing, lower panel depicts days per week meeting a walking objective of at least 75 minutes.

In addition to the monthly workshops, we publish the *Elements of Behavior* modules. The modules are brief, filling both sides of a single sheet of paper. The front page of each provides instructional material about one central behavioral concept, the back contains exercises for the reader to complete (including

contingency diagrams and narrative questions) applying the material from the front. Completed modules can be mailed in for written feedback, and then returned to the sender. Although the "return rate" for these modules is modest, in surveys we have conducted most of our members (a) read them (82%), and (b) rate them for usefulness at an average of 5.6 on a 7-point scale. Given that some of our members are behavior analysts already familiar with much of the material, we find these results satisfactory, although we continually try to improve them. (A subscription to *Elements* is also available to anyone who requests it.)

Finally, we offer a weekly self-management group, attended usually by three to four persons, in which members can design and monitor the achievement of professional goals, improvement in their personal lives, and desirable lifestyle changes. For example, Figure 2 shows two graphs from a member of this group; the top panel shows a cumulative record of hours spent in research and professional writing, the lower panel traces an exercise program monitored in the group. Note the shifts that occurred with participation in the group; prior to that time, resolutions and good intentions clearly had not made lasting changes in the person's behavior.

Consultation services

In Chapter 20 of *Walden Two*, Frazier expressed confidence in the ability of the Walden Two psychologists to "deal with it somehow", should personal problems become severe for a member. Once one accepts that behavior, whether overt or covert, is behavior, there is no reason to doubt that most behavioral problems, and most cultural problems (like those occurring within the microculture of a family or within an organization) can, in principle, be "dealt with" effectively and to the mutual satisfaction of those involved. There are limitations, of course, based on biology, limitations in current knowledge, and accessible control over the active contingencies, but overall the science of behavior provides a solid foundation.

Walden Fellowship personal and family consultation services, described in a subsequent paper (Seidenfeld & Mattaini, in press), take this optimistic perspective. While we rely on much of the behavior analytic clinical literature (e.g., Hayes, Jacobson, Follette, & Dougher, 1994; Kohlenberg & Tsai, 1991) in this work (to the extent possible), our consultants avoid construing what is happening in a case as a "mental disorder" (except where there is a clear or probable physical dysfunction present) or calling the services provided "psychotherapy." We believe that seeing personal problems as natural results of the contingencies within which they are embedded, and personal goals as requiring the design of, or exposure to, new contingencies (which may, of course, require new repertoires to access), is a far more hopeful stance, in which client and consultant can work together toward clearly specified goals. Given this collaborative emphasis, we also tend to avoid interventions that depend on paradox, except where the paradoxical mechanisms can be shared with the client (Ascher & Turner, 1979).

In addition to personal and family consultation, we provide consultation to several organizations (some for a fee, some on a voluntary basis, depending on the

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organization's financial circumstances). For example, in another paper (Ojeda, in press) one of our affiliates describes efforts to incorporate community reinforcement and contingency management into a program for homeless crack cocaine addicts, a project on which the first author has been consulting for three years. In addition, we are currently involved in consulting efforts in several organizations focusing on youth violence prevention, based on the model developed by our Violence Prevention Task Force (see below), as well as in efforts to enhance the already excellent parent education services at a behavioral preschool. These efforts include the following components: curriculum refinements, development of a supportive culture to reduce insularity (Dumas & Wahler, 1983; Wahler, 1980), and expansion of parents' capacity to advocate effectively for their children.

Cultural design service research

Many successful communitarian organizations have discovered that an external focus, an interest in more than the welfare of the members themselves, is important if they are to remain vibrant. A focus on broader sociocultural arenas is clearly called for in the Walden Fellowship mission statement. Therefore, in addition to member self-education in these areas, the organization has established several task forces to carry out experiments in changing cultural practices in community settings. Recent work by Biglan (1995), as well as some of our own, has been particularly helpful in shaping these efforts.

Among these task forces, the Violence Prevention Task Force has been active for the longest period of time, has produced one publication (Mattaini, Twyman, Chin, & Lee, 1996), and has set the clearest directions. For the moment, violence perpetrated by youth is the major focus, although ultimately we are interested in reducing all forms of violence. The work began with an extensive review of the literature which was used to prepare an initial conceptual analysis of subclasses of youth violence in which we attempted to extract relevant learning histories and networks of interlocking contingencies that select and maintain these behaviors. We have now established a contractual arrangement with a school district to test a program to introduce and stabilize nonviolent cultural practices in an alternative intermediate school; we are collaborating on a similar experimental program in a community youth center and a program for court-referred youth, and we are conducting an observational study of coercive episodes among youth. A subsequent paper discussing cultural design service research (Mattaini & Twyman, in press) presents this work in detail.

Two other task forces have been meeting regularly, and their agendas have been taking shape. One focuses on increasing respect and appreciation for diversity, and decreasing racist and other discriminatory practices. The Diversity Task Force has completed a conceptual analysis, and has decided to focus initially on ways to increase respect among persons working in human service and educational settings (essentially to "begin at home"). We recognize that work in organizations needs to address not only behavior among individuals but also structural and institutional practices that perpetuate racism and discrimination (Briggs & Paulson, 1996). The Diversity Task

Force has begun conducting experimental workshops, and has initiated a long-term collaboration with one human service agency to test approaches for constructing a culture supporting practices which constitute respect and appreciation for diversity.

The other currently active group is the Women's Issues Task Force, whose mission is to reduce sexist and sexually coercive practices and increase mutual respect across genders. This group has only begun to examine the practices and interlocking contingencies involved, examining the general feminist literature (e.g., Lerner, 1986) as well as the small amount of behavior analytic work that has been done (e.g., Daly, 1996). They have initially targeted sexual coercion as an important practice on which to focus their efforts, and are just beginning to clarify the actions needed. Biglan's analyses of approaches to reducing sexist practices (1995), and sexual coercion in particular (1996), are especially helpful in this work.

An additional area of organizational interest is the reduction of child maltreatment, and we hope to have an active task force addressing this issue in the near future; there is also interest in looking at environmental and safer sex issues. We have, however, tried to be careful not to "burn out" the relatively small number of very active members who tend to be interested in everything. As membership expands, so will our ability to become active around a wider range of issues.

In each area, our primary interest is to develop and test interventive packages and programs until we can demonstrate that the interventive approach is effective. At that point, we will be in a position to disseminate it. We are quite concerned that many educational, preventive, and treatment models are disseminated before their efficacy has been demonstrated; some may even do harm, as some early drug-abuse education programs apparently did (Stuart, 1974).

"Acting to Save the World"

At this point, the broad outlines of an extensive, integrated vision are beginning to emerge. We view the science of behavior as having the power to make major differences in the survival and quality of life of the human (and other) species. There is much that is not known, of course, but the experimental method and research strategies developed by behavior and cultural analysts, when linked with conceptual analyses based on the core principles of human behavior, can help us to ask, and teach us to answer, the right questions.

While these tools are critical, they are not enough. To have a substantial impact, we suspect that an active, effective cultural entity that can pursue these issues and establish the needed practices and cultural interlocks will be essential. This is, as we have conceived it, the role of Walden Fellowship: to serve as a nexus of such activities, a community of mutual reinforcement and challenge, a cultural entity that can serve as a model and catalyst. While the potential for a national organization exists, consistent with *Walden Two* we suspect that personal and, to a substantial extent, face-to-face contingencies are important. It may ultimately prove best to form a loose network of replications in various places, each optimized for the local situation, rather than

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creating an international monolith. Ultimately, however, this too is an empirical question.

This is a rather grand vision for an organization with a few dozen active members! In the meantime, however, we face a number of important challenges. One absolutely crucial question is how to ensure, as we grow, that the organization remains behavioral, grounded firmly in the science of behavior and, even more important, in empiricism, practicing objective observation and employing precise and quantified measurement. Only by maintaining this level of scientific rigor will we be able to confidently accept and objectively report the results of our endeavors and their implications for society.

Another issue, and one that we continue to wrestle with, is the question of personal leadership. Skinner suggested in *Walden Two* that, while a designer may be required to set things in motion, a relatively anonymous board of "technocrats" was all that may be required to make decisions and guide the community. We hope that this will ultimately prove true for Walden Fellowship, but our early experience suggests that this is a distant goal. We began by forming a Board of Planners, which met a few times over several months. We hoped that members of the Board would identify valuable activity streams and perhaps divide them up and begin planning. However, no significant activity occurred until one person began planning and "behaving," asking only approval and consultation from other members of the Board. Once activities were set in motion, Board members and others became more active, a process that is increasing with time. (The possible need for a "*primum mobile*" [p. 219] was recognized in *Walden Two*.)

There is another area in which personal leadership seems to have proven necessary. While Skinner recognized the need for "something like conversion" for new members of Walden Two, thus far we have found that persons interested in the areas on which the organization focuses are generally recruited first because they respect someone already associated with the organization and regard that person as a reliable authority, rather than because they have a deep belief in the principles on which the organization is based. They are open to the notion that science can help, but usually join more out of "faith." Membership often begins with a sort of pliance (Biglan, 1995), in which members participate and take specific actions in part because the respected person's approval serves as an establishing operation. Only later does something like tracking take over, where members apply principles of the science because they have a clear understanding that those rules describe reality in a useful way. What this may mean is that some form of "charismatic leadership" may be required to engage new members. This is a potentially troubling discovery; perhaps over time we can identify alternative establishing operations that will also be effective.

Finally (and this is certainly not unique to Walden Fellowship), much more could, be done if we had additional resources, both human and financial. The Board has not targeted growth as a primary consideration, since we are more concerned with doing what we do well, not with growing rapidly. The former will ensure that the mission of the organization is maintained. At the same time, incremental increases in resources,

and thereby in activities, will be important if the ripples on the surface are to extend to cover any significant portion of the pond.

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