

WALDEN 1.9: Successive approximations

Mark A. Mattaini
School of Social Work
Columbia University

ABSTRACT: In *Walden Two*, B. F. Skinner offered a cultural design that has intrigued behavior analysts and other thoughtful individuals for over forty years. Some experimental attempts to implement the technologies in the real world have occurred, but clearly the effects until now have been circumscribed, and behavior analysis is in short-term danger of becoming a specialized technology for dealing with a narrow range of human problems. Skinner himself, and others, have examined reasons for the limited impact of *Walden Two* on the overall culture. Perhaps the gap between the current sociocultural situation and that of *Walden Two* is too large to leap all at once. While Frazier's argument that separation from the mainstream is essential may ultimately prove true, at this point very few individuals have emitted the requisite behaviors, leaving behind family, career, and economic independence for a promised land of perpetual reinforcement. Three initial approaches are explored in this fictional account, each of which, building on stimulus equivalence, resembles existing cultural institutions to some extent, but may have potential for bringing Skinner's technology more broadly into daily life.

I had an odd experience recently I'd like to share with you. I was attending a reception for the establishment of an endowed chair in contemporary urban problems at the university where I teach. Not surprisingly, several prominent or wealthy people spoke about contemporary urban problems. There didn't seem to be much on which they agreed.

The woman sitting next to me leaned over at one point, and said, not critically, rather a bit sadly, "They really haven't a clue, have they?"

I just shrugged. A bit later, during the cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, we encountered each other again. She was striking, confident, well but not extravagantly dressed, perhaps my age, perhaps a bit older--just the type to relieve the tedium of an affair like this.

In an effort to break the ice, I asked, "What did you mean about not having a clue?"

She smiled, passing over the note of competition in my voice entirely, and said, "We're in the early stages of a cultural and scientific revolution, and I'm afraid your friends have yet to discover it." I said something slightly defensive and a little

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 17th Annual Convention, Association for Behavior Analysis: International, Atlanta, Georgia, May 26, 1991. Correspondence should be addressed to the author at Columbia University School of Social Work, 622 West 113th Street, New York, NY 10025.

MATTAINI

cynical, and she just looked at me oddly, as if to say, "That's not necessary," but continued warmly, "A scholar named William Vaughan recently suggested, as have others, that the Skinnerian revolution will have as profound effects as did the Copernican and Darwinian. He is clearly right; current efforts to return control to 'the inner man' are to be expected given what we know about behavior, but will, I think, eventually fade as have other superstitions, given enough time and data." I responded with something inconsequential, which I have fortunately forgotten.

"You know, B. F. Skinner may have been wrong about one thing, though," she continued thoughtfully. Now she had my attention.

Giving up my vague flirting altogether, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"He regarded *Walden Two* as his most important book, and I think it is. Modern systems theory suggests, though, that his belief that separation from the mainstream was crucial is problematic, since relatively closed systems seldom thrive. It has also proven troublesome empirically; large numbers of people have not thronged to the several attempts to establish communities based on *Walden Two*, it's simply too big a leap for most. The most successful attempts to put Skinner's ideas into practice are much more open to their environmental context than was *Walden Two*. I believe that, if the principles he clarified are scientifically valid, they'll work in the real world. Otherwise, it reminds me of my Christian friends who believe that their ethical principles are perfect, but have never really been tried. The problem is, they never will be, either. Besides, we have evidence . . ." Her voice trailed off. She picked up a cocktail napkin and wrote a couple of lines on it, then handed it to me.

"You seem really interested. Would you like to drop by on Friday morning? I'd like to show you my data." I had a bit of free time since the term was over, and quickly agreed, adding a line metaphorically equating data and etchings. She just vaguely shook her head, looked me in the eye, and said, "Friday, then...." I looked at the napkin, which said, "Experiment with Life!" listed an address and the name, "Deborah." I put it in my pocket and returned to the party.

On Friday morning, I found myself in front of a attractively renovated brownstone on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, almost in the shadow of the American Museum of Natural History. I noticed a small brass plaque near the door, that read "Institute for Experimental Living," and had what looked like a cross on it. I rang the bell, entered a small, bright foyer, and approached a young woman with an Australian accent.

I showed her my cocktail napkin, and she said, "Oh, yes, Professor Albert, Deborah is expecting you. Why don't you step into the Fellowship Hall, and I'll let her know you're here?" Passing her desk, I entered a large room that took up most of the first floor of the building, a white room, decorated with modern paintings and sculptures somehow selected to brighten the room at least as much as did the light coming in through large windows opening onto a back garden. Hearing a step, I

WALDEN 1.9

turned and saw Deborah, who led me through a small door into the only other room on this floor, her office.

I started, "I noticed a cross by the door; I take it this is some sort of religious organization?"

She laughed brightly. "Actually, what you saw is a plus sign; it refers to positive reinforcement. It's the closest thing to magic we've yet discovered, you know. The similarity to an important symbol for at least one cultural tradition is, perhaps, serendipitous, but relatively accidental." I noticed one wall of the office covered with paintings and photographs, portraying children playing, scenes of love and warmth, pets, beaches and sailing, camping, food, wine, and travel. "My reinforcer sampling wall," she noted, "sometimes it helps my clients to think of new alternatives."

"Ah," I thought, "clients," noticing a stack of business cards on the desk reading, "Dr. Deborah" . . . something or other. "You're a therapist, then?"

"No, although the title 'Institute,' our affiliation with a major university, and the fact that we provide graduate and post-graduate training for professionals might at first suggest that. We take a bit of a different cut on the matter. We provide consultation for building fulfilling, productive lives, rather than treating mental disorders. We keep our fees manageable, we don't take health insurance, since we're not dealing with curing disease (we do have pharmacological consultants for people for whom there is a significant biochemical component to their unhappiness). Let me show you."

We went upstairs, and discovered a waiting room and doors to several offices. Deborah led me to a young couple sitting on a couch, and introduced me as the professor she'd told them about. Saying they'd agreed to tell me about the consultation in which they were involved, the young woman told me that the two of them had lived together for two years, and were now trying to decide whether to stay together and get married. She explained that they had learned about the importance of exchanging positives selected by the recipient, new ways to talk and control conflict, and the difference between a request and a demand. She also told me about the "talking/lovemaking coin" they had invented to increase the rates of two behavior exchanges, one of which was particularly important to each of them. Although both enjoyed talking and making love, more talk was important to her (heads is for talking), and more lovemaking to him (tails, of course).

"So, several times a week, we flip our special coin . . ." They laughed, and proudly showed me some charts they had been keeping tracking positive exchanges, and said they hoped they would soon be selecting as a "teaching couple," helping lead a couples self-help group at the Institute.

As they were called into an office, Deborah knocked on the door of another, and we went in to observe a consultation. A young Hispanic woman nodded to us, and went on to her consultant, "So, as I was saying, when I was in therapy, I discussed the pain associated with living in a racist society. My therapist asked if

MATTAINI

I saw the connection between the way I would obstinately slam the door when I was an abused child, knowing my mother would hit me even harder, and my decision to immigrate to a country where I knew I would be exposed to racial prejudice. I decided right then that that sort of 'therapy' was not what I needed. What I'm learning here about self-experimentation, building a reinforcement network for myself, and developing more accurate self-rules is helping me move from being stuck in 'existential crisis' to trying experiments with my life, testing ways to build an empowered life that works for me." I was later told that this client had been in therapy for two years with a therapist in private practice. With her permission, I also examined charts demonstrating measurable change in eight weeks of personal consultation at the Institute. I was impressed.

Down the hall, Deborah took me into a conference room where three people were concentrating intently on colored circles and arrows projected from a computer onto a screen on the wall, and did not stop to acknowledge us. It soon became clear that they were analyzing the behavior exchanges and contingencies involved in serious coercive conflicts occurring in an academic department (not an unknown situation), and examining alternative approaches for resolving it, using a visual tool they called an "organizational eco-map." Deborah whispered that the Institute had been hired to consult with the department, and was developing a plan that would incorporate modifications of the existing incentive systems with social interventions suggested by the results of Axelrod's computer modeling, which demonstrate that a small island of cooperation can take hold tenaciously and propagate itself through an initially unresponsive environment.

"We also are coordinating a demonstration project in the neighborhood," she told me on the way back downstairs, "to analyze cross-cultural conflicts, and work with neighborhood groups to develop new ways to build bridges between groups and contain conflicts when they do arise. We call it 'Project Gorgeous Mosaic,' using Mayor Dinkin's rather elegant metaphor. We receive a bit of money from the City to partially support the study. It's very early-stage and a terrific challenge, but one of our exciting projects. We incorporate at least a modest research effort into all of our consultation work."

Returning to the ground floor, I could hear the voices of children from below. "Oh, we operate a special remedial school. The district sends us kids for a term or two, we catch them up academically and socially, and send them back with a maintenance and generalization plan. Actually, we use as many staff for follow-up as for the program downstairs. These workers provide consultation to teachers and pupil personnel based on our experiments extending the exciting work of G. Roy Mayer and his associates in the Los Angeles public schools, focused on decreasing aversives, increasing the use of positives, and ensuring personalized assignments at an academic level that challenges without overwhelming the student. Despite inevitable issues when returning the children to community schools, for which we

WALDEN 1.9

train our generalization workers intensively, our results are better than the District's special education programs, and much faster and cheaper."

Back in her office, I admitted that I had been impressed with the work and potential of the Consultation Center, and the way it seemed to be applying operant principles in rigorous but digestible ways.

She smiled warmly, and asked, "Are you free Sunday?" She wasn't asking for a date.

Sunday morning, I again found myself at the Institute, and found much more activity happening. Perhaps 200 persons had gathered in the Fellowship Hall, when a chamber music group in the corner began what I think was the Rondeau from Mozart's Flute Quartet in D. What followed was an analogue of a religious service, with announcements of coming events, music, and readings from a Chinese poet and an American novelist; then Deborah stepped up to a podium and discussed the readings in terms of recent research on the negative effects of coercion, and applications to everyday life. Her talk was simple, intelligent, and I found it genuinely moving. She finished with a reminder to the group that the following Wednesday was the monthly "Caring Day" (growing from the work of Dick Stuart) on which, I later learned, Members make a particular effort to increase specific positive exchanges at home and work.

After joining in singing what I was later told was an adaptation of a traditional French folk song, the "congregation" dispersed throughout the building and back garden. A young man who had been assigned to meet and guide me wandered about with me, answering questions. In the garden, the children were role-playing in a game that seemed to deal with learning to disarm verbal aggression and cynicism, and redirect the focus of conversations. Despite some extremely nasty provocations, the children laughed a lot, and came up with very creative solutions. At one point, I thought I recognized Deborah's tactic when we first met, and realized how effectively and quickly she had disarmed my somewhat artificial and competitive conversational openings, and engaged me in something more genuine. Jean Louis, my guide, who was as it turned out a doctoral candidate, explained that the success of the "game" depended on children's natural tendency to imitate, as well as on a high level of positive social reinforcement, and a group contingency, a trip to the Discovery Center at the American Museum, when everyone had reached criterion.

Upstairs, I watched a group of teenagers engrossed in a serious discussion of sexual ethics. I heard a young woman say, "Let's start with the facts: 1) Sexual gratification is a primary reinforcer, really a good thing, not a sin. Guilt doesn't seem to be the answer. 2) Like other primary reinforcers, say chocolate (a chorus of agreement there), the situation in the world now has changed from when sexuality evolved, and we may need to consider changing the associated personal and social contingencies" In the discussion that followed, the participants

MATTAINI

struggled to hammer out personal codes aimed at maximizing short- and long-term positive consequences for everyone concerned.

In another room, I watched as a social worker and a former addict diagrammed the contingencies associated with the use of crack. My guide explained that the social action interest group meeting here was examining realistic, if modest, ways in which they could impact on the "crack" problem, ranging from influencing public policy (some of the participants were prominent business and government figures) to appointing a subcommittee to work with one of the professional consultants on a new prevention-education curriculum based on the analysis for testing with primary school children. Relatively small behaviors that members of the group could take, and contingencies associated with ensuring that they were taken, seemed to be the focus. This really was a social *action* interest group. The group also decided to ask the members to allow them to provide their addresses to a small non-profit group selling crafts produced by Latin American cooperatives by mail.

In other rooms on an upper floor, we found other groups painting, and practicing chamber music. In one room, people were sharing ideas for self-experimentation relative to life problems, in another, engrossed in a seminar about "rule-governed behavior", on the door of the third was a sign identifying the activity as, "The Constitution of the Institute for New Members"; inside were people apparently entranced by computer screens. Jean Louis explained that other interest groups associated with the fellowship met on evenings during the week, although weekends were the busiest times. I smelled a barbecue; families, groups of friends, and single individuals (who seemed to have no difficulties making connections here) were cycling through the back garden in the sunshine; somehow I wasn't surprised to see them drinking from glasses with fiber handles, carried like pails, and eating from deep, square dishes.

We served ourselves and joined one group, where I found myself stimulated but a bit taken aback by the directness and openness of the conversation. Afterwards, my guide returned me to Deborah near the outer door.

"There is one more thing you should see," she said. We walked to an unmarked brownstone next door, and entered. It gave the impression of a large home; some fifteen people, mostly in their twenties, but a few much older, were discussing something called "labor credits," apparently associated with activities like cleaning and cooking. A couple of small children were playing nearby.

Deborah quietly informed me, "This is the Community for Experimental Living. Members join for a year at a time, and live in a communal environment, guided by the First Principles listed in the Constitution (including the primacy of positive reinforcement and experimentation, and the avoidance of coercion in Institute and personal activities), and the Behavior Code, which provides specific guidance in social relations, and changes as warranted by data. Most of the members of the Community work outside, often but not always in jobs with a

WALDEN 1.9

specific behavioral focus, and contribute the bulk of their salary the first year to the Community and the work of the Institute. If a member chooses to stay an additional year, she contributes a specified amount (determined over the past few years experimentally) but keeps the rest if she chooses. Many contribute more. A few people contribute additional labor rather than income (in fact, my husband does that, and does watercolors the rest of his time). The Community also takes in at any time one or two homeless individuals, who can become full members if they choose to stay, participate in the labor credit system, and complete the computerized initial training modules and social and reinforcement skills seminar that all prospective members complete.

"The Sunday governance meeting you are seeing here occurs twice a month. On the alternate Sundays, we hold a discussion seminar focused on reading recent research and applying operant principles to the lives of the members, both in the Community and in their outside activities. We have derived several fascinating publications from the results of these experiments, not to speak of an increasingly pleasant living environment. My husband and I have lived here from the beginning, but like everyone else, we make a fresh commitment each year. We've not yet decided about next year. This way, no one feels coerced into staying, and ensuring that the environment is truly reinforcing is almost guaranteed. The Community offers a rather elegant option to the generations of students who read *Walden Two*, and think they'd like to try something like that, don't you think?" She then joined in the discussion of labor credits.

Returned to her office after the meeting, I asked, "Who's in charge here?"

Deborah said that she functioned as General Manager, but self-selected Managers coordinated most functions, rather in the way they have emerged at Comunidad Los Horcones. A council of managers met monthly to coordinate efforts.

"Members can form and dissolve special interest groups at will, so long as they are consistent with constitutional principles," she continued. "Important decisions, however, are made by the Members, individuals who have completed the Institute orientation program and formally committed to be guided by the Constitution during their membership. Most decisions are not difficult, since the Constitution insists on the use of objective data for making any decision regarded by at least three Members as substantive, and Members have learned and rehearsed effective group problem-solving and compromising skills as part of the orientation package.

"From the central core of the Members, the Institute is organized into the three streams you have seen: the Consultation Center; the Fellowship, which has become a central part of the lives of many Members, between its Sunday meetings and the many fulfilling activities it potentiates and facilitates; and finally, the residential Community, 'the heart,' if you will, of the Institute."

"How do you support yourselves?"

"Several ways, actually. We received a small initial endowment from a retired engineer who was interested in supporting a 'social engineering approach to mental

MATTAINI

health.' Our consultation services and school are largely, although not entirely self-supporting. (Some of our work is contributed as public service.) You probably noticed that we take up a collection for expenses at the Sunday meetings; we track the level of contributions as one measure of the satisfaction of Members with Institute activities. Finally, the residential Community contributes funds back to the Institute. We're not well off, but we're financially stable and healthy. You do seem really interested; would you like to try an experiment, and begin our orientation program for Membership?"

"I'll have to think about it, but I am impressed," I said, revealing my usual overcautious repertoire. "I'll be in touch."

It seemed like I didn't sleep at all that night. Early Monday morning I looked at the business card that read, "Dr. Deborah Meyerson Frazier," and made a decision. I got dressed, and went directly to the subway. Passing the Museum, I almost ran to the Institute. It wasn't there. Standing there, near the center of a city that needed it so badly, I asked myself, "Why not . . . ?"