

Cultural design since Walden Two: Balancing selfish and altruistic aims in communities
with shared resources

What happens when we overfish the waters, strip minerals from the land, and clear-cut the forests in a world of finite resources? What happens to neighborhood, public, and business groups that share materials without a plan for managing the commons? A broad way of framing the question is, what happens when individual interests overshadow the need for community stewardship? The answer is only too clear – devastation of the neighborhood, the group, the ecosystem, the planet. Surely a system is needed to help us keep in check our appetites for natural resources and other goods. But what kind of resource management system should we engineer?

During the last century, two overarching strategies have vied for ascendancy in answering this question: top-down regulation and privatization. Darwin's contest between altruistic and selfish social strategies has been played out on the stages of government, private industry, and public institution. The two approaches appear to be polar opposites, and yet they share a gloomy view that cooperative groups of humans cannot be entrusted with the public good. But in 1990, an economist who had worked with common-pool resource use among those sharing water in the greater Los Angeles area questioned the logic of both approaches in her work, *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Elinor Ostrom, who went on to win the Nobel Prize in economics, argued that neither government nor private interests are needed to manage common resources. Her work took her to the far reaches of Africa and Nepal to study the practices of diverse common pool resource institutions. In the process, Ostrom found eight principles of group function, a sort of blueprint for self-governance. Groups that

coordinated their interactions with attention to these principles did not perish; nor did they merely survive. In essence, Ostrom found that these groups thrived.

Ostrom's work caught the attention of David Sloan Wilson, a biologist interested in using evolutionary science to improve neighborhoods and community institutions. Wilson contacted Ostrom, and together they drafted *Generalizing the core design principles for the efficacy of groups*, a paper showing that the ingredients of group function Ostrom had articulated followed foundational evolutionary principles that apply to community groups, schools, hospitals, municipal governments, and other organizations.

But the question remained as to how to teach groups to utilize these instruments of organizational coordination. That's when Wilson contacted Steven C. Hayes, Foundation Professor of Psychology at the University of Nevada, Reno and co-developer of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). ACT is a behavior analytic approach to building performance flexibility when normal psychological processes pull toward rigid patterns of behavior that are out of synch with a person's core values. Wilson recognized a fit for ACT in bringing Ostrom's design principles to community, government, and organizational groups. By infusing them with a sense of openness and curiosity about their immediate experience of themselves, groups can be led to articulate their mission and generate a workable plan for managing their future behavioral and cultural change.

Today, behavior scientists trained in the ACT model of behavioral flexibility teamed with Wilson and the Evolution Institute have developed PROSOCIAL, an international research project that aids groups learning to use "Ostrom's 8" and collects data that will further the emerging science of intentional change. Given the need for managing change at every level including that of individuals seeking to improve their

lives, neighborhoods building a common purpose, and nations attempting to strengthen their bonds with bordering states, the time is ripe for science to enter into the conversation for evolving behavioral and cultural practices that nimbly respond to changing environmental dynamics. PROSOCIAL is an experiment in behavioral engineering aimed at facilitating such intentional change.

Students of behavior analysis may recall that B. F. Skinner wrote *Walden Two* as an account of how a thousand people could work together to solve common problems with the help of behavioral technology. In common with Ostrom, Skinner read E. F. Schumacher's book, *Small is Beautiful*, and determined that by arranging effective contingencies of reinforcement, small groups could overcome problems such as the exhaustion of resources, pollution, crime, delinquency, and overcrowding. But Skinner's and Ostrom's visions did not stop there. Both sought to use science to generate a technology of change suitable for the world stage. Both recognized that what we need is not a new kind of government, but knowledge of human behavior and ways to apply that knowledge to the design of cultural practices.

If you are interested in learning more about PROSOCIAL, you may find valuable information here: <https://evolution-institute.org/article/introducing-prosocial-using-the-science-of-cooperation-to-improve-the-ffic/>.

References

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