

Token Economy

In a token economy, people "earn" objects (tokens), which they can exchange for desirable items, services, or privileges. The tokens are made contingent on appropriate behaviour in much the same way that wages are contingent on job duties for most adults. Token economies have been used in institutions, classrooms, sheltered workshops, and in numerous other settings where people are being encouraged to behave in more appropriate or adaptive ways. Tokens could also be earned for appropriate classroom and social behaviours. With the tokens they earned, residents could

purchase normal meals and longer, more leisurely mealtimes. During meals, more tokens could be earned by appropriate table manners; grabbing food off a neighbour's plate, on the other hand, could result in the loss of a token already earned.

The token economy, combined with several other behavioural techniques, resulted in dramatic improvements in the patients' behaviour. Appropriate behaviour increased sharply during the first 6 months of the programme and held up well for 4 years.

Token-economy programs like this can be quite effective, but they have questioned for both practical and ethical reasons. A practical problem is that the improvements people make when such token systems are operating often do not hold up when tokens are no longer being

given. A significant ethical issue arises over the question of human freedom and control. Many think so; one could argue, for example, that "normal" meals and pleasant sleeping accommodations are basic rights that should not be denied people like the mental patients. On the other hand, some argue that strict procedures like those described above are often necessary if real progress is to be made very seriously disturbed people. The essence of the problem is that there is some truth in both viewpoints. Token economics can produce improved behaviour, but they do exact a cost in human freedom. Thus, the procedures bring our society face-to-face with hard questions about our basic values.