

Retrospective: Riding With Batman, Superman and The Green Hornet

In the following retrospective, Paul Abels reflects upon working with a group of developmentally disabled children in the late 1960s at Case Western University's Mental Development Center. We have reprinted an article he wrote about the group as it originally appeared in Volume 7, Number 1 of the journal, Mental Retardation (February, 1969).

by
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What can I say? This was a group I worked with for almost a year. I learned a lot from them about the power of the group, the meaning it had for kids, and its valence, particularly for children who had not had opportunities to relate as equals to other children. It was the first time I really thought much about the value of contract, and a group being clear about its purpose. I may have been dense at the time, but it never occurred to me that the children wouldn't be able to set the direction of their group, and we worked together to shape the activities.

Looking back at the process records I wrote on the group, I see many things I might have done differently and thought about differently. I might have seen the African American child's fear of crossing the bridge not as a psychological problem, but a fear of going from the safety of Cleveland's more integrated east side

to its more segregated west side. Both interpretations might be wrong, and it wouldn't have made any difference in what we did anyway, because the spontaneity of this group made too much thinking and talking seem artificial and boring. Our conversations came out of the life of the group, the activities, and the challenges and meanings that arose with them.

There are many sweet memories from this group, the child going into the pond to try to catch the ducks and getting soaked; the child shoving the bubble gum in his mouth, wrapper and all, in the candy store before I could stop him, and then looking at me triumphantly; the child in the natural history museum seeing the mounted head of a buck deer on the wall, and wanting to go into the other room, to see it's other end. But most of all I remember each of their faces clearly. I wonder if they remember mine. . .

Abstracts. The fantasy life of children is utilized in an activity group to help the members come to terms with their quest for autonomy. The group worker in a mental development center helps a group of retarded children work through some of the difficulties they are having in their interactions with other group members. Their need for each other and the group becomes a vital factor in helping the members work on their problems and come to terms with themselves and each other.

Riding with batman, superman, and the green hornet: Experiences in a very special group

Paul Abels

BATMAN LOOKED at the large plastic globe that separated him from Superman. He fingered it lightly at first, then began to smash at it with his fist. He then started to kick it, and it began to crack.

"He's breaking your globe," the Green Hornet yelled at Superman, who turned just in time to see his globe crack into three large pieces.

"I'll kill you, I'll kill you," Superman screamed at Batman. "I'll kill you, kill you . . . I'm going to tell your father on you."

The worker-driver pulled the station wagon into the nearest parking lot, stopped, and turned to the boys.

"Why did you do that to Don's globe?" he asked Ed, who was looking around not knowing what to expect.

Don was yelling, "I'm going to tell your father and he will take care of you." The words were coming hard from between large sobs.

The other boys sat silently, concerned about the incident that they had just been partners to.

"He shouldn't have done that," Lou stuttered.

For the first time the others listened to his entire sentence even

though it took him 30 seconds to say it. Some of the boys nodded in agreement. Ed, although quiet, sat with a large grin on his face, as if to say, "It really doesn't matter."

The driver, the social worker with the group, trying to make sense out of the experience, turned and said: "We had better talk about this now. Is this what we want to happen to our club?"

The "Club"

The "Club" was formed by the Mental Development Center in order to provide a therapeutic group experience for boys 8 through 11 years old with mental development problems. The Center traditionally served as an outpatient clinic and information center concerned with problems of "slow mental development." In addition to counseling, the Center provides evaluation services and a preschool program for educable mentally retarded children, and carries out research and serves as a community information resource.

This group, one of the first specifically established at the Center, focus on the use of the group to help, was led by a professionally-trained social group worker.

None of the eight boys in the group had shown any signs of brain damage. They were all educable, and some were in regular classes in school. Three of the boys were being seen regularly by caseworkers. In six cases, the parents were being seen. In two instances, neither the parents nor children were receiving individual counseling.



Paul Abels

The large plastic globe had been given to Don by two workmen at the "Metals Center" which they had left about ten minutes before. He was extremely excited about the globe, as were the other boys. It was going to be a flying saucer or a sled. Three of the boys (Ed, Tim, and Andy) had been fairly upset that there had been only one globe and that they hadn't gotten one as well. Ed was the most upset. As they climbed into the car for the return trip, the group climate began to change, and some rumbling and "sniping" directed at Don by Ed was picked up by some of the other boys. The worker could see that the other boys were very envious of Don because of the globe, but he did not pick up with the group. He took it for granted that the return car ride and lack of opportunity to play with the globe would "cool out" some of the upset the other boys felt. Unfortunately, the plastic globe, about three feet round and a foot deep, was placed between the rear and middle seats of the wagon. It was a little cramped in the car.

The return trip seemed to be going well, when suddenly Ed attacked the globe. None of the other boys said anything until the first crack appeared. This was the group's first major crisis.

For two months, the group of eight boys, a worker, and an assistant had met weekly on Saturday morning for about two hours. One of the major difficulties was that there was no place for the boys to meet at the Center. This necessitated taking weekly trips to various points of interest, such as museums, playgrounds, parks, and frequent trips to McDonald's for a snack. In a way, the mandatory trips had helped create an extraordinary situation. Not only was the group an activity therapy group, but it evolved into a small club held captive by the demands of the car.

The boys were also drawn together by the common interest of having a club "just like other boys," and in working on some of the problems that were bothering them. The confines of the car, the "behavior setting," and the "trip time" created a strong catalyst for verbal communication.* The only other major activity that could be carried out comfortably within the confines of the car was "controlling."

"Controlling" was the name of the game, although no one ever named it. "Controlling" was played by being Superman, Batman, Mr. Terrific, the Green Hornet, or Kato. "Controlling" meant that the station wagon was Batmobile or a magic carpet which could transport a boy from an unfriendly home situation, where none of the other children wanted to play with you or would scapegoat you, to a club, where you had friends and even fights just like in all the clubs.

"Controlling" made you feel that you were strong and people had to listen, even if in real life you were in a special class and people called you dumb. It meant that those two big guys who worked with the club (the workers) did things that you wanted to do. They didn't yell too much, never pushed you around, and acted like you really had something important to say. You could even "control" them because you had a chance to plan what you wanted to do at meetings.

The boys are continually struggling to control their own destinies, a struggle in which the odds against success are overwhelming.

The Search for Autonomy

This search for control, so that you can control and not continually be controlled by others, is not too different from the search that all men carry out as they strive for in-

dependence, maturity, self-actualization or interpersonal competence.† It is the quest for autonomy. It is simply to be able to control your environment so that you have the kind of things happen to you that you want, to be able to do the things in your life that will get you the rewards you want from others, and to make your own decisions and know that these decisions may be implemented.

This lack of autonomy or feeling of inability to control one's own existence is often the source of people's search for help in solving problems. For these boys, their quest led them into a group. This quest led their parents to come to the Mental Development Center for help. The parents sought help in obtaining the rewards for themselves and their children that they wanted and needed. The group was offered as an additional way of working on these concerns. Some of the parents were "working" by meeting regularly with the casework staff of the agency. Some of the children were being seen as well, but the children's brief encounter with an adult was not sufficient to get at some of the conflicts they were facing as they attempted to solve their difficulties in learning to deal with others in their environment.

This search for autonomy is one of the common goals that the worker in the group shares with the members. He is one of the people who has been placed in the position of helping the member in his quest. The other members can share and, in fact, must help each member in his quest if the group is to survive and fulfill its purpose.

The worker with the group has three major goals in his encounters in the group during its existence:

The primary goal is to enable the member to solve the problems he came to the group to work on. In some cases this may mean help-

ing him focus on the problem in order to select a piece of it that he can work on. This can often be done during the initial phases of the life of the group, when the worker and the group come to some agreement as to some of the problems that they are there to work on, i.e., the purpose of their existence together. In addition, the worker attempts to spell out with the group some of the ways they, as a group, may accomplish their purposes. This "contracting" period serves to establish the group's purpose, some of the means of achieving its goals, and the rules of the game. The group contract is a dynamic, frequently changing and modified understanding, which group and worker continually negotiate together. It is seen as the dynamic agreements between the worker and the client system in which the problems to be worked, the goals, and the activities (means) by which the goals are to be accomplished are negotiated.

The second goal, which becomes a crucial ongoing task for the group, is for the group to maintain itself as a working unit long enough to achieve its purposes for being. This is the group maintenance aspect of the task.

The third goal of the worker and the group is to insure, nurture, and enhance each individual's quest for autonomy. The realiza-

tion of this goal requires that there be some carryover from the experience of the helping situation within the confines of the group to increased competence of the individual in the course of his life in other parts of his existence as well. Somehow the problem solver must be able to come to terms with his environment, i.e., with the "real" world outside the mutual-help group.

For the boys in the club, this meant not only learning how to get along with some of the other boys in the group, but hopefully with children in the neighborhoods where they lived, as well as with the teachers in their schools. The systemic interrelationships among individual members, the group, their parents and their schools would lead us to believe that changes for the better in school, for example, would lessen some of the pressure on the boy and the parent, and would result in less stress reactive behaviour in all the areas of his life space.

The Power of Interaction

The continuation of the trip home which followed the breaking of the globe was charged and intense. For the first time there was very little screaming. Tim was not making animal noises, and Jim was not starting fights with the boy next to him. Don was repeating over and over, "I will tell your father, he will give it to you, he'll beat you, I'm going to tell." Ed was calling

him a squealer. The boys were silent.

Then Lou said, "You shouldn't have done that."

This was voiced by a few of the other boys and repeated by Don.

Sam said, "He shouldn't be in the club."

Andy said, "Yeah, kick him out Mr. B."

"I don't think that is up to me, couldn't you guys have stopped him?"

Don said, "Kick him out, he broke my saucer."

Lou yelled, "He shouldn't be in the club. He knows he isn't supposed to do that."

Andy concurred: "The group is for fun and getting along together."

Ed was feeling the anger of the group, and for the first time the smile left his face. The worker asked Ed if he would like to say something about what happened. Ed said that he was sorry. Don wasn't satisfied and said he should be out of the group. Ed told him that he could rip his hat and offered it to him. He grabbed it and was going to rip it. The worker told him not to, and said he couldn't let him rip it, and that he didn't think it would solve anything.

"Did anyone else have any other ideas?" He returned the hat.

Ed said he wanted to be in the club and that he wouldn't do it again. The boys looked at Don. He was the key. . . .

Don was always threatening to kill or beat up on the boys, but he never did. He would wrestle with the worker or box with the other boys with the large stuffed bears as go betweens, but had never hit any of them. He was frequently frightened. In the Terminal Tower he was not able to look out the window, and following the trip he dreamt of falling from the Tower. Spiders terrified him, and on trips he was fearful when riding over bridges that

* The settings in which groups meet can play a vital role in determining the group's activities as well as its "life style." For an interesting approach to the study of "behavior settings," see Roger G. Barker, "Ecology and Motivation," in *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, 1960* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960). Barker defines a behavior setting as ". . . a place where most of the inhabitants satisfy a number of personal motives where they can achieve multiple satisfactions," p. 25

† On Self-actualization as the essential and basic drive see: Curt Goldstein, *Human Nature in the Light of Psychopathology* (New York: Shocken Books, 1963), p. 143. See also: Robert W. White, "Motivation Reconsidered," *Psychological Review*, Vol. 66, No 5 (1959) and *The Study of Lives* (Ather-ton Press, 1963).

they would crack. His father was in prison, his mother didn't want to take care of him, and he lived with his grandparents. His grandmother was a very large woman who loved and cared for him but would not be engaged with case-work help. She overwhelmed the small grandfather, who faithfully brought Don to the meeting each week. He didn't know why, except that something there was attracting the boy, and that was good enough for him.

It's hard to say what it was that enabled Don to sift through the hurt and anger of the broken globe. Perhaps some understanding of the meaning the club held for him and, therefore, the other boys allowed him to say, "I think we should give Ed another chance."

"Yes," the boys seemed to say in unison, "another chance."

"Another chance," Lou echoed in his stuttering way.

The worker looked at Don for a second and said he thought that it was a hard decision for him to make, but a good one, and that he

was glad Don had been able to make it. Don said he still was going to tell Ed's father. Ed began making up a number of excuses as to why he had broken the globe—whether for the club's benefit or as a rehearsal for his father, it was hard to say. The boys didn't really seem to care any more; they were back to talking about other things, such things as where they would go next week and when it would be warm enough to go to the zoo.

Ed sat back and thought quietly. He was no longer in control of the group, but he was in control of himself. He had been able to muster the strength to come to terms with the group. Perhaps he was thinking of the close call he had just come through. He had only missed one meeting since the group began, and his caseworker had uncovered the importance of this group to him. Ed was able to tell her that these were "my friends."

He was a stepchild who had faced a number of rejections from his stepmother. She was now preg-

nant, worried about holding onto the pregnancy, and she had told Ed that when the new baby came, he might have to go. This was a hard time for him. Although he was ten, he couldn't read, but he could remember everybody's order at the McDonald's drive-in. When he was happy, he lit up the entire "Center" with his smile. When he was unhappy, you had your hands full.

As they drove into the parking lot of the Development Center, Don ran out, saying he was going to tell Ed's father. Ed walked from the car, holding the worker's hand; it tightened as his father approached, but Don had not spoken to him. Ed and his father walked to his car, talking.

The worker found Don hiding in the room, sitting in the corner. . . alone.

"I know how badly you feel about that saucer. I'm sorry it got broken."

"I really wanted it, Mr. B. Why did he break it?"

The worker sat with his arm around Superman. The pain was for real. □

About the Author [as of February 1969]

Paul Abels, Ph.D., received his master's degree in social group work from Boston University School of Social Work in 1955, and his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration in 1968. He is currently an assistant professor of social work at Case-Western Reserve University, School of Applied Social Sciences. At the time this article was written he was working with groups at the University's Mental Development Center. Mr. Abels has had experience in work with groups, administration of social agencies, and has done research in the area of manpower utilization and training. For the past three years he has been a consultant on group behavior with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

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