

Gurth Higgin and Gunnar Hjelholt

Action Research in Minisocieties*

In the first part of this paper Higgin describes some aspects of the third minisociety sponsored by Gunnar Hjelholt of Denmark (Hjelholt, 1972). This is followed by an account by Hjelholt of more recent work in the field.

Gurth Higgin

The distinctive quality of the minisociety is that it allows experimental behavior, mutual exploration and confrontation between groups. Since the groups make up a microcosm of society, the themes that engage them and the dynamics that arise between them can throw new light on societal problems. The main theme illustrated here is the confrontation between the demand for personal liberation from the alienation resulting from the conventional demands of society and the opposing fear of chaos and social breakdown.† As this confrontation was acted out, the two groups most directly involved tended to force each other into self-caricature and out of communication with the other and to induce a growing paralysis or disruption in the other groups in the community. A necessary condition for the developments between the two confronting groups was that one of these other groups had to become highly visible in the community as passive sufferers.

Predetermined structure and procedures are kept to a minimum in the minisociety. The purpose of this is to minimize the possibility that what emerges may be determined by instructions, structure or predictions. Similarly, in writing this report I have attempted to let the data create their own understandings. So often in our writing we social scientists give so much attention to explaining and supporting our concepts about human experience that the human beings and the quality of their experiences are barely visible.

In a minisociety about fifty people and half a dozen social scientists get

*An extension of the original by Higgin in A. Clark (Editor), *Experimenting with Organizational Life*. New York and London: Plenum, 1975.

†Other minisocieties have explored different themes, such as the generation gap, societal power and the changing roles of men and women.

together—in this case on a peninsula in a lake in southern Sweden—and spend a fortnight living as a community running its own affairs. The community in this minisociety had children as young as four years old, and adults up to sixty. There were senior professional people and unemployed youths, industrial managers and trade unionists. There was a group of nine American students accompanied by one of their tutors. An industrial manager came from England, as did one of the social scientists. Everybody else was Scandinavian, mainly from Denmark. The only thing everyone at the minisociety had in common was that they wanted to be there. Nobody was sent.

Setting it up was very simple. The participants were sorted out beforehand into groups that were as much alike as possible. There were seven groups. One contained the American students; another, people from the helping professions—a doctor, a social agency administrator, a dentist, a personnel manager, the American university tutor, and so on; another was from a clinic/community center in Copenhagen; and there were two mixed groups—housewives, workers, industrial managers, and some complete families who formed two neighborhood groups. The sixth group consisted of the children of the community and the seventh, the sponsoring social scientists.

This mix reflected fairly accurately what the letter of invitation had said. The minisociety would try to

create a society in miniature, where the participants are confronted with other relevant groups from our ordinary society . . . [This situation] gives the possibility for investigating and experimenting with social roles in the small group as well as in the bigger society. We believe that this process of confrontation will make the participants more open to the forces at work in this temporary society and thereby enable them to work constructively with the problems of ordinary society.

This was as near to a statement of “theoretical approach and objective” as Hjelholt and his colleagues wanted to go—after all, if people want to get leave and even some financial support from an organization to go to something like this there has to be a “purpose.” Actually, what Hjelholt would have preferred to say was simply, “If you are interested, just bring your interest and curiosity along and let’s all see where we get together.”

Hjelholt and his colleagues did not want to test theoretical hypotheses. That way we tend to see only things that have to do with our hypotheses and we are likely to miss other things. They thought that it would be much better to let everybody undergo the experience and then try to understand it together. That way everybody knows as much about it as anybody else. There are no special experts, because who knows who can sense most accurately what it all means?

The only rule in the community—accepting it was a condition of coming—

was that everyone would participate in any research activities that were asked for. These activities were ways of getting information about what was happening, with the object of letting everybody know. They were seen as a contribution to the community's efforts to understand what was going on. The research included the gathering of information about where people were living, where they were eating and how many names of people in other groups everybody knew from time to time. It also included pictures that groups drew of themselves and others; lists of words describing other groups and the reactions of these groups to them; and some measurements of people's feelings about interpersonal and intergroup distances at different times. The information was given back to the community as it became available. Some of it caused great interest. Some of it was ignored.

With a community living like this for a couple of weeks with none of the usual community rules applying—apart from the research sessions, everyone was free to do what he liked, when he liked and with whom he liked—all sorts of things, usual and unusual, can happen.

On the Sunday night, the minisociety started. After the groups had spent a little time together they were asked to give themselves names. Of the two neighborhood groups, one called themselves the *Radishes* and the other the *Green Lases and Pjaltes* (green rags and tatters), a reference to the *Three-penny Opera*. The children made an acrostic of their names—*Anpekedochmekka*. They did not pretend it had any meaning or was even easily pronounced. The social scientists were sitting next to the children at this time and hearing what they were doing, did the same. They produced *Hyheph*. They, however, claimed this was an obscure Greek word, the meaning of which they had temporarily forgotten, but would tell the community when they remembered. They never did. The group of helping professionals called themselves the *Association*, the American undergraduates the *Dilemma* and the youth group the *Nine Veiled Hallucinations*. There were, in fact, only eight real people in the latter group at the time; the ninth was a vague but friendly wraith called Thomas (*thom* means empty in Danish).

The Hyhephs had set a timetable for the first three days. Time was allocated for community sessions, for group sessions and for community exploration. Together these sessions filled 40 percent of the time. During this time individuals or groups could do whatever they chose to find out more about the community and its physical surroundings. A Hyheph sat in with each group during their group sessions as a consultant. The Hyhephs did not like this term much, but it was better than leader or trainer. For these three days, Gunnar Hjelholt ran the community sessions; for the whole time he was the community's contact with household staff and outside society.

The Möckelsnäs peninsula is about half a mile across and stretches several

miles out into the lake. It is mainly wooded with a few fields. About halfway along it is an old manor house on the lakeside with a couple of dormitories attached to it; the Association, the Dilemma and the Hyhephs were living here. The other groups were in various smaller houses in the woods, the farthest being about a kilometer away. The manor house, which became known as the Main Building, had several public rooms, and at this time everyone was having meals there.

During the community exploration time on the first day, the Association decided to call on the Hallucinations at their house. Nobody was aware of it at the time, but looking back we can see that it was this meeting, sought by the Association and welcomed by the Hallucinations, that started the division between the different life-styles of these two groups. This was to become the pivotal theme for nearly everyone in the community.

At the meeting there was lively, serious, but not very personal discussion about, on the one hand, the need for expressiveness and spontaneity for the individual in the modern world and, on the other, the need for social responsibility, control, and structure. After a time the Hallucinations produced chillums and offered their visitors a puff of marijuana. They explained that this was their house and they would like to show their visitors true hospitality by sharing something that was important to them. They said it was not necessary for their visitors to have it, it was merely an offer. Most of the Association members tried it, but few liked it.

In discussion afterward, the Hallucinations decided that they were aware of both the Association's tolerance of their pot smoking and their suppressed disapproval. This discussion revealed the test-out aspect of the offering. The Hallucinations were saying, "Are you genuinely interested in people so that you will want to know us as we are? Or have you got a block against the things we believe in—drugs, spontaneity, expressiveness—so that you can't see us as people?" A genuine acceptance of others, even those with different habits and beliefs, was for them the most important quality in people. Their test-out of the Association members was typically simple and direct—no tact or diplomacy, no chance for an evasive or equivocal response. Suspicion was both their curse and their shield.

Meanwhile, back in the Main Building, the Association had settled for tolerance with distance, a position they stuck to throughout. Even when things got a bit sharp on the value confrontation front toward the close, the Association, although it became the most powerful group, never picked on the Hallucinations as a group or as individuals. But the two groups never met again.

Nevertheless, during the next week or so, the different styles of these two groups provided the two extremes for a range of beliefs about personal liberation and social responsibility. Exploring these positions, through experience

more than through talk, became a preoccupation shared by almost everyone in the community. Other preoccupations were also evident, of course, but to some degree everyone got involved in the liberation question. For some it became all-absorbing. It turned out to be a commonly shared worry, not far below the surface.

If a person or a group has a particular quality that interests other people or other groups, these others can make that person or group show more of that quality, until it becomes their predominant characteristic. The concepts of the role offer and the preemptive role offer capture this process. Part of the process of interaction between individuals, groups and even social classes is an attempt by each party to force the other to choose the role that is desired by the first party. Selective reward and punishment is one means of achieving this. A more powerful technique is selective confirmation or disconfirmation of the reality belief of the other. This process can be most clearly seen when there is a large difference between the parties in respect to power, prestige, experience or education—as between parents and children, group leader and group members, teachers and taught. It can lead to mystification, the result of an other-enforced denial by the weaker party of what experientially he knows is real. Much group process and therapeutic interpretation has this quality, usually justified as an attempt to get the group or the patient to accept “reality.” When a more powerful party ruthlessly exploits these processes, the weaker party finds the choice of role effectively preempted (Higgin, 1973).

The Hallucinations and the Association got caught like this. You have to be pretty liberal, or even radical, to come to such a way-out thing as a minisociety. Yet the members of the Association became more and more responsible, reliable and formal as the days went by. Several of them remarked in wonder at how organized and structure-dominated the group and they themselves had become. The same process influenced the Hallucinations. They had not been so completely disconnected from all the formal procedures of the community as they increasingly became at Möckelsnäs. They lived in unworried, easy irresponsibility and open, relaxed contact with all, showing spontaneous jollity and chatter—also equally genuine depression, even despair at times, but this was less public. The message of their behavior was, “What you feel now, you express; tomorrow will look after itself.”

These positions were taken by the two groups mainly because the other groups in the community had a rehearsal script for the liberation of man in society. They wanted to experience the evidence about it. They needed to interact both with the liberated and with those who questioned liberation. They wanted to try being liberated, and to find out what the unbelievers did to them when they tried it. They wanted the liberated role of the Hallucinations, so they exaggerated it. They wanted the questioning, responsible role of the Association, so they blew that up, too.

These differences became increasingly clear as the days passed. As a group, the Association were responsible, consistent and rational. The members attended community meetings dutifully, usually with clear, agreed statements about various issues. They had spokesmen to state their position, which was done fluently, with rational argument and often wit. They lived tidily, each in his or her own room, and went punctually to meals and meetings. After a few days they announced they had changed their name. They were to be known henceforth as the *Establishment*. They said that they had thought of this name on the first Sunday night, but were not quite sure enough of themselves to take it. Now, after several days' experience of the community, they felt they could appropriately do so.

The Hallucinations, by contrast, became more communal among themselves, but less active in the formal life of the community. They moved their mattresses from the bedrooms in their house and put them all in one room, in which they all slept. They moved the furniture, except for a very low table, out of one downstairs room and lived almost exclusively in that and the communal sleeping room. They attended community meetings less and less. At the same time, members of the community became increasingly interested in them and their house became an open house for visitors. At any time of the day or night people would drop in. They were always accepted and not so much invited as expected to join in anything that was going on—eating, talking, doing nothing, smoking pot or whatever.

The way the two groups reacted to the community was also quite distinct. Early on, the Association/Establishment decided to do something to fill the need for a community bar. They took over a cellar room in the Main Building and sold cans of beer that they bought wholesale. It was open each night for all comers. The enterprise was efficient and showed a profit which was paid back into community funds. At one point, the Hallucinations thought they would like to do something for the others. They settled on drawing little colored pictures and designs and giving one to everybody. This project started with enthusiasm, but after a few days petered out. They never got more than about halfway through. This was typical of all their activities. They acted only on impulse; they would do what they wanted to do when they were in the mood. Once the mood passed, they dropped it, only to pick it up if the mood returned. They felt no guilt or worry about unfinished jobs. Their position was quite explicit about this. They considered that if you do something from duty it has no value; it is only good if you want to do it, so that there is something of yourself in it.

As time went on, the Hallucinations increasingly presented themselves to the community as the liberated ones. They took less part in the formal life of the community. At times only one of them, or even none, would be present at community meetings. They did not visit any other group, except occasionally

as individuals. But they had a lot of informal contact both through their visitors and through dancing, talking and drinking in the Main Building in the evenings. They smoked more pot, now bought with the housekeeping money, and mixed it up with other things. One night one of them had so much of a mixture, including alcohol, which had already been identified as the Establishment drug, that he became ill and had to go to the hospital. This caused real concern in the community. There was considerable relief when he returned none the worse after twenty-four hours.

While the difference between the two groups was increasing—they were beginning to display a caricatured version of their starting positions—the rest of the community was feeling the mounting tension of the silent confrontation. The children's group had broken up quite early. Most had joined their parents, though several had experimented with joining other groups without their parents. The two neighborhood groups were also breaking up. They found they could not agree among themselves. The Green Lases and Pjalters were wandering around the community rather like a band of gypsies. The Radishes had split into two; the new group was a family that called themselves the *Pearl Divers*. Both main groups seemed to find these solutions satisfactory.

It was the Dilemmas who were feeling the most strain. They found they had given themselves an apt name on that first Sunday night. Being university students, but young, lively, and critical and, further, an American group alone among Scandinavians, they found themselves emotionally torn and confused by the developing situation. They were drawn to the Establishment, which represented the university from which they very much wanted to acquire the skills and knowledge education could give them. But they spontaneously identified with the Hallucinations' position; it represented the youthful, expressive, liberated life and rejection of the square world. This tension immobilized them. They stayed together, indeed grew tighter as a group, but found their internal life increasingly stressful and confusing. The community recognized this, and, as with the Establishment and the Hallucinations, used it.

When you want to experiment with an issue as exciting but also as frightening as the liberation/responsibility dilemma, you cannot do it if the usual fears and worries it provokes in you get in the way. So why not get someone else to do the worrying for you while you get on with it? This is where the Dilemmas came in. With the main roles fixed and the action about to begin, the need was felt for a role to absorb the worry and tension, to free others so that they could feel their way into what was happening. The Dilemmas, already feeling something of the tension of the confrontation anyway, were handed this role. They became the *Ophelia* (Higgin and Bridger, 1964).

The community kept the Dilemmas locked in their confusion; they did not want them to break out. It was discovered by many, and especially by the Dilemmas, that being in the Main Building was not a privilege: it was prison.

Privilege was running your own living and eating arrangements in your own way and in your own time on twenty crowns a day. Even the freedom to have an unmade bed or not to clean up your house was felt to be a privilege. Several times the Dilemmas asked for a move from the Main Building; but they never managed it. The Establishment, although less keen on a change, did move as did two of the Hyhephs. By contrast, the Dilemmas were kept against their will in the regimen of the household staff on fifty crowns a day.

Yet everybody liked the Dilemmas. The information collected on the last day showed that the community felt closer to the Dilemmas than to any other group. They were sitting in the middle of the community with the other groups at varying positions and distances around them. Fortunately they sat tight; the center held, though at some cost to its members. It was like calling in the New World to facilitate the rebalancing of the Old.

At the community meeting held on the Wednesday of the second week the Establishment announced they had changed their name again. They were now the *Saints*. This led to some discussion about fantasy in the community, and another reversal of perception seemed to be occurring. Up till then people had believed that the hippie/dropout position of the Hallucinations was a wild, fantastic, if fascinating, way to go on and that the ways of the Establishment represented sober, responsible reality. But now that the Establishment had become the Saints, people began to wonder. After all, to call themselves Saints was a pretty fantastic idea, a bit big-headed too, even a bit mad. People now wondered if the Hallucinations were not closer to reality and if the Saints were not dominated by fantasy. After all, the Hallucinations in their openness and their ups and downs, their gaiety and moroseness, were getting close to what was really going on inside them as individuals and as a group. Their behavior was real. But the structure of roles and rules the Saints lived by was made up of "idea" things, just as fantasies are. And how close was their responsible behavior to what they were really feeling and thinking inside themselves? Some of the Saints wrinkled their brows and wondered about this, but as a group they did not think much of it.

In the community meeting on the last day there was much talk about the events of the minisociety and especially those of the last few days. By this time the community was beginning to recognize one of the main rehearsal scripts it had been working on and the roles that different groups had taken in it. Few people were very sure any more of their definitions of what was real, what was fantasy and what was mad; but they were much more aware of the amount of fantasy about reality that was around. It was felt that the confrontation between the Saints and the Hallucinations was real enough and that it had set off some actual power moves.

The Saints seemed to have seen themselves as Saints and Saviors toward the

end. They behaved as if they thought the liberation experimenting had gone far enough. They seemed to feel it was time they exerted themselves to stop the irresponsibility, the self-expressive but undisciplined activities, the uncontrolled and indecisive meetings and the general air of chaos. They would save the community and bring it back to its senses in time for its members to go home to reality. They blamed the Hyhephs for letting things develop as far as they had. The Hyhephs were the initiators of the minisociety and at the beginning had been its establishment that ran things. They had then resigned and let anarchy loose.

From this story of what happened, it would seem as if some people might have gone home, especially the Saints and the Hallucinations, with no more than confirmation of the beliefs they came with. They would not have explored the liberation/responsibility theme, in the sense of getting to know it better and of feeling a little differently about it by getting inside other people's experience of it. But it could be said that everyone participated in the liberation rehearsal script by making different contributions to it. For example, the Dilemmas, like Ophelia, participated by taking the strain so that the action could go on. The Saints contributed by taking the role of devil's advocate; several of the group expressed surprise at the stuffy position they had adopted as they felt their way into opposition and experienced how the liberated reacted to this.

The social distance measurements done on the last day showed that the Dilemmas were the group that the community felt closest to. They were clearly in the middle. Of the six other groups, the Hallucinations considered that there were only two they felt closer to than the Saints; the Saints felt there was no group they were closer to than the Hallucinations. Moreover, the Hallucinations, who had done their job of exemplifying liberation, felt they had moved closer to the community as a whole than any other group.

Gunnar Hjelholt

Since the 1970 conference which Gurth Higgin described, large minisocieties or workshops, lasting from a week to a fortnight, have been set up in Austria, Germany, Sweden and England (Spink, 1974). The largest had 14 different groups and 140 participants and took place in a partly abandoned village. The aim is to provide participants with the opportunity to encounter the other systems which are relevant for them in their social life and which play a role in their identity self-image. At the same time they can explore and experiment with options in this microcosmos of contemporary society. This holds true for the social scientists as well.

Two variations have come out of the ordinary minisociety as some groups came into focus. Gurth Higgin vividly describes the Hallucinations and the Establishment, the one being the “drop-outs” from society, the other the professional group which had to take the stuffy, responsible role.

The Hallucinations came from a Danish Youth Clinic. The movements in the minisociety where they as a group drew toward society continued after the conference. The workshop had had a therapeutic effect; a reconnection with society had taken place. It led the Youth Clinic and other clinics to take a hard look at their treatment philosophy. A few clinics sent groups to subsequent minisocieties. But the Copenhagen one arranged a series of special minisocieties run on the same principles as the original workshop: separate housing for the groups, communal decision-making about time and money, staff obligation of instant feed-back to the temporary community about what was happening.

The one I took part in had eight groups: two current client-groups, two groups of old and young employees (helpers), a group of old alcoholics, a group of students from a kindergarten college, a mixed group of outsiders, and one comprising staff members and guests.

The drama in these therapeutic minisocieties comes from the difficulties the “helpers” have in redefining their role. Helpers seem to need “clients” and do their utmost to keep clients in a dependent, passive state. If not enough other groups are there for the clients to identify with or conceal themselves in, the helpers tend either to drive the clients out of the conference or—if that is not possible—take over some of the symptoms of the clients: excessive drinking, withdrawal from society, etc.

One staff member, a psychiatrist, wrote, “I am sure the mini-society can be a treatment model which one ought to explore further as I see it as being an extension of the therapeutic community and much better in respect of making the traditional personnel redundant.”

The other variation of the minisociety has been focussing on groups of “professional experts” and providing them with an opportunity to explore their social identity and contributions to society. How was it that the “Establishment” became so stuffy, a caricature of themselves as individuals, when they acted as a group? And why in contemporary society do professional associations seem to become unions fighting for power and defending status and neglect their function or mission as social systems in society?

Here the example of exploring the role, attitude and relationship of “professionals” inside a 1982 minisociety in Sweden is the best documented (Asplund, 1983). The groupings in five houses in a holiday resort were: economists, psychologists, priests, unskilled laborers on social security—and one “staff” person, a pensioner. In this temporary society it was not surprising that

the fight for the souls happened between clergy and economists with an uneasy alliance between clergy and psychologists. The “proletariat” had the passive, suffering role never getting their proper share of the capital, money and time.

To a large extent the three groups fought their battles on their own territories. The common meeting hall, where decisions were supposed to take place and grievances and research findings could be discussed was used only with great reluctance. As soon as possible it was abandoned—the interpretation being that here the power (a fantasy bear) resided which might show the groups that their self-image and their image of others had to be changed.

There have been other variations of the minisociety concept. Since 1976 the Universities of Leyden and Utrecht in Holland have run conferences for their students which are influenced by the minisociety idea as well as the Tavistock-Leicester conferences. Here the staff act in a professional role as facilitators of the learning process and the main purpose seems to be an educational one (Prein, 1983). Other conferences of this sort have been run in France, Belgium and Germany, but here the underlying theoretical work has been that of Max Pages (1973) and George Lapassades (1967) regarding flexible structures and the repressive character of institutions (Hjelholt, 1976a).

Recently (1987/88), the minisociety concept has also been used to prepare a group for living together. Fifty families about to move into a new housing area held a minisociety to see if they could get along and what sort of problems they would encounter. After having occupied their houses for eight months they repeated the experience in order to further improve relations in the neighborhood. Here the participants' ages ranged from the newborn to 80 year old pensioners.

The minisocieties are an attempt to combine the reality of the Northfield Experiment as described by Bridger (1946) with the temporary workshops or conferences based on Bion's (1961) and Lewin's (1951) theories.

The focus is on the relationship between different social systems or roles. The systems are kept together through the necessity of handling capital—money and time—and by each system being defined by the other systems present. The community meetings provide the forum for handling practical and emotional issues in the conference and help participants to understand the ways in which they and their system handle the anxiety of being confronted in practice with its social identity and the other systems they influence.

The role of the staff is different from the usual human relations conferences. It is more in line with the role of staff in the therapeutic community—one of many contributing systems. For many social scientists it is difficult to give up the privilege of being the expert and outside the happenings. Here we are not different from other professional groups. Several staff groups have split or retreated into writing large reports for their university.

The analogy which most often comes to mind is the Shakespearian drama.

Theatrical expression is one of the often used ways of indicating changes and bringing to the attention of the minisociety what is going on. Weddings or burial ceremonies might be held, kings crowned, duels fought. The actors are representatives impersonating the group feeling.

The dramas can take their theme from issues inside the conference—marriage between the youngest member of one group and the oldest member of another—or from society outside. In an Austrian workshop (Hjelholt, 1976b) one group took the name of one of the estates, *Peasants*, and quickly named the other groups *Citizens*, *Nobility* and *Church*. The workshop, with moves from one group to another, then started to re-enact German-Austrian history from 1530 to 1930. The last 50 years, with their traumatic effect on Austrians, could not be handled, because a good deal of the former “Citizens” left the minisociety before it was over.

The workshop can also be a stage for rehearsals of impending events whose advent is sensed. The small group of students in the 1968 spring minisociety tried out the occupation of a house, locking others out and making overtures to the workers to join them in a revolution. Later in the autumn, the students’ revolution with occupation of the University of Copenhagen took place.

The minisociety model plunges the participants, including the social scientists, into the psycho-dynamics of social systems, a field which—with dire consequences for society—has been avoided by most researchers.

From the point of view of action research, the experience of the minisociety highlights the difficulty of the social scientist acting in multiple roles; he is researcher, consultant, and participant. At the least, the other participants have a dual role. They are at the same time exploring their own group relations in a protected environment and attempting to understand how they can be reconciled with broad societal constraints. Drawing all participants into the collaborative tasks of collecting and interpreting data is an attempt to meet these problems. Whatever internal arrangements are arrived at, the minisociety emerges as a useful arena for action research, focused, in this case, on the conflict between the desire for personal liberation and the need for social order.

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