

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