



AARHUS UNIVERSITY



Coversheet

This is the accepted manuscript (post-print version) of the article.

Contentwise, the post-print version is identical to the final published version, but there may be differences in typography and layout.

How to cite this publication

Please cite the final published version:

Madsen, B., & Willert, S. (2015). Gunnar Hjelholt, a pioneer within group dynamics and organizational psychology. Part 1: Life and work. *Nordic Psychology (Online)*, 67(4), 243-258.

DOI: [10.1080/19012276.2014.963646](https://doi.org/10.1080/19012276.2014.963646)

Publication metadata

Title:	<i>Gunnar Hjelholt, a pioneer within group dynamics and organizational psychology. Part 1: Life and work</i>
Author(s):	<i>Benedicte Madsen & Søren Willert</i>
Journal:	<i>Nordic Psychology</i>
DOI/Link:	10.1080/19012276.2014.963646
Document version:	Accepted manuscript (post-print)

General Rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

September 22, 2014 (and September 2016)

Gunnar Hjelholt, a pioneer within group dynamics and organizational psychology. Part 1: Life and work

By Benedicte Madsen¹ & Søren Willert²

Abstract. On the basis of extended biographical material regarding Danish social psychologist Gunnar Hjelholt (1920-2002) the two authors present a historically oriented case study in professional culture construction. The culture thus portrayed is a particular brand of Kurt Lewin-inspired social psychology. From the 1960s and onwards Hjelholt was a key figure in developing this field in Scandinavia and, indeed, in most of Europe. In the present Part 1 of a two part article, Hjelholt's life story is unfolded chronologically and in its historical context. It is shown how his internment in a concentration camp during World War II shaped his view of the relationship between individual and organization. Further, how a 1958-visit to the USA where he encountered the Lewinian tradition exerted paramount influence on his thinking and practice in such areas as organizational development, group dynamics, laboratory training, adult education and the consultant role. It is concluded that Hjelholt's experiences with the Lewinian tradition, coupled with a talent for supporting organizational change and development, made him a central figure in shaping a European variety of consultancy and group dynamics. The follow-up article discusses characteristic professional themes in Hjelholt's contribution to the field.

Key words. Applied social psychology, concentration camp, consultancy, group dynamics, laboratory method, organizational psychology.

¹ Freelance consultant and associate professor emeritus at Institute of Psychology, University of Aarhus, Denmark. During 1988-2006 and together with Søren Willert she headed Center for System Development at Institute of Psychology. Stationsgade 16, DK-8240 Risskov, +45 8612 6260, benedic@psy.au.dk.

² Associate professor at Institute for Learning and Philosophy, Aalborg University, Denmark. Until 2006, associate professor at Institute of Psychology, University of Aarhus. During 1988-2006 and together with Benedicte Madsen, he headed Center for System Development at Institute of Psychology. Prins Knuds Vej 25, DK-8240 Risskov, +45 175220, swi@learning.aau.dk.

1. Introduction

This article and its follow-up (Willert & Madsen, 2014) are about the Danish psychologist Gunnar Hjelholt (1920-2002). The two texts are intended as a historically oriented case study in professional culture and culture construction of great relevance to work and organizational psychology. The professional culture thus portrayed is a brand of Lewin-inspired psychology including group dynamics, the laboratory method, on-the-job training, organizational development and consultancy. Hjelholt himself used the label ‘applied social psychology’. From the 1960s and onwards he was a key figure in shaping this field in Scandinavia and, indeed, in most of Europe.

To achieve our ends we shall use the method of personal-professional biography. We endeavor to show the reciprocities between Hjelholt as person – with a particular life history and psychological make-up; Hjelholt as citizen – with particular views on his position in and obligations towards society; and Hjelholt as professional – with a particular problem solving style and impact on his surroundings. In part 1, Hjelholt’s life-story is unfolded chronologically and in its historical context. In the follow-up, i.e. Part 2, characteristic professional themes of this pioneer within group dynamics, organizational psychology and consultancy are discussed.

The biographical material used originates from a prolonged project on and with Gunnar Hjelholt that the two authors initiated in 1992. We visited him in his home in Northern Jutland more than 15 times, interviewing him as well as reflecting and discussing with him. Data consists of huge amounts of interview material, documentary material, small internal notes written by Hjelholt along the road, and his own publications³. Up to 2006, the project resulted in three publications:

- A small article on his own social laboratory design, the mini-society (Madsen, Willert & Hjelholt, 1994).
- A booklet on Hjelholt’s experiences as a German concentration camp prisoner. The text was first published in Danish in 1995 and later translated as *Survival in the organisation: Gunnar Hjelholt looks back at the concentration camp from an organizational perspective* (Madsen & Willert, 1996).
- The posthumous anthology *Working on boundaries: Gunnar Hjelholt and applied social psychology* (Madsen & Willert, 2006).

Large sections of our two-part article are based on (suitably edited) excerpts from *Survival* and from our own contributions to *Working on boundaries*. Unless otherwise commented, all citations and all inserted passages originate from the interview material. Passages appearing as (inserted) quotes may not be verbatim since we rarely used a tape recorder; furthermore, many of them are composed of elements from different interview encounters. All interviews were done in Danish and have been translated into English at later stages.

A brief note on the soundness of our findings is required. On the one hand, the described project was initiated by us and at all times sustained by the energy we chose, or managed to invest in it. In

³ As for Hjelholt’s publications, seven papers and a non-exhaustive bibliography (36 entries) are published in Madsen & Willert, 2006. 19 of his texts are referred to in Part 1 and Part 2.

that sense the project was owned by us and was shaped as our project 'on' Hjelholt. Yet, as stated above, it was definitely also our project 'with' Hjelholt. Project findings emanated to a large degree as shared property between the three of us. During visits we two authors usually took turns between the positions as interviewer (guided by a loosely formulated set of themes that Hjelholt had been informed about before the visit) and note-taker on our portable computer (copying as much of the interview process as was physically possible). After returning home, it would be our job to expand the in-situ notes and make them into a tentative coherent narrative. These first-version narratives would never present themselves as clean text, but always hold a number of queries (e.g. "This seems interesting, we would like to hear more"), questions (e.g. "Did we get you right here?") and comments (e.g. "The intervention you describe might have been inspired by theory X, yet, the apparent similarity might also be accidental ... ?"). Sometimes Hjelholt responded to our queries in between visits. Had he not done so, we would ask for his response as part of the following visit. In this way the content part of the project was a joint venture. Themes and ideas emerged as an effect of the ongoing transactional process (cf. Dewey & Bentley 1949) involving the three of us.

2. Childhood and youth

Gunnar Hjelholt was born April 30, 1920 in Copenhagen. He grew up on the boundary line between a middle class and a working class neighbourhood. His father held a doctoral degree in history, the mother (of Swedish descent) was a person of great moral strength. All through life, Hjelholt felt himself to be suspended between the two parent poles: reflection vs. action, observation vs. participation.

In the turbulent thirties, characterized by economic depression, massive unemployment and increasing polarization between political right wingers (fascism, nazism) and left wingers (socialism, communism) Hjelholt's sympathies unquestionably belonged to the left, while, at the same time, he was hesitant to commit himself to any one political organization.

After having graduated from high school in 1938, he was admitted to the Department of Economics at the University of Copenhagen, but he never really got started. Soon after, he spent time in Stockholm at a workers' folk high school and got acquainted with the humanistic workers' movement in Sweden.

At this time, he envisaged himself as possible future war reporter. "At the end of October 1939, Russia put pressure on the Finns to surrender parts of their country. I called a Danish provincial newspaper and asked if they would like to have a correspondent in Helsinki. They promised to pay me, and I flew to Helsinki as the youngest journalist of all those who flocked there to cover the events".

He managed to return to Denmark shortly before the German occupation April 9, 1940.

3. The concentration camp

At the beginning of the war, Gunnar Hjelholt worked as a farmworker, and in 1942-3 he participated in the teacher training course at Askov Folk High School⁴.

During Germany's five year-long occupation of Denmark, 1940-45, he gradually moved from his preferred position as free political agent into that of organized resistance fighter. "I did not want to become attached to any movement, and at the same time I wanted to be an active participant. That is the way it has always been with me ". As it happened, for him as for many others, there was a price to be paid for this commitment. In the summer of 1944 he got arrested and was later sent via Neuengamme to Porta Westphalica, a German concentration camp where he was interned for nine months, from September 1944 to April 1945.

Porta was a labour camp. Years later he drew up a picture of an organization characterized by ruthless, goal-directed rationality. One important difference between work systems in a 'normal' capitalist setting and Porta Westphalica was that for the latter the Nazi regime secured a continued supply of human labourers in the form of captured criminals, political opponents, Jews and other unwanted elements. There were always plenty more where they came from. This gave rise to a peculiar production logic adhered to by the camp management team. In the name of profitability and with great determination, they simply pushed members of their 'labour force' to work themselves to death.

The production management team consisted of camp prisoners themselves. They were assigned to their function by the camp's topmost SS authorities. Hjelholt described the relation between SS and production management as analogous to the relation between board of directors and executive management in private firms. These personal experiences as camp inmate contributed to shaping his professional profile.

In 1945, Hjelholt returned as camp survivor, first to Sweden by one of Bernadotte's white busses and then, after the liberation of Denmark May 4, to his parents. He was in a miserable shape. He weighed 30 kilos. The tuberculosis he had contracted in the camp turned out to be persistent, demanding a number of visits to a sanatorium and several operations. This cost him a lot of lung tissue. He remained a heavy smoker, though, until lung failure caused his death at the age of 82.

4. Psychology at the University of Copenhagen

In 1948, after a three-year convalescent period and brief periods as folk high school teacher in Denmark and Sweden⁵ and as journalist Gunnar Hjelholt was enrolled as a student at the

⁴ For more than 150 years, the Folk High School movement has played an important and many-sided role in the development and modernization of the Danish society. Originally the movement emerged as an emancipatory counterforce to the State educational system, derogatorily labelled as 'the Black School'. As it appears, folk high schools played an important role in Hjelholt's life and work.

⁵ Here he met his future wife Berit Erikson (b. 21.09.1920), a Finnish textile designer. They were married January 1949 and settled down in Copenhagen. Their two sons were born in 1950 and 1953. Berit Hjelholt is an outstanding textile

Laboratory of Psychology, University of Copenhagen. He soon developed strong reservations concerning the intellectual stimulation he was offered there. During his university years his professional curiosity and yearning for learning were primarily satisfied when, on his own initiative, he stepped outside the institutional boundary lines defined by classroom, curriculum and exam. In this way he gathered for himself the kind of knowledge he considered useful, and at the same time got a chance to submit whatever academic knowledge he had acquired to the acid test of relevance and practicability. These activities included short-term jobs at a psychiatric hospital and at an observational summer camp for children with behavioural problems. He also frequented the small sociology group at the University and “in this way, psychology became a *social* study for me”.

The below quote summarizes Hjelholt’s generalized, critical assessment of the university as a significant societal institution:

Universities serve a double purpose. On the one hand, there’s the purpose of research: working to reach a valid understanding of the world. The University has a special commitment to deliver some kind of proof or documentation for their statements and knowledge claims, and to present them in a manner that may enable others to read and make use of the results of their work. Being society’s public research institution, the University has a special obligation to safeguard its research results and keep them available for the outside world.

On the other hand, there’s the purpose of higher education. It is meant to serve as a meeting ground for citizens who share an interest in obtaining knowledge and skills within certain professional fields. The University is obliged to facilitate this upgrading of skills – make sure that the proper professional expertise is available for guiding the students appropriately.

The importance of these two tasks is obvious. What infuriates me is that the University doesn’t make a determined effort to manage its tasks properly – for, indeed, in many respects these tasks are definitely mismanaged. At least, that’s what I’ve experienced time and again in my contact with the University. Far too great a share of what goes on ends up in internal struggles – concerning power or influence or ‘looking right’, not sticking out. Also, the language used for communicating research results tends to become less and less transparent. The fear of not being able to meet established scientific standards has gotten in the way. *The institution has gotten in the way of its own goal accomplishment!*

The highly passionate and also highly ambiguous attitudes towards the academic institution that are expressed in the above quote should stay with Hjelholt through his entire life. It was his deep-felt veneration for well-designed inquiries aimed at gaining “a valid understanding of the world” that kindled his equally deep-felt fury when he came across academic scholars

artist, perhaps best known for the large woolen tapestry behind the speaker’s rostrum in the Danish Parliament, completed in 1987.

who “mismanaged” the tasks they were meant to accomplish. This theme will be abundantly illustrated in later parts of the present article and in its sequel. Yet, in spite of felt infuriation and general dissatisfaction with his academic mentors, Hjelholt managed to carve out interesting academic paths for himself – in ways that, without his knowing it at the time, pointed towards his later professional career.

Freud-inspired psychodynamic theory was not only non-existent, it was actively denounced by local authorities. According to Hjelholt himself, however, this denouncement became a positive attractor:⁶

Personally, Edgar Rubin was of the opinion that Freud was wrong. Freud was an outsider, he came from the practical world and his ideas were based on qualitative arguments and individual cases, they were not experimentally supported. For these reasons, Rubin’s rejection became the official doctrine concerning Freud. As such it was repeatedly promulgated in lecture halls and other academic settings. The whole situation developed in a paradoxical manner. During those years, many among the teaching staff were in fact going through their individual psychoanalysis. I myself took hours with a Swedish psychoanalyst between 1948 and 1950. I believe Rubin’s fundamentalist attitude formed part of my wish to try it out. I was curious to learn what it was about Freudianism that could be so abhorrent. Yet, my psychoanalyst and I had difficulties finding common grounds. To him, all that mattered were childhood experiences from long ago. This was the kind of understanding in which he had specialized. To me my not-so-long-ago experiences from Porta somehow seemed more urgent – while at the same time they were difficult to put into words. We never really managed to make it work between us.

Eventually, Hjelholt established his own unique theoretical fusion between Lewin-inspired social psychology and psychodynamic thinking. Thus the theoretical introduction to a textbook he wrote in 1962 has this statement: “We shall follow a road that pays attention both to social psychology and to the so-called ‘dynamic’ psychology based largely on Freudian ideas” (Hjelholt, 1962:9).

5. The quest for a professional identity

In 1951, Gunnar Hjelholt graduated after three years of psychology study⁷. At that time, university-trained Danish psychologists were few in number, but society moved towards an increasing demand

⁶ Hjelholt refers to Professor Edgar Rubin (1886-1951), the internationally renowned researcher (‘Rubin’s vase’ as illustration of figure-ground perception) and undisputed king of Danish psychology in his time (see e.g. Pind, 2013).

⁷ During this period the psychology study plan was primarily intended as a three-year supplementary course for school teachers enabling them to work as educational psychologists within the Danish public school system. ‘Normal’ students with an interest in the field were also welcomed as applicants. In 1960, psychology became a ‘normal’ academic

for the kind of professional services they offered. Hjelholt, though, had no clear picture of his future professional career. “I wanted to become someone influential, but – mind you – by *doing* something”.

In his first years as titled psychologist, he was employed in a number of organizations and institutions, jointly characterized by their contribution to the social reorganization which, during the post-war years, consolidated the Danish welfare state. Below follows a catalogue presenting his four major workplaces after graduation (in 1951) and until his full professional commitment to (what he named) applied social psychology (in 1960). Taken together, the text can be read as a small-scale account of the large-scale societal development process that was set in motion in the 1920s and 30s and resulted in the Danish welfare state. The construction of the welfare state implied a radical change in many socially defined role patterns. In a Danish context the development of a professional identity for psychologists was closely bound up with the welfare state emerging.

Hindholm Occupational High School was a preparatory school for future child welfare service workers. Formally speaking, it enjoyed the status of a Folk High School, i.e. an autonomous teaching establishment having the individual pupil’s spiritual enlightenment as an important educational goal. Hjelholt taught courses in psychology and theory of education. This employment lasted for one year, 1951-52.

The Military Psychology Work Group was formed in 1952, Hjelholt being one of its first four members. It was a forerunner of what would later be known as the Institute of Military Psychology. The Work Group expanded rapidly, becoming the biggest Danish workplace for psychologists outside the public school system. On the small Danish scale, and with a certain delay, the process was parallel to what had taken place in the United States during WW II, the armed forces becoming institutional sponsors for the general professional development of psychology. Hjelholt’s affiliation with this group lasted for five years, 1952-57, in the first couple of years on a part-time basis⁸.

The place was filled with action. In those years, the Military as an institution was undergoing radical changes. A large group of young officers had experienced how the organization had compromised itself during the war: had gone morally bankrupt. Furthermore, sizeable financial resources had been granted for the purpose of actually realizing the new ideas in practice. This also explains why the Military Psychology Work Group was formed. We were four psychologists in the group when it started. All of us had graduated from the university, but only two of us were civilians.

Job requisitions kept coming in. One day, we might be asked to go and investigate certain problems that kept cropping up in one of the battalions. To do that, we must first get hold of existing knowledge concerning group or team work. All sorts of things that had been written about groups suddenly became extremely relevant. But the job wasn’t finished simply because we had succeeded in gaining some kind of *understanding* of

discipline covering 5½ years of study and offering supplementary specializations in clinical and occupational psychology.

⁸ Two articles, Hjelholt, 1955 and 1957, report from research carried out while he was employed in the Military context.

what had happened – *why* some situation had reached a deadlock. We also had to find a *solution* to the problem. We had to develop the necessary tools, acquaint ourselves with methodologies that had been developed here and there and on that basis design our own methods. That Work Group functioned like a small psychology course all by itself. It made sense, it was meaningful *because it was meant to be used*.

The Work Group also gave me my first serious opportunity to get acquainted with the consultant role. The two psychologists carrying ranks were accustomed to knowing their place in the hierarchy, so to speak. We civilians found it easier to take on the attitude of the observer, to ask silly questions, we were ‘the outsiders’, we kept a natural distance. From a consultant point of view, it gave us certain benefits.

The National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child had been established in 1923 on private enterprise terms. In 1939, the agency was given a statutory charter. Its history thus illustrates the trend towards ‘professionalization and nationalization’ of social work in Denmark. Hjelholt’s affiliation (1953-54) equalled a part-time job. “I wanted to find out whether this kind of work could possibly be my future professional field. I was far too inexperienced in clinical psychology. Would I be able to transform my knowledge into practice?” As it happened, this kind of work with primary focus on the individual as a private person was not destined to become his main professional focus. It may be added that his employment with The National Council came to an end partly due to tensions between Hjelholt and his boss: “I really did my best to let professional values guide me and to ask myself: What serves the woman best? At times this would bring me into conflict with the leader – e.g. if I told him his conclusions were completely off the mark since, in no way, they matched with my investigations. A general sense of mutual mistrust developed between us.”

The Danish Technological Institute (TI) had been established in 1906 to furnish small and medium business enterprises with state-subsidized development support in the form of trade-specific technology research and professional training courses. During the fifties, changes taking place in Danish society led to shifts of balance in the business sector meaning that TI’s traditional clients became of lesser relevance. A decision was made to move into the fields of organization and management consultancy and TI’s management team had plans involving ‘young Hjelholt’ who, at this time, happened to be one of the few Danish university trained psychologist with organizational experience. Thus, Hjelholt was recruited in 1957 and stayed on till 1960. As we shall see, these plans became a determining factor in shaping Hjelholt’s professional career. His association with TI came to a temporary halt in 1958 as the management decided to invest in his post-graduate training in the United States.

6. Meeting the Lewinian tradition in the USA

The stay began in January 1958 at Fels Center for Group Dynamics at the University of Delaware and also allowed Gunnar Hjelholt to visit the international centre for the group dynamic movement: The National Training Laboratories (NTL).

The working style at Fels was inspired by the Lewinian tradition (Kurt Lewin, 1890-1947). Anybody who has been exposed to Hjelholt as a teacher, trainer or consultant will know about his

characteristic intervention style where practice precedes theory and the would-be learner must plunge into deep water irrespective of whether he feels sufficiently prepared or not. In 1958, Hjelholt was the learner tasting the medicine he would later prescribe to others.

The Americans set me to work at once. Shortly after my arrival I was invited to a meeting between Fels and a client: Pennsylvania Bell. A five-day course for foremen and others had to be arranged. “Will you make a programme, the deadline is February 15?” my supervisor asked me. During the next month I had a lot of reading to do about “the small group”. At the meeting February 15 I presented my plan, and the client was asked to evaluate whether or not it was acceptable. Questions were asked and discussed at great length. Then my supervisor simply tore all my nice sheets off the wall: “Now start from scratch once again, Gunnar.” The psychological effect of his gesture was tremendous: Here, *the customer’s interests were all that counted*.

Hjelholt put together a new workshop programme. By mid-March, together with the training department manager at Penn Bell, he arranged a pilot course. It was a great success and his programme design became a prototype, not only in Penn Bell, but in all of the states operated by Bell Telephone.

In June 1958, Penn Bell offered Hjelholt a grant allowing him to participate in a training laboratory in the idyllic town of Bethel in the North-East state of Maine. The town was - and still is – the site of the NTL organization. Important names were Kenneth Benne, Lee Bradford, Dorwin Cartwright, Stuart Cook, Morton Deutsch, Jack Gibb, Murray Horwitz, Ron and Gordon Lippitt, and Mathew Miles, many of whom had collaborated closely with Kurt Lewin.

All that went on in Fels and NTL belonged to the Lewinian tradition called The Group Dynamic Movement. NTL was specialized in the so-called laboratory method, or training laboratories, in the beginning named human relations laboratories. Later, terms like the T-group method, sensitivity training and group dynamic courses were used. Over the years, numerous further developments and specializations were added. How, then, was a standard training laboratory organized in those days?

150-200 participants came travelling from near and far to participate in a three-week programme consisting of experiential groups, practice training and theory development. The participants were grouped in small experiential groups, each having two trainers skilled in process awareness. This basic group was called a T-group - T for training. Members from different T-groups would be brought together forming exercise groups.

As it turned out, Bethel had more in store for Hjelholt than a three-week laboratory. He was offered to participate, free of charge, in a subsequent trainer development programme, authorizing him to work as staff member in training laboratories. As he was telling us about this part, Hjelholt exclaimed:

So, you see – it was the same old story, once again repeated: If you want to learn something, first you must try it out in practice. Openness to experimentation was also demonstrated by our theory teachers. They were jointly working on a book on the

laboratory method. We received pre-print copies of various chapters thereby helping them, through our feedback, to develop the book for final publication.⁹

Having finished his own training, Hjelholt served as staff member at a training laboratory. Subsequently, in his professional life, he spent large amounts of time as initiator of laboratories and as a T-group trainer in the USA and in Europe (see Hjelholt, 1960).

After his summer in Bethel, Hjelholt returned to Fels and, by late October, continued to Denmark. Still, his American connection remained strong. In 1964 he served as a visiting professor in Philadelphia. In 1964, 1966, 1972 and 1987 he was staff member at training laboratories in Bethel and elsewhere in the USA. In 1966 he was elected associate member of NTL and in 1969 full member, a status he retained till, in 1992, he resigned.

The Lewinian laboratory design was taken up by the British Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and Tavistock Clinic and mixed with psychodynamic elements, resulting in ‘the Leicester conference’ alias ‘working conference’¹⁰. Another branch of Tavistock activities was the large-scale organization projects and the socio-technical approach (Trist & Murray, 1990). Hjelholt enjoyed professional relationships with many from this milieu. In particular, he valued Eric Trist and Gurth Higgin. Their systematic cross-breeding between social psychology and psychodynamic thinking matched his own efforts. Along the way, he incorporated elements of psychoanalysis *ad modum* Tavistock in his own laboratories even though he found their concern with vertical power struggles, e.g. between management and employee – or consultant and training laboratory participant – one-sided: “I rebel a little against their training methods. Tavistock has made the fight with conference management the most essential part, they have almost turned them into prison guards. They see everything as related to authority. I do not agree, yet being fully aware that authority issues may always crop up.”

7. Applied Social Psychology

In October 1958, Gunnar Hjelholt returned to Denmark and to Technological institute. His postgraduate training had been paid for by his workplace as a future-oriented, strategic investment and he acknowledged their generosity by taking on the position as head of a department formed to build up management consultancy as a new line of business.

However, he got more and more alienated from the way things worked out at TI and in 1960 he left this work place. He established his own small firm, called it *Applied Social Psychology – G. Hjelholt Associates* and appointed an international steering committee¹¹. For the remainder of his

⁹ The book, edited by Bradford, Gibb & Benne was published in 1964.

¹⁰ A recent Danish publication (Staunæs et al., 2014) ”rediscovers and rethinks” both kinds of laboratories, the Lewinian and the Tavistock version.

¹¹ It seems that the firm was closed down in 1972; at least it split up and Hjelholt went on his own (Hjelholt, 1985).

professional life, he was working on the boundary of organizations, in the position that not only suited him best, but also seemed to make the most of his special talents. *Boundary keeper* was his own term for the particular consultant style he cultivated over the years. We return to these issues in our follow-up article.

One of his first accomplishments after US was to translate the NTL material: “A very large part of the written lab-manuals circulating in Europe in the 1960s came from the NTL portfolio I brought with me from the 1958 laboratory”. Soon, he made professional contact with study group leaders, teaching labour union representatives in the organizational setting of the Danish Workers’ Educational Association (in Danish: AOF). Evening courses for study group leaders and adult educators were organized, including group exercises, role play (see Hjelholt, 1995) and a bit of theory. “Our main objective was to communicate to them *the teacher’s basic task*: Activate the learners, get them to trust their own observations, their own experiences. In one word: Democracy”. In the years following, a considerable part of Hjelholt’s work focused on adult education, the development of autonomous groups and democratization within the Danish labour movement.¹²

In the 1960s, Hjelholt was engaged in a great number of educational and consulting activities, covering a broad range of industrial companies, shipping companies, institutions, associations, trade unions and professional groups. Examples: BP, Esso, Standard Oil, Gulf Oil, the Police, prisoners, nurses, the cooperative movement (in Danish: FDB), adult educators and Askov Folk High School. Many of these engagements focused on the improvement of cooperation (see Hjelholt, 1962). Two Danish projects from this decade stand out: the Lauritzen project and an extension of the traditional training lab. Parallel to this, his theoretical interest in “the small group” developed further.

Lauritzen Shipping Company. This engagement was initiated in 1959 while Hjelholt was still employed at TI. It lasted for several years and in 1974-75 he was again called in as a consultant for the company. The involvement with Lauritzen was close to Hjelholt’s heart. One significant tool used was the allocation of a great deal of autonomy and responsibility to the crew as a whole. “Due to participative planning and the resulting changes in the organizational system, this experiment with reduced crew size was a success. It produced better-than-expected results, both in economic costs and in further innovation, as well as in personal growth” (Hjelholt, 1964/1968). In one of our interviews, he concluded: “Their financial situation improved and ships started functioning better due to our setting up autonomous work teams”. And yet: “In the end all these new activities became too much of a challenge for the shipping company, and we had to close down our activities!”

The Lauritzen contract gave me an opportunity to use the entire NTL repertory. I implemented management training in the form of eight-day laboratories. At every one of them, the participants represented a cross-section of the organizational structure. From 1959 until around 1963, these “in-company laboratories” were run three times a year. At some point while working for Lauritzen, my wife and I signed on as steward and stewardess on board the “Frida Dan”. The ship was bound for Italy to unload

¹² Einar Thorsrud from Norway is often credited for being *the* European working with autonomous groups (see Thorsrud & Emery, 1964). During one interview, Hjelholt brought in a correcting remark: “When it came to setting up autonomous groups, actually, I was the one who started it”.

paper pulp and then for North Africa to load phosphate for Aalborg in northern Jutland. The idea was to give me some first-hand knowledge concerning life on board the ships.

Extending the traditional laboratory. A training laboratory in 1962 for adult educational leaders was carried out in a collaboration between Hjelholt and Matthew Miles from the USA¹³.

“We intended to develop a European model, meaning a model based on the participants’ collaboration with the staff. Subsequently the model became widely adopted by European laboratory designers”. The design implied 3 weeks, a 12 week interim period and a follow-up week. In week one, participants took part in ordinary T-groups and inductive theoretical reflections. In week 2, they planned week 3. Week 3 was spent with field work, self-organizations and plans for the interim period in which they were supposed to digest and apply their learning at home. At this point, an authority shift took place, from a laboratory with trainers and trainees to “a fully functioning social system”.

In a subsequent publication the intended extension is explained as follow:

“Up to now, most lab staffs have preferred to ignore the fact that (as far as participants are concerned) operation of the lab requires real people (trainers, administrative staff, participants) to function in a real organization, having real conflicts, satisfactions, emotions (etc.) in the process. Conflicts within lab staffs form part of trainer folklore, yet participants are carefully shielded from such phenomena as if they did not exist” (Hjelholt & Miles 1963/2006:224).

In the 1960s and beyond, Hjelholt’s disposition for facilitating other people’s learning processes, interactions and joint decision making made him professional mentor, not only for the first generation of Danish organization consultants but also for many clinical psychologists.

Focus on the small group. Even before US, Hjelholt showed a keen interest in small groups, cf. Hjelholt, 1957. In 1960, he wrote an article on the role of group processes on attitude change and in 1962, he published a book titled (in translation) *The psychology of cooperation*. This book on process and structure in social systems – ranging from small groups to large organizations - emphasized the relationship between group variables and individual needs, motives, emotions, experiences and actions. Among the system dimensions treated were goals and tasks, leadership and hierarchies, functions and roles, communication and feedback processes, supportive and defensive group climates. When today, more than 50 years after its publication, the book appears a *good read*,

¹³ The American Matt Miles was among the founders of EIT, a European equivalent to NTL. He also contributed to the classical textbook account of the original NTL-version of the laboratory method (Bradford et al., 1964). Miles introduced the concept of *temporary system* and analysed the features of such a system by using the training laboratory as one example (Miles, 1964). In a preliminary form, this line of thought is expressed in Hjelholt & Miles, 1963.

it is not least due to its wealth of vivid case examples and illustrations sampled from Hjelholt's own professional practice and primarily drawn from private sector workplaces.

8. Working in Europe during the 1960s

Gunnar Hjelholt's experiences from NTL, coupled with a talent for organizational change and development, made him a central figure in the shaping of a European variety of consultancy and group dynamics. He had always been interested in other nations and cultures. As will be elaborated in Part 2, this attitude was strengthened by his stay in the concentration camp. Porta had held prisoners from 15-20 different nations and he was one among few in that camp who were able to "build bridges". The American experience further broadened his international view.

After my stay in the USA, my life almost entered a missionary phase. What I had learned *must be made use of!* And then I was seized by the great demand for change. Waves of democratization flooded Europe, Germany included. So much happened during the 1960s. Europe opened up, things must be built anew. I became part of, and I influenced this European movement in various ways, not least a large number of training laboratories. While Americans turned individualistic, we wanted laboratories to be reflections of society.¹⁴

The list of European activities covered by Hjelholt during the 1960s is truly overwhelming. A substantial part consisted in international laboratories taking place in England, Sweden, Austria, Italy, Ireland and for the UN organization WHO. "I traveled all the time", he told us. "To a large extent, it was the encounter between different cultures that occupied me" (Hjelholt, 1985:314). Below, summary presentations of a few examples of Hjelholt's European activities are given.

The European counterpart to NTL: EIT. Following preparations at meetings in Switzerland and The Netherlands, EIT - The European Institute for Trans-National Studies in Group and Organizational Development - was founded in 1965 with Hjelholt as its first secretary general; he stepped down in 1968. "I made efforts at making EIT a viable organization". The organization engaged in gathering knowledge about the social problems of contemporary and emerging Europe and applied this knowledge to organizations and institutions. Beside training activities, research and consultation projects were undertaken. The organization closed down in 2008¹⁵.

The Schliersee project in Germany. In May 1963, a three-week laboratory and subsequent follow-ups were held at Schliersee, headed by an international staff including Hjelholt. The aim was a democratization of the educational sector. The participants were 35 young teachers from the

¹⁴ See Hjelholt, 1960, 1976, 1992.

¹⁵ Personal communication 2014 with the Henrik Simmelkjær, secretary, CEO Municipality of Kolding in Denmark. He was the last secretary general of EIT, 2004-08. Before him, another Danish consultant, Susan Vonsild, occupied the post. The SG that succeeded Gunnar Hjelholt was the Norwegian Trygve Johnstad.

German land, Hessen, all levels of the educational system being represented. The laboratory was arranged as a joint venture between Institut für Sozialforschung in Frankfurt, the ministry of cultural affairs in Hessen and the Ford Foundation. In the years following Schliersee many of its participants would be recruited into leading positions. Another offshoot was the journal *Gruppendynamik: Forschung und Praxis*, appearing for the first time in 1966.

The Hammerfest project in Norway took place during the years 1966-68, it being a collaborative EIT-project carried out by Gunnar Hjelholt and the Norwegian psychologist Trygve Johnstad¹⁶. The client was an international company situated in a small fishing town; the trawler fleet as well as the entire community were included. While the project was running, Hjelholt suffered from concentration camp after-effects and was periodically hospitalized. Hence, his professional links with the field work was at times indirect rather than direct. Using a telephone from his hospital bed he interviewed Johnstad and it appeared that his role as distant observer, rather than involved actor, entailed certain benefits making it easier for him to grasp underlying patterns in what went on. "Too much involvement may bring you so close that you will no longer be able to take the detached view that allows you to see things from another perspective. As consultants we must stay outside the system".

9. Swedish and global activities 1970-85

Around 1970, parallel to withdrawing from the firm, Gunnar Hjelholt along with his family moved to a farm house in the north-western part of Denmark. They got a herd of sheep in order for his wife Berit Hjelholt to secure her own wool for weaving. Part of the two-winged cottage was fitted out with guest rooms and group rooms suitable for Hjelholt's legendary workshops, supervision sessions and even (in 1973-4) a "Centre for Social Experiments"¹⁷. The cottage also provided the setting for numerous visits by friends and colleagues from Denmark and the rest of the world – and for the mutual biographical project between him and the two of us.

During the next 15 years, Hjelholt's main activities were situated in Sweden and in the world at large. Besides, he further elaborated the mini-society design that he had invented in the late 1960s.

Consultation tasks in Sweden. Among the Swedish activities was a contract with the glass factory Emmaboda. Hjelholt was in charge of laboratory training with the aim of changing management climate and increasing staff commitment. In this, he collaborated with the sociologist Gurth Higgin from Tavistock whom Hjelholt counted him among his close friends. At one point, the owner of Emmaboda financed a leave of absence for Higgin giving him time to write *Symptoms of tomorrow* (Higgin, 1973). Sven-Åke Lenning (1974) evaluated the Emmaboda project and its effect on the

¹⁶ See Hjelholt, 1979. The Hammerfest project is also referred to in Johnstad, 1979. At that time, Johnstad was director of Norigo, Institutt for Gruppeutvikling og Organisasjonspsykologi A/S. [Dept. of Group Development and Organizational Psychology Ltd.].

¹⁷ In 1973, Hjelholt, his Swedish colleague Harald Berg and 11 social workers committed themselves jointly to a study of the way social institutions anticipated a major, national social security reform ('Bistandsloven'). They labeled themselves "Centre for Social Experiments"; cf. Hjelholt & Berg, 1974.

participants in an investigation with clear distinction between independent and dependent variables. In his dedication to Hjelholt, Lennung wrote: “Ett varmt tack till en utomordentligt oberoende variabel” (Warm thanks to an extraordinarily independent variable).

Other engagements in Sweden: a five year contract with the Swedish Employer’s Union where Hjelholt collaborated with Arne Ebeltoft from Norway; comprehensive supervisory activities with psychiatrist and group therapists; contributions to a reform of the Swedish university system; further, ICI Nobel, Ali Rati and the insurance company Skandia were among his client systems.

Large international projects. For a number of years, Hjelholt was attached to Unicef as a consultant, being part of ‘The Meg Groups’ that developed systems for monitoring and evaluating health projects around the world. It was financed by donor organizations and among the sponsors was the Danish governmental development organization Danida. MEG met four times a year, each time for a full week and oftentimes chaired by Hjelholt.

Hjelholt worked extensively in India, monitoring the construction of a health system in two states and also dealing with urban development; he even served as a visiting professor for a couple of months¹⁸. On and off, he collaborated with Gouranga Chattopadhyay from Kolkotta, a doctor in philosophy who is reknown for his consulting work with leaders of the so-called untouchables (Chattopadhyay, 2006). Hjelholt thrived in India, “I always got on well with the Indians because I travelled the same class as they and never stayed at the posh hotels”.

Another example from this period is his training activities and his ground work for a professional development program in Egypt. It was subsequently refined by his old EIT-colleague Leopold Vansina, a Belgian ph.d. in psychology (Vansina, 2006).

The mini-society is truly a Hjelholt design. The idea of the laboratory-as-organization, developed together with Matt Miles (see section 7), was further extended into that of the laboratory-as-society. A mini-society may be defined as a social-psychological experiment, set up with the aim of investigating the relation between a large system and its groups; it was held at an isolated spot, e.g. a manor-house surrounded by smaller buildings and had 40-60 participants, divided into homogeneous groups according to members’ age, professional position or social status. The underlying idea was to create a small-scale society that would mirror some of the structural features and procedural mechanisms of macro-society.

We must integrate all aspects of society in a laboratory – that’s how I must have been thinking. I trust that by using this method we got hold of latent trends in society before they became manifest. I sensed it as a kind of prediction method, as a diagnostic instrument for society – even though, admittedly, this idea was never put to a serious test.

¹⁸ The exacts character of these activities, the chronology and the relationship between Unicef and Danida is foggy in our data.

The first four mini-societies were arranged in Sweden 1968-1971 and the last one took place in 1985. All together 16 mini-societies were held, most often in Sweden or Denmark but in England, Austria and Pennsylvania as well – not always with Hjelholt on the staff, though.¹⁹

Action research. In 1970 Gurth Higgin from Tavistock wrote an article on his own participation in a mini-society. Twenty years later this text, together with a postscript by Hjelholt, was published in a Tavistock anthology under the title “Action research in minisocieties” (Higgin & Hjelholt, 1990). Originally action research was introduced by Lewin (1948) as a way of combining practice and generalizing research. It became a shared reference point for professional practitioners within the group dynamic movement. In a sense one may view Hjelholt’s professional mission as action research. He was unstoppably engaged in learning cycles trying to generalize practical experiences from encounters with groups and organizations and at the same time to find ways of enriching his professional practice from theory and research. Specifically, his ambition with the mini-societies was to investigate social processes, looking for tendencies that could be generalized to society at large.

10. Hjelholt’s last years

1985 turned out to be another watershed in Gunnar Hjelholt’s life. “My health deteriorated and I was thrown out of Danida”. Thrown out?

Yes, after having written a report they did not like. Of all donor organizations, the Danish Danida was the most difficult to collaborate with. As a matter of fact, I am probably one of the psychologists that has most often been fired by organizations. By IBM as well, just to mention another example. It happened when I exposed that the owners or management didn’t live up to their own espoused values.

In 1985, Hjelholt was 65 years old. His extensive traveling became too tiresome and although he wound up his large international projects, staffed a number of international laboratories, kept in touch with EIT and continued to nurse his many international friendships, he now concentrated on the social sector in Denmark.

On many occasions he was summoned as a consultant for institutions and sometimes as an evaluator in addition, e.g. by a youth center or an intercultural project (Hjelholt, 1997). “From early on, I stressed the importance of evaluations and always designed my own projects in ways that allowed evaluation – mind you: evaluations showing whether the activities were of any *use*”.

A video was produced showing his consulting work with shop floor employers in a factory (Frandsen, 1967). Hjelholt was a cherished supervisor for many young psychologists. Furthermore,

¹⁹ See Hjelholt, 1972a+b, 1973, 1993; Lauritzen, 2006; Madsen, Willert & Hjelholt, 1994.

he was a frequent participant and ‘wise old man’ at workshops. As late as in 2001, he supported one of us in carrying through a workshop on applied social psychology (Madsen, 2011).

He also increased his active links to the Danish Psychologist Association and in 2001, in view of his all-round importance as coach, supervisor and provocateur for Danish psychologists in the 1960s and onwards, he was made honorary member of this association.

Along the road, he worked on a manuscript with the draft title ”System in Chaos” in which he was inspired by Niklas Luhmann, among others. However, the book was never completed.

During the fall of 2002 he was bedridden most of the time and on December 27, he died peacefully in his home i North-Western Jutland.

References

Bradford, L.P., Gibb, R.J. & Benne, K.D. (Eds.). (1964). *T-group and laboratory methods: Innovation in re-education*. New York: Wiley.

Chattopadhyay, G.P. (2006). Unconscious transactions across boundaries. Two examples. In B. Madsen. & S. Willert (Eds.), *Working on boundaries. Gunnar Hjelholt and applied social psychology* (pp. 185-202). Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.

Dewey, J. & Bentley, A. (1949) *Knowing and the Known*. Boston: Beacon Press

Frandsen, N. (1997). *Midt i en forandringstid* [A time of great changes]. Video no. 812185. Copenhagen: Arbejdsmiljøfondet.

Higgin, G. (1973). *Symptoms of tomorrow: Letters from a sociologist on the present state of society*. London: Plume Press.

Higgin, G. & Hjelholt, G. (1990). Action research in minisocieties. In E. Trist & H. Murray (Eds.), *The social engagement of social science. A Tavistock anthology. Vol I: The socio-psychological perspective* (pp. 246-258). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hjelholt, G. (1955). Officersundersøgelse ved militærpsykologisk arbejdsgruppe. To psykologiske prøver [Examination of officers in the Military Work Group. Two psychological tests]. *Psykologien og Erhvervslivet*, 10, 120-127.

Hjelholt, G. (1957). Kammeratskabsvalg mellem 16-18 årige på tre af forsvarets skoler [Choice of friends among 16-18 year olds at three of the defense schools]. In *Nærhedens og tidens indflydelse på kammeratskabsvalg* [Proximity and the influence of time on the choice of friends], Fourth Nordic Psychology Meeting. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.

Hjelholt, G. (1960). Den lille gruppe som faktor ved indflydelsesændringer. *Nordisk Psykologi*, 12, 122-128. (A slightly abbreviated version is brought as Chapter 10 in Madsen & Willert, 2006: “The small group as a factor in attitude change processes”).

Hjelholt, G. (1962). *Samarbejdets psykologi* [The psychology of cooperation]. Danmarks Radios grundbøger [Radio Denmark Textbooks]. Copenhagen: Fremad Fokusbøger.

- Hjelholt, G. & Miles, M. (1963). Extending the conventional training laboratory design. *Training Directors Journal*, 17, 3-10. (An abbreviated version is brought as Chapter 11 in Madsen & Willert, 2006).
- Hjelholt, G. (1964/1968). *Training for reality*. University of Leeds, Working Papers 5 and 5A. (No 5A is brought as Chapter 12 in Madsen & Willert, 2006).
- Hjelholt, G. (1972a). Group training in understanding society: The mini-society. In C.L. Cooper (Ed.), *Group training for individual and organizational development* (pp. 140-151). Basel: Karger. (Brought as Chapter 13 in Madsen & Willert, 2006).
- Hjelholt, G. (1972b). Ziele des Mini-Society Laboratoriums. *Gruppendynamik*, 3, 371-373.
- Hjelholt, G. (1973). Minisamfund. Et socialpsykologisk eksperiment [Mini-societies. A social psychological experiment]. In G. Haslebo, P. Holbøl, S. Høystrup, F.H. Madsen, & B. Nejsum (Eds.), *Magt og påvirkning i systemer* [Power and influence in systems]. Copenhagen: Reitzel, 202-219.
- Hjelholt, G. & Berg, H. (Eds.). (1974). *Institutionen og folket* [The institution and the people]. Copenhagen: Fremads Fokusbøger.
- Hjelholt, G. (1976). Europe is different. Boundary and identity as key concepts. In G. Hofstede & M.S. Kassem (Eds.), *European contributions to organization theory* (pp. 232-243). Amsterdam: Van Gorcum,. (Brought as Chapter 14 in Madsen & Willert, 2006).
- Hjelholt, G. (1979). North of the polar circle. In D.P. Sinha (Ed.), *Consultants and consulting styles* (pp. 118-128). New Delhi: Vision Books. (Brought as Chapter 15 in Madsen & Willert, 2006).
- Hjelholt, G. (1985). 25 år som selvstændig psykologisk konsulent! [25 years as self-employed psychological consultant]. *Dansk Psykolog Nyt*, 313-315.
- Hjelholt, G. (1992). Beratung im interkulturellen Kontext. In R. Wimmer (Ed.), *Organisationsberatung, Neue Wege und Konzepte* (pp. 269-28). Wiesbaden: Gabler.
- Hjelholt, G. (1993). Das Minilab – Ein Spezieller Einstieg in ein längeres experimentelles Lernarrangement. In G. Schwarz, P. Heintel, H. Weyrer & H. Statler (Eds.), *Gruppendynamik, geschichte und Zukunft* (pp. 105-110). Wien: Universitätsverlag.
- Hjelholt, G. (1995). *Casemetoden og situationsspil* [Case method and role play]. Pædagogiske Høvlspåner fra Den Kommunale Højskole i Danmark, Copenhagen.
- Hjelholt, G. (1997). *Kulturmødet* [The meeting of cultures V. Aarhus: Forlaget Hali/ Interkulturelt Center.
- Johnstad, T. (1979). *Det sosiale samspillet: Trekk fra nyere europeisk gruppedynamikk* [Social interaction: Characteristics of recent European group dynamics]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Lauritzen, I. (2006). Minisociety. Towards a psychology of society. In B. Madsen & S. Willert (Eds.), *Working on boundaries. Gunnar Hjelholt and applied social psychology* (pp. 159-169). Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Lennung, S.Å. (1974). *Meta-learning, Laboratory training, and individually different changes. A study on the effects of laboratory training*. Lund: The Swedish Council for Personnel Administration.

Lewin, K. (1948). *Resolving social conflicts: Selected papers on group dynamics* (posthumously edited by Gertrud Weiss Lewin). New York: Harper & Brothers.

Madsen, B. (2002). Anvendt socialpsykologi [Applied social psychology]. *Psykolog Nyt*, 20-23.

Madsen, B. & Willert, S. (1996). *Survival in the organization: Gunnar Hjelholt looks back at the concentration camp from an organizational perspective*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press. (Out of print. Translation of a Danish version published in 1995 on the occasion of Hjelholt's 75th birthday).

Madsen, B. & Willert, S. (Eds.). (2006). *Working on boundaries. Gunnar Hjelholt and applied social psychology*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.

Madsen, B., Willert, S. og Hjelholt, G. (1994). Mini-samfundet plus minus 25 år. [The 25th anniversary of the minisociety, looking back and ahead]. *Psykolog Nyt*, 90-92.

Miles, M.B. (1964). On temporary systems. In M.B. Miles (Ed.), *Innovation in education* (pp. 437-490). New York: Teachers College Press.

Pind, J.L. (2013). *Edgar Rubin and psychology in Denmark*. Figure and ground. Springer.

Staubæs, D., Adriansen, H.K., Dupret, K., Høyrup, S. & Nickelsen, N.C.M. (red.). (2014). *Læringslaboratorier og – eksperimenter* [Learning laboratories and experiments]. Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.

Thorsrud, E. & Emery, F. (1964). *Industrielt demokrati: Noen norske og utenlandske erfaringer*. [Industrial democracy: Some Norwegian and international experiences]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Trist, E. & Murray, H. (1990). Historical overview: The foundation and development of the Tavistock Institute. In E. Trist & H. Murray (Eds), *The social engagement of social science: A Tavistock anthology* (Vol. I, pp. 1-34). London: Free Association Books.

Vansina, L.S. (2006). Gunnar remembered. A rope dancer, a clown, a rebel and a critical thinker. In B. Madsen & S. Willert (Eds.), *Working on boundaries. Gunnar Hjelholt and applied social psychology* (pp. 121-131). Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.

Willert, S. & Madsen, B. (2014). Gunnar Hjelholt, a pioneer within group dynamics and organizational psychology. Part 2: Professional themes. *Nordic Psychology*... <skal udfyldes til sidst>