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## **Gunnar Hjelholt, a pioneer within group dynamics and organizational psychology.**

### **Part 2: Boundary making and boundary breaking as consultancy theme**

**By Søren Willert<sup>1</sup> & Benedicte Madsen<sup>2</sup>**

**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 professional 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. Building on a chronological sketch of Hjelholt's life story presented in Part 1 of a two part article, the present second article part endeavors, not only to paint a picture of Hjelholt as a professional person with a distinctive problem solving style and impact on his surroundings, but also to search for interactions between identified professional themes and Hjelholt's personal life story as well as his political attitudes broadly conceived. The concept of boundary and the image of the consultant as boundary keeper play important roles as recurrent, unifying metaphors in the text. Among other themes covered the following may be mentioned: doing versus reflecting; what is the *good* organization; individuals and organizations. In an epilogue one overarching aim of the two texts is described as that of opening up for discussion and dialogue concerning organization consultancy in a historical perspective.

*Key words. Consultancy, boundaries, doing vs. reflecting, individual vs. organization, management vs leadership, organization quality*

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## 1. Introduction

This second article on Danish psychologist Gunnar Hjelholt (1920-2002) follows up on Part 1 that dealt with Hjelholt's life and work (Madsen & Willert 2014). Both texts harvest from our biographical project on and with Hjelholt and from previous publications based on interview material (Madsen & Willert, 1996, 2006). The project and our use of interview materials are explicated in Part 1.

Part 1 presented Hjelholt's childhood and youth, his internment in the German concentration camp Porta Westphalica during World War II and what happened after his return to Denmark. After his graduation from University of Copenhagen 1948, he held a number of jobs which, taken together, illustrate how the build-up of the Danish welfare state supported the development of a professional identity for psychologists. A watershed occurred when he spent eight months in the USA, first at Fels Center for Group Dynamics in Delaware and later at NTL: National Training Laboratories in Main; both organizations were heavily inspired by Kurt Lewin's contributions to social and organizational psychology. In 1958, he brought the Lewinian heritage, theory and practice, back to Europe under the heading of 'applied social psychology'. From the 1960s and onwards he was a key figure in shaping this professional field in Denmark, in Scandinavia and in most of Europe.

This second part of our article text replaces the chronological logic-of-presentation by a summarizing intent. In the space available and to the best of our abilities, we shall paint a portrait that may do justice to, and also, for younger generations, evoke interest in Gunnar Hjelholt as a pioneer within group dynamics and organizational psychology. However, we portray him as a person of his time. The issues with which he was grappling – in theory and practice – are still with us and still of importance.

Our main data source is Hjelholt's personal reflective self-assessments as these emanated and became expressed as part of our project collaboration during the 1990s. One weighty ambition of ours will be to make professional sense out of the terms *boundary* and *boundary keeper* in a specific Hjelholt context. With boundary as umbrella theme a number of sub-themes are discussed, such as doing versus reflecting; what is the *good* organization; individuals and organizations.

## 2. The boundary theme

The authors' book on *Gunnar Hjelholt and Applied Social Psychology* (Madsen & Willert, 2006) carried the main title *Working on Boundaries*. Likewise, as the reader may have noticed, the term 'boundary' cropped up here and there in part 1 of our two part article.

- As a family member Hjelholt "grew up on the boundary line between a middle class and a working class neighbourhood".
- As a psychology student he persistently "stepped outside the institutional boundary lines defined by classroom, curriculum and exam".

- As a full-fledged consultant 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 distinctive consultant style he cultivated over the years”.

Boundaries function as lines of separation. The boundary keeper consultant refrains from “too much involvement” with the client system – as is illustrated in the below (slightly adapted) Part 1 quotes. The boundary term is not explicitly used, but definitely implied.

- In order for the consultant to be useful he must speak with a voice different from the client system’s voice(s). This requires “a detached view. As consultants we must stay outside the system”.
- In the Military Psychology Work Group that was one of his workplaces in the 1950s “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 boundary theme was not unilaterally invented by us, Hjelholt’s biographers. In embryonic fashion it emerged as part of our shared reflections concerning the interview project. At one point Hjelholt commented upon the theme – which we had tentatively labelled *Gunnar-on-the-edge* – like this:

It is to your credit that I now see the pattern so clearly. Already after our second conversation, it struck me that I had expressed it *so* clearly, without even realizing it myself. It is my destiny to find myself on the edge or at the border, with no possibility of being elsewhere?

Later during the same conversation Hjelholt told us one story that had been constructed in his family-of-origin as a means of pinpointing him in a characterological sense:

I spent a lot of time with our neighbors’ two sons. They were full of energy. One day we were playing in the yard and mother told the boys’ father that I wasn’t really in on the fun, but sitting passively on the fence watching. The father corrected her by pointing out that I was participating by provoking the boys with remarks and commentary.

It should be added that the story is not one that I can remember my-self, it is one which, to this very day, I can hear my mother telling other people. She wanted to get the better of my passivity. She was the one who wanted me to *do* things.

In what follows, the boundary theme will be further explored and put into a professional perspective.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hjelholt’s article *Europe is different* (chapter 14 in Madsen & Willert, 2006) elaborates extensively on this theme.

### 3. Doing versus reflecting

The first article part has made it indubitable that Gunnar Hjelholt's professional life became a life filled with *doing*. He was a social entrepreneur, invented new designs, inspired his social surroundings by being and behaving in a manner that was different.

Looking back on his life Hjelholt was prone to attribute this *doing* addiction to maternal influence ("Mother should actually have reformed Sweden, or the whole world, but instead she had to confine herself to me, her first-born"). As also documented in part 1, however, Hjelholt's inclination towards the doer position: getting things done, obtaining results, having an impact – was continually co-existing with an awareness that this impetus, professionally speaking, could be overdone, and must be curbed, especially in the direct face-to-face exchanges with client systems. The first sentence of the following quote warns against giving in to the doer-attitude. The second sentence indicates that social heritage deriving from his father, the historian, might have made reflection come easy to him:

People may lose themselves in action – they just plainly enjoy getting things done and never bother to reflect. As for me, I do have that basic curiosity making me keen to know *what is there*, and *what has been*.

In spite of his principled positive appreciation of reflection and theorizing Hjelholt's doer instincts remained active. The incident reported below illustrates how comments from a colleague once helped Hjelholt become aware that an activist streak might in fact color his professional undertakings more than he himself had recognized. This awareness apparently helped him curb his activism – without necessarily making his professional life easier:

One of my colleagues once made the observation that my T-groups during training labs would typically be the ones that arranged social events for the lab as a whole – such as inviting everybody to a party, or taking other, like initiatives. His observation troubled me a bit. It made me start reflecting on the influence coming from the trainer's personality and I tried to make up my mind concerning the positive versus negative effects of this influence – and whether such an impact is likely to stay with the participants even after you have left them. As an outcome of all this reflection work, I actually changed my trainer role into a more passive one – the result being that I, as a projection screen, became the target of all the attacks and aggressions.<sup>4</sup> I started thinking that my most important task might be that of simply *being there* – i.e. being the boundary keeper.

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<sup>4</sup> The wording used in this quote shows Hjelholt's professional alignment with the psychodynamically inspired so-called Tavistock tradition including the fact that he himself underwent a training analysis authorizing him to practice as a psychoanalyst; cf. Madsen & Willert, 2014.

We return to the reflection theme in a later section describing Hjelholt's concern with the value and the use of theory in consultancy work.

#### **4. Experiencing freedom in the boundary position**

For Gunnar Hjelholt, the boundary position (on the edge of events) was one of freedom. You abstain from making the decisive, all-committing choice between either one side or the other side. The successfully held boundary position allows you to stay in contact, exchange ideas and share thoughts with any and all available social groupings.

In one interview session he described his concentration camp survival strategy as being based on continued non-commitment – being addicted to boundaries, rather than to one particular identifiable position.

The Camp (he told us) was a strongly segmented community and segmentation was strongly signaled, for everyone to see or hear. And then he continued:

The various groups kept each other in check. Racial prejudice was common to all of us. Germans were better than Poles and Danes, but Danes were better than Poles because we belonged to the Nordic race. Apart from national groups there were the colors. All the prisoners were divided into categories: green for criminal, red for political, blue for anti-social, purple for draft dodgers and Jehovah's Witnesses, and black for homosexuals. The colors were an incredibly sophisticated invention. The national groups took care of themselves first, as they always do. Within each nation the moral status was indicated by your color. We classified each other.

The many segment-defining boundary lines crisscrossing the camp population structured the day-to-day social life at Porta – but, according to Hjelholt in a way that wasn't necessarily wholesome, neither for the individual nor the social climate amongst camp inmates. Allying yourself indiscriminately with one particular segment was risky. Such alliances restricted your freedom of movement: "I had seen how being unable to maneuver, or being afraid of others, killed people." Successful camp inmates were those who managed to move across boundaries: "They had the ability to move between nationalities and languages. Those who could get news from the outside also gained a kind of leadership position. News was important."

Hjelholt describes himself as, basically, a camp inmate who did have "the ability to move between ..."; but, then, also as one who in order to safeguard his cherished freedom of movement, would actively evade leadership positions:

I could move within the system. But do you know what? I *did not want* to take responsibility for others. You have to do that if you want to be a leader. Something that separated people within their national groups was the resistance movement they belonged to: The Communist Party, the former military people or other groupings. I

was in contact with all of them and could move *between* groups. Perhaps you could say I had a mediating function in that sense, but this is one of the reasons why I was not a leader. A leader must overrule the mediating function by taking a stand.

A thematic link may thus be noted between Hjelholt-the-boy, sitting on the fence and throwing possibly stimulating remarks at his playmates – Hjelholt-the youngster, actively disregarding his (career-wise ‘sensible’) study of economics in favor of the spontaneously grabbed job as observing, reflecting war reporter<sup>5</sup> – Hjelholt-the-camp-inmate maintaining his freedom of movement through multilateral rather than unilateral contact making – Hjelholt-the-consultant willfully keeping a certain distance. What seemed interesting, to him as well as to us, his biographers, was that, for Hjelholt-the-adult, this peculiar talent of his could only be put into practice when he enjoyed the status of an outsider. With one important exception his pre-US professional career shows him having to break out of every salaried insider position he manages to place himself in:

This kind of freedom – freedom to observe, freedom to act – I lose when I am part of the system myself, as was the case in the stories I told you about my various jobs after graduation. I couldn’t help getting entangled in all sorts of conflicts, and it was stressful to me at a personal level. I could not let go of it. And at some point I had to resign: quit the job. That was my only choice available.

To tell you the truth, I’ve been doing quite a lot of thinking about this fact. Why is it so difficult for me to belong to an organization? Somehow I always reach a point where I simply have to gather my things about me and walk away. It’s a certain kind of impatience within me. I start noticing that other people fail to live up to the stated values or goals of the organization. Agreement no longer exists between what people say they do and what they actually do. I see them as no longer honouring the task. That’s what makes me put on my rigid self. I cannot accept it. As long as I’m still part of the organization, I cannot compromise.

This trait of mine has pushed me into a lot of difficulties – which doesn’t imply, though, that I regret my ways, or feel I should have been more flexible.

Important matters are at stake here, goddammit. Are humans there for the sake of the systems, or are systems supposed to lend service to human beings?

The one exception was *Information*, a newspaper house where Hjelholt worked as a free-lance journalist during his study years.<sup>6</sup> When, eventually, he left this workplace in the year of his graduation, he had not been forced to do so by his ‘rigid uncompromising self’ – or should we say: his strong moral and political values? At this point in his life he simply chose to quit journalism in favor of exploring the possibilities inherent in the professional psychologist’s role for which he had

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Madsen & Willert, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> This newspaper started as a medium for illegal transmission of information (hence the name) among resistance fighters and their supporters during the Second World War. After Denmark’s liberation in 1945 it was transformed into a ‘normal’ newspaper and as such it still exists.

just been formally authorized. Yet, as will become evident below, the newspaper house he'd left some forty years before our interview sessions stayed close to his heart, both in a personal and professional sense.

## 5. What is *the good organization*?

During our interview sessions Hjelholt often lamented the fact that organizations were apt to replace active commitment to the task that gave them their right of existence with simplistic, mindless self-preservation strategies.

When as a consultant I work in organizations where this tendency is strongly marked, I have a habit of thinking – and sometimes I say it aloud – that in this society of ours *organizational and institutional post-mortems are working at far too slow a pace*. Can't you see it? – death has already occurred for these organizations, at least if you look at the original motives for bringing them into existence. What's missing is for somebody to actually have the courage to sign the death certificate. Certainly, you can't expect any such thing from the organizational members themselves.

Amidst all such examples, *Information* seemed to retain its status as the one unique organization with which Hjelholt might have linked himself in a fully committed insider fashion. This organization didn't hamper, but rather boosted individual creativity. Within Hjelholt's generalized understanding of organizational life the following description may thus be read as pointing at a positively normative ideal type.

The primary task at *Information* was to get a newspaper published every day – well, and to make sure that the stuff written was worth reading: that the quality was as required. All employees knew and let themselves be guided by this overall task; but the task wasn't talked about a lot. That was not necessary. All employees carried an implicit understanding of it in their heads.

Further evidence of the way things got regulated by a shared understanding was seen in the fact that only very few *stated* rules governed the way work was carried out on a day-to-day basis: division of labour, process control, etc. Somehow, it just happened. Everybody simply did what seemed the right thing to do. In that way problems sorted themselves out.

*Information* was a child of the Resistance Movement. A peculiar attitude, which also had been present in the Movement, somehow helped keep the newspaper house together as a workplace. In the Resistance Movement lots of similar stories had been told about the way in which individuals formed small collaborative units and seemed able to use some kind of gut feeling that made them do the right things at the right moment, even though they were physically separated from one another, and with hardly any means for mutual communication. Somehow, *Information* attracted people with just that talent.

The goal of employees was not to push themselves forward as brilliant individuals, but to make the work community function. The amount of freedom delegated to each and every one was incredible. Each individual employee used this freedom as a means towards the end of getting the paper published on time.

When, today, we ‘listen’ to Hjelholt’s enthusiastic portrayal of *Information* we are reminded of one programmatic statement he’d sometimes pronounce with much certitude: “*The organization is the context of the individual – the individual is the context of the organization.*” For him the mutual contextual relatedness between an organization and ‘its’ individuals seemed to have had a particularly seamless quality in this particular workplace. The newspaper-producing organization was through and through dependent on ‘its’ people for getting the job done. At the same time – and in spite of division of labor-based positional differences within the organization – each and every one of its members was somehow carrying *the essential organization* around as part of their mental baggage, using it as a guide for getting their particular job done.

## 6. Individuals and organizations

The just-quoted ‘programmatic statement’ describing the relation between individual and organization as one of mutual contextualization may well be viewed as a theoretical cornerstone within Hjelholt’s professional thinking.<sup>7</sup> The statement consists of two sub-statements and derives its theoretical power by integrating them into a dialectical or circular unity. Below we shall deal with the two sub-statements one by one and search for their theory- and practice-related implications in Hjelholt’s professional universe.

*The organization is the context of the individual.*

This sub-statement tells us that the decontextualized person is an artifact. Persons acquire personhood as a function of their ongoing transactions with socially structured surroundings. Thus a change of surroundings – or a change in the way given surroundings are contextualized – implies personal change. This idea is part of the Lewinian heritage on which group dynamics and the laboratory tradition was founded. Hjelholt’s allegiance to this idea lay behind his concern – briefly alluded to in Part one – that “the Americans”, i.e. the original founders of group dynamics and the laboratory method, had gradually “turned individualistic”. In the quote below we find him elaborating on this theme.

Since its beginning, the Lewinian laboratory method had been linked with active social commitment: community development, adult education, democratic cooperative methods etc. By contrast, in the Personal Growth movement the individual is the main focus. The distinction shows in the kind of interventions undertaken. The laboratory

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<sup>7</sup> Support for this assessment may be found in Hjelholt & Berg, 1974 (textbook on cooperation in groups and organizations) and Hjelholt, 1995 (his last published paper, and definitely inspired by/an inspiration for his unfinished manuscript on *System in Chaos*).

method focuses on the function and roles of the individual within the group. The other tradition used the group simply as a setting for individual therapy – often with a strong, and to my mind problematic, element of seduction, since participants in this type of group may well move further into self-revelation than they actually feel like doing. Today the Personal Growth tradition has become predominant as a consequence of the current individualistic trend.

Hjelholt's discomfort with 'current individualistic trends' provided inspiration for his efforts at shaping a particularly 'European' type of laboratory design where trainers as well as trainees finally became integrated in one "fully functioning social system" (a *real* organization, having *real* conflicts, etc.). Even more so, the described concerns inspired his invention of the mini-society design which according to our Part 1 "may be defined as a social-psychological experiment, set up with the aim of investigating the relation between a large system and its groups ... The underlying idea was to create a small-scale society that would mirror some of the structural features and procedural mechanisms of macro-society".

The mini-societies demonstrated the ways in which individuals are affected by social-psychological and sociological conditions. Compared to the Personal Growth method, I much prefer working with structures and, in a certain sense, I do not give a hoot about the individuals. At least I do not try to change them. I like to work with reality as it *is*.

In the mini-society, the *reality that is* comprises more than simply persons in an *organizational* context. *Historically moulded society*, i.e. the world at large, formed the context through which participants' actions were to be understood. Ideally speaking mini-society participants represented human beings understood as history-making citizens:

Yes, for me the mini-societies became an occasion to *go all the way*. I tried to combine social psychology with sociology, guided by the assumption that in so far as we succeeded in having true sections of society represented in the laboratory, we would mirror society. You may say that I placed the traditional laboratory in a sociological perspective.

*The individual is the context of the organization.*

The second sub-statement helps us pin down Hjelholt's distinctive work style and priorities as a consultant. Within organization consultancy a division line may conveniently be drawn between, on the one hand, so-called management consultants who aim, typically in a top-down strategic fashion, at streamlining organizational structures with a view to optimizing task realization at minimal costs. On the other hand, you find people-oriented so-called OD-consultants (OD = Organization Development) who deal with meaning-making, typically with a strong commitment to bottom-up

strategies.<sup>8</sup> The term ‘OD’ actually refers to consultancy approaches linked to the very Lewin-inspired tradition to which Hjelholt became introduced in 1958. Everything said about Hjelholt in this text – and now also the above sub-statement – makes ‘people-oriented’ an obvious label for his professional style.

Ardent dedication to bottom-up values permeates all Hjelholt’s professional activities. He attributed extreme importance both to leaders’ and managers’ contribution to organizational success or failure. Yet, functionally speaking he also viewed these contributions as being radically different from the contributions of those being led or managed. As stated earlier leaders are not there to please everybody, they must “take a stance”, i.e. give expression to and act uncompromisingly in accordance with the primary task. When working in organizational settings Hjelholt’s job was to help those led and managed to define themselves up against the demands put on them by management. Subsequently, in his role as consultant, he must do his utmost to make sure management listened and understood their employees’ messages as a prerequisite for their earnest response – whether this response would actually satisfy employees’ wishes or not.

Hjelholt viewed the consultation work he did for the Lauritzen Shipping Company 1959-1963 and then again 1974-1975 as one especially satisfactory example of his working style. He describes it as “one of the things I did that really went well”. Yet, the following quote shows that even though owner-manager Knud Lauritzen seemed highly appreciative of ‘the Hjelholt cure’, and possibly even took pride in heralding a new management era, in the end Hjelholt (according to himself) became “too much of a challenge”. On a par with similar stories about “being thrown out of organizations” alluded to in Part 1.

The Lauritzen leadership training included T-groups, exercises, role play and theory. During the last days of the course, the spouses would join in. Knud Lauritzen joined the course for one afternoon and evening so that questions could be asked. *It was my job to make sure he did not evade the tough issues.* Before the war, you know, managers just stated what needed doing, period! After the war, the notion arose that employees must be consulted and have a say – but the managers did not know how to go about it. Then this company brought in a psychologist. In the 60s these ideas proliferated enormously. Lauritzen, himself, thought it was great fun that his company had been a pioneer in this field.

Yet, I was not satisfied. Their financial situation improved and ships started functioning better due to our setting up autonomous work teams – but, then, 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!

By way of summarizing this section on individuals and organizations we quote yet another of Hjelholt’s succinct one-liners. And once more, we shall break it up into parts.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. chapter 1 in Molly-Søholm & Willert, 2010.

The first part goes like this: “*You cannot live without structure, and a life without boundaries is no good.*” This part may be read as a direct implication of Hjelholt’s insistence that persons are socially (organizationally, societally) contextualized. Attempts at playing the sublime loner, disregarding the surrounding structures, is equal to disregarding your very personhood.

Then comes the second part: “*Going beyond boundaries is good.*” This part obliges man to put herself in the critical observer’s and actor’s position vis-à-vis any structures that channel (facilitate as well as restrict) his self-expression and ways of reaching out to his surroundings. As temporary historical products, no such channeling will be ideally suited to the needs of mankind, neither at macro- nor at micro-levels. There’s always room for improvement, and improving mankind’s lot is a task residing with mankind.

In the interview session, this combined one-liner proclamation is actually followed by a third part where Hjelholt explains how the consultant-as-boundary-keeper may assist human beings in their perennial task of boundary transgression.

But to do that – and now I talk about laboratory training and consultancy work – someone must be placed at yet another boundary line *outside* the first and immediate boundary, so that participants may feel free, possibly even tempted to extend *their* present boundaries.

## **7. Boundary keeper as provider of emotional support**

The just-presented quote launches the idea of the professional boundary keeper as a provider of hope. For people struggling with the possibly anxiety provoking task of undoing structures or strictures that are experienced as unnecessarily restraining it is soothing to somehow relate to a fellow human being who can impersonate the possible alternative.

The hope theme is also an integral part of the image of Hjelholt as the bell ram. This image was originally constructed by his close friend and work-mate Gurth Higgins from the London-based Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, but with family roots in New Zealand, a sheep-farming country. In Hjelholt’s own wording the image was explicated like this.

The Bell Ram is the male sheep of the herd who is most sensitive to upcoming weather change – he senses them before they actually happen. So, by keeping an eye on the Bell Ram, the sheep may hope to escape bad weather conditions and take themselves to places where grazing can be done peacefully. For this reason, the Bell Ram must stand all by himself, on a hilltop, so as better to be able to concentrate on his function.

In Hjelholt’s rendition the bell ram image establishes links, once more, to the idea which we’ve met before in this text that the consultant needs to keep a distance to his client system. This distance

theme, however, may also be over-stressed. After all, the bell ram is linked, and as such belongs to the herd. If the consultant is seen as the complete outsider with no caring or concern for the well-being of the group and its members, no attention will be paid to his signaling activities. In the following quote Hjelholt describes himself as an emotionally supportive consultant who may lend his own voice to authentic, but non-articulated sentiments within a client system sailing through dangerous waters.

The wish for participatory democracy is a good thing. However, I also realize that mass meetings can be dangerous unless a boundary keeper is present to make sure that moral standards are not lowered. Democratic phraseology may be used to suppress and control people – and then the need arises for a boundary keeper to say: “Hey, stop, listen: Three persons of the entire crowd do all the talking”. Or for someone to structure the debate, for instance by allowing time for small group discussions. Or for a chairperson who may separate the case-related from the person-related issues. When I take, or am given the role of boundary keeper, or when I act as leader at a mass meeting or a conference, I feel that my actions are on behalf of everybody else. I perform a certain function ensuring that “the others” may feel free to move around, sensing at the same time that it is reasonably safe to do so.

Thus the artistry of the professional boundary keeper seems linked to a talent for establishing the proper balance between sensitivity to the insider perspective coupled with making constructive use of the freedom of movement inherent in the outsider perspective. Hjelholt never described his own balance-making as being in a generalized sense the correct one. It was simply the one that apparently allowed him to transact in a fruitful manner with his surroundings. He stayed a keen observer, and often an admirer of ‘other ways’, not least the ones he knew to be forever outside his own professional action range.

Apart from being emotionally supportive the consultant may help the client system to gain a clearer understanding of its inner workings and its way of being related to its external surrounding. Such cognitive support may be given in ways that primarily reflect an insider perspective, e.g. when the consultant assists in structuring the group’s or organization’s own prevailing self-understanding. Cognitive support may also, to a greater or lesser extent build on research findings or scientifically developed theory, and thus add an outsider perspective.

## **8. Boundary keeper as provider of cognitive support**

Hjelholt’s published articles bear witness to his keen interest in theory building. Likewise our Part 1 holds many examples showing the importance he attached to consultancy being conducted in a theoretically committed fashion, possibly through making use of an action research format. When

talking about his employment in the Military Psychology Work Group<sup>9</sup> he enthusiastically described how problem solving required work group members to “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.” And he continues by emphasizing that ‘external’ theory didn’t do the job by itself. For each singular consultancy job, general theory had to be translated in ways that matched local circumstances: “But the job wasn’t finished simply because we had succeeded in gaining some kind of *understanding* of 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.”

Universities function as society’s theory-producing institutions *par excellence*. Remarks made by Hjelholt in Part 1 show that he felt little respect for the academic institution he encountered as a psychology student: “Far too great a share of what goes on ends up in internal struggles – concerning power or influence or ‘looking right’, not sticking out. The institution has gotten in the way of its own goal accomplishment!” Yet, as a professional person he greatly cherished the academic idea search for generalized knowledge.

There are few comments from my student years I remember in particular. One of them came from professor Franz From when he emphasized that psychology is a basic science. That comment made me think: Yes, that’s right! I often think about what psychology entails, and I cannot come up with anything better than this: It has to do with how man deals with the impressions we receive and how we come to experience the world through them. There are some very basic things about the way mankind experiences the world that cannot be reduced to anything else. Exploring these ideas is the basic task of psychology.

Hjelholt’s lifelong efforts at re-inventing the Lewinian tradition in a European setting was also an effort at establishing a valid theoretical grounding for consultancy work – a grounding he found to be partly neglected in the USA, the birthplace of the professional tradition that had shaped his own life course. This shows in the following pro-and-con description of the Fels Center for Group Dynamics where, as already mentioned, he’d first encountered this tradition.

One of the characteristics of the Center was the open atmosphere. Plus their capacity for discarding anything below the highest possible standard, and their certainty that even the worst imaginable scenario wouldn’t kill you. Gradually, however, I also realized that the place had certain shortcomings. To name one, in their eagerness to *make things work*, they did not always care too much about *why* they worked. When it comes to theorizing and reflection, Europeans are definitely more sophisticated.

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<sup>9</sup> Hjelholt’s attachment to the Military Psychology Work Group lasted for five years (1952-57). It was his longest employment as graduated psychologist and also the one from which he gained the most professionally speaking; cf. Madsen & Willert, 2014.

Globally speaking Hjelholt also expressed concern over a general historical trend towards diminishing the importance of theoretical reflection as part of group dynamics events.

From the very beginning, the laboratory design roughly divided the available time in three equal parts. During one third, participants would be experiencing human interaction in the raw. One third was set aside for generating general, though experience-based understanding. During the last third, they were meant to reflect on how, in their home surroundings, they could make personal use of their new learning and knowledge. Later adjustments removed all that. The tempo wasn't fast enough, not enough "action".

1960 was the year Hjelholt left salaried employment for good, and became a free-lancer. His first move was to establish the consultancy firm *Applied Social Psychology - Gunnar Hjelholt Associates*. The name itself pointed at an academic discipline as foundational. As did the following presentation of the firm to prospective customers, clients and co-workers.

We are – and are not – a consulting firm. We are – and are not – an institute doing research in group and intergroup problems. We are – and are not – an educational training centre. We are – and are not – a university. We are, perhaps, in our working methods a strange mixture between the consulting firm and the university.

## **9. Epilogue – on generation boundaries**

Gunnar Hjelholt belonged to the Second World War generation. His active involvement in the Resistance Movement and ensuing internment as Concentration Camp prisoner had a profound impact on his life course. The post-war years with their manifest needs for restoration both in a material and a moral sense appealed to his reformist utopian traits: "So many things needed doing; there was no need for a lot of vacillation."

We two authors, who happened to make ourselves professional biographers of Hjelholt, were born in the very year in which the Resistance Movement, according to Hjelholt, "started to grow". We see ourselves as belonging to the '68 generation', a generation from which Hjelholt felt somewhat estranged:

In my opinion, much political and social activity from the sixties and onwards have been attempts at re-finding or re-establishing some sort of overall meaning or possible direction of it all. To my mind, these various experiments have not succeeded in any very convincing way.

The mutual mirroring which, due to generation differences, could take place between us and Hjelholt was part of what made our collaboration project exciting and worthwhile: a learning experience for the three of us.

The audience we have in mind when writing the two articles is the post-68 generations: professionals to whom Hjelholt is a voice from long gone past: a 'historical figure' whose name they may not have heard before. The 'Gunnar Hjelholt' we want to emanate from our portrait is not simply Hjelholt -as-he-was, but Hjelholt-as-he-was-different – from us, from the generation following us – even though it was he who laid many of the very first bricks of the European organization consultancy platform on which we all stand. In the present text we've made an effort to present a 'Hjelholt' who may invite to-day's young generations of professionals into a self-reflective mode. Do the ways in which he was different indicate that he is simply outdated: a historical figure of the past? Or may he, in certain respects inspire us, e.g. by making us aware of professional issues calling for the pendulum of history to swing back?

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