

## Book Review

Marianne Kristiansen, Joergen Bloch-Poulsen (2005):  
Midwifery and Dialogue in Organizations –  
Emergent Mutual Involvement in Action Research

Rainer Hampp Verlag, München & Mering 2005, 297 pp., € 29.80,  
ISBN 3879889937

Reviewed by Olav Eikeland

### How about a dialogue<sup>1</sup>?

Marianne Kristiansen and Joergen Bloch-Poulsen from Denmark have written a book called *Midwifery and Dialogue in Organizations – Emergent Mutual Involvement in Action Research*, published in 2005. Through this book, they want to reach two sets of readers (p. 21), i.e. *both* people from the academic world working with interpersonal and organizational communication from a theoretical or philosophy of science perspective, *and* “reflective practitioners”. The term “reflective practitioners” includes not only people in “ordinary” work life, but even OD-consultants, process consultants, supervisors, trainers, mediators, facilitators, and others in the field of interpersonal and organizational communication. Although neither prominent nor obvious throughout the book before Part VI (p. 245ff.) and VII (p. 265ff.), the title also indicates that they think of their work as some form of action research. Since I believe I belong to all of these groups I suppose I am a relevant reader.

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<sup>1</sup> The title is borrowed from the title of my colleague Henrik Finsrud’s article (1995). In: Eikeland, Olav & Finsrud, Henrik D. (ed.): *Research in Action – Forskning og handling - søkelys på aksjonsforskning*. AFIs skriftserie nr. 1, Arbeidsforskningsinstituttet, Oslo.

Generally, the book raises many important discussions, only a small part of which can be touched upon here. Reading the book has been quite interesting but also quite frustrating, sometimes even provoking my anger. Since the authors strongly encourage using and displaying (*appropriate!!*, [p. 254-255]) emotions in dialogue, I hope they will forgive me for saying so. Their motto seems to be “sharing, daring, and caring”, and in order for me to share, I’ll have to dare, and hopefully I’ll be able to care adequately as well. I’ll try to be frank, and I need to be somewhat personal in order to explain. Although interesting to read; for me, the reading of the book has produced more questions than consent. This in itself, however, is not necessarily a bad thing.

Personally, I find it quite frustrating that the authors and I appear to have been working in very similar ways and with very similar concerns for many years in neighboring Scandinavian countries with native languages that are practically the same, but – as with so many (*too many!*) action researchers over the years – in parallel, without any communication or even mutual knowledge about each other. If dialogical research or action research is ever to grow strong, it needs to advance beyond isolated fragments. So, although this review is ambivalent and parts of it may at times sound even a bit sour, it is written with a clear wish for a dialogue. It is also written in clear understanding and sympathy with the authors’ main objectives in promoting dialogue and midwifery as “special forms of conversations”.

In certain ways, I think the book is quite good. Among other things, the authors have a keen eye for distinctions in their empirical material – much keener than many others (action researchers or others) – making it interesting to follow their “discoveries”, since, in many ways, the book deals mainly with their own learning itinerary and the distinctions that emerged on the way. The authors declare their openness and willingness to learn continuously. This is a great merit, but it also obliges.

Although the book claims to deal with a specific training project at Bang & Olufsen running for six months in 1995 and with its follow up (p. 11, 21, 24, 29, 159), the main purpose of the book still seems to be the explication of two kinds of conversations (p. 11, 38): dialogue and midwife conversations, and with the conditions for their realization in organizations in what the authors call a “caring container”. In my opinion, these are very important

distinctions, and trying to specify their characteristics is praiseworthy. But the project at B&O is hardly presented systematically. Instead, it serves as the provider of conversational examples thoroughly documented through video, which are analyzed. The book starts out with examples of conversations that are not dialogical, gradually approximating midwife conversations and dialogues as the authors understand these.

In other respects, the book is not very good, and I think it raises some general questions about what kind of standards we should set for this kind of text. Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen's book is quite ambitious, trying to deal with both theory and practice in the field, and with their interrelatedness (p. 19). According to the authors, the book deals with how the philosophical and the practical aspects of dialogic interaction can be blended (p. 39). Still according to the authors, it combines interpersonal communication theory, organizational communication theory, discourse analysis, dialogue theory, psychology, anthropological philosophy, and hermeneutic philosophy. With ambitions like these, a reader might reasonably expect the authors to present some kind of broad overview of the field, with its different contributors, controversies, and schools of thought in relation to which their own contributions are situated. There are many, or maybe I should say *we* are many today, who try to explore "dialogue" systematically and theoretically as an important "approach" to practical development. One major challenge for all of us is that there are several different discourses on dialogue. Quite often, actually most of the time as far as I can see, they don't overlap or communicate. They don't share much, and apparently don't care much about each other either.

Some are inspired by Martin Buber and existentialism, some by Mikhail Bakhtin and literary studies, some by David Bohm and management studies, some by the resurging rhetorical movement, others by philosophers like Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and finally, some are mainly inspired by Socrates, Plato, and even Aristotle (as myself). Theoretically, the field needs to be integrated by bringing these discourses into some kind of communication, comparison, and mutual, critical fertilization. But the authors do not really contribute much to this effort.

Although some “Bohmian” contributors are referred to casually along the way, and the book has a major excursus discussing Gadamer in part V, the authors clearly and explicitly belong to the first group, with Martin Buber and Carl Rogers as their main inspirational sources, presented mainly in Part III.4 (pp. 173-181, cf. p. 20). This “Buberian” approach seems to have flourished from the 1950s through the 1970s, but seems almost to have disappeared in contributions from Bohm-inspired writers dominant since the 1990s. On this “Buberian” background, however, the authors present their special approach to the field and how it has been modified over the years, including their special understanding of every term in the book-title; “midwifery”, “dialogue”, and “emergent mutual involvement”, which is what they call their own approach.

Actually, the authors introduce a whole battery of “technical terms” peculiar to their approach. This tendency to define things in their own way and with their own terms seemed clarifying at the beginning of the book, but it quickly becomes a bit annoying as it goes on and on over the pages. Continuously introducing new special terms by inserting comments like “by *x* we mean *y*”, or “*our* definition of *x* is *y*”, complicates the reading since it seems to introduce the authors’ private definitions of mostly ordinary words. For the authors it seems to have necessitated a separate appendix with a glossary at the end (pp. 275-284) (incomplete, by the way) where peculiar terms and meanings are explained, like e.g. “perspective reflection, confirmation, tracking, scanning, meta-communication, congruence, and humor” (p. 13), all essential to their concept of dialogue.

This peculiarity seems to indicate something more general about the approach in the book too, illustrated by the following example. Early in the book (p. 12), the authors introduce a central concept of “self-referentiality” that they claim emerged from their work, meaning that “unknowingly you think and speak from your own perspective”. Self-referential conversations are distinguished from “dialogues” through which you presumably can transcend your own perspective and understand the other by means of empathy (among other things). Although on page 20, we are warned about a discussion coming up later with Gadamer – who opened their eyes to the positive and useful qualities of self-referentiality – it is not until page 224 that

the authors reveal that their concept of “self-referentiality” is basically the same as “prejudice”, a concept considerably easier to understand, and with almost 50 years of “Wirkungsgeschichte” as a hermeneutical “*terminus technicus*” after Gadamer published his “Wahrheit und Methode” in 1960. Their discussion with Gadamer is in many ways quite interesting and good. But still, the authors write as if Gadamer made a singular contribution *after* they did their field work and discovered “self-referentiality” in the second half of the 1990s, and with hardly any reference to the hermeneutical “Wirkungsgeschichte” since 1960. I am sorry to say that this style of writing makes the book itself much more “self-referential” than it could and should have been had the authors positioned and justified their own conceptual work within some broader discourses from the very beginning.

This “self-referential” character of the whole book is confirmed by its use of references. Apart from their orientation about their inspiration from Buber and Rogers, and their discussion with Gadamer, their use of references seems quite insufficient and unsatisfactory, lumping heaps of them together with hardly any discussion (see e.g. p. 45, 50, 53, 55, 63, 90, 156, 166, 176, 203, 205, 225). Together with the lack of overview mentioned above, this creates a very strong impression that these references are not really a part of their discussion but have been added afterwards to the finished results from the authors’ discussions with themselves. For example on page 186, the authors end their discussion with themselves about “congruence” with the following sentence: “The significant difference between what is said and what is not said in organizations is also dealt with by Argyris & Schön (1966)” (The reference is to *Organizational Learning II* from 1996). This may be the minimum politeness required in academic discussions, but it is hardly dialogical in any sense.

The discussion with “action science” is resumed later on (pp. 250-256), however. But still very much as a mere comparison, *after* the authors have finished presenting themselves. Apparently, neither Gadamer, nor Argyris & Schön, nor anyone else apart from Buber and Rogers are recognized as being *formative* to their approach. But since both Gadamer and Argyris & Schön have been “teeming buzzwords” among the audiences the authors write for at least since the 1970s, this is not quite credible. No-one working with dialogue

in work life settings can claim to have been totally uninfluenced by Argyris and Schön. No-one with a theoretical interest can claim complete independence of Gadamer. But there really isn't much dialogue with other contributors in the book. The broader professional and popular "Wirkungsgeschichte", of which even the authors are a part, becomes completely invisible.

As already mentioned, I think the book's central concepts of "dialogue" (collaborative inquiry through which the dialogue participants try to become wiser together), "midwife conversations" (where one is midwife; the other already has the answer within him- or herself and needs help to find it), and "caring container", are all very interesting and important. And the experiences and challenges the authors report from working with their enactment and implementation are equally interesting and thought provoking. Although I am not always convinced that their examples really illustrate their points, these discussions about the character of the conversations during the project, is quite interesting and constitute the best parts of the book.

But, again, the "self-referentiality" of their writing strikes me. Their concepts of "dialogue" and "midwife conversations" would have profited greatly by being developed in critical dialogue with other ways of conceptualizing them. Comparing their concepts with Gadamer's *textual* hermeneutics is insufficient, and a little bit unfair, since Gadamer's concept of interpretation builds explicitly on Aristotle's concept of *phrónêsis*, not on the mainly oral *dialogue* concept of Plato or the broadly inductive dialectics of Aristotle. It is in several ways quite un-dialogical to write a book about "dialogue" and "midwifery" with theoretical, philosophical, and practical ambitions *without* discussing and, actually, barely mentioning these concepts as they were introduced and used by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Not only do these ancient philosophers still have relevant thoughts as isolated contributors, but the whole history of dialogue and dialectics springs directly from them. The conceptual history is part of their "Wirkungsgeschichte" (again). To limit their "discussion" with these formative "forces" to superficial and uninformed comments about what they call Plato's "*so-called dialogues*" and "*so-called Socratic midwifery*" (p. 241, cf. p. 28) is not only "self-referential".

In a book with academic ambitions like this one, this is insufficient.<sup>2</sup> The book leaves big discussions about similarities and differences between the different dialogical schools awaiting; too big to even initiate in this review. Although such full-scale discussions may be too big for the book as well, a book with declared ambitions in all directions (trans-disciplinary, academic, and practical) like this one would have profited greatly by showing a greater awareness and recognition of the broadness and differences in the field.

The authors think of their work as some form of action research. Once more, whether through a consciously chosen form of presentation or by the facts of the matter, the impression is that the authors have been working for a long time *without* thinking of their work in action research terms. But then, apparently *after* everything has been said and done on their own behalf, they *compare* their approach called “emergent, mutual involvement” with different action research approaches (in the last Parts VI and VII). The authors’ approach is involved, open, and non-technical, letting things emerge in dialogical processes, apparently very much like many action research approaches declare themselves to be. The research processes mostly referred in the book, however, are based on videotaped conversations between members of the client organization and feed-back sessions from the authors (“collegial supervision conversations”, “employee appraisal interviews”, and “feedback conversations” [p. 21-22]). This is all impressively thorough, and the authors obviously have a recorded material to work with that many action researchers should envy them. But still, most of the recorded conversations appear to be the conversations of “the others” interpreted separately by the authors. Because of this, the authors get involved in interpretive work very similar to that of any qualitative observer, and interesting questions about the observation of others from a distance as a method and the possibility of multiple interpretations are raised.

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of recollection work and midwifery in Aristotle and Plato, see e.g. my article: Anamnesis - dialogisk erindringsarbeid som empirisk forskningsmetode. In: Eikeland & Fossetøl (red.) (1998): Kunnskapsproduksjon i endring - nye erfarings- og organisasjonsformer. AFIs skriftserie nr.4, Arbeidsforskningsinstituttet, Oslo: 95-136.

But is this action research? There are, of course, many different opinions about what constitutes action research, and I will not pursue the discussion here. But I think the question is appropriate. Ultimately, a lot more in the book is based on these observations and interpretations of “the others”, than on thinking through and articulating their own dialogical practice with its presuppositions and implications – or what they call “research-training” (p. 32), developing their research through training and vice versa – something which at least would have increased their action research credibility in the eyes of this reviewer. Having said this, I think the comparisons with other action research approaches in Parts VI and VII are quite interesting. They raise many important questions that need to be addressed among action researchers, such as similarities and differences between “dialogue” and “democratic” practices, between “intervention” and “emergent, mutual involvement” among others.

When it comes to their chosen “comparees”, however, I am struck by wonder once again. They choose cooperative inquiry, participatory action research (PAR), action science, and constructivism / constructionism (not always by means of the most central representatives). The striking part in this is what is missing here. There is absolutely no comparison or discussion with Scandinavian action research. The only reference to Scandinavian action research is a casual mention in footnote 40 on page 192 with reference to one unpublished paper, an article and its own anthology mentioned as *two* references, and two small, casual articles from Bjørn Gustavsen.

I find this, once more, all the more incredible since Scandinavian or Nordic action research, in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway is what the authors’ ways of working have the most in common with. The emphasis on working with real communities of practice (work teams) in real organizations and with real challenges of these communities (p. 269), not with some chosen few individuals from different backgrounds gathered in temporary groups constructed for some educational or therapeutic purpose, is common to almost all Nordic action research. The authors’ “caring container” has obvious similarities to concepts like “development organization” and “free spaces” that have circulated among Nordic action researchers since the

second half of the 1980s. But there is no discussion or comparison with this; there is not even anything mentioned at all about these similarities.

My feeling, therefore, is one of ambivalence and sorrow after having finished the book. Lack of dialogue makes me sad. And although the book promotes dialogue in several very interesting and laudable ways, it lacks dialogue in equally many ways. There is much to learn from the details of their descriptions, making the book considerably better than many other action research reports, but their academic framing is lacking. Their dialogue with their own project experiences is in many ways excellent, but their dialogue with other colleagues is lacking. The book has so many interesting discussions about important concepts, questions, and challenges; it deserves to be better than it is. This is why I had to borrow the title for this review: *How about a dialogue?* The whole dialogical field needs it. Action research needs it. And so does everybody else!

*About the author*

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