

Balint Group Architecture: A Response to Sitting In or Sitting Out

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The two discussions in the Journal of the Balint Society about 'Sitting in - or sitting out' (Tyndale and Salinsky, 2010, Elder, 2010) are the tip of an iceberg, and, to me, suggest issues and discussions broader than this limited choice. That is, these reports identify and stimulate thinking about so many additional and related questions for me that I believe it is helpful to more fully consider these issues - both above and below the surface - in order to sufficiently appreciate the impact of 'Sitting in - or Sitting out.' What follows is an articulation of the specific questions that are raised for me, an offer of a broader framework within which to consider these questions, and then an exploration of how this framework can help to consider the issues implicit in these questions.

First, some questions:

In addition to sitting in or sitting out, several additional, related questions that emerged and their implications:

Should the presenter participate in the discussion of the case they present? If so, how do they truly let go of the case?

Should the presenter be allowed to add information they 'forgot' in the initial presentation and then later remembered? If so, doesn't the case change? Can the 'forgotten' material be understood the same way after it is remembered?

Should the presenter be expected to or prevented from responding to the discussion? Responding definitely changes the discussion and the flow!

If the presenter sits out, when and how should s/he be re-integrated into the group? This is potentially very awkward.

If the presenter does not sit out, how might a leader guide the presenter's participation in the group's discussion? Again, the challenge and benefit of truly letting go of the case emerges.

Second, a framework:

I read these two reports while at the 2010 Oxford Balint Weekend of Reflection and Renewal, and, not unrelated, my reading them followed a walking tour of Oxford led by John and Mary Salinsky. The gestalt of this experience is dominated by the richness of the history and architecture of such a setting - a setting where proper debate is so fitting. I offer these observations and this context to share my own musings about the emergence of insights and added perspectives provided by experiences outside one's primary interest or focus.

Having read the two reports of discussions about sitting in or sitting out, and while considering the various pros and cons of these alternate methods, the phrase 'Form

follows Function' came to mind. That is, the form of the group, including the decision of sitting in or sitting out, has everything to do with the function of this decision. What would be the purpose of considering the presenter's position vis-a-vis the group? I then realized that this principle of 'Form follows Function' is a primary tenet of Louis Sullivan's modernist architectural style (Kaufman, 1969). It is not a big leap to the notion of the architecture of a Balint group, and to the value of using this metaphor to think of the ways each approach might be considered and understood with respect to purpose.

In suggesting an architecture metaphor, I refer to the steps that a group takes as they work on their task - essentially, the group's structure. Typically, for a Balint group, there is the assembly of the group at an appointed time along with the social banter of the moment, followed soon after by a leader's beginning request for a case, a consideration and acceptance of the case or a choice among several offered cases, an opportunity for clarifying questions or questions of fact, a push back (or not), a discussion and speculation about the case, a return of the presenter (as necessary) and an end to the allotted time. As I think about this architecture of a Balint group, I believe that it would be particularly helpful (e.g., anxiety reducing) for group members as well as co-leaders to have clear expectations about the process of the group experience. It becomes a structure that group members can depend on to guide them about their role - a role which differs in each part of the process. There is an understanding of what rules or guidelines to follow, and these rules or guidelines inform the leaders in their efforts to assist group members through each phase and from one phase to the next.

For example,

Stage	Leader role	Group Member role
Who has a case?	Invite a case	Consider potential cases
I do	Recognize offered cases	Offer a case
Clarifying questions?	Invite questions	Consider needed information
Presenter push back	Structure transition	Monitor personal reactions to the case
Group takes the case	Invite speculation	Consider Dr. - Pt. experiences or dynamics
Presenter rejoin the group	Invite return to group	Continue case exploration
Time is up	Thanks presenter and thank group	

Returning to the original question, to sit in or to push back and sit out, what would be the benefit of staying in or sitting out, or alternatively, what is the role of the presenter once the case has been presented to the group?

Questions imbedded in the question:

Can or should the presenter let go of the case mentally and psychologically and emotionally by giving this patient temporarily to the group, or does s/he hold onto the case, getting none of the feeling of relief one gets when handing over a troubling situation for someone else to handle?

Should the presenter participate in the discussion, still embroiled in the emotional complexities one holds for the patients we present, or can a presenter better benefit by getting on the outside of the case, only listening and observe others grapple with the drama?

Should a presenter add information they have 'forgotten' - thus changing the case and losing the psychological importance of the unintentionally hidden data, or focus only on listening to the group process their case as presented, without forgotten information and consider the importance of what they forgot to identify?

Based primarily (but not solely) on observations from groups where presenters are asked to sit out and in which they are asked to hold off adding information they may have forgotten in their presentation of the case, I have been impressed by the palpable relief experienced when a presenter can truly let go of the patient they present. This will often be accompanied by comments such as "She's yours!" or "You can have him." In other words, they have truly distanced themselves from this patient. On occasion, there is a noticeable desire to add information when it occurs to the presenter who is sitting out that there is something important that the group does not know. These presenters will sometimes make eye contact with a leader and ask "Can I add something?" or just begin to react to or respond to something the group is grappling with, or ask "Can I rejoin the group?" My response is almost always "Not yet."

My encouragement to stay out would occur whether or not the presenter pushes back, and to me, the request is evidence that the presenter has not yet fully separated from the case. They clearly have owned the patient, but they may be so enmeshed in this patient's situation that they may have compromised their own objectivity. Staying out can encourage listening from the perspective of an outside ear. Finally, the participation of the presenter and the potential to add additional clarifying information make the group's work more of a consultation encouraging a focus on solutions rather than exploring the territory of the relationship.

Finally, the awkwardness of returning to the group will occur in any group where the presenter is asked to hold off participating while the group explores the case. If the presenter remains in the group but is asked to not participate, there is still the challenge of when they are free to participate, if they so wish. This is important as well because the return of the presenter to the group can be an interruption of the group process. In other words, can the group continue to process the various aspects of the case in the same way with the presenter free to participate and presumably ready to make corrections or add commentary?

The presenter's return creates an awkward dynamic between presenter and group. The group members often - especially in a 'young' group - look for feedback or confirmation that the work they have done on the presenter's case has been helpful and relevant. The presenter is equally interested in communicating their appreciation and value of the work to the group. Both impulses interfere with processing the dynamics of the case.

A third alternative to Sitting in or Sitting out:

I suggest that one of the unique contributions of Balint groups is to create opportunities for physicians to present a challenging case to colleagues, truly let go of the case and just listen to the ways others understand what is going on in the relationship. In addition, physicians rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to speculate about a colleague's case without concern for accuracy or for resolution. These opportunities are facilitated by the request to the presenter that s/he formally sit out. The challenge of returning a 'sitting out' presenter to the group should not dictate whether or not we opt for this intervention. One solution to the challenge of returning them to the group without disturbing the group process and without putting them on the spot to respond to the group's work is to invite them to return to the group "...when they are ready." This leader intervention tells the group that the presenter is to be considered as part of the group, and it tells the presenter they may participate or not as is their inclination. What is ambiguous to the group members is whether the presenter is silent because they are not yet ready to rejoin the group or they have rejoined the group but have nothing to contribute or they wish to remain in their own space. There is no expectation to respond to the groups's work, and there is total permission to maintain silence or to add their contribution if and when they desire. The presenter's space and emotional safety is preserved by giving them the option, and the groups process is preserved because there is no automatic focus on the returning group member. No one needs to know how the presenter is managing the choice; they are now like any other group member who chooses to speak or not.

Using this approach, the presenter sits out and his or her return is invited, but their participation and potential engagement with group members is left up to them. It is less interfering of the group's process, is protective of the presenter, and returns the group to wholeness while preserving the roles of listening and speculating. In addition, I believe it is easier for the group to continue to 'work' the case.

Summary:

I have seen sitting in work as well as sitting out as a technique designed to help a presenter truly give a case to the group. However, the leader must be vigilant to keep the presenter from deciding on their own when they wish to enter the discussion. Their presence in the group can also be a temptation for group members to address them directly, thus undermining the purpose of letting go of the case. An alternative view could suggest that this is merely material to interpret as reflecting something about the case. However, this happens on occasion with a push back method as well. Allowing the presenter to return to the group ‘...when they are ready’ may facilitate a smoother transition while preserving the unique opportunities for presenter and for the group. This alternative intervention (Form) may enable the use of a push back method to support listening from the outside as well as speculation for its own sake (Function).

References

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