

Converting Balint into online

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The online format of a Balint Group was thoroughly analyzed to better understand the differences to the face-to-face group. Due to a Covid-19 lockdown an established face-to-face group was converted to an online-format. Findings underwent an in-depth interpretive phenomenological analysis, comparing similarities and especially differences in the format, the group process and contributions. The online group seems to partly miss social and dimensional space, while the general setting continues. In comparison to the face-to-face group, a loss of body and projective phenomena is observed with reduced non-verbal, subliminal communication and reduced negative capability. The online format could possibly be adjusted on special terms yet to be defined. Nevertheless, the online Balint Group maintains the underlying Balint Group goals. In conclusion, online Balint Groups continue Balint work under changed circumstances. They maintain the required professional education and self-experience. Online Balint Group could be a means to save time and energy resources.

Keywords: Balint online Group, Web-Seminar, non-verbal communication, negative capability

Covid-19-lockdown and the continuation of Balint work online

Covid-19 confronted humanity with special issues, such as lockdowns and social distancing. Due to such circumstances, our established Classic Balint Group came to a stop at the end of March 2020, as about 10 people meeting in a single closed room was legally no longer possible. On the suggestion of the participants and with the approval of the Bavarian Medical Board, we changed the established group to a web-based format. Up to that point we had been running a slow open group since 2011 with two chairpersons and continually changing participants. Balint work is a compulsory part of the participating MDs' formal education¹. For that reason, they had a special interest to continue the group online instead of pausing it until after the lockdown.

Experiences from our online group may give merely preliminary results and should therefore be looked at as a "case report". We have decided not refer to technicalities and preparations, as this topic has already been discussed by Nease (2019) and Nease et al. (2018).

¹ Balint Groups are obligatory in Bavaria/Germany for specialization in General Practice (Allgemeinmedizin), Obstetrics and Gynecology (Gyn kologie) and, if specialization runs in psychodynamic psychotherapy, also in Adult Psychiatry, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Psychosomatics and Psychotherapy.

An Acute Situation: The Setting

Being forced to stop regular meetings in March 2020 after a full lock down was imposed in Germany, our Balint Group meetings had to be suspended, despite being part of our participants' ongoing specialist training. In mid-April 2020, we started the conversion into an online format. After three weekly sessions and with the agreement of the two chairpersons the group decided to continue since new regulations on social distancing and the requirement to wear a face mask even in educational settings made personal meeting practically impossible.² At that point participants mentioned that meeting people from outside their own working situation online during the ongoing lock-down situation – was enjoyable to some degree –, as cultural activities and social intercourse with friends had come to a halt. Parallel to the gradual easing of the lockdown restrictions, the initially high participation in the bi-weekly group seemed to return to “normal” again because, short journeys being allowed again, people took the chance to see friends and were then often lacking a working internet connection during these visits.³

In June 2020, we started to allow new participants to join the online group. Due to the experimental situation – which all participants were aware of – everybody was keen on knowing how things would work. There was no obligation to continue participation online, but for a variety of reasons all members except one wished to continue their professional training online and in the already familiar group.

A basic requirement for participation turned out to be an obstacle on several occasions: When trying to join from a remote location an unreliable internet connection sometimes forced participants to quit during a running session. Fortunately, the presenters were never affected by this problem.

Method – A phenomenological approach to online Balint

As there are very few papers on online Balint Groups we decided to use the Covid-19 lock-down situation like an experiment. We informed the members of the group at the time of our intentions and they happily

² Seminars in continuing medical education or in other fields had to cut down the number of participants in order to meet regulations, or to find bigger rooms which was an unsolvable issue for many.

³ In rural areas of Germany internet connection can still be difficult (2020), especially if you try to connect via a mobile.

agreed to cooperate and continue online. We decided to use a phenomenological approach, already used to analyze the Balint format under other aspects like co-leadership (Holch & R uth 2013). This approach leads to an in-depth and scrutinizing examination of the phenomenology encountered, comparing our findings with the face-to-face group format, and interpreting findings on the basis of our psychoanalytic understanding of Balint work. We used an interpretive phenomenological analysis (Levitt 2020), leaving aside technicalities already discussed elsewhere (Nease et al. 2018). Findings were discussed with participants who contributed their own impressions and feelings.

Balint online elsewhere

Online Balint work has already been shown to be a workable approach in remote locations (Antoun et al. 2014; Koppe et al. 2015; Nease et al. 2018) and even during the Covid-19 situation (Dhekordi et al. 2020). Findings concerning online Balint Groups seemed to be presented mostly as descriptive narrative for deeper understanding. Due to the need to establish online Groups elsewhere during Covid-19 restrictions, the American Balint Society, in cooperation with the International Balint Association, launched online seminars on the basics of Balint online Groups in Spring 2020, with participants from all continents.

Findings

1. Loss of social space

Before and after the usual face-to-face Balint meeting, members and chairpersons get into contact via small talk, sharing the atmosphere and (waiting) time as an open space. In such a situation, participants start to tell about past holidays or the new workplace, a difficult family one had contact to, an interesting seminar one had attended or the new shoes or bracelet worn. When participants sit down to start the group work everyone gets into a real working contact with the persons they are sitting next to or even opposite. The digital technology of an online group also requires time for entering, attuning, moving in and out of the session and some kind of small talk might be possible, but only as long as the group is still small and incomplete. And the nature of the small-talk is much more formal compared to the face-to-face situation.

We have not come across literature which deals with a (therapeutic) group's social framework before and after the group's formal meeting and thereby "outside" the group – and there is still no paper on the social frame of a Balint group outside the group itself.

Chair and co-chair have to arrange how to coordinate their roles – by meeting online beforehand and discussing the group process online afterwards. The chairpersons' usual pre-meeting at a restaurant on the street opposite to have a small evening meal and a work session focusing on the past and the forthcoming group was missed much. This special situation outside the Balint Group itself couldn't be fully replaced by other means, so that the "social space" for the leaders was cut down too.

Ending a session and saying good-by online until text time seemed to be somewhat strange, as members quit the virtual room and vanish from the screen in a way otherwise only ghosts can vanish in real space. It's even quicker than people were beamed away in Star Trek. Where do they go then? In the face-to-face situation, members go away through space and time, and they can even leave together and have some small talk afterwards.

We made the proposition that members should give themselves at least a short time to calm down after quitting, allowing impressions that emerged during the group have a flow, a bit like they do when going downstairs after the group and being on their way home.

2. Loss of dimensional space

Even in gallery view when looking online at all participants, each participant sees a different mix of pictures. The usual group situation in space flattens down to only two dimensions and gets mingled up. Looking only at the upper part of the bodies (or even only the faces), the filling of real space by human beings in the flesh gets lost.

In the virtual session an "opposite side" in space and so within the group doesn't exist, and therefore "opposing" positions of what might be brought into discussion won't show up, in contrast to the situation in the three-dimensional consultation room.

3. Getting more personal

Doing Balint online in your kitchen or personal living room invites others into your private space. This might have a special effect on the usual

separation between work and private life, which seems to diminish. Some participants liked these private aspects, which might even cause some noise irritation now and then while not going into mute – such as pouring tea into the cup, which made other participants aware that they hadn't prepared enough to care for themselves. "Being at home feels more cozy", was noticed by some members, and this had helped them to tune in.

To some it was quite helpful to see the names of colleagues at the bottom of the pictures – as sometimes it's not so easy to remember all the names, especially when you are new to the group. That way the online situation made it even somewhat easier to get acquainted with each other.

4. The general setting continues

The usual frame and format of a Classic Balint Group (Rüth 2009) were both easily applied, with the exception of the presenter's pushback, for lack of dimensional space. The presenter could go into mute if preferred, but this didn't make any noticeable difference.

Due to the random arrangement of the participants' pictures, the chair had to call out who's turn was next when participants introduced themselves to new members – as presentation calls couldn't go around from one seat to the next. But this didn't cause any awkwardness.

Furthermore, if you don't use the "hands up" signal before making a comment, people might end up talking simultaneously. This sometimes has to be organized or controlled by the leader, as the technology gives more sound volume to the person speaking first and the ones coming second could get lost.

5. Loss of eye contact and non-verbal communication

With the camera usually situated at the top of the screen (sometimes at the side) neither leader chair or co-leader nor participants can have direct eye contact. Most of the body being invisible, usually even the hands, non-verbal communication is much restricted, with a loss of physically mediated gestures, expressions or sitting posture. The non-verbal communication between leader and co-leader is shifting mainly into verbal, like in a reflecting team situation. Using the chat option (e.g. with Zoom) seemed to be not confidential enough to us – and frankly too complicated to handle.

6. Loss of the body

With non-verbal communication diminishing, it seemed as if the body also “vanished”. Being online, although in a situation with a tendency to get more private, sometimes even more intimate, comments seemed to refer no longer to body impressions, such as feelings in the belly, stomach, heart, even head. Nobody showed up to describe oneself getting physically nervous, or having the urge to run out of the room – yet where to?

7. Internal versus external space

Examining our impressions as, it seemed as if statements by participants sometimes seemed to stay more individual, less relating to statements from others, with therefore less resonance within the group and as if a special kind of connection had diminished or even vanished. We still can’t identify whether this might be due to the character of presented cases or the consequence of using telepresence on a flat screen holding us apart – or even both.

8. Loss of projective space

As the group met virtually and not in real space, the participants’ comments, impressions and statements did no longer show a spatial pattern – being opposite or on a 90-degree level, which sometimes, by looking on real crossing formations, can lead to a special understanding of splitting aspects. Statements being “opposite” therefore had to be explicitly named by leaders if necessary, but unfortunately, they could not be referred to more explicit by pointing to the positions in space. As such “interpretation” depends on the style and activity, the loss of such possibility might not irritate in general. Nevertheless we can conclude that through the loss of real space there was, at least to some degree, also a loss of projective space.

Balint online compared to the real space group

Because of being remote from friends and acquaintances during the lockdown, motivation to participate was high, probably similar to a situation of geographical remoteness.

At the beginning, when we started with our online sessions, the process was quite unfamiliar to all of us, it therefore took more time to tune into

our usual working attitude. Whether concentration and working attitude are the same online compared to face-to-face seemed to depend on the participants. After the first sessions group members expressed that online working seemed to be at least slightly more exhausting.

The size of a group might also have an influence on the effect of online Balint work. If there are too many participants on the screen (more than ten including chairs), we seem to lose contact to some degree; on the other hand, a small group can easily be dominated by one active member – like in face-to-face.

Going online the co-leader seemed to be more an observer of individual participants, as no eye-contact can be made, neither with members nor with the leader. As a consequence, the co-leader's role might need a slight re-definition in the online-situation.

Leaders and participants got the impression that the usual well known Balint work can continue online, with some specific differences with regard to the representation of unconscious aspects within the group and entering and leaving. Even waiting for a case to show up seemed very similar.

Vinokur (2017) described social phenomena in Balint Groups that can also be observed online: Socializing while sharing feelings, mirroring, condensing unconscious aspects, exchange which increases mutual understanding, active social support, assistance in clarification and even verbal communication. Difficulties arising in Balint Groups (Kjeldmand & Holmstöm 2010) might show up online as well, like defensive moves, rivalries, hidden agendas, group dynamics; with the exception that a higher motivation to participate might have lowered down such difficulties in our special situation. It could be stated that the conversion to an online situation had an impact on working as a professional work group and regressive aspects, described as basic assumption groups by W. R. Bion (1961), might have been decreased.

Considering that participants within the real group setting would not usually by themselves start to look at a representation of different aspects of a case by referring to the three spatial dimensions, and considering that the pointing out of such phenomena depends on the leader's style, this aspect was not missed much. Thus far we observed that a parallel process in the Balint Group was lowered down online, a process commonly observed

in face-to-face Balint Groups as well as in psychodynamic supervision (Schmolke & Hoffmann 2014).

The online situation might lead to a kind of “different”⁴, but nevertheless working energy leaving out some aspects of unconscious physical representation. This means that projective identifications might work differently and participants have to develop different, nonverbal ways of subconscious communication.

The role of the co-leader (Holch, Rütth 2013; Rütth & Holch 2014) might have to be re-visited, as the leaders’ communication is more difficult. In general, their roles might stay the same with a slight tendency that, due to diminished contact, the co-leader is less active.

Mirroring processes (see Schmolke & Hoffmann 2014) seem to be less virulent online, possibly caused by a diminished “negative capacity” of the group (Betts 2009; Simpson 2010). According to Bion, Negative Capability is the capacity to tolerate “uncertainty, mystery and doubt” and to “allow new discoveries to take place” (Lopez-Corvo 2003). The online situation might reduce the capacity to pick up on projective identifications sent by the patient via the presenter – as the direct contact “within space and body” between presenter and group members listening to a patient history is missing and merely visualized on a screen – and anything else has to go on within the mind. This could mean that nonverbal, subliminal communication might be less effective online or sometimes impossible. Balint sculpture work as an (not yet common) approach to unconscious or underlying aspects of a case by means of identification, would obviously be impossible online, as there is no space and physical presence to form the sculpture.

At first sight any Balint case is just a representation of the “real case”. In the online format, representations seem to show up more in the mind and less in the body – as the finding of less frequent physical impressions would indicate. With fellow participants and with the unconscious going online there might be a need to define ways how to get into an equal contact with the case.

⁴ The term “different energy” is owed to an adolescent patient who used it when converting his therapy sessions into online – he being accustomed to online video contacts to people all around the world.

Conclusion

Online Balint is preferable when remoteness makes real participation impossible. Balint online might also be preferable when we consider to our ecological footprints, as even short travel to a meeting might use resources without need. Furthermore, Balint online groups save time which can be used for recreation or study.

Preliminary findings suggest that Balint groups can easily meet online, and the process of Balint work can continue with slight differences. A mixture of 3 or 4 Balint groups face-to-face followed by groups meeting regularly online for the next 6 sessions could be appropriate due to the necessity of preserving resources for future generations – and the need to save time. Gaining more experience by using the online format over a prolonged period will create opportunities for additional considerations and enhanced professional development. In any case, Balint online works.

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