

“Pushback”; historical evolution of a modification in Balint group work

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Short summary

A microhistory of “sitting-out/pushback” in Balint groups – often assumed standard, yet documented as a later innovation. Drawing on published records and oral history, the paper traces how a small facilitating intervention spread, became normative in some trainings, and reshaped how groups contain emotion.

Abstract

Background and context: “Sitting out” (also called “pushback”, “rest back”, “lean back”, “bubble” or “retracting to the loge”, among other descriptive or poetic labels) is treated in some Balint group settings as the default methodology to do group work: after presentation and (optional) brief factual questions, the presenter withdraws from discussion and “just listens” while the group begins to work by offering reflections, associations and fantasies. Yet published Balint sources describe this format as a later development, unevenly adopted across countries and communities. This perspective first came to my attention at the 22nd International Balint Congress in Brussels, 2022, at which I decided to trace the origin and evolution of this methodological variation and tool.

Aim: To chart the likely post-Michael Balint emergence and international diffusion of “sitting out”, and to ask how and why an optional intervention can harden into a norm.

Methods: (1) Microhistorical reading of Balint leadership texts that describe “sitting out/pushback” and explicitly discuss its origin and spread; (2) oral-history notes from an interview with John Salinsky (September 2022) and a seminar with Heide Otten (June 2025); (3) an exploration of how a teachable technique and intervention can be transmitted through workshops and treatises, and become an implicit grammar for a “right belief”.

Key insights: The records from *Journal of the Balint Society* (UK) in 2010 place the emergence of “sitting out” in Germany, with uncertain timing, and subsequent transmission through international congresses and leader training, and variable uptake (prominent in some intensive training). Conversations with key figures in the international Balint community, locate the originator of the intervention as the German physician Werner Stucke (1921–1995) and his Balint Group work in the early 1980s. Through a visit by John Salinsky to Germany in the late 1980s Stucke’s variation, or “*Stucke’s tool*”, caught on and spread across the Anglosphere. I propose that “Stucke’s tool” is best understood as a deliberate re-engineering of a group dynamic: it can reduce early interrogative pressure on the presenter and shift the group from fact-finding to affect, but it also changes the field of identification, projection, and “parallel process” by temporarily removing the presenter as an active relational partner. The group members get to project their fantasies into the void left by the “absent” presenter. It can of course be done with the presenter still partaking in the discussion, but then demands more (self-)moderation and potential intervention from the leaders to contain and process anxieties.

Paper

Why the history of a small gesture matters

In many Balint settings, a familiar choreography has become “the way” of conducting the work: a member presents a case; the group may ask brief factual questions; then the presenter is invited to withdraw from dialogue – to lean back, sometimes literally to move their chair back and rest behind a figurative stage curtain (perhaps even in the “loge”) – while the group continues without them for a time. This practice is commonly called “sitting out/pushback”. As the latter descriptive name has a political connotation, a plethora of descriptive or poetic names have been conjured forth; “rest back”, “lean back”, “bubble” to name but a few. Some colleagues experience it as containing, safe and clarifying; others experience it as disruptive, or even subtly shaming.

Many have wondered about the genealogical questions; who started it, when and where. And if it did not originate with the Balints, why has it caught on so quickly? **[1]** The microhistory of a technique is not antiquarianism: my argument is that when a practice becomes assumed rather than chosen, it changes what the group can hold and contain.

Method and sources

Facilitation techniques travel mainly by oral transmission, through a form of apprenticeship. I therefore triangulate evidence from: **(1)** published leadership texts that explicitly describe “sitting out/pushback” and comment on its origins; **(2)** oral-history notes from an interview with John Salinsky (September 2022) and a seminar with Heide Otten (June 2025); and **(3)** a conceptual exploration drawing on psychoanalytic literature on how a teachable technique and intervention can be transmitted through workshops to become an implicit grammar for a “right belief”.

What does the published record say about origin and diffusion?

Much has been said about the potential origin and use of “sitting out/pushback”. An explicit account appears in a leadership discussion by Anne Tyndale and John Salinsky, first published in 2010 and republished in the *Journal of the Balint Society* (2022). They define the practice thus: “This is called ‘sitting out’ or sometimes ‘pushback’ (referring to the movement of the chair).” [2] Tyndale and Salinsky state the rationale offered by proponents: it blocks overeager interrogation of the presenter, so the group must work on its own thoughts and feelings. Andrew Elder and David Watt, then president and secretary of the UK Balint Society, commented. [1] All authors locate Germany as the origin of the intervention, but none are sure of exactly when. Elder notes that “the ‘sitting out’ or ‘pushback’ method of leading groups seems to be becoming accepted as a new Balint orthodoxy.”

Tyndale and Salinsky refer to Heide Otten of the German Balint Society, who states that; “it [sitting out] was often used on an occasional basis when it seemed to be appropriate. Perhaps if the questioning of the presenter was getting too prolonged and too intrusive.” [2]

The authors then continue, sketching a pathway of diffusion: clinicians from other countries encounter the practice at international congresses; it is taken up in multiple national settings such as Scandinavia, Britain, Australia and the USA; however less popular in France and Belgium. This asymmetry is a finding the record reports but does not explain, and one worthy of further investigation. In some National Leadership Training courses the methodological variation became “very successful” for a number of years, and apparently became part of the standard repertoire.

The 2010 articles agree that no rule should govern its use. In 2017 Shake Seigel reiterates that “We need to avoid mechanistic or ‘formulaic rules’ for leadership. For example ‘pushback’ can be viewed as ‘a tool and not a rule’.” [3] The same point recurs in *Let’s talk about pushback* by Alice Polomeni and Jean-Daniel Gradeler, presented at the 22nd International Balint congress in Brussels, Belgium, in 2022. [4] The presentation was

followed by an affect-laden discussion – different opinions and perspectives among those gathered in the monastery were voiced. This is a question of genealogy, and clarifying the historical roots and origin – to the extent possible – can ground the discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of an intervention, methodological modification and tool. This distinguishes the question from whether said tool was handed by God, stolen from Mount Olympus, or constructed here on Earth. I decided to find out how the pushback as intervention actually came to be. Prominent figures at the Congress named John Salinsky as the person who had inoculated the technique; the truth turned out to be more intricate.

What oral history adds

John Salinsky (b. 1941) narrated that he, at an unremembered time and place, approximately in the 1980–90s visited Germany to partake in Balint Group work (Personal communication, 6 September 2022). From there he first picked up the “sitting out/pushback” modification, and found it interesting and valuable. In the coming years he demonstrated the intervention in his own Balint groups and at overseas conferences, and mentioned an American friend as an early adopter. In his charming and humorous manner, Salinsky referred to himself as responsible for “spreading the disease”, referencing the strong affects and passionate discussions that the modification at times have given rise to. He acknowledged being a vector or vehicle for its spread, and had noted that no one else said “I do it” when he asked around about usage in the early days.

Drawing on microbiology as metaphor, one can, in Salinsky’s humorous spirit, dub him the early disseminator and primary vector of the Pushback-plasmid – the circular, extrachromosomal DNA molecules found in bacteria and other microbes that replicate independently of the host chromosome – present in the global Balint bacterial strain. The plasmid’s presence in some local flora is so ubiquitous and integrated that it appears as if it’s

been there since the dawn of time. This is however not the case – to follow the analogy to its end – the new mutation does not affect all colonies.

Salinsky has shared an autobiographical article on the matter in *The International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine*. [5] The article locates the moment of transfer to “the German groups I observed at international meetings”, later demonstrated at the American Balint Society's meetings, with exact year and location unspecified.

To find out more of the potential origin in German-speaking Balint circles, I attended a seminar by **Heide Otten** (b. 1944) titled “*Pushback: What does it mean?*” (The Balint Society of Australia and New Zealand, 21 June 2025). Otten, having searched the archives of her memory and, as additional details may emerge for the presenter during the group discussion, remembered that it was German physician and professor Werner Stucke who had introduced the “sitting out” modification in the early 1980s. Werner Stucke (1921–1995) had, together with Margarethe Stubbe (1921–2010), accompanied and significantly shaped the German Balint Society from its founding in 1974. [6] Stucke had used the modification as an intervention along the lines of “just listen to your colleagues, don't interrupt, just lean back. You may not agree, but listen to their associations.” Otten also cautioned against essentialising the practice, and against naming Stucke's modification as “pushback/the German method”. In the days of Stucke, the modification was not called “pushback”, thus doing away with all potential political and uncomfortable connotations.

In summary, oral history adds two points and one proposal. (1) The earliest named source is Werner Stucke, in the early 1980s. From where he got the concept, God only knows. (2) Once it reached Salinsky around 1990, the spread in the Anglosphere was rapid. (3) Names shape identities. Once a gesture is baptised and repeated, it becomes easy to teach as “a step”, and hard to remember as “a choice”. A rebaptism is in order. Drawing on the history of

naming surgical tools after its inventor, a historically accurate name suggestion would be to call the methodological modification “*Stucke’s tool*”; a deliberate and optional intervention used at the leader's discretion.

Why do techniques become norms?

Since “*Stucke’s tool*” is not inherently “the method”, why has it become experienced as such in some circles? Three mechanisms help explain this.

1) Functional fit. The tool solves a recurrent leadership problem: group anxiety can express itself as interrogative fact-finding, possible bombardment of questions – detrimental for free association and fantasy in the group work – that calls for an intervention of the leaders.

Temporarily placing the presenter behind a figurative stage curtain then shields the presenter from having to answer, and also facilitates the group members’ focus shift from “facts” to affect, from certainty-seeking to meaning-making.

2) Portability. “*Stucke’s tool*” is low-cost and easily teachable. It requires no new theory – only a gesture and a leader’s decision – so it transmits efficiently through workshops and leadership trainings. In small professional communities, portability is a powerful selective advantage, a virulence factor to return to Salinsky’s contagion-metaphor.

3) Authority and identification. In Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939) classic account *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) identification with an admired leader and the group’s ego-ideal can bind individuals to shared practices with remarkable speed, without explicit arguments. [7] In professional micro-cultures, a technique is often adopted because it is “how competent leaders do it”. René Girard (1923–2015) would gloss this as mimetic desire: we want what admired others want, so a model's practice is imitated less for its merits than because it is the model's. [8]

Once that identification and badge of belonging is in place, the practice may be repeated without reflection about indications and contraindications.

A complementary frame comes from Wilfred Bion (1897–1979). Under stress, groups oscillate between work-group functioning and basic assumption modes, in which shared emotional states pull the group away from its task toward self-preservation and anxiety reduction. [9] In such conditions, clear procedures can feel containing and comforting: standardisation can promise containment, holding out the hope of transforming raw, disturbing affect into thinkable experience. Nevertheless, standardisation is not the same as containment. Containment depends on leaders' capacity to hold affect, enable symbolisation, and protect the conditions for associative thinking. Here the paradox returns: if we add rules and regulations to a practice designed to evoke associations, fantasies, and emotions, we may inadvertently narrow the very space needed for interpretation and free fantasising. A rule may protect against one anxiety (interrogation) while generating others (exclusion, silencing, performance pressure, or a "clock race" to produce good reflections).

Conclusion, curtain call and closing

Stucke's tool' has been the subject of animated and passionate discussion for decades, and written and oral historical records trace it back to at least the 1980s. By all accounts, it was not part of the traditional method, yet has charmed many Balint leaders and, once Salinsky took it up, spread rapidly across the Anglosphere. It remains optional, at the leader's discretion, and is – beyond tradition – a choice. For leadership practice and retraining the implication is simple: preserve pluralism by design.

What this genealogy cannot yet explain – why the modification was embraced readily in some communities, such as Scandinavia, Britain, Australia and the United States, yet met reluctance in others – is a question for future research. The published record notes this

asymmetry but does not account for it, and the present sources cannot resolve it. This is where history opens out to the room. Many present here today have led or sat in groups in different countries and formats, and hold direct evidence of why "Stucke's tool" took root in one setting and not another. The next project is therefore to interview anyone willing to share narratives and insights into its usage in their country or area, focusing on understanding the context – or microbiome – in which such an intervention takes hold and flourishes, and that in which it fails to culture.

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