

1 -Title : Overview of supervision of Balint group leaders and its contribution to containment

2 - Summary : (50 words)

Balint group supervision has been developed based on experience and references referring to psychotherapeutical group supervision.

A sub group of the leadership task force has gathered experiences and references to develop an overview of supervision for Balint group Leaders.

How can Balint group supervision contribute to the containing function of leaders?

3 - Abstract: (448 words)

Balint group supervision has been developed based on experience and references linked to psychotherapeutical group supervision.

A sub group of the leadership task force has gathered experiences and references to develop an overview of supervision for Balint group Leaders.

- a. *Defining “Balint leader supervision” we keep in mind different functions of supervision.*
- b. *“Supervision of Balint group leaders” reflects the activity of leading a Balint group and aims at containing the leadership.*
- c. *The decision has to be made of a supervision method.*
 - i. Some supervisors lead as experts using knowledge and experience.
 - ii. Some Balint group supervisors propose supervision based on the Balint Method, with the group presented as a ‘case’.
- d. *The task to lead a Balint group is:*
 - i. the focus on the assignment to come to a better understanding of the doctor-patient- relationship
 - ii. the specificity of the method to lead a Balint group means to abstain from teaching, and rather facilitate the group to come to their own findings using free association.
- e. *Qualification of a supervisor for Balint group leaders*

A need for containment exists at each level of the Balint network: containment of the patient’s emotions or acting, containment of Balint group participants.

How can Balint group supervision help leaders develop their containing function?

- a. *What abilities may a Balint leader wish to develop?*
 - i. to connect to peer leaders, to share difficult situations.
 - ii. to contain whatever comes up in a group, and hold the frame.
 - iii. to welcome conflicting or negative ideas,
 - iv. listening, including “floating listening”, or a ‘capacity for reverie*’ (Bion ‘capacity for maternal reverie*’)

f. How can Balint group supervision contribute to containment?

- i. The structure of a Balint group applied by supervision, offers containment at each level of the Balint system.
 - ii. The Balint group or supervision session can be compared to a “space of creativity”, according to Balint.
 - iii. The limit of a group can have a symbolic function, contributing to differentiate the inner thought and discussions within the group,
 - iv. The outer surface of the group may be conceived as a Psychic skin following Ester Bick’s concept.
 - v. Anzieu defines the group as ‘an envelope holding individuals together’.
 - vi. Supervision may help the leader be connected to peer leaders, contributing to a triangulation of the thought.
 - vii. Balint supervision may be an opportunity to express the need to put a limit.
- Overall, supervision sessions led in the Balint way contributes to develop the containing effect of the Balint frame at different levels. Experiencing the secure space of a supervision session will help leaders develop their abilities, including differentiation of ideas, inner and outer listen, and feeling connected to a broader Balint community.

4 - Paper : version April 7th 2026 – 2200 words

Revised version after feedback of scientific committee - August 30th - 1887 words

I. Introduction

Balint group supervision has been developed based on experience and references linked to psychotherapeutical group supervision.

A sub group of the leadership task force has gathered experiences and references to develop an overview of supervision for Balint group Leaders.

In times of instability, a need for containment exists at each level of the Balint network: containment of the patient’s emotions or acting, containment of Balint group participants.

How can Balint group supervision help leaders develop their containing function?

II. Task Force position paper on Supervision for accredited Balint group leaders

- a. *The guidelines on Balint group leadership (2016) state: “6. Leaders should receive adequate and continuing supervision.”*
- b. *The results of the survey 2022 of the member countries of the IBF show that 90% of the member countries see a need of supervision and expect support of the IBF performing it.*
- c. *The definition of supervision for Balint group leaders beyond the definition of supervision relates to its specific object “Balint group leadership”. “Supervision of Balint group leaders” is part of a **Continuing Professional Development (CPD)** to help*

Balint group leaders maintain their leader's competences, improve their leadership skills, within a space to present difficult situation, and connect to their inner listening capacities, while connecting to peer leaders, and handling ethical questions.

- d. *“Balint leader supervision” implies different functions of supervision.*
 - i. In Balint work, self experience happens to a certain and limited extent. Balint work is patient centered, focussing on the doctor patient relationship.
 - ii. Supervision of Balint group leaders is a type of supervision, using different methods, and different types .
- e. *“Supervision of Balint group leaders” reflects the activity of leading a Balint group and aims at containing and securing the leadership.*
 - i. Concerning Balint work, the focus of attention lays on unconscious processes among group members, leader or co-leaders. Group process mirrors the dynamics of the case, with attention to group dynamics or systemic aspects.
 - ii. Verbalization of affective reactions in a Balint group help clarify relationships between patient and doctor. Quoting Andrew Elder: “In a *supervision group* reactions as well as parallel processes may occur likewise, leading to a mirror effect in the supervision group, originating from the group presented.” (1).
 - iii. A Balint leader supervision group can give a space for the leader to reflect on some unspoken elements of a group session he may have led. “Our experience is that a parallel process is happening at the level of a Balint group, and at the level of a supervision group, when a leader presents his group and its complex dynamics.” (1)
 - iv. The Fractal metaphor seems an interesting idea to name the reproduction of equivalent patterns between Balint group, and Balint supervision group (Metaphore inspired by Shake Seigel along a Balint Online Leadership Development Intervention).
- f. *The decision has to be made of a supervision method.*
 - i. Some supervisors seem to lead supervision as experts using knowledge and experience to clarify questions or highlight new perspectives.
 - ii. Others propose supervision based on the Balint Method, with the group presented as a ‘case’.
- g. *The task to lead a Balint group is defined by:*
 - i. the focus on the assignment to come to a better understanding of the doctor-patient- relationship
 - ii. the specificity of the method to lead a Balint group abstaining from teaching, and facilitating the group work, using free association psychodynamic processes and group dynamics.

- iii. The complexity to *lead* a Balint group is comparable to leading psychodynamic or therapy group. Complexity increases when *supervising* Balint group leaders.

III. How can supervision of Balint group leaders help develop their containing function?

- a. *The ability to Contain seems required at each level of the Balint Network.*
 - i. Health professionals may contain emotions or acting-out of patients,
 - ii. Balint group participants may feel contained by the dynamic of the group,
 - iii. Balint group leaders may have to face difficult or conflictual emotions during a session, and may feel the need to be helped containing them in the aftermath.
- b. *What can motivate a leader to join supervision?*
 - i. Leaders may wish to connect to peer leaders, to share difficult situations, get new perspective and sometimes enlighten some of their blind spot.
 - ii. How can leaders contain whatever comes up in a group? “Winnicott has described a leader as being an ordinary person in an extraordinary position. How much can any of us contain at any particular moment? *How much space is there in the leader’s mind?* „, quoting Andrew Elder (1)
 - iii. How can leaders welcome conflicting or negative ideas? and let them circulate in a mature group which accepts contradiction and separated opinions. This may require feeling connected to a broader and secure perspective. “ „leader“: „in the sense of leading into awkward places, creating space for the group where it may not want to go. If the leader can’t go there, what hope for the group? If the doctor can’t go there, what hope for the patient? „ (1)
 - iv. Can the leader develop a ‘floating listening’ or ‘capacity for reverie’ When leading groups?
 - 1. “Bion makes the hypothesis that the mother, *containing object* if any, transforms the projections of her child thanks to an intuitive thinking process which he named ‘*capacity for reverie**’” following Didier Houzel (2)
 - 2. Likewise, the task of receiving, assimilating some archaic or unspoken elements within a Balint group may require a ‘capacity for reverie’ from the leader, to help him inspire the capacity of participants.
 - v. Joining a supervision session, may help a leader experience a secure space, to express difficult group situations or emotions. “In all Balint work there is the need for a secure frame which enables the freedom and creativity of the participants to flourish”.(1)

- vi. Eventually the supervision group once secured may enlighten some unconscious blind spots of the leader, or unconscious dynamics in the group, including the supervision group.
- c. *Balint supervision may be an opportunity to experience containment and maintain leading and containing abilities*
- i. The structure of a Balint group may offer containment at each level of the Balint system: Applied to a supervision session it allows the leader to experiment exchanging with peer leaders within a secure space, protected by one or co-supervisors.
 - ii. The limit of a group has a symbolic function, differentiating the inner thought of the participant from discussions within the group, and encouraging differentiated ideas.
 - iii. The image of the group limit as a skin can be an interesting image. The concept of 'Psychic envelope' described by Didier Houzel may illustrate the containing function within a group (2). "the experience of skin contact with the containing object establishes a limit between subject and object, between the inside and outer world quoting René Kaes (4)." Very close to notions described later under the term of 'Psychic Skin' by Ester Bick in 1967(5) or the 'Me Skin' by Anzieu in 1974 (6)."
 - iv. "Anzieu will expend the concept of psychic envelope to groups. He defines the group as an envelope holding individuals together... Otherwise there is only an aggregation of individuals. " Quoting Jacob Benarosch –(7).
 - v. Supervision may help the leader experience a triangulation of the relationship, helping elaborate from a distance. It may linger in the aftermath, adding a "symbolic third person "in the leader's mind when meeting his group.
 - 1. "Andre Green (8) presented the hypothesis of the therapist being "a third person" between the patient and his representations, necessary to help him access symbolization, as a way out of a fusional mode relating to others." According to squierety (9)
 - 2. Experiencing a Balint session 'here and now', is an opportunity for leaders to feel connected to a broader Balint community and contributes to triangulation of future encounters.
 - vi. I will share with you a leading situation, echoing the interest of floating listening to help the leader and the group feel 'the need to put a limit'.
 - 1. A young intern expressed during a Balint session: "when is it too much?". That question arose once she had described how helpless she felt, questioning a silent patient, which lack of reaction made her believe, "she must have been assaulted". The more the patient was

- silent, the more the intern would want to intervene and ask her questions. The participants kept silent, quite puzzled;
2. The leaders felt helpless witnessing a helpless presenter describing the situation, group members somehow obliged to support their colleague, while judgment seemed to float in the air.
 3. To avoid being contaminated by judgment, the leader joined a reverie state of mind, listening to her inner feelings while sensitive to the emotions within the group. It echoed in the leader's mind that the group might be judging the patient.
 4. The leader decided to focus on containing the group, respectful while asking for emotions in the presenter's shoes and then in the patient's shoes.
 5. The containing function may have secured the group and help the presenter say: "I wondered when is it too much?"
 6. The leader felt relieved hearing a spontaneous reaction of the presenter, sharing suddenly a potential blind spot. She suggested the question might relate to the patient. The group followed: "when would it be enough?", for the patient... Imagination started to flourish in the group. A member allowed herself to fantasize "how the patient might be stuck in her situation, and feel ambivalent".
 7. *The question: "when is it enough?" echoed in the leader's mind as a pertinent question for leaders to name their own limits.* To think from their own shoes, and listen to their own emotions, in parallel with the group process, hence keeping an empathic perspective while listening to the group.

In total, Supervision sessions led in the Balint way propose secure spaces, helping leaders maintain their leading abilities while taking care of themselves. Being contained within a supervision session, may help experience a secure space with symbolic limits, allowing listening and inner listening, and feeling connected to a broader Balint community.

Following Voltaire's image of Candide "cultivating his garden", returning from worldwide experiences. That Image came to me in a favorable moment when I was mowing my lawn on a tractor, just before starting to write that paper. Connecting to the earth, taking care of the grass at the surface of the earth, be it full of wild herbs, or like a velvet skin when freshly mowed. Listening to birds singing, in connection with nature, and animal instincts, dreaming in connection to the story of past encounters, with present or missing peer leaders.

- Thank you for listening
- If you feel connected to your inner listening,
- Please join the supervision workshop to experiment...

References

1. Elder A. *Balint Group Leadership*. Warsaw; 2016.
2. Houzel D. *The Concept of Psychic Envelope*. 2010.

3. Bion WR. *Learning from Experience*. London: Heinemann; 1962.
4. Kaës R. *L'appareil psychique groupal*. Paris: Dunod; 1976.
5. Bick E. The experience of the skin in early object relations. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. 1968;49:484–486.
6. Anzieu D. *Le Moi-peau*. Paris: Dunod; 1985.
7. Benarosch J. *Remembering in Balint groups*. Caen Balint Days: 2025.
8. Green A. *On Private Madness*. London: Hogarth Press; 1986.
9. Squitieri F. Andre Green and configurations of triangulation. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. 2015.
10. Herzog P. *Supervision for Balint group leaders/luxury or necessity*. Balint journal 27; 2026

5 – Isabelle Nouet Martinot
Isabelle.martinot@me.com