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Editorial: Leadership, Looking forward, Looking back

Raluca Soreanu¹, Shameel Khan², Andrew Elder³ and John Salinsky⁴

¹ Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex: raluca.soreanu@essex.ac.uk

² General Adult Psychiatrist, MRCpsych, MA, Karachi: shameel@doctors.org.uk

³ FRCGP DEd (Hon): andrewelder@blueyonder.co.uk

⁴ Balint Groups Leader, former President of The Balint Society UK: jvsalinsky@aol.com

Raluca Soreanu, Editor¹

Volume 49 of the *Journal of the Balint Society* is published at a time when the need of sitting together in a group and elaborating loss and anxiety is ever greater. The COVID-19 pandemic made its own mark on health systems, and even on the way we are imagining and experiencing our relationships with one another. There is war in Europe, and at this time memories of past losses, conflicts and catastrophes return. In uncertain times, having a *method* for approaching both certainty and uncertainty seems more important than ever. The Balint community has a method, a way of sitting together in a group, a way of elaborating difficult feelings.

In our free-associations that led to the theme of the current special issue, *Leadership: Looking forward, Looking back*, the members of the Editorial Committee converged on the necessity of the gesture of looking back at past key contributions on leadership. It is a kind of gesture of looking back that aims at revitalising the futures of the Balint method. In the pages of the current issue, by organising an archival space, alongside contemporary reflections, we aim to generate new questions on the transformations of leadership; on its continuities, as well as on its discontinuities; and on the challenges of being a Balint group leader in 2022.

In other words, the current volume has organised a space of memory for important contributions on leadership. They were written by D. L. F. Dunleavy, Michael Courtenay, John Salinsky, Valerie Parker, Anne Tyndale & John Salinsky, Andrew Elder, and Anthony Froggett between 1976 and 2017. We invited short responses to these republished contributions, which were authored by Gearóid Fitzgerald, Jeff Sternlieb, Eamonn Marshall, Judy Malone, Liz Lee, and Shake

¹ Raluca Soreanu is Professor of Psychoanalytic Studies at the Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex, and psychoanalyst, member of Círculo Psicanalítico do Rio de Janeiro. She is leading the five-year multidisciplinary project 'Free Clinics and a Psychoanalysis for the People: Progressive Histories, Collective Practices, Implications for our Times' (FREEPSY), funded by a UKRI Frontier Research Grant. She is Academic Associate of the Freud Museum and Editor of the Studies in the Psychosocial series at Palgrave.

Seigel. The short responses offer contemporary views on the archival pieces, and they reflect on some of the most stimulating questions and themes that the archival pieces confront us with. How has leadership changed from the picture that Michael Courtenay was painting in his 1986 piece, 'The Role of the Balint-Group Leader: A Critical Re-appraisal'?

This space for memory is preceded by a section on 'Leadership: Looking forward', with contributions from John Salinsky, Gearóid Fitzgerald, and Theresa Davies. The third section of volume 49 brings together the three authors who won the Essay Prize in the Balint Society competition of 2021. We first meet Maria Khan, whose essay was praised by the Essay Prize Jury for its exceptional capacity to capture the spirit of the Balint experience; for its subtle tracing of the position of medical student in the group; and for the scope of its reflection. We then meet Felix Simpson-Orlebar, whose writing was remarked for its capacity to record the progression of thinking that Balint work enables and the depth of change that it affords; for its thought-provoking use of a vignette; and for capturing the plurality of angles that a Balint group can be viewed from. Finally, we encounter Katy Mason, whose essay was appreciated for its capacity to make a complex construction starting from a Balint group experience; for illustrating the functioning of difficult affects, such as envy, in the Balint group; for capturing the complexities around attachments of members to the leader; and for gifting the readers with a fully-fledged fairy-tale transposition of a Balint group. You will read – perhaps your first – Balint group fairy-tale.

In the section 'Voices from around the World' we come across important themes, such as the medical care of non-binary individuals, or the meaning of gifts to doctors, in the writing of Isobel Austin, Natasha Khalid, Scott Abramson, Elsa Brew-Girard, Henry Jablonski and John Salinsky. In the final section, 'From the Archive', we hear Michael Courtenay's voice, in an interview conducted by John

Salinsky in 2004. I bring a short commentary on a letter from Enid Balint to Wolfgang Loch, written in 1977, with insights into co-leadership, transmission of the Balint groups tradition and the boundaries between psychoanalysis and medicine.

You will discover in the pages of the Journal seven still images from a film. They too are part of the gesture of looking back. They are images I took from the *Balint Groups* short film, which I prepared together with psychoanalyst Judit Szekacs-Weisz in 2018, based on BBC footage on Balint groups produced in 1970. The short film shows the atmosphere of Balint groups led by Michael Balint himself, in the 1970s, and it contains selections from three case discussions.

The cover image transports us to the Château de Kernuz, in France, in August 1968, when Balint was leading an open-air group (photo credits: Guy Lavellée).

In what follows, the Deputy Editor of the Journal, Shameel Khan, and two of the members of the Editorial Committee, Andrew Elder and John Salinsky, write their reflections on leadership. A third Editorial Committee member, Anne Patterson, also contributed to the conception of this issue.

Shameel Khan, Deputy Editor²*From technique to technology: Leadership at times of change*

While recovering from the shell shock of pandemic and beginning to grapple with the reality of living in an increasingly polarised world, I am reminded of the labour that Balint leaders have undertaken over the last 2 years. The transition from room to zoom and then back into rooms, has been like a surreal navigation from dissociation to association to re-integration. Whilst dealing with the adversity of novelty and change, leadership has yet again become open to exploration through the trifocal lens of past, present and beyond. There is a pressing need for an ongoing discourse in this fermenting environment of change regarding what truly constitutes the core of Balint leadership today.

In my previous job, I was given a book as a farewell gift by psychiatry trainees titled *Governing the Ungovernable* by Ishrat Husain. Although the subject matter of the book was economic cum political context of Pakistan, the title, I felt, had a coded meaning covertly handed to me as a present. The title made me think about the challenges of Balint leadership I had encountered with these trainees at times of unprecedented change during COVID. It also made me think about how social, political and anthropological schemas of leadership (relevant to each geographical region) can interplay with the schema of Balint leader as our community continues to expand across continents.

The space between a clinician and patient creates the stage for *emotional happenings* evoked in our day to day clinical encounters with patients. Such

² Dr Muhammad Shameel Khan is a consultant general adult psychiatrist with an interest in group work and physician wellbeing. He has a Masters from University of Essex in Foundations of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy (Tavistock and Portman NHS foundation Trust) and a Postgraduate Diploma in group work from Institute of Group Analysis. He is currently involved in supporting and developing the practice of Balint groups within the contextual healthcare systems of Pakistan. He has also previously worked as a faculty and postgraduate training programme director for psychiatry at Aga Khan University Hospital, Pakistan.

emotional happenings by nature are like a cosmic meteor that can't be '*governed*' but can be processed, contained and regulated within the safe orbital spaces that our leaders create. The frame of Balint group (leader being part of that frame) provides that essential safety needed for such holdings and containments. The challenges that lie ahead for Balint leadership are partly inherent in the ever-increasing demand and pressure on this frame today, as we adapt to a world of changing social interactions and technology. There is a need for qualitative research on the experiences of leaders (belonging to different clinical disciplines and diverse socio-cultural contexts) who are trying to adapt to these technological changes while also preserving the tradition and technique that we have been long familiar with.

For me, technique is dependent on the situation and the medium in which humans encounter novelty or a problem. Room and zoom are different mediums where access to the unconscious, body language or the unsaid is differently available to the leaders. We as leaders need to realise our vulnerability at times of such change, where generalisation and/or over-simplification can sometimes impede our true understanding of this hybrid existence that most of us are now faced with. For example, questions like 'Where is the empty chair' in online groups is not a critique of the medium but an invitation to discuss the absence of something symbolic in a frame. My hope is that as a community we continue to engage in sharing our lived experiences as leaders as we expand beyond borders and dimensions of time and space.

Andrew Elder, Editorial Committee Member³

Our Society is at a time of considerable change. In relation to leadership, many more people are interested in training as Balint Group leaders. The majority come from psychiatry or the psyche-professions. Whereas previously becoming a leader depended on being a member of a group for a considerable time this is no longer possible. There are now many more groups for students in medical schools, for junior doctors during their training posts, for psychiatrists, hospital doctors and some for non-clinical professionals such as teachers or lawyers, as well as for GPs. How can leaders gain enough experience before being accredited to lead groups in these many different settings? How flexible are leaders in adjusting their approach to different groups? Is the temptation 'to teach' stronger when a psychiatrist leads a group of psychiatrists? How do psychiatrist leaders in training get experience of GP groups? As a Society, how do we encourage and support the growth of a leadership culture in which we continue to develop our understanding of Balint Group Leadership in the many different settings in which it is now practiced?

Enid Balint used to say: I am a psychoanalyst in whatever I do – conducting a consultation, or leading a group for GPs, seeing someone for supervision or a patient in analysis. As Balint Group leaders, can we say something similar: in whatever group I am leading, my behaviour and aims might differ, but in essence I am *always* a Balint Group leader? In which case, what *is* that essence? What *is* a Balint Group leader? Balint Groups have many close relatives but defy easy definition. Perhaps it is only by continuing debate, discussion and working together, that any of us can begin to feel confidence in approaching such a complex question.

³ Andrew Elder was an Inner London GP (1972-2008). Honorary Academic Staff Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. Balint Group leader. Past President Balint Society (UK) and Co-ordinator of International Balint Federation (IBF) Leadership Taskforce for its first six years. Awarded Honorary Doctorate (2017) for work in primary care and mental health.

In his Appendix 1 on Leadership in *The Doctor, His Patient and the Illness*, Michael Balint is keen to point out that a leader 'will teach more by example than by everything else combined. After all (he says) the (leadership) technique we advocate is based on exactly the same sort of listening that we expect the doctors to learn and then to practise with their patients'. He encourages us to pay close attention to the parallel between the way a leader listens to the group and the way the participating doctors are encouraged to listen to their patients.

We have had over fifty years of research into the doctor-patient relationship when the doctor is a GP. But what do we know about the pharmacology of the drug doctor when the doctor is a psychiatrist? There is much scope for new research.

John Salinsky, Editorial Committee Member⁴*What happened to training-cum-research?*

The Balints often described their groups for GPs as ‘training-cum-research’. The aim was partly to show the GPs how to listen better to their patients and thus to hear some of the unexpected contributions from the Unconscious. That was the training. The research involved both leaders and members in learning to understand more about the doctor-patient relationship. Several of the early groups studied a particular subject that bothered the doctors, such as *Night-calls* (Clyne 1961) and *Repeat Prescriptions* (Balint et al 1984).

These ‘research groups’ ran for several years and each eventually published their accounts of the work as a monograph which was well worth reading. Most, if not all, of the group members contributed to the writing. But now we seem to have no more research aims. The last research group to be led by Enid Balint published its results in 1993; and the most recent Balint research book, (*What are you Feeling, Doctor?*), appeared 22 years ago in 2000. Its theme was ‘Doctors’ Defences’. This group used to meet every two months for a whole weekend day. Meeting days were hosted in turn by the doctors and included a convivial lunch and a refreshing walk. The leaders were Michael Courtenay and Erica Jones, both retired GPs, thoroughly marinated in the Balint process. Everyone had a good time, learned a lot and contributed to a book which is still available. Sadly, there seems to be no sign of any new research of this kind, and this is of great relevance to the theme of leadership. So, if you are a member or a leader of a group, I recommend that you discuss the project with your colleagues and find a theme. Training-cum-research!

⁴ John Salinsky is currently leader (with co-leader) of local Balint groups for the last 15 years. GP Principal (1972-2018). Past Programme Director, Whittington GP Training (including Balint groups). Past president of The Balint Society. Past editor of The Journal of the Balint Society. Past treasurer and secretary of the International Balint Federation. Honorary founder member of the American Balint Society.

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