

ICI for Beginners

ICI's workshops are based on a method of studying and understanding group behaviour called **Group Relations** arising from the **Tavistock Institute**. Group relations was developed by psychoanalysts in the UK in the post-WWII era who were establishing new social organizations in Britain and thinking about how to make sense of violence and trauma.

Based on these theories, ICI workshops and conferences rest on a few basic ideas:

- Group behaviour is affected by both conscious and unconscious forces, which are not entirely under the control of the group's members.
- Groups can fall into one or more unconscious **basic assumptions** (see below), based on the group's unconscious needs, desires, fantasies, and anxieties. These basic assumptions can undermine the group's ability to perform its task or do its work.
- Groups activate their members to perform certain activities or express ideas and emotions through a process of projective identification – an unconscious process where, being made 'the target of a projection', you can unconsciously take the projection on and act it out.

The basic assumptions

One of the pioneers of group relations, psychoanalyst and thinker Wilfred Bion, identified three ways groups form unconscious basic assumptions which interfere with a group's capacity to work well together to accomplish tasks. They are:

The basic assumption of dependency – Groups under the sway of this basic assumption are overly dependent on a leader or leaders, believing themselves incapable of making decisions or accomplishing tasks in their own right.

The basic assumption of pairing – In this basic assumption, the group "pairs off" two or sometimes more members. The hope, often unexpressed, is that this pairing will produce a "messiah" who will save the group and solve its problems.

The basic assumption of fight/flight – The group becomes obsessed with an external enemy, who they will either avoid (flight) or attack (fight).

Later thinkers added two more basic assumptions:

The basic assumption of oneness – the group is obsessed with its own unity and togetherness, denying the agency and individuality of its members.

The basic assumption of me-ness – The group denies that it is a group at all, and cannot come together in order to accomplish its task.

The conference, the task, and the consultants

ICI conferences or workshops involve a number of different events. While every conference or workshop will define its task slightly differently, all of them will boil down to the same thing: learning; that is learning to attend to the task to study what groups are like, what you are like, and how the group and you function as the exploration unfolds **in the here-and-now**, or in the moment. This is much more difficult than it sounds.

The small and large study group events will have 1 or 2 consultants (and in this workshop, trainees termed “practitioner consultants”). First-time members sometimes find the behaviour of the consultants cold and confusing; this is because the role of the consultant is not to facilitate the conversation, break the ice, or keep the conversation on track. The role of the consultant is to offer observations and suggestions to facilitate your learning and enable the process of exploring what’s going on. The absence of a traditional facilitator, lecturer, or teacher in the workshop creates space for you to take up your own authority and direct your own learning.

Authority

ICI, using the group relations model, defines authority as “the right to do work”. As a member in this workshop, you hold full authority over your own learning and experience. If you are experiencing difficulty, feeling lost or overwhelmed, it can help to remind yourself of this.

Further reading

While it’s difficult to really understand what group relations is like without experiencing it, here is some more background information that can help you prepare:

- More workshop readings at <http://ici-ici.ca/readings>
- [An Introduction to Tavistock-Style Group Relations](#)
- “Basics of Group Relations” series on On Memory and Desire: <https://onmemoryanddesire.wordpress.com/category/group-relations/>