

# Authority in Education – Free Association with Authoritativeness?

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## Abstract

The current vision of authority goes significantly beyond that of the traditional one and is being viewed within new contexts, which take into account the social status of the individual, their freedom and self-realization, and their capability to manage complicated social relations and challenging life situations. In addition, emphasis is placed on the individual and their social responsibility, self-control, inner discipline, volitional effort and other personal characteristics. The theme of authority is currently topical not only in education but also in broader social contexts, and not only in the Czech Republic. This study has a theoretical character. It explains the etymology of the term authority, compares this term with the substance of authoritativeness, analyses in brief T.W. Adorno's theory of Authoritarian Personality, characterizes differences in parenting styles, and in particular the specifics of the authoritative and authoritarian styles.

**Keywords:** authority of the schoolteacher, parental authority, authoritarian personality, freedom, duty, value, discipline, responsibility, parental styles, authority of schools as an institution, family, social role

## Introduction

Some contemporary theoretical considerations and polemics about the procedures in education frequently have one thing in common – and that is a diversely motivated but sometimes very intensive – attack on authority. However, the irony is that for this purpose its own (for this purpose intentionally overexposed) armamentarium is used. After all, the proverbial “fight fire with fire”, as maintained by the scientific world, can be used when emotions prevail at all costs and even then over empirically substantiated arguments. What therefore happens during explosive scientific disputes is that everything is driven under the wings of authority, which raises the impression in excited heads of an unduly limiting system. So when the bath water is thrown out, the terms obedience, directive, discipline, lack of freedom, and regime are anathematized together

with that of authority. Even if this is forgotten, be it either conditionally or for the long term, pejorative associations are attributed to the rule of authority. This happens in particular on the grounds of the fact that authority is usually understood to be the practical manipulative activity of persons or institutions that misuse the entrusted authority, rather than admitting that authority is the basis for observing rules.

It is of course difficult to estimate to what extent the mentioned widespread image of authority reflects the *association of authority with authoritativeness*. The closeness of the verbal association of both terms is surprising for teachers, practitioners and pedagogical theoreticians alike. The tendency to understand studies about authority as studies about authoritativeness still persists to this day. The degree of misunderstanding serves as an example of the fact of how closely both terms are associated in the minds of educators, parents and teachers.

### **The secrecy of scapegoats?**

From an analysis, for the purposes of this text, of sources which are related to Authoritarian Personality (T.W. Adorno and team), it is evident that the concept of authority (in the form used under the majority of social sciences) differs from authoritativeness (Adorno 1950). The team of authors focused their research especially on ethnocentric, anti-Semitic, and fascist prejudices and stances. The team conducted extensive research into prejudices in order to determine to what degree the hostility shown to one ethnic group or another “out-group” (not their own) is an indicator of the hostility that would be shown towards ethnic minorities and other foreign groups. They first put forward a scale for the measurement of prejudices against Jews, the so-called anti-Semitic scale (A-S). They subsequently proposed a scale for ethnocentrism (so-called E-scale) to measure stances towards black people, other minorities and patriotism (based on the contradiction between America and other nations). The team discovered the internal homogeneity that existed in these structures and the association between ethnocentrism and anti-Semitism. They finally developed a scale of fascism (so-called F-scale) for measuring personal depth tendencies, including for example, excessive submission to authority, uncritical preference of their own group’s values, antipathy towards perceiving other groups from the psychological point of view, unwillingness to seek one’s own hidden motives and conflicts, tendencies to see foreign and dangerous forces outside one’s own world, etc. Adorno’s team empirically proved that those people who scored high on the A-S scale also scored high on the E- and F-scales. They therefore deduced that a complex of stances towards other groups is seemingly part of a person’s broader personal structure. They classified this as “authoritativeness, an authoritarian person” (Výrost et al. 1997, p. 60). It is evident that the issues surrounding that of authoritarian persons exceeds the limits of the understanding under social sciences and also social psychology itself with regards to terms such as anti-democratic, fascist or totalitarian. In many ways this theme has now moved into the sphere of pedagogy, both at theoretical level and in educational practice (Novotný 1997).

How can an authoritarian person be characterized? In order to describe an authoritarian personality it is necessary to use a psychoanalytical relational framework. An authoritarian personality is characterized by a rigid system of stances as a consequence of a strict upbringing during childhood, during the course of which all manifestations of aggression and hostility towards the parents were suppressed. An authoritarian personality is characterized by subjection and obedience. This expresses itself in the person playing the role of “scapegoat” with regards to their superiors, whilst treating those who are considered as “inferior” with contempt and aggression. An authoritarian personality holds prejudices towards many other groups. Such personality traits tend to originate in a domestic environment characterized by strict moralistic discipline. This means that such people view society and its social groups hierarchically and therefore lay excessive emphasis on socioeconomic status. Due to their strict upbringing during childhood they are obedient towards those who hold authority and wield power. The hidden aggressiveness, of which they are often unaware or is suppressed, is transferred to weaker objects (inferior persons, different minority groups, etc.) through the sublimation mechanism. It has also been revealed that an authoritarian personality often possesses two-dimensional thinking, hating ambiguousness and contradiction. This rigidity also manifests itself in interpersonal relations: where preference is given to situations with clearly determined social limits and status, and whereby personal closeness hinders them.

Authoritativeness has become a term that has pervaded from scientific language into everyday speech. In everyday speech the fact that an authoritarian is usually the one who fails to be an authority is intuitive. Investigations into how a charismatic personality is formed and that of a person who becomes a role model of success for others, in this or in other spheres of human activity, confirm that authority cannot be formed, but that it is a part of a person’s natural qualities and requires some virtues, in the sense of having a disposition to do good or abilities that win recognition. A certain “vivisection” of the internal disposition of the authoritarian personality can therefore help us to understand what authority absolutely should not represent in order to achieve full acknowledgement. An authoritarian is affected by a loss of willpower, suffers from feelings of desolation and lonesomeness that need to be permanently compensated. At the same time, activities and suggestions put forward to them by a person not subordinated to them are experienced as a threat and a way that could deprive them of their own initiative. An authoritarian person who constructs unconquerable walls in their immediate surroundings, does not do it for reasons of protecting themselves against the deceptions of everyday life. On the contrary, they do it because they are completely absorbed in their own project. They are also not meticulous, but worried by details driven by their obsession with an extensive or remote dream; in so doing they disregard their immediate family and show contempt for everyday life. Their feelings also range from being the greatest to being too small; worrying profusely what their surroundings think of their unpredictable behaviour. There is evidently a difference between an authoritarian and vigorous use of legitimate power. The first invokes aversion in people. What are then the roots of

authoritativeness? And, from where do the destructive attacks on us in the contemporary world originate? The answer can be found (as in the majority of complicatedly structured social rebuses) in the basic model, in the initial molecule of every society – in the family.

**Parents moving between styles of child care**

If a comparison were to be made with the world of architecture and engineering, it would be evident that the detail of every part of the design of the project would be more or less derived from the original sketch. The same is valid for the process of bringing up and educating a human being. The most interesting theories are not applied as long as they collide with the everyday development of the preconditions, talent and abilities of the child in the family. Parental care is – and it is assumed always will be – the most significant environment for the metamorphosis of a “blank sheet” or a “jungle child” into a sociable person. It is therefore understandable that this care is under permanent investigation and classification. Within this context, one of the most useful models (Maccoby and Martin 1983) with regards to the correlation of parental care with authority cannot be ignored. This model was developed on the basis of normal, not-harming parental care and focuses on the two principal dimensions of parental behaviour (Čáp 1993; Arendtová 1994; Fontana 1997; Vališová 1997; Goleman 1997).

The first dimension is based on the contrast of care in terms of: insisting – commanding; as opposed to: not insisting – not commanding. The second dimension is based on the contrast of care in terms of: receiving – responding – child-oriented; as opposed to care in terms of: refusing – not responding – parent-oriented. These two dimensions are mutually combined and offer four different models of childcare behaviour (see Table1).

Table 1. Styles of childcare

Style of childcare	Receiving Responding Child-oriented	Refusing Not responding Parent-oriented
Insisting, Commanding	AUTHORITATIVE	AUTHORITARIAN
Not insisting, Not commanding	BENEVOLENT	NEGLECTING

*Source: Maccoby and Martin, 1983.*

Manners of parental behaviour, connected with these styles of childcare and the corresponding manners of child behaviour are briefly characterized below.

**Parental styles and their consequences**

**Authoritative:**

Under this parental style, children are required to reasonably behave and socially interact at a level appropriate to their age and abilities. This style is characterized by warmth, care, and the interest of parents in the opinions and feelings of their child(ren).

Parental decisions are explained to the children. The behaviour of the child is subsequently independent, self-asserting, cooperative towards the parents, with a friendly disposition towards other children of the same age, contented, performance oriented, and successful.

**Authoritarian:**

Under this parental style power is asserted without warmth and mutual communication. It sets absolute demands, requires obedience and respect for authority, and is driven by tradition and hard work. Due to this style the behaviour of the child tends towards social isolation. It misses spontaneity. Girls are taught to be dependent and lack any endeavour to perform well. Boys tend to be aggressive towards other children of the same age.

**Benevolent:**

Under this parental style not much is required from children. It is characterized as receiving, responding and children-oriented. The behaviour of the child is characterized by prevailing positivity and lively emotional harmony. However, their behaviour is also viewed as immature, whereby the children lack the ability to handle their impulses, lack adequate skills in terms of social responsibility and are not self-sufficient, with a tendency towards being aggressive.

**Neglecting:**

Under this parental style, parents are too engrossed in their own activities. They take inadequate part in the life of their children and exhibit little interest in what they are engaged in. Parents shun mutual communication and rarely take notice of the child's opinions or feelings. The behaviour of the child tends towards moodiness and a lack of concentration. The child is profligate and does not handle its emotions and impulses well. They also show little interest in school, whereby truancy is frequent and the risk exists that they will be exposed to the dangers of addiction.

Some parents of course can change their style of childcare. This usually occurs under the influence of external factors, and is dependent on the momentary perceptiveness of their relationship with their children and on their own mood and emotional lability. Many parents are ambivalent to this and their care bears the attributes of several of the above described styles. This ambivalence applies to the children's behaviour too, their individual temperament and abilities thereby generating unique deviations from the above described behavioural responses. Nevertheless, the aforementioned model provides a precious practical guideline for the investigation and application of parental care models and the typical behavioural responses of children. Parent – child interactions requires communication in both directions because the behaviours of both parties are the subject of mutual influence. The existence of harmony between both parties is in large part also conditioned by the perception of the parents of the individual needs of the child. These needs can be diverse, ranging from rich physical activity up to the accentuated need for privacy or special claims to emotional security.

### **Ping-pong war about authority in schools**

Some alternative schools reject authority entirely. This is in contrast to the accepted philosophy, a symbol of military discipline, that adults wield unlimited power over children on the mere grounds of their age. In rejecting authority, the most dogmatic claim that is made is that students have the same fund of knowledge as adults. Such an approach denies the demands of society, its minor social units, and those of the individual. It denies the existence of a society's cultural and technical heritage and the importance thereof today. Analogously it also denies the fact that experience provides skills, knowledge and wisdom that can be handed down to others. This therefore makes a Robinson Crusoe out of every child, one who begins always and entirely anew, whilst surrounded with potential companions and teachers.

Similar problems exist, although to a lesser degree, when a school gives students the right to define and recast its moral code. In an attempt to take highly intelligent, bright young people seriously, the adults easily give up any responsibility for the definition of educational goals and the handing on of information. The impulsivity of students, who are given absolute freedom of action, can result in never ending discussions and the recasting of goals as a response to every minor suggestion. This can subsequently result in students working towards the almost total elimination of formal teaching within the classroom or even the whole school framework.

A formal form of impersonal teaching, one that does not comply with the interests of students, hardly awakens the trust of students in schools as an institution, let alone contributes to the authority of teachers. When the basic value of the academic education is repeatedly questioned, teachers must therefore turn to other forms of power assertion than are not linked to the authority of an institution or subject. Teachers have no other choice but to use their personal influence in their pedagogical work in order to convince students to cooperate with them in the process of academic cognition. The activation of such forms of power assertion naturally lures the teacher away from the given task and exhausts their psychical strengths before the commencement of the teaching activity itself.

In a school with a rigid curriculum and discipline this can gradually result in the so-called ping-pong response, whereby misunderstandings arise from the experiences and findings that many active and enthusiastic teachers register. Under such circumstances, even if it is necessary to have educational goals, the conception and realization of which must take into account student participation and their ability to fulfil them, the adult must retain responsibility for the determination of the principal educational orientation.

It is not only their right but also their duty to remind students (where necessary, strictly) of their responsibility to exert at least a certain form and degree of proper intellectual and volitional endeavour. By choosing this form they will occasionally have to submit to the wisdom of their superiors. In doing so, it saves valuable time and psychical energy, particularly when the students take seriously the contention of the

adult that certain school subjects will be of benefit to them later (be it either for their general or professional development).

Consideration must therefore be given to the pedagogical finding that the value of the teaching style or strategy cannot be assessed without taking into account the nature of the students and the character of the school subject. Unless the children or students accept the assigned educational goal, the simple insistence on this goal only becomes a weak method of persuasion. Under these conditions, the teacher must first bring out the desire of the students to learn and arouse their interest. It is only then that further aspects come into play. If the subject of the study relates to the acquisition of critical or creative skills, the teacher can enable the students to set goals and helpful strategies. However, when the subject of the study has a clear structure which has to be acquired as a tool, then the teacher has a greater chance to succeed by choosing an incorporative procedure and stick to the given approaches developed by experts.

The principal problem of selecting a pedagogical strategy is therefore not only a question of a general decision about the complexity of the structure or the amount of freedom, but also about the basic skills and hand on information required in comparison with general skills and the need to discover. The principal point is more likely to be determined by whether the students believe in the value of the knowledge they acquire. It is therefore necessary to choose methods that support this belief prior to the achievement of such a goal. As soon as the students experience aspirations or understand the necessity of learning, it is important that they themselves create sufficient capacity to handle the structure (code, system) and freedom, and also learn to participate in the common tradition.

## **Conclusion**

Authority is present in all areas of life. It determines and influences the relations between family members, partners, in schools and workplaces, as well as within the framework of leisure time activities. In such differing environments, equating authority with authoritativeness constantly causes misunderstandings. Seeking a consistent and understandable code and discovering functional partner relations will continue under family and school conditions as long as there is mutual respect for the rights and duties of both adults and children alike. However, these efforts should not affect the exclusion of authority.

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