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## **Authority and Setting in the Psychotherapy Group**

What is Authority? Is there a definition of Authority? What does an act of authority look like in a situation of group analysis?

In my report, I would like to share my reflections, in a way, continuing the tradition, which Gary Winship once called “introducing the sociological field into the psychoanalyst's room”, into the psychotherapy group.

Such a phenomenon of social life as Authority and its various aspects have been studied by philosophers since antiquity. While theological and theocratic theories study only the seminal and absolute Divine Authority, deriving all other phenomena of authority from it, Plato reflected on power and its legitimacy based on the concept of Justice. Any other authority can exist exclusively through Force. And Aristotle wrote about authority, which should be justified by wisdom, knowledge and the ability to foresee things. Hegel's theory of Authority boils down to a detailed examination of the Master-Slave relationship (in the philosophical understanding of Master and Slave), the Victor and the Vanquished.

In 1943 in his work *The Notion of Authority*, Alexandre Kojève, a French sociologist of Russian origin (in Russia he was known as Kozhevnikov) defined this social phenomenon and carried out phenomenological, metaphysical and ontological analyses.

Let me give you the definition of authority given by Alexandre Kojève in full.

**“Authority exists only where there is movement, change, action (real or at least possible); authority is held only over that which can ‘react’, that is to say, that which can change according to what or who represents (‘embodies’, realizes, or exercises) Authority. It is obvious that Authority belongs to the one who performs changes, not to the one who is changed: Authority is essentially active, not passive.**

**A being endowed with authority is thereby necessarily an agent, and an act of authority is always a true action, i.e., free and conscious.**

**An act of authority differs from all other acts in that it is not opposed by the one or those at whom it is aimed. This implies, on the one hand, the possibility of opposition, and on the other, a conscious and voluntary refusal to exercise this opportunity.**

**Authority is necessarily a relationship between the acting and the suffering parties. This is essentially a social phenomenon. For Authority to exist, at least the presence of two is necessary.**

**Authority is the possibility that an agent has of acting  
on others (or on another) without these others reacting against him, despite  
being capable to do so. By acting with Authority, the  
agent can change the outward human given without suffering a  
repercussion from this action, i.e. without himself changing as a result of  
his action.”** (Kojève, 1943)

Alexander Kozhev gives an example. “If I use force, sending somebody out of the room, I must change my own behaviour in order to take such action, and by doing so I show that I have no power. It will be completely different if I do not move and the other person leaves the room, that is, changes according to the simple command “Step outside!” from me. If the given order causes discussion, it forces the one who gave the order to do something himself – namely, to discuss – then there is no authority.”

Besides, as a result of the phenomenological analysis, Kojève identified four simple, “pure”, elementary, non-intersecting types of Authority:

**Authority of the Father**. Power that stems from age difference. Authority of parents over the child. This is the power of the old over the young, the power of tradition and those who adhere to it, the power of the dead, who, through a will, exercise power over the living, the power of the “Creator” over creation and the like.

Authority of the Father is the dominion of cause over effect. If we consider the Power of the old man over the young, we will find, along with other elements, the concept of "fatherhood" or "cause" in the concept of "generation", "collective" fatherhood, where the "older generation" is the generation of fathers of young people – the "younger generation". The same can be said about the power of the Tradition and its bearers. The latter are, being elders, not only the “material” (physical) fathers of today's people, but, as representatives of the Tradition, they are “spiritual fathers,” the embodiment of the “cause that has made today's people what they are.” Such cause determines the social, cultural and political reality. The tradition itself has Authority: we voluntarily and consciously or completely unconsciously refuse to “react” to it, since such a reaction would be a reaction against ourselves, a kind of suicide. “But the purest case of the Authority of the Father, understood as the power of the cause over the effect,” writes Kojève, “would be the Power of the Author (in the broadest sense of the word) over his Creation. For example, the Authority of the “head of a school”, whether it be literary, artistic, psychotherapeutic or whatever ”(Kojève, 1943). The Authority of the Father is the power of the past over the present.

If we ask ourselves: can such a phenomenon be observed in psychotherapy groups, the answer is quite obvious.

The leader of the psychotherapeutic group is the “cause” of the existence of the group, he chooses the method, and the method begins with the setting. With the very rules by which the group analysis situation is determined. In my opinion, a detailed acquaintance with these rules determines the Authority of the leader over the future participants of the psychotherapeutic process. However, a psychotherapeutic contract not only fixes the Authority of the leader, but also introduces certain restrictions on the leader and his powers.

**Authority of Master over Slave**. Kojève writes: “Two opponents set themselves the same human goal (not an animal or biological goal) – to be recognized in their human reality, in their human dignity. The future Master passes the test of struggle and risk, while the future Slave is not able to overcome his fear (animal fear of death). He yields and throws in the towel, recognizes the superiority of the winner and obeys him as a Slave to his Master. Thus the Absolute Authority of Master over Slave is born”(Kojève, 1943).

Understanding this type of power refers to another, earlier work of Alexandre Kojève, “Outline of a Phenomenology of Right”, which, with almost behavioural accuracy, describes a person's fear of risk. A Master is one who takes the risk of asserting oneself and being recognized in his human dignity. A Slave rejects the risk in favour of security and thereby recognizes the Master as the Master. According to Kojève, the evolution of the whole mankind consists in a person finding and recognizing in himself both the Slave and the Master and becoming a Citizen.

This type of Authority is exercised in the Present and leads from the historical past to the future embodiment of a certain project.

How does this phenomenon manifest itself in psychotherapy groups? E.g., as the desire of group members to avoid the risk of understanding themselves, their feelings and desires and things taking place in the group and to surrender to the facilitator who thinks, feels, establishes connections and orders to establish them. Endowing the facilitator with reference knowledge, almost as a general practitioner who must know how to help everyone at any time in the group’s life. Avoiding the risk of being visible in the group gives the facilitator the Authority of the Master until one of the participants takes this risk, thereby revealing the Master in himself.

**Authority of the** **Leader**. The authority of a superior over a subordinate. In various situations, this can be the power of the director over the employee, the officer over the soldier, the power of the teacher over the student, the power of the scholar, the power of the soothsayer or prophet.

E.g., the authority of a teacher over a student is exercised when the student refrains from reacting to the teacher’s actions, because he believes that the teacher is already where he will only come with time – the teacher is ahead of him. Similar remarks can be made about the Authority of the Scholar. Scholars can see the depth of things where profanes see only the surface. Therefore, they can see in a better, broader and deeper way and therefore can foresee events, which sometimes strengthens and even creates the Authority of Scholars. If the authority of a Soothsayer is not questioned, then this is a pure case of the Authority of the Leader.

This is just the case of submission to power, when one who is aware that he sees worse, e.g., some process development prospects, and not so far as the other, easily concedes the right to lead and direct to the one who has a project. And thus, he consciously dismisses the possibility of opposition and obeys the actions of the other without protest, without discussion, even without any questions – he blindly follows the other. The Authority of the Leader is the Authority of the Future.

The leader of a psychotherapy group has a project, he has been trained in the method. He knows more than the group members, patients who applied to him for help, do. That is, the conductor may well claim the Authority of the Leader, and it would seem that projections of the group members on him or her as an expert having a plan to cure them are fully justified. However, the philosophy of group analysis implies significant freedom of self-expression for group members within the psychotherapeutic process. In this sense, the leader has no control over this.

**Authority of the Judge**. The Authority of the Judge is the Power of the Arbiter, the Power of the Controller, the Power of the Confessor, the Power of a just and honest person. The Authority of the Judge has nothing to do with projects or foresight. He offers nothing, but simply judges what is.

Situations are not uncommon in a group when the facilitator is addressed as the arbiter of a dispute and the therapist's neutral position in an unfolding conflict can be attacked. Some aspects of “dynamic administration” related to appealing to the rules of the group may be perceived by the members of the group and even by the conductor as assuming the authority functions, namely, the Power of the Judge.

The Authority of the Judge is the Power of Eternity. The rules almost do not change throughout the life of the group.

Thus, "pure" elementary types of Authority have been considered above. Obviously, most often we are dealing with mixed types of Authority in relations with other people and groups.

This understanding of Authority shows that the phenomenon of Authority is related to the phenomenon of Right (rules, law). Indeed, I have the right when I can do something without meeting an opposition, although it is possible in principle. But there are differences between these “related” phenomena. In the case of the Authority, any disagreement that becomes an action, for example, a discussion or a competing suggestion, destroys the Authority. On the contrary, in the case of the Right, the “reaction” can be realized without destroying the Right. The right and the rules are vested with Authority. The Right becomes the Authority for those who recognize it, it also remains the Right for those who “submit to it” without recognizing it.

The role of the right/law in group analysis belongs to the setting in the broad and narrow sense, in particular the group rules that we discuss in detail during preliminary interviews with potential group participants. The rule of free interactions, the convenience of the group venue and time, payment, including sessions that are missed, confidentiality, no interactions outside the group, the rules for leaving the group, and the regularity of visits. The group includes only those who recognize these rules, consider them suitable for themselves, when during the preliminary interviews and when discussing the group’s rules there are no disagreements as to the work schedule, financial capabilities or self-image. For example, disagreement with the idea of oneself as a very quick-tempered person, whom the leader should stop from actions in the group in case of an outburst of anger. Perhaps, the group analyst possesses and exercises his right to authority in its entirety in forming the group’s composition when selecting participants: the Authority of the Father, as the creator of the group, the Authority of the Leader, as only he has a certain project, a vision of the future group, the Authority of the Judge and the Master.

In 1964, Foulkes described the initial phase in the group as the dynamic administration phase. The group members are bewildered and frustrated, what seemed so obvious at the preliminary interviews turns out to be something else. “Omnipotence is attributed to the therapist, and there is a desire to obey him and at the same time to rebel against this desire” (Foulkes).

The transfer attitude to the leader is powerfully charged with the expectation of patients that he will assume the Authority of the Father, the Master, the Leader and the Judge and that they will depend on the Power of the Leader. The level of projections may strike with its intensity or can only be guessed at a hidden, latent level. An important role is played by the sensitivity of the leader himself to situations of power manifestation, by the extent to which he thinks of himself as a power figure in a situation of group analysis and the extent to which he is ready to practice Authority. In any case we encounter situations that are understood as resistance.

Resistance in psychoanalysis is something other than resistance to authority. And most often it manifests itself in attacking the setting and the rules, manifesting in a violation of boundaries. “At the boundaries of the therapy situation, there are always forces that both support and destroy them. The function of the therapist as an administrator is to increase the constructive forces and minimize the destructive ones” (Pines, 1984a). Violation of these boundaries is the most fruitful for therapeutic work, leading to the expression of urgent, primary conflicts. Thus, even at the very first stage of the group's life, the rules may become a subject of discussion.

E.g., during the seventh session from the beginning of work, one of the participants in a psychotherapy group declares that she is going to leave the group. She says very excitedly that she really likes the members of the group and she even would like to be friends with some of them. “I don’t like that we cannot communicate after a session! I don't want to pay money to the facilitator! I’d better buy some fruit with this money for kids, who get sick all the time!” From the preliminary interviews, I knew that the patient divorced her husband a year ago and had to go back home with her two children and live in her parents' apartment. Her very domineering mother insisted that all the money that Zinaida got after the division of property should be given to her brother to develop a business, which made it impossible to buy a separate apartment. The patient suffered as she had no connections in her hometown, as for the last ten years she had lived in the place where her husband served. Her anger at her mother, who constantly controlled her and gave commands to her, was combined with infantile need for guidance. The participants of the group hushed.

Zinaida began to fantasize about how she could communicate and be friends with some members of the group. Addressing individual members of the group, she insisted that they agree to maintain a relationship with her.

I felt angry. I thought that Zinaida used group's immaturity just like her mother took advantage of her confusion after the divorce and only increased her dependence on herself, controlling any new acquaintances of her daughter. I wanted to immediately remind her of the rules for leaving the group. One of the group members, to whom Zinaida spoke most often and insisted that immediately after the session they could continue to talk in the nearest café, said, hesitating, that there remained another four group meetings before Zinaida would cease to be a member of the therapy group. “I'm not going to attend these four sessions!!! And what will you do to me?!” These words were addressed to me and sounded as a defiance. They helped me see in the patient a little girl who defies her mother. And yes, I completely share Isobel Conlon’s views on the fact that the dynamics of the beginning of the group work are characterized by the attitude of the individual to authority and this authority is the power of the mother, not of the father at all. “It is this dependence that must first be worked on before it can be transferred to the group” (Isobel Conlon, 1991)

I responded, saying: “I cannot do anything. But it seems like you’ve got the opportunity to understand what causes such strong feelings in you and makes you run away from the group and break your obligations.” The patient was somehow confused, her expectation of a rebuff and punishment did not materialize. A space appeared for the personal history of the relationship with her mother.

If the leader of the group claims authority, declares his or her authority, then he or she must be ready to encounter a situation where the group or individual participants object, look for other options or simply disagree; thereby, according to the definition of Authority, they destroy the Authority of the Leader. But if a member of the group attacks the rules and violates them, fantasizing about punishment or anticipating a triumph, the rules will not be broken by that, they will remain the same.

In the course of the group's development, we can see how the leader, without recognizing or denying the projection of Authority, creates a situation of high uncertainty, doubt and disorder. According toAnthony E. James, this is the climate “in which therapy seems to be thriving. A leader who gives up leadership is a powerful creator of a situation producing therapeutic curiosity, exploration, self-examination, and a request from the group. The answers are in the group, not in the leader, and are rarely clearly defined.” Becoming aware of unconscious desires and expectations makes the group members replace the authority of the leader with the authority of the group. The group is gradually weaning itself off its infantile need, which exists primarily at the latent level, to be controlled in an authoritarian way. The conductor accompanies the group in this process, helping it to transfer expectations from the authority function of the leader to the group itself.

What does a group claiming Authority or exercising it look like? Morris Nitsun notes: “Foulkes did not claim that a group, having gained authority, would remain mature. I would like to emphasize that authority is not acquired once and for all. I would like to note that power, in the sense of inner belief in one's own authority, comes and goes. It both fluctuates from phase to phase and changes throughout life.”

*Clinical Vignette.* The group is at a stage when it has already overcome the frustration and chaos of the initial stage, the members of the group have tasted rivalry, anger from not understanding what was going on and partaken of the first joys of understanding, when they first clarified their relationships and not just stayed in them, but felt participation, mutual help, overcame irritation and felt acceptance, got closer to each other and feel the value of each other and the group as a whole. And now, for two sessions on end there has been peace and mutual understanding. That is the moment when the cohesion of the group becomes resistance. The members of the group are so polite and attentive to each other that it seems that the group has power over them, as something greater than the members of the group themselves or subgroups or couples that have already formed within the group. Everybody without exception seem to obey an order never to upset what seems to me a shaky balance. There are almost no silent pauses, the participants do not interrupt each other, and their stories are either about something good that has happened during the week or about minor problems, they ask questions, show sympathy and cautiosly give advice to each other. What the group is talking about at the current level falls apart for me into many unrelated stories, like beads from a string. I feel an increasing tension. I see how tense the group members are. Two of them are sitting almost on the edge of the chairs, listening attentively, as if they are ready at any moment to come to the aid of the person telling his story. One participant is anxiously shifting her gaze from one person to another, occasionally asking questions. Men are sitting very straight, like the military at a commander-in-chief's solemn reception. A young woman, who has occupied the only seat where the chair stands near the wall, is leaning against it with her eyes closed, but her body does not look relaxed. Authority has been transferred to the group. The leader follows the group, “exposing himself to currents that permeate both himself and the group” (Foulkes), “listens attentively, perceives, allows” (Foulkes). It seems that the members of the group obey a fantasy about the ideal group and ideal relationships, which is shared by everyone. However, intervention of the leader in such a situation may well become an action of authority. E.g., it can be understood as the exercise of the Authority of the Leader who sees a frozen group and decides that a process of exploration should be launched. What makes the group members break the basic rule of saying everything that comes to mind, to express themselves freely? Or is my intervention just an appeal to the setting in the broadest sense, as “the same member of the group as the others, but with special powers” (Foulkes)? What are “special powers” in terms of Authority? And how do they relate in the group analysis to democracy and pluralism in a psychotherapeutic group? In his lecture dedicated to the memory of Foulkes, Morris Nitsun expressed himself quite peremptorily: “There is an issue of real differences between the conductor and the group. Although the goal is to democratize the group process, in which the conductor becomes, in some aspects, another member of the group, at the same time he remains fundamentally different, and this cannot be denied. The conductor has been trained, has experience and still has authority, which other members of the group do not have, and it would be insincere to pretend otherwise. Beliefs of democracy may blur differences by encouraging an illusory sense of equality.” But according to the definition of authority, the leader has it only when he intends to practice it.

Back to the vignette. As the facilitator, I drew the attention of the group to the feelings that prevented them from expressing themselves freely. I wanted to direct them along the path of exploration. But as soon as I finished talking, a breath of relief swept through the group, and the postures relaxed. The group came to life, the process started, the participants continued to act out their relationships full of drama, as if forgetting about the tension that had fettered them during the last two sessions. And they did not hurry to explore what had brought them into such a state. One could actively hold onto the Leader’s Authority and insist on the need to reflect on the group’s difficulties. I followed the group, anticipating that this situation would happen again in this group and maybe more than once, which, in fact, is also the Authority of the Leader, but the Leader, who does not lead, but trusts the group.

*Clinical Vignette* A group working for three years without changes in its composition. One of the participants tells the facilitator over the phone that she has been hospitalized with a serious diagnosis and will not be able to attend the group sessions in the near future. The facilitator announces this to the group. As, session after session, one chair in the circle remains empty, participants feel more and more uneasy. There are fantasies that the sick participant will no longer return to the group. Stories are told of losses and ties broken because of death. Separation anxiety is increasing. At the eighth meeting, when the chair is still empty, there is a fantasy that when the sick participant returns, she will have to pay for all sessions that she missed. And that it would be very unfair to her. Since she has already suffered from the disease and from the surgery, and could even die. All medical procedures and medicines are very expensive now, and, besides, she would have to pay for missed sessions of the group, which she simply could not attend in her condition. Relying on the sense of justice, the group literally takes over the Authority of the Judge and renders a verdict that the sick participant should not pay for the sessions that she has missed. They also speak of their fear that otherwise she may not return to the group and may leave it. This is a group that has worked for a long time. The group has declared its Authority and wants to use it to change the Rules and to make a change in the setting, albeit in one specific case, based on its understanding of justice. But, despite the tension in the group, what is happening does not look like rebellion, riot or uprising. I sympathize with the absent participant, and I am also worried about her ability to pay for sessions that she has missed, I have no doubt about the need for this, but I feel that I am not kind and caring enough. I say that all members of the group empathize with Anna and want to rescue her so that she could continue her participation in the group. The members of the group begin to express their anger to the leader in their claims, reaching the point of absurdity, that the leader could not prevent the disease and is now so insensitive and does not want to change the rules, which may prevent Anna from returning to the group. At that moment, all eyes in the group turned to me and one of the group members asked: “So will you insist on Anna paying for all sessions that she has missed?” I wanted to rely on the rules that we all agreed on when starting the group. I myself caught the anxiety that the group would lose its integrity and start to disintegrate. On the one hand, I felt that the group, using Their Authority of the Judge, was ready to judge how sensitive and fair the leader was. But on the other hand, I felt that the Authority of the Judge making the decision, the Authority of the Father who established these rules, the Master who can ruthlessly exercise it, had already been transferred to me by the group. I did not say anything, although at that moment it was not easy. It seems that in this way I did not accept all those projections of authority.

Interrupting each other, the participants started to share unfair and simply absurd rules of school life and gave an example of traffic rules, which you have to obey. And how delighted they felt sometimes, when they violated those rules. They immediately started talking about types of transport: government motorcades of the "people's servants" and ambulances, which by and large violated the generally accepted traffic rules. And there were special rules for them. The ambulance driving along the oncoming lane with a flashing light and a siren was discussed with special enthusiasm. I thought that the group looked like a car that had been observing traffic rules for a long time and now suddenly turned into an ambulance. The group members were trying to understand what kind of car they were in at that moment. This caused a lot of anxiety. I said about that. The group responded with stories of how important it was sometimes to follow the rules, including the traffic rules, even when you know for sure that there are no cameras and the crossroads are empty. And how it filled you with self-esteem and sometimes even brought pleasure.

I chose the last vignette as an example showing that matters of authority are acted out and come to the foreground during various periods of the group's life. This vignette is also an illustration of how a Citizen is born in Kojève's terms. The self-esteem and satisfaction that were mentioned in the group are signs that the Master and the Slave are recognized intrapsychically. This always happens based on rules, on the Right/Law.

To conclude, I would like to say that transferring authority to a group is not a one-time act. That wonderful and disturbing moment when the members of the group begin to overcome their inner need for dependence only on the leader and begin to be interested in other members of the group and to establish contacts with them is only the beginning of the journey. In one of the therapeutic groups at this stage, a fantasy arose that the members of the group were like babies in a sandpit, but under the supervision of an older adult. “But we can mold any Easter cakes!” one of the participants exclaimed. We see that there is already some freedom for self-expression, but also a reference to the Authority of the Father, as an elder adult.

I think that the very process of transferring authority to the group and the moments when the leader of the group decides to declare his authority depends on the personality of the leader, on how dramatic his experience of socialization is, for it never takes place without encountering authoritative figures. There is also dependence on his understanding of justice and his willingness to practice it, recognizing and meeting his inner totalitarian object or ignoring it.

In other words, a group analyst is interested in an ever-increasing knowledge of himself and his relations of Authority.

If we turn to the definition of Authority: “Authority belongs to the one who performs changes, not to the one who is changed,” it becomes clear that the method itself contains limitations of totalitarian practice of Authority by the leader. Every therapeutic group changes us, but understanding and recognizing such changes also depends on the personality of the leader and his or her sensitivity and willingness to look for answers together with the group members, not for them.

Thus, Authority and its modalities are distributed differently and creatively in the group each time, allowing the group and its participants to discover and begin the process of interaction with their inner Master, Slave, Judge and Father, thereby training ego in action.

I hope that the definition of Authority developed in sociology will help understand and comprehend group processes in psychotherapeutic groups.

Thank you for your attention!