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THE AUTHORITY
OF THE ADULT EDUCATION LECTURER
AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT

Authority remains one of the most contested yet indispensable concepts in contemporary adult education. This paper explores the authority of the adult education lecturer from philosophical, sociological, and pedagogical perspectives. It highlights the interdependence of authority, freedom, and responsibility in adult learning environments. Building upon previous theoretical work, the study integrates an empirical component based on interviews with Czech adult education lecturers, identifying major dimensions of authority in practice. The discussion situates these findings within current debates on lifelong learning, democratic education, and professional ethics.

Key words: lecturer's authority, adult education, freedom, responsibility, lifelong learning, andragogy, educational ethics

Introduction

In recent decades, the sciences of upbringing, education, and teaching have been enriched by interdisciplinary perspectives, particularly those arising from philosophy, sociology, and psychology. One persistent and complex issue within this evolving framework is the question of authority – not only in relation to educational processes but also as a reflection of broader social transformations (Arendt, 1994; Jarvis, 2021).

Authority in education is shaped by pluralization of life forms, globalization, cultural diversification, and crises of values and democracy. These phenomena influence the relationship between the educator and the learner, reshaping expectations concerning freedom, autonomy, and mutual respect (UNESCO, 2022; Rabušicová, 2024). The current discourse calls for renewed understanding of authority as a relational, dialogical, and ethically grounded phenomenon rather than a remnant of hierarchical systems.

Theoretical Background

Authority has long been interpreted as a multidimensional concept. The Latin *auctoritas* conveys meanings of credibility, trust, and moral legitimacy rather than mere power (Kučerová, 1999). Contemporary theorists emphasize that authority should not be confused with authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950; Arendt, 1994).

According to Tureckiová (2009), an *authoritative* educator combines competence with empathy, fostering discipline through respect rather than coercion. This distinction aligns with recent studies on professional identity and reflective practice in adult learning (Brookfield, 2021; Illeris, 2022).

Authority may be viewed simultaneously as a social relationship and a personal characteristic. From a sociological perspective, it is context-dependent and relational: authority is granted, recognized, and sustained through interaction (Vališová & Kovaříková, 2021). In pedagogical contexts, authority may stem from professional knowledge (epistemic authority), ethical integrity (moral authority), or relational trust (affective authority).

Typologies of authority (Vališová, 2008; Kron, 1989) continue to provide a useful framework, yet they must now account for the digital and post-pandemic educational environments in which informal, participatory, and hybrid forms of teaching predominate (OECD, 2023; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

Methodological Framework of the Study

The research adopted a *qualitative interpretative approach* aimed at examining how adult education lecturers in the Czech Republic conceptualize and exercise their authority in everyday practice.

Research aim and questions: the main goal was to identify the perceived sources and manifestations of lecturer authority in adult education. The study addressed two questions:

1. How do lecturers define and sustain their authority in interactions with adult learners?

2. How do they balance authority, freedom, and responsibility within the learning process?

In attempt to clarify the concept of authority, it is essential to recognize the need for its scientific interpretation. As a broad and complex domain, authority can be interpreted from the perspectives of various scientific disciplines, with each focusing on particular aspects and viewpoints. There is no consensus regarding the conceptual definition of authority; it is a complicated term whose usage is often imprecise. It frequently obscures or overlaps with a wide range of other related concepts, such as freedom, manipulation, responsibility, power, values, tradition, law, duty, discipline, and more.

The etymology of the term is particularly interesting. The Latin word *auctoritas* implies support, guarantee, certainty, reliability, and credibility, and carries additional positive meanings. The related word *auctor* signifies a supporter, patron, role model, example, or predecessor. The root of both words – the verb *augere* – can be interpreted in several ways: to support growth, to increase, to expand, to enrich, to endow. Social reality and historical development often shift and transform these meanings. The idea that authority is contrary to freedom and democracy emerged from an identification of authority with violence, or from reducing influence merely to coercion and suppression.

It is, of course, difficult to estimate the extent to which this widespread perception of authority reflects its association with authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950). The semantic association of the two terms is often surprising – not only among practitioners who conflate them (teachers, lecturers, participants in lifelong learning programmes) but even among some theorists. In contrast, a consistent distinction between the terms 'authoritative' and 'authoritarian' in relation to leadership styles in andragogy is made by Tureckiová (2009, pp. 99-100), as an example.

Adorno's research team focused primarily on ethnocentric, anti-semitic, patriarchal, and fascist prejudices and attitudes. Their extensive research into prejudice aimed to determine the extent to which hostility toward one ethnic group or another 'out-group' indicates hostility toward other ethnic minorities and external groups. From their research and analysis, the authors concluded that such a set of attitudes appears to be part of a broader personality structure. They termed it authoritarianism – the authoritarian personality. In connection with concepts such as anti-democratic, fascist, or totalitarian, it becomes evident that the issue of the authoritarian personality significantly transcends the boundaries of social sciences and social psychology alone. This theme has also entered the field of education studies and disciplines such as management theory, organizational theory, and others, both theoretically and in application. More recent revisions of Adorno's original concept highlight the connection between the authoritarian personality and one's social status,

as well as the link between authoritarianism and various ways of perceiving and interpreting the world, attitudes, and convictions.

If we attempt to define authority within the field of education science, we can state that 'authority is by its nature an anthropological constant that co-creates the rules of group life, the organizational order of the group, contributes to its biological survival, the development of individuals, and the transmission of experience from generation to generation' (Kučerová, 1999, p. 73). It becomes a guarantor of positive value structures, an essential precondition for the development of human potential, and the foundation of societal functioning in the broadest sense (Wróbel, 2006).

To clarify the issue of authority, a multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach is essential - one that synthesizes philosophical, sociological, psychological, and pedagogical perspectives.

Sample and data collection: twelve lecturers ($N = 12$) from public universities and private training institutions participated. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between March and June 2024. Participants represented diverse fields (humanities, engineering, social sciences) and varying levels of teaching experience.

Data analysis: interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Three dominant categories emerged: (1) professional credibility, (2) relational trust, and (3) moral consistency.

Ethical considerations: participation was voluntary, and anonymity was ensured. The study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Chemistry and Technology, Prague.

Findings and Discussion

When considering authority as a social relationship – that is, a reciprocal connection between the bearer of authority and the recipient – it is necessary to recognize two fundamental aspects:

– The aspect of relativity – an individual gains authority during a specific period of time, in relation to their social environment, to certain people, or particular groups (e.g., in the workplace, within the family, in an interest group); they may not possess the same 'degree of authority' across different contexts of their influence.

– The aspect of asymmetry – the bearer of authority establishes a relationship of superiority and subordination, of leadership and followership; the asymmetry of the relationship may stem from the formal position of the authority figure, but also from their informal status or a combination of both. The recipient of influence validates the existence of authority by acknowl-

edging, respecting, and accepting the influence of the authority figure (see Vališová & Kovaříková, 2021, pp. 179-191).

An awareness of the social conditionality of authority calls into question the notion that authority is a personal trait an individual possesses regardless of their surroundings – even though certain personality characteristics may indeed facilitate the acquisition and maintenance of authority. In a social context, authority can be interpreted in terms of social roles (as a process of leading and following – for example, lecturer and learner, parent and child, teacher and student, leader and group member). These social roles complement one another, but are asymmetrical – in the end, it is essential to respect the specific nature of these roles and the associated competencies and responsibilities.

The analysis confirms that authority in adult education is not imposed but *earned* through a combination of professional expertise and human authenticity. Lecturers described authority as a dynamic process requiring continuous negotiation with learners.

Cognitive and disciplinary dimension

Participants emphasized the importance of expertise, clear structure, and coherence of instruction. Authority based on knowledge (*epistemic authority*) was perceived as foundational, particularly in technical and professional courses (Beneš, 2014; OECD, 2023).

Relational and communicative dimension

Trust and empathy were crucial in building and sustaining authority. Adult learners expect equality in dialogue, yet they appreciate the lecturer's guidance and clarity. This supports the concept of *shared authority* (Illeris, 2022), where both parties co-construct the learning process.

Ethical and personal dimension

Lecturers associated authority with responsibility, authenticity, and moral coherence. They perceived ethical integrity as a condition of credibility — echoing earlier philosophical reflections by Arendt (1994) and recent studies in educational ethics (Rabušicová, 2024).

The results suggest that effective authority integrates three interrelated levels:
– *epistemic authority* (knowledge and competence),
– *relational authority* (trust and communication),
– *moral authority* (integrity and responsibility).

This triadic model aligns with current debates on transformative learning and lecturer identity (Illeris, 2022; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

Conclusion

Authority has long played a significant role in addressing numerous educational phenomena. Foremost among these is the direct relationship between authority and education (Rich, 1982). This relationship can be viewed and discussed on three interrelated levels, which are mutually dependent and converge in content:

– Macrosocial level – this encompasses the relationship between authority and education within society, arising from the norms and values of the family, educational institutions, and society in the broadest context.

– Microsocial or interindividual level – here the focus is on values, behavioural norms, rules, and principles that are shaped, for example, by family life or interaction patterns within educational institutions. The key interest lies in uncovering specific situational behaviours, forming the level of everyday interactions between educators and current learners.

– Intraindividual level – this aims to examine how acting individuals adapt to norms and value orientations.

The core of the relationship between authority and education lies in the fact that social norms and values are embedded in authority and are reinforced through it. The way they are presented is inherently a matter of the educational process, the applied methods of instruction, and is related to the degree of emotional connection between lecturers and adult learners. Based on this premise, we can argue that education and authority are so closely intertwined that they cannot be separated from each other.

The conflict between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian tendencies remains central to education. Yet, the empirical findings demonstrate that genuine authority in adult learning emerges from dialogical interaction, not subordination.

Authority and freedom must therefore be viewed as *mutually reinforcing* rather than contradictory. The lecturer's authority grows when learners experience respect, intellectual challenge, and moral consistency. Educational institutions lacking legitimate authority risk losing their formative function and credibility.

To strengthen the authority of adult education lecturers, we recommend:

1. Supporting continuous professional development focused on reflective and ethical competencies.

2. Encouraging participatory teaching methods that balance structure with learner autonomy.

3. Promoting institutional cultures that recognize authority as relational trust rather than administrative power.

In this sense, the authority of the lecturer remains an indispensable element of democratic education — one that integrates freedom, responsibility, and human dignity.

Authors contributions
The authors confirms being the sole contributor of this work.

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