

## **Psychotherapy, the family and authority, from the first encounter to the session**

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### **Abstract**

The crisis of the culture goes along with a crisis of authority in families: the author questions about the role of authority in family psychotherapy sessions as well as in individual psychoanalysis, both with adults and children. Nowadays, indeed, the therapeutic setting is often violated. Considering these transgressions, how can one think, analyse, interpret or even act?

**Keywords:** authority, family therapy, group transference, family group.

Since it is said that psychoanalysis is no longer involved with authority, the psychoanalytic psychotherapist should have nothing to do with it. Should his clinical work concern the authority? Should he prove or act authority during the session? How does he deal with, how does he analyse these problems of authority that are more and more frequent in consultations? Does authority have anything to do with the psychoanalytic process?

After deciding to face this question I felt some anxiety. I managed to get over it with the passage of time and most of all with the help of many discussions with colleagues. I want to thank all of them and particularly André Carel who keeps training us since 2002, with constancy and a wonderful freedom of words and thought. In particular, I refer to the work done by the College during the 2002 congress and published in issue 10 of the magazine "Groupal".

### **The meaning of authority**

If we want to place authority at the heart of our reflection, we need to seek the real meaning of this word so that we won't be confused about its possible interpretations. In the French language, if we look in the Larousse dictionary, authority is defined as the power to act upon someone else. A quote from Marcel Jouhandeau in "Monsièr Godeau intime" (1926): "The cruellest necessity was the one that came from others. Why should he have felt more irritated about the authority of a man and less about the height of a mountain standing in his way? If he was tired, he would go around it, as much as possible. If he could not go around it, he would rise above and over it. And when he had placed both feet on the head of the mountain, for which he felt love more than hate, he would turn back, gaze at the landscape of the world and discover the furthest horizon". Here we have the fine oedipal ambivalence of the son towards the father as described by Jouhandeau, an ambivalence that does not negate confrontation in the process of growth. This unavoidable oedipal conflict, with its sorrows, suffering and renunciation, bearer of relief, of prowess, makes it possible to see further and gives its full meaning to the question of authority.

A second meaning in the Larousse refers to the authority of the state, the supreme power of a prince, a text or a judgment and raises a division of the spirit, a reaction of prudence or suspicion. Does authority in psychoanalytic practice or in the family have the same meaning and function, it has in the social or political field? Needless to say, I do not wish to hold such power over my patients, nor indeed over their behaviour. I do not wish for them to obey me. I wish for them to respect me, which is not the same thing. Although, at times... On the other hand some parents, counsellors, teachers do look for obedience. It is a common, sometimes imperious or threatening, request.

Larousse also mentions the “being seen as the authority”. This social function of being seen as the authority talks about assurance, firmness, energy and is far from being insignificant. It may be put in the service of propping up many people, even a whole population, particularly in the field of health. There is a connection here with Freud's idea that caring services have to tolerate to “mix the copper of suggestion with the pure gold of psychoanalysis” (1918). Using the authority as a tool of suggestion would be a transgression of the psychoanalytic rule. In addition, the social function of being seen as the authority, imposing one's rule, having force of proof, and therefore credit, guarantee or fame may just as easily serve a wrong cause. It must at the very least be set within a field of competence, outside of which it becomes abusive. It can also be placed at the service of the narcissism of the person who is seen as the authority or at the service of the inability to think for themselves of the followers of such a person. These are the mechanism that we can see in the crowd psychology or in the sects that go adrift. Trivially, the psychotherapist can be utilised as guarantee. I have always been bothered by “did you listen to what the doctor said?”

“Doing something with authority” is a bit different: it evokes strength of character and ease in the exercise of one's duties. It inspires respect, admiration, it makes it possible to assert oneself. Equally it can slip into insolence, arrogance or paranoia.

“Doing something on one's own authority” clearly marks independence of action with respect to the judgment of the group or of the environment. It may be remarkable or unacceptable depending on the point of view.

Therefore, on the social scene authority is not an absolute right and its use is always regulated in a contractual manner, through rules concerning its attribution as well as its exercise. It is linked to a definite field of competence and it is practiced within a specific field. On the internal psychic scene the exercise of authority is subject to the criticism of a more or less benevolent Ideal Super-Ego, linked to the memory of one's own infantile experiences of authority, but equally inherited from one's ancestors and from the memory of previous generations. . . In turn, the encounter with authority and being subject to it supplies and transforms the psychic functioning and, in particular, the complex organism of the Ideal Super-Ego. It is useful to remember that the word authority comes from the Latin *autoritas*, derived from *Augeo* which means to increase. I hope to have brought out two things so far: first that authority is necessary

and structuring for psychic development, for the functioning of groups and society. Secondly, whatever the shape it takes, authority cannot be considered as the interaction of individual psyches. It is necessary to take into account intersubjective, transubjective, groupal and cultural aspects. This is a major change in perspective with many consequences, but we must experience this process with our patients in the transference. Transgressive fantasies in dealing with these types of issues would then belong to the extension of psychoanalysis to the functioning of groups and families. This change in perspective may upset the way we work and our comfort zones.

If one manages to make this leap into the unknown, the question will arise from the point of view of the “processes of authority”. These are lively and extremely complex dynamics. According to André Carel, they produce and are the result of many inter and intra psychic operations, centred around the transformation of the Super-ego and the Ideal Ego. I always quote this author because he puts it clearly: “these operations generate psychic growth and/or suffering” (2002). These operations are “contextualised through a socio-cultural community of belonging” (2002). Beyond the fact that any clinical encounter may be seen as an intercultural encounter, this socio-cultural reference concerns family, group and institutional ideals and therefore systems of values. These family, group, and institutional values bring about loyalties, feelings of belonging, narcissistic values and confirmation of identities. It is necessary to take the utmost consideration before proceeding with any analysis. I personally think about it as a large cake we do not have the recipe of but only an incomplete list of ingredients, each of them representing a function of authority.

### **The functions of authority**

I shall also use these different functions as a common theme to show how I see the exercise of authority in consultations or sessions from the point of view of the therapist in a group session.

### **The protective function**

This function of authority seems obvious: the young child depends on an adult to survive. Some dangers do not need to be explained, such as external ones: “*Give me your hand to cross the road!*”. Others rely on trust or a formal imperative: “*Because I do ask you, that's all!*”. This applies to internal dangers: “*No, I won't allow you to watch these images!*”. The question of how to explicate authority is a problem in itself: the obvious “*It's no good for you!*” is the favourite of many. But in other situations, the evidence is missing, or the explanation will not be readily available. If we attempt: “*Because it is too exciting for your age!*” we run the risk of being asked “*what does that mean, exciting?*”. Not everything can or must be explained, for fear of bringing about in fantasy what we attempt to avoid in reality. As Jean-Pierre Caillot (2015) tells us, within a family the prohibition of incest must prevail, but it does not need to be uttered, at least not all the time and not under just any conditions, so to avoid the danger of incestuousness. The problem lies in the possibility of

explaining or acting protective attitudes in a non-sexualized way. The nervousness of those who act authority will mean for the patient that the other is entering as well in the area of co-excitement. He thus adds fuel to the fire he tried to extinguish.

### **The limiting setting function**

Setting limits is linked to two sub items: the setting of boundaries and the structuring of an inside/outside psychic space on the one hand and the support for these boundaries, that is to say the containing function, on the other. The metaphor of the “Ego Skin” elaborated by Didier Anzieu (1998) obviously speaks about the first function, the second one, the containing one, is expressed through the voice of W.R. Bion. These protective and limiting functions of authority are supported in the symbolic world by the two fundamental prohibitions of murder and incest. “No, you cannot hit your brother!” Or “No, I won’t allow you to touch my breast!” They present themselves as a support for the Super-Ego under threat of violence from the instinct, an offer to the Super-Ego, as André Carel puts it (2002). The pulsional intensity can threaten the frontiers of the various kinds of love or aggression and, moreover, it urges the strength of the Super-Ego that needs to be rescued.

The rules regarding these prohibitions bear down on patients and psychotherapists alike, with the difference that therapists have a responsibility for them and that their actions or not actions may be endowed with a transgressive signification or one of complicity with transgression.

In its paternal version, the setting of limits which may go, and sometimes should go, as far as direct confrontation is not a proof of the parent's hatred for the child, but quite the opposite, a proof of love, attention and concern for him. This parental or therapeutic ability to say no, to oppose, to face or confront if necessary, may be impeded. It may paradoxically engender incestuous or murderous fantasies, or the fear of being hated or of losing the trust of the family, of parents, sometimes of colleagues.

*An example: A mother came to me for help with her little girl Anaïs, aged 4, who has terrible tantrums and is constantly undermining her authority. In the first two meetings I am struck by the omnipotence of this little girl and the very contemptuous words she uses about her mother. At the third session, she crosses the boundary asking about my private life which I point out to her. She flies into a tyrannical tantrum and demands her mother to take her back home. Mother prevaricates, asks me what to do and we agree to shorten the session and meet again later. But Anaïs refuses to leave and starts violently hitting her mother. Without any further thought I grab her and sit down in my chair holding her firmly in my arms. She shrieks and struggles, and I am obliged to use my full physical strength to hold her, avoid hurting her and prevent her from hurting me. I tell her as calmly as I can that I shall only let her go when she calms down and we can speak. The whole thing goes on for about thirty minutes, in the presence of her mother. I am soaked with perspiration and so is*

*Anaïs. When I begin to progressively let her go, she slowly goes back to her mother and they kiss tenderly. A few months later the mother tells me that she has been able to use “my technique” twice and that their relationship has greatly improved. It would be presumptuous to attribute this improvement to “my technique”, but it allowed the mother to manage a concrete situation with her daughter and to go on elaborating “her own issue of obedience with her own mother” - who meddled unduly in her daughter's private and conjugal matters. . .*

This limiting function is an essential component of containing. It sometimes needs to be experienced concretely, to be bodily experimented before it becomes possible to think and internalise it. It is not always easy to take on board as it engenders so many contradictions and therefore disjunctions in containing. I am referring and referring you to Didier Houzel's work on the bisexuality of psychic envelopes. To put it simply he considers that disjunctions in containing between the maternal and the paternal may occur at different levels under particular circumstances. They may occur at archaic levels within a person or go as far as interacted levels between individuals. Parents quarrel about the education of their children or two institutions quarrel whilst “forgetting” the patient. We are reminded of the phenomenon of the hot potato. In any event, the integration of psychic bisexuality in relation to authority consists in the right synthesis between tenderness and firmness, when at the other extreme there is the iron hand in a velvet glove, hardness and control masked under seductiveness.

### **The carrying function**

Carrying is not often quoted as a function of authority and yet in its maternal form, made up of tender love as much as of solid firmness it is essential to the constitution of the sense of being of the baby. Winnicott clearly linked holding with the sense of being and of wellbeing of the baby. This integration of psychic bisexuality is facilitated by regression, the parent puts himself “at the level” of the child in every sense of the term. The parent recruits the attention of the baby through a gentle smile and a game of presence-absence: “I'm here, what about you?” If the baby gets lost into the excitement of his needs, the parent, not too disturbed, may contain him and go find him there. For example: lightly stroking his chin with a comforting voice: “Hello sweetie, mummy's here!” What about you, are you here? Head tilted to the side, invitingly! A “play signal” is triggered at the same time: the parent smiles and coaxes the baby into smiling, which distracts him from his need: “Ah, there you are!” The head straightens up and the smile leads to talking: “Oh dear, you're hungry, you're very hungry, is mummy going to keep you waiting? Is she?” “Yes, she's going to keep you waiting just a little longer. Well she shouldn't keep you waiting too long now, should she!” Etc.

This whole carrying activity requires the mother being actor, authorised and amused. Let us remind ourselves that the roots of the word authority, actors and authors are the same. This is the way I encourage my colleagues in training to develop this

carrying activity in the session, through freeing their spontaneous creativity as much as possible, reducing their fear of transgressing the rules, elaborating their phobic tendency not to intervene for fear of being incestuous or murderous, but orienting this carrying activity more towards the baby family rather than directly towards the child in the family.

### **The accompanying function**

The accompanying [*agogique*] function of authority may allow us to reconcile psychotherapy with education. The latin etymology itself derives from the Greek: *paidagogikos*. The teacher [*pédagogue*] in ancient Greece is a slave who accompanies the child to his master (Agein = take to). This dimension of authority is preparatory to the exposition-submission to the authority of the master. It's a transitional function which is noted for the "next to", "accompanying" position, in empathy with the patient of authority. This function rests on the fact that the therapist, the parent or the teacher acknowledges and undertakes this submissive part, respectful of authority, and does not project it into the child. This accompanying position oscillates or switches place with the position of confrontation, not necessarily less friendly, but which can bear not being friendly or can even bear the hatred brought about by refusal, whereas the accompanying version rather tends to avoid it.

Here is a brief example:

*A little 4 year old girl whom I have gone to fetch from the waiting room with her mother has planted herself at the entrance to my office and is looking at me, her body leaning forward, a resolute yet expectant expression on her face, as if ready to leap, or waiting for something specific and clear from my part. Her mother has gone ahead and is already settling in a chair. She says "come along Myriam". But the little girl doesn't move. I say, "Hello Myriam, I am the doctor your mummy talked about. This is my office. Here are my things, you musn't touch them. You can move around here and here is the cupboard where we keep the toys that you can use and here is the table with the pencils if you want to draw". All of this is uttered by me in one go, with no hesitation whatsoever. Myriam immediately relaxes. She comes into the room and goes to lean against her mother's chair.*

My invitation to Myriam is clearly a matter of accompaniment, but the outlining of the geography of the office conveys some tension on my part: I was somewhat fearful about the "wild child" aspect of this little girl. It is equally possible that I was unconsciously irritated by the fact that Mother didn't take on the accompanying function with her little girl or that she even had the child carry her own reticence or negative transference.

Another clinical space where this function unfolds is the road that leads from the request for a consultation to the psychotherapy space. The analysis of the request, the pre-alliance based on the "being seen as the authority", may bring the parental or

family group to consider its request in a new way and to reformulate it in terms that may have an effect. The time between the first request and the therapeutic alliance within the setting may sometimes be the most important or the longest one on the way towards feeling better and it is necessary to accompany it.

*Example: A parental couple asks for a consultation about a 12 years old child, clearly precocious but in a state of clinical depression. A first individual treatment lasting a few months quickly leads to some relief as well as a recommendation for a test with a view to possibly “skipping a year”. During this period it appears that a difficulty within the couple disturbs the atmosphere within the family and causes anxiety for the child. When I see the parents without the child, they assure me that they are looking into couple therapy. Two years later the child contacts me again. After we have reviewed his own vulnerabilities and noted that he is doing rather well, I ask about the “real” reason for his coming. He says that his parents are not well. We speak about this for a while and he says that he's going to deal with it. Very cleverly at the time when his parents come to settle the session, he speaks of his worry about going abroad on a school trip leaving his sister alone with them. Father bursts into tears and confesses his shame at not being up to what his children expect of and need from him, in particular concerning what they should or should not be told. As he sees that I have a question about this he asks his son to go out for a bit. He then very quickly speaks of three recent suicides in the family and recurrent difficulties in his couple. When the boy comes back in the room I mention that a possible way of working “here” would be to set up some family sessions. The parents could see to their couple issues elsewhere. The boy gives me a knowing look and adds, looking at his father, that he's going to enjoy his trip.*

The accompanying function was clearly carried by the child in this instance and I wanted to relieve him of it. I had to think very fast during the exchange with these parents. It seemed more logical to me to offer a space for the family rather than for the couple which would eject the child and promote a fantasy of reversal of the parents children places.

### **Authority and transference: inhabiting one's place and one's function?**

The processes of functional authority are rooted in an asymmetry of places. This asymmetry is not just a matter of fact (there are big people and small people) but it also symbolises the difference between the generations: there are parents and there are children. It is the difference between the generations which accounts for the asymmetry concerning the exercise of authority in therapy. I mean by that that this asymmetry endows the therapist with a responsibility concerning the means of therapy, maintaining the setting for example or spotting the tendencies in families to undo these differences. The way each individual occupies these places within the generational order is linked to numerous misadventures within the individual and

familial histories and gets expressed through the present circumstances of the session. It is true of the family, but it is also true of the therapist within the family. This means that in a session therapists are psychically called upon to engage with two issues : their own personal positions concerning these asymmetries and authority within their history, but also the way they allow themselves to be pulled by the encounter with the family or the group into occupying particular places in the transference

Thus it can be said that the processes of authority are consubstantial products of the whole family structure, organisation and functioning. It is a major axis for the analysis of the psychic, concrete and social functionality of the family. If we see more and more families experiencing difficulties with or actual disturbances in the processes of authority, we can also glimpse behind the screen of appearances and official requests the fact that this happens in relation to poorly represented or poorly symbolised parents-children differences. The parents' parents, the ancestors' ways of being are projected into and acted by the child who is then accused of not obeying. In its extreme form, places are not occupied by the right people.

*Example: During preliminary family consultations set up at the request of the mother, I find myself hesitant as to what therapeutic setting to recommend, knowing that the father is already being treated individually and that the son doesn't want to come for himself. The main symptom consists of violent fights between the father and his son. Ending up in repeated visits to the Emergency Services. The boy is becoming unmanageable at school. The mother is unable to cope. She avoids any conflict with her son but ends up fighting with his father, She says at one point that she doesn't know if she should separate from the father, who, on top of it, has been unfaithful, or whether she should send her son to boarding school. But as the father is having a breakdown, that makes things more complicated. All of this is spoken in front of the boy's young brothers. I say that everything is rather mixed up in my mind. She then tells the following story: when she was a child , she used to live with her father, her mother and a younger brother. Father decided to separate from mother and go off with his daughter, leaving the brother with the mother. But he couldn't take the separation and wanted to come back home. In the intervening period his wife had taken a lover. She then went to live with her lover leaving the flat to her ex-husband and her daughter. Except that she would come to the flat "to meet with" them. Their daughter, the person telling the story, was instructed not to mention these meetings to the lover and when asked to answer him that she didn't know where her mother was. The original couple, for unclear reasons, bought another flat which remained empty for a while. Then, as the relationship between the mother and the lover deteriorated, it seemed obvious to them that they should live separately and the flat bought by the couple was offered to the lover, whilst she, herself, carried on living in the lover's flat. They went on "also meeting". And thus, until the death of my patient's mother, the lover went on living in the flat that had been bought by the legitimate couple, where he would meet his sweetheart, whilst she lived in her lover's flat. The patient's father*

*is still living in the legitimate couple's original flat which actually belongs, through inheritance, to my patient's mother.*

Listening to this I was gripped by an intense confusion and had to have the story repeated twice. The confusion of places was so spectacular, the content at once so exciting and terrifying that it had become traumatic. It is only in the après-coup of the session that I was able to make the link between the story told by the mother and my difficulty in imagining adequate settings for treating this family's problems. Thus the child was utilised to process a wounded infantile part of the parent. But the child can also be used to express the parent's negative transference to the therapist. It may be what is happening for Myriam, the little wild child I mentioned earlier. The parent asks for help for his child but may not bear to see the therapist succeed where he himself has failed. It is a paradoxical situation, very delicate to handle within a fragile narcissistic context where the parent cannot bear to see himself as lacking, or incompetent or even bad. The therapist's knowledge and savoir faire is both at once called upon and attacked. The therapist's benevolent attitude, tolerating being loved and hated, put in the place of the child or in the place of the bully, may then make it possible for the parents to learn his job as a parent: to give love whilst setting boundaries and ensuring that they are respected.

### **Obstacles in the exercise of authority: the counter-transference**

Whatever the usual style of our practice, when the exercise of authority is brought into play so it is the counter-transference. Most of the time it happens immediately, even before we become conscious of it. Our pre-conscious works much quicker than the more laborious conscious. It is alerted by attitudes, expressions, actions. This is how we pick up on a provocation even before we think about it. The importance of the “glance” is not to be underestimated.

The main flow of our counter-transference may manifest itself in positive aspects which we do not complain about, when, for example, we are granted “the full authority of the specialist”, or in defensive aspects or even with strong feelings of aversion. It can happen, it happens to me often, that we are overwhelmed by a strong feeling of hostility when faced with parents who do not exert any authority, letting their children, in front of us, undertake any exploration, from handbags, to blouses, to underside of chairs or of skirts. In cases like these, we do not feel very keen to set up a treatment which will take us some distance from our comfort zone. We will have to bear the hatred immediately engendered by a direct act of authority in relation to the child in the session. It gets even more complicated if one has to bear the parents' hatred, who may feel like children and be complicit with them. “*No, you can't let your son go poking under your skirt. It's no good, either for him now, or for his later development*”. Thus, I remember parents who had complained to the prosecutor that I had hit their son during an assessment. It was very unpleasant. I had not hit him, but I had thrown him out of the office, grabbing him quite vigorously, it is true, by the

shoulders. They had hit him after they had left, leaving strong marks on his face, and they showed it to the procurator.

Without going as far as this type of misadventure, it may happen that we do not feel like undertaking the setting of boundaries for a child or an adult, or even a family, during a session for fear of losing the therapeutic alliance. This is a reasoning one often hears during review meetings between therapists and institutions. I am not sure it is a good idea.

On the other hand, I am certain that it is not necessary to wait until we are provoked by a child or a family to set a boundary or a prohibition. We may be easy receptacles for anti-authoritarian projections that make us take a step back or differ when we are expected to stand firm. In addition, we have a psychoanalytic culture which has always favoured thinking and verbal interpretation over direct intervention.

### **Authority, from “why to do” to “how to do”**

“the exam of the not overcome together” as André Carel (2002) puts it, enables the “transmission-elaboration” of a protective Superego which promotes growth, narcissism and autonomy. This formulation contains several apparent paradoxes that need to be explained:

- The “not exam” is not, as I have pointed out earlier, the sign of a lack of love, but on the contrary the sign of a more highly elaborated love.
- Secondly, obeying is not synonymous with being dependent, nor is rebelling or challenging a proof of independence. The “not exam” prepares for the capacity to distinguish one's own wish from the will of the other, as Hanna Arendt said (1954). It teaches to decide and to submit to one's own decisions in order to bring them to fruition, in other words, to get interested.
- Through its limiting function it makes it possible to “feel contained” and allows for the preservation of Objects and of the Self against destructiveness. The symmetrical internal movements of the individuals, namely refusal, rebellion, hatred, suffering, projection, internalisation, transformation, relief and gratitude bring about the transformation of an archaic Super-Ego into a moderate Super-Ego.
- It will be emphasised that the confrontation with authority is a factor of differentiation and individuation. In the intersubjective realm, it separates and allows the encounter of the individuals. In the intra-subjective realm, it creates a distance between the ego's thoughts and feelings. Conscience and emotions are distinguished and brought into relation.
- Finally, it contributes to de-condensing internal constraining and projected representations and to transform protective imagos.

All of this leads to a much more direct and active technique in consultations and in sessions, relying less on protracted waiting and verbal interpretation. Learning the play of authority in the session allows for an adjusting of positions, from the “being with” which starts with carrying, to the direct confrontation of the “no”, through

messages conveyed with the use of puppets, the game without any rules of the squiggle, overlaid attitudes or psychodramas staging. The shift for us in many situations, even seemingly neurotic ones, in groups or family, is having to promote feelings-thoughts during the session, perceiving them, then playing them or overlaying them before possibly naming them.

The staging: Example: mother, father, 10 years old Mathieu, 13 years old Chloé, my co-therapist and myself. 6<sup>th</sup> session.

*The mother, supported by father's gaze, wants to "make her son speak" and relates the review meeting the three of them had with the teacher. This meeting followed on from a violent incident in the schoolyard which resulted in a broken wrist for one of the school friends. Mathieu's results are dropping despite a strong potential. Under the pressure of projective assignation from the mother who denies being physically violent the way her parents were with her, Mathieu loses his way and doesn't know how to be himself, cannot find his words or cannot think in front of us. The mother insists and adds that she can no longer stand her son's inappropriate words.*

*The co-therapist asks what words? For instance: "Very good mummy, you're doing well. You concentrated and didn't raise your hand to hit me!" Mother confirms, "You see how little respect he shows me!" My co-therapist tries to support Mathieu, but father takes over. "So, what did the teacher say?" I then suggest a role play. I ask Chloé if she will be the teacher scolding a child and I shall be the child. Chloé is delighted and plays a teacher who truly wants to help the child and looks for solutions with him. I play a shameful child, seeking excuses for himself: a sister who bothers him, friends who attack him. Everyone laughs. But my idea is to stage the adult child reversal. When I stop the game within about ten minutes, Mathieu then spontaneously tells us what the teacher said. Mother associates to a discussion she had with Mathieu when he was two and a half. Mathieu had asked her: "Is sharing [échanger] synonymous with speaking?" She remembers having been terrified by such precociousness. She had thought that she would be unable to cope with this boy's intelligence and God knows she needs to be in control she adds!. I was thinking of little Mathieu's question: "Is sharing synonymous with speaking?" Did it mean that speaking meant exchanging places.*

The play, dramatize in this particular circumstance, could be considered a communicative action but it actually is more than this. First, it clearly frees Mathieu from the projective assignment in which he is blocked and relaunches the associative process within the family. The idea of staging the parent-child reversal opens new horizons where previously there was a closed and limited projection in the past. The mother was terrified of her son's earliness. We do not know if she had imagined a conflictual teenager or if this earliness had faced her with a feeling of a-differentiation of generations. Whether it is "doodle", psychodrama or other tools, the feature of the game is the fact that, starting from an initial idea, a whole series of new

and unexpected perspectives can open up. This openness to the unknown can scare families as well as therapists but, from the point of view of mental health, it is better to take a small risk in a de-sexualized and regulated context rather than helplessly witnessing the repetition of announced catastrophes.

## **In conclusion**

We talked about how the authority crisis within the family, and in consultation or in therapy as well, is linked to the fear of something that authority is not: it is not violence, neither it is not abuse or totalitarianism. Furthermore, obedience is not submission. When only obedience is expected or demanded, authority is lost in the systematic use made of sanctions or excess arguments. But if you get to this point, it means that there has not been a meeting between people in the true sense of the term: this can happen both because people cannot distinguish themselves psychically from each other, and because they cannot locate themselves within a generational order, in which each one should naturally find its place. The two options are often complementary.

The art of the therapist, in order to reconstitute the authority, consists in cancelling the existing prejudices on the negative aspects of authority. To do this, it is necessary to reveal these fears, to put them on stage and to make them representable. It will also be necessary to support everyone in recognizing himself as an individual within the family group. The goal is for everyone to be able to share their ideas and emotions with others. This is not simple, since the sexualization of affects can reactivate co-excitement deviating towards indifferenciation, the defensive breakdown or, paradoxically, towards both. Finally, it will be a matter of favouring the insertion of the subject into the generational order, reconnecting the here and now situations, which take place during the session, with the family history and the ancestors.

This path towards the reconstitution of authority requires a great resistance to attacks, threats or various seductions that will certainly happen. One must contain one's own violence, without however ceasing to implement one's beliefs within the therapeutic setting. With respect to this, it is necessary not to be afraid of judgments or retaliations from those who formed us without even rejecting "a debate of opinions". In this way, we will gradually approach the possibility of reopening those potential games that have not yet taken place within the family and, at the same time, share their amusing pleasures for a moment. These games, in turn, will allow these families to open up to new possibilities for mentalization, creativity and meeting.

*Translated by Giacomo Pittori*

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