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*Main Article:*

## **Application of Work Psychodynamics to the Analysis of CEOs’ ‘Presentation of Self’: Resorting to an ‘Astute’ Clinical Methodology**

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### **Abstract**

Does work psychodynamics—a sub-discipline of clinical psychology in the field of work sciences—offer a relevant methodological reference to analyze the psychological processes that come into play when a CEO is working? The objective of this article is to propose an answer to this question by going back to a doctoral research, which focused on the clinical analysis of the CEOs’ “presentation of self,” noted as one aspect of their work. The author’s arguments for a clinical approach are presented as well as the later decision to resort to “astute” tactics that, beyond the traditional frameworks of work psychodynamics, were required to have access to the CEOs’ presentation of self. Following the presentation of the research’s achievements, the article shows that, while methodologically unconventional, the astute tactics proved useful in ushering in new elements of knowledge that otherwise would have remained inaccessible. Notably, the specifics of the intersubjective relationship that was established between the author and each CEO had a major positive impact on the interpretations. To legitimize this clinical approach further, the conclusion draws a few indications on criteria that could be investigated to scientifically validate the qualitative methods and their interpretive results.

**Index Terms:** research context; research frameworks & paradigms; research process; research method; communicative rationality; logic of research; clinical approach; defense strategy; intersubjectivity; presentation of self; top management; work psychodynamics

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## 1. Introduction

Many of us have seen the Internet video where Steve Ballmer, CEO of Microsoft, is falling head over heels on the stage of a giant stadium, heaving, jumping, and yelling (“Steve Ballmer going crazy,” 2006). Richard Branson, President and founder of Virgin Group, also surprises more than a few with his recurring eccentricities (Kets de Vries, 1997).

These are not isolated cases: many other CEOs fascinate the public with their extravaganza, and questions abound about their possible delusions of grandeur or hysteria. Interpretations of their behaviors in terms of psychopathological disorders are indeed commonplace in organizational behavior publications (Kets de Vries, 1984; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1987) as well as in French social psychology (Enriquez, 1997) and are even echoed in some autobiographies (Grove, 1998). Work psychodynamics, a research field in work sciences, which usually explores the impact of work on the individual’s subjectivity, is no exception in that it claims, similarly, that leaders have either perverse or paranoid personality types (Dejours, 1998).

Despite these dominant assertions, we also see evidence that, in acting the way they do, these CEOs are doing their job. Indeed, Ballmer motivates his employees and Branson launches products and promotes his brand. So, the question arises: are CEOs simply “mad people” or could we refer to the general theories in work psychodynamics and put forward that CEOs do work and that their work transforms them?

With the reference of work psychodynamics at hand, we launched a doctoral research in psychology, including a series of interviews with CEOs in France, to explore what it is that, in the interplay between the CEOs’ subjectivity and their work, would allow us to better understand behaviors that are often considered irrational.

Starting with a brief account of how this research was initially fuelled by the author’s own experience, our intent here is to discuss the relevance of work psychodynamics and its methodology, which originated in clinical psychology, in order to study the psychological processes coming into play when a CEO is working. In this article, we will recall the main concepts drawn from the field of work psychodynamics, which support the chosen methodology. We will also explain how thorough readings of management literature helped us focus the scope of the research on the CEOs’ *presentation of self*. This article will then shed light on the author’s decision to adopt a method of research that, while inspired by that of work psychodynamics, could not use all the rigorous frameworks that it offers, and so had to resort to ad hoc tactics. The report of the main results will then show that the way in which the results were achieved was highly determined by the author’s personal style and experiences as well as by the intersubjective relationship that was established with each CEO. We will then question the approach’s major pitfalls and will also discuss its contributions in ushering in pieces of knowledge that alternative methods had so far not been able to reveal.

No matter how legitimate it may be to use qualitative interviewing techniques when investigating psychological processes, we understand that they could still be considered suspect by those more accustomed to the positivist sciences. Indeed, results drawn from individual case studies never meet the validation criteria of quantitative methods. So, we will try to draw a few conclusive ideas, opening a reflection on the various criteria that could be applied to assess the scientific validity of this qualitative approach.

## **2. The CEO's Subjective Relation to Work: Issues and References**

How do CEOs understand their work, how do CEOs overcome obstacles that stand in their way, what do they—consciously or not—put at stake when at work, and how does their work experience affect them? In other words, as obscure and enigmatic it may be, is there any kind of rationality behind their rather awkward stage-acting?

### **2.1. Starting From Personal Questions**

Obviously, these questions did not come up spontaneously. They partly originated in the author's past experience when, as Finance Director, was told to give a "sexy presentation" of budget figures to the Executive Committee. At this time, press articles and general audience publications were setting forth the rather dramatic behaviors of some well-known CEOs (Coatney, 2002), pointing to their personality traits (Kets de Vries, 1984) or cognitive biases to explain their incomprehensible decisions (Finkelstein, Campbell, & Whitehead, 2009).

Based on this early experience, these existing explanations did not seem exactly right, and led to a series of personal questions, such as: What does a sexy presentation mean when performed during an Executive Committee? What does stage-acting mean for a CEO? Is this dramaturgical behavior indeed related to any form of megalomania or hysteria? Could it not be rather interpreted as a means to address the specific requirements of the CEO's job?

### **2.2. Referring to the Theories and Concepts of Work Psychodynamics**

In the academic field of psychology, an extensive corpus of research outlines the CEO's individual psychology (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1987; Zaleznik, 1966) and examines their relations within teams and with subordinates (Kets de Vries, 1978). In doing so, however, it tends to disregard the specifics of the CEO's actual work. Management studies, for their part, aim at defining the CEO's activity (Hales, 1986; Mintzberg, 1973; Steward, 1970), categorize their tasks, qualify their leadership styles (Bennis & Nanus, 2003; Yukl, 2005), or try and explain their decision patterns with reference to cognitive psychology (Roxburgh, 2006), leaving aside any reference to their subjectivity.

Work psychodynamics, for its part, has never investigated top management and is even known for having overtly denounced CEOs for their responsibility in the increasing prevalence and severity of psychopathologies in the workplace (Dejours, 1998). However, this discipline was set up to explore the individual's subjective relation to their

work and has developed specific methodological tools to do so. So, as uncomfortable as it may be, we were determined to look at it as a possible theoretical reference.

Work psychodynamics emerged in France in the late 1970s, from a cross between psychoanalysis and ergonomics from the francophone world (Wisner, 1972). It considers the person at work as a subject, with reference to the Freudian theory, that is: a person with affects and passions, with conscious or unconscious inner conflicts, with desires and projects, deeply rooted in his/her specific singular history. Yet, whereas psychoanalysis closely refers the subject's psychological development to the centrality of sexuality, work psychodynamics places the emphasis of its theory on its analysis of work as a major medium of development and self-fulfillment or, on the contrary, as a factor of destabilization and ill-health. It defines work as a central living experience combining a specific involvement of the human body and the capacity to refer to one's practical intelligence to react, feel, and interpret all situations. The key lesson it draws from ergonomics is that there is always a gap between the prescribed work (the task) and the actual work (the activity). This gap is due to the incidents, breakdowns, and unexpected events that undermine the prescribed work. Then, according to work psychodynamics, working consists in filling in this gap so as to perform what is expected, despite all the obstacles that resist technical control and know-how and which are referred to as the "real" of work (Dejours & Deranty, 2010).

For the subject, work is a painful experience of setbacks and inevitably means suffering (Dejours, 2006). Yet, this suffering does not always generate pathologies; it can also bring out the best. Indeed, when facing the real of work, one needs to invent ingenious paths to get round the flaws of prescribed work and still manage to perform the expected task (Dejours, 1993). These tricks involve a form of *practical intelligence*, which is related to the Ancient Greeks' *mètis*, whereby one acts by intuition, flair, or imitation to achieve one's goal (Detienne & Vernant, 1974/1991). While *mètis* has been translated into "cunning intelligence," we will later refer to it as "astute intelligence," so as to eliminate its pejorative meaning and give it a more appropriate positive sense. Indeed, this all means experiencing new abilities and sensitivities that were unknown to the subject, prior to that work experience and which are leading to feel one's life more intensely. Work then becomes an irreplaceable factor of health and can indeed generate pleasure.

However, work psychodynamics does not limit work to a solitary experience but rather puts emphasis on its collective dimension: the subject always works for or with others and does so partly in the hope to get recognition. Recognition plays an essential part in the development and consolidation of the subject's identity to the point where it can contribute to the transformation of suffering into pleasure at work.

Studies in work psychodynamics also revealed that, when the necessary conditions required to transform the suffering into pleasure are not in place, the subject develops, alone or with others, intentional, non-conscious, and often paradoxical behaviors. These are individual or collective defense strategies, which are mainly organized around a form of denial of the real of work and which can help the subject preserve their self and health.

When these defense strategies fail, suffering at work can yield forms of mental or somatic pathologies.

### **2.3. Yielding Research Questions**

With this exposure to the theories of work psychodynamics, the author's personal questions gradually developed into research questions on how CEOs understand what they are expected to do (their prescribed work), how they report their constraints (their real of work) and what they can say about the ingenious adjustments they make to overcome them (their actual work).

Beyond the stakes of mere knowledge acquisition, there was obviously an epistemological issue: as the specific terrain of top management had never been approached by any study in work psychodynamics, our research also questioned the relevance of this discipline when applied to the analysis of the CEO's relation to work.

## **3. The Right Method for a Given Question**

### **3.1. The Invisibility of Work**

With its definition of work, work psychodynamics can explain why work remains so difficult to describe and understand. Indeed, formal procedures and organizational charts give some indication of the prescribed tasks and of the hierarchical relations at work. Some gestures can be observed or even timed and performance against targets can be evaluated with help of progress reports.

Yet, as the subject's involvement at work also includes practical intelligence, suffering, pleasure as well as unconscious motivations, it far exceeds the observable components of work to the point where it can partly remain obscure to the subject (Dejours, 2000). Besides, the ingenuity that is required to go round the real of work to make up for the shortfall in prescriptions basically amounts to personal knacks and secrets or tacit skills, which are in nature unspeakable. Lastly, when defense strategies are set up, they anesthetize the suffering at work, hence diminishing the subject's ability to verbalize it.

The "invisibility" of work could even be more ordinary in the case of the work of the CEO, as it is known to be mostly cognitive or intuitive, often confidential and practiced in secret locations, in dispersed geographic settings, at any time of the day and night. Should anyone be admitted to watch the CEO working, observation of his physical movements would not be of much interest. Besides, as the CEOs' tasks never address identical topics and are not reproducible "all things equal," they remain inaccessible to the usual methodologies of work analysis (Daniellou, 1997). Questionnaires and structured observations, for their part, do give account of the CEOs' tasks and of some categories of their feelings (Mintzberg, 1973). Yet, by urging them to answer to predetermined standard questions, they do not give any chance to address any unheard-of aspects of the subject's work experience.

### **3.2. A Clinical Approach to Work**

So, with the aim of describing the subjective invisible components of the CEO's work, we were forced to turn away from the use of the pre-set instruments of these objective methods and chose to go for a clinical methodology. Indeed, in reference to Freud's works, the clinical research methodology is specifically designed to allow the outbreak of unexpected findings and is the sole and only method that takes the invisible and even the unconscious into account.

#### ***3.2.1. Going for a Clinical Methodology***

While it was initially developed as a therapeutic method, clinical methodology is also widely used as a research method (Kvale, 2003). With reference to its etymological origins (Greek κλίνη means "bed, couch, that on which one lies"), it defines any method where the researcher examines the subject in their actual environment and does it without the support of any external instruments.

Clinical methodology is based on individual case studies as opposed to extensive standardized, repeatable observations and collection of quantifiable data. It uses an open mode of interviewing, where the researchers encourage the respondents to talk freely without questioning them, listen to the manifest content of the intercourse, yet also take into account the disruptions, the gestures, the body language, and all the reactions they trigger. Carrying out this approach implies that the researchers have undergone work on themselves to acquire the necessary self-awareness that will enable them to deal with their own affects when listening to the subject. It also implies that researchers can refer to a documented psychological theory with its conception of mental functioning, upon which they will draw their interpretations of the clinical material. This know-how is further completed with the supervision by clinician peers, which will give further credit to the validity of the interpretations.

Clinical methodology hence relies on several things: the researcher's subjectivity, the specifics of the relationship dynamics in the interview, and the researcher's academic and personal training as a clinician. All of this gives rise to interpretations of the subject's spoken word and helps to understand the meaning of what they feel, live, and do.

#### ***3.2.2. The Clinical Methodology in Work Psychodynamics***

With its central interest for people's health at work, its Freudian theoretical basis, its open mode of interviewing subjects in actual situations by proficient clinicians, the methodology in work psychodynamics lies within the scope of clinical methodology. However, though it owes a lot to the psychoanalytical approach, it also differs from it in many ways: the subjects are not patients with neurotic symptoms but men and women experiencing work situations; the structured setting of the interview is more flexible; the resort to such specific techniques, as transference, free association, or suspension of external reality (Freud, 1912/1958) are not specifically involved. This is because work psychodynamics does not seek to explore the subject's fantasies and relieve their

conflicts inherited from the infantile sexuality but rather aims at understanding how the subject is mobilized when facing the realities of work.

Knowing how work pathologies are closely related to solitude, work psychodynamics has further departed from the traditional psychoanalytical methodology and has designed and thoroughly documented its own clinical methodology of intervention. In this, workers, in recognition of their need to examine the causes and meanings of their suffering at work, are ready to voluntarily report their own work experience to co-workers and to researchers in a series of half-day meetings (Dejours, 2000). Drawing from German philosopher Dilthey's general theory of "understanding," work psychodynamics favors interventions where the researcher listens to the spoken word of the co-workers, then sparks off the debate and lets co-workers mull over the various compromises, adjustments, or work rules they can find together in order to gradually solve their degraded work situation. An intervention in work psychodynamics is then closed with a report that is made up of an extract of each subject's comments, filtered through the researcher's memory, personal thoughts and feelings when listening to them. This report is then submitted to the collective of workers for validation and can later be more broadly dispatched within their organization.

This clinical approach to work had proven efficient in revealing the subjective dimensions of working in a variety of work environments in the last 30 years, and hence, seemed most appropriate to this research topic. Yet, referring explicitly to work psychodynamics required a few precautions. Indeed, the lack of references to the CEO's work in work sciences required to confirm that CEOs do indeed work. This was the objective of the first stage of the research. Only in a second stage, would we meet CEOs who, it was hoped, would be ready and volunteer to confront their experience and speak of their actual work.

### **3.3. Resorting to an Astute Methodology**

#### **3.3.1. Reducing the Scope**

As the disciplines of work sciences have not addressed the CEO's work, we turned to articles and scientific publications in management as a source of knowledge. As this form of literature proved to be very prescriptive in nature, we chose to use it as a basis for setting a definition of the CEO's prescribed work: what business schools teach the future CEOs, what reference books say of their roles and missions. Reading this substantial corpus of knowledge gave numerous lists of the CEO's daily tasks and pointed to some of their major activities: decision-making, controlling, managing and leading, negotiating, envisioning, and communicating, with a specific emphasis on self-promoting (Gardner, 1992; Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989). This self-promotion was extensively described in the field of impression management, stemming from the sociology of interactions. Thus, in reference to the work of Goffman (1959), in the later stages of the research, this specific aspect of the CEO's work was referred to as *presentation of self*.

During the process of organizing the research fieldwork, it soon became obvious that there would be no call from any collective of CEOs seeking to ease their suffering in the workplace. Thus, the rigorous rules offered by the work psychodynamics methodology proved impossible to apply. Moreover, with no recognition of anyone's need, the choice for a clinical methodology itself was jeopardized. Facing the real of the research work forced us to depart from the pure methodology and design an ad hoc research setting to address this specific terrain: if we were unable to access the authentic spoken word of a subject calling for psychological help, we would reduce our ambition and set the focus on the CEO's presentation of self which, by definition, is always accessible. So, the questions were redefined as follows: What is this presentation of self and how can its clinical analysis help us better understand the CEO's relation to work and the impact of that work on his or her subjectivity? At this stage, we considered that the presentation of self could be a possible indicator of the psychological processes at stake when a CEO is working.

### ***3.3.2. Going for Individual Interviews***

Reaching CEOs individually to bring them together and encourage them to start a reflection on their work experience was not an option. CEOs would have had to accept to give account of their practices, detail the content of their work, their projects, their issues, their solutions and yet also, their awkwardness or mistakes. Such a frame of investigation seemed incompatible with the confidentiality that seems to prevail in a population where career and power are important issues. Thus, departing from the methodology in work psychodynamics, we opted for individual interviews.

As no call from any CEO was to be expected, all meeting opportunities were accepted: conferences, CEO trainings, consulting assignments, and referrals. Due to this unusual recruitment method, most of the 15 male and female CEOs that were interviewed were at the head of small businesses, in France. Most of them were the owners of the company they were leading. These companies were operating in various sectors with very different management concerns. Apart from a family (a father and three sons) co-owning a company in which the author intervened for several consecutive years, up to four interviews were held with each CEO. While an interview would normally take an hour and a half, some exceeded three hours. Due to the relative distance of some of the companies' headquarters, two meetings took place in the business facilities of a hotel, two others at the CEO's home, and others, in prestigious restaurants that one CEO insisted on qualifying as his "canteen." The heterogeneity of locations and the relative relaxed atmosphere of some of the settings were all taken into account, all the more as they were never neutral when related to the CEO's presentation of self.

During the course of each interview, we let the subjects develop their thoughts and unroll their story. The lack of any personal thoughts, the resorting to stereotyped speeches, dodging and avoidance were not viewed as hindrances. The CEOs were permitted to relate any details freely. Our attitude derived from the hypothesis that anything the subject does—consciously or not—has meaning.



Despite all other deviations, the clinical material drawn from these many interviews closely followed the recommendations of the methodology in work psychodynamics. The attitude and the verbal delivery were reported as well as the associations that came into mind and the elements of the speech that were found most striking (the keywords, recurring expressions, verbal slip-ups, and anecdotes). Of specific interest were all the elements that were unexpected, incomprehensible, inconsistent, painful, or puzzling, in reference to the author's own experience or to other similar interviews. Then, whenever possible, the author's understanding was submitted to each CEO in the following meeting, to compare with his or her own understanding and encourage the CEO to utter further clinical material.

### ***3.3.3. Resorting to Astute Tactics***

However, in the absence of any call from a subject in recognition of his needs, there remained the concern to get from the CEO a form of consent to participate in the research. The other remaining concern was to attempt to go beyond the conventional presentation of self (for example, press conferences and other public appearances). In Goffman's words, the aim was that of being admitted in the "backstage," where speeches are less polite and forced, where the CEO, can relax and let their attention wander (Goffman, 1959).

Meeting obstacles in fieldwork is common, indeed. It is precisely what work psychodynamics would define as the real of work for a researcher. For us, it implied resorting to some specific ad hoc tactics, which were mainly centered on connivance and equity. We chose to qualify these as "astute" tactics in reference to the noble sense of *mètis*, which work psychodynamics publications refer to, when describing the practical intelligence exerted to get round the real of work.

One example of these tactics consisted in keeping a watchful eye on our own presentation of self, insisting on a common education or mentioning a comparable professional experience, following an adequate dress code and agreeing with the use of *tu* (French informal "you") so as to create a quick though superficial bond.

Being protective and tactful was another example of these astute tactics. We refrained here from highlighting possible inconsistencies in the CEOs' talk, stayed unflinching when they had incongruous behaviors, and showed patience when a CEO forgot what he had just said and repeated it all over. This specific tactic was close to the "audience's tact" as Goffman names it, in that it was to protect the CEOs' stage-acting, ensuring that the content of the presentation of self would remain consistent during the whole interview.

A more severe contrast with regard to Freud's recommended anonymity (Freud, 1912/1958) lied in our adoption of a give-and-take stance, whereby we revealed part of our own experience in the hope to get a more authentic report in return. Besides, we tended to push the open mode of interviewing to its limits when we let the CEOs take the lead in order to make them feel comfortable in a more dominant position.

Though debasing the approach, these astute tactics enabled to hold interviews with CEOs and secured our way to witness their presentation of self.

## **4. The Results**

### **4.1. The CEO's Work**

#### ***4.1.1. The CEO's Prescribed Work***

In the first moments of the first interviews, the CEO's lived experience at work remained indeed inaccessible. Many CEOs faced a genuine difficulty in putting their work into words: they remained elusive or admitted their descriptions were mere banalities. So, they ended up confirming what the management literature had described: they insisted on their prescribed roles as a visionary, a communicator, and a promoter of their company. Some added that they were expected to "be the one that solves the unsolvable problems" or "be God."

#### ***4.1.2. The CEO's Real of Work***

After this first stage, when the CEOs accepted to pursue the interview, they would at last go beyond the hackneyed formulations. Their account was then less controlled. In some cases, they showed confusion; in some others, they were rude or vulgar. It is during these later stages of the interview, that they revealed some additional aspects of their work, which are less often mentioned in management literature.

So, in contrast to a prescribed work that partly consists in predicting the future, in knowing and controlling, and in reassuring others, CEOs said they face the absurdity of futurology, the solitude and the absence of any reference points, the impossible mastery, and the lack of any social recognition. Facing the prescription of "being God," they mentioned their own limits, their overtiredness, their changeable moods, their qualms, and even their shyness in public as other major hindrances.

#### ***4.1.3. The CEO's Actual Work***

However tough the obstacles, the CEOs we met had each found their own way to get round them. To fill in the solitude, they said they were reading, going out, and meeting other CEOs to better feel their product and their market. Fighting, or developing a protective, cynical, and insensitive shelter or shell was another way that they said helped them to resist, even if at the cost of going against their own values. Another trick they reported consisted in building up reassuring speeches, in stage-acting as a public figure who has control and self-control, and who shows the image they suppose others expect of them. All the same, stage-acting would help them receive the attention of a public (press, shareholders, etc.), filling in the lack of recognition they deplore.

This reference to the public image confirmed our earlier hypotheses. From our readings, we had posited that the presentation of self was one aspect of the CEO's prescribed work.

Now, it was also one of these ingenious practices that enable CEOs to perform a task despite the obstacles. Filling the gap between the prescription of mastery and the realities of impossible mastery, CEOs stage mastery. And, filling the gap between who they are expected to be and who they are actually, they substitute a dramaturgical presentation of self, where, despite their doubts and lack of knowledge about the future, they offer an official version of their certainties.

## **4.2. The Analysis of the CEO's Presentation of Self**

During the interviews, their presentation of self was a combination of multiple factors: the enhancement of their uniqueness and exemplarity, the reconstruction of their background and historical data (many times in the form of a saga), and the denigration of all others (predecessors, competitors, spouses, etc.). It was very discreet on many aspects of their work, such as: controlling, supervising or negotiating, and insisted more on their "generous" management of human resources, describing "humanitarian achievements" or emphasizing an "intimate wish to give and do good."

### ***4.2.1. Pleasure and Suffering at Work***

Very often, notably when the interview lasted over two hours or when several interviews took place, when the CEOs were relaxing their attention, and were hence neglecting their presentation of self, the facade disappeared. Sighing, anger, or extreme fatigue dawned as some of them reported feelings of constriction, tachycardia, or insomnia due to "bursts of negative stimuli" or "spraying of violent radiations." At the same time, their doubts, the feeling of their uselessness, their love of power and its attributes (seduction, money), their lust, their possible use of psychoactive drugs, and their degrading family relations, which so far had been concealed, were overtly exposed.

### ***4.2.2. A Defense Strategy Against Suffering at Work***

These revelations however were of short duration. Very soon, indeed, the CEO would pull himself or herself together and, in a kind of sudden burst of self-control, nothing would remain of what he or she was saying. The CEO showed again infallibility, control over the situation, and social usefulness, this time in a way that was more marked than before. Those who did not succeed in returning back to this mode cut off the interview abruptly and unexpectedly.

This returning to an exaggeratedly positive mode of presentation of self has occurred in many cases. We decided to name it "overinvested presentation of self." It was characterized by a surprising to-and-fro movement from a positive presentation of self to a confession of their actual fragilities and suffering, to self-control and then back again to an overrated reassessment of their positive presentation of self, after a momentary surprising form of amnesia. This overinvested presentation of self was uncontrolled and gave way to behaviors that, though strange, seemed to be particularly well adapted to protect the CEO from sudden bursts of distress or confusion. Its protective yet largely

unconscious characteristics suggested it could well function as a defense strategy against the CEO's unexpected yet easily perceived suffering at work.

### ***4.2.3. The Dimensions of the CEO's Presentation of Self***

Certainly, the CEOs' presentation of self is not all of their work, yet it was identified as one important part of it. The clinical approach of this presentation of self revealed its three functions: (a) a way to deal with the constraints of their prescribed work and especially of prescribed mastery, (b) a way to achieve recognition, and (c) a defense strategy against suffering at work.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1. Pitfalls and Advantages of the Astute Tactics**

This research leant on the conceptual fundamentals of work psychodynamics and drew inspiration from its methodology. However, the specific constraints of the fieldwork called for the addition of a series of astute tactics that transformed the initial approach. While it was specifically designed to better understand the CEO's presentation of self, this approach created a risk of manipulation, seduction, and other behaviors that could have been pitfalls for this research.

First, the display of a common background hindered any possibility of questioning the CEOs' elliptic use of managerial jargon and was thus of no help in clarifying what they actually do. In the absence of any therapeutic interest, some CEOs would only address general points or conform to what they thought they were expected to say. Other CEOs used their participation in the research to satisfy conscious and less conscious wishes, such as domination on the researcher and influencing the outcome.

Furthermore, the unusual settings and the informal ambiance of some of the interviews provoked attempts of seduction, which required the author to improvise a sudden reserve. Finally, there were risks of things getting out of control when the CEOs were in a state of distress, no longer able to put up with what they had told. In such cases, being unexpectedly exposed to their suffering and not having a structure to alleviate this meant that the only recourse was to support the CEOs' defense strategies in order to avoid uncomfortable emotional outbursts.

However, the perception of a common professional past experience made the first contact easier and established the basis for a sufficiently confident relationship to start the interview in the best conditions. It also reassured those who could well be wary of any interview, all the more when in the field of psychology. The displayed connivance might also have opened the way to expressions of their genuine feelings and thoughts about money, luxury, power, and related lifestyle, which are often left unsaid. Then, following revelations of the author's own life, CEOs agreed, in turn, to take the risk of pouring their feelings out, as if reassured by the equity in the interaction. More generally, the relaxed

setting of some interviews might have led to a slackening of the CEOs' attention and self-control and explain the confession of their fragility.

## 5.2. Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity as Methodological Devices

In contrast to the quantitative methods that urge researchers to minimize their influence on the respondent, the achievements in the analysis of the CEOs' presentation of self depended on the intersubjective relation established between the researcher and the subject.

As shown in many studies in work psychodynamics, at work, we all unconsciously seek answers to tormenting questions which relate to our own life. There was no exception here: the author arrived at each meeting with all kinds of prejudices and intuitions drawn from past experiences (i.e., the requirement to make a sexy presentation). Then, there were feelings, physical reactions, boredom, or genuine interest. Being receptive to the CEOs' spoken word implied a good self-awareness of these in order to be able to spot some of the unconscious processes at stake in the intersubjective relation. In this research, in particular, the author's presuppositions were challenged by the spoken word and attitude of the subject as well as by the inconsistencies that could be noticed between their words and their acts. The unexpectedness of the overinvested presentation of self and the surprise caused by the prior amnesic stages were clearly a major source of its interpretation as a possible defense strategy against the CEO's suffering at work.

## 5.3. Interpreting Singular Cases

With the objective of setting an alternative interpretation of the meaning and possible origins of some of CEOs' behaviors, the reference material used in this research was the individual case study, which intensively studied the condensed unique experience of each subject. Indeed, case studies do not aim at producing universal laws, where reproducible causes would give predictive effects. Their value is pedagogical, not demonstrative. The clinician's interpretation follows the *logic of qualitative probability*: we do not say our proposal is true and irrefutable; we say it has a higher probability of being correct than another one, based on the strength of the reference theory, soundness of the line of argumentation, confirmation by each additional case study, and subsequent validation by the subjects (Dejours, 1995).

## 6. Conclusions

Stimulated by what was initially an issue of personal concern and later by some CEOs' extravagant stage-acting, the research reported in this article was to set forth an alternative explanation of this stage-acting, wondering whether CEOs' work and subjective relation to work were not essential drivers of these behaviors.

Reflecting on the subjective dimension of this specific research question, a qualitative and interpretive methodology offered itself. The decision to reduce the scope to the mere

analysis of the CEO's presentation of self then led to a clearer focus for the research project.

As controversial as this approach may be and even if this astute clinical methodology was somewhat shaky, it ushered in unexpected elements of knowledge about concrete behaviors of actual people that otherwise remained unheard of. Indeed, with the focus on work and subjectivity, it became possible to break away from the usual explanations of CEO's so-called irrationality and suggest that stage-acting and a positive presentation of self could well aim at protecting them and preserving their health, revealing here the unexpected subjective rationality of their incomprehensible and often denounced behaviors.

The clinical approach, though, has its supporters and its doubters, and the opposition between interpretive and positivist methods continues to feed many scientific debates (Abbott, 2001). This requires that the clinical approach be validated in as rigorous a fashion as would be needed for a quantitative approach. Yet, as clinical data result from the subjective commitment of the researcher, they will, by construction, never be infallible. So, in our view, we have to definitely break from the *falsification* criterion in the logic of research (Popper, 1963) and acknowledge that their scientific validity will have to lie somewhere else.

Clinical methodology highly depends on the specifics of the relation between the clinician and the subject and, more precisely, on the way these intersubjective specifics are worked on by the clinician. Therefore, *communicative rationality* of action which was theorized by the German social-critical philosopher Habermas (1981/1984) could well give hints on how and when a clinical study can be considered valid. With that in mind, we could then suggest that the reference to the criteria of *intelligibility* and *authenticity*—which define communicative rationality—could be the potential leads to work on (Dejours, 1995). By intelligibility, we mean that, besides the mere report of the subject's spoken word, clinical material should be explicit about all that is implicit in the clinical practice, including the specific part devoted to subjectivity and intersubjectivity, so as to be understandable and accessible to the critics of other clinicians and trigger a well-argued scientific debate. By authenticity, we mean that validation cannot rely on the sole arguments and viewpoint of the researcher and that the clinical material and its analysis could be reviewed by the subjects themselves.

If we acknowledge that clinical methodology is a means of knowledge acquisition with specific rigorous schemes and validity criteria, then, in view of our research, we would be particularly inclined to confirm the French psychologist Lagache's statement that a method is right for a given question (Lagache, 1949). Indeed, if research in social sciences aims at understanding the complexity of human behavior more completely, then there is space for distinct epistemological routes, including conventional or the more astute ones.

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