

Occupational-Biographical Orientations of English and German Car Mechatronics and the Influence of the national VET Systems

Erika Edith Gericke

Department of Vocational Education and Human Resources Development, Otto-von-Guericke-University Magdeburg, German

E-mail: erika.gericke@ovgu.de

Tel: +49-391-6756504; Fax: +49-391-6716550

Abstract

In this study I investigate which occupational-biographical orientations English and German car mechatronics develop and how the respective national VET system influences these orientations. A qualitative research design was applied in order to reconstruct the subjective perception as the subjective perceptions are the force for action. The first result is that three patterns of occupational-biographical orientations which are valid for both English and German car mechatronics could be reconstructed. The second outcome is that English and German car mechatronics differ in respect of how they perceive their structural components. The third result is that there is a linkage between the development process of the occupational-biographical orientations and the subjective perception of national structural component.

Keywords: occupational-biographical orientations, car mechatronics, VET system, grounded theory, narrative analysis

1. Introduction

Throughout the last twenty years a macro-societal change can be observed in complex societies like Britain and Germany. This macro-societal change is especially visible in an increased individualisation and globalisation (cf. Beck 2003). These two developments affect the working system, for instance, occupational biographies have become much more flexible (cf. Voss/ Pongratz 1998). In addition, especially in Germany the occupational principle (Berufsprinzip) has become a site of much discussion and reform. This is also happening in the context of European VET policy and the so-called Copenhagen process: its intention being to make European VET systems comparable in order to secure transparency. European citizens are supposed to acquire vocational qualifications which are comparable and accepted throughout Europe and thus shall become mobile workers. Furthermore, the introduction of a modularized VET system for whole Europe shall enhance the employability of every working European. One strand of German scientists question the anticipated positive effects the introduction of a modular VET system brings for German trainees. They fear that replacing broad vocational qualifications with partial qualifications will hinder the development of a holistic occupational self-conception as they argue that employability and Germany's occupational principle are incompatible (cf. Drexel 2008; Kuda/ Strauß 2006). In fact, up to now there have not been any studies which investigated the connection between the VET system and the development of the occupational self-conception. Apart from this European policy context it is a worthwhile endeavour to analyse the development of the occupational self-conception as the working world itself changes rapidly and it is doing this constantly. For instance, the automobile industry has experienced a huge change within the last twenty years. Whereas the automobile had been more or less a purely mechanic product, nowadays it is mainly an electronic device and employees need to rise to new challenges. In fact, these changes within the automobile industry led to a new occupation – the so-called car mechatronics. This occupation was introduced in Germany in 2003. Thus, employees do not only face European policy challenges like developing an increased employability and changes within the national VET system but they also have to deal with a fast-changing technology and thus being constantly challenged in their daily work.

2. Research Questions

With this in mind, I pose the following two research questions:

- Which occupational-biographical orientations do English and German car mechatronics develop?
- How do a fragmented (English) VET system and a holistic (Germany) VET system influence the development of such occupational-biographical orientations?

The term occupational-biographical orientation has been given favour over terms like 'identity' or 'self-conception'. The term 'identity' is too rigid. An 'orientation' has a cross-situational character and it does not stay the same throughout the time as new life situations lead to new experiences and thus change orientations (cf. Giegel/ Frank/ Billerbeck 1988). So, looking at a process – in this case, how occupational-biographical orientations are developed – it is important to use a concept which captures the process character.

3. Research Method

The methodology applied is the grounded theory methodology according to Strauss/ Corbin 1990. It is characterised by theoretical sampling, coding and constant comparison. The autobiographical-narrative interview (cf. Schütze 1983) had been employed with the argument that the analysis of a whole life story enables the researcher to reconstruct biographical and structural influences regarding the development of occupational-biographical orientations. Those life stories had been analysed in a two-fold manner. Firstly,

the narration analysis had been applied (cf. Schütze 1983) in order to reconstruct the biographical process. Secondly, grounded theory coding (cf. Strauss/ Corbin 1990) had been employed so as to develop a pattern of occupational-biographical orientations and the influence of the VET systems. The sample consists of German and English car mechatronics aged 30 to 67, who have been working in their occupation for at least three years. All German car mechatronics have completed their vocational training successfully before entering the labour force.

4. Three Patterns of Occupational-Biographical Orientations of English and German Car Mechatronics and the Role of the National VET System

4.1. Three Patterns of Occupational-Biographical Orientations of English and German Car Mechatronics

The analysis of the autobiographical interviews has led to the reconstruction of three patterns of occupational-biographical orientations which are valid for both the English and the German interviewed car mechatronics. These three patterns consist of a code structure which is composed of two selective codes – ‘biographical orientations’ and ‘process of biographical orientations in conjunction with the occupation’ – which are constituted of a number of axial codes.

Table 1: Three patterns of occupational-biographical orientations of English and German car mechatronics

Selective Codes	Axial Codes	Strategic Usage	Drawing Borders	Passionate Handling
Biographical Orientations	Focus	twofold: customer and car	customer	car
	Tool	strategic acquisition of qualifications	experience	passion
	Physicality	issue raised in regards to career advancements	physical work & dangers	physical work
	Perception of technology and its development (and its handling)	technology as a quasi-organism strategic formal education	technology as component parts delineated from each other differentiation of work tasks	Passionately acquired knowledge about mechanics as a foundation
	Quasi-Professionalism	holistic view of the automobile customer orientation (exception for the pattern passionate handling) diagnostic capability, recognizing one’s own limits, aspiration for being an all-rounder (exception for the pattern drawing borders) quality work, dealing with customers, professional pride		
Process of Biographical Orientations in Conjunction with the Occupation	Occupational-biographical Resources	orientation towards education and career strategic usage of institutions (Engl.: self-realization; Ger.: securing employment)	institutional resources (only for Germans) networking drawing borders	passion institutional resources (only for Germans)
	Dominant Process Structure of the life	metamorphosis process (Engl. find oneself; Germ.: intrinsic commitment to the	metamorphosis process (Engl.: find oneself; Ger.: intrinsic	metamorphosis process

	course	occupation)	commitment to the occupation))	
	Job Motivation	self-realization / further development joy	earning money self-realization joy	passion joy
	Priority of Work and Family	family higher	family higher	work higher o+++++r balanced

4.1.1. Occupational-Biographical Pattern ‘Strategic Usage of Vocational Education Institutions’

The selective code ‘biographical orientations’ consists of four axial codes. The first one I termed ‘focus’ and for the pattern ‘strategic usage of vocational education institutions’ its character is twofold: Mechatronics focus on the one hand the customer and on the other hand the automobile. The mechatronic wants to offer a fair and high-quality service to the customer. Acting according to ethical values, for instance a fair price-performance ratio is of special importance to him. In addition, he is committed with the automobile and feels obliged to justify himself towards the vehicle in regards to his quality of work. His aim is that his quality of work corresponds to the product quality (i.e. the quality of the automobile). Thus the feature of this pattern regarding the axial code ‘focus’ is that both – customer and vehicle – are perceived independently from each other and constitute two scopes of work. ‘Tool’ is the second axial code of ‘biographical orientations’ and in this pattern it is the strategic acquisition of vocational qualifications by visiting vocational education institutions. The mechatronic uses formal education in order to acquire the knowledge needed for acting competently in his daily work. He perceives his knowledge as a precondition for work and sees himself being responsible for acquiring knowledge by the strategic use of vocational education institutions. The issue physicality – which is the third axial code – is only mentioned in passing and only in connection with the topic of career developments. Mechatronics of this pattern perceive the current automobile technology and its development – the fourth axial code – as a quasi-organism. That means, they see the automobile itself as a living organism which has its own will and acts independently. Furthermore, they observe a fast-changing automobile and an increase in complexity. Many components which had been mechanical components are now electrical ones, which are more complex. The mechatronics conclude that their knowledge is not up-to-date and thus see a constant need for further (vocational) education. The mechatronics perceive this development of the automobile technology as a danger. They feel overstrained with these new challenges and perceive the vehicle as a quasi-organism which is uncontrollable. However, mechatronics acting according to this pattern see themselves as professional. Their professional characteristics are: having a holistic view on the vehicle, having a customer orientation and good communication skills, having diagnostic capabilities, being able to recognise their own limits, doing quality work and being proud of their occupation.

The second selective code is termed ‘process of biographical orientations in conjunction with the occupation’ and consists of four axial codes. The first one is ‘occupational-biographical resources’ and in this pattern consists of two resources. One resource is the orientation on education and career. This is especially interesting as these mechatronics have had a problematic school career. It seems that this difficult school career functions as a catalyst for developing this orientation on education. This is also possible due to his interest on his work and his need of being a good mechatronic. In order to fulfil this educational orientation these mechatronics make strategic use of available VET institutions. There is a national difference regarding the underlying function of this education and career orientation. Whereas English mechatronics of this pattern look for self-realization, the

German mechatronics of this pattern pursue secure employment. The second axial code is termed 'dominant process structure of the life course'. Again there are national differences in this pattern: English mechatronics pass through a metamorphosis process of finding oneself, i.e. they found their occupation by accident, later on they identify themselves with the occupation; German mechatronics pass through a metamorphosis of intrinsic commitment to the occupation, i.e. parents have influenced the choice of occupation, whereas in the beginning German mechatronics of this pattern have an extrinsic commitment to the occupation – for instance, commitment to the company, later on they have a personal commitment. The third axial code is 'job motivation'. Self-realization and enjoyment of work is the motivation for those mechatronics of this pattern. The last axial code is 'priority of work and family'. Mechatronics of this pattern prioritize family over work. They rather quit work than reducing their family time.

4.1.2. Occupational-Biographical Pattern 'Drawing Borders regarding the Field'

Within the selective code 'biographical orientations' the first axial code is 'focus'. In contrast to the first pattern does a mechatronics of the pattern 'drawing borders regarding the field' have a single focus which is the customer. He views the automobile industry on the one hand as a sales industry and his task is to sell products and/ or services to the customer. On the other hand he sees the automobile industry as a 'repair industry' and it is his task to get the customer's car fixed. The customer is his ultimate challenge and he gets his job satisfaction out of positive customer contact.

The second axial code is 'tool' and there are fine national differences regarding the tool 'experience' in this pattern. The English mechatronic with this pattern is aware of the increasing importance of formal qualifications; however, he does not have any and is not willing to participate in further education. In respect of his working tool he refers to his experience which he has gained by learning-on-the-job. The German mechatronic of this pattern knows of the importance of vocational qualification and has acquired a certificate. However, he points at his experience as his working tool. He is willing to acquire new knowledge but only in informal ways, for instance through conversations with colleagues.

'Physicality' is the third axial code and mechatronics of this pattern present five aspects of their physical work. Firstly, there is a dependence on the weather: due to toxic fumes the garage has to be open; thus, it is very hot during summer and very cold during winter. Secondly, repairing vehicles is a dirty job; the hands get dirty. Thirdly, it is physically hard work as heavy car parts have to be picked up and carried around on a regular basis. Fourthly, the mechatronic deals with carcinogenic and toxic substances which lead to occupational diseases. Lastly, this occupation provides a higher risk of accidents as for instance one can get trapped under a car.

'Perception of the technology and its development' is the third axial code. The mechatronics with this pattern views the automobile rather in single parts. He is specialised on some parts and looks at and deals with them autonomously. He sees the vehicle as a dangerous object which can be mortal for his customer, i.e. if he does not repair the car correctly. He observes the fast technological change and the increase of complexity and feels being at the technology's mercy and threatened by it. He deals with this by drawing borders regarding his field of work. Although he accepts that electrical tasks belong to his occupation, he draws specific borders to which extent he is dealing with electrical components of the automobile. In addition, he is not willing to acquire knowledge about new electrical parts.

'Quasi-Professionalism' (quasi because mechatronics in no academic knowledge and thus cannot be called professional according to the classic sociological professionalism theories) is the last axial code of the selective code 'biographical orientations'. Although he concentrates on single parts of the car, he is aware that the vehicle is a holistic object.

Furthermore, he has a pronounced customer orientation. His professional skills include diagnostic capabilities and being aware of one's own borders. He does not aspire to work as an 'all-rounder'; however, providing good quality work is important to him.

The second selective code which constitutes the pattern structure is 'process of biographical orientations in conjunction with the occupation' and consists of four axial codes. The first one is 'occupational-biographical resources'. Both English and German mechatronics with this pattern are interested in and have an affinity to their occupation. The English mechatronic of this pattern does not have any institutional resources; however, he is very good at networking which has led to getting new jobs. Another resource is his ability to limit his field of work. German mechatronics of this pattern have institutional resources such as parents and a school curriculum which help them to deal with the task of choosing an occupation at an early stage. Their networking activities are limited on gaining insider knowledge about technical questions from their colleagues. Like their English colleagues an additional resource is being able to limit one's own working field.

The second axial code is termed 'dominant process structure of the life course' and shows national differences. The English mechatronic with this pattern develops an occupational-biographical acting scheme after starting a family as he has the responsibility to take care of his family and needs to settle job-wise. Whereas he begins with the goal of earning a lot of money, he undergoes a metamorphosis and his final aim is to find self-realization in his occupation. The German mechatronic with this pattern undergoes a metamorphosis of 'intrinsic commitment to the occupation', i.e. he has chosen his occupation due to peer-pressure (all young men wanted to become car mechanics), and throughout the years he has been able to become intrinsically committed to his occupation.

'Job motivation' is the penultimate axial code. Earning good money, self-realization in the occupation and enjoying work are the three motivating factors for English and German mechatronics with this pattern.

'Priority of work and family' presents the last axial codes. Mechatronics with this pattern put family first. They rather change jobs than cutting down on family time.

4.1.3. Occupational-Biographical Pattern 'Passionate Handling of the Automobile'

The structure of this occupational-biographical pattern is the same like the previous two patterns, beginning with the first selective code 'biographical orientations' having 'focus' as its first axial code. Mechatronics with the pattern 'passionate handling of the automobile' focus on the automobile alone. The vehicle is a fascinating object to him and he feels obliged to the automobile.

His working 'tool' – second axial code – is beside his profound knowledge his passion. This passion is linked with a virtuosity regarding the handling of materials and single parts of the automobile. He refers to a nearly biologically determined occupational aptitude which is his internal working tool.

Mechatronics with this pattern mention the physicality – third axial code – of his occupation in respect to getting hands dirty and doing physical hard work. He is willing to sacrifice his body in order to being able to practice his occupation.

In respect to the fourth axial code 'perception of technology and its development' do mechatronics with this pattern observe a fast changing automobile technology and an increase of complexity. In contrast to the previous described patterns, the mechatronic with this pattern does not view these changes as a challenge. He copes with the new electrotechnology due to his in-depth knowledge in mechanics. He understands electrotechnology as a continuation of mechanics. The mechanics are the base for repairing the electrical parts of a car. However, he shows a passionate will for learning the new electrotechnology.

Mechatronics with this pattern are ‘quasi-professional’ – last axial code of the first selective code. This quasi-professionalism can be seen in his professional handling of the automobile, his diagnostic skills, quality work and holistic view of the vehicle. In addition, he voices a criticism of the system. The automobile industry – and for the English mechatronics also the VET – want mechatronics to act as henchmen, who only plug their diagnostic machines into the car and let the machine do the work, instead of thinking oneself. Furthermore, those diagnostic machines provide only a limited analysis of the problems of a car – it is absolutely necessary that a car mechatronic has in-depth knowledge in order to recognise a car’s problem and to solve it.

‘Occupational-biographical resources’ is the first axial code of the selective code ‘process of biographical orientations in conjunction with the occupation’ and car mechatronics with this pattern have their passion as their resource. Again German car mechatronics of this pattern have institutional resources, such as school curriculum, in addition. Their ‘dominant process structure of the life course’ is a metamorphosis, i.e. finding their way regarding which specialised field they want to work in. Joy and passion for their occupation are their ‘job motivation’. For them work is either more important than family life or it is equally important.

4.2. The Role of the English and German VET System

Whereas the three reconstructed patterns of occupational-biographical orientations answer the question, which occupational-biographical orientations do English and German car mechatronic develop, does the reconstructed car mechatronics’ perception of the English and German Vet system and other structural components answer the question how the respective national VET system influence the development of the occupational-biographical orientations. Four influential structural components have been reconstructed:

- Institutional conditions for biographical orientation process in conjunction with the occupation and quasi-professionalism
- Transition school – VET
- Subjective perception of the VET
- Subjective perception of the national technical culture

Table 2: Comparative view of the English and German car mechatronics’ perception of the structural components

Selective Codes	Axial Codes	German	English
Structure	Institutional Condition for biographical orientation processes in conjunction with the occupation & quasi-professionalism	the issue choosing an occupation has been raised and there has been the impetus for an occupational-biographical conception through family and school	lack of institutional conditions (family and school) for dealing early with the issue
	Transition school – VET	direct entry in the VET family-related gatekeeper	period of unemployment path 1: straight into the car sector path 2: different first job job centre or gatekeeper choosing occupation arbitrarily
	Subjective Perception of the	Dual System very good College very good Equality of theory and practice Teachers good Class group good	Different types of VET (3 months – 5 years) Change of company that takes on trainees Training conditions bad Teachers bad Different types of theoretical lessons Different influences on

		Working atmosphere good Different influences on commitment to the occupation	commitment to the occupation (in no way the VET)
	Subjective Perception of the national technical culture	Automobile as a quasi- Organism Automobile workshop industry: aspiration for being an all- rounder, extensive tool kit	Automobile as a quasi-organism Automobile workshop industry: single units, dependencies, unskilled workers, , de- professionalization

Throughout all three patterns of occupational-biographical orientations it is visible that within the axial code ‘biographical-occupational resources’ English car mechatronics lack institutional resources. Firstly, English informants report that choosing an occupation had been no topic being discussed at home. Secondly, the school curriculum did not include the issue of occupational orientation. Thus English people did not have the opportunity to deal with the topic choosing an occupation at an early stage. In contrast, all German informants report about discussion with the family and the school raising the issue of what occupation to choose. They had to undergo a work placement for a week during school time in order to get practical knowledge. This affected the ‘transition from school to the VET’ directly. English informants left school and had to undergo a period of unemployment. This was either followed by choosing a training or job within the automobile sector (i.e. the passionate mechatronics) or by entering the labour market working in a different field (e.g. hotel, restaurant). English informants (except the passionate ones) report that their choice of careers was arbitrarily. Due to the job centre or gatekeepers did they end up in the automobile industry. In comparison, German informants with the help of their family-related gatekeepers got an apprenticeship straight away. There are also huge differences regarding the ‘subjective perception of the VET’. The interviewed English car mechatronics had participated in a huge variety of vocational training programmes. Whereas some have completed a 5-year-apprenticeship, some have undergone 3-month-trainings.

The same variety can be found in respect to the accomplished vocational certificates: some have a City Guild certificate, some have merely an in-house-training certificate. All English informants have changed their training company as they were unsatisfied with the training. In general, training is perceived as improvable: training conditions, instructors and theoretical input did not satisfy the needs of the informants. In contrast, all German informants completed a 3-year-apprenticeship in the dual system. All were satisfied with the training conditions, instructors and the practical and theoretical input. Regarding the structural component ‘subjective perception of the national technical culture’ English and German car mechatronics share one perception: they view the automobile as a quasi-organism. A car is not merely an object, it is an object which ‘lives’, which makes demands, which needs to be treated correctly. The automobile workshop industry is characterized by fragmentation, i.e. cars get dealt with in single components, workshops repair single components and have a referral network. They have the problem of an unskilled workforce and deprofessionalisation, i.e. complete dependency on the diagnostic machine instead of in-depth knowledge. The German automobile workshop industry is characterized by a holistic approach. It is expected from the car mechatronics and the car mechatronics demand from themselves that they are able to repair everything at a car. They aspire to be all-rounders.

4.3. The Linkage between the Occupational-Biographical Orientations and the national VET systems (and other structural components)

Taking the above described findings into consideration one detects two linkages. Firstly, there is a connection between the ‘institutional conditions for biographical orientation processes’ and the ‘transition from school to the VET system’. Secondly, there is a link between the ‘subjective perception of the national VET system’ and the ‘subjective perception of the technical culture’.

Table 3: Linkage between occupational-biographical orientation patterns and national structural components

	English	German
Institutional conditions	Lack of institutional conditions	Existence of institutional conditions
Transition school – VET system	Brittle transition	Successful transition
Subjective perception of the national technical culture	Fragmentized tasks in garage shops	holistic range of tasks in all garage shops
Subjective perception of the national VET system	Fragmented forms of VET	Holistic VET system

With the linkage between the ‘institutional conditions for biographical orientation processes’ and the ‘transition from school to the VET system’ the following is meant: a lack of institutional conditions, such as families discussing the topic of choosing an occupation and a school curriculum including this topic, seems so lead to a brittle transition from school to the VET – that is the English case. In contrast, do such institutional conditions exist then the transition from school to the VET is successful – that is the German case. This linkage explains three findings. Firstly, the development duration of quasi-professionalism for English and German car mechatronics differs. English car mechatronics take longer than German ones. This can be explained with the institutional conditions English car mechatronics lack. Secondly, English and German car mechatronics differ in respect to the occupational-biographical resources available to them. English car mechatronics can not draw upon institutional conditions as they simply do not exist. Thirdly, the dominant process structure for both English and German car mechatronics is the metamorphosis. Whereas English car mechatronics have the metamorphosis of ‘finding themselves’, i.e. what do I really want to do, German car mechatronics undergo the metamorphosis of ‘intrinsic connection’, i.e. I really want to do this job. As the English car mechatronics lack institutional conditions it is more difficult for them to find out which industry would suit them. So, they find themselves in an occupation and ask themselves whether this industry is something for them. German car mechatronics find themselves in the chosen industry, where they thought that is the right one for them and they ask themselves how to establish a strong emotional link with their occupation.

With the linkage between the ‘subjective perception of the technical culture’ and the ‘subjective perception of the national VET system’ the following is meant. In England we find a technical culture which is characterized by fragmentation, i.e. the car garage workshop industry is fragmented in many different parts. Some garages do brakes and tires, other garages do gearboxes and generators, but none of the ‘free’ garages do everything. The VET system in England is modularized to that extent that students can choose which modules (parts of a car) they want to take. Of course, there are compulsory modules but there is also a wide range choice. In Germany, the garage workshop industry is characterized by holism. Car mechatronics are expected and they also have the aspiration that they can repair everything on a car. The German VET system has the same orientation. Students have to learn everything, they cannot choose to exclude certain parts from the car.

5. Summary and Concluding Remarks

Two research questions were posed and could be answered. The first question was: Which occupational-biographical orientations do English and German car mechatronics develop? The answer is that three orientations could be reconstructed which are also valid for both English and German car mechatronics, namely: strategic usage of vocational educational institutions, drawing borders regarding the field, passionate handling of the automobile. The second question was: How do a fragmented (English) VET system and a holistic (Germany) VET system influence the development of such occupational-biographical orientations? First of all, the outcome, i.e. the three occupational-biographical patterns, is the same. They are valid for both English and German car mechatronics. The influence of the national VET system can be found in the findings regarding linkage between institutional conditions and the transition from school the VET with the consequence, that English car mechatronics take longer and with more personal costs to become quasi-professional than German car mechatronics. Thus, the outcome is the same, but it is the development process which is different.

The English system is suitable for people who have long processes of searching what they want to do. Thus, these people need the freedom and the time for these processes. People, who are looking for clearly structured pathways may find it difficult to get along within the English VET system. In contrast, the German VET system is suitable for people who are looking for set structures and who know early what they want to do professionally. But people, who need time to find out which professional pathway they want to go, will struggle greatly with the German VET system. However, the some German scientist voiced in respect to the introduction of a more modularized German VET system with the consequence of hindering the development of a holistic occupational self-understanding is refuted by this study.

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Bioprofile Erika Edith Gericke

Erika Edith Gericke has read sociology as a major and English as well as Vocational Education and Human Resources as minors. She has graduated with a M.A. (grade A). Mrs. Gericke works as a scientific research and study assistant at the Department of Vocational Education and Human Resource. She is about to hand in her doctoral thesis which deals with the development of occupational-biographical orientations of English and German car mechatronics. Mrs. Gericke is a specialist in qualitative research methods.