

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2000 Conference Proceedings (Vancouver, BC,
Canada)

Comparison of national E&T-cultures: findings of a transnational research project in UK, Germany, Italy, France and Portugal

Michael Kuhn

Institut for Technology and Education, University of Bremen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Kuhn, Michael (2000). "Comparison of national E&T-cultures: findings of a transnational research project in UK, Germany, Italy, France and Portugal," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2000/papers/44>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Comparison of National E&T Cultures: Findings of a Transnational Research Project in UK, Germany, Italy, France and Portugal

Michael Kuhn,
University of Bremen, Germany

Abstract: *The paper presents the findings of a transnational project shedding some light on the role of national VET cultures in 5 EU-member-states performing joint labour market policies. In focus group interviews with the main social actors in VET, trainees, industrialists and trainers, both intra-cultural between the groups and inter-cultural differences between the countries will be investigated.*

Introduction

Interestingly enough, the globalisation of all economic and as a consequence all social relations, the equalisation of competition, in Europe reinforced by the process of political and economical integration, has revealed and also reinforced the importance of the hidden concepts of the social actors within social structures in the field of employment, work and work-related teaching learning.

Differences in coping with equalised global challenges are both based on institutional and on cultural factors. The ways in which strategies and actions in the field of employment, work and training are carried out by the social actors (employees, entrepreneurs, trade-unionists, politicians and policy makers, etc . . .) in the Member States of the European Union are strictly dependent on the *social representations* concerning issues such as “vocational training”, “occupation/ profession,” “work organisation” in the different countries.

However, major differences emerge for what concerns the cultures of VET– the way in which VET is regarded by the employers and the other actors in the work system, and the way in which it is experienced by the trainees. Therefore, the success of the policies responding to globalised challenges in an integrating Europe seem to be based not only on institutional arrangements but also on the recognition and mutual understanding of the meanings and representations concerning these issues within the European Countries.

The paper presents a LEONARDO da VINCI project, which tries to shed light on the identities and differences in socially shared meanings, and social representations in the different participating countries, UK, France, Portugal, Italy and Germany.

The Project Concept

The project is based on a set of conceptual assumptions, deriving from research and literature concerning two main thematic areas: cultural differences and social representations.

Cultural Differences

In recent years, diversity in national and group cultures has been studied by scholars who showed how cultural differences constitute powerful predictors of how people behave in organisations and institutions. For example Hofstede et. al. (1990) recognised different national value systems in the areas of social inequality and relation to authority; relations between the group and the individual; social implications of gender (being a male, a female, or other gender); ways of dealing with uncertainty, controlling aggression, expressing emotions, and orientation toward time (e.g., short vs. long term). Hampden, Turner and Trompenaars (1993) also pursued broad in depth comparison between European cultures using the dimension of attitude toward security and norms, interpretation of the relation between mankind and nature, attitude toward individual and national identity, attitude with respect to family values, religion, conception of time and work organisation, and hierarchical distance. Similar findings were presented by Hofstede (1991). These national and regional differences are of course embodied in, and sustained by, the institutional arrangements, regulating bodies, and practices carried out in the different member states.

A crucial dimension relates to differences in power structure: in every country the structure of power is affected by several variables such as relation of private and public power; range, aims, and forms of state interventions; form and distribution of power and local authorities (democracy, federal,

centralised state). Economic differences are relevant. For example structure, performance, technology, and labour market structure conditions differentiate the economies of each country.

Differences in the institutional arrangement and learning styles are another dimension of national differentiation. Educational and training systems usually vary in relation to specific configurations of the above elements. Differences involve structure, administration, curricula and regulations, pedagogical attitudes and teaching methods. Such differences combine at the various levels, for example with the value attributed to the diffusion of technology and awareness of its benefits and constraints. Together, they come together to determine the prevalence of specific learning strategies and learning styles at the individual level. Cultural differences permeate all the aspects of VET and create national and sub-national specificities of VET systems.

Recent works analysing the assumptions and values regulating VET in different countries have begun to identify the cultural premises which allow national VET systems to work effectively. Although such works are based mainly on impressionistic data and do not carry out extensive cross national comparisons, they shed light on the importance of cultural aspects for understanding the specific actions and actors in different VET systems at the national level.

Social Representations

Different theories and constructs provide explanations of the link between the way people make sense of themselves and the world and the way they act. Among them is the theory of *social representation* introduced three decades ago to account for the links between broader cultural beliefs, attitudes and behaviour.

In short, social representations can be defined as the elaboration of an object by a community which enables its members to behave in a comprehensible manner and to communicate. These representations are cultural systems with a logic and a language enabling the members of a community to organise the conditions and contexts of their interactions. On the one hand, social representations allow individuals and groups to construct a coherent vision of reality which they use to orient their behaviour. On the other, they are the outcome of mental activity

modulated by the features of the social situation in which they are produced (Gherardi, 1998).

In this sense, social representations provide a link between attitudes and behaviours and give reason of the co-ordinated behaviour of people toward the same phenomenon, or different behaviours under different cultural circumstances. Representations of VET are likely to determine a number of differences in the ways the system is perceived by the different actors involved determining, or concurring to determine.

Methodological Considerations

The research design is based on the progressive enrichment and refinement of an explanatory framework based mainly on a set of focus groups interviews and a series of working conferences.

The Initial Working Hypothesis

Representations of VET are likely to determine a number of differences in the ways the system is perceived by the different actors involved determining, or concurring to determine. Such differences are likely to include:

- the level of consideration granted to VET;
- the relation between VET system and the economic world;
- the social perception and labelling of trainees within and outside the workplace;
- the status accorded to trainees and apprentices within the workplace and in the wider social context, including the form of contractual arrangement between trainee and employer;
- the level of involvement in the work activities;
- the attribution of responsibility for training;
- the relations between learners and teachers, and between trainers and teachers;
- the perception of VET employers and trainers;
- the relations between VET activities and other forms of instruction and education.

Eliciting Representations of VET using the "Focus Group Technique"

The project runs focus groups with representatives of the three social actors in the VET field. In every participating country group interviews are carried out for every representative group, i.e. trainees/apprentices, industrialists and teachers/trainers.

| | UK | D | I | OUTCOME |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>TRAINEES/ APPRENTICES</i> | <i>Focus groups</i> | <i>Focus groups</i> | <i>Focus groups</i> | T/A inter-cultural differences |
| <i>INDUSTRIALISTS</i> | <i>Focus groups</i> | <i>Focus groups</i> | <i>Focus groups</i> | Business inter-cultural differences |
| <i>TRAINERS</i> | <i>Focus groups</i> | <i>Focus groups</i> | <i>Focus groups</i> | Trainers inter-cultural differences |
| <i>OUTCOME</i> | UK intra-cultural differences | Germany intra-cultural differences | Italy intra-cultural differences | Clues for the European dimension |

The scheme shows two main lines of analysis and comparison:

- at the national level, in order to discover the *intra-cultural* differences between the three groups;
- at the transnational level, in order to discover the *inter-cultural* differences between the same group in the three countries.

Validating and enriching the framework using “working conferences”

Working conferences are used to validate and enrich research data on the basis of a feed back process obtained by inputting the results of a field research to a panel of expert contributors. Experts include representatives of all the relevant stakeholders in the specific issue. In the present context they will include members of training institutions, policy makers, representatives of working unions, academics and researchers.

Interview Domains and Interview Issues

The following social relations of VET and other society subsystems will be subject for focus group interviews to identify intra-cultural and inter-cultural differences (prompts and cues in square brackets). In addition the below list indicates also the focus group interview issues for the first interview group, the trainees.

VET and the Labour Market/Employment

How did you get involved in your current course? [family, friends, relatives, advice at school, personal interest]

How well will the course you are doing help to prepare you for getting a job when you have

finished? [getting to work on time, dealing with work colleagues]

VET and Education

How do you feel about your current course? [like or dislike, what aspects]

How does this course compare with your previous experience of education? [school, how they treat you, how hard the work is, the amount of practical work]

VET and Social Inclusion

Do you think that people doing your current course are given the respect and social standing they deserve? [is this the sort of course people are proud to do, people view this area of study favourably]

Do you think that people doing your current course will be given the respect and social standing they should have in the job they are going to do in the future? [seen as a 'good' job, the sort of occupation people would like to be in]

VET and Corporate Identity

Do you think that your current course will give you the respect and social standing you deserve in the organisation in where you work or are likely to be working in the future? [working somewhere you will feel proud to work, feeling good about the kind of work to have to do]

How will your training contribute to the standing of your company benefit? [from having people who have your have training, improve efficiency in the company]

VET and Lifelong Learning

Do you think that what you are learning now provides a solid foundation for things that you might want to learn about in the future? [other courses later on, getting more training in order to get on in your line of work,]

VET and Life Project

What role does your current course play in your overall educational career? [what you planned to do, what you really wanted to do]

What role does your current course play in your future plans concerning how you want to live your life? [your work is really important to you, it will get you where you want to be]

VET and Preparation for Work

Do you think your course will prepare you for future changes in the work that you do? [you will be adaptable, flexible, able to adjust to new ways of working]

Will your course help you to contribute to innovation in your workplace? [in how work is carried out, in what the final product is, in doing things more efficiently, in trying out new ideas]

The project presented has been elaborated collaboratively by Eduardo Figuera, Portugal; Benedict Gendron, France; John Konrad, UK; Michael Kuhn, Germany; David Nicolini, UK.; Massimo Tomassini, Italy

References

Dietzen, A, & Kuhn, M. (1997). *Building a European Co-operation Research Tradition in Vocational*

Education and Training – the contribution of the survey and analysis. Leonardo da Vinci programme.

Flament, C. (1981). L'analyse de similitude: une technique pour le recherches sur les représentations sociales. *Cahier de Psychologie Cognitive*, 18, 423-429.

Gherardi, (1998) Competence - the symbolic passepartout for change in a learning organization. *Scandinavian Journal of Management, Special Issue, Spring*.

Hampden, Turner, C., & Trompenaar, A. (1993). *The Seven Cultures of Capitalism*. New York: Doubleday.

Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organisations: Software of the mind*. Berkshire, UK: McGraw-Hill.

Hofstede, G., Neuijen, B., Daval Ohyv, D., & Sanders, G. (1990). Measuring organisational culture: A qualitative and quantitative study across twenty cases. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 35, 286-316.

Meyerson, D. & Martin, J. (1987). Cultural Change: An integration of Three Different Views. *Journal of Management Studies*, 24, 623-647.

Moscovici, S. (1969). Preface in *Santé et maladie: analyse d'une représentation sociale*, C. Herzlich. Paris: Mouton.

Moscovici, S. (1981) On social representations. In J. P. Forgas (Ed.), *Social cognition*, pp.123-158. London: Academic Press.

Tudole, (1993). *Cultural impact on learning. A practical guide to managing the effective adaptation of learning material across international boundaries*. Manchester, UK: Contact Publications.