**‘It doesn’t take much force’ – The negotiation of gender by two women motor mechanic apprentices through the biographical lens.**

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*Abstract*

*The marked and persistent gender segregation in apprenticeship has been well documented. The social construction of ‘male’ and ‘female’ jobs is a key factor in the gendered patterns evident in career choice. Research on young women who have chosen careers in male-dominated occupations risks constructing them as ‘Other’, typically concluding that rather than challenging the gender binary, the women would reinforce it, echoing ‘tomboy’ identities according to which girls are aligning themselves with boys whilst devaluing femininity.*

*Based on biographical interviews, this paper explores the role of gender in the career decision-making of one German and one English woman motor mechanic apprentice. It illustrates the strongly normative but highly contextual nature of gender as the two women negotiate identities in their quests to live ‘liveable lives’. It will be argued that the rich and multi-faceted experiences of these two young women belie stereotypical accounts of gender, suggesting acceptable ways of being in male workspaces.*

Keywords: gender identity; tomboy; biography; apprenticeship

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**Introduction**

Apprenticeship has long been integral to skill formation in many industrialised countries, including in England and Germany. The generally low-status apprenticeship system in England is commonly contrasted with its high-quality German counterpart. In Germany, the dual system of apprenticeship represents a well-established and prestigious route, attracting around 50% of school leavers, of whom an increasing proportion have university entry qualifications (Cedefop, 2019). In England, successive governments have sought to expand apprenticeship as a key mechanism to enhance the country’s skills base. However, notwithstanding high-quality programmes, particularly in the traditional sectors of engineering and construction, apprenticeship as a whole remains a comparatively low-status route, commonly deemed for ‘non-academic’ learners (Brockmann, 2012). In 2018, only 6.1% of 16-18 year-olds were on apprenticeships (DfE, 2019a). While German apprenticeship focuses on comprehensive occupational and personal competence development based on the integration of theory and practice, the English system has prioritised the acquisition of fragmented skills sets, neglecting theoretical content and general education (Brockmann et al., 2011).

Despite these differences, apprenticeships in both England and Germany continue to be strongly gendered. Whilst men dominate the (generally more prestigious) traditional craft occupations, women are concentrated in the service sector, such as retail and hospitality, and health and social care. Fuller and Unwin (2014) note that the rise in women apprentices in England is directly related to the expansion of ‘non-traditional’ apprenticeships in this sector. The picture is similar in Germany. While women are considerably under-represented in the dual system (at 37.2% in 2018), they form over three-quarters of learners in the (far less prestigious) school based vocational system, which provides training for occupations in health and social care, and in early years (BMBF, 2019).

In view of the skills shortage in science and technology, the lack of diversity in these sectors has been a major concern for the British and German governments. It has been the focus of countless initiatives designed to improve the participation of under-represented groups (including of women), particularly through apprenticeships (Education and Skills Funding Agency 2018; BIBB 2017). However, efforts to increase the participation of women in male-dominated careers (or indeed, that of men in female-dominated occupations) have had little impact. For motor mechanic apprenticeships, the proportion of women currently stands at 4.1% in Germany (BIBB 2018) and 5.6% in England[[1]](#footnote-1) (DfE, 2019b).

The under-representation of women in certain sectors of education and the labour market is of course well documented. A large of body of research offers a range of explanations for the persisting gender segregation, including the social construction of gendered occupations, the lack of female role models, and the challenges faced by women in masculine work spaces, all of which pointing to the risk women face when taking up male-dominated occupations (Beck et al. 2006).

Before discussing my own data, I will be exploring two main bodies of literature. First, I will review evidence on the construction of gender by younger children in school settings (e.g. Reay 2001; Paechter 2010). Drawing on the work of Judith Butler on performative identity, this research provides important insights into the power of hegemonic categories, such as hyper-femininity and masculinity, which make it difficult for children to deviate from the norm (e.g. Paechter and Clark 2007). An understanding of this research is critical to the central premise in this paper, namely that the ways in which individuals make sense of the social world is rooted in past experience, and that identity formation and career decision-making have to be understood biographically. In my research I draw on Alheit’s (1994, 2002) notion of biography as ‘a lifelong process of meaning-making’, where each new situation is made sense of in terms of continuously accumulated and renewed knowledge.

Secondly, I will look at the work on gender and career decision-making, and young women’s experiences in ‘male jobs’. Some of this research has highlighted how, in order to succeed in male-dominated workplaces, women conform to male norms and in doing so reinforce rather than challenge masculine work cultures (e.g. Powell et al. 2008, 2010).

In my own research, I draw on Francis’ (2010) and Francis and Paechter’s (2015) notions of monoglossic and heteroglossic representations of identity. Their work highlights how, in an effort to conform to normative gender categories, individuals may downplay or mask traits and behaviours that do not fit them. The authors go on to argue that in a similar vein, researchers also tend to focus on qualities that confirm these norms, thereby neglecting more diverse identities.

In this paper I will be exploring the experiences of two women motor mechanic apprentices, one in England and one in Germany, and, in particular, the role of gender in their career decision-making and school-to-work transition. It will be argued that the meaning these young women attach to their gender identities and their choice of apprenticeship must be understood in the context of their biographical pasts as they moved between multiple social contexts, each with their own discursive framework. Based on biographic and ethnographic data, the paper shows that the two women negotiate heteroglossic identities that suggest acceptable ways of being in male workspaces that go beyond normative categories.

**Gender negotiations in school environments**

The role of normative masculine and feminine identities is evident in the literature on children’s negotiation of gender in primary and secondary school environments (e.g. Reay 2001; Paechter 2010). This research commonly draws on post-structural perspectives, such as the work of Judith Butler (1990) on performative identities. Butler sees identities as discursively produced. These discursive regimes of gender exert enormous regulatory power, as individuals feel compelled to conform to the normative positions thus established, a process Butler refers to as ‘the compulsive citation of norms’. Individuals conform because of the need to live ‘liveable lives’ and to be intelligible social beings (Butler 2004). Thus, a number of studies have illustrated the superior power of conformist identities and, in particular, those of hyper (heterosexual) masculinities and femininities, whilst children who deviate from the norm risk being marginalised (Renold 2005). Children who produce ‘girly-girl’ and macho masculine identities tend to be the most powerful and popular in both primary and secondary classrooms (Reay 2001; Renold 2005; Archer et al. 2007; Francis 2010). However, the social recognition of ‘girly-girlhood’ is of a dubious nature and accentuates the conflict between feminine identity and educational achievement. Thus, girls in both primary (e.g. Reay 2001) and secondary (e.g. Archer et al. 2007) classrooms may have to downplay their academic ability in order to stay true to the girly-girl performance. The regulatory power of normative feminine identities is equally well illustrated in studies examining girls’ negotiation of gender in the context of physical education, where girls may have to hide markers of masculinity in order not to risk othering (Clark 2012; Hill 2015).

Crucially, the kind of identities available is dependent on the social context and the interaction of a range of categories, including gender, social class and ethnicity, within a particular school environment, all combining to produce local discursive regimes that render certain identities possible or impossible (Youdell 2006; Renold 2005; Reay 2001). Of particular interest for the present paper are single-sex all-girl environments, within which girls have been shown to be less constrained than in mixed-sex settings (Reay 2001) and do better academically (e.g. Belfi et al. 2012). Hill’s (2015) study of girls’ performances of gender through physical education classes in a secondary school suggests that, whilst in mixed-sex classes the girls were careful not to appear as too masculine, the same girls reported feeling much more at ease to position themselves as active and sporty in all-girls lessons.

One alternative identity discussed in the literature alongside normative femininities and masculinities is that of tomboy. However, this is equally problematic and restrictive, as it is also constructed against the gender binary: Tomboys are seen as rejecting normative femininity whilst subscribing to markers of masculinity. The tomboy category conjures up images of a girl with a masculine appearance (trousers, cropped hair, no make-up) and demeanour (physically active, assertive) (Holland and Harpin 2015). Paechter (2010), in the Tomboys Identity study, describes how the girls who identified as tomboy constructed their identity in direct opposition to that of girly-girl, whom they described as ‘other’ to themselves. While the author found more nuanced performances of gender (in the form of identifying with aspects of masculinity without entirely rejecting femininity), the girls could only refer to these as being ‘a bit tomboy’ (2010: 226). What is more, it is commonly argued that tomboys, rather than challenging stereotypical norms of femininity, in reality confirm the gender binary and with it male superiority (Reay 2001).

Tomboy identities may be difficult to take up and are dependent on the dominant norms and power constellations in any given context, including those of peer, familial and school contexts (Reay 2001; Paechter 2010). In addition, tomboy identities are acceptable only as long as they are a pre-pubescent phase that girls ‘grow out of’ (Halberstam 1998; Holland and Harpin 2015). Thus, girls who identify as tomboys have been found to come under increasing pressure as they get older to adjust to more ‘passive’ and feminine behaviours (Paechter and Clark 2007), whilst Holland and Harpin’s (2015) study highlights the increasing conflict between mothers and daughters, with the former discouraging their daughters from displaying gender-transgressive behaviour.

As argued by Francis (2010) and Francis and Paechter (2015), the power of the gender binary leads children to conform to the hegemonic categories of hyper masculinities and femininities and to downplay any qualities that would disrupt them. Francis (2010) notes that while the children in her study of high-achieving pupils subscribed to dominant gender norms that are presented as unproblematic, very few of her participants actually fitted these stereotypical accounts. Following Bakhtin, she applies the terms of monoglossia and heteroglossia to her analysis of gender construction, arguing that most performances of gender were much more nuanced and diverse (heteroglossic). Francis (2010) and Francis and Paechter (2015) suggest that just as children present an image of a holistic identity, researchers tend to depict hegemonic identities, while neglecting more diverse representations of gender. Crucially, Francis and Paechter (2015: 781) argue that what they describe as the ‘monoglossic masking of gender heteroglossia’ is often not picked up by researchers, who, by simply recording ‘monoglossic, dualistic performances of masculinity and femininity’, are ‘complicit in re-inscribing binary gender categories (2015: 783).

The power of normative identities is evident in the literature on young women’s transition into male-dominated occupations, as will be discussed in the next section.

**The gendered construction of occupations**

A growing body of research suggests that career choice is strongly influenced by the gendered construction of ‘male’ and ‘female’ occupations, with children and young people drawing on stereotypical ideas of what constitutes masculine and feminine work. Based on assumptions of innate qualities of men and women, occupations are regarded as ‘male’ or ‘female’ and thus unsuitable to the other sex. A recent international survey of primary school children found strongly gendered patterns of career aspirations (Chambers et al. 2017). While boys overwhelmingly preferred male-dominated occupations (to do with ‘making things’ such as scientist and engineer), girls were found to be more interested in ‘caring’ careers, such as nursing or teaching. In the UK, over four times as many boys wanted to become engineers compared to girls (ibid.).

Research has shown how certain subjects and types of work are associated with stereotypically masculine attributes, such as bodily strength, physicality, assertiveness and even cognitive ability. The ESRC-funded ASPIRES project (DeWitt et al. 2018; Archer et al. 2013), an ongoing longitudinal study on the factors influencing the choice of science subjects and careers by children aged 10 to 18, suggests that the association of science with ‘braininess’ and white middle-class masculinity is putting off girls, along with children from working-class backgrounds and certain ethnic minority groups. In particular, science subjects were seen as incompatible with hyper-feminine gender identities (ibid.). The findings echo previous research that identified a conflict between femininity and academic achievement (e.g. Archer et al. 2007). Similarly, in a study on access to physics and engineering following compulsory education, Francis et al. (2017: 156) concluded that the construction of these subjects as ‘quintessentially masculine’ was the key factor in preventing girls from taking up careers in these fields. In the same vein, Smyth and Darmody (2009: 284), examining the gendered take-up of craft and technology subjects in Irish secondary schools, found that subjects such as metalwork were perceived by both girls and boys in the study as ‘naturally’ male based on ideas of ‘men’s natural affinity with technology’. In relation to apprenticeship, both young people and employers have been found to hold strongly stereotypical attitudes, with different types of apprenticeship perceived to require particular ‘male’ or ‘female’ qualities (Beck et al. 2006; Fuller and Unwin 2006).

Research on young women who have entered male-dominated careers and pathways commonly focuses on the difficulties of being accepted in masculine work cultures. Evidence from the construction industry illustrates the harsh reality of women in male-dominated jobs and the challenges they face in environments that are constructed as hyper-masculine (e.g. Fielden et al. 2001). Common findings are the extent of sexual harassment and gender discrimination women experience (ibid.; Tangaard 2006; Butler 2013) as well as the idea of women having to be extremely good at their work. Agapiou (2002) reports how women operatives in the Scottish construction industry felt they were under heightened scrutiny, having to ‘prove’ themselves by being as good as or better at their job than their male colleagues. Girls on apprenticeships have also been found to have fewer learning opportunities than their male counterparts (Tangaard 2006).

A common suggestion in the literature is that women, in an effort to overcome these challenges, seek to embody male norms, and, by aligning themselves with their male peers and constructing themselves as ‘different’ from other women, actually reinforce masculine work cultures. It is argued that the women aspire to be ‘one of the boys’, adhering to strongly stereotypical assumptions about the work being unsuitable to women while regarding themselves as the exception. Thus, Craig and Lacroix (2011: 450) argue that whilst tomboydom grants girls and women ‘limited privilege to spaces for which masculinity is an unspoken requirement’, such as male-dominated workplaces, it serves to reinforce the polarisation of gender norms (and the masculine norm as the privileged position), as tomboys are seen as the exception.

It is highly indicative that the young women working on a yard in the horse racing industry in Deborah Butler’s (2013) study were referred to as female ‘lads’. The author suggests that women reproduce male norms inadvertently as they struggle to become accepted by their male colleagues. Butler writes how the female ‘lads’ on the yard had to be seen to either tolerate sexist banter or participate in it themselves in order to be accepted. Butler (2013: 1317) argues that these women had ‘to learn to behave in ways […] acceptable to the men in the yard’ and that this involved ‘embodying certain aspects of working-class masculinities’. Thus, the female ‘lads’ in her study identified as ‘hard working, strong, tough, and not acting like a girly-girl’, although, interestingly, this contradicted their gender-conforming identities outside work.

In some contrast, Powell et al. (2010: 578), exploring the career decision-making of women on construction-related degrees, found that their study participants held strongly stereotypical views about construction jobs as male, requiring certain masculine qualities (including male cognitive skills!), and they deliberately wanted to align themselves with men. Whilst they perceived the work to be unsuitable to women, they saw themselves as the exception, drawing a certain satisfaction from being ‘different’. The authors argue that, rather than challenging the status quo, the women would reaffirm it, refuting previous suggestions that, as the proportion of women in male-dominated jobs increases, this would gradually soften the masculine culture. Following the work of Francis (2010), it would appear that this work prioritised monoglossic constructions of gender while neglecting more multi-faceted presentations. I will now be introducing my study before discussing the findings.

**The study**

The research presented here was conducted as part of my PhD thesis ‘Learner biographies and learning cultures: identity and apprenticeship in England and Germany’, which aimed to explore the apprentices’ construction of their learner identities over time and in the contexts of the particular learning environments of apprenticeship (Brockmann, 2012). Following the approach of ‘contrasting contexts’ (Skocpol and Somers 1980), I chose two countries with strongly contrasting apprenticeship systems. Apprenticeship in England is commonly cited as relatively low status with often poor provision, deemed for less achieving or ‘second-chance’ learners, while Germany’s dual system of apprenticeship is regarded high-quality and increasingly attracts young people with university-entry qualifications (Behrens et al. 2008; Brockmann, 2012). I also included motor mechanic and retail apprenticeships as a further institutional contrast in terms of high- and lower-end quality programmes. The main finding was that the academic-vocational divide in England produced a discursive regime within which apprentices presented themselves in those terms, strongly identifying with ‘practical’ work while rejecting ‘academic’ learning, whilst in Germany this dichotomy was mitigated by a closer integration of theory and practice. The biographical approach in particular also enabled me to challenge accounts of young people insisting they were ‘not good at reading and writing’ which research so often takes at face value. Analysing subjectivities and how these are shaped biographically brings to the fore much more nuanced and complex constructions, alerting us not to take at face value accounts of young people solicited through semi-structured interviews.

The study used a multi-method ethnographic framework, combining a mix of methods that enabled the analysis of apprentices’ construction of ‘learner identities’ (i.e. their perception of themselves as learners) both, over time and within the main sites of apprenticeship, the workplace and the college. The focus of analysis was on the individual case studies of the young people (four retail and four motor mechanic apprentices each in Germany and England, a total of 16). My sample consisted of three male and one female apprentice in the case of the motor mechanics apprenticeship, and three female and one male retail apprentice, in an effort to reflect the gender distribution on these programmes to some extent.

With each of the young people I conducted biographical interviews according to the biographical narrative interpretive methods (BNIM) (Wengraf 2001), lasting 45 minutes to two and a half hours. BNIM is designed to encourage the telling of a life story, bringing the interviewee closer to actual life experiences, with minimal intervention from the interviewer. In the analysis, the researcher distinguishes between the life as told and the ‘objective’ events and structures at the time, thus alerting us to the non-inevitability of human action. The aim is to reconstruct the *gestalt* of the story, providing insight into the interviewee’s current perspective and how it was shaped over time. Importantly for the purpose of this paper, gender was not raised by the interviewer but introduced by the interviewees themselves.

The interviews were complemented by ethnographies, consisting of participant observations in the apprentices’ workplaces and college classrooms (two days in each of the sites), and semi-structured interviews with tutors (in colleges) and managers or trainers (in workplaces). For motor mechanics, I recruited all apprentices through one Further Education college (one in England and one in Germany), although the apprentices were distributed across different workplaces (two in Germany and four in England). The ethnographies allowed me to explore the discursive regimes (or ‘learning cultures’) in these sites and the co-construction of identities by the actors within them. The data was analysed according to principles of Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and written up as descriptions of learning cultures for each of the sites. The learning cultures constituted an important additional layer in the analysis of the young people’s biographies. The biographical data were transcribed and analysed according to principles of the BNIM (Wengraf, 2001). The individual case studies were written up as short life stories, which combined the biographical data and the findings from the ethnographies. Finally, pairs were selected for comparison, matched on certain criteria, such as gender and biographical experience (Crompton 2001).

The paper draws on the case studies of the two women motor mechanic apprentices, Lisa, aged 17, in England and Erika, aged 18, in Germany. Both names are pseudonyms. They both worked in small, independent garages with around 6 or 7 mechanics in total, and they were the only female employees. Erika was the only apprentice in her garage, while there was another (male) apprentice in Lisa’s workplace.

**Findings**

***Erika***

Erika grew up in a working-class family, in a rural part of Western Germany. The central theme of Erika’s unfolding story is her gender identity, and, in particular, that of a highly active person, who does not conform to gender stereotypes. Erika’s identity is summed up when she asserts herself as ‘different’ from other girls, echoing the literature on tomboy identities (e.g. Paechter 2010):

I’m different I know, ya know, I’m not your typical girl, y’know, I don’t need three hours to get ready[…] because actually I don’t have that much time, y’know, at home, well, I’ve always had to help, it started with um Saturdays before [going horse] riding, then with sweeping the court yard, cleaning the bathroom and things like that…

As is evident from this quote, her gender identity was closely bound up with her childhood experience that she talked about at length with pride. She grew up a very active child who was expected by both parents to help around the house and yard from a young age. Importantly, her father seemed to have involved her in his practical activities, such as fixing cars. She recounted a story when, aged eight, he encouraged her to help him fix a puncture on her bike. Remarkably, aged twelve, she helped him build a shed, a process she recalled in great detail, suggesting incredible aptness at the tasks involved, including digging up the soil and paving the yard. It becomes clear that her parents, and her father in particular, were proud of her and a less restrictive identity was readily available and made sense to her.

The main theme of her narrative then is about her emerging identity clashing with established gender norms at (secondary) school, where she clashed with her female peers. As her story unfolded, it quickly became apparent that the freedom she had enjoyed at home was no longer possible at school, where available identities were restricted and she became marginalised (Renold 2005). It would appear that the life Erika had lived thus far became less and less liveable as she was expected to conform to normative presentations of gender. It was striking then that, when she exclaimed that ‘school was really hard’, she did not refer to finding it challenging academically (and her grades suggested she did not), but to her troubled relationships with some of her female classmates. It soon became clear that she was reacting to the hyper-femininity performed by these girls:

They start talking about “Germany’s Next Top Model”, and ‘oh my god’ … ‘how do I look, I’m too fat’… no that’s not my thing … I don’t have a problem wearing men’s trousers occasionally, you know, …I don’t care what they think of me, you know, and pink and that is not my colour…

It appears from this extract that she defined herself in opposition to the girly-girl femininity, subscribing to markers of masculinity. She clearly must have stood out from the other girls in her class, in terms of her appearance (cropped hair, baggy trousers) and demeanour (she recounted several incidents of rebellious behaviour when she ‘clashed with teachers’). Interestingly, however, she also revealed elsewhere in the interview that she was not ‘someone who always needs to wear dresses in the summer’, indicating that she also would wear them occasionally and denoting a more fluid identity. At the same time, she was close friends with some of her male classmates, whilst outside school she was affiliated with a group of ‘rockers’ (made up of young men and women) and their out-of-school activities, such as barn fetes, loud music and barbeques. Her refusal to conform to hegemonic norms of femininity regularly brought her into conflict with her female classmates whom she recounted as bullying and scheming against her. For example, girls would challenge her appearance (‘What are you wearing? Look at you!’), or threaten to punish her when it was alleged that she was ‘going out with three guys at once’ (which she denied).

In terms of career choice, shaped by a family habitus that encouraged physical activity (see Taylor et al. 2015), it was always clear to Erika that she wanted to take up a manual job, explaining that she could not imagine having to sit down all day. Equally, however, she did not set out to enter a male-dominated occupation. During her final years at school Erika undertook a number of placements with local employers. She stressed how she enjoyed her first placement at a hairdresser’s, and that she was determined at the time that that was her chosen career. However, her father was adamant that she should look for ‘something better’ (likely in terms of status and remuneration) and he facilitated various placements at local garages. Erika enjoyed working in the garages, not least because she was able to build on her experience of working on cars. When during her final placement she applied for an apprenticeship place as a mechanic, she was accepted.

The field of car mechanics is of course itself heavily gendered and governed by normative ideas about what defines a mechanic. By applying for an apprenticeship and working within a male-dominated occupation she was confronted with a different set of challenges. She was acutely aware of acting against dominant gender norms and the difficulties she was facing. She explained it was more difficult for her to obtain an apprenticeship place, and she recounted an incident when she submitted her application at a dealership and it was assumed she was applying for an office job. Her only chance was to show her abilities as a mechanic, afforded to her by the placements (‘as a girl, the more people know me, the more chance I have getting a place’). The constant need to overcome gender stereotypes and her perception that she had to ‘prove’ herself were thus other salient parts of her narrative. Crucially, she subverted gender norms not by aligning herself with men, but by insisting that, as a woman, she was well capable:

*…well for me it’s like, precisely* ***because*** *I’m a girl y’know I can do it…*

While she found some of the tasks physically challenging and frustrating, she was keen to resist the temptation of asking for help, acutely aware of the penalties this would potentially entail. In particular, before starting her apprenticeship she was concerned that her garage lacked modern equipment, requiring much of the work to be done manually. Interestingly however, rather than reinforcing the gender hierarchy, she challenged some of the stereotypical constructs. It is therefore highly instructive how she thought to overcome the idea of male prowess, for example, by insisting that it was about developing the right technique rather than physical strength:

Very quickly I tried to manage on my own, without needing help, you know, yes even now from time to time I go ‘can you come and help?’ […] but on the whole, it doesn’t take much force I’d say, it really depends on the technique, you know, so for a big bolt I won’t use a half inch or quarter inch spanner but the big torque wrench, you know, main thing is it works.

The motor mechanic apprenticeship in many ways afforded her the freedom to consolidate her gender identity. Notably, it appears that she was generally supported by her male colleagues. When the garage owner asked her to let him know of anything ‘untoward’, she insisted she could ‘look after’ herself. She felt accepted by the other mechanics, with some of whom she socialised after work, without some of the normative restrictions imposed on her by her school classmates.

***Lisa***

Lisa’s story of becoming a car mechanic apprentice was primarily about developing as a person and growing into a confident young woman. Unlike Erika, she barely raised gender as an issue. Her appearance, with her make-up and jewellery and long hair neatly tied back into a ponytail, in many ways fitted the gendered expectations of femininity.

Lisa grew up in a working-class family in South East England, in an area she described as ‘rough’. She struggled at school, an all-girl comprehensive, an experience which imbued her with a strong sense of failure. Most of her peers left school at 16, many only to find themselves unemployed thereafter. Lisa compared herself to her older sister, who went to the local grammar school and who was ‘the clever one of the family and I’m the one that goes out and gets dirty’:

I went to… next to a grammar school… and we was like the rejects school, so like … in the grammar school, they was all like pushed, like, to get the best grades and that, … but we was all just… like I don’t know, no-one bothered with us…

She resented having to ‘sit down all the time’, and felt that teachers would ‘give up’ on her. She insisted that she had always been a ‘practical person’, that she used to love painting and ‘making things out of random stuff’. In her penchant for physical activity she seemed similar to Erika:

*… [as a child] I was always outside running about […] I had so much energy to like burn of […] I’m always moving, I always have to be doing something…*

However, Lisa did not present herself in opposition to normative femininity. In an interesting contrast to Erika’s experience, it seemed that she was much less restricted in her construction of gender in the social environment of the all-girls’ school as well as at home. She was a member of the school’s football team (she still played at the time of interview), and she fondly recounted occasions when her father accompanied her to matches. While football is commonly regarded as a marker of masculinity (Paechter and Clark 2007), many girls in her school would have been part of this, and a more flexible identity seemed available without the risk of marginalisation. At school, she socialised with a group of girls who also were into physical activities and some of them also chose male-dominated jobs.

There were no obvious career choices for Lisa, who insisted that she did not know how she got into car mechanics. It seemed that she was attracted by the local garage, where, in passing it on her way to school every day, she would have witnessed the mechanics going about their daily routine. This certainly may have appealed to her, given her preference for hands-on work. It was here that, aged 14, she began working on Saturdays and where, two years later, she started her apprenticeship. Starting work as a mechanic constituted a crucial turning point for Lisa. The main theme in her narrative was about how the apprenticeship had given her confidence and helped her overcome her shyness:

*… I used to be like well shy and like I … didn’t know how to talk to people and didn’t know how to act in certain situations, but now I’ll- I’ll talk to anyone and I’ll have a laugh with anyone […] it’s made me a different person …*

Crucially, through the Saturday job Lisa was able to construct an alternative learner identity, one associated with manual work (Brockmann, 2012). She enjoyed working in the garage. Becoming a mechanic had provided her with a genuine prospect of being good at something and of recognition by her peers and family:

*… I loved it because I went into school, like, and […] no-one had jobs […] it wasn’t really about the money but […] I was doing something for myself […] I just like the satisfaction of knowing that I’ve helped someone with their car and […] I can always help someone if they need it and I can do people favours and that and it’s just nice to know that I’ve got that, I’m capable of it…*

While she did not fit normative femininities, there was no indication that she set out to enter a male-dominated occupation, or indeed, that she actively identified with signifiers of masculinity. Many of her classmates went into Hair & Beauty as their chosen career, which she dismissed as boring. However, she never articulated the challenges of taking up an apprenticeship as a mechanic, and it may well be that, because of her upbringing and schooling, she had experienced little exposure to constraining gender norms. Her apprehension of starting the apprenticeship extended only to the prospect of an all-male environment:

*I always remember just being well nervous […] cos I went to an all girls’ school, I weren’t used to being around boys, it was intimidating […] I thought “I’ve got to handle like all of these boys” […] I didn’t know how to act, how to put myself across…*

While she was soon able to ‘make quite a few mates’, it is notable that at the FE college her best friend became the only other female apprentice, and the two of them sat next to each other in all the classes I observed. Outside the apprenticeship she socialised with a mixed group of young men and women, who shared a love of cars. She described a meeting place where they would gather to show off their cars and driving skills.

There is no doubt that Lisa found the apprenticeship challenging. Similarly to Erika, she expressed her sense of frustration about having to ask for help, although she did not frame it in terms of gendered expectations:

*…like changing a tyre […]I’d always want to do it and be able to do it right on my own, but I’d always have to ask for help […] and when someone else would come along and do it so easily, obviously because they’ve got experience, it used to really […] like break you down inside […] but after a while… it’s just experience and practice, that’s what I found, like keep going no matter what […] after a while I was like “no I can do this and I will do it’*

This frustration had caused her to consider dropping out two months into the apprenticeship. It was a male colleague who persuaded her to persevere and ‘to keep going’. As illustrated by the above quote, like Erika, Lisa was determined to overcome these challenges and, again like Erika, she did not think that tasks that might be seen as physically demanding were in fact about strength. It is notable that she put the ability to change a tyre down to experience rather than physical force. She related that she now appreciated the help of the other mechanics who would show her the ‘tricks of the trade’. During my observation, I certainly found the work environment to be friendly and relaxed.

**Discussion**

This paper explored the experiences of two women motor mechanic apprentices (in the different contexts of the English and German apprenticeships?) and the heteroglossic constructions of gender in their career decision-making and school-to-work transitions.

A somewhat superficial analysis might conclude that the two young women apprentices were ‘tomboys’. They subscribed to many qualities commonly associated with masculinity, of which their interest in cars and physical activity are two of the strongest signifiers, and they appeared to reject common markers of femininity. However, a more thorough analysis shows that their identities were much more nuanced and fluid. If we want to understand the meanings the two young women attached to their apprenticeships, we need look at it within the contexts of their biographical experience.

Both Erika and Lisa came from working-class backgrounds with a habitus that made manual work and apprenticeship viable career choices (Taylor et al., 2015). Supported by their families and home environments, both women in their childhood constructed certain classed and gendered identities that centred on physicality and practical activities. For Lisa, this relative freedom from normative constraint continued at school. Echoing previous research (e.g. Reay 2001), the particular gender regime in her all-girls’ comprehensive, and in particular the absence of the ‘male gaze’ (Evans 2006), made possible a range of different identities performed by various friendship groups, including one that centred around activities commonly associated with masculinity. Although it is likely that hyper-femininity was presented at her school, Lisa did not define herself in terms of the gender binary. Instead, her main concern in growing up as a teenager had been about the sense of academic failure and ‘becoming somebody’ (Ball et al. 2000), and she presented herself as someone who through the apprenticeship had grown into a confident young woman.

By contrast, Erika presented her experience at secondary school as a disruption to her biographical identity formation. The particular discursive regime in the classroom, and in particular, the dominance of hyper-femininity, made it difficult for her to continue living a more flexible identity. Being confronted with girly-girl femininity and at risk of being marginalised, she defined herself in opposition to these girls (in terms of what she was not), something she was not required to do in her family home, where she would have taken the freedom for granted. Importantly, however, while she clearly reacted to the dominance of hyper-femininity (and the girls’ challenging her), it would appear that, rather than rejecting femininity *per se*, she resisted some of the extreme aspects of it as she perceived them, such as the girls’ obsession with beauty and fashion. And while she embodied many qualities that are stereotypically associated with masculinity, she also presented in gender-conform ways, albeit in a much more flexible manner than the feminine norm would permit (in terms of aesthetics, by wearing dresses occasionally, and her career aspirations, wanting to become a hairdresser).

Both young women were aware that by embarking on the apprenticeship, they would have to conform to a different set of norms – those that regulate the field of motor mechanics, including popular representations of the work requiring physical force (Smyth and Darmody 2009). Erika in particular told of her fear before starting the apprenticeship that her garage lacked modern equipment and that much work needed to be done by hand rather than modern technology. Both felt under pressure to ‘prove’ themselves (Agapiou, 2002), abide by male norms, and both anticipated penalties for not being able to accomplish the work or having to ask for help.

Interestingly, it seems that these fears were not born out by the reality of the garages in which they worked. In each case, the workplace culture, as evoked in the interviews and as I experienced it during the observations, seemed friendly and supportive. Senior mechanics worked closely with apprentices to initiate them into the work. This is in contrast to many workplaces (including in my thesis), where apprentices are expected to be fully-fledged workers rather than learners (Brockmann, 2012). The stories of the two women would suggest that it was not only acceptable to ask for help but it may even have been desirable – in order to learn ‘the tricks of the trade’. Equally, both Erika and Lisa had come to conclude that accomplishing tasks was about mastering the technique rather than applying physical force, a discourse that was likely a part of the workplace culture in the garages. At no point did they claim that the work was unsuitable to women.

As we saw earlier, existing research on women in male-dominated careers tends to highlight women conforming to male norms in order to succeed in masculine workplaces. Following Francis’ (2010) work on monoglossic and heteroglossic representations, I argue that, by focusing on stereotypical accounts of gender-transgressive behaviour, this research risks constructing these women as ‘Other’. My own study based on biographical interviews revealed much more multi-faceted and nuanced experiences. The two women apprentices negotiated acceptable ways of being beyond stereotypical categories, which can only be understood within the multi-layered contexts of their own personal biographies.

It is through the biographical lens that we can begin to understand that the apprenticeship enabled both women to continue to construct more flexible gender identities, be recognised, and live liveable lives. Apprenticeships have been shown to serve as important spaces for the construction of gender identities (Tangaard 2006). Crucially, the biographical method allows us to explore the two young women’s heteroglossic performances of gender. They constructed their identities within the respective contexts in the different phases and domains of their lives, the meaning they afforded to their school-to-work transitions, and the ways in which they negotiated and made sense of the discursive regimes and learning cultures of their motor mechanic apprenticeships, with all the nuances and apparent contradictions this might entail. Research conducted in any one particular context, such as the school or college classroom, tends to give rise to certain dominant presentations, as individuals perform in line with normative expectations in their quest to be recognised and intelligible (Francis 2010). In my own research (Brockmann, 2012), during the participant observation of the English college classroom, I was taken aback by the strong anti-learning culture, which appeared to confirm common stereotypes about vocational learners. It was only through the biographical interviews that much more nuanced and often contradictory identities emerged.

In conclusion, a focus on normative identity categories, including that of tomboy, is highly problematic as it promotes the analysis of gender in terms of stereotypically masculine and feminine behaviours. In researching gender in this way, the danger is that girls or women displaying any stereotypically masculine traits, such as wearing less restrictive clothing, being assertive or physically active, are labelled tomboy, whilst more nuanced and diverse performances remain hidden. This is not to dismiss the (substantial) evidence of the challenges women face in male-dominated occupations and masculine workplace cultures. However, othering young women who enter these jobs may serve to reinscribe the gender binary and to uphold presentations of masculine work cultures, and thus to be detrimental to initiatives to open up these sectors to women. It must be possible for girls and women to be interested in cars and technology and to take up male-dominated occupations without the risk of othering or the charge of reproducing male norms.

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1. This figure relates to subject area ‘Transportation Operations and Maintenance’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)