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Methodological Choices and Research Design

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Introduction

Conducting empirical research on an emerging phenomenon that cannot be analysed with existing conceptual tools is a challenge. In the previous chapter, we saw that high-speed travel and communication technologies reshaped our relationship to time and space. These considerations have led to the idea that high mobility practices can be interpreted heuristically, using the concept of reversibility. The questions then become: (1) to what degree are these practices reversible from spatial, temporal, relational and experiential viewpoints; (2) how can we develop an empirical research design to analyse high mobility through the lens of reversibility?

One possibility would be to categorise high mobility based on how people describe themselves. Do they consider themselves highly mobile? If so, why? Deconstructing the category of highly mobile individuals is likely to reveal a wide variety of mobility practices that are difficult to group and measure. This could be all the more difficult considering that high mobility is a multi-faceted phenomenon that is not stabilised, terminologically speaking, and does not exist as a recognised, shared social phenomenon.

A second possibility would be quantifying the phenomenon based on pre-existing categories, without considering how highly mobile individuals experience them on a daily basis. From this perspective, we would be left with a primarily descriptive analysis that would not allow us to grasp fully the individual and social mechanisms that underlie high mobility.

We chose a third possibility, a longitudinal, cross-country analysis combining quantitative and qualitative methods. This mixed
methodology allowed us: (1) to quantify the phenomenon of high mobility in several national contexts; (2) study individual practices of high mobility and their changes over the life course; (3) explore more deeply how these practices are related to the social context in which people are embedded, such as family, work, place attachment; (4) examine how people experience past and present forms of high mobility.

The quantitative part of the study continues and extends the investigations begun within the Job Mobilities and Family Lives in Europe research programme (see below). The 2007 survey was designed from the outset as a possible panel. Participants in the 2007 survey living in France, Germany, Spain and Switzerland were re-interviewed in 2011 to explore new aspects related to high mobility behaviours and to examine continuity and changes in these behaviours.

This chapter presents the methodology, its benefits and limitations. We begin by clarifying the definition of high mobility, then we present the quantitative and qualitative instruments before discussing the advantages of a mixed research methodology.

High mobility: definition and positioning

Due to the diversity of its forms, defining high mobility is no easy matter. In the 2007 Job Mobilities and Family Lives in Europe project (Schneider and Meil, 2008; Schneider and Collet, 2010), the approach was quantitative, based on a sample of 7,220 people in six European countries (Belgium, France, Switzerland, Germany, Spain and Poland). High mobility was conceptualised as a strategy or resource, a way of organising one’s personal, social and professional life in a context of increased demand for mobility among both men and women. The survey focused on any form of spatial mobility with a potential significant impact on personal or family life. A strong emphasis was placed on travel time (rather than distance travelled or the origin/destination of trips). The rationale was that long travel time to work or for work is likely to reduce (quality) time in other life domains (leisure, family, community). Based on different dimensions that could potentially characterise the practice of high mobility (permanence, frequency, regularity and predictability), three main forms of high mobility were defined:

- daily long-distance commuters, home to work trips of more than one hour, at least three times a week;
- overnighters, that is, people who spend at least 60 nights a year away from the (main) home for work-related reasons;