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High Mobility Over the Life Course
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Introduction

We begin this chapter with a brief portrayal of three different mobility histories, those of Jean, Christelle and Thierry who participated in our study. Jean’s career has been marked by high mobility and regular absences from home. Having completed military service at age 20, Jean rose through the ranks of the French national railway company SNCF from ticket inspector, to train driver in the Paris metropolitan area, to finally becoming a high-speed train driver. Christelle has a diploma in sales and marketing. For several years, her job in sales involved 5-day periods away from home. At 31, she found a more sedentary job with a view to starting a family. Thierry teaches music at several music schools and municipal associations. Working in several locations means that he must commute over long distances in order to make a living wage.

The mobility histories for Jean, Christelle and Thierry underline the importance of studying high mobility practices over an individual’s life course. This raises the question of whether high mobility is a long-term practice or a life stage. In the latter case, does high mobility occur earlier in a career, or later when people are more tied to their place of residence by family responsibilities, home ownership and job stability? Workers who are highly mobile in the early career stage, before having children, may well differ from those who practise high mobility throughout their careers. The duration and timing of high mobility practices are also essential for understanding the consequences of high mobility on family, health and career success (see Huinink and Feldhaus, 2009; Viry et al., 2014). In particular, individual high mobility histories must be understood relative to other life trajectories, such as the career and family development. For example, high mobility during the first half of the career can have a
positive effect on career advancement but a negative effect on intimate relationships and family trajectories (Mulder and Hooimeijer, 1999).

In this chapter, we use quantitative and qualitative retrospective data to construct individual high mobility histories. We address four specific questions: (1) What are the main patterns of high mobility history in Europe and their socio-demographic determinants? (2) To what extent and for what people is high mobility a life stage? (3) To what extent is high mobility perceived as a long-term practice? (4) What are the effects of high mobility histories on the work situation, in particular, are highly mobile people more successful in their career?

A plurality of high mobility histories

The first part of this chapter uses sequence analysis to identify typical patterns of high mobility history and their socio-demographic determinants in France, Germany, Spain and Switzerland. All respondents aged 35 and over were included in the analysis ($n = 1851$). The younger respondents were excluded, as their high mobility histories were too short to be characterised accurately. Roughly a third of the analytic sample were highly mobile people oversampled during the first survey wave ($n = 262$, from the four countries) and the second survey wave ($n = 365$, from France and Germany). Data were unweighted. The objective of the analysis was to identify contrasting patterns of high mobility history and their relationship to socio-economic variables. It did not aim to describe the distribution of patterns within the population since the sample was not representative of the resident populations of the four countries. The patterns identified were certainly influenced by the over-representation of mobile people in 2007 and in 2011. However, these mobility behaviours occurred at different career stages and a significant portion of the sample was not mobile in 2011 ($n = 1280$). It is therefore reasonable to assume that the patterns identified represent common mobility histories within the resident populations of the four countries.

Respondents were asked retrospectively about current and past jobs held for at least one year since the age of 15. For each job reported, they were asked to indicate if they were highly mobile in one or more forms. Based on this information, complete individual sequences of high mobility histories were built. We ran an optimal matching (or optimal alignment) procedure, followed by a cluster analysis to group people with similar sequences. Sequences that did not include any mobility episode were excluded from this classification procedure. A four-pattern solution was chosen. Figure 5.1 shows the distribution of states for each year of age grouped according to the four patterns identified. The years