

# **Spatial mobility and its associations with family development and subjective well-being**

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## **Abstract**

High degrees of work-related commuting and relocation are central features of contemporary societies. Therefore, research on the relationship between mobility and family life is getting more and more important for our understanding of family formation and household structures.

In this paper, we introduce the notion of spatial mobility to widen our understanding of living arrangements. Phenomena like residential multi-locality or living-apart-together increasingly question the classical concept of the household that is based on the idea of co-residence. Especially work-related mobility requirements are expected to lead to a further proliferation of what we call *mobile living arrangements*. Mobile living arrangements can be understood as complex organization of everyday life that has incorporated mobility requirements.

Starting with the examination of the prevalence of mobile living arrangements in six European countries the paper focuses on the analysis of the associations between mobility and family development and mobility and subjective well-being. Possible differences by gender and parenthood are also examined. Implications for practice and policy will be discussed.

The data come from the first wave of the study "Job Mobilities and Family Lives in Europe", a representative survey focused on the spread, the causes and the consequences of work-related spatial mobility carried out in 2007 among 7,220 persons aged between 25 and 54 years in France, Germany, Spain, Poland, Belgium, and Switzerland.

## **Keywords**

Work-related spatial mobility, commuting, relocation, travel, mobile living arrangements, family development, subjective well-being

## Background

A high degree of spatial mobility characterizes modern societies (Giddens 1991; Sennett 1998; Urry 2007). In the context of the "new mobilities paradigm" the immense repercussions of the increased level of (spatial) movement of people, ideas and things on individuals and societies are emphasized (Urry 2000; Sheller and Urry 2006; Cresswell 2010). Increases in mobility and mobility requirements have been attributed to economic globalization and the flexibilization of the work environment (Callaghan 1997) *as well as* to changes in family models and gender roles accompanied by an increasing labor force participation of women and the rise of dual-earner-couples (Schneider and Limmer 2008).

The present paper deals specifically with *work-related* spatial mobility, where work is the source of mobility allowing people to balance competing demands of work and personal life. In recent years, causes, prevalence, forms, and social valuation of work-related spatial mobility have changed considerably (Limmer and Schneider 2008). It can be expected that high mobility requirements will lead to a further proliferation of what we call *mobile living arrangements*. We define mobile living arrangements as complex organization of everyday life that has evolved around these mobility requirements. We argue that a thorough understanding of transitions in family and household demography becomes more and more dependent on research into mobile living arrangements. For instance, work-related relocation mobility (change of residence and workplace) is increasingly substituted for work-related circular mobility ((long-distance) commuting, etc.) (e.g., Green et al. 1999; Huinink et al. 2014) and phenomena like residential multi-locality (staying overnight or living in more than one place) or living-apart-together question the classical concept of the household that is based on the idea of co-residence (e.g. Dittrich-Wesbuer et al. 2015).

The main objectives of the paper are, first, to introduce the concept of mobile living arrangements, second, to examine the prevalence of mobile living arrangements in Germany and other European countries, and, third, to analyze the influence of mobility behavior on well-being. We portray the prevalence and socio-demographic characteristics of three forms of spatial mobility – daily commuting, work-related overnight stays (including business travel and weekend commuting), and work-related relocations. Based on sociological role theory and the concept of work-family conflict, we expect that effects of spatial mobility behavior on individual well-being differ by gender and parental status. We assume that different social roles (in work and family life) are linked to different behavioral expectations, which, in turn, may conflict with each other (inter-role conflict). Specifically, mobility-related demands placed on employees (with respect to temporal and spatial flexibility) conflict with the demands of other roles (Goode 1960) – in particular with gender and parental roles (work-family conflict). As research shows, work-family conflict is positively associated with adverse health-related outcomes (Greenhouse/Beutell 1985; Coverman 1989). Therefore, we assume that gender and parenthood moderate the effect of mobility on individual well-being. While not subject to analysis in the paper at hand, we acknowledge that mobility might not only affect the well-being of the person who is (directly) involved with mobility, but also other members of the living arrangement, in particular partners and children, who are (indirectly) affected by mobility as well (Schneider et al. 2002; Schneider et al. 2009; Rüger and Ruppenthal 2010).

The data come from the first wave of the study "Job Mobilities and Family Lives in Europe", a representative survey focused on the spread, the causes and the consequences of work-related spatial mobility carried out in 2007 among 7,220 persons aged between 25 and 54 years in

France, Germany, Spain, Poland, Belgium, and Switzerland (Schneider and Meil 2008; Schneider and Collet 2010). The study allows for a distinction between different mobile living arrangements and offers the unique possibility of a European comparison.

### **The concept of mobile living arrangements**

As proposed elsewhere, we expand the concept of living arrangements to include practices of spatial mobility (see Schneider et al. 2002). Living arrangements constitute the "structural dimension" of private life (Schneider 2011) and, thus, relatively permanent "patterns of organization of everyday social life" (Huinink and Konietzka 2007, p 32). Constitutive characteristics of living arrangements are, amongst others, the existence of a partnership, parenthood, the number of persons in the household, or the division of labor between partners.

Fundamentally, we can distinguish between exclusively education or work-related motives and exclusively private motives for spatial mobility. In many cases, educational/professional motives and private motives for mobility cannot be kept separate and the actual motivation lies somewhere between the two extremes. The "motive-question" also relates to the subjectively experienced degree of voluntariness or control over the mobility decision (Schwedde, 2013). Professionally motivated spatial mobility that involves a low degree of voluntariness might occur, for example, in the event of a relocation of the employer's place of business. Employees may decide not to move associated, however, with the risk of job-loss. Empirical evidence suggests that the experienced degree of voluntariness varies with socio-demographic characteristics (Lück and Rieger 2013) and determines if mobility has adverse effects on a person's quality of life (Rieger 2010).

In this paper, we focus on work-motivated mobility and define mobile living arrangements as living arrangements in which at least one person performs mobility practices because of work-related requirements (see also Schneider et al. 2002, p 25). We further differentiate mobile living arrangements according to form (i.e. relocation vs. circular mobility etc.), duration, and intensity of spatial mobility and define a minimum level of mobility (intensity) to be able to discern mobile and non-mobile living arrangements. Otherwise, since almost every living arrangement is in some way "mobile", the concept would lose its meaningfulness. Moreover, significant influences of spatial mobility on life course events (e.g., family formation) can be expected only if mobility reaches a minimum level of intensity (for a detailed discussion see Limmer and Schneider 2008).

Mobile living arrangements always have a space, a place, and a time dimension. The spatial dimension reflects the distances covered. If the travel speed is high, the spatial dimension loses its relevance. The place dimension refers to the "locality" of dwellings and people and, therefore, to the degree of integration into (local) social networks. The time dimension of mobility refers, on the one hand, to the permanence of mobility, understood here as the continuity of mobility over the life course and, on the other hand, to the temporal absence of the mobile individual from the main place of residence. All mentioned dimensions are important for the characterization of mobile living arrangements. However, we argue that the time dimension is most significant, since long-term mobility practices which involve periodical absences from the main place of residence fundamentally encroach on the everyday lives of couples and families (cp. also Schneider 2015). In this regard, spatial mobility is a serious challenge for "doing family" (e.g., Schier and Jurczyk 2007).

## Empirical findings

### Prevalence of mobile living arrangements

The average *daily commuting* time (one-way) across the six countries studied corresponds to 25 minutes. 25% of the commuters spend 30 minutes or more travelling to work. Differences between countries are small. A one-way-commuting distance of 50 kilometers or more and/or a commuting time of one hour or more is referred to as "long-distance commuting". The share of long-distance commuters among employees in Germany is 7% (i.e. people with one-way-commuting time 60+ minutes at least three times per week). This parallels the average share of commuters over all countries examined (see Table 1). The mean commuting time among long-distance commuters over all six countries is 75 minutes.

Table 1: Share of highly mobile employees, by country (%)

	Germany	France	Spain	Poland	Belgium	Switzerland	6-country-average
Long-distance commuters	7.0	4.5	8.1	6.0	11.4	6.7	7.2
Overnighters	4.4	4.4	2.3	4.4	3.0	2.1	3.6
Long-distance Relocations	4.2	4.2	1.5	1.8	2.0	2.4	3.0
Long-distance Relationships	0.9	0.8	0.3	0.4	0.2	0.5	0.6
Multi-Mobiles	2.5	1.5	1.6	3.1	0.9	1.6	1.9
Total	18.9	15.2	13.8	15.6	17.4	13.3	16.3

Notes: Job Mobilities and Family Lives in Europe (wave 1, 2007); 6-country-average: weighted by population size; ages 25 to 54; for definition of mobility forms see text; Multi-Mobiles: at least two forms of mobility; variations due to rounding errors

Source: Schneider et al. (2016)

The proportion of employees in Germany who had at least one work-related *overnight stay* during the last 12 months is 31.4%. With respect to these occasional "overnighters", Germany has the highest and Poland (10.4%) the lowest share (6-country-average: 22.9%). The average number of overnight stays (if at least one overnight stay was reported) is 37 in Germany. In contrast, in Poland the highest average number of overnight stays (97) is reported, in Switzerland the lowest (24). With the exception of Poland, differences between countries are not very large. Across all countries, 25% of those who have at least one overnight stay have reported below four, 50% have reported below 10 and 75% have reported below 30 overnight stays. Although the proportion of employees with at least one overnight stay in Poland is significantly lower than in the other countries, the proportion of those with many overnight stays is significantly higher; a quarter of overnighters in Poland had at least 172 overnight stays during the last 12 months. One explanation for this finding is the high prevalence of seasonal work and weekend commuting in Poland (Giza Poleszczuk and Stec 2008), while in the other countries business travel is the main reason for overnight stays.

There is no established way of categorizing the frequency of overnight stays and translating it into different degrees of mobility. We propose categorizations of 15+ and 60+ overnight stays (per year) for indicating an at least "moderate" and a "high" degree of mobility, respectively. 14.8% of the workforce in Germany had 15+ and almost 6% 60+ overnight stays. With these

values, Germany – together with France and Poland – is at the forefront of the countries studied when it comes to work-related mobility involving a high number of overnight stays. Across the six countries, the average number of overnight stays among the highly mobile employees (60+ overnight stays per year) is 140, and a quarter of them reaches 190 or more business trips involving overnight stays outside the home.

*Relocation mobility* often involves significant disruptions and changes in the spatial and social environments. We expect this to be the case for long-distance moves in particular. We consider a work-related move of a distance of at least 50 km that has taken place within the last three years to be a *long-distance relocation* (cp. Limmer and Schneider 2008). Correspondingly, the share of (recent) long-distance movers among employees in Germany is 4.2% (see Table 1). Together with France, Germany has the largest share of (recent) long-distance movers among the countries studied. The corresponding figure in Spain, for example, is only just over one percent. Looking retrospectively at employment histories, 76.6% of the employees across the six countries never relocated over long-distances for work-related reasons. We also find that about 10% of the biographies of those who have had at least one work-related long-distance move qualify as veritable "relocation biographies" with at least four work-related long-distance moves.

*Long-distance relationships* (partners who do not live together but maintain households in separate geographic locations for professional reasons) and *multi-mobility* (a combination of at least two forms of mobility) are less frequent forms of highly mobile living arrangements (0.6% and 1.9% across all countries, respectively; see Table 1) and have been studied extensively elsewhere (see e.g. Lück and Ruppenthal 2010).

From a biographical perspective, about half of those aged 25 to 54 years have experienced high mobility in terms of long-distance commuting, overnighting (60+), or long-distance moves in the course of their working lives (Schneider and Meil 2008). In addition, about one in ten of non-mobile people have a highly mobile partner – reflecting the proportion of people who are "indirectly" affected by mobility (Schneider et al. 2008; Lück and Ruppenthal 2010).

#### Socio-demographic characteristics of mobile living arrangements

Between the various forms of high mobility (i.e. long distance-commuting, nr. of overnight stays  $\geq 60$ , or long-distance relocations), and compared to non- or less mobile employees, we find significant differences with regard to the *socio-demographic characteristics* age, gender, and education. Highly mobile employees are on average younger, better educated, and more often male compared to less or non-mobile employees (Schneider and Meil 2008; Lück and Ruppenthal 2010; for circular forms of mobility: Rürger et al. 2011). Specifically, *long-distance commuters*, in contrast to other highly mobile employees, are represented proportionally across all age groups. Long-distance commuters also differ less than other highly mobile employees with respect to their educational attainment and gender from non- or less mobile workers. However, men are more often commuters and travel longer commuting distances than women (Federal Statistical Office 2005). *Overnighters* (60+) are overrepresented in the middle age group (35-44 years). Differences in educational attainment between overnighters and less or non-mobile workers are moderate, but gender differences are very pronounced: about six out of seven overnighters are male (Rürger et al. 2011). *Relocation mobility* is more common among workers of younger age (25 to 34 years) and with higher formal education. In particular, persons with a university degree are clearly overrepresented and around two-thirds of those who moved for work-related reasons are men.

Moreover, there is a pronounced *interdependence between work-related spatial mobility behavior and gender, partnership status, and parenthood*. For example, parents with school-age children prefer commuting over relocation. The same applies to dual-earner-couples who rely more frequently on commuting than couples in which only one partner is in paid employment (Kalter 1994; Jürges 2006; Schneider et al. 2008). Highly mobile employees are in a relationship as often as less or non-mobile workers, but are much less frequently parents (which only applies to highly mobile *women* as we will see next) (e.g. Lück and Ruppenthal 2010). Thus, there are characteristic differences between commuting and relocation mobility. While the latter is more often associated with being a single and being childless, the former is more prevalent in situations where relocation is restricted by children or partners. The association between high mobility and parenthood is moderated by gender (e.g. Rüger and Becker 2011; Rüger et al. 2011). While highly mobile men are as often fathers as non-mobile men, highly mobile women are significantly less likely to be mothers and to be married compared to non-mobile women. Working women in Germany are as often highly mobile as working men – as long as they do not have children (Schneider et al. 2008; Jürges 2006; Rüger and Becker 2011).

Effects of work-related spatial mobility on well-being: differences by gender and parenthood

We study the effect of different forms of circular mobility – daily long-distance commuting (60+ minutes one-way-travel time to work), overnighing (60+ work-related overnight stays in the past 12 months), and multi-mobility (combination of at least two forms of mobility) on the subjective health status (which was logarithmized in order to make the distribution more symmetric; cp. e.g. Keene 1995). Separate models were calculated for men and women and for people with and without children, respectively (see Table 2).

Results show that long-distance commuting has a significantly negative effect on health for female ( $B = -0.055$ ), but not for male employees ( $B = -0.025$ ). Moreover, long-distance commuting has a significantly negative effect on health for employees with children ( $B = -0.051$ ), but not for childless employees ( $B = -0.030$ ). Multi-mobility has a significantly negative effect on health for female ( $B = -0.106$ ), but not for male employees ( $B = 0.017$ ). In contrast, multi-mobility has a significantly negative effect on health for childless employees ( $B = -0.066$ ), but nor for employees with children ( $B = 0.006$ ). No health impairment effects can be found for overnighing.

Table 2: Factors of subjective health status (semi-logarithmic regression models)

	Full model	Men	Women	Without children	With children
	B (SE)				
<b>Sociodemographics</b>					
Women <sup>1)</sup>	<b>-0.026</b> (0.011)	--	--	-0.025 (0.017)	<b>-0.024</b> (0.014)
Age (in years)	<b>-0.006</b> (0.001)				
With partner <sup>1)</sup>	<b>0.024</b> (0.013)	<b>0.047</b> (0.197)	0.010 (0.017)	<b>0.032</b> (0.017)	0.020 (0.018)
With children <sup>1)</sup>	<b>-0.027</b> (0.013)	<b>-0.032</b> (0.019)	-0.024 (0.018)	--	--
SES <sup>2)</sup>	<b>0.034</b> (0.005)	<b>0.031</b> (0.008)	<b>0.039</b> (0.008)	<b>0.034</b> (0.008)	<b>0.033</b> (0.007)
<b>Mobility type</b>					
Long-distance commuter <sup>1),3)</sup>	<b>-0.042</b> (0.012)	-0.025 (0.018)	<b>-0.055</b> (0.017)	-0.030 (0.020)	<b>-0.051</b> (0.016)
Overnighter <sup>1),3)</sup>	-0.004 (0.018)	-0.017 (0.021)	0.056 (0.037)	-0.015 (0.029)	-0.001 (0.024)
Multi-Mobile <sup>1),3)</sup>	<b>-0.034</b> (0.019)	0.017 (0.026)	<b>-0.106</b> (0.031)	<b>-0.066</b> (0.026)	0.006 (0.031)
<b>Country</b>					
France <sup>1),4)</sup>	<b>-0.053</b> (0.016)	<b>-0.046</b> (0.025)	<b>-0.064</b> (0.022)	<b>-0.048</b> (0.028)	<b>-0.052</b> (0.020)
Spain <sup>1),4)</sup>	-0.006 (0.016)	-0.001 (0.024)	-0.014 (0.023)	<b>-0.044</b> (0.026)	0.016 (0.021)
Switzerland <sup>1),4)</sup>	<b>0.081</b> (0.018)	<b>0.058</b> (0.025)	<b>0.109</b> (0.027)	0.028 (0.027)	<b>0.119</b> (0.024)
Poland <sup>1),4)</sup>	<b>-0.059</b> (0.018)	-0.040 (0.026)	<b>-0.081</b> (0.026)	-0.028 (0.030)	<b>-0.073</b> (0.023)
Belgium <sup>1),4)</sup>	0.001 (0.018)	0.006 (0.025)	-0.009 (0.025)	-0.023 (0.031)	0.014 (0.022)
Constant	<b>1.225</b> (0.024)	<b>1.208</b> (0.033)	<b>1.205</b> (0.034)	<b>1.234</b> (0.034)	<b>1.199</b> (0.035)
N (obs)	2831	1314	1517	948	1883
adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.080	0.068	0.091	0.052	0.070

Notes: Job Mobilities and Family Lives in Europe (wave 1, 2007); only employees; subjective health status: "In general, would you say your health is poor, fair, good, or excellent?" 1 = 'poor' to 5 = 'excellent'

**Bold numbers** are statistically significant at the level of  $p = 0.05$

**Bold and *Italic* numbers** are statistically significant at the level of  $p = 0.1$

<sup>1)</sup> Dummy-coded: 0 = 'no'; 1 = 'yes'

<sup>2)</sup> 2 = 'lowest socioeconomic status' to 6 = 'highest socioeconomic status'

<sup>3)</sup> Reference is 'non-mobile employees'

<sup>4)</sup> Reference is 'Germany'

Source: Rürger/Schulze (2015)

## Conclusion

Due to high occupational mobility requirements and the increasing labor force participation of women, mobile living arrangements have become more common. Mobile living arrangements can be differentiated with regard to form, duration, and intensity of mobility. Overall, various different forms of mobility can be identified. It turns out that commuting is much more widespread than relocation mobility. In Germany, currently around one in five employees aged 25 to 54 years is highly mobile. Germany, thus, has a high level of work-related spatial mobility compared to the other European countries studied. Across all countries, around one in two employees had at least one episode of high mobility in the course of his or her working life. Highly mobile employees are on average younger, higher educated, and more frequently male compared non- or less mobile employees. However, we also find marked socio-demographic differences between the various

forms of mobility. Gender moderates the relationship between mobility behavior and parenthood. A strong negative correlation between mobility and parenthood can only be demonstrated for female but not for male employees. And employed women in Germany are as often highly mobile as men – as long as they don't have children. We argue that intensive mobility requirements, especially for women, represent a major challenge for partnerships and families and are difficult to reconcile with caring for children. In line with assumptions derived from sociological role theory, long-distance commuting – representing the most prevalent form of high work-related mobility – has a negative effect on subjective well-being only for female employees and employees with children. We do not find an adverse health impact for other forms of mobility (overnighting and multi-mobility). However, this calls for further research since these forms are more selective and the number of cases within our sample was rather small. It is likely that work-family conflict still predominantly affects women due to a traditional, gender-specific division of labor and is further aggravated in the case of high work-related mobility requirements. Alongside infrastructural improvements in public transport and public childcare services, flexible working arrangements like flextime, compressed-work-week, or home office may be expanded in order to prevent adverse outcomes of mobility. Moreover, dealing with work-related spatial mobility should be made standard practice within workplace health promotion/management.

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