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Do People Live in Geographic Categories? Cities, Countryside, and Mountains in Biographical Narratives

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Abstract: This paper explores how individuals describe their residential trajectory. Based on more than 50 interviews with residents from three municipalities in Switzerland, it seeks to understand how individuals combine geographic categories and specific places in the narrative of their residential history. The most frequent categories cited are “city,” “countryside,” and “village.” These categories are used and characterized in different ways. By contrast, though all interviewees live in the “mountain” zone as defined by the Swiss authorities, “mountain” is a relevant category only for some interviewees, who are mostly attracted to their residential area by leisure opportunities. Approaching residential narratives through geographic categories sheds new light on dwelling and housing issues.

Keywords: geographic categories, city, countryside, mountain, residential trajectory, interview, Switzerland

This paper analyzes interviews concerning residential mobility with residents of three Swiss municipalities. In their biographical narratives, interviewees tended to mention generic geographic categories and specific places. This paper focuses on the different ways in which interviewees used four geographic categories: “city,” “village,” “countryside,” and “mountains.” Analyzing how these geographic categories are used in biographical narratives sheds new light on the topic of residential choices. As the interviewees spoke about their residential backgrounds and choices, they also produced geographic configurations.

This paper examines how people express their residential trajectories in biographical narrative form. The term “residential trajectory” refers to places where people have lived and to their reasons for living there. More specifically, this paper deals with how people describe present and past residences and associate them with a number of generic categories. These places and categories serve as the spatial framework for biographical narratives. While the interviewees' spatial representations are obviously unique to them, shared ways of describing places and defining categories were found among interviewees. Just as government officials and researchers use categories to understand geographical space, so too do residents. In some instances, they use similar modalities and, in others, modalities that are specific to them. This paper is based on 53 interviews with residents of three Swiss municipalities – Saint-Cergue (Vaud), Bagnes (Valais), and Soulce (Jura) – and discusses the range of ways in which people account for space. Before emphasizing a number of narratives that illustrate the type of information shared by the interviewees, it opens with an overview of three respondents' residential trajectories.

1 - Three Short Narratives on Residential Backgrounds

Roberto (44) was born in Italy. “I grew up in the city. At 16, I went to study in England. . . I lived there until I was 24. After that, I split my time between England and the mountains.” After his studies, Roberto decided to spend a winter in Chamonix. He had skied in Italy during his adolescence. “In fact, I didn’t know where to go. I looked around a bit and found Chamonix. It’s a city, well not really a city, but it’s big for a ski resort town. I thought it’d be easier to find work there. . . So, I spent a winter in Chamonix. Then I decided I had to get serious and went back to England.” He spent a year in London, but does not remember enjoying it: “I didn’t have any money. . . You wake up and it’s dark; you take the subway and work all day and it’s already dark when you leave. . .” However, he never lost his affinity for the mountains. “The year I lived in London, I looked out of the window every day and longed to see mountains.” In the early 1990s, he moved to Verbier (in Valais canton) because he “had friends there.” “At first, I only planned to stay for the season, two or three months.” However, ten years later, he owned an apartment in a chalet just below the resort town of Verbier. “If you’re at home and feel like skiing, you’re out there in just two minutes. If you want to walk in the mountains, you hop in the car and ten minutes later, you’re far from everyone. I can even walk five minutes in either direction from home and not see another house. It’s awesome.” Roberto chose to live in Verbier. However, what he was really looking for were mountains. “I like the mountains. They suit me. In fact, I could live anywhere in the mountains, but I like it here because I have friends.”

Véronique (46) was born in Delémont (Jura canton). “My parents were farmers. We didn’t live far from the city, but it was still quite rural. It’s not far from Courtedoux. But I guess we were still pretty much in the city.” After finishing school in Delémont, she met her husband. Due to his job, they moved to a “little village” (“I liked Chavornay and the little village feel”) in Vaud canton close to Lausanne. A few years later, Véronique’s husband took a job in Jura canton. “We kind of wanted to go back to Jura canton to be near our families.” They bought a house in Courfaivre and lived there for ten years until their divorce. She remarried and “needed a bigger house” because her husband “wanted us to have enough space for his daughters. He thought my house in Courfaivre was too small. So we started looking and came across Soulce, where some old farms were for sale.” They bought and renovated a farm in Soulce. “I didn’t know Soulce. . . I thought it was so beautiful. I was opening a new chapter and I was positive.” Due to her profession as a childcare provider, Véronique is highly active in the community and said that the “peace and nature” of the village appealed to her. She attributed this appeal to having become a mother: “While I still like to be around crowds sometimes, I love coming home, relaxing, and just having my own little space. That shows how I changed. Before the kids, I preferred the city and busy places, with much more culture and chances to see new things. I did that.” In terms of her identity, she says she is “a rural woman who is very open to the city.” “The way I live now is simpler. However, I still like to go out in the city. But when it comes to everyday life, I like the countryside. Since I’ve been at home more, I’ve started making my own bread again, paying more attention to food, doing a little gardening, and just doing more things the natural way.”

Mylène (43) bought an apartment in Saint Cergue (Vaud canton) a few years ago. She lives there with her three children. Mylène spent her childhood in Onex, a residential suburb of Geneva. She self-identifies as a country girl. “When I was a teenager in Onex, I used to go out into the countryside every weekend, so it’s a big part of me.” She married a “country boy.”

2 All names are pseudonyms. The interviewees agreed to the publication of their interviews.
After they moved across the Atlantic, they decided to move into a house. Both were drawn to “open spaces.” “As a child, I spent all my vacations in Valais, in the mountains, the Vaud Alps. . . I’ve always felt at home and happy in the mountains. . . I was raised between the two – in the mountains as a child, and in the country as a teenager – so I’m not afraid of living out in the sticks. I’m convinced that what I’m most familiar with is life in the sticks: villages, casual drinks among neighbors, and local gossip. However, someone from, say, Boulevard Georges-Favon in Geneva would have some adjusting to do.” As the years passed, the isolated location became more problematic and she left her husband. She sold her share of the house, rented an apartment in the city, and then moved into the apartment building where she now lives.

2 - Biographical Narratives, Categories, and Spatial Configurations

Despite being condensed, these three accounts of residential trajectories illustrate the impromptu narrative styles of the interviewees and the type of information they shared. More importantly, however, they present one aspect of biographical narratives that researchers have thus far neglected, namely the role that geographic categories play in people’s accounts of their residential choices.

Most research on residential mobility aims to objectify one of two things: the characteristics of places of arrival (Green, Deller, and Marcouiller 2005; Thomas and Pattaroni 2012), or the events, typically family- or work-related, that lead to migration (Détang-Dessendre, Piquet, and Schmitt 2002; Grafmeyer 2010). This paper has a different aim. It neither treats interviews as factual resources that reveal the reality of people’s movements nor weighs the significance of factors people cite to account for them (for a critique of these approaches, see Winstanley, Thorns, and Perkins 2002). Instead, it considers these interviews from a dual perspective: i) the impromptu narrative style of interviewees, and ii) the spatial configurations interviewees used to illustrate their narratives.

When interviewees were asked about their residential trajectories, they invariably replied in biographical narrative form, an observation other researchers have noted (Dubar 1998; Mason 2004; Winstanley et al. 2002; Taylor 2006). The events that mark people’s lives seem to acquire meaning only when described in narrative form. People construct their biographical narratives by selecting from a multitude of things that have occurred in their lives (Taylor 2006). Narratives then take shape through this selection process and give a unique meaning to each person’s trajectory.

In addition, the interviewees’ biographical narratives exhibited a process of spatial configuration. Of course, the narratives included the places where interviewees have lived and now live. In other words, they cited a set of specific places. However, interviewees also frequently mentioned types or categories of places and environments, namely the mountains, the city, or the countryside. The biographical narratives collected are thus based on spatial configurations, that is, on a selection of toponyms, categories, and geographic descriptors that can be related and interwoven in a variety of ways.

Few researchers have examined the role geographic categories play in biographical narratives. This paper views such categories through the lens of phenomenological approaches, particularly that of Alfred Schütz, who coined the concept of “natural attitude”:

*We do not experience the world as a sum of sense data, nor as an aggregate of individual things in isolated form and standing in no relation to one another. We do not*
see colored spots and contours but rather mountains, trees, animals, in particular birds, fish, dogs, etc. (Schütz 1966, cited in Quéré 1994, 23)

From this perspective, categorization may be seen as a way of organizing environments and worlds by relating one particular experience or context to similar experiences or contexts (Fradin, Quéré, and Widmer 1994). Biographical narratives thus tend to draw on these categories and the conventional ways in which they are used (Taylor 2006)

Among the few researchers to examine the role places and categories play in individual experiences and how they influence residential choices are social psychologists working with the concept of “place attachment” (Altman and Low 1992; Hidalgo and Hernandez 2001; Lewicka 2011; Proshansky 1978). Place attachment refers to the emotional bonds individuals form with places and the ways in which these shape personal identity and self-image. Some researchers have focused on how individuals or groups develop emotional attachments to particular places, which serve as grounding mechanisms. Others have focused on the range of connections people can make and un-make with a variety of specific places in contexts of high mobility (Gustafson 2001).

However, social psychologists tend to focus on attachments to types of spaces rather than to specific places (Feldman 1990; Hummon 1986; Proshansky, 1978; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996). For instance, Roberta Feldman argues that people’s assessments of space types stem from a process whereby they generalize their assessments of specific places. In her words,

\[ \text{a person's experience of psychological bonds with a specific locale [or locales] – the ideas, feelings, and behavioral dispositions that relate a person to the tangible home surroundings – may generalize to the experience of psychological bonds with that type of locale. (Feldman 1990, 191)} \]

Feldman, and more recently Feijten, Hooimeijer, and Mulder (2008), both argue that when seeking a new residence, individuals often look for residential environments similar to those they have known in the past. Similarly, in the case of peri-urbanites in Quebec City, Fortin and Després (2010) found that the more similar a space is to someone’s childhood environment, the more he or she tends to like it.

This paper relates two topics and underscores their complementarity, namely social categorization and motivations for individual practices. Its approach to spatial representations differs slightly from the approaches that have been preeminent since the 1980s (Arlaud, Jean, and Royoux 2005; Bailly 1995; Guérin and Gumuchian 1985; Short 1991; Williams 1973). These researchers have devoted much energy to describing types of environments or specific places while neglecting to examine the ways in which these shape people’s life trajectories. Instead, this paper attempts to account for the relationship between individual choices and references to geographic categories as expressed in biographical narratives. More specifically, the following two questions will be addressed:

- In what ways do individuals’ biographical narratives – told in the context of interviews about residential backgrounds – engage geographic categories? and
- What spatial configurations do interviewees highlight when telling their stories?
3 - Methodology and Sample

The rest of this paper will examine the social and institutional uses of the “mountain” category in Switzerland\(^3\), and more specifically the ways in which residents of the [French-speaking] Romandie region use this category when explaining their residential trajectories. We conducted 53 interviews in three Romandie municipalities: Bagnes (Valais canton – VS, home to the resort town of Verbier), Soulce (located in a remote valley in Jura canton – JU), and Saint-Cergue (in Vaud canton – VD – close to Geneva) (Figure 1).

Fig. 1 – The Three Sample Areas

\(^3\) We would like to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for funding this study (no. 100013-122384). We would also like to thank the local government offices that offered assistance, all the interviewees, and Marius Schaffter and Mélanie Gamper, who helped conduct the interviews.
The Swiss federal administration classifies these three municipalities as mountainous zones. Zoning primarily serves agricultural purposes (OFAG 2008) and is based on topographic, climatic, and accessibility criteria (defined in the ordinance on land-use and agricultural production of December 7, 1998). As in many other European countries, the Swiss government’s zoning policy serves as a framework for drafting certain public policies and for determining agricultural subsidies (Rudaz and Debarbieux 2013).

This paper focuses on mountain municipalities for two reasons. Firstly, new migration patterns are transforming mountain regions in Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe. In addition to the well-documented phenomena of rural exodus in some valleys, the emigration of young graduates to metropolitan areas and immigration in tourist areas, new forms of migrations have emerged in recent years, including peri-urbanization around cities close to mountain zones (Perlik and Messerli 2004; Torricelli 2001), and amenity migrations, which primarily affect cities that are (or were) tourist destinations (Perlik 2006).

Table 1 provides an overview of population trends in the three municipalities. Bagnes and Saint-Cergue both have high net migration rates and very high population turnover rates due to both immigration and emigration (Camenisch and Debarbieux 2011). In Bagnes, this is due to Verbier, one of the largest winter sports resorts in Switzerland (averaging over one million overnight stays per year), whose tourism industry draws workers who often stay no more than a few years. In addition, many people have turned secondary residences there into primary ones. However, the demographic growth of Saint-Cergue stems from peri-urbanization due to its close proximity and ease of access to Geneva and Lausanne. Drawn by the quality of life and lower real estate prices than in nearby cities, many new residents have moved to this somewhat declining tourist resort over the last 20 years. Here too, many people have turned their secondary residences into primary ones. However, the emigration rate remains significant. Bagnes and Saint-Cergue have much higher populations than Soulce. Relatively isolated from large cities and having subpar accessibility, Soulce has experienced weak demographic growth for the last 20 years (below the Swiss average). In addition, over the last decades, many residents have moved away.

**Tab. 1 – Population Trends in Soulce, Saint-Cergue, and Bagnes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soulce JU</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>6.35</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St-Cergue VD</td>
<td>1,332</td>
<td>1,973</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>17.55</td>
<td>15.55</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bagnes VS</td>
<td>5,107</td>
<td>7,617</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9.34</td>
<td>6.95</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>6,751,000</td>
<td>7,870,000</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Office Fédéral de la Statistique*

Interviews were conducted with residents of these three municipalities (Table 2). Interviewees were not selected with statistical representativeness in mind. Rather, the aim was to achieve the greatest possible diversity in terms of personal situation and length of residence. Interviewees were aged between 25 and 74 and consisted of 55% women and 45% men. All had resided in one of the three municipalities for periods ranging from a few years to several decades. In each municipality, a few interviewees were born there and never moved away.
The average interview length was 40 minutes. An interview grid was used to orient narratives in two directions. The first aim was to obtain a description and a classification of the interviewee's current place of residence. The second aim was to obtain background information, with interviewees encouraged to identify and describe the various places where they had lived and to compare them with their current place of residence. They were also asked why they moved to or away from a place. Interviewees spontaneously mentioned residential changes and periods of stability in their personal, social, and family lives even though they were not explicitly asked to provide such information. The interviewers avoided using their terms in their questions and follow-ups in order to allow the interviewees the freedom to use their own descriptive categories, except for the purposes of testing an interviewee’s reaction to specific terms.

Interview results were processed with ATLAS.ti software. This qualitative data analysis software is used to classify and sort information. For the purposes of this study, it was coded to detect specific terms, or the primary categories interviewees used to describe their residential backgrounds. The aim was to observe the way in which they characterized types of environments and their moves to new places.

4 - Four Ways of Characterizing Geographic Categories

Interviewees used a variety of categories to describe the geographic environments in which they lived. Many referred to the residence itself: “house,” “apartment,” “building,” etc. Others were more abstract, referring to “nature,” for example. This analysis focuses on the categories most commonly used to describe the environments and geographic areas of Switzerland, namely “village,” “city,” “countryside,” and “mountains.”

Interviewees from all three municipalities used the first three categories more frequently, while the “mountain” category was cited less often, at least until the interviewer introduced the term to test the interviewee’s reactions to it. Once it was introduced, interviewees almost always reused the term and expounded on it, sometimes at great length. At first glance, this descriptor does not seem as important – or as relevant – to people when characterizing the environments in which they lived and explaining their residential choices.

According to the analysis using the ATLAS.ti software, the greatest differences emerged in the ways respondents referred to the first three categories followed by differences in how they referred to the mountains. We identified four registers in which the categories of city, countryside, and village were used. Two of these – the “biophysical register” and the “functional register” – refer to ways of objectifying categories and their attributes. The other two – the “emotional register” and the “axiological register” – encompass the subjective aspect of characterizing places and categories. However, the terms used in narratives that

Tab. 2 – Interviewees’ Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Number of interviews</th>
<th>25-45 age range</th>
<th>46-50 age range</th>
<th>51-60 age range</th>
<th>Over 60</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Married/partnered</th>
<th>With children (at home)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sourse</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St-Cergue</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bagnes</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
fall under the first two types are always related to personal opinions or subjective stances (see below).

**Biophysical characterization**: Although the interviewers’ questions did not explicitly encourage this, all the categories under study were described at one point or another in terms of a few material characteristics, primarily morphological, which were conveyed as though being part of a social consensus. These mainly concerned the type and density of construction, the size of residences, the type of land use, the absence or presence of public spaces, of natural spaces, etc. (Excerpts 1).

Excerpts 1: Biophysical Characterization

> “Living in the countryside, in the mountains, or on the ground floor of a house, well, you have space to spread out. It’s ridiculous not to have outside space. That’s the main advantage.” (STC10)
>
> “I get a little uneasy in cities with all the cars and crowds.” (BA5)
>
> “I’d like for my kids to grow up far from the city … somewhere with green spaces and forests. Most of all, I just don’t want them to grow up inside a building.” (STC2)

**Functional characterization**: Functional attributes relate to day-to-day activities and the availability of amenities, services, or public infrastructure. The most commonly cited activities were related to culture, shopping, and recreation (Excerpts 2). Interviewees considered these first two characterization types as objective and not shaped by personal views. These types include attributes that interviewees implicitly took for granted and which they assumed were known to the interviewer. However, they were never the only ones used to describe categories. Rather, they were always cited when explaining the reasons for moving to or from places and thus relate to subjective expectations, needs, worries, fears, or personal ideals. In other words, these attributes are descriptors whose full meaning derives from their ability to express a subjective position as to whether or not the category ascribed to a place meets expectations at a specific point in life.

Excerpts 2: Functional Characterization

> “If there’s one thing I’d miss about the city, it would definitely be the cultural aspect.” (BA4)
>
> “I loved living in the city. I could walk everywhere and rarely drove. . . You could be like, ‘Hey, I’d like to see a movie tonight’ and just go. The city had its advantages.” (SOU5)
>
> “The only thing I like about the city is going to shows or going shopping in gigantic malls.” (SOU9)
>
> “I like the countryside too much. For the last year or two, I’ve been able to do the sports I most enjoy, which are running and biking.” (SOU6)

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4 The interviews from which the following quotes were taken are numbered and identified according to the initials of the municipality where the interviewee resided (BA: Bagnes; SOU: Soulce; STC: Saint-Cergue).
**Emotional characterization:** The third type of characterization refers to the subjective or intersubjective aspects interviewees claimed to like or dislike in social interactions within a given environment. Emotional characterization deals with feelings, experiences, ambiances, and social interactions (Excerpts 3).

Excerpts 3: Emotional Characterization

“You’re more anonymous in the city.” (STC1)

“After all, there’s that village feel.” (BA4)

“I like villages; well, not exactly villages, but smaller places where it’s easier to get to know people.” (BA15)

“It’s more stressful in the city. . . I can see the difference. When I’m in the city, I feel stressed out. But, when I’m here, it feels like life goes by more slowly.” (SOU16)

**Axiological characterization:** The fourth type of characterization refers to the values the interviews associated with the different categories of places (Excerpts 4).

Excerpts 4: Axiological Characterization

“I’m dumbfounded by all the consumer temptations in the city.” (BA1).

“I’m much more a country person than a city person. I live more simply. I think I have much simpler needs than people in the city. Here, we don’t need as much.” (SOU4)

“I feel like a country person. I kind of live like that. My life is pretty simple.” (SOU6)

“Because you have values; things that make you more solid maybe. . . I actually kind of like it that those get a little lost in the city. It’s a lesson that doesn’t take long to learn. You can go and experience the world, but those values remain deep down.” (SOU2)

“We like the simple lifestyle of Swiss villages.” (BA2)

“Living in a city does help build a different social network. It really is mind-opening.” (STC2)

Unlike the first two objective registers, these two characterization registers fully engage the subjectivity of the speaker. Here, there is no clear connection between objective attributes and positive or negative assessments, and the characterization contains explicit references to the person making it.

As several of the interview excerpts above illustrate, when interviewees spontaneously mentioned the categories of “city” and “countryside” or “village,” they almost always contrasted the first category with the latter two. This contrast was as evident in the way biophysical, functional, or emotional attributes were used to compare residential environments, as in the types of appreciation or rejection used to account for residential changes. When speaking about their places of residence and promoting them, some interviewees systematically contrasted them with the city, which they depicted as either undesirable or as better adapted to their needs at another point in their lives (Excerpts 5).
Excerpts 5: Statements Referring to the City in Comparative Terms

“To me, the biggest downside of the city has to do with family and things like raising kids in an apartment... Here, you have more freedom to, for example, just let them cry when they're little... I also think school is different in the city; the mentality is harder. Here, we can let them run around in the fields... There's also not as much pollution here. The summers aren't too hot and it's pleasant in the winter.” (BA5)

“Here, I can leave the house without taking the car... I go for walks every day. I go out every day regardless of the weather. That's not something you do in the city.” (STC7)

5 - Uses and Attributes of the “Mountain” Category

As indicated above, interviewees tended to use the “mountain” category to describe their residential environments much less readily than the categories of “city,” “countryside,” or “village.” With a few exceptions – which will be discussed later – interviewees seemed to see using this category as either unnecessary or problematic. For instance, some interviewees – all residents of Verbier – claimed that the mountainous aspect of their environment was so obvious that they felt no need to mention it. When interviewees in Saint-Cergue and Soulce were asked about the mountains, their replies were often somewhat vague.

Despite the federal administration’s official classifications, all interviewees in Soulce claimed that they did not live in the mountains. To explain their position, they cited altitude or topographic criteria, although other attributes such as the climate were sometimes used to add a layer of ambiguity to that position (Excerpts 6).

Excerpts 6: Biophysical Characterization of the “Mountain” Category

“No, in my mind, to be in the mountains, you have to be above 1,600 meters.” (SOU4)

“No, this is more like a valley floor.” (SOU5)

“The village itself [Soulce] isn’t that high. Still, you see a difference when it snows. There’s usually a little more in Soulce than in Bassecourt.” (SOU18)

“We’re in the mountains... At least from a weather standpoint anyway.” (STC4)

“Believe it or not, Saint-Cergue is in the mountains. Sure, it might only be 1,000 meters above sea level, but that’s still the mountains.” (STC8)

“Yes, normally mountains start around 800 meters. That's where you start seeing mountain vegetation. Above that, it's the High Alps. We have gentians at our house, as well as these big odd plants. I don’t know if those grow down below. We have lots of mountain things here.” (STC13)

“It’s the mountains. It's not urban or rural. There're more rural people, in summer we have the alpine pastures... In Saint-Cergue, we don’t have cows in the winter, so it’s really the mountains. The cows come up to graze in the warmer seasons.” (STC3)

“In many respects, it’s a mountain village. The cows come up in the summer and then go back down for the winter. We have local dairies, which supply fresh cheeses and
cream all summer long. Obviously, that's part of life here; we live against a rural and rustic backdrop.” (STC4)

By contrast, most interviewees in Saint-Cergue thought that they lived in the mountains. However, while some spontaneously used the term to describe their residential trajectory, others did not do so until the interviewer specifically asked about this category. To explain why this area qualified as mountainous, most interviewees cited biophysical attributes.

A tendency to place mountains elsewhere – at higher altitude for instance – seems to account for why residents of Soulce did not refer to their immediate surroundings as mountainous while residents of Saint-Cergue were divided or had reservations in this regard (Excerpts 7). Some residents contrasted Soulce with other higher areas, such as the Franches-Montagnes area. In Saint-Cergue, interviewees downplayed the mountain aspect. They imagined mountains as being further from cities and preferred the term "mid-elevation mountains."

Excerpts 7: Comments about Soulce and Saint-Cergue being in the “Mountain” Category

“To me, the mountains are the Franches-Montagnes. They’re higher... At the same time, we do have long, harsh winters here, but we’re still not in the mountains.” (SOU3)

“Saint-Cergue is in the mountains and it’s not at the same time. Sure, if you look, it’s 1,000 meters above sea level. We live at 1,100 meters, so it's in the mountains. However, it just doesn’t feel like the mountains to me.” (STC15)

“Well, I tend to think of it more as the countryside... Saint-Cergue isn’t too far away, but we are 20 minutes from Nyon, after all.” (STC15)

“You might say we live in mid-elevation mountains. It's rural for sure. There are cows everywhere.” (STC5)

Many interviewees also justified or nuanced their assessment by comparing their residential environment to that of the Alps, or more precisely the Valais region (Excerpts 8). This fact reiterates that the geographic – and other – categories people use are based on prototypes (Rosch and Lloyd 1978) and that their use depends on specific cultural contexts. Some interviewees were aware of this when they compared their cultural references to those of Dutch people. In fact, the “mountain” category and the way of defining it (in the form of a prototype, in this instance) are based on a culture common to the Swiss in general (Crettaz 1993; Walter 1991).

In Soulce and Saint-Cergue, interviewees referred to the mountains and to the city and the countryside in similar ways. Although interviewees almost never spontaneously mentioned the mountains, they were just as capable of ascribing specific attributes to the mountains as they were to the other two categories. However, they tended to characterize mountains in biophysical terms, and to a lesser extent in functional ones, but never in emotional or axiological ones. In addition, references to the mountains almost never expressed personal preferences as if this term was irrelevant in the narration of residential biographies.

Excerpts 8: Use of the Alpine Prototype to Define “Mountains”

“Yeah, the mountains are the Alps. You can’t see them from here and I’ve never been to them... I can climb up there and there’s this place where you can walk out on a
boulder and see them. Now, those are mountains. You can see them off in the
distance." (SOU7)

“Soulce isn’t in the mountains. Valais is, though. To me, the mountains are in Valais.
Here, it’s hilly, you might say. You have to go and live in Valais to have real
mountains. . . But here, you know, you can walk your dog up in the pastures at 1,100
meters. It takes an hour to get there. It’s mountainous, but it’s not really in the
mountains.” (SOU9)

“Mountains are the Alps. This is Switzerland. A Dutch person might think Soulce is in
the mountains, but not someone who grew up in Switzerland.” (SOU7)

“Compared to where I grew up, these aren’t mountains. If you ask my friends who still
live there, they’d say, ‘No, this isn’t the mountains.’ I mean, mountains are higher.
Here, the highest point is La Dôle, at 1,670 meters. Except for a few places, it’s not
even that steep. Even the Alpine foothills have much deeper valleys than here. That’s
where you start getting into the real mountains. The only thing that’s mountainous here
is the weather. The landscape isn’t Alpine since, obviously, we’re not in the Alps, but
we do have mountain weather.” (STC12)

“No, it’s a village that’s a little higher than the lake, but it’s not really in the mountains.
Sure, we get more snow on good years, but that’s not enough to make it the
mountains . . . We often go to Valais. That’s where the mountains are.” (STC7)

However, this was not the case for Verbier. In fact, this is where most of the spontaneous
references to mountains occurred. It is also the only place where interviewees cited the
mountains when explaining their residential choices, similar to what was noted above for the
city and the countryside. While interviewees here characterized the “mountain” category in
biophysical terms, they most often did so in functional terms (typically skiing and outdoor
activities) and in emotional terms. These types of characterizations are readily associated
with personal preferences and lifestyle choices (Excerpts 9). In these cases, the term
“mountains” is therefore both a descriptor for the environment and a category people
spontaneously use to explain their residential choices. Moreover, in explaining residential
choices, this term is used much more readily than the specific characteristics of places of
residence. In other words, these interviewees told us that they chose to live in the mountains
and that they ended up in Verbier due to circumstances. By contrast, only one interview in
Saint-Cergue followed this pattern.

Excerpts 9: Functional Characterization of the “Mountain” Category

“I came here for the lifestyle. The standard of living is better than in England. We have
mountains and fresh air. I love everything about the mountains.” (BA15)

“One decision was to live in Switzerland. Then, I had to decide where. I chose the
mountains because I wanted to ski. I came to Verbier and thought it was cool, so I
moved here.” (BA3)

“Initially, I was just supposed to spend one winter here. Skiing played a big role. I’m a
ski instructor, so that’s what I was looking for. I just wanted to spend a winter in the
mountains.” (BA4)
“Both of us prefer the mountains. We go on lots of hikes and I also do mountain climbing. In the winter, we go skating and cross-country skiing. So we’re both mountain people. . . . Another benefit is that in winter, it’s easy to hit the slopes at Rousses or anywhere in the French Jura and go skating, snowshoeing, or down hill ing." (STC15)

Only a few interviewees contrasted the “mountain” and “city” categories (Excerpts 10). This pairing of categories was used along the same lines as the pairing contrasting the city and the countryside. Both pairings involve references to biophysical features (such as urban buildings) or emotional attributes (such as tranquility).

Excerpts 10: Statements Contrasting the “City” and “Mountain” Categories

“I was looking for a place that would be good for me and my children. One important thing was to have outdoor space. Living in the mountains in Verbier, with all the song birds and the green grass, well, I didn’t want to be back in a stuffy apartment with a view of another building.” (BA19)

“I think one thing that makes this place so nice is that in winter, it’s like a city, with the festivities and activities, but then it’s much calmer in the summer and fall; it’s kind of rustic.” (BA17)

“We’ve seen lots of people come and lots of people go. Some who came just missed the city too much. Urbanites aren’t happy here. . . . My wife likes the mountains, so it works well for us. But both partners have to like it to make life work here.” (STC6)

6 - Conclusion

This paper examined the types of geographic knowledge residents of three Swiss municipalities used to account for their residential trajectories. As discussed above, interviewees described their trajectories not only in terms of the places where they lived but in terms of a number of geographic categories, with “city,” “countryside,” and “village” being the most commonly used categories. The way in which the interviewees used these categories suggests that they believe they have an objective meaning, with attributes and values known to all. In this respect, they are thought to be based on common sense and are taken for granted.

Although the three municipalities under study here are classified as “mountainous” by the Swiss federal administration, residents do not always appropriate the official classification. In fact, the “mountain” category was cited with less frequency and certainty than the other categories. Moreover, the interviewees used the term “mountains” in different ways, indicating that no social consensus exists over this term over that for the terms “city” and “countryside.”

In describing and explaining their residential trajectories, interviewees commonly drew on basic geographic knowledge that is socially shared, with interviewees tending to associate the same traits with the same categories. These categories play two distinct roles. Firstly, they are used to connect specific places with generic places with the same attributes as employing these categories and attributes facilitates communication about residential backgrounds. Secondly, these categories correspond to what we suggest calling “geographic configurations,” that is, configurations of spaces, environments, and values individuals use to frame and to make sense of their life trajectories. This second characteristic offers a clue to understanding the significance and recurrence of the semantic contrast between categories,
the main ones being between the city and the countryside or village. This contrast is based on descriptors and antinomic attributes in addition to being assumed subjectively as an area of contrast that is useful when explaining decisions to stay in a place or move elsewhere.

In more general terms, this paper suggests that the study of residential migrations should focus more on individuals. Such migrations should be seen as circumstantial decisions that can be elucidated by analyzing not only explanations in terms of exogenous variables (such as jobs, the environment, or the housing market) but also in terms of how these choices are narrated by individuals as well as the geographic configurations they employ when doing so. Therefore, residential trajectories must be viewed both objectively – as a succession of places, durations, or family contexts – and subjectively – as personal constructs that are narrative and geographic. Of course, analyses of residential backgrounds must look at types of attachments to places or feelings of belonging, but they must also take into account the spatial and narrative knowledge base that constitutes a common frame of reference, in other words, common sense.

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