

Uncertainty in fertility intentions: how real are reproductive goals?

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Why focus on uncertainty?

- Level high in annual GHS since 1991
- Importance identified in classic work of Morgan but less emphasised recently
- Uncertainty is reasonable
- May help to refine our view of reproductive decision making

Outline

- Levels of uncertainty in GHS 1991-2007
- Cross-national estimates
- Uncertainty is reasonable
- Ambivalence and complexity of pregnancy intentions
- Concluding comments

Data source and definitions

- General Household Survey: repeated annual cross-sections, 1991-2007
- *“Do you think that you will have any (more) children (after the one you are expecting)?”*

Yes

Probably yes

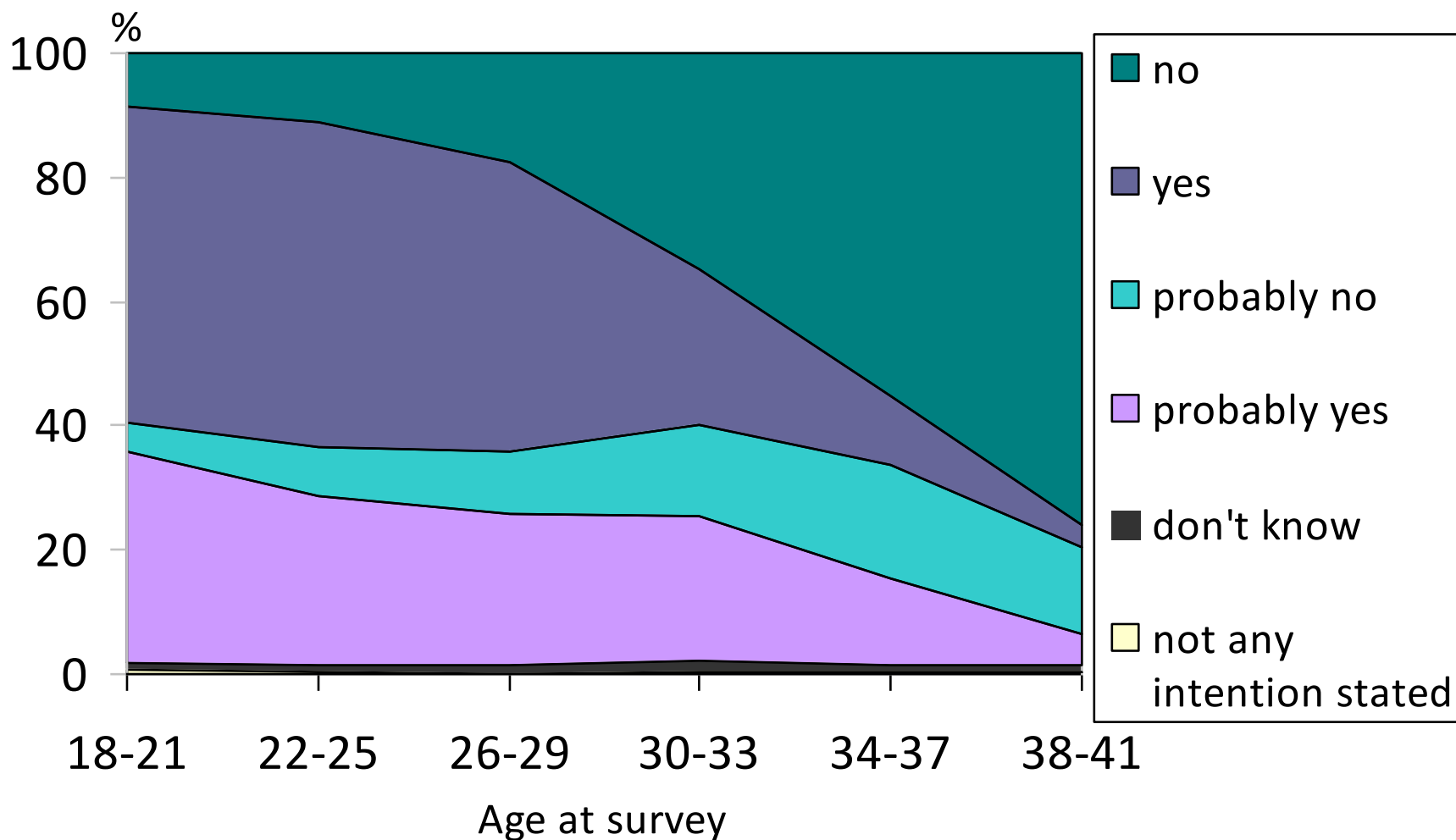
Probably not

No

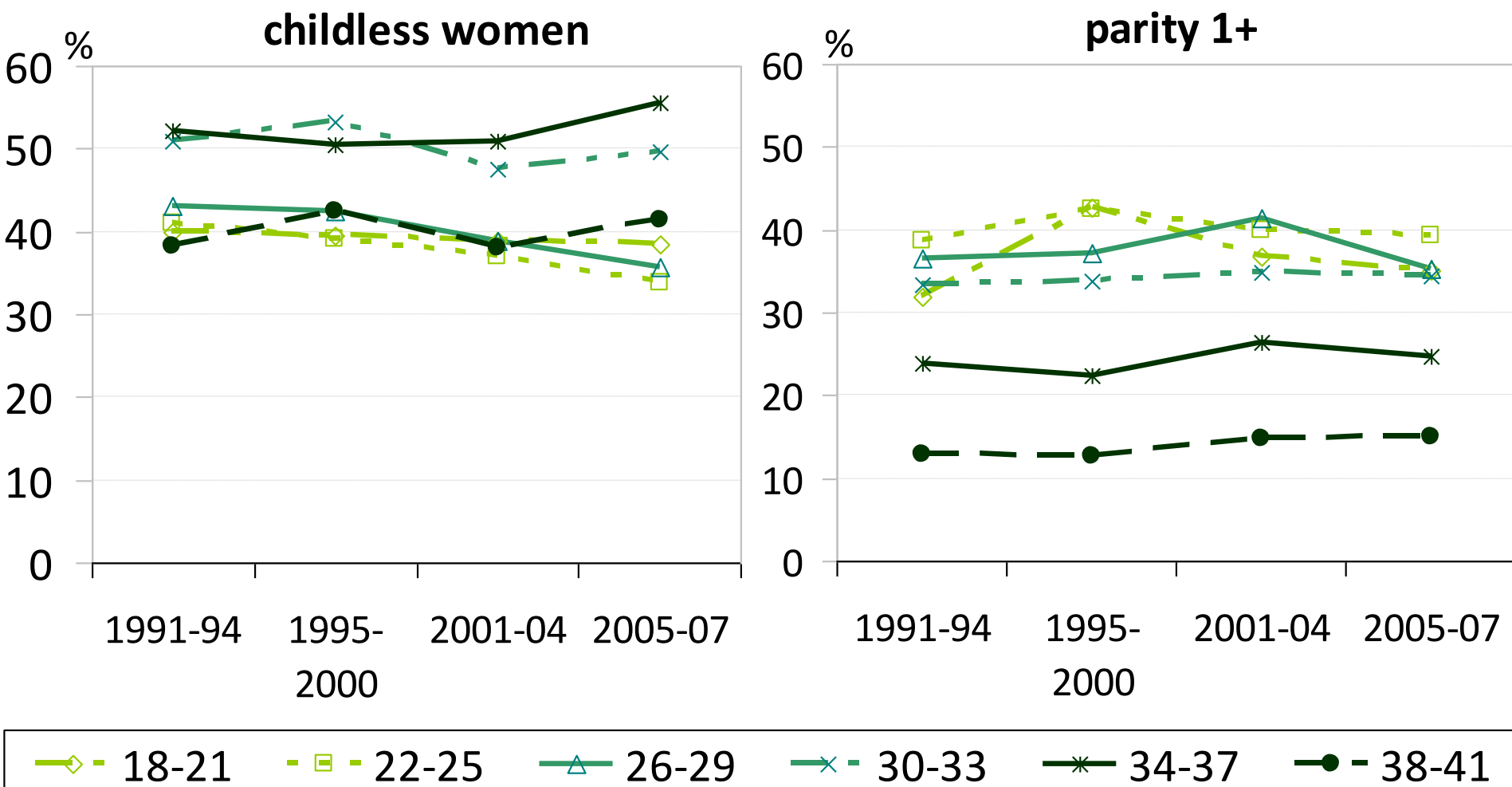
Don't know



GHS 2005-7: level of uncertainty is high



Little change since 1991 in level of uncertainty



Individual level factors associated with uncertainty

Logistic regression: uncertain vs certain

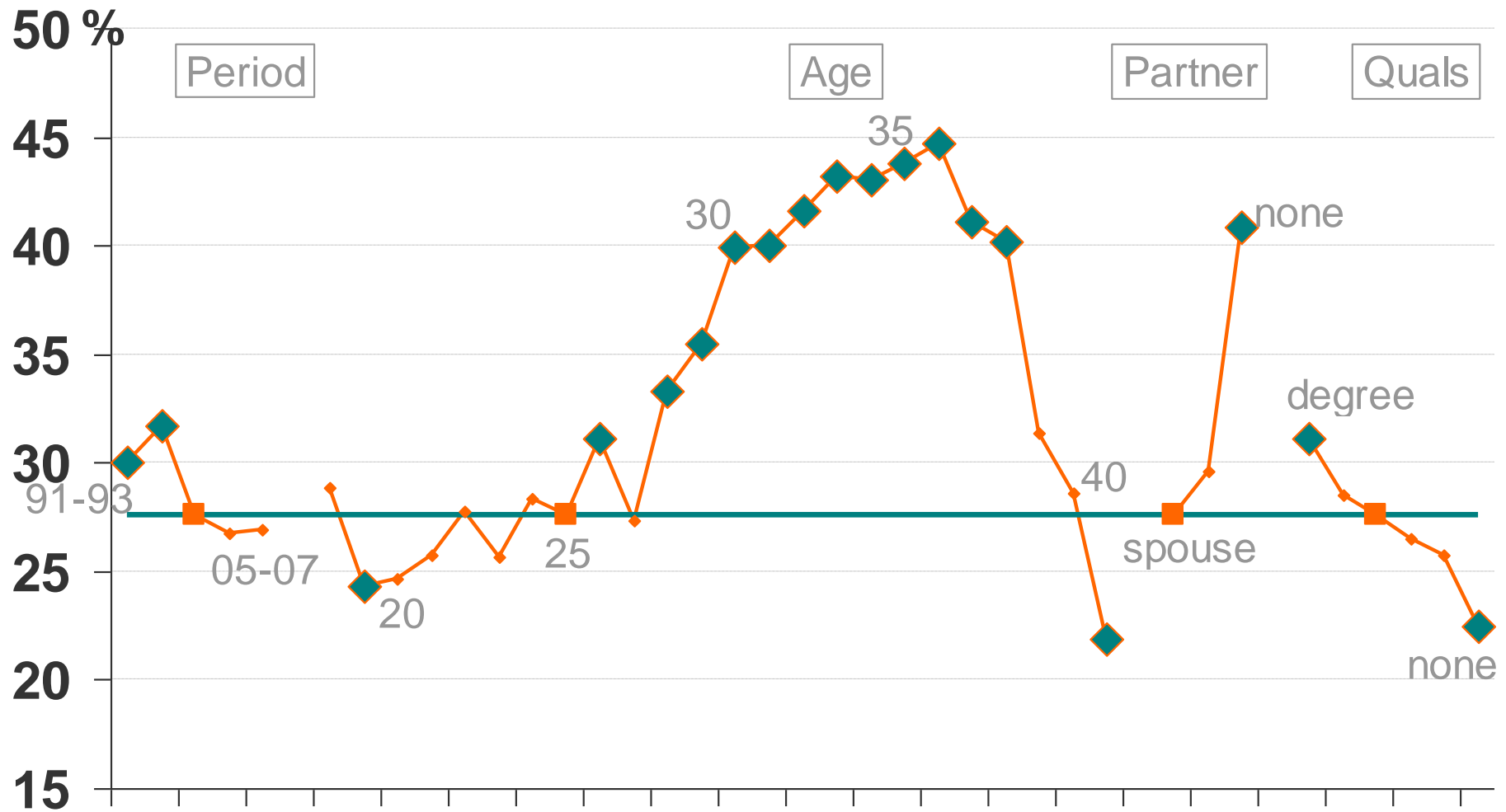
Separate analyses: childless and parity 1+

Variables: time-period, age, partnership status, education, SEG, country of birth & parity, duration since last birth (parity 1+)

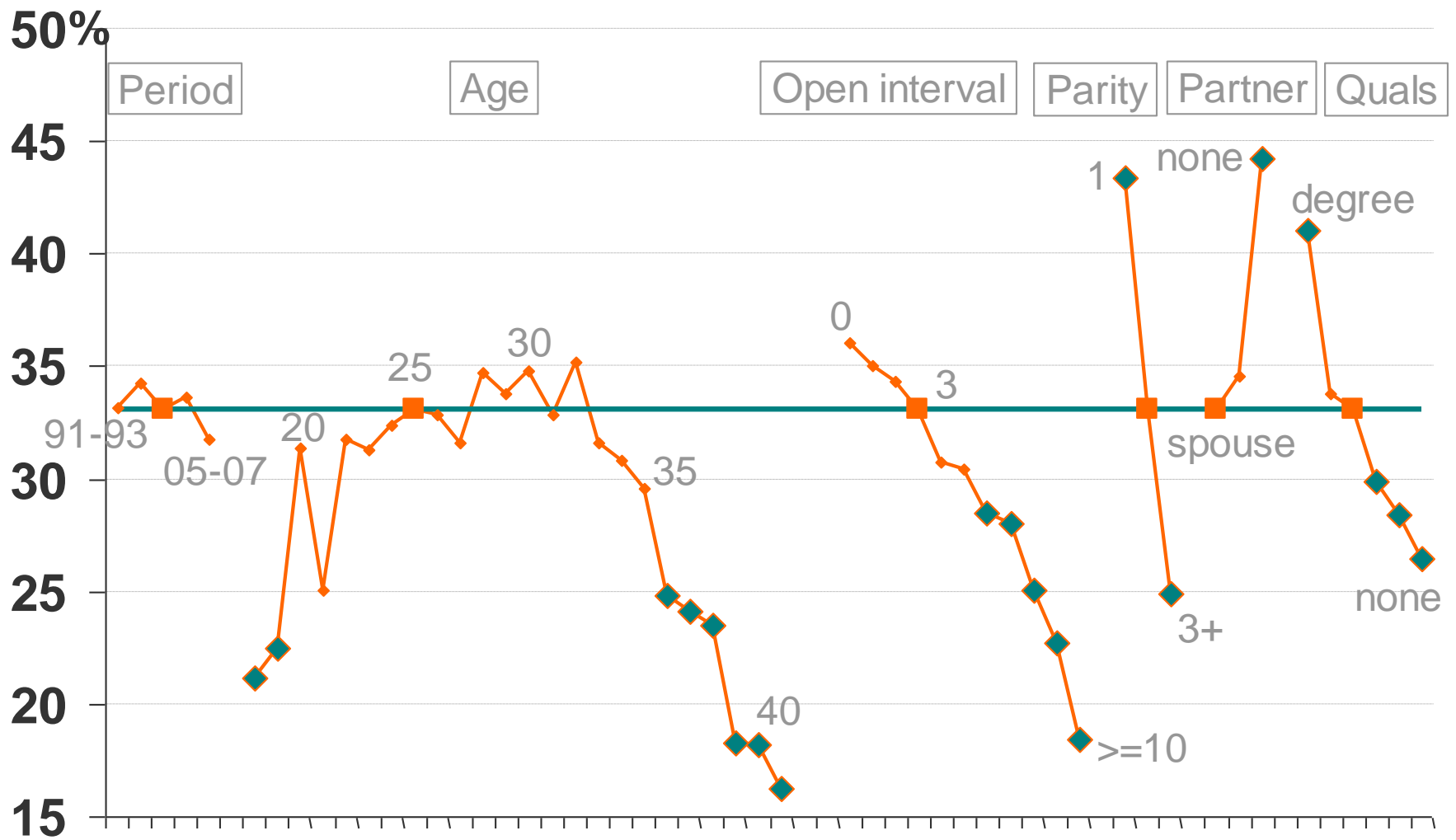
Broad summary of findings

- uncertainty mainly associated with demographic status and life-stage
 - little change over time
-

Estimated probability of uncertain response, childless women, GB 1991-2005/7



Estimated probability of uncertain response, women of parity 1+, GB 1991-2005/7



Cross-national evidence on uncertainty

30%+ overall or in at least one age group (selection)

Austria

Bulgaria: 2002-05 panel

France: 1998-2003 survey

Italy: GGS-FSS

UK: FFS 1976, 1958 cohort, BHPS, GHS

US: National Fertility Studies 1965, 1970, 1975; NSFH

Sweden: 1992 survey

Sources: various, see Table 1

Uncertainty is reasonable...variance substantial

Age at first birth has wide dispersion in developed countries...

Age at first birth, GB 2001

1 st quartile	21.6
Median	26.8
3 rd quartile	31.8

} based on age-specific first birth rate schedule

Interquartile range 10.2 years

... and inconsistency is also substantial

% not having a birth
among those intending

5 year gap

US National Fertility Studies 34%

Norway WFS 43%

France 41%

6 year gap

US NSFH 36%

UK BHPS 50%

Range of % inconsistent 34%-50%

Sources: various, see Table 2

Ambiguity in pregnancy intentions

Concepts of “intended”, “wanted” and “planned” being challenged in reproductive health arena

Trussell et al, 1999

of pregnancies resulting from contraceptive failure, 31% are “intended”

25% of “unintended” are “happy” or “very happy”

McQuillan et al, 2010

23% of sexually active sample neither trying to become pregnant nor trying to avoid pregnancy – “okay either way”

Reminder of Morgan's classic assessment

Demography 1981

“[U]ncertainty...is a real phenomenon inherently part of fertility decision making.”

“...adequate understanding and analysis must incorporate this uncertainty.”

How real are reproductive goals?

- Uncertainty can be substantial
 - It is well-founded and inherent in the family formation process
- ⇒ Fertility intentions are likely to be, for many, imprecise, ill-defined, tentative
- Ideas from behavioural economics – e.g. preferences as constructed
 - Construction of preferences and link with behaviour need investigation in relation to fertility

Concluding comments

Demography needs to:

- reconsider models of fertility rooted in classical rational choice assumptions
- investigate the substantive role of uncertainty in fertility intentions
- develop more sophisticated concepts of fertility intentions and preferences

References

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Acknowledgments

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