

# How real are reproductive goals? Uncertainty in fertility intentions

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“It is perhaps a testimony to the coerciveness of interview situations how rarely participants say *don't know*, much less try to bolt...”

Fischhoff (1991) *American Psychologist*. p. 841

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# Outline

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- why study intentions? uncertainty?
- digest of past findings
- level of uncertainty, measurement, definitions
- uncertainty is real
- uncertainty is reasonable
- an outline theory of fertility preferences and intentions

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## Why study intentions?

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- ESRC programme: GHS 1979-2007
- But fertility histories defective Murphy 2009
- Major revision of fertility histories
- Intentions and “postponement”: a long-standing interest (SSRC WP)
- Intentions paper for Pop Trends—uncertainty...

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## Why focus on uncertainty?

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Level high in annual GHS since 1991

Meaningful -- not just nonresponse (Morgan 1981, 1982)

Has implications for ideas about reproductive decisions

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## Reproductive orientation: concepts

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intentions	}	a/another
desires		
expectations		number
ideal		

**origin = population projection**

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## 60+ years research on fertility intentions/ expectations/ desires

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### Aggregate level

- correspondence better than at individual level but..
- not sufficiently accurate for forecasting
- reflect current rather than prospective conditions: vary with TFR

### Individual level

- stronger predictor than socio-economic factors but...
- substantial inconsistency and..
- vary through personal time

Remains true, despite contraceptive revolution

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Do you think that you will have any (more) children at all (after the one you are expecting)?" GHS 1979-2007

**1979-1990**

Yes

No

Don't know

**1991-2007**

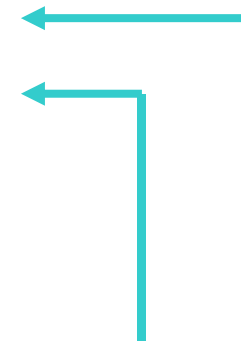
Yes

Probably yes

Probably not

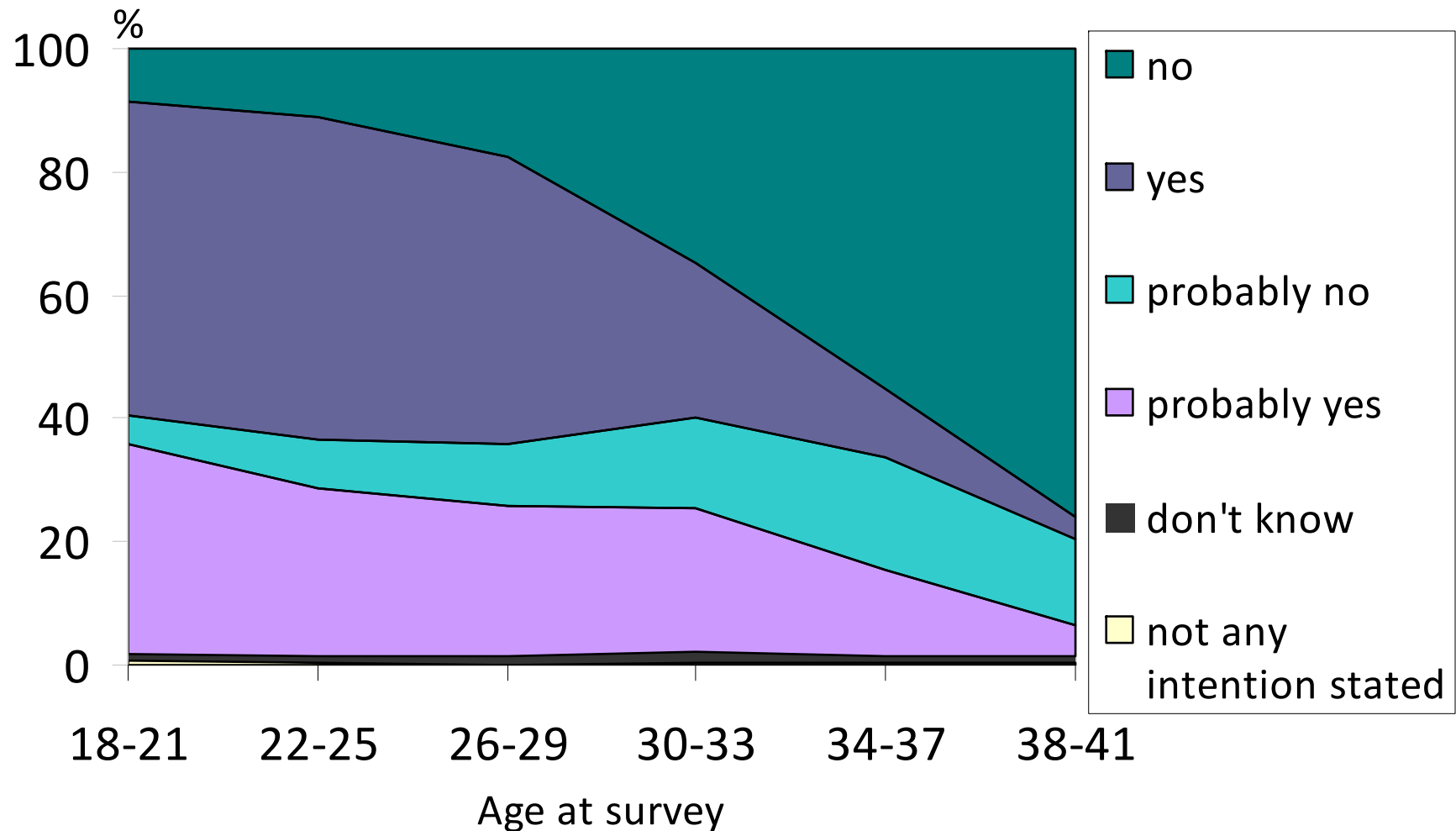
No

Don't know





## GHS 2005-7: level of uncertainty is high



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## Uncertainty is common elsewhere also...

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Prevalence of uncertainty in 33 developed country fertility surveys,  
1970s- present : overall or in at least one sub-group

	no. of surveys
20% +	23
30% +	18
40% +	6

- questions vary
- answer options available also vary

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...and may be underestimated

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- social desirability
- interviewer instructions
- answer options
- time-scale

# Question format affects estimated prevalence: GHS 1979-2005/7

“Do you think that you  
will have any (more)  
children at all (after the one  
you are expecting)?”

**1979-1990**

Yes

No

Don't know

**1991-present**

Showcard:

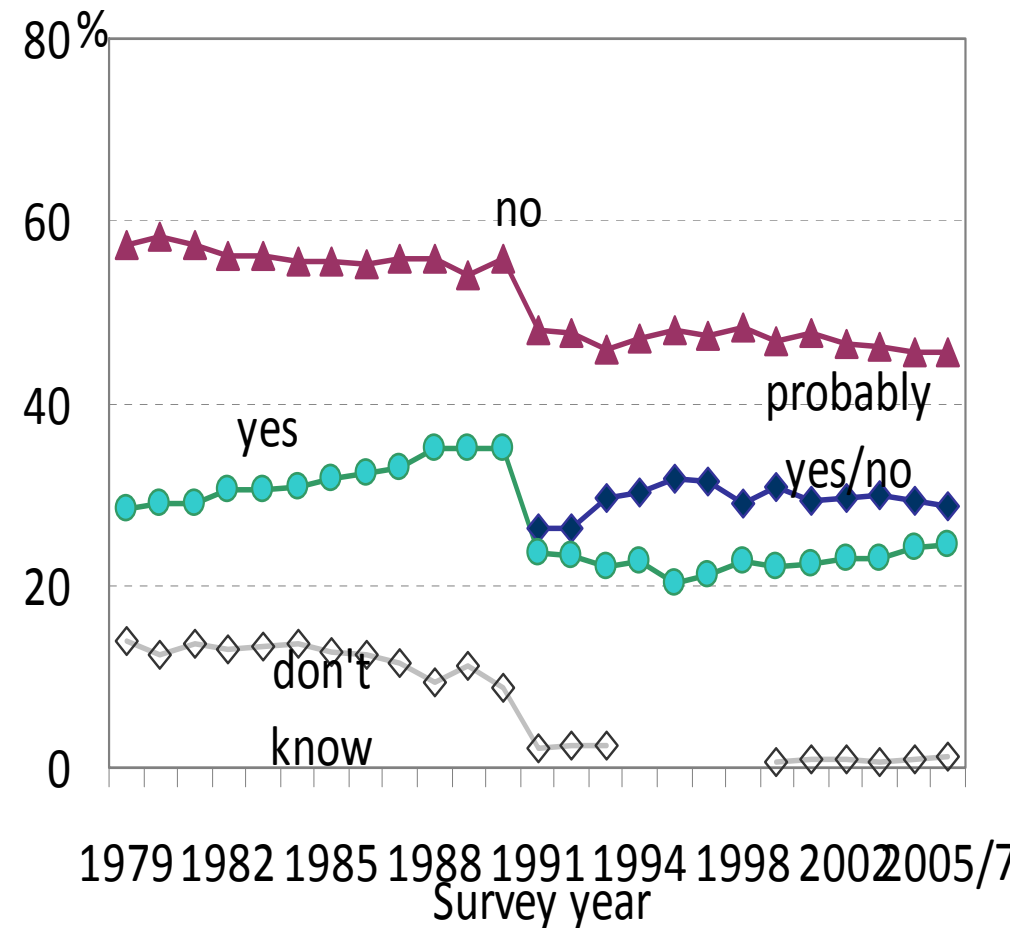
Yes

Probably yes

Probably not

No

+ probe for don't knows



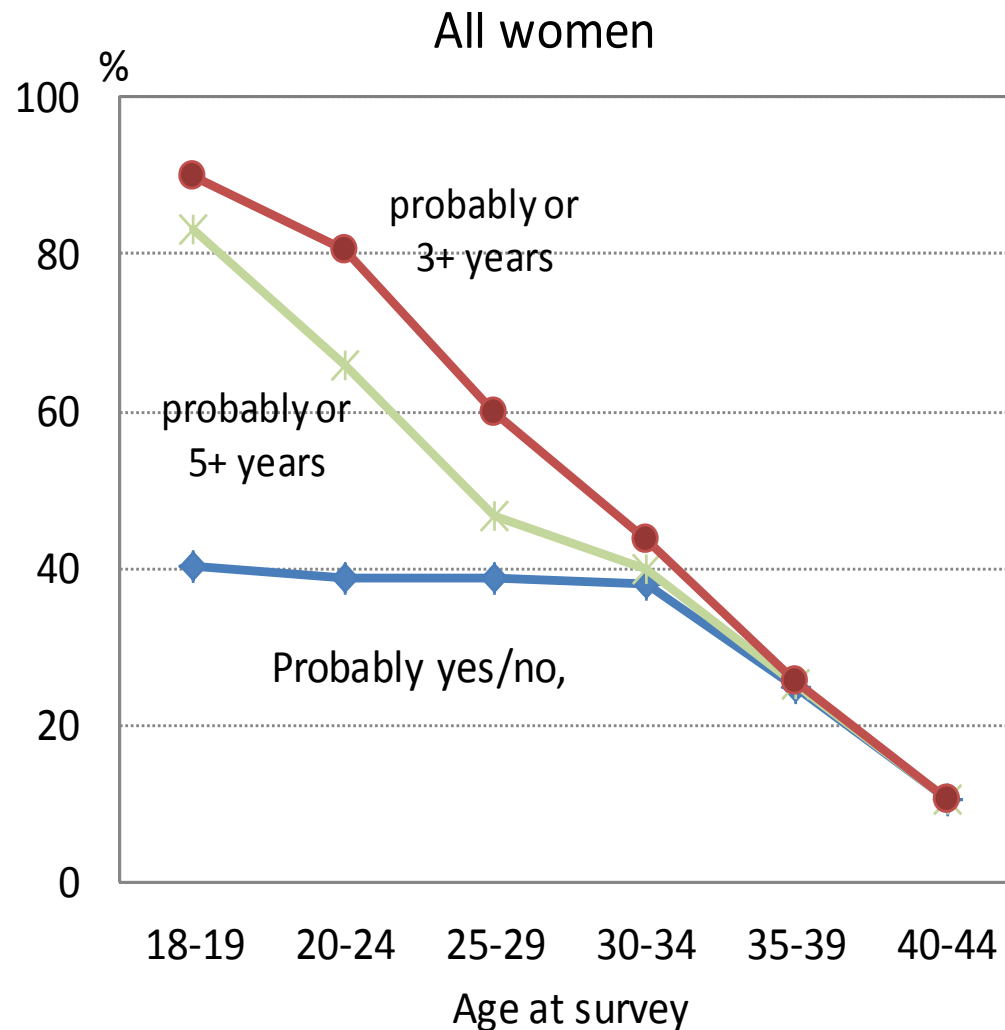
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## Extending definition

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- probably yes/not or don't know
- probably... or in 5+ years
- probably... or in 3+ years

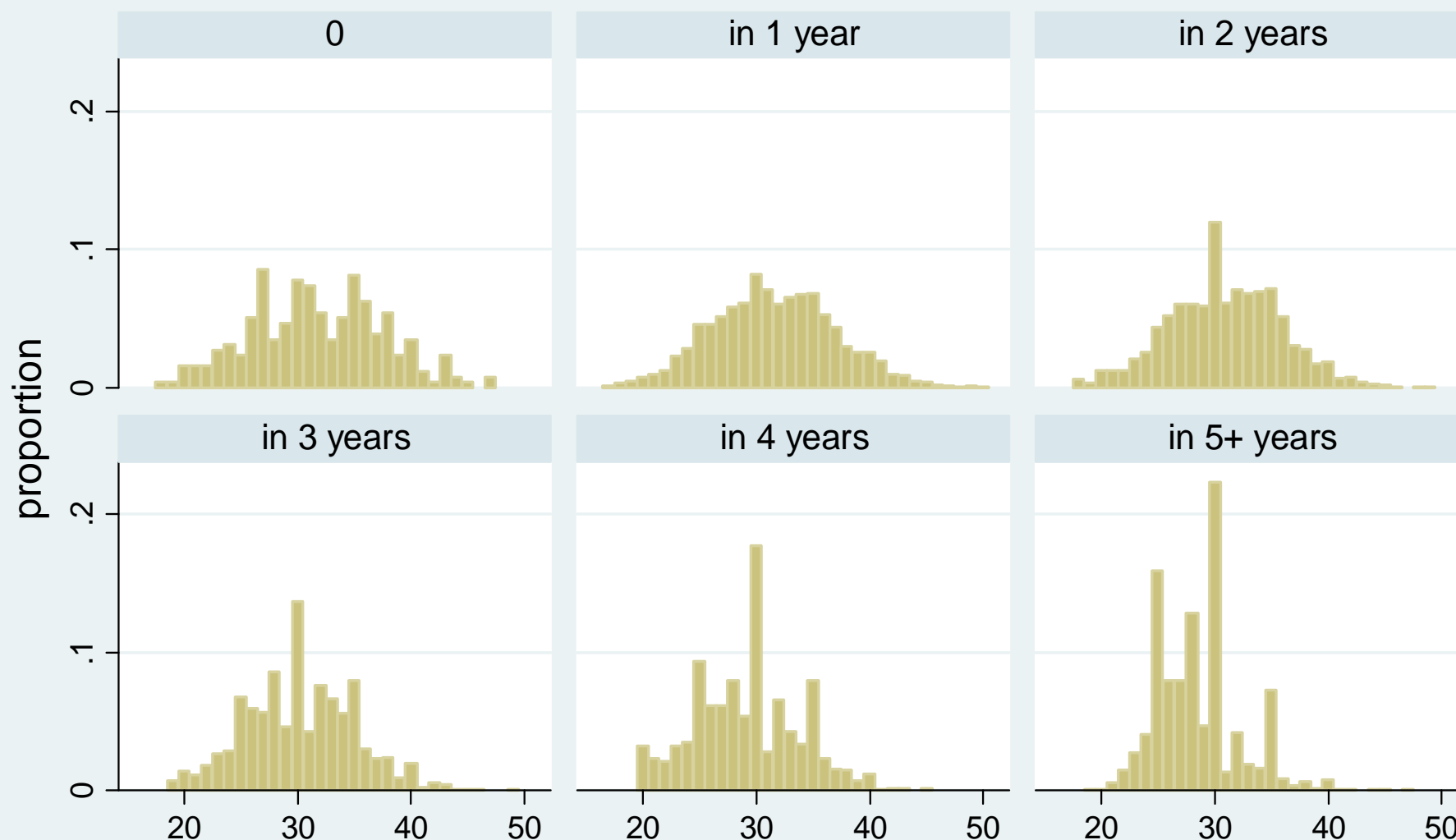
# Definitions matter... GHS 1991-2005/7



% uncertain

	<u>def. 1</u>	<u>def. 3</u>
<25	39%	83%
<35	39%	62%
<45	30%	44%

## Dist. of age at next birth by years to next birth, 1991-2007



'If intends to have more children, age at birth of next child'

Graphs by years to next birth topcoded 5

years to next birth = expected age at birth - current age

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## Story thus far...

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- high prevalence of uncertain fertility intentions
- not confined to UK
- question format and definition matter a lot



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So... is uncertainty real?

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poorly formulated questions?

superficial responses?

respondents not motivated?

respondents not familiar with the subject?




concealment?

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## Arguments for reality of uncertainty

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- origin of concept and early scepticism 
- qualitative studies
  - demographic
  - fertility and family planning 
  - ethnographic
- fertility outcomes
- uncertainty reasonable 

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## Hauser (1967) on ideal family size

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“It is quite possible that many of the responses in KAP surveys are efforts at politeness to meaningless queries or forced responses to questions to which the respondent really has no answer either before or after the question is put.”

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## Ambiguity in pregnancy intentions

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Concepts of “intended”, “wanted” and “planned” being challenged in family planning research

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”



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# Uncertainty is reasonable

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- in principle
- statistical-demographic

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## Grounds for uncertainty...1

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- Preferences weak, unclear, absent
- If clear positive preferences...
- fecundity?
  - find a partner?
  - keep a partner?
  - future circumstances ok – “right time”?
  - own future preferences?
  - partner’s future preferences?

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## Grounds for uncertainty .. 2

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If clear negative preferences...

- sure that no future pregnancy?
- reaction to any future pregnancy?
- own future preferences?
- partner's future preferences?

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## Clear, unambiguous intentions

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are a hypothesis

but are assumed to exist

little evidence, assumption questionable

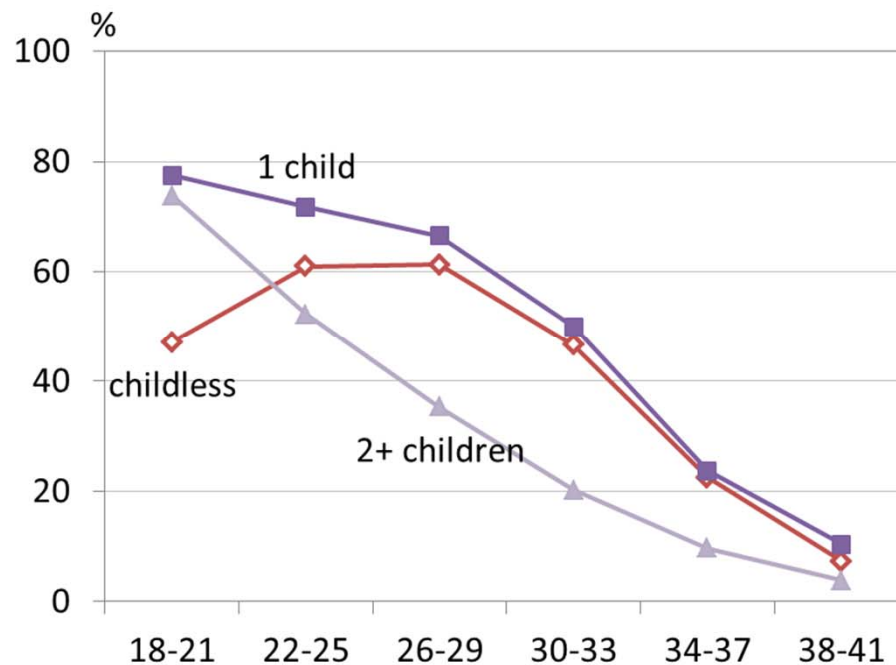


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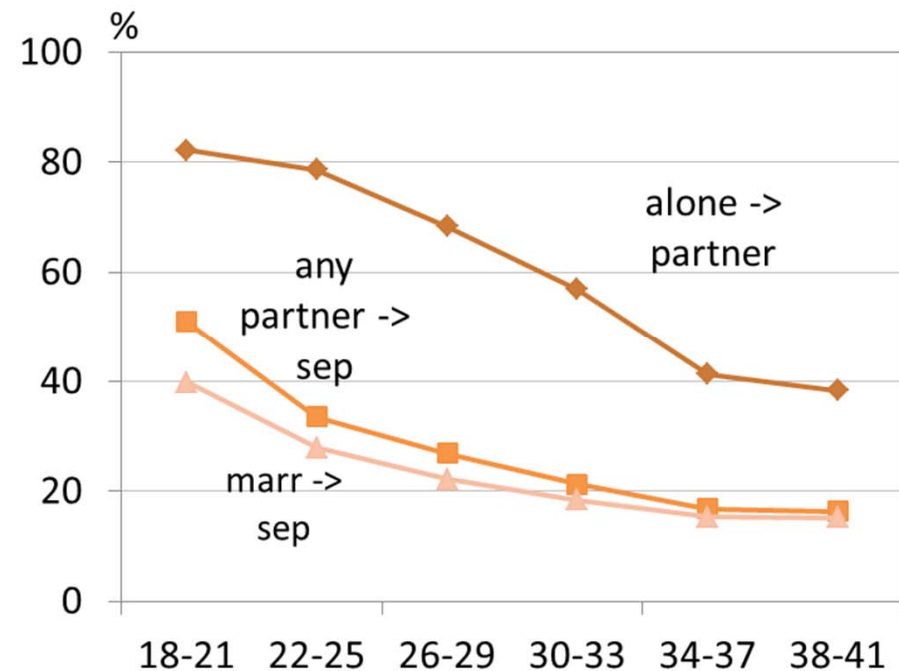
## It is reasonable to be uncertain...statistically

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Prob. birth within 10 years  
by age and initial parity



Prob. change of state within  
10 years by age and initial state



Source: GHS 2000-2005/7; based on experience 10 years before survey

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... consistency intentions- behaviour not high

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Longitudinal data, various countries, since 1970s

% having a birth among those intending to

in the range 27%-66%

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## Interim conclusion....

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- uncertainty is justified and likely to be real
- therefore, think again about  
intentions as concept  
reproductive preferences

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# Rethinking intentions and preferences

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Psychology and economics

- constructive preferences

- potentially explains inconsistency and instability

Political science

- non-attitudes: Converse

- survey response: Zaller and Feldman

Empirical results

- some in hand, further work planned

- qualitative work of special interest

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## How real are reproductive goals?

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- 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 decisions need investigation

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## Concluding comments

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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

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