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…”

Outline

• 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
Why study intentions?

• 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…
Why focus on uncertainty?

Level high in annual GHS since 1991
Meaningful -- not just nonresponse (Morgan 1981, 1982)
Has implications for ideas about reproductive decisions
Reproductive orientation: concepts

intentions       a/another
desires
expectations    number
ideal

origin = population projection
60+ years research on fertility intentions/expectations/ desires

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

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Probably yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>Don’t know</td>
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</table>
GHS 2005-7: level of uncertainty is high

Source: Ní Bhrolcháin et al (2010), Population Trends no. 141
Uncertainty is common elsewhere also…

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>no. of surveys</th>
<th>20% +</th>
<th>30% +</th>
<th>40% +</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
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- questions vary
- answer options available also vary
…and may be underestimated

- 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
Extending definition

• probably yes/not or don’t know

• probably… or in 5+ years

• probably… or in 3+ years
Definitions matter… GHS 1991-2005/7

All women

% uncertain

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Age at survey</th>
<th>def. 1</th>
<th>def. 3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;25</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;35</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;45</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>44%</td>
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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
Story thus far...

• high prevalence of uncertain fertility intentions

• not confined to UK

• question format and definition matter a lot
So... is uncertainty real?

poorly formulated questions?

superficial responses?

respondents not motivated?

respondents not familiar with the subject?

concealment?
Arguments for reality of uncertainty

- origin of concept and early scepticism
- qualitative studies
  - demographic
  - fertility and family planning
  - ethnographic
- fertility outcomes
- uncertainty reasonable
Hauser (1967) on ideal family size

“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.”
Ambiguity in pregnancy intentions

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”
Uncertainty is reasonable

- in principle

- statistical-demographic
Grounds for uncertainty...1

- 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?
Grounds for uncertainty .. 2

If clear negative preferences...
  • sure that no future pregnancy?
  • reaction to any future pregnancy?
  • own future preferences?
  • partner’s future preferences?
Clear, unambiguous intentions are a hypothesis but are assumed to exist little evidence, assumption questionable
It is reasonable to be uncertain...statistically

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
… consistency intentions- behaviour not high

Longitudinal data, various countries, since 1970s

% having a birth among those intending to

in the range 27%-66%
Interim conclusion....

• uncertainty is justified and likely to be real

• therefore, think again about intentions as concept reproductive preferences
Rethinking intentions and preferences

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
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 decisions need investigation
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
Acknowledgments

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References


