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When Family Embeddedness Unravels: A Dynamic Perspective on Marital Dissolution and Entrepreneurial Activity in China

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Abstract

Family embeddedness research has largely treated marriage as a relatively stable context for entrepreneurship, leaving unclear how disruptive family transitions reshape entrepreneurial activity. Integrating the dynamic family embeddedness perspective with conservation of resources (COR) theory, we examine the behavioral and motivational consequences of marital dissolution for individual entrepreneurial activity in China. Study 1 draws on the 2016 and 2020 waves of the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) and combines propensity score matching with a difference-in-differences (PSM-DID) specification. The results indicate that individuals who experienced marital dissolution engage in less entrepreneurial activity than those who remained married. Further analysis suggests that this effect is concentrated in entrepreneurial persistence. Drawing on a three-wave survey of 533 respondents, including a focal analytical sample of 307, Study 2 provides evidence of a mediating role for family motivation in the relationship between marital dissolution and entrepreneurial activity, which becomes stronger at higher levels of social status. Our study advances a dynamic family embeddedness perspective and extends COR theory by revealing how marital dissolution erodes the motivational resources that sustain entrepreneurial activity.

1 Introduction

The family embeddedness perspective on entrepreneurship holds that entrepreneurial intentions and decisions are shaped by the family systems in which individuals are situated (Aldrich et al., 2023; Andric et al., 2024). Prior research establishes that families shape entrepreneurial behaviors through resource provision (Feng et al., 2026), intergenerational value transmission (Swab & Patel, 2025), and structural characteristics (Criaco et al., 2017). However, family systems are not static. Major life-course events, including childbirth and the formation or dissolution of intimate partnerships, can reconfigure family roles, responsibilities, and risk-bearing capacities, thereby reshaping individual entrepreneurial activity (Carter et al., 2017; Kanji & Vershinina, 2024).

Despite these advances, our understanding of family-system dynamics and their entrepreneurial consequences remains limited. First, prior research has predominantly treated marriage as a relatively stable context (Mathias & Wang, 2023; Stamm et al., 2024), paying less attention to marital status changes as dynamic life-course events that may redirect entrepreneurial trajectories. Second, existing findings regarding family transitions and entrepreneurship remain mixed. Some studies suggest that marriage is positively associated with business ownership (Kanji & Vershinina, 2024). In contrast, others find that divorce and widowhood may also prompt entry into self-employment (Tran, 2026), reinforcing calls to broaden the application of the family embeddedness perspective (Aldrich et al., 2021). These divergent findings indicate that the mechanisms through which family transitions influence entrepreneurial activity require further clarification. Third, marital dissolution differs from positive family transitions such as marriage or childbirth and warrants separate theoretical attention. Divorce disrupts established arrangements for risk sharing, household labor, and emotional support, requiring individuals to adjust to abrupt economic, temporal, and psychological constraints (Leopold, 2018; Tamborini et al., 2015). In China, where Confucian ethics and collectivist values remain influential, marital stability may represent not only a private relationship but also a source of reputation and social recognition (Buckley et al., 2006; Yan et al., 2023). For individuals with higher social status, family image is often more closely linked to social prestige, social networks, and identity. Thus,

the resource losses and social consequences associated with marital dissolution may be particularly consequential for entrepreneurial activity.

To address these gaps, we integrate the family embeddedness perspective with COR theory to develop a dynamic account of how marital dissolution shapes entrepreneurial activity. The family embeddedness perspective highlights that entrepreneurship depends on resources and obligations embedded in family relationships, whereas COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Shahid & Kundi, 2022) explains how individuals respond when such resources are threatened or lost. From this perspective, marital dissolution represents not merely a change in legal status but a disruption to an interconnected system of economic, emotional, relational, and identity-based resources and motivations. Accordingly, we address three related questions: (1) Does marital dissolution affect entrepreneurial activity? (2) Through what psychological mechanism does this effect occur? (3) How does this mechanism vary according to individuals' social status?

We test our hypotheses through a complementary two-study design. Study 1 draws on longitudinal data from the 2016 and 2020 waves of the CFPS and uses a PSM-DID estimation to assess changes in entrepreneurial activity associated with marital dissolution. CFPS is a nationally representative longitudinal survey covering a broad range of individual- and family-level socioeconomic characteristics and is widely used in economics and management research (Hu et al., 2023). However, large-scale panel surveys rarely include detailed measures of the psychological processes through which marital dissolution shapes entrepreneurial behavior. Study 2 uses a three-wave survey conducted at one-month intervals to examine the mediating role of family motivation and the moderating role of individual social status. Thus, two studies provide complementary tests of the proposed theoretical model across different data sources, empirical strategies, and measurement approaches.

Our study makes three primary theoretical contributions. First, by adopting a dynamic perspective and treating marital dissolution as a distinct family transition, we advance the family embeddedness perspective (Aldrich et al., 2023; Kanji & Vershinina, 2024) by showing how disruptions within the family system reconfigure the resources and relational conditions that sustain entrepreneurial activity. Second, we extend COR theory by elucidating how the loss of resources and motivation within the family domain affects entrepreneurial behavior. Our findings indicate that marital dissolution negatively affects entrepreneurial actions and is associated with a decline in entrepreneurial persistence among existing entrepreneurs. Third, we extend family motivation research by showing that it responds to disruptions in family embeddedness and links such disruptions to entrepreneurial activity (Menges et al., 2017; Cui & Zhang, 2025). This pathway is stronger among higher-status individuals, who may face greater reputational and relational stakes when marital stability is disrupted (Su & Li, 2025).

2 Theoretical background and hypothesis development

2.1 Dynamic family embeddedness perspective in entrepreneurship

The family embeddedness perspective suggests that individual entrepreneurial intentions, venture creation, and resource mobilization are shaped by family systems (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). Family systems influence

how individuals perceive opportunities, mobilize resources, and make decisions. This perspective is particularly relevant in China, where collectivistic values give the family a central role in individuals' economic and social lives (Foltz et al., 2020). For example, Chinese family culture emphasizes family continuity and harmony. Family members value both emotional bonds and practical support, while individual achievements are often closely tied to family reputation. Within this strong-tie context, entrepreneurial activity tends to be embedded in family relationships and kinship networks (Wang et al., 2023) rather than being undertaken by entrepreneurs in isolation. Thus, family relationships may play an important role in shaping entrepreneurial activity in China.

Prior research has identified several channels through which family embeddedness shapes entrepreneurship. From an intergenerational perspective, the transmission of business knowledge and experience can facilitate entrepreneurial activity among family members (Capolupo et al., 2023), while the reorganization of family resources can help individuals manage challenges arising from family conflict (Mayanja et al., 2026). Within the immediate family, financial support can lower barriers to entrepreneurial entry, although it may also create financial and non-financial obligations that influence entrepreneurial choices and family stability (Sieger & Minola, 2017). Spouses represent another important source of support, contributing financial, human, and emotional resources across the stages of venture development (Turnalar-Çetinkaya & İslamoğlu, 2024). In China, relational networks rooted in Confucian ethics further strengthen these family effects, as kinship proximity influences trust, resource sharing, and obligations that may both facilitate and constrain entrepreneurial activity (Su et al., 2023).

However, family embeddedness is a dynamic process that evolves with family roles and resource arrangements. Such changes can shape how family members identify, evaluate, and pursue entrepreneurial opportunities (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). Major changes in family relationships may also alter role expectations, resource allocation, and decision-making processes (Aldrich et al., 2021). Accordingly, transitions such as marriage, childbirth, separation, divorce, and widowhood represent important life-course turning points because they reorganize household time, risk-sharing arrangements, and resource-mobilization capacity (Carr, 2018). For example, the choice of a spouse may shape an individual's entrepreneurial trajectory by changing the composition and availability of family resources (Zelekha, 2024). However, entrepreneurship research has devoted limited attention to how family transitions reshape entrepreneurial activity, particularly through changes in family roles and entrepreneurial motivation (Tran, 2026).

2.2 Marital relationships and entrepreneurial activity

Among family relationships, marriage is particularly consequential for entrepreneurship because spouses often provide complementary financial, social, operational, and emotional resources. A spouse's stable income can serve as a financial safety net, enabling entrepreneurs to tolerate uncertainty and persist during periods of weak business performance (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). Consistent with this view, married entrepreneurs exhibit higher business survival rates than their unmarried counterparts (Fairlie & Robb, 2008). Spouses may also share household responsibilities, offer advice, and provide emotional support, helping entrepreneurs navigate critical stages of innovation, venture creation, and growth (Mathias & Wang, 2023).

These benefits raise an important question: what happens when this resource arrangement is disrupted? COR theory suggests that resource loss has a stronger psychological impact than an equivalent gain in resources

(Hobfoll, 1989). Marital dissolution entails more than the absence of spousal support. It disrupts established systems of resource sharing and role coordination. Divorce can dismantle arrangements involving pooled income, domestic labor, and emotional support, converting shared responsibilities into individual economic and psychological burdens (Elder et al., 2003). It may also impose reputational and relational costs, particularly where marital stability is viewed as an indicator of family success in China (Yan et al., 2023).

Marital dissolution may weaken the conditions required to initiate or sustain entrepreneurial activity. The loss of income sharing can reduce individuals' capacity to absorb entrepreneurial risk, while emotional distress can deplete the psychological resources needed to cope with uncertainty. Divorce may also disrupt relational networks and erode access to social capital (Wanberg et al., 2023). COR theory further suggests that resource-depleted individuals become more vulnerable to additional losses and increasingly seek to protect their remaining resources (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). When financial, emotional, and social losses occur simultaneously, individuals may avoid uncertain and resource-intensive activities such as entrepreneurship (Shahid & Kundi, 2022). In China, these pressures may be reinforced by losses of face and disruptions to relational networks, further weakening social capital and family-based identity (Schaper et al., 2025).

The effects of marital dissolution may also extend from resource availability to individuals' motivation to deploy those resources. Marriage can activate family motivation, defined as an altruistic desire to exert effort for the benefit of one's family (Grant, 2008; Menges et al., 2017). Family motivation can energize effort and improve performance, particularly when intrinsic motivation is limited. This mechanism is especially relevant to entrepreneurship because entrepreneurial decisions are often tied to the needs, security, and future well-being of family members (Gao et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2025). A stable marriage may reinforce long-term family goals and strengthen the motivation to improve family circumstances through entrepreneurship. By contrast, marital dissolution may weaken the family context sustaining these goals, thereby reducing both the resources available for entrepreneurship and the motivation to initiate or continue it.

2.3 Marital dissolution and entrepreneurial activity

From the family embeddedness perspective, entrepreneurial decisions are embedded in family systems that shape access to resources, role obligations, and willingness to assume risk (Aldrich et al., 2021). Marriage can provide a stable foundation for entrepreneurship: a spouse's income may buffer uncertainty (Turnalar-Çetinkaya & İslamoğlu, 2024), while coordination between entrepreneurial and spousal roles can support venture development and continuity (Mathias & Wang, 2023). Spousal involvement and support may influence entrepreneurial behavior over time (Stamm et al., 2024). These effects may be especially salient in China, where collectivistic values and relational obligations give marital and family networks substantial economic and social significance (Fang et al., 2022).

Marital dissolution disrupts this foundation by weakening the coordinated resource system created through marriage. COR theory suggests that substantial resource losses prompt individuals to protect remaining resources and adopt more conservative behavioral responses (Hobfoll, 2000). Divorce may simultaneously reduce financial security, emotional stability, social support, and available time, diverting attention and resources from uncertain long-term activities. Entrepreneurship is particularly vulnerable because it requires sustained effort, tolerance for uncertainty, and continued financial and psychological commitment (Wanberg

et al., 2023). The loss of pooled income, shared caregiving, and risk-sharing arrangements may further constrain individuals' ability to initiate or sustain entrepreneurial activity (Tran, 2026).

The Chinese cultural context may intensify these consequences. Marital harmony is widely regarded as an important dimension of personal and family well-being in China (Pimentel, 2000), while marriage also supports social identity and relational capital. Marital dissolution may generate not only financial and emotional disruption but also reputational costs, loss of face, and the need to reconstruct social relationships (Yan et al., 2023). Thus, these losses may encourage individuals to conserve their remaining resources rather than commit them to risky entrepreneurial activity.

Accordingly, individuals experiencing marital dissolution are likely to exhibit a less favorable change in entrepreneurial activity than those who remain married. This argument does not imply that divorced individuals necessarily display lower entrepreneurship at every point in time; rather, it predicts a greater decline following marital dissolution.

H1. Compared to individuals in stable marriages, those who have experienced marital dissolution engage in less entrepreneurial activity.

2.4 A moderated mediation model of family motivation and social status

Marriage provides financial, emotional, and social resources while creating a relational context that sustains family-oriented goals and responsibilities. Family motivation refers to an individual's altruistic desire to exert effort for the benefit of the family (Menges et al., 2017). Individuals with stronger family motivation are more likely to invest effort, persist in demanding tasks, and pursue goals that enhance family well-being (Riaz et al., 2025). COR theory suggests that resources accumulate within enduring social and family contexts (Hobfoll, 2011). By linking individuals to stable roles, reciprocal commitments, and long-term goals, marriage helps maintain a family-centered orientation. This function may be especially salient in China, where emphasis is placed on reciprocal obligations, family responsibility, and collective well-being. Close family ties may provide Chinese entrepreneurs with a strong normative foundation for family motivation (Schaper et al., 2025).

Marital dissolution disrupts these relational and resource conditions. Financial restructuring, legal demands, changing caregiving responsibilities, and separate household management consume psychological and material resources, shifting attention from long-term family goals toward immediate adjustment and self-protection (Wanberg et al., 2023). The loss of pooled income and reorganization of caregiving may also weaken the perception of entrepreneurship as a means of advancing shared family goals. For example, Tran (2026) pointed out that post-divorce self-employment may instead reflect short-term economic necessity.

These consequences may be reinforced by the social meaning of marriage in China. Marital dissolution can threaten face and social reputation, adding identity-related and relational losses to the practical burdens of divorce (Buckley et al., 2006). Such losses may weaken family identification and reduce motivation to pursue family advancement and collective well-being. Thus, marital dissolution undermines the relational context that gives family-oriented goals their motivational significance, making family-directed proactive behavior more difficult to sustain (Cui & Zhang, 2025).

H2. Compared to individuals with stable marital status, individuals who experience marital dissolution exhibit lower family motivation.

Building on the preceding arguments, marital dissolution may reduce entrepreneurial activity by weakening family motivation. In China, entrepreneurial decisions are closely embedded in family relationships and obligations, making family motivation an important psychological pathway through which family transitions shape entrepreneurial activity (Ahlstrom et al., 2025). Prior research suggests that concern for family well-being and security can strengthen individuals' willingness to view entrepreneurship as a means of advancing family goals (Riaz et al., 2025). Thus, the emotional, financial, and relational losses associated with divorce can constrain individuals' capacity to pursue long-term family goals and diminish their willingness to undertake demanding entrepreneurial activity for the benefit of their families.

H3. Marital dissolution reduces entrepreneurial activity by lowering family motivation.

According to the family embeddedness perspective, the consequences of family transitions vary with individuals' broader social and resource conditions (Aldrich et al., 2021). Social status captures an individual's position in the social hierarchy, including access to economic resources, social prestige, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Research suggests that entrepreneurs' socioeconomic status shapes how they respond to threats and deploy relational resources, making social status an important boundary condition of entrepreneurial action (Brändle et al., 2023). In China, higher social status also heightens the reputational and identity stakes of maintaining a stable family image. Marital dissolution may represent a more consequential threat to family identity and relational capital for higher-status individuals.

Higher-status individuals are often more strongly motivated to preserve family prestige (Wang et al., 2026). However, this status advantage may also highlight their vulnerability to marital dissolution. From a COR perspective, when highly valued resources are threatened or lost, individuals are more likely to experience stronger psychological strain and adopt resource-protective responses (Wanberg et al., 2023). Because marital stability carries greater symbolic and reputational value for higher-status individuals, divorce is likely to produce a sharper erosion of their family-oriented goals and motivation.

Moreover, higher-status individuals often possess broader and more visible social networks. For them, marital dissolution entails not only emotional loss but also greater damage to relational capital and face (Li & Bian, 2024). These combined losses may further weaken family motivation and, consequently, intensify the negative indirect effect of marital dissolution on entrepreneurial activity.

H4. Social status moderates the indirect effect of marital dissolution on entrepreneurial activity through family motivation, such that the negative indirect effect is stronger at higher levels of social status.

To rigorously test the proposed theoretical hypotheses, our study employs a dual-study research design. Study 1 uses longitudinal data from the 2016 and 2020 waves of the CFPS and applies a PSM-DID approach to estimate the effects of marital dissolution on entrepreneurial activity. Study 2 conducts a three-wave, one-month-lagged survey among 533 respondents, with 307 respondents following the two focal marital trajectories to test the mediating role of family motivation and the moderating effect of individual social

status. The two studies complement each other in data sourcing and measurement methods, jointly providing robust empirical evidence for our theoretical model.

3 Study 1 method

The CFPS is a comprehensive, nationwide, biennial longitudinal survey project covering 25 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions in China. By tracking data at the individual, family, and community levels, the CFPS reflects social and economic changes in China and has become an authoritative data source for management research (Hu et al., 2023). For our empirical analysis, Study 1 selects adults aged 18–65 who participated in the 2016 baseline survey and were successfully re-interviewed in the 2020 wave.

3.1 Measures

Dependent variable. Entrepreneurial activity was measured using the respondent's current employment status as reported in the CFPS: 1 = the individual has established a private enterprise or is otherwise self-employed; 0 = the individual is engaged in agricultural production and management, works as an agricultural laborer, or is employed in the non-agricultural sector.

Independent variable. In the questionnaire, marital status is classified into five categories: unmarried (never married and not cohabiting), married (currently having a spouse, including both legally married and de facto cohabitation), cohabiting (living together without marriage or de facto status), divorced (divorced, not remarried, and currently without a spouse), and widowed (spouse deceased, not remarried). Based on these categories, we constructed a binary variable to capture *marital dissolution*: 1 = respondents who were married in 2016 but divorced by 2020, 0 = respondents who remained married in both 2016 and 2020.

Control variables. At the individual level, we controlled demographic characteristics such as *age* (in years), *gender* (1 = male, 0 = female), *educational level* (1 = illiterate/semi-literate to 8 = PhD) and *hukou* (1 = agricultural household registration, 3 = non-agricultural household registration, 5 = no household registration, 7 = resident household registration) since these variables have all been shown to have a significant impact on individual entrepreneurial decision-making (Hahn et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2021; Henry et al., 2016). Furthermore, given that CPC membership helps individuals gain more timely access to policies (Zhong & Zheng, 2025), our study controlled for *CPC membership* (1 = yes, 0 = no) and *trade union membership* (1 = yes, 0 = no). Our study also controlled for *individual social status* (1 = very low to 5 = very high) (Brändle et al., 2023), *life satisfaction* (1 = very dissatisfied to 5 = very satisfied), and *confidence in the future* (1 = no confidence to 5 = very confident), in order to rule out potential confounding effects of individuals' subjective states on entrepreneurial activity. At the household level, given the close-knit nature of family relationships in China, our study controlled for the *Family size*, *the degree of trust in parents* (0 = very distrustful to 10 = very trusting), and *household income* (Feng et al., 2026) (total household income over the past 12 months in yuan, with values winsorized at the top and bottom 2.5%). Finally, because individual entrepreneurial activity is inextricably linked to regional economic development, we also controlled for this by treating *provinces* as dummy variables using the national standard administrative division codes. For detailed variable definitions, see Table A1 in the Appendix.

3.2 Procedures

Because marital dissolution is not entirely exogenous, various individual, household, and regional factors may jointly affect marital status and entrepreneurial activity, raising concerns about selection and omitted variable bias. To address this, we utilized a combined PSM-DID approach. First, we used individual- and household-level covariates measured in 2016, and calculated propensity scores with a logit model and applied kernel matching, excluding categorical variables (hukou and province) from the propensity score model. Second, we evaluated matching quality by examining covariate balance both before and after the matching process. Subsequently, the matched observations and kernel weights were incorporated back into the two-wave panel, allowing us to estimate the DID model to account for time-invariant individual heterogeneity and common temporal shocks.

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(Treat_i \times Post_t) + \gamma' X_{it} + \mu i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it},\ (i = 1\ldots n,\ t = 0, 1) \quad (1)$$

Y_{it} indicates whether individual i engaged in entrepreneurial activity in year t. $Treat_i$ equals 1 for individuals who were married in 2016 and divorced by 2020 and 0 for those who remained married in both waves. $Post_t$ equals 1 for 2020 and 0 for 2016. The interaction term $Treat_i \times Post_t$ captures the differential change in entrepreneurial activity among individuals who experienced marital dissolution relative to those who remained married. X_{it} is a vector of time-varying individual- and household-level covariates. *Hukou* and *province* indicators were included as categorical controls in the DID regressions, although they were not used in the propensity score model. μ_i denotes individual fixed effects, λ_t denotes year fixed effects, and ε_{it} is the error term. The models were estimated using kernel-matching weights, with standard errors clustered at the individual level.

4 Study 1 results

4.1 Descriptive statistical analysis

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the full sample and both subgroups. Despite a slightly higher pooled average entrepreneurship rate in the treatment group, the core analysis examines whether changes in entrepreneurial activity over time diverge between the two groups after marital dissolution.

Table 1
Study 1: Descriptive statistics of key variables

Variables	Full sample			Treat			Control		
	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.
Entrepreneurship	18,426	0.122	0.327	284	0.141	0.348	18,142	0.122	0.327
Age	18,426	45.04	10.38	284	39.01	9.51	18,142	45.14	10.37
Gender	18,425	0.510	0.500	284	0.662	0.474	18,141	0.507	0.500
Education	18,231	2.82	1.32	283	3.06	1.34	17,948	2.82	1.32
CPC membership	17,467	0.049	0.216	265	0.053	0.224	17,202	0.049	0.215
Social status	18,093	2.97	1.03	277	2.83	1.03	17,816	2.97	1.03
Life satisfaction	18,119	3.81	1.03	277	3.46	1.06	17,842	3.81	1.02
Confidence in the future	18,107	4.07	0.98	277	3.96	0.99	17,830	4.07	0.98
Family size	18,426	4.52	1.98	284	3.86	2.14	18,142	4.53	1.97
Trust in parents	18,084	9.43	1.30	276	9.57	1.17	17,808	9.43	1.31
Trade union membership	18,100	0.092	0.289	276	0.149	0.356	17,824	0.091	0.287
Household income	18,413	86,402	72,884	284	81,919	73,294	18,129	86,472	72,878

Note: For interpretability, categorical variables (province, hukou) are not included in the table.

4.2 PSM-DID results

We estimated propensity scores using a logit model based on individuals' characteristics measured in 2016 and then applied kernel matching with a bandwidth of 0.01 (see Table 2). The matching procedure substantially improved covariate balance, with all covariates achieving standardized mean differences below the conventional 10% threshold. We further included these covariates in the subsequent DID models with individual and year fixed effects to account for residual observable differences.

Table 2
Study 1: Covariate balance before and after kernel matching

Variable	Unmatched	Mean		%bias	%reduct	t
	Matched	Treated	Control		|bias|	
Age	Unmatched	37.230	43.320	-62.5	86.2	-6.94
	Matched	37.230	38.068	-8.6		-0.71
Gender	Unmatched	0.652	0.504	30.3	85.8	3.42
	Matched	0.652	0.631	4.3		0.36
Education	Unmatched	2.978	2.783	14.7	78.0	1.72
	Matched	2.978	2.935	3.2		0.26
CPC membership	Unmatched	0.096	0.087	3.1	55.9	0.36
	Matched	0.096	0.100	-1.4		-0.11
Social status	Unmatched	2.807	2.801	0.6	-101.5	0.07
	Matched	2.807	2.795	1.2		0.10
Life satisfaction	Unmatched	3.430	3.569	-12.9	86.8	-1.49
	Matched	3.430	3.448	-1.7		-0.14
Confidence in the future	Unmatched	4.022	3.951	7.2	55.7	0.81
	Matched	4.022	3.991	3.2		0.27
Family size	Unmatched	4.356	4.594	-12.7	95.5	-1.44
	Matched	4.356	4.366	-0.6		-0.05
Trust in parents	Unmatched	9.793	9.495	29.9	84.7	2.81
	Matched	9.793	9.747	4.6		0.51
Trade union membership	Unmatched	0.133	0.086	15.0	99.5	1.92
	Matched	0.133	0.134	-0.1		-0.01
Household income	Unmatched	79,197	72,348	9.8	91.3	1.25
	Matched	79,197	79,796	−0.9		-0.07

Note: Province and hukou were not included in the propensity score model.

Table 3 reports the PSM-DID estimates of the relationship between marital dissolution and individual entrepreneurial activity. Model 1 includes the full set of time-varying controls, individual fixed effects, and year fixed effects. Model 2 adds the interaction between the treatment and post indicators (B = -0.114, p < 0.01). This finding supports Hypothesis 1, indicating that individuals who experienced marital dissolution exhibited a greater decline in entrepreneurial activity than those whose marriages remained stable. Models 3

and 4 further examine heterogeneity according to individuals' entrepreneurial status in 2016. The interaction term is not significant among individuals who were non-entrepreneurs in 2016 (B = -0.023) but is negative and significant among those who were entrepreneurs at baseline (B = -0.199, p < 0.1). This heterogeneous pattern provides further support for Hypothesis 1, and it may be driven primarily by reduced entrepreneurial persistence among existing entrepreneurs.

To formally assess whether the effect of marital dissolution differed by baseline entrepreneurial status, we estimated a triple-interaction model. The *Post × Treat × Baseline Entrepreneurship* interaction was negative and statistically significant (B = -0.233, t = -2.39, p < 0.05), indicating that the effect of marital dissolution was significantly more negative among individuals who were entrepreneurs at baseline. For baseline non-entrepreneurs, the DID estimate was insignificant (B = -0.020, t = -0.87). These results indicate that the negative DID estimate is concentrated among baseline entrepreneurs, a pattern consistent with reduced entrepreneurial persistence.

Table 3
Study 1: PSM-DID estimates of the effect of marital dissolution on entrepreneurial activity

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	0.701	0.965	-0.274	0.468
	(1.10)	(1.42)	(-1.09)	(0.67)
Age	-0.0196	-0.0242	0.00382	0.0115
	(-1.30)	(-1.53)	(0.89)	(0.93)
Educational level	0.0628	0.0689	0.0413	0.0784
	(1.29)	(1.37)	(0.89)	(0.55)
CPC membership	-0.0328	-0.0481	-0.0419	-0.0963
	(-0.48)	(-0.70)	(-1.25)	(-0.53)
Social status	-0.0259	-0.0283	-0.00292	-0.0568
	(-1.36)	(-1.54)	(-0.99)	(-1.50)
Life satisfaction	0.0219	0.0137	0.00750	0.0234
	(1.17)	(0.74)	(1.37)	(0.63)
Confidence in the future	0.0124	0.0101	-0.00297	-0.0249
	(0.62)	(0.51)	(-0.77)	(-0.60)
Family size	0.00661	-0.00213	0.00486	0.0413
	(0.86)	(-0.26)	(0.80)	(1.21)
Trust in parents	-0.0130	-0.0148	-0.00213	0.0312
	(-1.09)	(-1.24)	(-0.38)	(0.96)
Trade union membership	-0.0786	-0.0764	-0.0141	-0.199**
	(-1.40)	(-1.39)	(-1.39)	(-2.34)
Household income	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	0.000
	(-0.15)	(-0.35)	(-0.66)	(0.54)
Post × Treat		-0.114***	-0.0234	-0.199*
		(-2.81)	(-1.11)	(-1.94)
N	15,468	15,468	13,428	2,040
Adjusted R^2	0.474	0.485	0.043	0.529

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01; *t-statistics are reported in parentheses.* For readability, province and hukou are not included in the table. In addition, gender is time-invariant and thus absorbed by individual fixed effects, so it is excluded from the regression.

4.3 Robustness check

For a robustness check, we estimated a first-difference model using changes in entrepreneurial activity and the time-varying covariates between 2016 and 2020. Marital dissolution is negatively associated with the change in entrepreneurial activity (B = -0.118, t = -2.89, p < 0.01). Specifically, compared with individuals who remained married, those who experienced marital dissolution showed an approximately 11.8-percentage-point greater decline in entrepreneurship. This result provides additional evidence consistent with Hypothesis 1. Moreover, the results remain robust when standard errors are two-way clustered at the individual and province levels. The coefficient on *Post × Treat* remains negative and significant (B = -0.114, t = -3.45, p < 0.01).

5 Study 2 method

5.1 Data

In 2025, we recruited 650 adults residing in mainland China who were at least 18 years old and able to report their marital and employment status during 2020–2024. Data were collected in three waves at one-month intervals. At T1, respondents reported their marital-status transitions, social status, demographic characteristics, and entrepreneurial experience; family motivation was measured at T2, and entrepreneurial activity at T3. Of the 650 respondents who completed T1, 575 completed T2, and 550 completed T3. After data-quality exclusions, 533 valid cases remained, representing 82.0% of the original T1 sample. The focal analytical sample comprised 307 respondents who remained married from 2020 to 2024 (N = 261) or transitioned to legal divorce (N = 46). Those who experienced widowhood, remarriage, separation without legal divorce, or other marital transitions were excluded. Participants were geographically dispersed, with the largest numbers drawn from Guangdong, Shandong, Shanxi, Jiangsu, and Henan.

5.2 Measures

Independent variable. We used a retrospective measurement approach to capture respondents' marital-status transitions over the preceding years (2020 to 2024). We created a dummy variable to measure *marital dissolution*: 1 = respondents who transitioned from married to divorced, 0 = those who remained married throughout this period. In addition, the questionnaire initially included six categories regarding marital status: unmarried, married, unmarried-to-married, married-to-divorced, married-to-widowed, and divorced-to-remarried.

Dependent variable. Entrepreneurial activity was measured as a binary variable indicating whether the respondent was currently running a business (1 = yes, 0 = no).

Mediator. Family motivation was assessed using the five-item scale developed by Menges et al. (2017). Sample items include 'I care about and support my family' and 'I want to help my family.' The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.757).

Moderator. Individual social status was measured using respondents' self-assessed local social status, rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high).

Control variables. Consistent with Study 1, we controlled for a range of variables at the individual, household, and regional levels. At the individual level, we included *gender* (1 = male, 0 = female), *age* (in years), *educational level* (1–7, 1 = primary school or below to 7 = doctoral degree), *health status* (1 = very unhealthy, 5 = very healthy), *life satisfactio*n (1 = very dissatisfied to 5 = very satisfied), *risk propensity* (7 items, α = 0.923; Meertens & Lion, 2008), and *prior entrepreneurial experience* (number of previous ventures). At the household level, we controlled for the *number of children*. At the regional level, we included a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent resides in an *eastern* region (1 = yes, 0 = otherwise) to account for regional differences in economic development and entrepreneurial opportunities. According to the National Bureau of Statistics' economic region classification, the eastern region comprises Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shandong, Guangdong, and Hainan.

6 Study 2 results

6.1 Descriptive statistical analysis and correlation analysis

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations. Marital dissolution is significantly and negatively associated with entrepreneurial activity (r = -0.34, p < 0.001), providing preliminary support for the proposed relationship. Family motivation is positively related to entrepreneurship (r = 0.32, p < 0.001) and negatively related to marital dissolution (r = -0.60, p < 0.001), a pattern consistent with the proposed theoretical mechanism.

Table 4
Study 2: Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients of key variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Entrepreneurship	1						
2. Marital dissolution	-0.34***	1					
3. Family motivation	0.32***	-0.60***	1				
4. Social status	-0.07	0.38***	-0.08	1			
5. Gender	0.03	-0.01	0.02	-0.14*	1		
6. Age	0.08	0.06	0.03	0.03	0.10	1	
7. Education	-0.12*	0.06	-0.02	0.18**	-0.20***	-0.27***	1
8. Health	0.01	-0.05	0.08	0.20***	-0.12*	-0.14*	0.25***
9. Life satisfaction	0.08	-0.09	0.15*	0.11	-0.10	-0.08	0.19***
10. Risk propensity	-0.06	-0.01	-0.03	-0.11	0.06	0.07	-0.14*
11. Eastern region	-0.06	-0.02	-0.005	0.07	0.02	0.05	-0.05
12. Entrepreneurial experience	0.02	0.19***	-0.06	0.13*	0.01	0.10	0.12*
13. Number of children	-0.10	0.10	-0.002	0.01	0.06	0.07	0.001
Mean	0.51	0.15	4.26	3.28	0.36	36.49	5.20
S.D.	0.50	0.36	0.47	0.80	0.48	7.29	0.75

Variable	8	9	10	11	12	13
8. Health	1					
9. Life satisfaction	0.29***	1				
10. Risk propensity	-0.24***	-0.12*	1			
11. Eastern region	0.04	-0.002	-0.01	1		
12. Entrepreneurial experience	-0.01	-0.05	0.08	-0.05	1	
13. Number of children	-0.02	-0.03	0.10	0.07	0.13*	1
Mean	4.15	4.06	3.55	0.59	0.95	1.21
S.D.	0.65	0.62	0.85	0.49	0.84	0.48
*Note: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001*, *N* = 307, two-tailed test.						

6.2 Regression results

Table 5 reports the results for the proposed mechanism and boundary condition. Models 1 and 4 include all control variables to establish the baseline specifications for family motivation and entrepreneurial activity, respectively. Model 5 shows that marital dissolution is negatively associated with entrepreneurial activity (B = -2.691, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Model 2 indicates that marital dissolution is negatively associated with family motivation (B = -0.805, $p < 0.001$), consistent with Hypothesis 2. In Model 3, the interaction between marital dissolution and social status is negative and significant (B= -0.257, $p < 0.001$), indicating that social status moderates the relationship between marital dissolution and family motivation. Model 6 shows that marital dissolution remains negatively associated with entrepreneurial activity (B= -2.089, $p < 0.001$), whereas family motivation is positively associated with entrepreneurial activity (B = 0.781, $p < 0.05$).

Table 5
Study 2: Regression results

Variable	DVs					
	Family motivation			Entrepreneurial activity		
	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*	*Model 6*
Constant	3.735***	3.828***	4.191***	1.074	1.359	-1.482
	(9.80)	(12.53)	(13.70)	(0.64)	(0.77)	(-0.69)
Gender	0.031	0.020	0.012	0.073	0.050	0.034
	(0.54)	(0.42)	(0.27)	(0.29)	(0.19)	(0.12)
Age	0.003	0.005	0.002	0.018	0.029	0.025
	(0.68)	(1.53)	(0.67)	(1.06)	(1.54)	(1.32)
Educational level	-0.027	0.001	-0.021	-0.406*	-0.384	-0.398*
	(-0.67)	(0.03)	(-0.66)	(-2.22)	(-1.96)	(-1.98)
Health	0.038	0.016	0.003	0.038	-0.013	-0.040
	(0.84)	(0.44)	(0.09)	(0.19)	(-0.06)	(-0.19)
Life satisfaction	0.108*	0.072	0.051	0.335	0.293	0.237
	(2.33)	(1.93)	(1.41)	(1.66)	(1.37)	(1.09)
Risk propensity	-0.004	-0.020	-0.018	-0.155	-0.233	-0.215
	(-0.13)	(-0.74)	(-0.70)	(-1.07)	(-1.50)	(-1.37)
Eastern region	-0.013	-0.023	-0.036	-0.264	-0.345	-0.334
	(-0.24)	(-0.51)	(-0.84)	(-1.10)	(-1.34)	(-1.28)
Entrepreneurial experience	-0.028	0.029	0.020	0.134	0.331*	0.304
	(-0.85)	(1.06)	(0.77)	(0.92)	(2.07)	(1.88)
Number of children	0.007	0.051	0.059	-0.454	-0.414	-0.460
	(0.13)	(1.11)	(1.34)	(-1.80)	(-1.50)	(-1.64)
Marital dissolution		-0.805***	-0.723***		-2.691***	-2.089***
		(-12.89)	(-8.95)		(-5.13)	(-3.62)
Social status			0.144***			
			(4.34)			

*Note: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. N = 307. t-statistics are reported for the linear models and z-statistics for the logistic models.* Social status was mean-centered before constructing the interaction term. Models 1–3 were estimated using OLS regression, whereas Models 4–6 were estimated using logistic regression.

Marital dissolution × Social status			-0.257***			
			(-3.43)			
Family motivation						0.781*
						(2.34)
R^2 /*Pseudo* R^2	0.031	0.379	0.422	0.037	0.134	0.147

*Note: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. N = 307. t-statistics are reported for the linear models and z-statistics for the logistic models.* Social status was mean-centered before constructing the interaction term. Models 1–3 were estimated using OLS regression, whereas Models 4–6 were estimated using logistic regression.

We conducted a moderated mediation analysis using PROCESS macro for SPSS with 5,000 bootstrap resamples (Hayes, 2015). The bootstrap indirect effects reported in Table 6 provide further evidence consistent with Hypothesis 3. The moderated mediation effect is significant, with a moderated mediation index of -0.201 (95% CI: [-0.542, -0.003]). It indicates that social status significantly moderates the mediating role of family motivation in the relationship between marital dissolution and entrepreneurial activity, supporting H4.

Table 6
Study 2: Moderated mediation results

Direct effect	***Effect***	***SE***	***95% LLCI***	***95% ULCI***
	-2.089	**0.578**	**-3.221**	**-0.956**
Conditional indirect effects				
Mean-1SD	-0.415	0.221	-0.866	0.001
Mean+1SD	-0.737	0.360	-1.454	-0.019
Index of moderated mediation				
	Index	*SE*	*95% LLCI*	*95% ULCI*
Social status	-0.201	0.142	-0.542	-0.003

Simple slope analysis (Fig. 2) reveals that the negative relationship between marital dissolution and family motivation is significantly steeper for individuals with higher social status (*slope* = -0.944, t = -13.937, p < 0.001) than for those with lower social status (*slope* = -0.531, t = -4.343, p < 0.001).

7 Discussion

Our study integrates the family embeddedness perspective with COR theory to examine how marital dissolution shapes individual entrepreneurial activity and the conditions under which this effect becomes stronger. Study 1 uses CFPS panel data from 2016 and 2020 and applies a PSM-DID approach to estimate changes in entrepreneurial activity associated with marital dissolution. Study 2, based on a three-wave survey, shows that marital dissolution is associated with lower entrepreneurial activity through reduced family motivation and that this indirect relationship is stronger among individuals with higher social status.

Our findings reinforce the view that entrepreneurial activity is deeply embedded in the family system (Sieger & Minola, 2017). Whereas prior research has often treated marriage as a relatively stable contextual condition (Stamm et al., 2024; Mathias & Wang, 2023), our study highlights the dynamic characteristic of family embeddedness by showing how marital dissolution reconfigures entrepreneurial motivation and trajectories. In doing so, we respond to calls to examine family transitions, rather than family structure alone, as antecedents of entrepreneurship (Tran, 2026; Turnalar-Çetinkaya & İslamoğlu, 2024).

Our study also extends COR theory in entrepreneurship by showing that family-related resource loss can undermine entrepreneurial persistence, particularly among individuals already engaged in entrepreneurship. The moderating role of social status further suggests that resource advantages may heighten vulnerability when marital dissolution threatens valued identities and relational capital (Hobfoll, 1989; Wanberg et al., 2023). Thus, these findings clarify why family transitions produce heterogeneous entrepreneurial outcomes.

7.1 Theoretical contributions

First, our study advances the family embeddedness perspective by conceptualizing the family–entrepreneurship relationship as dynamic rather than static. Although prior research has recognized that changes in family structure can shape entrepreneurial activity (Ahlstrom et al., 2025; Turnalar-Çetinkaya & İslamoğlu, 2024), less attention has been paid to how marital dissolution reconfigures the resources and motivations that support entrepreneurship. In Chinese family systems, where collectivism and relational embeddedness are especially salient (Su et al., 2023), marriage provides economic and emotional support as well as social identity and relational capital. Our findings suggest that marital dissolution disrupts this coordinated resource system and that its negative indirect effect through reduced family motivation is stronger among higher-status individuals. It extends the family embeddedness perspective by showing that family resources can generate both support and dependence.

Second, our findings refine the application of COR theory in entrepreneurship by clarifying how family-related resource loss shapes entrepreneurial activity through changes in family motivation. Existing studies have primarily applied COR theory to explain entrepreneurial burnout and exit under stressful conditions (Su & Li, 2025; Shahid & Kundi, 2022), while paying less attention to resource loss in the family domain. We find that individuals experiencing marital dissolution engage in less entrepreneurial activity than those who remain married. In addition, this effect is concentrated among baseline entrepreneurs. Marital dissolution appears to undermine entrepreneurial persistence more than entrepreneurial entry. Moreover, the greater reputational and relational stakes associated with higher status may intensify resource-protective responses following marital dissolution (Hobfoll, 2000; Wanberg et al., 2023). In China, where marital harmony carries substantial normative and reputational significance, higher-status individuals may face stronger expectations of family stability. Marital dissolution may impose greater losses of face and relational capital, weaken family motivation, and further constrain entrepreneurial activity.

Finally, our study contributes to the family motivation literature by identifying family motivation as a key mechanism through which changes in family embeddedness shape entrepreneurial activity. Prior research has mainly examined family motivation as an antecedent of work performance and proactive behavior (Cui & Zhang, 2025; Gao et al., 2025), with limited attention to how major life-course events reshape it. Our findings

show that marital dissolution is associated with lower family motivation and that this decline helps explain reduced entrepreneurial activity. Family motivation thus functions as a resource-to-action mechanism: family resources influence entrepreneurial behavior, in part, through individuals' willingness to invest effort and tolerate uncertainty for the benefit of their families. By extending family motivation research from organizational settings to entrepreneurship, our study also highlights the cultural embeddedness of family-oriented entrepreneurial motivation in China.

7.2 Implications for practice

First, our findings have implications for entrepreneurs and their families. Individuals who are experiencing or have recently experienced marital dissolution should recognize that such transitions may affect not only their financial resources but also the family motivation that supports entrepreneurial effort. Greater awareness of these effects may help them make more informed decisions about the timing and continuation of entrepreneurial activity. Support from extended family members and other close relationships may also help compensate for the loss of spousal support and facilitate the rebuilding of motivation.

Second, entrepreneurship education and support programs should pay greater attention to major life-course transitions. Incubators, accelerators, and mentoring programs could incorporate guidance on how family disruption influences entrepreneurial motivation, resource allocation, and decision-making. Rather than treating family motivation as fixed, these programs could provide tailored psychological, relational, and practical support to help entrepreneurs rebuild supportive networks and sustain engagement during periods of personal disruption.

Finally, policymakers could develop more differentiated support mechanisms for entrepreneurs facing significant changes in family circumstances. Such support may include flexible training, financial counseling, mentoring, and access to emotional or family-related services. In relationally oriented contexts such as China, entrepreneurship policies that acknowledge the interdependence between family well-being and entrepreneurial activity may be particularly effective in supporting individuals through periods of family transition.

7.3 Limitations

Our study has several limitations, which provide directions for future research. First, although the PSM-DID design reduces observable selection and controls for time-invariant individual heterogeneity, the two-wave structure does not allow a direct assessment of parallel pre-treatment trends. In addition, the exact timing of marital dissolution between survey waves is not observed, limiting the precision of treatment exposure identification. Future research could use additional pre-treatment waves or event-study designs based on more precisely dated marital transitions. Secondly, our paper focuses on marital dissolution and has not fully examined the differential effects of other family life-course events, such as childbirth and widowhood, on entrepreneurial activity. Future research could conduct a systematic comparison of various types of family transitions to test the boundary conditions and generalizability of the theoretical framework employed in this study. Finally, our study focuses on whether individuals engage in entrepreneurship. It does not address subsequent outcomes such as venture quality, entrepreneurial performance, or exit strategies. Future research could examine the dynamic impact of marital dissolution across the entire entrepreneurial life cycle,

thereby more comprehensively revealing the complex relationships between family life course events and entrepreneurial activity.

Ethics declaration

Study 1. This study used secondary data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). The CFPS complies with applicable ethical requirements and regularly submits ethical review or continuing review applications to the Peking University Biomedical Institutional Review Board (PU IRB). The CFPS project was approved under IRB No. IRB00001052-14010, which remains unchanged across survey waves. Further information is available at: https://www.isss.pku.edu.cn/cfps/en/faq/PublishwithCFPSData/index.htm

Study 2. In accordance with Article 32(2) of China's *Measures for Ethical Review of Life Sciences and Medical Research Involving Human Beings* (Guo Wei Ke Jiao Fa [2023] No. 4), research using anonymized information or data may be exempt from ethical review when it causes no harm to participants and does not involve sensitive personal information or commercial interests (https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2023-02/28/content_5743658.htm). Study 2 collected only fully anonymized questionnaire data, involved no experimental intervention, and posed no more than minimal risk to participants. Accordingly, the study met the conditions for exemption from ethical review under Article 32(2).

Declarations

Author Contribution

Author contributions: Conceptualization: Qian Zhang and Xiaoyun Ren; Methodology: Qian Zhang and Xin Tong; Formal analysis and investigation: Qian Zhang and Sirui Chen; Writing - original draft preparation: Qian Zhang and Xin Tong; Writing - review and editing: Xiaoyun Ren, Qian Zhang and Sirui Chen; Funding acquisition: Qian Zhang and Xiaoyun Ren.

Data Availability

The data used in Study 1 are derived from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). Peking University owns the copyrights of CFPS data. Users are not permitted to publicly share CFPS data on journal websites or unauthorized third-party platforms, either in its original or modified form. Researchers can obtain access to the CFPS data by applying directly through the official CFPS website. Details can be found on the website: https://www.isss.pku.edu.cn/cfps/en/index.htmFor Study 2, we have provided the de-identified analytical dataset, Stata analysis code, SPSS/PROCESS Model 7 syntax, and supporting documentation as supplementary files for editorial and peer-review purposes.

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55. Appendix—Table A1 Definitions of key variables

Figures

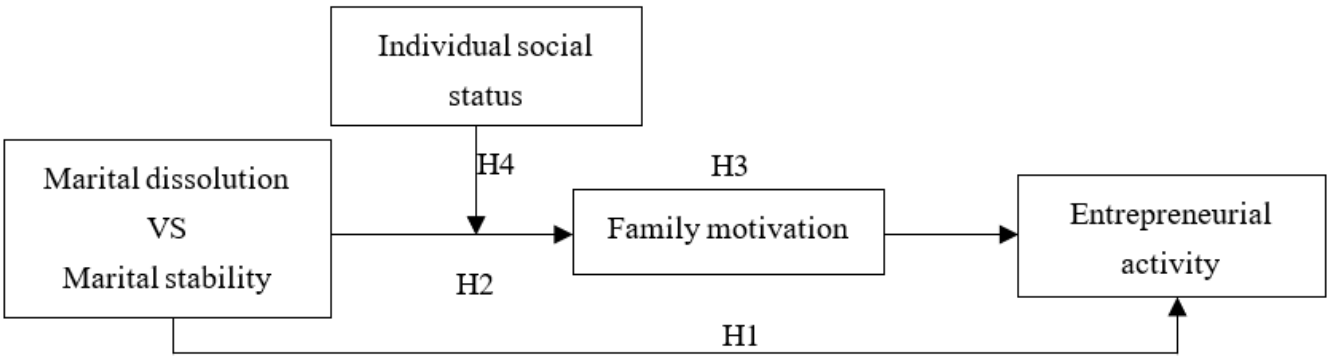


Figure 1

Research model

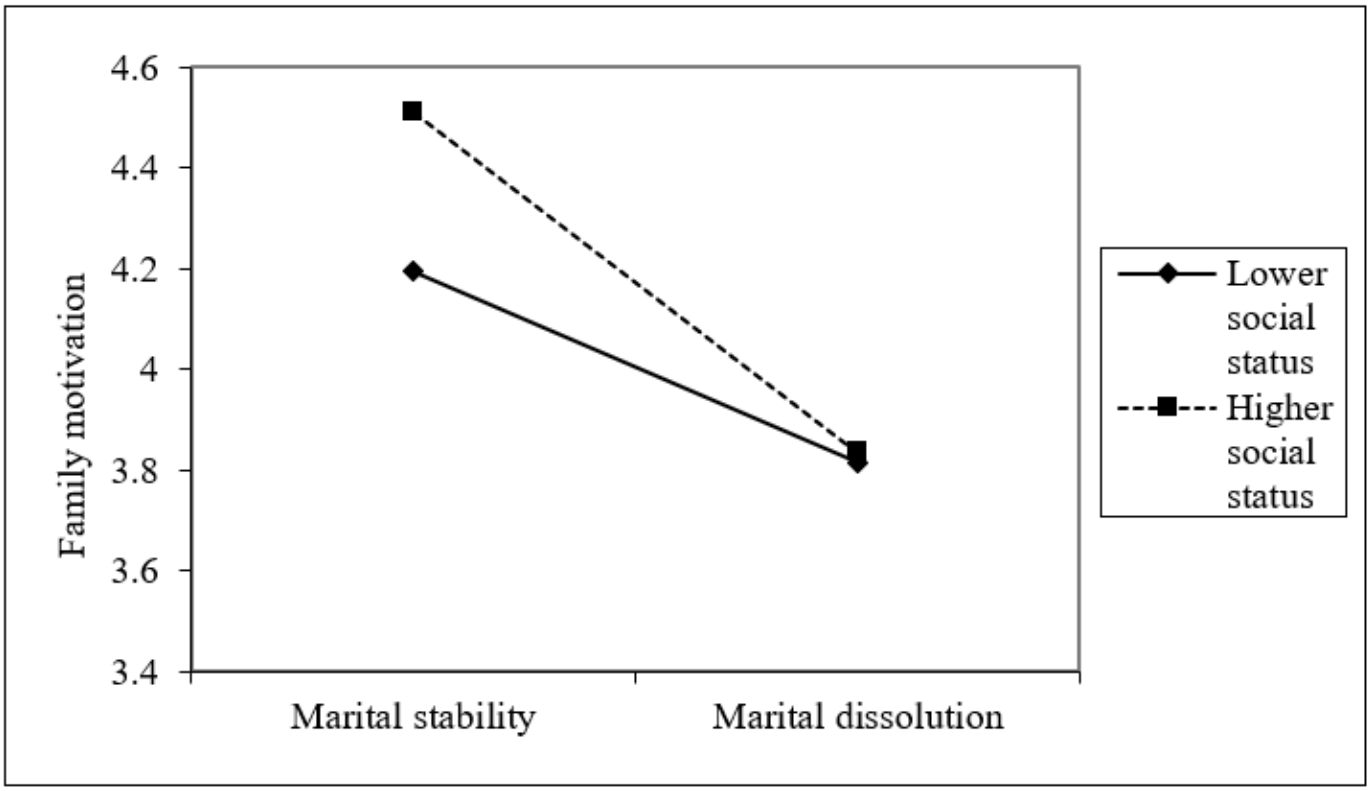


Figure 2

Moderating effect of social status on the relationship between marital dissolution and family motivation