Fathers' housework and childcare as protection against union dissolution in disadvantaged families

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Background

Couples with children: probability of separation in first five years

- Overall - US: 24% UK: 14% Sweden: 7%
- Married - US: 19% UK: 9% Sweden: 5%
- Cohabiting - US: 35% UK: 23% Sweden: 9% (Musick, 2018)

Low-income families face a variety of risk factors for separation or divorce

- Higher rates of cohabitation (CAP, 2016)
- Lower levels of employment and income (Sayer et al, 2011)

Prevalence of the male breadwinner norm is problematic

- Deepening wealth and income inequality
- Decreasing demand and wages for low-skilled workers
- Mass incarceration

Theoretical Framework

Competing models of union stability and dissolution

1. **Gendered institution:** instability increases as gender norms are violated (e.g. mother earns the living, father cares for home) (Killewald, 2016)
2. **Mutual Dependence:** stability increases when mothers and fathers are economically dependent on each other (Schwarz, Gonalons-Pons, 2016)

Model validity for the general population vs disadvantaged families

- Educational and economic homogamy reduces specialization
- Low- and working-class couples rely on two incomes (Sweeney, 2002)
- Traditional gender norms are higher among lower levels of education
- Sensitivity to masculinity threats

Research Question

- Does father's instrumental support protect against failure in the breadwinner role? Mutual dependence or adherence to gender norms?
- Does the relationship between instrumental support and union dissolution differ by adherence to gender norms or union type?

Bringing the gender revolution home: extending the mutual dependence model

- First wave: women's increased participation in the labor force has a stabilizing effect on unions
- Second wave: does men's instrumental support (involvement in unpaid housework and childcare) also have a stabilizing effect? (Goldscheider et al, 2015)

Data and Method

Data

Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Survey (n = 2366)

Waves: First five waves (Baseline – 9 years after focal child birth)

Analytic sample: married and cohabiting couples

Method

Event history analysis (Cox proportional hazard models using Stata)

- Event: union dissolution
- Hazard: time (in months) in marriage or cohabitation

Data and Method

Independent variable: Instrumental support (four items)

1. How often does he look after child when you need to do things?
2. How often does he run errands for you like picking things up from the store?
3. How often does he fix things around your home, paint, or help make it look nicer in other ways?
4. How often does he take child places he/she needs to go, such as to daycare or the doctor?

Controls

household income
employment hours
race
multi-partner fertility
importance of steady job
employment hours
age
child sex
alcohol/drug abuse
father's relative income
education
number of other kids
traditional gender roles

Results

Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean/%	SD	Range
Union duration (months)	44.7	27.5	1 – 119
Instrumental support	2.34	.62	0 – 3
Income[3]			
Household income	61,960	53,156	0 – 772,430
Father income	39,953	31,624	0 – 308,972
Mother income	24,991	24,229	0 – 617,944
Ever-married couples (%)	41		
Father's relative income (%)	.76	.26	0 – 1
Fathers full-time (%)	89		
Mothers full-time (%)	63		
Father race			
Non-Hispanic White	.24		
Non-Hispanic Black	.41		
Hispanic	.30		
Mother race			
Non-Hispanic White	.26		
Non-Hispanic Black	.39		
Hispanic	.30		
Traditional gender attitudes	2.1 (Disagree)	.38	1 – 4

Results

Association between instrumental support and union dissolution (n=2410)

Lower risk for union dissolution:

1. Higher levels of father income
2. Higher instrumental support

Greater risk for union dissolution:

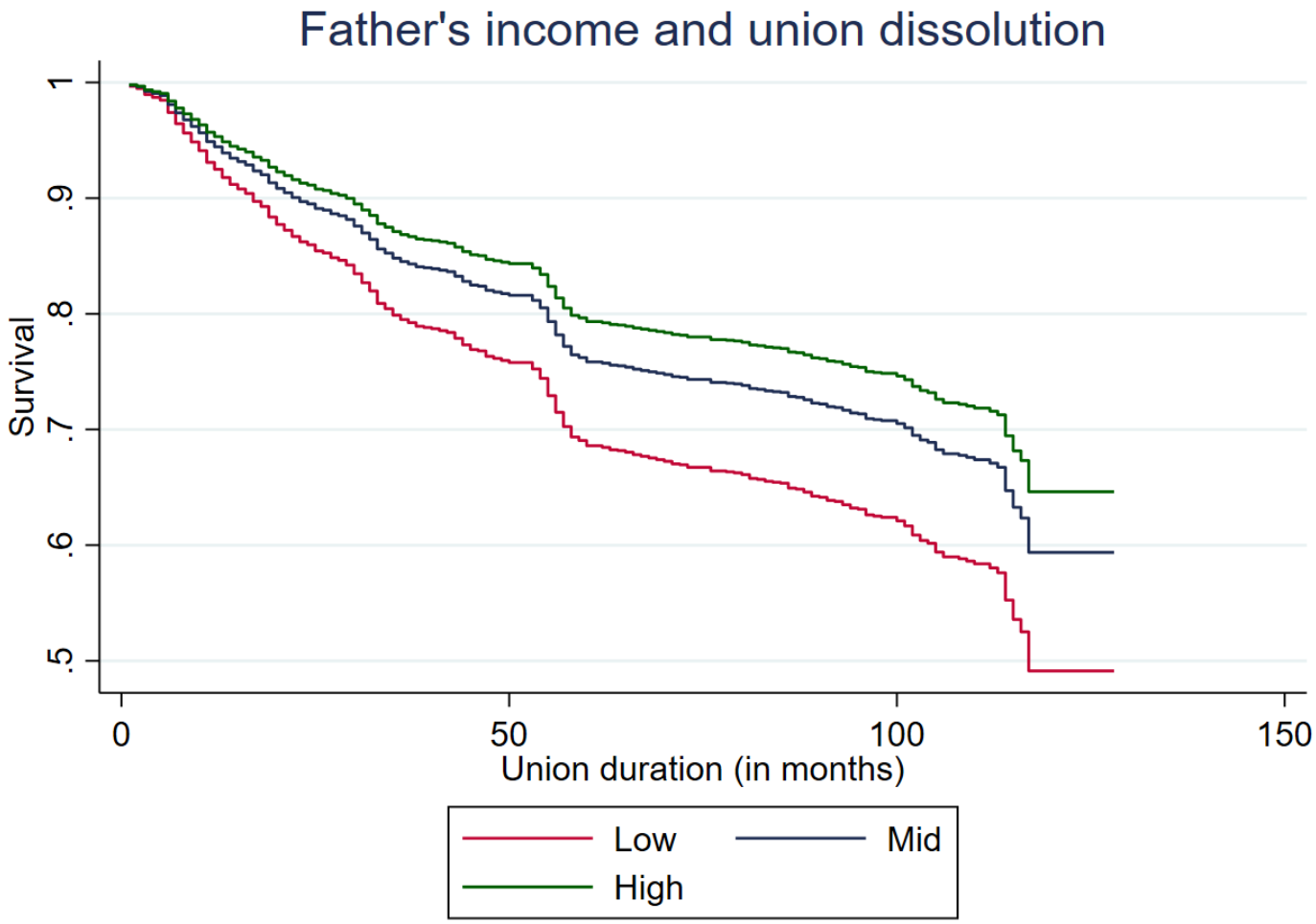
1. Mothers who work more than the father
2. Non-Hispanic Black fathers

No association:

1. Mother's income
2. Working the same amount of hours
3. Hispanic fathers
4. Gender attitudes

Variable	Hazard	z	p
Father's income	0.96	-2.73	0.000
Mother's income	1.01	0.07	0.944
Instrumental supp	0.32	-30.13	0.000
Employment hours			
Mother works more	1.26	2.60	0.009
Both work the same	1.13	1.43	0.152
Father's race			
Black	1.50	4.18	0.000
Hispanic	0.92	-0.83	0.409
Gender attitudes	1.03	0.26	0.795

Results



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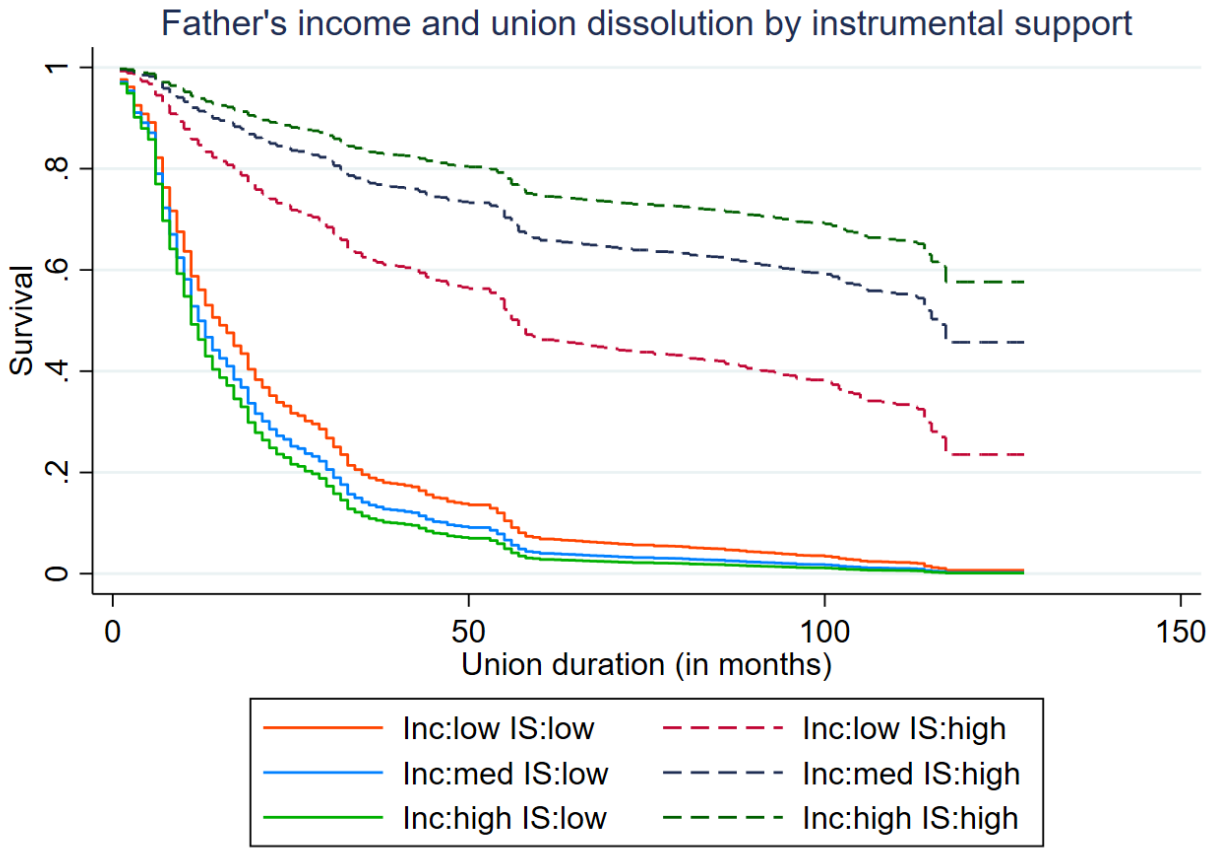
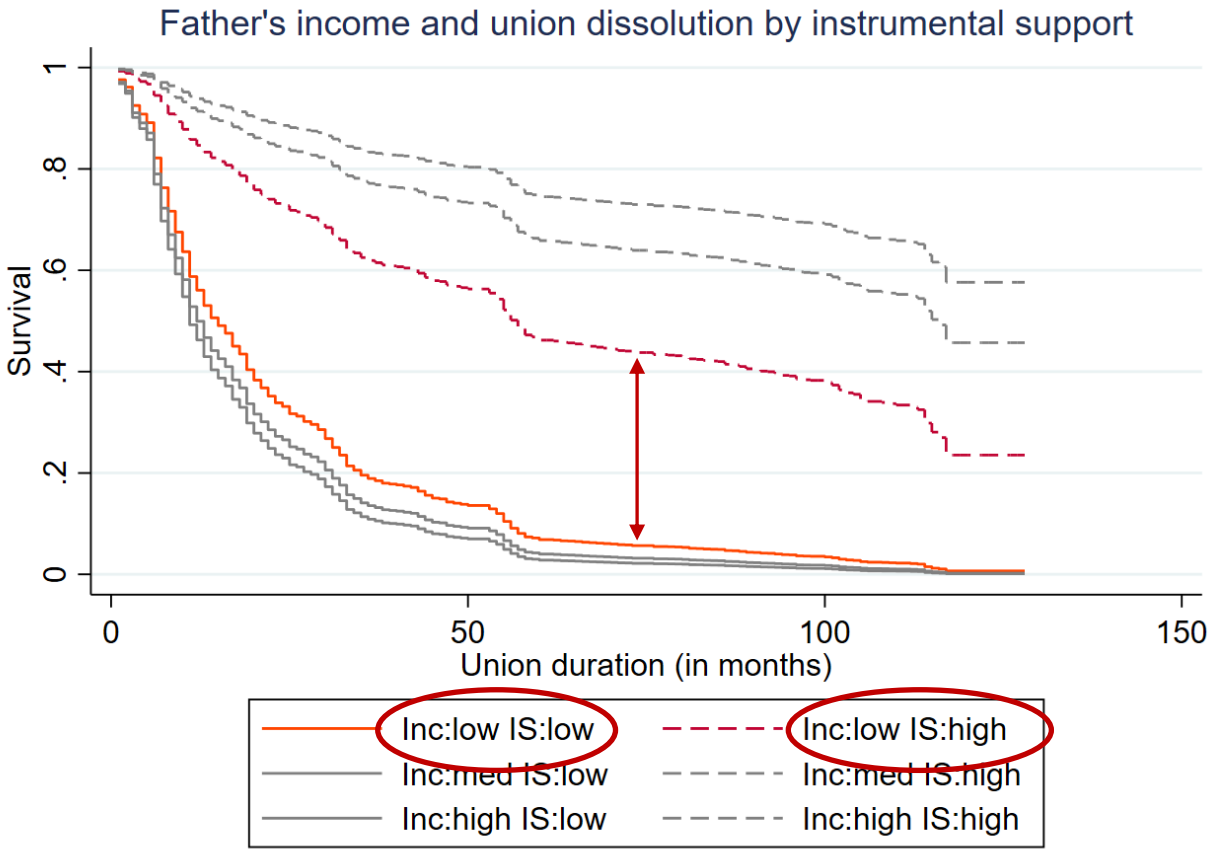
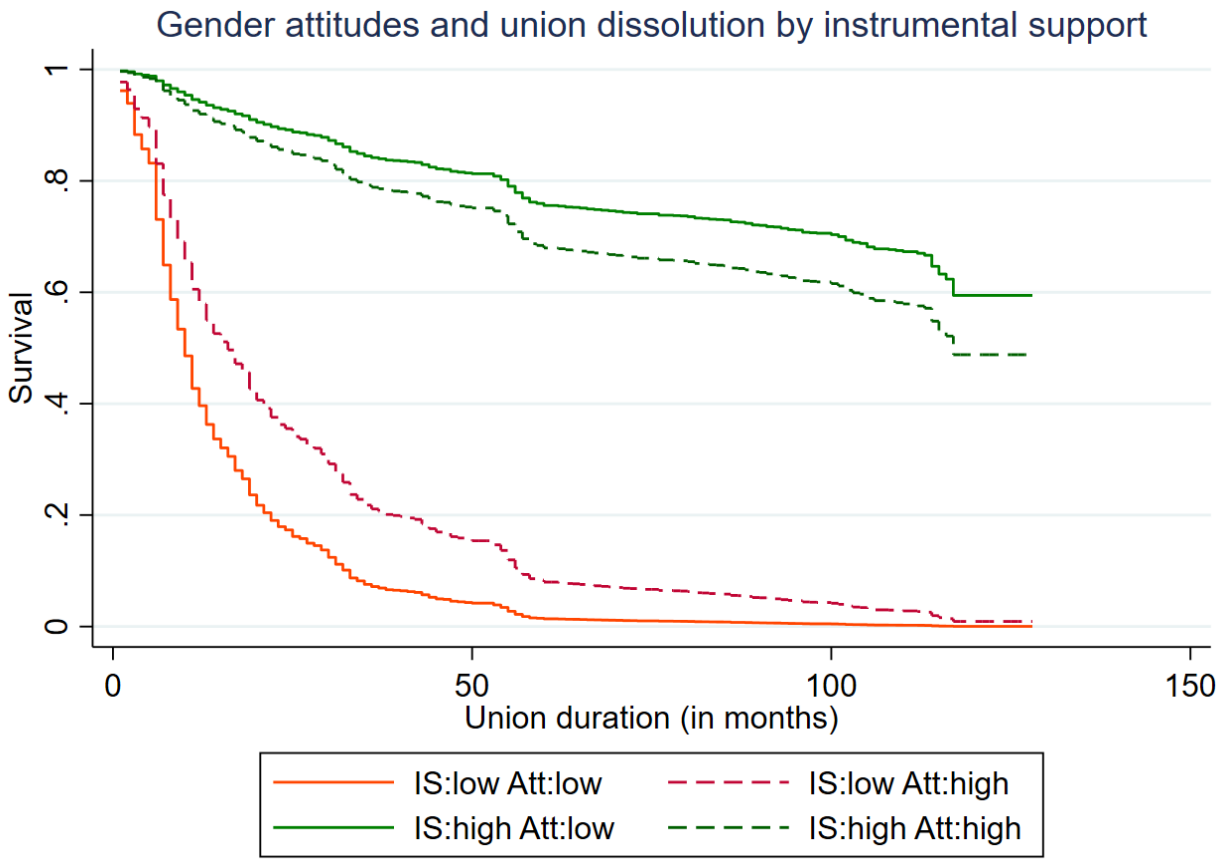
Results


Father's income and union dissolution by instrumental support
Survival
0
.2
.4
.6
.8
1
0
50
100
150
Union duration (in months)
Inc:low IS:low
Inc:med IS:low
Inc:high IS:low
Inc:low IS:high
Inc:med IS:high
Inc:high IS:high

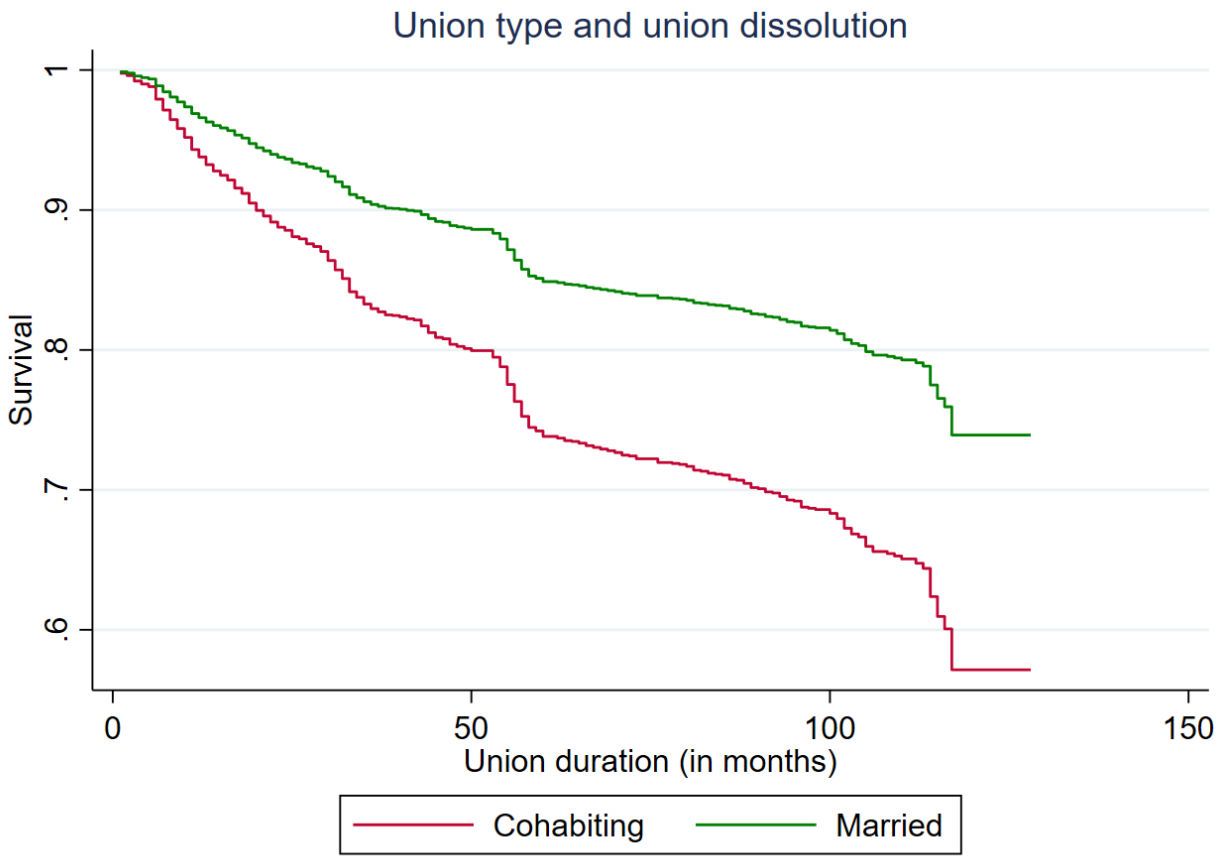
Results


Father's income and union dissolution by instrumental support
Survival
0
.2
.4
.6
.8
1
0
50
100
150
Union duration (in months)
Inc:low IS:low
Inc:low IS:high
Inc:med IS:low
Inc:med IS:high
Inc:high IS:low
Inc:high IS:high

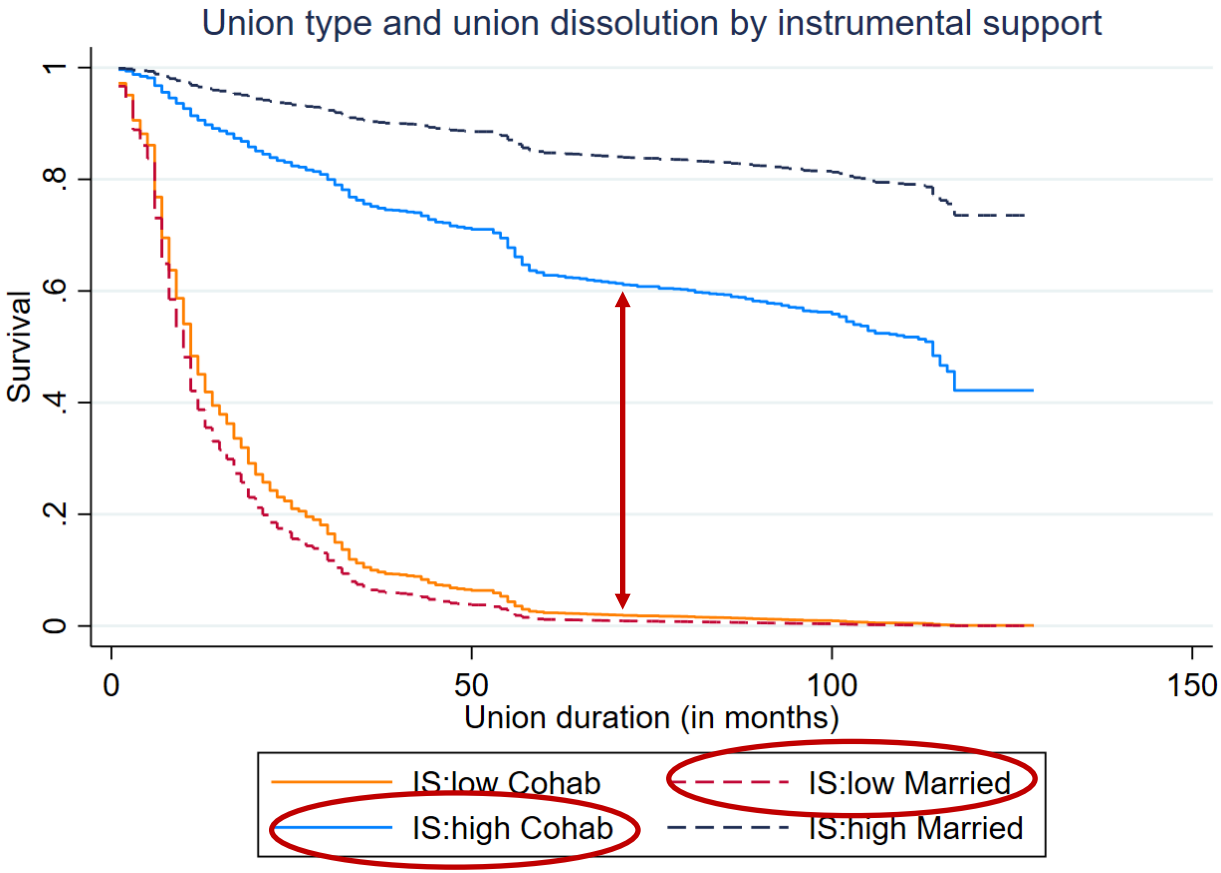
Results


Gender attitudes and union dissolution by instrumental support
Survival
0
.2
.4
.6
.8
1
0
50
100
150
Union duration (in months)
IS:low Att:low
IS:low Att:high
IS:high Att:low
IS:high Att:high

Results


Union type and union dissolution
Survival
1
.9
.8
.7
.6
0
50
100
150
Union duration (in months)
Cohabiting
Married

Results


Union type and union dissolution by instrumental support
Survival
0
.2
.4
.6
.8
1
0
50
100
150
Union duration (in months)
IS:low Cohab
IS:high Cohab
IS:low Married
IS:high Married

Discussion

Mutual dependence model of economic and instrumental support

- Results support the hypothesis that fathers' increased activity in unpaid work and childcare are highly stabilizing to unions
- Adds support to the idea that the second wave of the gender revolution will strengthen families

Gendered institution model

- Little evidence that violation of gender norms was destabilizing to unions

Potential mechanisms

1. Support for mothers → higher income and relationship satisfaction
2. Signals commitment to mother and child, regardless of economic provision
3. The father's experience