

Ambiguous Financial Responsibilities: Second Wives and Alimony Reform Activism in the United States

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“Ambiguous Financial Responsibilities: Second Wives and Alimony Reform Activism in the United States”

Jocelyn Elise Crowley, Ph.D.

Professor, The Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy

Affiliated Faculty, Department of Women’s and Gender Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

33 Livingston Avenue

New Brunswick, New Jersey 08901

jocelync@rutgers.edu

(848) 932-2971

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Abstract

Alimony, which involves financial transfers from mostly men to women after a divorce, has recently received more scrutiny in the United States by members of an emerging social movement. These activists are attempting to change alimony policy in ways that economically benefit them. One important part of this movement are second wives, who ally themselves with their new husbands and against first wives in the pursuit of alimony reform. This analysis examines how these second wives articulate their objections to alimony by introducing the concept of economic boundary ambiguity, meaning in this case a state of human relationships where financial obligations between first and second wives are contested. In addition to creating several tangible stressors, economic boundary ambiguity can also have important consequences for women's own social identities as well as the collective identity and the success of the social movement overall.

I am paying alimony to my husband's ex-wife because she made a choice that allowed her to be a burden to me. I would like to speak about choices. We all make choices in our life, some are good and some, well, if we had it to do over, we would have made a different choice. Marriage is a choice we make and sometimes, for whatever reason, it just doesn't work out. When we make the choice to end a marriage, we do so with the intention of going forward with our lives in a more positive way. Unfortunately, most of the time the decision to dissolve the marriage and the ensuing discussion of the division of assets and children are typically acrimonious in nature. To add to the mix is the provision for alimony (that) is usually requested by the former wife, who is advised by her attorney that it is her "right" to receive alimony. (This is a) "right" that if she so chooses, keeps her former husband firmly in her grasp for her financial security for the rest of his life.—Massachusetts Alimony Activist #7

Introduction

Divorce remains one of the most defining characteristics of modern American families.

Although there has been a decline among younger couples, divorce among individuals older than 50 has risen. This trend translates into approximately one-half of ever-married persons experiencing a separation or divorce by their late 50s (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). In many cases, undergoing a divorce is not an easy nor a necessarily sequential process of gradual separation. In fact, Bohannan (1971) has suggested that couples move through six different stations of decoupling, some of which may overlap with the others or remain unfinished for many years.

More specifically, Bohannan's (1971) emotional station occurs when couples grow increasingly unhappy with their marriages and move towards breaking up, and the legal station emerges when former partners meet each other in court to work out a settlement. The coparental station is played out when parents decide where their children will reside and who will be in charge of decision-making, and the community as well as the psychic stations involve ex-partners developing new friendship networks and accepting autonomous new identities, respectively. Most significant in this analysis is the economic station, where property, assets,

and other types of income streams are divided, typically by judicial action. Notably, research has consistently shown that the financial consequences of divorce are much worse for women than for men (Amato, 2010; Smock, Manning, & Gupta, 1999). These disparate outcomes in the economic arena have consequently prompted governmental efforts to help level the playing field between the sexes after a marital breakdown.

One of the most significant ways policymakers have intervened on behalf of women's financial interests is through alimony awards. Alimony payments are typically made from men, who tend to be higher earners in their families, to women, who tend to be the lower earners over the course of their marriages (Ellman, 1989). Historically, alimony began as a continuation of a husband's responsibility to support his wife, even in the case of divorce (Espenshade, 1979; Hoffman, 1977). However, throughout most of the twentieth century, alimony determinations were in no way uniform. Across the states and even within states, judges had tremendous autonomy in deciding how much alimony, if any, should be awarded (Katz, 1994; Oster, 1987). According to Shehan et al. (2002), judges could consider the following factors in ordering that alimony of any amount be paid: the length of the marriage; ages of both parties; employment histories; earning capacities; emotional/mental health of both partners; property bought during the marriage; homemaker status during the marriage; potential for further training and employment for each party; and the presence of adultery, cruelty, or family violence.

In the contemporary United States, alimony awards persist in going predominantly to women; in fact, in 2013, approximately 22,000 men and 344,000 women were receiving alimony across the country (Proquest, 2015). These awards also continue to be unevenly distributed based on a variety of circumstances, including the nature of the couples' marital histories and judicial discretion. For example, pendent lite alimony, or temporary transfer payments, can be

ordered while a divorce settlement is being reached. Rehabilitative alimony is a short-term income transfer between former partners that funds education and training, typically for the wife, who may have taken a brief amount of time out of the paid labor market to raise children. Related to this is reimbursement alimony, which involves compensation to most often the former wife who helped further her husband's occupational advancement through her financial sacrifices. There is also lump sum alimony, which pays the lower earning spouse, typically the wife, in bulk at the time of the divorce as a way to promote resource equality. Finally, judges can order long-term (until a designated future date or the retirement of the payer) or even permanent alimony when a marriage has lasted a significant amount of time or when one partner, most commonly the wife, has sacrificed pursuing a full time career over the long run in order to take care of the family's children.

While women are the ones who overwhelmingly benefit from alimony payments, they do not necessarily support this policy as a cohesive group. Instead, they are frequently divided in their views by spousal order in relation to their current or former husbands. More specifically, many second wives tend to ally themselves with their current husbands rather than the first wives who receive these payments. In fact, these second wives have become key players with their current husbands in an emerging social movement based on promoting alimony reform across the country. How, exactly, do these second wives articulate their demands in the context of this new social movement?

This analysis argues that second wives engage in a specific type of claims-making in establishing their point of view as meritorious. The concept of symbolic interactionism, whereby individuals make sense of, manage, and transform their social world through communications with others, helps illustrate their strategies (Blumer, 1969; Snow, 2001). In this framework,

claims-makers who desire collective change aim to identify particular conditions as social problems, deserving of both attention and action (Best, 2003; Lio, Melzer, & Reese, 2008; Loseke, 2003). One of the most influential ways to mobilize awareness around an issue is to evoke sympathy as a victim of unfair circumstances (Leisenring, 2006). This involves demonstrating that a particular group is blameless in a difficult environment. But sympathy is not limitless. In fact, Clark (2007) has argued that there are specific rules regarding the giving and receiving of sympathy. The givers provide “sympathy margins” or accounts to whom they deem worthy of sympathy. These accounts can run dry if the receivers of sympathy, or sympathy “entrepreneurs,” ask for too much, for too long, or for causes not grounded in commonly held values. With this in mind, Clark (2007) suggests that some types of sympathy requests—such as those to remedy the abridgement of individual rights—are easier to make than others.

In the case of second wives, their particular form of sympathy-based claims-making involves their desired right to have families that are private, sacrosanct, and free from external intrusion. Their arguments thus revolve around what they perceive as the unfair consequences of the monetary blurring of lines between their own current families and those headed by their husbands’ first wives. In other words, second wives claim to object to alimony because of the stressors produced as a result of the *economic boundary ambiguity* it generates between these two families. This is an extension of Boss’ (1977, 1980a, 1980b) work that identified physical and psychological boundary ambiguity as experienced by families as problematic for their overall well-being. That is, Boss noted that debates over specific individuals’ physical and/or psychological presence in families generate a series of negative consequences for the more universally accepted family members. This analysis contributes to this literature by arguing that

economic boundary ambiguity operates in an analogous way, with monetary obligations to marginalized or suspect individuals on the peripheries of families creating a variety of stressors for the core members of those same family units. Only by reforming the alimony system, assert these second wives, will they be able to resolve problems caused by this ambiguity and help their new families thrive.

“Doing” Family

Central to second wives’ as well as broader societal notions of “thriving” modern families are the socially constructed roles each member is expected to play, with gender defining one of the earliest categories of scholarly analysis. Indeed, the concept of “doing” gender in American life is one that is now well-established among sociologists (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In this context, gender is not an innate attribute; instead, it is created and recreated in daily interactions among individuals. Whether individuals are working, are at home, or are engaged in recreational activities, gender is repeatedly performed in all human interactions. In addition, the extent to which an individual “does gender” effectively is highly policed. “Doing gender” properly involves the perpetuation of accountability standards that measure the extent to which women and men are engaged with their assigned roles. These accountability standards reward conforming behaviors related to gender expectations while discouraging non-conforming behaviors.

The concept of “doing” gender has been extended to many other categories of human experiences, including how individuals satisfy specific roles within individual families. Modern families fulfill a variety of functions for their members, including providing emotional assistance and companionship, economic stability, and social and biological reproductive opportunities

(Blackstone, 2014). To “do” family, then, means to engage in socially acceptable ways that conform to expected behaviors related to these functions (Nelson, 2006). Many of these practices are private in that family dynamics play out within the home. For example, parents might “do family” when they teach their children to undertake household chores. On the other hand, some of these practices may be public, as when adult children purchase elderly care services in the health care market to help their aging parents. In either case, however, problems emerge when there is contention over who can rightly claim family member status.

Boundary Ambiguities in the Modern Family

While the process of “doing” family for its core members, such as parents and their children, is relatively straightforward, it is much more complex for those individuals on the margins of family life. Boss (1977, 1980a, 1980b) developed the concept of boundary ambiguity within the context of family systems theory, which systematically seeks to map out exactly who, when, and how individuals participate in family life. According to this framework, perceptions of the key involved actors play a pivotal role in shaping debates about who qualifies as a bona fide family member (Jenkins, 2013; Sarkisian, 2006). Boss and Greenberg (1984) originally focused on physical and psychological boundary ambiguities that can emerge from within distinct family units.

First, boundary ambiguity can involve an unclear *addition* of individuals to families in the physical and psychological areas. With respect to physical additions or gains, the creation of step-families can create boundary ambiguity for previously defined core family units (Stewart, 2005). The recombined family members in these cases each need to define their roles with respect to every other new core family member as well as with certain original family members

(Pasley, 1987). Boundary ambiguity created from the addition of new individuals can also occur when previously conceived outsiders make new demands on a formerly insulated family unit. This type of process, for example, can take place with respect to clergy families, whose members frequently have to respond to the ever-changing and unpredictable requests of parishioners (Lee, 1995, 1999). These demands can include church members' requests for time and/or shelter directly from a pastor's family. Boundary ambiguity with respect to expanding psychological pressures can also occur in families. This might involve, for instance, the incorporation of a godparent or a mentor who is theoretically present to offer certain types of advice to a family member but whose overall continuity and stability in this same person's life can be less than clear.

Second, in terms of losses, boundary ambiguity can pertain to the unclear subtraction of individuals from families' lives. For example, an absence such as a recent death of a family member can create significant physical boundary ambiguity (Brabant, Forsyth, & McFarlain, 1994). In this case, family members might resist going through the deceased individual's personal effects for a period of time as they adapt to the reality of this death. The second type of loss involves individuals' psychological absence. This might emerge when a relative suffers from an illness such as Alzheimer's disease and past forms of communication between him/her and other family members break down (Boss, Caron, Horbal, & Mortimer, 1990). In these situations, individuals within these families have to come to terms with the fact that although the external body of their loved one is still present, the person they once knew has fundamentally been changed by this serious disease.

In all of these cases of ambiguity in the physical as well as the psychological arenas, deciding who is "in" versus who is "out" is a very important task of "doing" family (Collett &

Childs, 2009; Coontz, Parson, & Raley, 2008; Knox & Schacht, 2013). Those with the most authority have the ability to exclude individuals from the benefits of being a family member if he or she is deemed as not qualified as belonging (Naples, 2001). In other words, those with the most power have the ability to assign rights, privileges, and responsibilities for those who are deemed worthy of inclusion and label all others who attempt to gain access as invalid outsiders. This authority and power can emerge internally from within the family unit itself, or externally by the state through public policy that legally determines interpersonal obligations. However, this does not mean that everyone will necessarily agree with these resolutions. In fact, significant research has suggested that elevated levels of persistent boundary ambiguity—where not all affected parties agree with who is in and who is out—can trigger hardships for family members in various forms of disability, emotional distress, and dysfunction (Boss, 1987; Boss & Greenberg, 1984).

More specifically, if a high level of boundary ambiguity persists, certain family members might perform less adequately in managing the tasks of everyday life. For example, research has suggested that parents having a difficult time letting their adolescents move into full independent adulthood, meaning those with higher levels of ambiguity regarding their children's physical autonomy, have reported more somatic symptoms such as depression and irritability than those who have lower levels of boundary ambiguity (Boss, Pearce-McCall, & Greenberg, 1987). In the psychological realm, other research has shown that mothers with elevated, ongoing levels of boundary ambiguity regarding the developmental and mental capacities of their children with epilepsy have suffered from lower levels of self-esteem as well as a diminished ability to cope with these medical challenges than other mothers with lower levels of ambiguity (Mu, Kuo, & Chang, 2005). While this research is not uniform in its results (see Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman,

1989, for example), it is suggestive that families might be healthier along a variety of measures when their members have distinct, defined, and a commonly accepted sense of belonging.

In addition to physical and psychological boundary ambiguity, a third type of boundary ambiguity—as of yet unexplored—might also affect the operation of family systems. This is economic boundary ambiguity and can come in the same forms as either gains or losses. In terms of gains, an individual within a family unit might have a financial benefactor or guardian who provides financial support, but perhaps does not do so consistently. This unpredictability can produce uncertainty for the recipient with respect to such practices as long-term financial planning. More common would be economic boundary ambiguity in the form of a loss. This is most prominently illustrated in the case of divorce. When a family breaks up, it must divide its financial assets. At first, this division is unambiguous as it involves a court order and formal paperwork that outlines the specifics of this separation. However, economic boundary ambiguity can emerge when there is a remarriage involving one of these former partners. Goetting (1982) has argued that each family member experiences a variety of developmental tasks after remarriage, including economic remarriage. Economic remarriage involves incorporating and redefining prior familial financial obligations with respect to the currently married couples' sets of financial expectations (Cole & Cole, 1999).

Alimony is a complicating factor in that it involves a financial obligation to an ex-spouse. Since alimony is typically transferred from a husband to his previous wife, if he remarries with such an award in place, there can be serious repercussions for his second family. This newly constituted family, especially as articulated by the second wife, might experience significant economic boundary ambiguity with respect to the legitimacy of alimony owed to the previous wife (Knox & Zusman, 2001). This is because the existence of alimony sustains a link between

the two families, prompting second wives in particular to worry about their husbands still being “married” in an important way to their first wives (Knox & Zusman, 2001). Although the state has attempted to resolve this ambiguity through continuing to support alimony policy, one of the key affected parties—in this case second wives—might vehemently disagree. This analysis investigates how this unresolved ambiguity manifests itself as a series of stressors for second wives who are vocal members in alimony reform groups.

Methods

In recent years, alimony reform groups at the center of analysis here have emerged as a loosely-linked social movement across numerous states. They are grassroots organizations that argue that overall, alimony laws place too great of a burden on payers. In order to achieve their political goals of reducing these obligations, these groups collect “horror stories” (also called letters or documents here) aimed at state legislative members from payers and other affected parties who describe what they view as their unfair economic responsibilities to their previously constituted family units. Eight state reform groups have collected such statements and posted them on their informational websites, including organizations in Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon, and South Carolina.

The time frame for this analysis began in 2011, when reformers in the first state, Massachusetts, were successful in passing a new law to limit long-term alimony settlements. This analysis ended in 2014, with the passage of the New Jersey Alimony Reform Act of 2014. This law instructed judges to use formulas and other guidelines that are dependent on the length of the marriage in awarding support. Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, and Maryland had ongoing reform campaigns during this time period. Oregon and South Carolina conducted reform

campaigns in 2012-2013, but their websites remained active during the study period. I collected all of these horror stories from these websites in June 2014. I excluded from my analysis all state efforts that appeared to be driven by sole activists rather than broader-based, grassroots organizations of more than one individual.¹

Across these eight states, I defined a horror story as an account posted to an alimony reform group's website concerning a specific case of an obligated payment. This could be a blog entry or a letter; they could also be case summaries written by the groups' leadership.

Originally, there were 182 letters, with all states described above represented. I then searched these documents to locate those that were written by second wives. There were a total of 25 of these letters. Only Oregon did not have documents submitted by second wives. Table 1 displays the numerical distribution of documents across the seven remaining states.

[Table 1 about here]

To analyze the data, I first read through each horror story several times. I then coded all statements related to the negative consequences of alimony as expressed by second wives. Some of these thematic stressors emerged from anticipated content as suggested by the literature, while others materialized from the data independently on their own. This dual-focused type of modified grounded theory analysis is especially helpful when a particular phenomenon has been relatively understudied (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To group the thematic stressors together, I relied on the qualitative software program Atlas.ti with standard open coding procedures. Here I present actual quotations from second wives as they represent the concept of "thick description." This technique permits second wives' own thoughts and perceptions of alimony obligations to be most accurately represented (Geertz, 1973). In the following results, each document has an identifying number and state attached to it. In addition, all quotations containing personal

information were modified in ways to protect the identity of the writer. Over 50% of the twenty-five second wives described at least one of three types of stressors from the economic boundary ambiguity produced by these financial obligations: the amount of awarded alimony, the duration of alimony payments, and the process of modifying alimony awards.

Results

Amount of Alimony Awarded

Divorce produces significant strains not only on the dissolving couples (Amato, 2010; Walzer, 2008), but also upon new partners involved in remarriage. One of the most pressing concerns generated by the economic boundary ambiguity of alimony and voiced by second wives was the total amount of alimony that their current family had to transfer to their husbands' first wives. These high amounts, in their view, prevented their new, independent families from flourishing by affecting the following: their own ability to make wise employment decisions, their capacity to engage in effective household budgeting, and their power to achieve a desired standard of living.

A central way that the amount of alimony creates economic boundary ambiguity and its corresponding stressors is the claim from second wives that it negatively influences their employment decisions. According to numerous second wives, some first wives keep working for pay and simply reap the rewards of the "free money" dispensed by alimony payments while second wives must work to fund, in their view, these ill-gotten gains. Alternatively, they point to the high level of alimony support as incentivizing first wives to stop working completely or to work much less than they do. A second wife from the state of Florida reported that her husband's first wife had served her husband with divorce papers the day after he received his yearly bonus. Adding to this stress, within weeks, this first wife's new boyfriend moved into the

family home after the husband left. Nevertheless, since they were married for nineteen years, the judge ordered that he pay a significant amount of lifetime alimony to her.

Alimony affects all of us in the family. My husband pays 25 percent of his income in alimony, 25 percent in child support, and 'extra alimony' that comes out of his bonus – 45 percent of his net pay. It doesn't leave much for us. So while he works very long hard hours, and I work full-time to try to make ends meet, the ex-wife works part-time and enjoys a very active social life.—*Florida Alimony Activist #1*

In this case, the first wife did not completely retreat from the labor market. However, she did reduce her hours of employment with assistance of the large alimony award she received. In contrast, the second wife noted that she had to continue working on a full-time basis in order to keep her family financially afloat.

Second wives also reported facing difficulties in creating sustainable household budgets due to the amount of alimony being paid to their husbands' first wives. For many, these obligations kept their families virtually penniless every month. In addition, other second wives complained that the extraordinary alimony amounts that had to be paid to first wives prevented them from engaging in any recreational activities that they believed to be an essential part of any family's budget. One second wife's husband worked as a truck driver. Sometimes he was able to drive many miles and bring home a high level of income, but most months he made just enough to pay the bills. While he had health insurance, he could not add his second wife nor her son from a previous marriage to his policy because it was too expensive. As this second wife claimed to struggle in her job as a substitute teacher with no health benefits, she could only imagine what a life with greater resources would look like.

We do not ever have the "extra money" so that we can do things such as a weekend trip or a little getaway. Family vacations are completely out of the question. We spend all (of) our time at home. We don't go to movies or bowling or even out to eat. We have to budget every penny just to stay above water.—*South Carolina Alimony Activist #3*

In cases such as these, stressors from the economic boundary ambiguity generated by alimony created a situation where the amount of money owed previous wives did not seem to make sense to the second wives as they labored to plan their budgets. Instead, according to these second wives, these large transfers of money sustained their current families' ties to previous spouses in inequitable ways.

Lastly, the amount of alimony paid to first wives created economic boundary ambiguity and thus related problems according to second wives as the financial transfer between the two families often produced two very different standards of living. To them, this outcome raises questions of fairness pertaining to how these two families should be financially positioned to live their lives moving forward. On this point, one second wife from South Carolina outlined why she was enthusiastically joining the fight for alimony reform in her state.

My husband's ex-wife was awarded permanent alimony in 1993. The children were adults; she had a job and retirement (savings). She has bought a house, a new car, dresses well, and appears to live a prosperous life. We have two boys of (whom) one is in college, and the other will be in one year. My husband cannot retire because of the alimony burden on our income. She has been receiving alimony for TWENTY years for a total of \$170k! The ex-wife has already retired and is also drawing on my husband's Social Security AND retirement as well as weekly alimony. Permanent alimony is causing a hardship in our life while she lives like a queen.—*South Carolina Alimony Activist #1 (her capitalization)*

In this second wife's view, the disparities in lifestyles due to the amount of alimony awarded to the first wife were unbearably oppressive. She, like many other second wives in her situation, was frustrated by the payment of significant amounts of money to a woman whom she felt no obligation through familial ties, but nonetheless had to alter her standard of living according to these legal realities of spousal support.

Duration of Alimony Payments

Besides the problems created by the amount of alimony awards, economic boundary ambiguity also produced stressors according to second wives as they related to the duration of alimony ordered by judges. To these second wives, alimony in these circumstances needlessly prolonged the length of time in which families were linked to one another (Cole & Cole, 1999; Hetherington, 2003). In these cases, these women cited how their new families experienced harm related to the following: violations of their own human rights, damage to their emotional health, and the unjust, forced subsidization of cohabitation practices.

With the courts frequently specifying that alimony payments extend over long periods of time or even permanently, many of these second wife activists maintained that as a result of this economic boundary ambiguity, they lost their human rights as independent, self-actualized individuals. One second wife from the state of Maryland described the lifetime burden she had to help carry in what she previously thought was a country of opportunity. Here she condemned the common policy of alimony only ending upon the first wife's remarriage as infringing on her Constitutional rights to freedom.

The family courts treat good people going through a divorce like criminals. How is this possible in the United States of America? I was raised to believe the courts are fair and just, only to experience this atrocity; (it) is truly unbelievable. Marriage is a contract between two people. Divorce ends that contract. No crime was committed but (there is) a sentencing of LIFETIME ALIMONY? (All) ex-spouses will never remarry and lose their entitlements. Paying alimony until death interferes with our (family's) Constitutional Right to LIFE, LIBERTY and the PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS! Not to mention a violation of the 13th Amendment to ABOLISH INVOLUNTARY SERVITUDE!—*Maryland Alimony Activist #1 (her capitalization)*

Another second wife from the state of Massachusetts echoed this theme of being forced into “involuntary servitude” by the alimony her new husband was required to pay his first wife. As a second wife, she complained that her family would never be able to enjoy retirement.

While many of our friends are retiring or looking forward to retirement, we are not. We can't. If the law is not reformed, we will never be able to enjoy the fruits of our labor.

We are forced into this involuntary servitude of paying alimony for life. I find it ironic that in New York, I was not granted alimony (in my previous divorce), but now that I am married, living, and working in Massachusetts, I am forced to help pay alimony to my husband's ex-wife.—*Massachusetts Alimony Activist #5*

The case of this second wife was especially compelling as she reported being married for 23 years and divorced in the state of New York in 1996. She was not awarded alimony in that case, but instead was expected to return to full-time employment after 21 years of cycling between staying at home and working for pay part-time; this was the period in her life when she had concentrated her efforts on raising her two children. Because she quickly became a self-sustaining individual in the wake of her own divorce, she expected all others to follow her lead rather than subject another human being to this form of “involuntary servitude.”

The long-term nature of many alimony awards created another type of economic boundary ambiguity-related stressor according to these second wives: emotional distress from living with a payer who is seized by fear. One Connecticut second wife came to her new marriage with a 16-year-old son from a previous marriage. She was troubled that he had to witness the unhappiness of his mother and stepfather as they struggled to pay alimony to her husband's first wife. Here she argued that both the payer and recipient remained bound by alimony in ways that were psychologically damaging to both parties, but especially to the payers and their new families.

Initially the recipients of alimony feel a sense of victory, (and) that they (have) won. However, this false sense of victory is the very thing that will later keep them trapped. They (the recipients) are unable to emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and financially move forward in their lives. They remain stuck, never to marry or regain control of their own destiny, all because they are in fear of losing their weekly alimony check. On the other hand, the payers accept their financial destruction and emotionally detach from the marriage, something the recipients never do. Eventually, the payers begin to heal from the inside. Sooner (rather) than later they begin picking up the pieces and re-building a life worth living. These individuals go on to re-marry, re-build, and live a productive, meaningful life. Then awareness sets in and due to an archaic system, the (second family starts) living in fear. (This fear comes from) not knowing how they will

ever be able to pay alimony after retirement, loss of a job, or becoming disabled. And if (they are) unable to pay, the (payers) face incarceration. The entire situation is very sad. These laws must change.—*Connecticut Alimony Activist #2*

According to this second wife, the whole judicial system is to blame for promoting long-term alimony awards that almost guarantee future economic friction between prior and current wives. This fighting then spills into the children's lives as they grow up never understanding why financial obligations persist in linking two families that, in their view, should be separate and distinct.

The long duration of alimony awards also creates economic boundary ambiguity-driven stressors according to second wives because it reinforces the practice of cohabitation rather than marriage for the first wife. First wives will not remarry in the view of these second wives—and will prefer to live with their new boyfriends—because as described earlier, alimony often only ends when the payees remarry. But there are some exceptions to this general rule. One second wife from South Carolina made this point by noting that in her state, alimony can stop when there is evidence of the first wife engaging in a long period of cohabitation. However, gathering this proof is often difficult for cash-strapped second families.

(The first wife) has had a male companion for the past few years who provides her with financial support, extravagant gifts and trips, and stays at her home, yet they circumvent the courts by not cohabiting for 45 consecutive days (which under the law is the limit under which alimony must continue)... The burden of proof falls to (us and we are) in no position to hire a P.I. because so much of (my husband's) income goes to alimony.—*South Carolina Alimony Activist #2*

This second wife's story was especially notable because her husband was a returning combat veteran from Afghanistan. When he arrived home, his first wife of 26 years filed for divorce. At the time of the divorce proceedings, he was battling undiagnosed Posttraumatic Stress Syndrome and thus did not hire an attorney. No one in the judicial system checked on his competency and the judge awarded permanent alimony to his first wife. Although his mental health improved

over time according to his second wife, he was unable to schedule a new hearing on the alimony issue due to his limited financial circumstances. His second wife reported the couple's desire to seek out a detective to prove the live-in status of his first wife's boyfriend, but could not as of yet save the money required to hire such an expensive professional. According to this second wife, because the alimony order was permanent, his first wife was simply going to live forever with her new boyfriend without any financial worries. In this way, in her view, alimony unjustly binds the second wife to her husband's first wife forever, so that the two families can never move forward and delink.

The Process of Modifying Alimony Awards

Alimony modifications create significant economic boundary ambiguity-related stressors in the view of second wives as they increase feelings of being punished for their own personal financial successes. This can happen through current alimony modification protocols. More specifically, if their circumstances change, men, including those with second families, have a right to go back to court and request modifications related to their previous alimony obligations to their first wives. However, if an individual man chooses to do this, he might expose his new wife to further financial obligations. This is true because often judges will look to the income of the second wife in order to determine whether modifications are appropriate. In these cases, second wives might feel the greatest amount of angst as they are assigned new roles they do not necessarily want, as frequently happens in divorce and remarriage (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009).

In one New Jersey case, three months after they got married in 2005, a man and his second wife discovered that his first wife had filed a Qualified Domestic Relations Order, or QDRO against him. A QDRO is a legal vehicle that gives a divorced partner part of his/her former spouse's pension plan. According to this New Jersey alimony activist, when they as a

newly married couple began fighting the QDRO, they also unsuccessfully attempted to change the alimony obligation.

We have been fighting this QDRO ever since (we found out about it). This QDRO would allow her to get half of his pension up to now and eliminate me, his current wife, as beneficiary (to receive) spousal benefits. My husband also filed a motion to eliminate or reduce his alimony, but was denied. The judge used my salary and my ability to work to contribute to this alimony. Due to this QDRO (and lack of reduction in alimony), my husband has only received limited funds from his pension, making it very difficult to make ends meet. (This is all) for a woman who decided to stay home and do nothing for herself.—New Jersey Alimony Activist #3

Another second wife in Massachusetts recounted an example of financial distress whereby a request for a downward modification in alimony was denied due to the judge's inclusion of her income in this decision. In her case, her new husband was laid off from one job and ended up taking a job that reduced his income by 75%. He returned to court asking for a reduction in his \$39,000 per year alimony payments to his ex-wife, who made \$32,000 per year as a nurse.

There was a hearing held at the...Family and Probate Court on the modification of alimony (proposal). When we arrived at the court house, my husband's attorney requested my financial information to present to the court. At first I protested, stating we had a pre-nuptial agreement which guaranteed my right to privacy. I was told that I could be held in contempt of court if I did not comply. I was asked for my salary, the value of my home, equity in my home, 401(k) balance, and whether I collected any child support for my minor child from my first marriage. Both attorneys were called into a closed door meeting with a probation officer (we were not given, nor later able to obtain, the probation officer's name) and we were not allowed to attend this meeting. When the meeting was over, my husband's attorney said the probation officer proposed a new figure of alimony for the ex-wife of \$26,000 per year. We were told that we had 10 minutes to discuss this proposed settlement or go before the judge. The probation officer literally stood about 8 feet away, urging us to hurry because "the judge was not in a good mood." Our attorney advised us that it was possible for the judge to leave the previous order of \$39,000 in place and that the \$26,000 might be a good deal. He clearly stated that "the judge can do what he wants and he is not in a good mood," so my husband signed the agreement.—*Massachusetts Alimony Activist #6*

This second wife was dumbfounded by this decision. Now not only did the first wife earn a salary of \$32,000 per year, but she also benefited from an alimony award of \$26,000 per year.

The probation officer explained that they had to go along with this new arrangement because she

as the second wife brought new income into the marriage and therefore they as a team could still afford to pay a substantial amount in alimony. Moreover, the attempt at a modification cost them \$12,000 in legal fees. If they chose to pursue an appeal, this second wife reported, they would have to pay attorney and court fees of between \$10,000 and \$20,000 at a minimum. At any point in time in their view, because alimony payments could change indiscriminately based on their own earnings, they could never form a distinctive, financially independent new family.

Conclusion

Through their attitudes, actions, behaviors, and other social practices, men and women actively participate in the process of “doing family.” Within this context, family behavior is not arbitrary; in fact, the structure of roles within the confines of the family space encourage certain types of human interactions while discouraging others. In addition, the implementation of accountability standards means that those who “do family” the most effectively will obtain the greatest social rewards. But membership in specific family units can be contested (Boss, 1977; Boss & Greenberg, 1984). In these cases, individuals must be judged as either in or out. This is a critical process in that the rights, responsibilities, and rewards of family membership can be granted or denied internally by the most powerful players involved or externally by public policy. Yet, even after these decisions are made, not everyone will necessarily agree, thus creating multiple types of family-based boundary ambiguities. These boundary ambiguities, in turn, can then produce a series of negative consequences or stressors for particular groups of affected parties.

The analysis presented here makes four important contributions to our understanding of boundaries, social identities, and ultimately, collective identity practices among women. First, it argues that in addition to physical and psychological boundary ambiguities, a third type of

boundary ambiguity is also important to the structure and functioning of families: economic boundary ambiguity. The process of earning, using, and managing money is central in the operation of all family units. However, conflicts can arise when there are unclear responsibilities with respect to financial donors or recipients in a family system. In the case of divorce considered here, alimony, even though it is a state-supported practice, is still a subject of debate, especially in the eyes of second wives. It is therefore not surprising that second wives report a series of negative consequences emanating from the economic boundary ambiguity generated by alimony policy.

Second, this analysis speaks to the importance of mapping out the intersection between economic boundary ambiguity and social identity theory. Social identities are affiliations made by individuals to larger groups with whom they share allegiances and alliances (Klandermans & de Weerd, 2000; Tajfel, 1981). Women as wives, for example, may be said to share an important social identity as female spouses in the context of adult partnerships. However, the process of divorce, and the resulting policy intervention of alimony that is implemented in certain cases, can create economic boundary ambiguity and its related stressors between two wives—one former and one current—if the husband remarries. In particular, the contested nature of financial obligations in the form of alimony can serve to create new social identities among women. In these cases, women are no longer simply wives. Instead, they may draw upon other social identities and affiliate themselves with new groups, such as “first wives” or “second wives.” In this way, economic boundary ambiguity plays an active role in generating and sustaining new social identities within specifically affected populations.

Third, boundary ambiguity issues can serve an important function in defining the collective identity of emerging social movements. Collective identity pertains to a social

movement's base of participation, organizational framework, and set of desired goals (Gamson, 1997; Taylor, 1999). The collective identity of the alimony reform movement has been predicated on mostly male participants who engage in letter-writing campaigns and other types of internet-based activism to modify alimony laws. Yet collective identities in social movements are never static. As economic boundary ambiguity can drive new social identity allegiances, it also can affect collective identity affiliations as well. Once women define themselves as either first or second wives, second wives might seek out partnerships with men with respect to alimony laws to form one, unified and expanding collective identity (Crowley, 2009). They can learn to make sympathy-based claims side-by-side next to their new husbands. And by incorporating these second wives, this male-based social movement can then attempt to appeal to a broader audience of sympathizers and therefore improve its prospects for success as well.

Fourth and lastly, the process of wives dividing themselves to fight for or against a collective, social movement goal such as alimony reform does not have to be a foregone conclusion. Instead, the public policy of alimony that generates such debate is necessarily rooted in much deeper forms of economic inequality faced by American women in the paid labor market. Historically, women in the United States are much more likely to be financially disadvantaged than men over their life course. More specifically, not only do women earn less than men due to patterns of wage inequality and occupational segregation, they face a "motherhood" wage penalty for every child they have, an economic loss that men as fathers do not experience (Budig & Hodges, 2010; Waldfogel, 1998). Alimony exists partly due to these factors, and the remediation of these underlying forces would reduce the need and impact of alimony as a driver of divisions among women seeking to better their financial circumstances.

Table 1. Second Wives' "Horror Stories" by State

STATE	NUMBER OF HORROR STORIES
Arkansas	2
Connecticut	4
Florida	2
Maryland	1
Massachusetts	7
New Jersey	6
South Carolina	3
TOTAL	25

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¹These states included Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee.