Southern Living: Intersectionality of Gender, Education, and Socioeconomic Class

Mandy Langlois

University of North Carolina

at Chapel Hill

Introduction

With the U.S. experiencing the longest and most severe economic downturn ever faced by the industrialized Western world, the era characterized as the Great Depression, which lasted a decade, not only crippled the economy but also had a devastating impact on the social fabric of the United States. During this time, the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), established as part of the Works Progress Administration's New Deal in 1935, aimed to provide work relief, foster a renewed sense of national pride, and promote cultural exploration. Recognizing the diversity within the United States, FWP officials sought to document the experiences of various groups, including southern communities, by creating state books and collecting life histories (Hirsch, 2003).

This study explores gendered patterns at the intersection of socioeconomic status and education within the Southern Life Histories Project (SLHP), focusing on how societal structures shaped access to opportunities and occupational outcomes for men and women. To examine these patterns, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to analyze these archival collections. By examining the frequency of certain words and occupational terms through distant reading, creating visual representations of key trends, collecting metadata from the narratives to create a structured dataset, and obtaining detailed insights into lived experiences and societal expectations reflected in individual stories through close reading, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of how gender intersected with education and socioeconomic status in the lives of southern individuals. The Southern Life Histories Project (SLHP) reveals how societal structures and systemic inequalities created gendered patterns in the relationship between socioeconomic status and education. Women faced distinct barriers to educational and economic opportunities compared to men, reflecting broader systems of gendered inequality in the southern United States.

Background

During the first 100 days of his presidency in his first term, President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched the New Deal to counter the Great Depression. Among these countermeasures was the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), established under the direction of William T. Couch in 1936, through which the Southern Life Histories initiative was launched. Having gained knowledge of

the conditions in the South, Couch sought to address the failures of traditional historians, who often relied heavily on abstraction and generalized narratives that ignored the complexities and individuality of the diverse communities of the region who were plagued by stereotypes of being backward, incapable of advancement, and poorly educated (Fox, 1961).

Through the Southern Life Histories, Couch aimed to create a collection of personal narratives that fostered a more nuanced understanding of Southern culture and history. Narrators frequently described their struggles with accessing educational opportunities, often due to economic pressures and societal norms. These life histories shed light on individual family structures, various occupations, such as the pervasive effects of the sharecropping system that trapped many Southern families in cycles of poverty and dependency, and social inequalities, providing valuable evidence of the social and economic realities of the Great Depression (Report on Economic Conditions of the South, 1938).

Method

This research utilized a mixed approach, integrating computational text analysis, data visualization, and qualitative narrative analysis to examine gendered patterns in the relationship between socioeconomic status and education within the Life Histories. These methods balanced macro-level trends with micro-level insights for a complete analysis. Metadata from the Life Histories was organized into a spreadsheet, extracting details such as gender, education level, socioeconomic status, and occupation for both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Text analysis was conducted in RStudio to identify linguistic patterns and occupational trends. The text was cleaned by removing stop words, punctuation, and numbers, focusing on relevant content. Tokenized into individual words, the text allowed for frequency counts and gendered trend identification. For example, terms like “farmer” and “job” were analyzed to assess their frequency in male versus female narratives and their connection to education and socioeconomic status.

Data visualization in Tableau presented findings through charts comparing occupational roles by gender and education level, distinguishing between those with and without formal education. Additional visualizations explored the connection between gender and socioeconomic status, highlighting disparities in access to education.

The narrative analysis included distant and close readings. Distant reading examined word patterns and frequencies across the collection, offering a broader understanding of how men and women discussed themes like education and work. Close readings focused on individual narratives to explore personal experiences behind these trends. Historical scholarly sources were also used to situate the Life Histories within the broader context of the Great Depression, providing essential background on systemic inequalities, educational barriers, and socioeconomic conditions.

Data & Findings

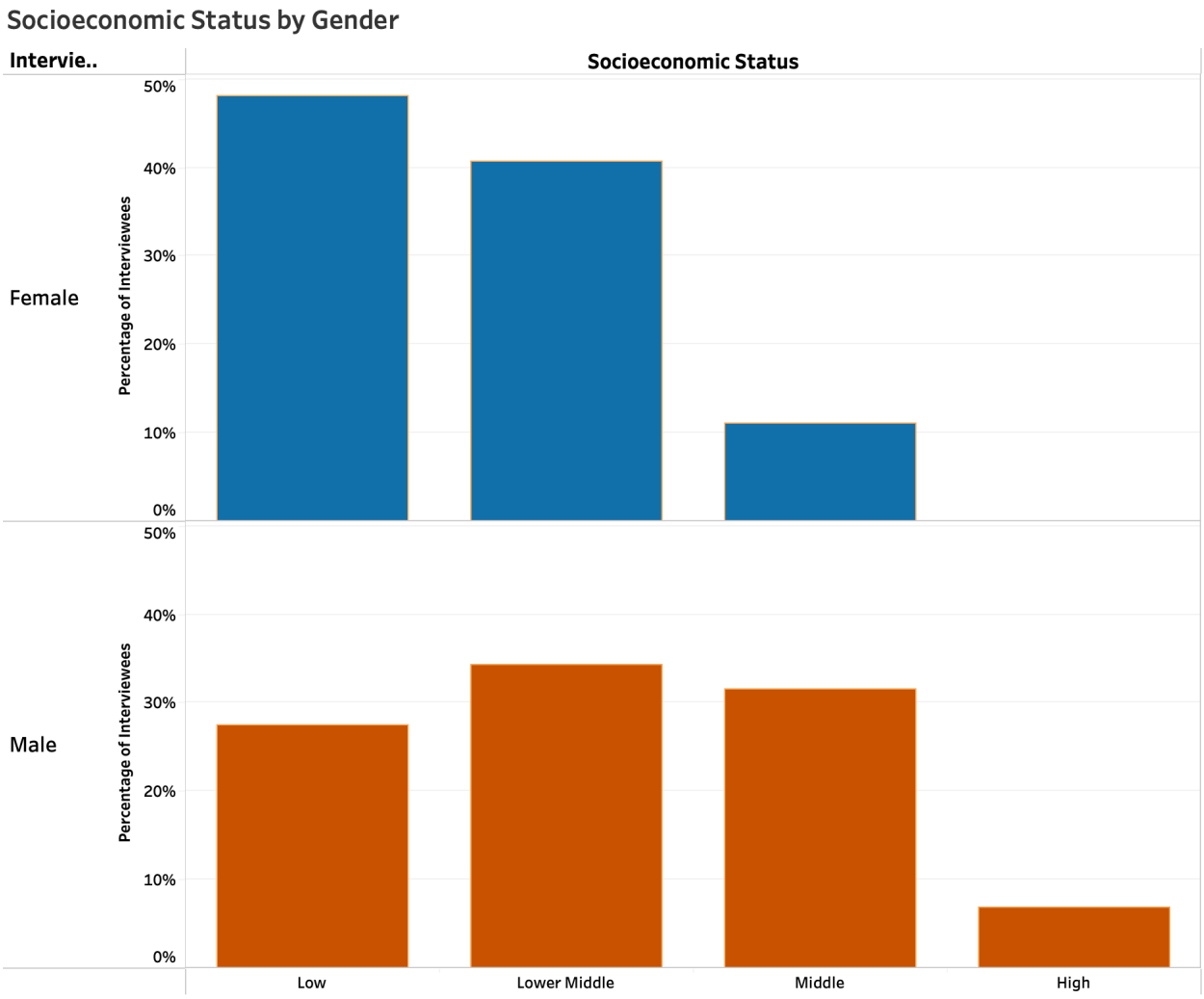

Figure 1. Socioeconomic Status by Gender.

Figure one is a bar graph that shows the socioeconomic status (SES) trends between female and male interviewees. Notably, 48% of the women in our collection of narratives fell into the low socioeconomic class, followed by 40% in the lower middle SES class. 11% of women were categorized under the middle SES, with no representation in the higher SES class. In contrast, male interviewees represent 27% of the low SES, notably lower than the females in this category. Males made up 34% of the lower-middle SES, followed by 31% in the middle SES class and 7% in the high SES. These trends suggest potential gendered economic inequalities, pointing to systemic factors like disparities in access to education, occupational opportunities, and societal barriers that might perpetuate these differences.

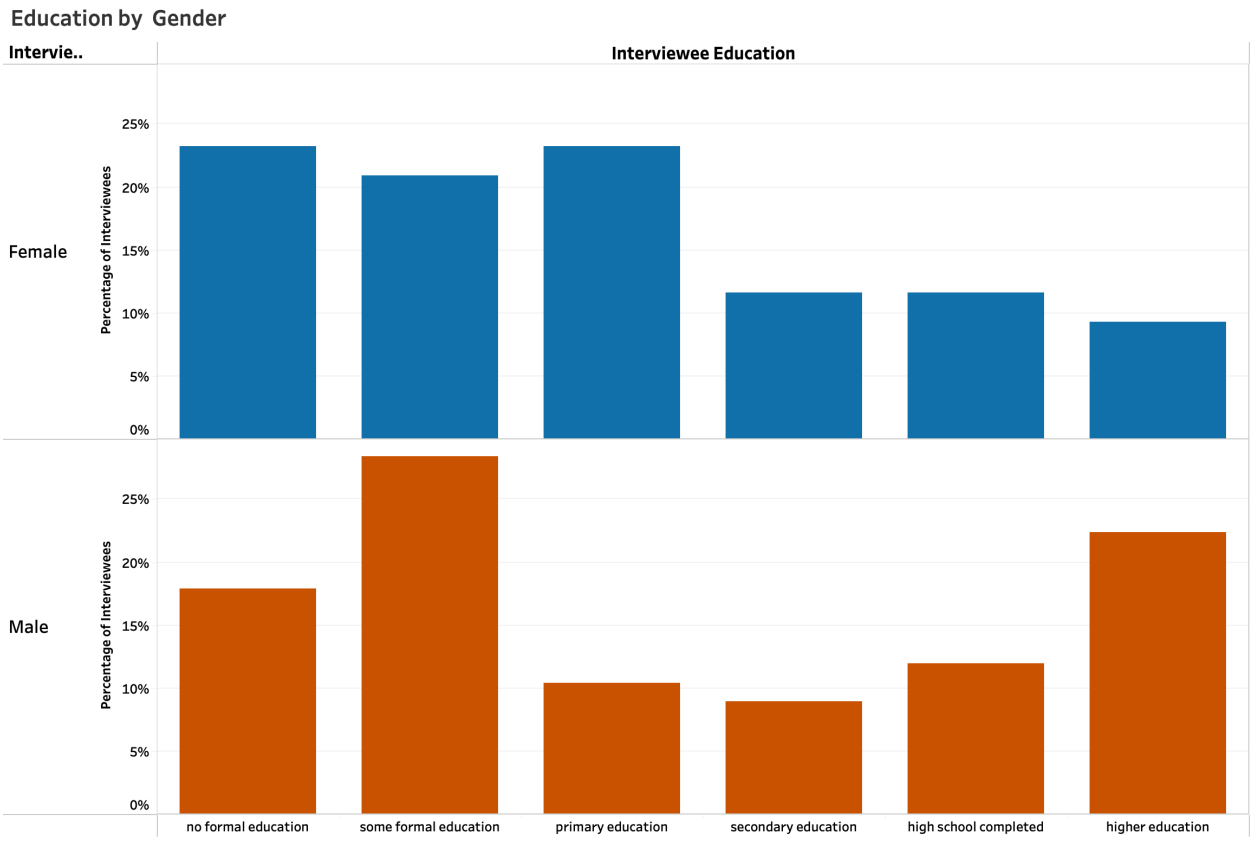

Figure 2. Gender by Education.

Figure 2 is a bar graph that highlights the relationship between education and gender among the interviewees. Among the females, the highest representation is in the “no formal Education” and “primary education” categories, with both at 23%. 21% of females had some formal education, followed by 12% with a secondary education and having completed high school, and 9% representing the higher education category. For males, 18% had no formal education, followed by 28% having some formal education, indicating this is the most common level of education. 10% of males had a primary education, closely followed by 9% with a secondary education. 12% had completed high school and made up 22% of the higher education category. These trends from this graph reflect historical and systemic gender disparities in access to educational opportunities.

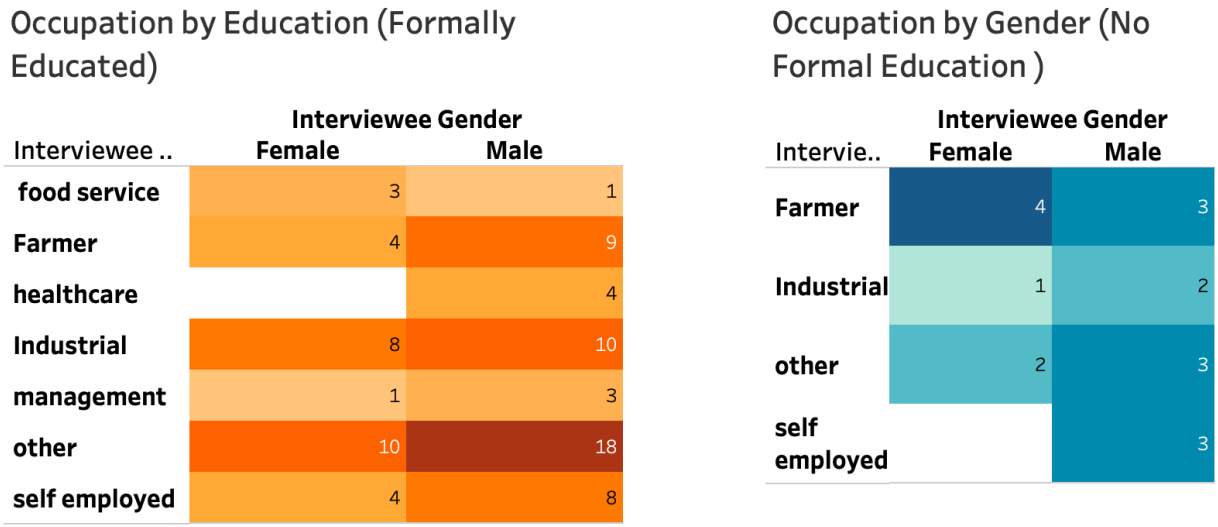

Figure 3. Occupation by Level of Education.

Figure 3 is a table that compares occupations by gender within two educational categories: formally educated individuals and those with no formal education. On the left, for formally educated individuals, men dominate in fields such as industrial work, 10 males to 8 females, and farming, 9 males to 4 females. Females, however, were more present in "other" roles, 10 females to 18 males, and in food service, 3 females to 1 male. On the right, for individuals without formal education, there is a noticeable gender gap in farming, with more females (4) than males (3), while industrial roles remained dominated by males, with 2 males to 1 female. The "other" category also shows a higher representation of males, 3 to 2 females. These trends suggest gendered occupational disparities based on educational status, with certain industries being more male dominated when formal education was attained.

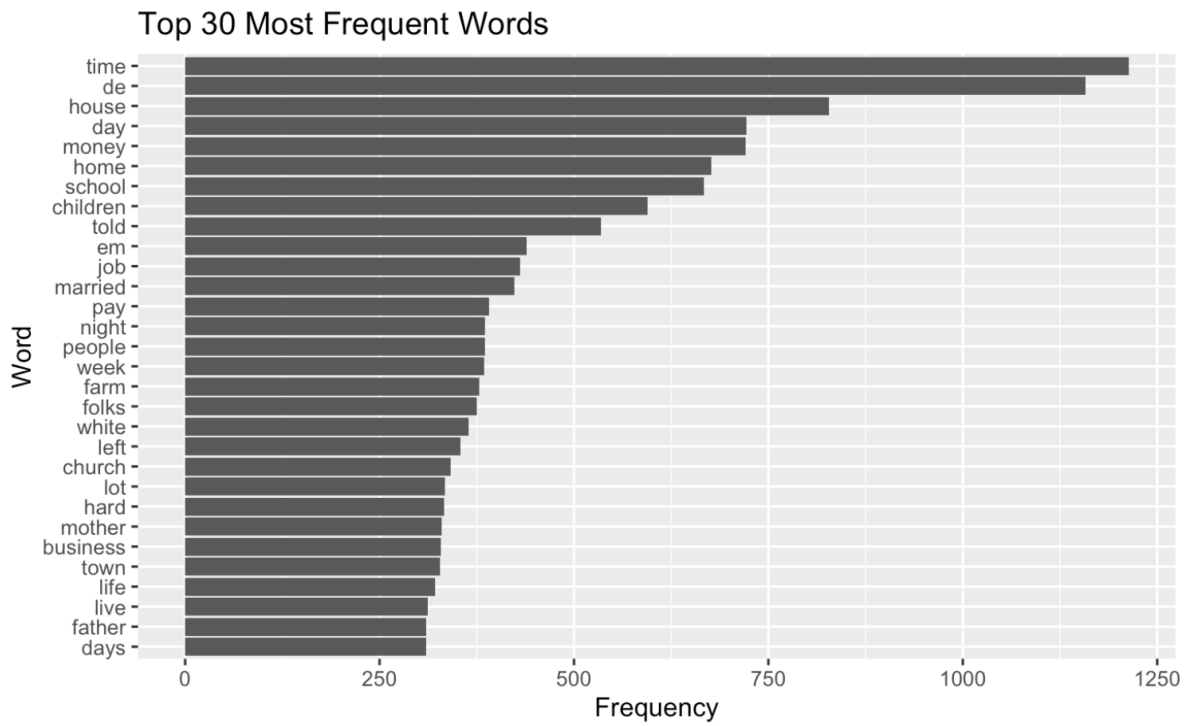

Figure 4. Top 30 Most Frequent Words.

Figure 4 is a chart that shows the top 30 most frequently used words from the Southern Life Histories Project that highlight key themes such as daily life, economic struggles, and education. reflected in terms like "time", "house", "money", and "school." Words like "children", "job", and "farm" may suggest an emphasis on family roles and agricultural occupation, while terms like "mother", "father", and "hard" might have revealed familial relationships and life challenges, aligning with metadata findings on occupations and socioeconomic patterns.

Total Occupational Words Used by Gender

interviewee_gen... <chr>	total_occupation... <int>
Female	1319
Male	2191

	word <chr>	freq <dbl>
1	career	2
2	employer	4
3	employment	3
4	farmer	45
5	industrial	3
6	job	312

6 rows

	word <chr>	freq <dbl>
1	employment	2
2	farmer	16
3	industrial	1
4	job	113
5	labor	10
6	management	1

6 rows

Figure 5. Total Occupational Words Used by Gender.

Figure 5 shows the total number of occupational words used by gender, with a higher frequency of words used by males (2,191) compared to females (1,319). For females, the most frequently used occupational words are "job" (312), "farmer" (45), and "employment" (3). For males, the most frequent words are "job" (113), "employment" (2), and "farmer" (16). These trends suggest a greater focus on traditional occupational terms like "job" and "farmer" for both genders. The gendered use of these words can reflect differences in occupational experiences and social views of work.

Discussion

Education and Economic Mobility

The Southern Life Histories highlighted the gender disparities that existed and were perpetuated by societal expectations, systemic inequalities, and socioeconomic barriers. As seen in Figure 2, the percentage of men with an education was notably larger than that of their female

counterparts, which aligns with societal norms at the time that prioritized men's education as a means of securing better economic opportunities. The large percentage of women represented in categories like "no formal education" and "primary education" and the downward trend in percentage highlight the systemic barriers women faced in accessing sustained educational opportunities. Education for women was shaped by rigid gender norms, defining women's primary roles as caregivers, homemakers, and "moral guardians of the domestic sphere." Higher education for women was considered both unnecessary and potentially dangerous. The endorsers of this view argued that intellectual activity could take away from women's reproductive health, rendering them unfit for marriage and motherhood (Dean, 1987). These beliefs were particularly rooted in the South, where cultural conservatism further restricted women's educational opportunities.

From the SLH, Clara Raynor's story shows the common barriers women faced in accessing education. While her early years included educational support, with her mother teaching her at home and preparing her for school, Clara's formal education was cut short when financial hardships forced her to leave school and work in a mill at just 14 years old. We see Clara's frustrations when she expresses, "I was anxious to finish high school. I had always wanted to take a business course, and going to work in the mill seemed to be an end to all my hopes" (Folder 334, P.9). This reflects a common trend at the time, where women's education was often seen as less important than their role in helping their families survive economically, especially in low-income households. Additionally, even though Clara earned $10 to $20 per week, she had very little financial freedom as most of her wages went to support her family, leaving her only 50 cents a week for personal use (Folder 334, P.9). This lack of control over her own money reflects the economic pressures young women faced, where their work was often valued over their education until they had to conform to societal expectations.

It is also important to note that during the 1930s, the Southern United States faced significant challenges in its education system, primarily due to insufficient funding and resources. Although the region was home to a large portion of the nation's children, it received much less financial support for education compared to wealthier areas. This gap in funding led to overcrowded classrooms, shorter school terms, and lower high school enrollment, with only 16% of Southern children attending high school compared to 24% in other regions (Report on Economic Conditions of the South, 1938).

Gendered Labor Roles and Occupational Trends

The Great Depression worsened existing gendered disparities in the workforce, particularly concerning women's labor. Women were often employed in domestic service, textiles, and retail industries, which were hit hardest by the economic downturn. These industries, characterized by low wages and minimal job security, made women's employment more vulnerable to the economic crisis. In contrast, men were employed in sectors such as manufacturing and

construction, which, although initially impacted, recovered more quickly as the economy began to stabilize (Milkman, 1976).

The Southern Life Histories Project (SLHP) sheds light on how these gendered labor disparities played out in southern communities. Figure 4 highlights the separation of work, with women's occupations frequently tied to terms like “job,” “married,” and “home,” all of which are associated with less stable, lower-paying roles compared to those of men. These roles not only provided limited financial stability but also offered fewer opportunities for advancement, reinforcing the notion that women’s work was secondary to that of men (Report on Economic Conditions of the South, 1938).

Additionally, while the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 sought to improve labor conditions, it largely excluded women, especially those in low-paying or informal jobs. As a result, many women were left unprotected by labor laws, leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation. In contrast, men were more likely to benefit from labor protections and union support, which helped them manage the economic challenges of the time (Mettler, 1994).

Societal expectations further restricted women’s participation in the labor force during the Depression, pushing them into informal or less secure jobs with fewer benefits. As shown in Figure 5, these trends were particularly noticeable in industries like textiles and retail, where women made up a significant portion of the workforce. These industries, being more susceptible to the economic downturn, only deepened the inequalities women faced in the workforce.

Conclusion

The Southern Life Histories Project (SLHP) offers an invaluable view into the lived experiences of men and women during the Great Depression, shedding light on how systemic inequalities in education and labor shaped their economic opportunities. This research combines text analysis, data visualization, and historical context to demonstrate how education served as a pathway to social mobility, while also reflecting established societal norms. Women faced significant barriers in accessing formal education, which limited their occupational options and reinforced traditional gender roles. Men, while also affected by economic hardships, were more likely to benefit from opportunities aligned with societal expectations of them as breadwinners.

The SLHP narratives, supported by historical data, underscore the profound impact of the South's economic precarity on individual lives. Educational inequalities, coupled with gendered labor disparities, upheld cycles of poverty and dependency, leaving lasting marks on the region's social fabric. The SLHP served as a reminder of the importance of documenting diverse perspectives to understand the intersectionality of gender, education, and socioeconomic status in historical contexts. This study not only deepens our understanding of the social impact of the Great Depression but also provides a framework for examining the ongoing challenges related to gender and class inequalities in today’s education and job markets.

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