

Labor Experiences of Men and Women During the Great Depression

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Background

The Southern Life Histories Collection (SLHC) was part of the Federal Writers' Project, which began in the 1930s as a part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) following the Great Depression. The WPA was an organization intended to create more jobs for individuals in the United States after unemployment surged following the period of economic downturn. The Federal Writers Project focused on the description and documentation of life in the United States. The SLHC was the group of these papers that focused predominantly on the lives of individuals living in the Southern United States. These papers are housed in the UNC-Chapel Hill Southern Historical Collection at Wilson Library. The Southern Life Histories Collection serves as evidence of the presence of work and labor experiences as a significant part of life following the Great Depression.

Methods

Our metadata visualization was performed using a dataset of 200+ life histories that were assigned various metadata categories. Tableau, a data visualization software, was used to create metadata visualizations using the gender and occupation categories. Text analysis was performed in Google Co-Lab, a collaborative environment, using the programming language Python and the Pandas library to create word frequency dataframes. Word frequency was filtered using a natural language processing library, Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK), and its list of "stopwords" to filter out frequently used words such as "the" or "and." Finally, after removing the stopwords, word frequency visualizations were created for all life histories, life histories written about women, and life histories written about men.

Citations

Gellman, E., & Rung, M. "The Great Depression". Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History, 2018, <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-336>.

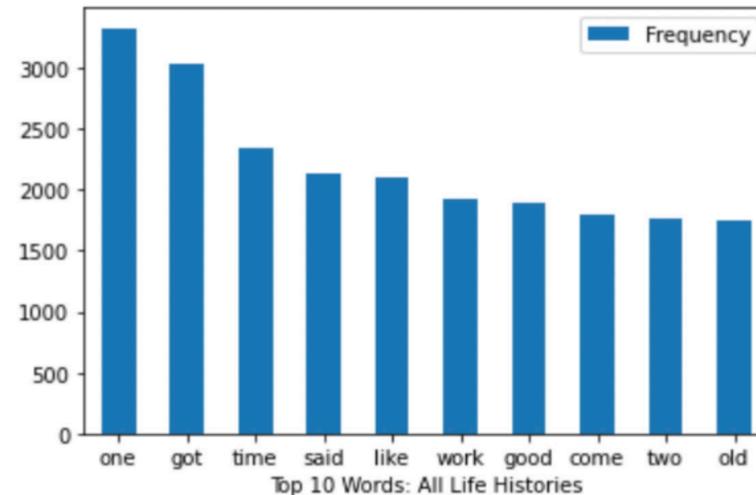
Hirsch, Jerrold. "Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project." The University of North Carolina Press, 2003, pp. 161-178.

Abelson, Elaine S. "Women Who Have No Men to Work for Them: Gender and Homelessness in the Great Depression, 1930-1934." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2003, pp. 105-27, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178478>.

Gelber, Steven M. "A Job You Can't Lose: Work and Hobbies in the Great Depression." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1991, pp. 741-66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3788855>.

Word Frequency

Top Ten Words Used in All Life Histories

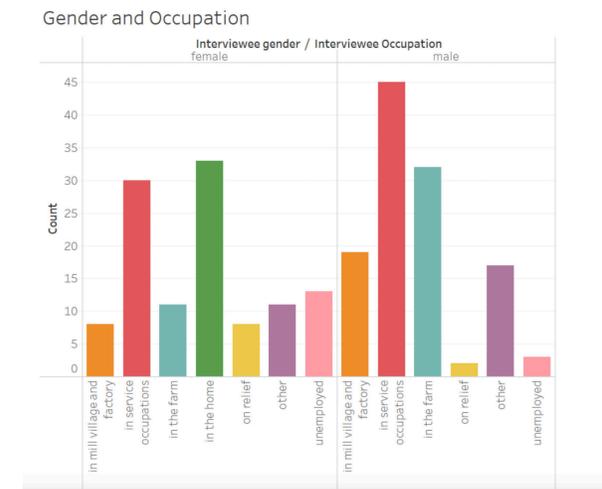


This visualization shows the top 10 most frequently used words among all life histories. "Time" appears as the 3rd most frequent word and "work" appears as the 6th most frequent word.

Word frequency visualizations are used to see what words appear in the life histories that seem to indicate a frequent mention of certain subjects. Here, we see that "work" is a highly discussed topic among the collection.

Metadata Visualizations

Occupation Breakdown: Men v. Women



This visualization shows the distribution of occupations based on Gender in the Southern Life Histories collection. Results from the Metadata visualization show women worked most frequently in the home and men worked most frequently in service occupations.

The occupation breakdown and historical background on the time period provides the basis for further research looking into the differences in experiences due to differences in occupation.

Conclusions

Work

The Southern Life Histories Collection serves as evidence of the presence of work and labor experiences as a significant part of life following the Great Depression. Word frequencies of all life histories, life histories about men, and life histories about women all have "work" appear in the top 10 most frequent words, signaling that regardless of gender, work remained a salient part of life. The Great Depression ushered in an economic era that touched all lives; given the major unemployment rates, rise in poverty, loss of jobs, wage cuts, and homelessness that marked the era, work was no doubt at the forefront of the lived experiences of Southern men and women who were interviewed for the SLHC (Gellman & Rung).

Time

Similarly the word "time" is also a top word in the word frequency visualizations, revealing that those interviewed often talked about time and this could be due to an increase in free time. As individuals and families were thrown into unstable economic situations, hobbies became a way for the unemployed and underemployed to occupy the time that was once dedicated to work; even those with jobs still desired leisure activities to eat up time (Gelber).

Occupation

The occupation breakdown of the SLHC suggests different labor lifestyles between men and women. Our occupation breakdown visualization reveals that there are no men who worked in the home, suggesting that women were the majority in the domestic sphere. All other occupations are shared between men and women. However, unemployed women are represented in a greater number than unemployed men, which can be attributed to the discrimination that women faced during the era, leading to the inability to obtain a job or the loss of a job (Abelson).

Further Research

Further research would include sentiment analysis of the text to determine the attitudes of southerners towards labor amidst the Great Depression. A larger selection sample would also provide more data to support arguments about attitudes towards labor in the SLHC. Our analysis is focused only on gender; further analysis would include exploration of labor distributions across different demographics and would include deeper analysis on occupation and labor as it relates to race, gender, and immigration status.