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“Disaster Narratives and Embodied Cognition – A Qualitative Analysis of ‘Voices in the Storm’-Interviews”

This project analyzes oral narratives of disaster-related experiences with qualitative measures to identify links between embodied trauma, embodied cognition and narrative expression. Looking at the way the experiences are recounted allows us to hypothesize about how the embodied trauma correlates with psycholinguistic metrics.

We reviewed established linguistic approaches such as the LIWC, neuroscientific approaches to trauma studies as well as approaches in cognitive narratology and cognitive studies. This project integrates all the above into a working model of narrated embodied trauma that was tested with post-Katrina disaster narratives taken from the oral history collection Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections. We conducted a qualitative analysis (using LIWC and discourse analysis as well as content analysis methods) of seven interviews using MAXQDA. The interviews were about an hour long on average, and both the recordings as well as the transcripts were used to develop the code system to account for non-verbal information. The code system was a combination of systemic codes as well as deductive and inductive codes.

Separating the interviews into two groups based on whether or not they evacuated showed significant results in the way they relayed their experiences that support the working hypothesis. For example, Group A's (not evacuated) accounts utilize more sensory descriptions in contrast to Group B, including tactile 75% (vs 0%) and olfactory 25% (vs 0%). Within auditory, 75% of Group A used sound perception (vs 66.7%) and 50% of Group A used hearsay (vs 66.7%). Within visual perception and visual memories, which are central to embodied trauma theories, 100% of Group B referred to collective memory and media images (vs 0%) and 100% of Group A narrated visual experiences (vs 0%).

The data is not yet generalizable. The next steps in testing the model would entail more data points, data points from comparable narratives as well as PTSD narratives, specifically, to revise and refine the model before potential applications could be developed. In context of computational-based analytical tools, the model might feed into a tool that helps to monitor early onset PTSD and other trauma-related symptoms.