

METAPHORS AS EVIDENCE OF DEPRESSION

Investigating the mental representation of depressive disorders

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Abstract – This study aims at investigating the metaphorical expressions stemming from the experience of depression to deepen our comprehension of this mental disorder and its consequences. To this end, four online fora dealing with mental illness were selected to gather data concerning the metaphorical description of depression as offered by online users who suffer from it. The personal accounts of 71 users were chosen to qualitatively analyse the most recurrent metaphorical patterns employed to conceptualise depression. The results were interpreted by means of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Embodied Cognition Theory (ECT). According to CMT, linguistic metaphors are a reflection of our innate capacity to think metaphorically in order to create mental models of reality based on analogical and associative mode of thinking, two powerful mental forces of the human cognitive system. This is the reason why metaphors, due to their cognitive power, are able to shape our mental comprehension of the world by organising and constructing a cognitive representation of reality. Moreover, as claimed by ECT, metaphors stem from our daily interactions with the world which are unconsciously internalised and later used as a conceptual basis to structure abstract, subjective and intangible domains of experience. By combining these two frameworks of reference, the study re-constructs a view of the conceptual world of depression. Not only does this analysis offer an insight into the depressive disorder, but it also contributes to showing that the conceptual world of depression is not only *thought* and *conceptualised*, but it is also intensely *experienced* and *lived*, in line with the hypothesis that conceptualisation entails simulation.

Keywords: depression; cognitive metaphors; embodied cognition; online fora; qualitative analysis.

1. Introduction

Depression, together with anxiety disorders, represents one of the most common mental disorders in the world. The WHO (World Health Organization, 2017) estimates that about 322 million people in the world suffer from depression, that is, 4.4% (estimated value for the year 2015) of the world's entire population. Since metaphors represent a tool to create cognitive models of reality to give it meaning and structure, they are particularly abundant in contexts of abstract and subjective phenomena such as mental illness. Indeed, metaphors also represent ways of conceiving and living with a disease. Semino *et al.* (2016, p. 631) show that they are particularly relevant in areas such as medical care, where the choice of different descriptions of a given disease can have both positive and negative implications for the general well-being of people who find themselves in already particularly vulnerable positions. Moreover, in the healthcare context metaphors become crucial tools to understand an illness in more detail and provide important clues about the nature of people's perceptions, experiences and attitudes (Demjén 2014, p. 1).

Levitt, Korman and Angus (2000) demonstrated that metaphors can be important indicators of psychological change in people suffering from depression. This was also confirmed by Lawley and Tompkins (2000), who claim that when in therapeutic contexts

clients explore their inner world by paying attention to their metaphorical conceptualisations, their metaphors begin to evolve along with their everyday thinking process, their feelings and their behaviour. Indeed, this process of metaphor awareness would lead to a reorganisation of one's existing symbolic perceptions resulting in the transformation of one's entire landscape of metaphors which is the sum total of a person's embodied symbolic perceptions (Lawley, Tompkins 2000, p. xv). For this reason, analysing the metaphors associated with a mental illness means discovering how depressed individuals organise their symbolic perceptions and what needs to happen for these to change (Lawley, Tompkins 2000, p. xv). Additionally, changes to imaginative representations have been correlated with changes in heart rate, galvanic skin response, blood pressure and other chemical and neurophysiological effects (Lawley, Tompkins 2000, p. 15). This therefore confirms most of the hypotheses made by Embodied Cognition Theory, which will be discussed later.

Since metaphorical thinking is coherently and systematically structured, metaphors limit and constrain perceptions and actions to those which make sense within the logic of the metaphors (Lawley, Tompkins 2000, p. 9). In this way, they can be tools for creativity or a self-imposed prison (Lawley, Tompkins 2000, p. 9). Accordingly, analysing the metaphors associated with depression becomes fundamental in order to understand how to help depressed individuals to reframe their illness and metaphorical landscape for a psychological change to occur.

The purpose of this study is to identify the most salient metaphorical conceptualisations associated with depression through a collection of data gathered from four online fora devoted to mental disorders. Moreover, this study aims at interpreting the data by means of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Embodied Cognition Theory. Finally, I will also consider whether my findings could be useful in terms of practical implications.

Section 2 presents the theoretical framework; Section 3 is devoted to the methodology employed and the data collected for this study. Finally, Section 4 discusses the results of the metaphor analysis and Section 5 summarises the main conclusions of this qualitative study.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

The present study is based on the key principles of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as outlined and developed by the pioneering text *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff, Johnson 1980/2003). CMT sheds light on the cognitive nature of metaphors, thus avoiding a restrictive definition of this linguistic phenomenon as a mere rhetorical device. Metaphors seem to reflect the very structure of our cognitive system since the latter adapts packages of knowledge already acquired to understanding concepts that are difficult to grasp (Boden 2004). This means that metaphorical thinking allows humans to fill the gap in the comprehension processes of unfamiliar, abstract, subjective, and vague phenomena (Gentner, Holyoak, Kokinov 2001).

The main process underlying metaphorical creation involves meaning transference from one entity to another. This phenomenon is generally called *mapping* and involves the projection of some elements from a given *source domain* into a *target domain* that needs to be defined more clearly. Thanks to this meaning transference process, metaphors represent a powerful cognitive tool that makes perfectly sense in evolutionary terms since

they allow the human cognitive system to classify unfamiliar phenomena in terms of familiar and concrete ones, so that individuals can understand them and act accordingly. Consequently, metaphors become a means of reality-organisation which exploits two powerful forces of human mental organisation: similarity and association (Gentner, Colhoun 2010).

This study adopts the definition of metaphor provided by Semino (2008), who defines it as a cognitive phenomenon used to talk, and potentially think, of one thing in terms of another. It is however crucial to make a distinction between conceptual metaphors and linguistic metaphors in order to understand their relation to human thought and language. Linguistic metaphors concern the act of talking and they are concrete manifestations of conceptual metaphors, which concern thinking (Deignan 2005, p. 14). Indeed, conceptual metaphors can also be conveyed through non-linguistic or multimodal expressions, such as gestures for example (Evola 2008). Accordingly, linguistic metaphors are linguistic expressions used metaphorically, whereas conceptual metaphors are conceptual models of thought we rely on daily in order to think, understand and interpret different aspects of reality (Kövecses 2017). Therefore, metaphors are a reflection of our cognitive capacity to talk of one thing in terms of another and to think in these terms given the fact that most of them rely on conceptual models of thinking. Accordingly, metaphorical expressions can systematically interact with other metaphorical concepts, while other metaphors do not create systematic structures that link a source domain to a target domain. One example is the metaphor *A MOUNTAIN IS A PERSON*: this metaphor does not create a very systematic network of metaphorical expressions since it takes into account just few aspects of the source domain. This metaphorical expression is quite marginal in our culture and language, therefore there are few expressions that became conventionalised; consequently they do not systematically interact with other metaphorical concepts (Lakoff, Johnson 1980). For this reason, this kind of metaphors cannot be labelled as conceptual mappings that radically shape our way of thinking about a phenomenon. However, we could consider the metaphor *A MOUNTAIN IS A PERSON* as a by-product of our anthropocentric view, that is, our way of conceptualising reality based on our bodily and sensory experience of it. This would give credit to the idea that our metaphorical conceptual models stem from the interactive nature of our bodies with the world (see section 2.2). Therefore, in these cases, although some metaphors do not create a rich and systematic metaphorical network, they should anyway be considered within a broader network of conceptualisation models.

When generating a metaphor, individuals are also engaged in a process of reality-construction (Kövecses 2017) given that metaphorical creations depend on one's own subjective and personal interpretation of a phenomenon that will be influenced by one's beliefs, expectations, past experiences and culture. This is the reason why metaphors become particularly relevant in cases where we need to get an insight into the subjectivity of a person. Therefore, taking into account the cognitive nature of metaphors is key to understanding their pivotal function in the human conceptual system: they help structure intangible domains of experience in terms of tangible ones. This is why many abstract topics, such as mental illness, exhibit an abundance of metaphors which are able to give concreteness to otherwise ungraspable areas of experience. Additionally, since conceptual metaphors can have the power to shape the very conceptual system that individuals use to interpret their reality, metaphorical thinking comes to govern our daily functioning in the world (Lakoff 2003), thus shaping the way we think, talk, and eventually act (Evola 2008).

2.2. Embodied Cognition Theory

Central to the study presented in this paper is Embodied Cognition Theory (ECT) that conceives human cognition in terms of interactions between human body, mind, and environment. Classical cognitivism considered human cognition as independent of the neural organisation of the brain and the structure of the body; our cognitive system was therefore defined as *dis-embodied*. According to this paradigm, a piece of information previously encoded through a modal and perceptual process would be stored in an a-modal and a-perceptual way (Winkielman *et al.* 2015, p. 152). This classical form of cognitivism was based on a dualistic-Cartesian view of cognition where body and mind do not interact, neither between themselves nor with the external environment (Arzarello 2008). On the contrary, ECT is concerned with understanding and explaining what is the role of our body and its interactions with the environment in shaping *how* individuals can think and *what* individuals can think of (El Refaie 2014, p. 1). This theory is of particular relevance in the field of metaphor studies for it claims that some conceptual metaphors emerge from correlations with our direct bodily experiences. Of course this connection between ECT and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Section 2.1) is comprehensible only if we adopt a cognitivist perspective of language where the linguistic human faculty is viewed as a product of the very structure and nature of our species' cognitive system (Bazzanella 2014).

Claiming that some conceptual metaphors are *embodied* implies that our daily interactions with the environment would be unconsciously internalised and later used as a conceptual basis for structuring concepts that are difficult to grasp. Accordingly, our body would be involved in the comprehension of abstract phenomena through the activation of metaphors that refer to tangible and concrete entities or experiences (Dijkstra *et al.* 2014).

Unlike classical cognitivism, ECT claims that the processes of imagining and actually doing something share part of the same neural substrate (Gallese, Lakoff 2005). This claim has important implications for the field of cognitive linguistics as it implies that semantic processing initiates a mental simulation that re-activates the sensory-motor and introspective states previously acquired during our interactions with objects, people and our own body (Gjelsvik *et al.* 2018). Consequently, human conceptualisations merge body and mind into a single unity that undergo the same experiences.

3. Methodology and data

3.1. Objective of the study

Metaphors are pervasive in human communication and thinking since they manifest the fundamental nature of our cognitive system. It follows that metaphors structure our way of thinking, perceiving, and acting, thus merging together thought, word and action. Indeed, our attitude towards life differs based on our conceptualisations and personal interpretation of a given circumstance. Regarding the healthcare field, a growing number of medical research studies are now claiming that the attitude of a patient can have serious implications on the outcome of an illness (Ray 2004). This would be the result of a constant dialogue occurring among four systems of information processing which constantly interact with each other: the mind, the endocrine system, the nervous system and, finally, the immune system (Ryan 2004). Consequently, re-framing and re-interpreting one's own illness could dramatically help improve their relationship with their

disease. Accordingly, this study aims at identifying the main metaphors associated with depression in order to understand how to re-frame it and what happens inside a depressed mind and body. Moreover, since this study is also based on the principles of Embodied Cognition Theory (Section 2.2), it will be shown how body and mind come together in the experience of depression through language. In the discussion of my results, I will also consider whether my findings could be useful in terms of practical implications, that is, if metaphor analysis could contribute to enhancing concrete practices such as psychological therapy. This kind of studies can help future research understand how to improve treatments for depression. Moreover, analysing the linguistic personal accounts of people living with an illness is crucial for the phenomenological approach to healthcare (Doerr-Zegers *et al.* 2017). Phenomenology does not reduce diseases to an objective series of symptoms which appear regardless of the person's holistic background, but rather focuses on the subjective manifestation of an illness; hence linguistic accounts become precious resources to help clarify the nature of a health affliction.

3.2. Online fora selection and data

According to Page (2013), in recent years researchers have come to understand how important it is for patients to create their own narratives in response to their experience of an illness. Indeed, in this context, narratives have the healing potential of creating models of coherence that re-establish the fundamental linearity and causality necessary to re-build the integrity and unity of the self (Page 2013, p. 49). Illness breaks the illusion of continuity of one's own life and, as a consequence, it generates a narrative interruption in one's own autobiographical experience. In this sense, online fora become precious resources for re-constructing a person's identity after having been disrupted by the coming of an illness. Moreover, online fora allow individuals to find a support group in which other persons live the same experiences; in this way they can communicate in a virtual space where it is possible to freely express their emotions and feelings. These are the main reasons why online fora were chosen to gather data for this study.

For the purposes of this article, four online fora devoted to mental disorders were chosen and 71 users selected in order to study their metaphorical descriptions of depression, reaching a total number of about 15.000 words analysed. Thanks to the division into sections of the fora, it was possible to select only the threads dealing with depression in particular. The fora selected were: *Mental Health Forum*, *Depression Understood*, *Beyond Blue* and, finally, *Mind*. More than one forum was chosen in order to collect more heterogenous data. Moreover, the online fora had to follow certain criteria to be selected: they had to be open-access and they had to be in English. For privacy reasons no nickname will be reported. Moreover, not all the threads were analysed, but only those in which depressed individuals described their experience with depression and what depressive disorder was for them, thus excluding other discussions dealing, for instance, with depression treatments and medications. The total number of users considered was 71, divided as follows: 33 users from *Mental Health Forum*, 21 users from *Depression Understood*, 12 users from *Beyond Blue* and 5 users for *Mind*. The number of users varies only because in some fora users were more likely to write about topics that were not of any interest for the present study. Data collection took place between February 2019 and August 2019. The posts analysed were written in the fora over a quite long time span: the most recent post dates back to 15th August 2019, whereas the least recent dates back to 5th August 2015. It was not always possible to understand whether a user was male or female due to the ambiguity of certain nicknames used and the lack of gender-specific terms in some of the posts; this is why the distinction between male and female linguistic

behaviour was not taken into account. For the same reasons, I could not classify the posts according to the age of the users: most of the time age was not specified in the texts written and not all the nicknames included the date of birth of the user. Likewise, I did not classify the posts depending on the different varieties of English: sometimes it was possible to identify a specific variety due to features such as spelling or vocabulary preference; however, these features were not consistent enough in the data. For this reason, I did not distinguish metaphors based on whether they were used by speakers of different varieties of English, native speakers or non-native ones. Finally, for the sake of authenticity, the examples provided will report the exact words of the users. This is the reason why there might be some grammatical or spelling mistakes.

3.3. Data analysis and methodology

As far as data analysis is concerned, the MIPVU (Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit) method (as detailed in Steen 2010) was followed to identify the most salient metaphorical conceptualisations employed by fora users. The MIPVU method is widely recognised as being one of the most effective techniques for metaphor identification and includes six guidelines that were followed in order to understand whether or not one expression was used in metaphorical terms. The guidelines outlined by the MIPVU method and followed for the present study include a first step in which all the texts collected were read to reach a general understanding of their meaning and content; later each text was analysed word by word to identify any metaphors. In a third step, words that were known for possessing a more literal meaning in other contexts were marked as potentially metaphorical as far as the specific data were concerned, thus coming to be labelled as ‘words used metaphorically’ in our context. In this way, it was possible to identify the metaphorical use of a word or expression that was therefore used to describe depression by comparing it to other experiences or entities.

4. Results and discussion

For the purposes of this study, the metaphors identified in the data collected were divided into categories according to the nature of their source domain. Specifically, during the analysis of the experimental data eight categories of metaphors were identified: Metaphors of motion, metaphors that transform depression into a predator, metaphors of energy decay, metaphors of isolation, metaphors of self-disintegration, metaphors of darkness, metaphors that focus on the forces of depression, and, finally, metaphors of loss. These categories will be analysed in the following sections.

4.1. Metaphorical motion and depression

In the data collected, metaphors linked to motion were very recurrent. Specifically, those metaphors were associated to *lack* of motion, *downward* motion, and to *circular* motion. Moreover, the metaphors DEPRESSION IS A PHYSICAL WEIGHT and DEPRESSION IS DROWNING were also added to this category since depression was frequently described as being a physical weight or a drowning feeling that bring the depressed person downwards. This reports complete passivity on the part of the people suffering from depression since they fail to impose their force upon their affliction, as is clear from Section 4.4. Interestingly, the very etymology of the term *depression* is metaphorical: it is a noun derived from the

Latin verb *deprimere* which means “to press down, depress”.¹

As for the metaphor DEPRESSION IS DOWNWARD MOTION, this can be considered as a manifestation of the more basic conceptual metaphor BAD IS DOWN. For instance, a person in the fora wrote that all s/he *understood was this sinking feeling, my heart in the depths of my stomach* and another one wrote: *I feel my thoughts and emotions holding me down*, whereas another user described the experience of depression as *digging [himself/herself] deeper and deeper into a hole*. The downward motion is also manifested through various other metaphorical expressions as in the case of DEPRESSION IS DROWNING: *I feel like I'm drowning; I'm currently studying a master's degree and am feeling like I am drowning but don't want to help myself either. I just want to give up; I'm drowning and I have no one to talk to*. What is interesting is that the metaphorical downward motion is not only expressed conceptually, but also manifested through bodily expressions which provide evidence of the embodied nature of our mental states and cognition. Indeed, according to Winkielman *et al.* (2015), depression also results in posture alterations² where the body tends to sink and droop, entailing a reduction in postural height. The metaphor DEPRESSION IS A PHYSICAL WEIGHT (*It had been a while since I have felt this darkness and almost physical weight on me.*) could be therefore taken literally. However, this conceptual and bodily attunement could be very harmful: cognitive states send signals to the body regarding the general mental conditions of an individual and when they attune to identical sensory states they can generate a feedback loop that self-sustains itself in a continuous cycle of interactions, as claimed by the *Interacting Cognitive Subsystems* hypothesis (Michalak *et al.* 2012). Additionally, Michalak *et al.* (2012) argue that cognitive and bodily feedbacks inform and influence each other, therefore they can stabilise themselves within a configuration that continuously feeds and maintains the depressive state, known as *Depressive Interlock Configuration*. In this sense, identifying the metaphors associated with depression can be very helpful because metaphorical conceptualisations eventually come to signal how to challenge and divert the vicious cycle between cognitive and sensory information. In this case, re-framing and sensory-physical work could be useful for alleviating the symptoms related to depression; indeed, it is more and more evident that physical activity is highly beneficial for reducing the symptoms of depressive disorders (see Lindeman, Abramson 2008).

Physical activity would also challenge the recurring metaphor DEPRESSION IS INCAPACITY TO MOVE associated with depression. Many expressions found in the data collected for this study reveal that depression is *conceptualised* and *experienced* as entailing an incapacity to move: *I can't get out of the whirlpool of thoughts late at night; I feel hopeless and stuck in a rut; I feel trapped by my anxiety and depression; *Every time I flirt with the idea of hope the wave of dread washes over me, almost paralysing me*. Considering Embodied Cognition Theory in this context can be particularly useful in order to understand the twofold nature of depression since it hits individuals both at the cognitive-emotional level and at the bodily one. Lindeman and Abramson (2008), proposing their Metaphor Simulation Model, argue that conceptualisation entails simulation: mental concepts initiate a mental simulation of sensory perceptions and motor actions which, in turn, produce physiological effects as if one were actually experiencing the sensory-motor experience that is conceptualised³. This may explain the link between*

¹ See <https://www.etymonline.com/word/depression>.

² See <http://biomotionlab.ca/Demos/BMLdepression.html> (05.08.2019)

³ It has been shown that actions in which responsibility is delegated to someone or in which information is communicated, as in the phrase ‘she gave him an idea’, initiate a mental simulation in which a physical object is transferred from the hand of one person to that of another (Lindeman, Abramson 2008). Moreover,

cognitive and somatic symptoms in depression. Specifically, the two scholars claim that the feeling of hopelessness associated with the depressive disorder is metaphorically conceptualised as a motor incapacity (DEPRESSION IS INCAPACITY TO MOVE) and, consequently, this incapacity is simulated as a true sensory-motor experience that leads to the production of the corresponding peripheral physiological effects. This simulation therefore leads to a psychomotor delay because it accesses the motor system.⁴ In this way the Depressive Interlock Configuration would be endlessly maintained: This is why Lindeman and Abramson (2008, p. 237) claim that inducing certain bodily experiences (imagined or real) regarding motor capacity could alleviate the symptoms of depression from a cognitive and somatic point of view.

The users taken into consideration for this study constantly complain of a general inability to move from where they are; they feel trapped, blocked, they believe their lives are not progressing, they are not moving forward, they are stuck in an eternally fixed position. Hence the idea that the depressed person cannot move forward. The implications of the DEPRESSION IS INCAPACITY TO MOVE metaphor cannot be understood unless we consider a broader conceptual framework that governs the thinking system of some people and lays the groundwork for other conceptualisations. Indeed, this feeling of incapacity to move is certainly comprehensible only if we consider a more basic conceptual metaphor that governs the conceptual system of these people: LIFE IS A PATH. This metaphorical conceptualisation, together with the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, represent primary conceptualisations that govern the conceptual system of most people, at least in the Western world. They reveal a lot about the ingrained mode of thinking of Western culture, including the need to feel that one's life has a purpose (that is, a destination to reach along the journey), a future ahead (that is, the path/journey to follow), and goals to achieve that motivate to move forward with one's life. Depression however alters the idea that life is a path, where living means going forward and progressing. The consequences of this alteration are particularly harmful for our psychological dimension, as claimed by Deci and Ryan (2000), who argue that the human spirit, in order to thrive, needs to feel it has goals to achieve and that life is moving forward, otherwise our psychological dimension could deteriorate.

Another manifestation of the metaphorical conceptualisation DEPRESSION IS INCAPACITY TO MOVE is the metaphor DEPRESSION IS LACK OF DIRECTION which also results in the metaphor DEPRESSION IS BEING LOST. On the conceptual level, depression causes the same feeling as when we do not know which direction to take when we physically move from point A to point B. If we do not know which way to go along this path, we stop where we are without clearly knowing where to go. This is exactly the same experience induced and simulated by depression on a conceptual level. For instance, many users *feel completely lost* as a consequence of their depression; one user describes this experience writing that s/he *may not be able to find [his/her] way back*. This metaphorical conceptualisation, together with the metaphor DEPRESSION IS A BOUNDED SPACE (*Over the last few months I've managed to get myself into a pretty dark hole; I had started writing*

it has been noticed that this simulation is also accompanied by weak motor hand impulses. Further, imagining one's hand inside a bucket of hot or cold water leads to changes in the temperature of the skin of the hand consistent with the mental imagery. It has been therefore concluded that mental imagery reproduces the same somatic responses involved in the original situation (Lindeman, Abramson 2008). This fusion of sensation and perception emerges because individuals make use of bodily experiences to structure concepts that are more intangible, abstract and subjective.

⁴ The motor system is also linked to the system that regulates motivation; as a matter of fact, depression also comprises lack of motivation among its main symptoms (Lindeman, Abramson 2008).

when my depression had gotten very bad, I was at the bottom of the abyss trying to reach up and climb my way out) alter some basic and essential conceptualisations that govern the human conceptual system, thus entailing a psychological distress that is at the basis of depression.

The metaphor DEPRESSION IS A BOUNDED SPACE signals that depressed subjects experience a feeling of psychological entrapment which limits their freedom to move. The space in which these people find themselves confined is generally a dark space, isolated from the social environment of interaction and can be found in an area below the surface of development of human contacts (see the case in which depression is described as an *abyss*). Also, depression is often described as being a tunnel: [Depression] *gives us a tunnel vision so we can't see the bigger picture of all that is going on in our lives*. This personal account is particularly relevant as it reflects the ego-centric attitude that depressed people tend to exhibit. This was also observed in various studies concerned with studying how natural language use reveals psychological aspects of the self. Particularly, various studies⁵ show that in written personal accounts people living with depression tend to use the first-person singular pronoun more frequently than people who do not suffer from this disorder, thus demonstrating an increased focus on the self and a high degree of self-involvement. Likewise, the tunnel vision previously mentioned does not allow depressed individuals to distance themselves from their problems. Their isolation within a BOUNDED SPACE does not allow them to widen their gaze on the world, nor to see 'the big picture' because of the narrowness of the conceptual space in which they are confined. Physical space therefore influences mental space: what cannot be done physically cannot be done mentally either. In this way, the limits of one's own conceptualisations become the limits of one's own reality.

Finally, in the data collected for this study depression was also associated with a circular kind of motion: *I try to drown it out and just stay high all the time but it just keeps repeating itself in my head like a broken record; I was so wrong I've started a new job and the bull that comes with that has sent me on a mental downwards spiral; I can't get out to the whirlpool of thoughts late at night*. These metaphors help to get an insight into what happens within the mind of people living with the depressive disorder. Indeed, the metaphor DEPRESSION IS CIRCULAR MOTION could be a symptom of one of the most recurrent characteristics of depression, that is, rumination (Bartczak, Bokus 2015). Circular motion is neither active nor productive, but denotes passivity on the part of the depressed individual who cannot control it. This circular motion may be symptomatic of the ruminative activity typical of the depressive disorder. Moreover, the motion, being circular, does neither progress ahead nor is linear, thus further hindering the human need for psychological evolution and progression. The consequence is a ruminative activity characterised by a hyper-abstraction of one's own thoughts and the activation of the sensory-motor and introspective states associated with depression in the past (Gjelsvik *et al.* 2018) which continuously feeds the vicious cycle that characterises the *Depressive Interlock Configuration*. As a consequence, it is important for depressed individuals to engage in anti-ruminative activities to get out of the circular and endless movement of their thoughts. In those cases, it is crucial to *act* instead of to *think* in order to interrupt the cycle of thoughts, as suggested by e.g. Ilardi (2009).

⁵ See Pennebaker *et al.* 2003; Rude *et al.* 2004; Demjén 2015.

4.2. Otherness: depression as a predator

In the data gathered for this study, depression was often conceptualised as a predator: *Depression is such a perfect predator, silent and cold; It is usually the kindest, most loving and empathetic in our midst who are slowly murdered by this cowardly beast; It can wrap you in a coil so tight, you can feel nothing good around you.* The depressed person considers depression as a state of otherness because it invades the integrity of the self. It therefore becomes a perceived threat. This would be in line with the recent hypothesis according to which inflammation of the body could contribute to the pathogenesis and development of depression (Bullmore 2019).⁶ This means that an inflammatory state would underlie depression at the bodily level as well as at the brain level. Indeed, some inflammatory proteins, like cytokines, can also reach the brain, consequently altering its most relevant physiopathological characteristics (Raison *et al.* 2006, p. 25). The body activates an inflammatory response when a threat is perceived, as in the case of harmful bacteria and viruses that enter the body. Similarly, at the conceptual level, depression is experienced as being a threat and, consequently, a state of inflammation would be generated in order to defeat it. Inflammation does not emerge only as a consequence of a concrete invasion coming from outside the physical boundaries of an individual, but also when abstract phenomena are perceived as threatening. Indeed, Bullmore (2019) explains that stress responses, which are inflammatory in nature, are activated also when a complex situation must be faced, as for instance in the case of public speaking. This means that inflammation is triggered even when a threat is *perceived*, not only when it concretely takes the form of viruses and/or harmful bacteria. Accordingly, experiencing depression as a threat may prove the validity of the ‘depression as inflammation’ hypothesis. Metaphors, and language in general, become symptomatic of what happens inside the mind *and* the body of an individual, thus becoming a means of communication of interoception, that is, the process in which the nervous system perceives, interprets and integrates signals deriving from the body to provide a mapping, moment by moment, of the internal state of an organism in order to maintain body homeostasis (Khalsa *et al.* 2018).

According to the personal accounts analysed in this study, the metaphorical conceptualisation DEPRESSION IS A PREDATOR establishes a conflictual context and, as a result, depressed people often complain of a feeling of powerlessness that does not allow them to win the conflict against the aggressor that depression is. Moreover, just as if depression entailed a *real* physical conflict, depressed individuals experience a constant feeling of lack of energy resulting from this tremendous battle. Indeed, depression is often described through the metaphor DEPRESSION IS A CONFLICT (*Every day seems like a constant struggle; It's a constant battle which I'm losing now; In myself I'm exhausted. Its a battle everyday as you will know*) and DEPRESSION IS LACK OF ENERGY/VITALITY (*Some days it takes all of my energy; I feel useless, lost and exhausted, sleep constantly and have no energy, no life*). The warlike scenario dominates the conceptual representation of depression and this may be very harmful because, in this way, people could come to the conclusion that they are not strong enough to defeat their enemy. This could generate further dysfunctional negative thoughts that continue to perpetuate the cycle of negativity that characterises depression and contributes to its maintenance.

⁶ Although not all scholars share Bullmore's (2019) point of view, in recent years there has been an increasing number of evidence in support of this hypothesis (see Dantzer *et al.* 2008; Dantzer 2012; Miller, Blackwell 2006; Miller, Cole 2012; Miller, Raison 2016; Raison *et al.* 2006, Vogelzangs *et al.* 2012; Zunszain *et al.* 2012).

Finally, the aggressor that harms and threatens the person suffering from depression, also robs them of many aspects of their life, hence the metaphor DEPRESSION IS A THIEF (*I am not a genius anymore. Long term depression has taken that away from me; My Mental health has taken all the life out of me, I am not the person I used to be and my relationship is breaking down because of it.*).

4.3. Energy decay, isolation and self-disintegration in depression

As argued in Section 4.2., depression is often described as entailing energy decay, both mentally and physically. What is interesting is that this lack of energy and vitality is often represented as a consequence of the BATTLE fought against depression, as if it involved a *real* physical combat. What is even more interesting is that this lack of energy and general fatigue not only manifests itself mentally, but also physically. Indeed, one of the main symptoms of depression is a general fatigue, sleepiness and lack of energy (WHO 2017). Therefore, depression alters both the cognitive and the bodily dimensions of an individual, demonstrating how body and mind closely interact with each other. This demonstrates the validity of one of the main principles of Embodied Cognition Theory according to which states of the body influence states of the mind and can be effects of the latter (Barsalou 2008, p. 618).

The personal accounts of people suffering from depression make clear that this mental disorder also entails a progressive separation from the social environment, as confirmed by the metaphor DEPRESSION IS ISOLATION and DEPRESSION IS DISCONNECTION: *I have experienced a few rough years, and now have isolated myself in a bubble, it gets overwhelming and I get anxious, but not over things that seem significant; [...] I have a beautiful partner .. the greatest family yet I'm so disconnected from them all; Someone who got in touch and shared their own experience of depression with me – as many people have – described it as looking out at the world from inside a goldfish bowl.* These metaphorical expressions demonstrate that depression entails an isolation of the self from the social surroundings where it cannot integrate itself, thus causing a division between themselves and the world. Considering that the human being is deemed to be a social animal, this disconnection can lead to a state of alienation because one of the psychological needs of our species is not satisfied (Deci, Ryan 2000). This disconnection is also confirmed by the metaphor previously analysed DEPRESSION IS A BOUNDED SPACE since it reveals a confinement of the self from the external environment.

The metaphors just discussed, together with the metaphor DEPRESSION IS LACK OF ENERGY, could be a further signal of the presence of an inflammation within the person who suffers from depression. Ilardi (2009) argues that lack of energy and social withdrawal are often responses resulting from inflammation of the body because the body needs to exploit all its energies for its own healing; therefore it cannot waste energy on other activities. Additionally, social withdrawal would represent a process of self-defence and self-protection as a consequence of perceiving the world as threatening; individuals would withdraw from the social environment to avoid the dangers and risks of reality. Consequently, depressed individuals withdraw into themselves, thus perpetuating the cycle of isolation that characterises the experience of depression. As a consequence of this detachment from the environment, depressed subjects also report a constant feeling of cold deriving from their social marginalisation and, accordingly, the metaphor DEPRESSION IS FEELING COLD emerges: *Recently had my birthday and I've never felt so cold and disconnected, it made me realise how badly things have deteriorated over time.* This metaphor reflects the primary conceptual metaphor SOCIAL EXCLUSION IS FEELING COLD, which demonstrates that situations of social marginalisation actually lead to an alteration

of the temperature perceived in an environment (Zhong, Leonardelli 2008). This also demonstrates that perceptions are subjected to the filter of emotions and cognition.

The impaired relationship between the depressed individual and the surrounding environment is also signalled through other metaphorical expressions which highlight a lack of harmony between individual and external environment, namely between inner reality and outer reality. Consider the following examples: *I am begging for help on the inside but trust me no one would ever know on the outside....*; *It's life I have an Idyllic Life On The Outside, but I am Dying Inside*; *On the outside people wouldn't even know, I pretend to smile but on the inside, I am an absolute mess.* These expressions are clear examples of THE SELF IS A CONTAINER conceptual metaphor. In the experience of depression this container is generally described as being separated from external reality. Depression entails a thickening of the boundary of this container, a characteristic that highlights even more its separation from the surrounding environment. This is in line with the assumption that depression would involve disturbances of the body of the depressed individual (Doerr-Zegers *et al.* 2017). The body becomes an obstacle to its own involvement in the world by altering its centrifugal functions (those that connect individuals to the external environment) and its own state of *being-in-the-world* (Doerr-Zegers *et al.* 2017). The conceptual metaphor THE SELF IS A CONTAINER is used by depressed subjects especially to emphasise the lack of attunement and coherence between what they feel inside themselves and what is perceived outside. This leads to a growing alienation resulting from the lack of balance between two different dimensions of one's identity.

The depressive disorder does not only cause a separation from one's own environment, but also from the self itself. The metaphor DEPRESSION IS SELF-DISINTEGRATION was very frequent in the data, thus revealing that depressed individuals experience an identity crisis because of their mental disorder, consequently disrupting the psychological unity of the self that is fundamental to the mental wellbeing of humans. Deci and Ryan (2000) explain that the human psychic architecture needs to develop an integrated self that tends towards cohesion, unity and coherence of oneself and one's life experiences. This means that experiencing situations that undermine the construction of our identity, our values and our vision of ourselves in the past, present and future can lead to a condition of alienation and psychological disintegration. Linguistic accounts of depressed people reveal that this psychic unity collapses during the experience of depression, thus failing to satisfy one of the primary psychic needs of humans. This dissatisfaction is consequently reflected at the linguistic level through various metaphorical forms: *It just feels as if I'm falling to pieces and those pieces are majority broken*; *[...] a part of me gone missing as a leaf in the wind and I feel lost without it. I estimate since 17 I have lost maybe 1/3 my time to depression and anxiety, the storm itself and including the picking up the pieces*; *They could do nothing to save me, but watch me crumble into my pit of darkness...but, that was where you wanted me, wasn't it? I became a shadow of my former self but knew where and when I should smile and laugh and put on a show to not draw attention to myself.* As a consequence of this disintegration of the former self, depressed subjects complain of a general feeling of vanishing, as testified by the following expressions: *But I was crumbling under the pressure and was consumed by anxiety and depression*; *I feel like I am fading away*; *Depression reminds me of muscular dystrophy. Except instead of watching, year after year, our bodies deteriorate and grow weaker, we feel our minds and our ability to cope deteriorate.* These metaphorical expressions are examples of the metaphor DEPRESSION IS VANISHING, which indicates that the inner division of the self entails a feeling of fading away. Accordingly, it is possible to

claim that metaphors concretely manifest the deep psychological dimension of individuals and their ongoing psychological processes.

4.4. The forces and darkness of depression

The data collected demonstrate that depression is often experienced as being an unbeatable force. Some metaphors systematically structure depression in terms of a game of forces where the individual clashes, mostly passively, against depression. Specifically, depression is mentally experienced as being an active and oppressive force, thus establishing a conflictual context; hence the metaphor DEPRESSION IS AN OPPRESSIVE FORCE where depression is normally described as being active (vs the passive person), oppressive, strong, invincible and indomitable: *Depression is not compression, nor is it expression, or decompression. Depression involves pressure. It squeezes our strengths and our weaknesses closer together; There are times when it all just feels so suffocating and overwhelming; It all seems to happen at once. Sort of makes sense. Like squeezing through the Gibraltar straits, or the Suez, or the Panama canal. Everything comes together and the squeeze is on.* The more basic and inclusive metaphor DEPRESSION IS A FORCE also manifests itself in the form of more peculiar and specific instances of this metaphorical conceptualisation. Indeed, in our data depression is found to be conceptualised as a natural force that has detrimental consequences over the depressed subjects, hence the more specific metaphor DEPRESSION IS A NATURAL DISASTER: *Suddenly my thoughts take over and twist my head about and make things bad. But since all this shit happened my mind has been flooded with all the bad shit I've dealt with in my life; Every time i flirt with the idea of hope the wave of dread washes over me, almost paralysing me. Its like my own personal natural disaster leaving me utterly destitute of hope.* Depression therefore establishes a context of coercive forces generating a state of constant battle against an opponent. Moreover, this force robs its victims of their independence, freedom, strength and vitality; as a consequence, depression is often conceptually transformed into a thief as discussed in Section 4.2.

Since depressed individuals experience a persistent presence of a threatening force, they do not feel free to develop themselves and maintain self-control. The metaphor DEPRESSION IS LACK OF CONTROL was also quite frequent, denoting passivity on the part of the person living with it: *I thought I would never make it back from the darkness because this time the darkness took control of everything in my life.* Depression thus presents itself as an active force that clashes with a passive subject. The examples cited above indicate a general inability which manifests itself as an incapacity to maintain control over one's own thoughts and life. The essence of depression can be therefore summarised through the expression *not-being-able-to* (Doerr-Zegers *et al.* 2017).

The expressions *I thought I would never make it back from the darkness because this time the darkness took control of everything in my life; I can feel the darkness and gloom just below wanting to surface in my thoughts; I know that the light that once was turned on, turned off for a period of time; If for any reason you find yourself lost and all around you seems to be dark; I am hoping that things will get better with time, but so far things seem to just keep getting darker* are clear examples of how depression is often conceptualised in terms of darkness, that is, absence of light. This darkness is also implied in other forms of metaphor, as in the case of DEPRESSION IS BAD WEATHER: *I am just trying to find something to do today to amuse myself as can already feel that dark cloud looming over me; Next time you [depression] knock on my door, when you bring me the next dark cloud to pour its filth to dampen my happiness, you will not be welcome; That getting up on those days when all I want is to hide myself under my duvet and wait*

for the storm to pass is one heck of a massive victory; The problem is, I'm still being followed by a dark fog that is my anxiety and depression; I estimate since 17 I have lost maybe 1/3 my time to depression and anxiety, the storm itself and including the picking up the pieces.

The world of depression is a monochromatic world in which different shades of dark dominate, thus entailing a lack of light. Perceptions are therefore deeply influenced by one's mental states. As Aho explains (2013, p. 5), depressed people are immersed in a monochromatic atmosphere since the affective quality of their perceptions is reduced and emptied. What was previously perceived as beautiful, warm and alive, is now perceived as dead: depression bleaches the affective radiance of the world (Aho 2013, p. 5). Therefore, our affective states colour our perceived reality, but no colour appears when emotions vanish. A decrease in the range of colours at the conceptual level could therefore indicate a decrease in one's range of emotions. Indeed, at the conceptual level, each cognitive act corresponds to different shades of colour based on the physiological responses it activates (e.g. for some, anger would be associated with the red colour because when one is angry, a physiological response is activated and this includes redness of the face as a consequence of the faster heartbeat). Consequently, the link between perception, emotion and language is evident. Moreover, considering only the range of dark colours of one's experience means considering only its negativity (hence the conceptual metaphor NEGATIVITY IS DARKNESS), thus failing to perceive reality in its broadest essence, probably as a consequence of the cognitive rigidity that characterises depression. Investigating self-help newsgroups of suicidal, depressive and anxious people in a 3-month period, Fekete (2002) demonstrated that both depressed individuals and people with suicidal ideas tend to use negative words more frequently as a consequence of their degree of pessimism and negativity typical of the defence mechanism of denial and rejection (Fekete 2002, p. 353). This dichotomous characteristic also signals the presence of a polarised mode of thinking and cognitive rigidity. The polarisation of thoughts and beliefs also reflects an underlying psychological defence mechanism called *splitting* which leads to an inability to consider the various points of view of a situation in order to simplify and schematise it to make it easier to analyse (Fekete 2002, p. 359).

4.5. Depression and loss of control, clear vision and emotions

As discussed in Section 4.4., the dynamics set in motion by depression cause a feeling of lack of (self-)control in people suffering from it, hence the metaphor DEPRESSION IS LACK OF CONTROL. This is the aftermath of experiencing depression in terms of strong forces that threaten and invade the depressed individual. As a consequence, people living with depressive disorders do not feel masters of themselves, thus losing all control over their life.

Lack of control is not the only missing aspect caused by depression. Indeed, this mental disorder also causes individuals to experience lack of clear vision, hence the metaphor DEPRESSION IS LACK OF (CLEAR) VISION: *I can become blind to all I have good in life, it will tell me things without words being spoken, in shows me the past present and maybe the future; Normally I am depressed but I feel sad, anxious and stuff.. now it's a blur..; Then I decided to get back to college again at age of 25 after years of isolation, grief and then I had started to see that my brain was in complete blur; Some parts of my life don't feel completely real or like they feel like a haze.* These examples show that depression entails a lack of (clear) vision which may be the consequence of the cognitive alterations triggered by the depressive disorder: difficulty in concentrating, attention and

memory deficits, neuro-toxicity (WHO 2017). These alterations involve a malfunction of one's neuro-cognitive system. In the data collected, expressions referring to this cognitive dysfunctions were recurrent: *It [my brain] wasn't working properly, it couldn't absorb the college material until I decided to go to the psychiatrist after psychiatrist, went on antidepressants; But after the person I considered my only true friend, and the person I wanted to spend my life with - chose a path of actions that made me experience hurt more than I've ever experienced in my life, something in my brain snapped and it's felt like I've been cut off from the ability to use it properly ever since; I feel like my brain doesn't work the same way as my classmates and sometimes wonder how I even got to this point.* These figurative expressions reflect the metaphorical conceptualisation MIND IS A MACHINE. The experience of depression endangers the mechanisms of the brain-machine system and, as a consequence, depressed people feel like this machine no longer works as it should. Again, metaphors become a window into one's psychological, cognitive, and also biological ongoing mechanisms. This implies that becoming aware of one's metaphors means understanding the nature of the mind-body processes.

Depression not only generates a feeling of lack of control and lack of clear vision, but it also provokes a lack of emotions and pleasure called anhedonia (Friedman 2014, p. 1). This means that the emotional resonance necessary for the optimal functioning of the human being is lacking (Aho 2013). According to Hardcastle (2003, p. 354) humans react emotionally to the world around them: emotions stimulate us to (re)act in a certain way rather than another, but the lack of emotions that characterises depression leads to a lack of (re)actions, thus provoking an alteration of human agency. Hardcastle (2003, p. 354) therefore argues that we cannot literally move around the world without emotions. The lack of motivation underlying depression thus represents a lack of emotional drive that pushes us to act in the world. When the depressed subject claims to feel 'empty' (feeling of emptiness derived from our data), s/he is manifesting, in words, a lack of emotional expansiveness necessary to (re)act. As previously discussed, the self is often experienced and conceptualised as being a container (THE SELF IS A CONTAINER metaphor). In the case of depression, this container is generally empty (DEPRESSION IS EMPTINESS) thus signalling a lack of emotional echo within oneself, probably as a consequence of the anhedonia that characterises depression: *I feel so empty. I don't see the point in life; [Depression] It's a deep, dark, vast emptiness within all of us; I don't want to feel like a victim and I sometimes feel like the best thing would be for it to be all over, not just for me but for everyone as id rather them remember me for the person I was rather the empty person im becoming; I am an empty shell, full of useless facts and skills, devoid of meaning; I feel trapped by my anxiety and depression on the inside I feel numb, lifeless and empty; [...] But over the past 18 months, I've had this emptiness feeling almost just overwhelm every aspect of my life.* This conclusion about the lack of emotional drive is also in line with the implications derived from the metaphor previously discussed DEPRESSION IS DARKNESS which denotes a decrease in the range of colours on a conceptual level as a consequence of a decrease in one's range of emotions.

Since there is no inner emotional movement that pushes individuals to act in the world, they will consequently feel *paralysed*, that is, *incapable of moving*; this incapacity will later result in an isolation from the social environment with a consequent feeling of disconnection and confinement. This lack of emotion also entails a lack of motivation on the part of the depressed individuals since they cannot associate an emotional value to what they do, see and think. Consequently, depressed individuals lose the motivation necessary to engage and act in the world as claimed by Hardcastle (2003). Accordingly, metaphors that associate a feeling of emptiness to an experience of human life could signal a lack of emotional resonance within one's own inner space.

4.6. A network of co-dependent metaphors

Analysing the metaphors associated with the depressive disorders contributed to re-constructing the world of depression at the conceptual and cognitive-representational level. These mental states can take the form of a bounded space from which the person cannot escape, a predator that suffocates and paralyses, a clouded and obscure sky, an island that separates the individual from his/her own world, a trap that immobilises, a thief who robs the depressed person of his/her lifeblood, an extension of water into which one sinks towards the abysses, a war scenario in which one cannot win, a physical weight that drags uncontrollably downwards. Interestingly, all the metaphorical conceptualisations identified in our data create a network of co-dependent metaphors which are coherently structured, making it possible to re-construct a conceptual world linked to depression which is entirely coherent and systematically organised. This means that, though the metaphors collected are potentially used by people of different ages, genders, backgrounds, nationalities, they all participate in the creation of a figurative world that is rather consistent. For instance, the metaphorical downward motion associated with depression and analysed in section 4.1. is perfectly consistent with a series of other metaphors found in the data such as DEPRESSION IS A PHYSICAL WEIGHT and DEPRESSION IS DROWNING; these in turn are coherent with the conceptual metaphor BAD IS DOWN. Additionally, the metaphor DEPRESSION IS DARKNESS is consistent with the conceptual metaphor DARK IS DOWN/LIGHT IS UP, reinforcing the association between depression and downward directionality. Consequently, a systematic network of metaphors is created by linking negativity – hence depression – to downward motion and darkness, hence the conceptual metaphor NEGATIVITY IS DARKNESS/POSITIVITY IS LIGHT. Similarly, other metaphors create a network of coherent conceptualisations: DEPRESSION IS INCAPACITY TO MOVE (also connected to the feeling of being paralysed found in the data); DEPRESSION IS BEING STUCK; DEPRESSION IS BEING LOST; DEPRESSION IS LACK OF DIRECTION; DEPRESSION IS BEING TRAPPED all convey a sense of motionlessness. Moreover, this inability to move is also revealed by the metaphor DEPRESSION IS A BOUNDED SPACE which, in turn, generates a set of implications perfectly in line also with the metaphor DEPRESSION IS ISOLATION/DISCONNECTION and DEPRESSION IS FEELING COLD (because of social exclusion). This last metaphor can also be connected to DEPRESSION IS BAD WEATHER which can also be related to DEPRESSION IS DARKNESS and with DEPRESSION IS LACK OF (CLEAR) VISION because of the ‘haze’ provoked by depression (example taken from the data). The data demonstrate that the experience of perceptual darkness in depression also generates a set of coherent implications typical of the darkness we experience daily: it does not allow one to find the way, it makes it more difficult to see reality as it is, and it generates a feeling of being lost. DEPRESSION IS DARKNESS has been found to be related also to the metaphor DEPRESSION IS EMPTINESS as discussed in section 4.5. Finally, various metaphors gravitate around the metaphor DEPRESSION IS A CONFLICT: DEPRESSION IS A PREDATOR; DEPRESSION IS LACK OF ENERGY/VITALITY; DEPRESSION IS AN OPPRESSIVE FORCE; DEPRESSION IS A THIEF; DEPRESSION IS SELF-DISINTEGRATION; DEPRESSION IS LACK OF CONTROL; DEPRESSION IS A NATURAL DISASTER. The creation of this network of co-dependent metaphors is made possible by one of the most relevant features of the human conceptual system: coherence. Indeed, metaphorical mappings take into account only the elements of the source domain that do not alter the structure of the target domain so that coherence is maintained. As a consequence, some aspects of the metaphorical concept are highlighted, whereas others remain ‘hidden’. This allows metaphors to create a coherent network of metaphorical

conceptualisations. However, the principle of coherence governing the human conceptual system also entails a restriction of the possibilities of interpretation. This is the sense of Lawley and Tompkins' (2000, p. 9) claim according to which metaphors can be transformed into self-imposed prisons: metaphorical coherence limits and constrains perceptions and actions to those which make sense within the logic of the metaphors.

4.7. Practical implications

To study the metaphorical behaviour of individuals is useful because it can contribute to clarifying the nature of their mental states and, in this case, their state of depression. According to László *et al.* (2007), psychological phenomena are expressed in our narratives, descriptions, stories and this allows scholars and doctors to get a more detailed diagnosis of our psychological state. Metaphors can be important tools to improve treatments for this disorder. The psychologist Ilardi (2009) created a treatment for depression called *Therapeutic Lifestyle Change* (TLC) which has given excellent results in terms of efficacy. This treatment includes six main components: (i) omega-3 fatty acid intake, (ii) physical activity, (iii) exposure to sunlight, (iv) social connection, (v) improvement of sleep quality, (vi) anti-ruminative activities. It is interesting to notice that five out of six components included in the TLC deeply challenge the most recurrent metaphorical conceptualisations associated with depression; it is possible to say that metaphors point to solutions for the problem described. Physical activity (ii) would help depressed individuals re-frame their conceptual incapacity to move and it would divert the continuous cycle between sensory information and cognitive information which reinforce each other and maintain the depressive disorder. Moreover, physical activity allows individuals to experience a situation of control over their body and this therefore fosters a feeling of abstract or psychological control over their life, thus diverting people from the idea that DEPRESSION IS LACK OF CONTROL. Secondly, exposure to sunlight would challenge the metaphorical darkness in which people with depression are immersed due to their depressive states, but it would also challenge the mental representation of depression as a BOUNDED SPACE from which it is impossible to escape. Social connection would help them alleviate their ISOLATION/DISCONNECTION by feeling connected to people and the social environment again. As for the improvement of sleep quality, this could boost their energy levels since depressed individuals experience ENERGY DECAY. Finally, anti-ruminative activities would help them interrupt the CIRCULAR MOVEMENT of their thoughts thus interfering with the ruminative activity typical of depression. This demonstrates how metaphors can be used to raise the awareness of medical staff dealing with this illness, and enhance our comprehension of our mental states.

Metaphors can also be important indicators of psychological change in people suffering from depression, as demonstrated by Levitt, Korman and Angus (2000). In this sense, also the data and findings of the present study can contribute to confirming this hypothesis. For instance, in our data I identified the metaphor RECOVERY FROM DEPRESSION IS ABILITY TO MOVE: *I had started writing when my depression had gotten very bad, I was at the bottom of the abyss trying to reach up and climb my way out; my journey through depression: from falling in to clambering out, and what I clung onto that helped.* These examples show that if depression entails a conceptual incapacity to move, than it is important to conceptually – and physically – move in order to find one's way out of this *dark place*. Psychological change manifests itself through a change in the metaphorical behaviour: if being depressed means being 'stuck', it is necessary to move, normally forward, that is, along the path of our life, in order to recover from depression.

If we consider the systematic coherence of metaphorical behaviour, we could therefore expect that if a person relapses into depression he/she returns to the same place where he/she was when he/she was depressed. This is indeed confirmed by the metaphor RELAPSE INTO DEPRESSION IS BACKWARD MOVEMENT found in the data: *I guess it just feels like going backwards. I had been doing so well; When I think this way then I'm just back to dark thoughts and that I'm never going to get better.* These examples show how psychological changes entail a change in the metaphors used by individuals and offer further evidence for the consistency of metaphorical behaviour. As previously mentioned, metaphors limit the possible interpretations of a given phenomenon by structuring it in a coherent and intelligible way. Accordingly, I claim that helping individuals to become aware of their metaphorical behaviour and change it – if necessary – can contribute to re-shaping people's perceptions and the patterns of thought exploited to interpret reality. Further evidence is given by Deci and Ryan (2000) who explain that the human spirit, in order to thrive, needs to develop a sense of unity of the self, to feel competent and to feel socially connected, otherwise a pathological condition could emerge. Indeed, the metaphorical behaviour of depressed individuals demonstrates that these basic human needs are not met, and, consequently, a pathological condition emerges. At the psychological level, depression entails a SELF-DISINTEGRATION, an INCAPACITY TO MOVE and a DISCONNECTION from the external – and internal – environment. This clearly demonstrates that metaphors are important indicators that signal a tendency towards a deterioration of the psychological states of the self. As Pennebaker (2003, p. 548) points out, individuals' linguistic behaviour is diagnostic of their mental and physical state since the unconscious reveals itself through language.

5. Conclusions

The present study presents some limitations due to the rather small sample of data and the kind of source employed to gather them, that is, online fora. Four online fora were chosen and 71 users selected in order to study their metaphorical descriptions of depression reaching a total number of about 15.000 words analysed. Undeniably, it is not possible to be sure that the users writing in the selected fora were actually suffering from depression. However, during the analysis it was possible to identify some repetitive patterns of use associated to the metaphorical description of depression not only at the individual level, but also at the level of the whole sample of data.

By combining CMT with ECT it has been possible to investigate the nature of depression. Although we usually consider metaphorical language as not literal, this study shows that what is *literal* and *objective* clashes with what is *experienced* and *subjective*: The conceptual world of depression is not literally how it is conveyed by depressed people's words, yet it is *experienced* as such. This means that the depressed individual actually feels the sensation of e.g. being suffocated and paralysed, of not being able to move, of having a weight within himself/herself, of seeing everything black, of not being able to get out of his/her own situation. Mental and emotional states are therefore manifested at the physical and perceptual level too and they will generate and influence one's vision of the world. Some concepts related to emotions and generally defined as 'abstract', such as depression or love, should be considered literal because they are actually experienced through the strong sensory experience they produce and the bodily sensations they trigger (Connell *et al.* 2018, p. 6).

The metaphorical expressions associated with depressive disorders give us access

to sensory-motor representations of relevant bodily states, in line with Embodied Cognition Theory (Keefer *et al.* 2014, p. 13). This implies that from daily interactions with reality, information is extracted from a context of relationships thanks to the human capacity for abstraction. This information will then be essential in the generation of the individuals' inner world, since daily experience of the world is exploited to create mental representations (Boroditsky *et al.* 2002). Our interactions with the world are thus internalised and exploited as a conceptual basis to understand the world and build our personal and subjective reality. In this way, the conceptual world of depression is also created.

Interpreting the data on the basis of the principles of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Embodied Cognition Theory (ECT) confirmed the complexities of depression and contributed to the evidence that this disorder cannot be labelled as a purely *mental* illness. The analysis of metaphors showed that depression not only influences individuals at the psychological level, but also at the level of their body: When living with depression, mind and body come together to experience the same afflictions. Investigating the metaphors stemming from the experience of depression can therefore contribute to understanding how to improve treatments for this disorder. Consequently, metaphor analysis can have important practical implications as it may help to early diagnose depression. This study demonstrates that language becomes symptomatic of internal bodily and mental states and reflects the fluctuations of an individual's inner world. Metaphors provide important feedback about a person's (lack of) homeostasis.

To conclude, tracing the most common patterns of metaphorical use associated with depression provided further evidence for the intrinsic coherence of the human conceptual system: individual metaphors proved to be part of a larger metaphorical constellation. Our conceptual capacities are able to generate constellations of metaphors that are co-dependent. This study contributes to identifying the most frequent constellations of metaphors associated with depression and, in this sense, it could help to better diagnose and treat this disorder.

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