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### **Metaphors of Psychological Deterioration: the Case of Depression**

**Abstract I:** Il presente articolo si propone di individuare e analizzare i comportamenti linguistici metaforici di individui che convivono con stati depressivi. A tale scopo, sono stati selezionati quattro *fora* online di auto-aiuto dedicati a varie malattie mentali, tra cui la depressione. I dati raccolti sono stati interpretati alla luce dei principi cardine della Teoria della Metafora Concettuale e della Teoria psicologica dell'Auto-determinazione. La combinazione di questi due quadri teorici permette, in primo luogo, di individuare modelli metaforici ricorrenti nella comprensione della depressione e, in secondo luogo, di discernere una dimensione psichica armonica da una problematica per il benessere psicologico della persona.

**Abstract II:** The present article aims at identifying and analysing the linguistic metaphorical behaviours of people living with depressive disorders. To this end, four online *fora* dealing with mental illnesses were selected in order to gather data on how individuals metaphorically describe their depressive states. The data were interpreted by means of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Self-determination Theory. Combining a linguistic theory with a psychological one allows to deepen our comprehension of depression and helps diagnose it: linguistic behaviour paves the way for accessing the psychological dimension of individuals while revealing a potential tendency towards harmonic or problematic mental states.

**Keywords:** depression, conceptual metaphor theory, self-determination theory, online *fora*.

#### **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to explore how the symbolic perceptions of depressed individuals are organised in order to understand what they reveal about the nature of their mental states. Mental states influence perceptions and the resulting view of reality may be communicated via metaphors. Demjén (2014: 1) mentions that the language choices made while speaking and/or writing are not random, but provide important clues about the nature of people's perceptions, experiences and attitudes. The study behind my article also contributes to identifying prevailing metaphorical conceptualisations that signal a tendency towards a deteriorated psychological dimension typical of depressive states. In fact, language can communicate an alteration in people's perceptual dimension, as well as an ongoing psychological change (Levitt *et al.* 2000).

No longer relegated to their mere rethorical and ornamental role, nowadays metaphors are deemed to be part of our universal mental toolkit (Kimmel 2002). In the past, metaphors were considered as devices that could obfuscate the 'objective' representation of reality because they did not reflect a 'truthful' image of the world, but rather its figurative and allegorical aspects. Metaphorical language was therefore downgraded to mere stylistic embellishment of extra-ordinary language (Landau, Keefer & Meier 2010). This view of metaphor, and of language more generally, derives from an idea of reality as something completely external and independent of how human beings conceptualise the world. Such a view does not take into account the human aspects of reality, that is, human perceptions, conceptualisations, motivations and actions (Lakoff & Johnson 2003) that shape individuals' understanding of the world.

A paradigmatic change in the theory of metaphor took place after the publication of the first edition of *Metaphors We Live By* by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003). This publication led the way to new theoretical and practical studies on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, whose main principles will be treated in the following section.

Lakoff and Johnson claim that metaphors are, first of all, a matter of thought, which manifests itself in our ordinary linguistic behaviour. Avoiding the use of metaphorical language would therefore be impossible since it is a pervasive and inescapable phenomenon whose mechanisms originate in our mind. Metaphors are an integral part of our ordinary system of thought and language (Lakoff 1993: 203) and reflect conventional models of thought (Semino 2008: 5). In order to understand their role in human cognition and language, it may be useful to consider human mechanisms of reality comprehension and organisation. When individuals are faced with an unfamiliar phenomenon, they rely – more or less consciously – on their cognitive capacity to create analogies and structure concepts on the basis of what is already known and familiar (Boden 2004). Gentner and Colhoun (2010) write that a familiar situation is used as a model to understand an unfamiliar one and project inferences onto the latter. In metaphorical language and thought, familiar phenomena normally concern concrete, tangible and/or bodily domains of experience, which define the source domain of a metaphor. On the contrary, the unfamiliar, less tangible or more abstract phenomenon which needs to be structured more clearly, tends to be the target domain of a metaphor.

Metaphorical language reveals the creative, fictional, and imagistic nature of human cognition, which is able to generate conceptual mappings between everyday domains of thought. Light can therefore be shed on conceptual representations of reality thanks to the linguistic choices made by individuals. Based on CMT, metaphors are thus implicated in the generation of our inner world which is profoundly imagistic, creative, dynamic, and embodied. The realm of perceptions, given its subjective nature, can be deeply imbued with metaphors. Metaphorical behaviour reveals the symbolic domain of individuals' experience and their ways of perceiving themselves and their world (Lawley & Tompkins 2000: xiv), thus creating a conceptual model of their perceptions. Analysing the metaphorical conceptualisations of people therefore means accessing their existing symbolic perceptions, which describe their way of being in the world (Lawley & Tompkins 2000: xv). This means

that their experience of reality is filtered by their organisation of perceptions, that is, the lenses through which they 'see' and interpret the world.

If one wants to study the metaphorical behaviour of individuals, the field of mental health turns out to be very fertile: communication on this topic is often imbued with metaphors since it concerns an intangible domain of experience, which therefore needs something more concrete to be referred to so as to be completely understood by the human mind. According to Bartczak and Bokus (2015: 162), one of the most promising methods to study cognitive representations of depressed patients seems to be the analysis of metaphorical conceptualisations associated with different concepts. Indeed, metaphors become a fundamental tool of human cognition because they allow to think and talk of complicated experiences in terms of simpler and more basic ones (Bartczak & Bokus 2015: 163). Nowadays, depression is one of the most common mental disorders in the world (WHO 2017). Depressive disorders involve a series of alterations that affect not only the mood, but also the cognitive, neurovegetative and psychomotor dimensions of the person affected by this disabling medical condition (Friedman *et al.* 2014). In the case of mental illness, language becomes a symptom and indicator of the psychological imbalance; for instance, people under stress often provide important information about their degree of psychological adaptation and psychological defence mechanisms manifest themselves in the way they speak (Pennebaker *et al.* 2003: 548).

Given the inextricable link between metaphors, perceptions and psychological phenomena, this article interprets the data according to a linguistic theory, that is, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and a psychological one, namely Self-determination Theory, discussed in Section 2. Identifying the conceptualisations of an individual is fundamental since human beings tend to act as a consequence of their perception of the world. Our interpretations of ourselves create the world outside of us, and, in turn, the world outside of us influences the way we understand ourselves in a continuous interactive process (Pritzker 2003).

In this article, Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework of reference of the study, as previously mentioned; Section 3 presents the methodology employed and the data gathering process; Section 4 is devoted to the results and discussion of the data and Section 5 summarises the main findings of this study.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Self-determination Theory**

### *2.1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory*

The present study is based on the main principles of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Self-determination Theory (SDT). CMT considers metaphor as an event of thought concerning concepts (Evola 2008: 56), which is why Lakoff and Johnson define it as 'conceptual'. Moreover, in order to define a metaphor as such, two entities of different nature and linked by a relationship of analogy or empiricism must always be involved. In particular, one entity will define the source domain, while the other will circumscribe the target domain. The latter identifies the entity we want to talk about in metaphorical terms, while the source domain designates the entity we use to define the target domain. Semino (2008: 5) defines conceptual domains as rich mental representations, portions of our

basic knowledge related to particular experiences or phenomena. A domain is therefore a coherent organisation of human experience (Kövecses 2017: 24). Using one specific source domain or another is not the same since two different source domains give rise to very different worldviews and create very different realities (Kövecses 2017: 17). The power of metaphors lies in their ability to represent reality by using information and experiences that have already been internalised. In this sense, metaphors become a tool of reality-construction which reveals the mental organisation of a person's experience of the world.

The mapping process between the two domains generates a process of alignment between the two structures involved in the metaphorical creation. This alignment entails a series of matches between the two domains, which will be then combined in a structurally coherent cluster and then in an overall mapping (Gentner & Colhoun 2010: 3). Moreover, as a natural consequence of such alignment, inferences would be transferred from the source domain to the target domain by completing the target structure (Gentner & Colhoun 2010: 3). This mechanism thus becomes a generator of new knowledge; analogy is often used in the process of reasoning and is considered as a force of mental organisation (Gentner & Colhoun 2010). Additionally, in the reasoning process there is a tendency to maintaining the structural coherence of the two domains, which is why the interpretations of a metaphor are limited in order to preserve the consistency of metaphorical mapping. This is an important aspect to be considered when analysing the possible implications of the metaphorical comprehension of a phenomenon given that it constrains its understanding and knowledge. Moreover, given their cognitive nature, metaphors can have the power to shape people's attitudes, which is crucial since research has shown that the moods of people affected by an illness can make a difference in the healing process (Ray 2004; Miller & Blackwell 2006).

## 2.2. *Self-determination Theory*

As for Self-determination Theory (SDT), Deci and Ryan (2000) explain that living organisms come into the world with a series of needs that must be satisfied to ensure their own survival and that of their species. These needs generate instincts of action that lead the organism to act in order to satisfy them. When we think of the basic needs of human beings, we may normally think of physiological needs, such as the need to eat, drink and reproduce. However, according to SDT, human beings also come into the world with a series of primary psychological needs that they need to satisfy in order to maintain a state of well-being. Specifically, this theory has identified three basic psychological needs which, if not satisfied, can lead to a psychophysical disorder: the need for autonomy, the need for connection and the need for competence. Each of these innate needs should be satisfied: just as human beings cannot thrive with food but without water, people cannot thrive psychologically by satisfying only one or two of the psychological needs mentioned. If even one psychological dimension is neglected, this is likely to lead to negative mental consequences.

As far as the need for autonomy is concerned, this refers to the organismic desire to organise one's own life experience and behaviour and to act in accordance with one's own vision of oneself (Deci & Ryan 2000). Indeed, Deci and Ryan (254) claim that the need to

develop an integrated self is a reflection of the deepest and most archaic human nature that tends towards the cohesion and unity of the self, thus avoiding its fragmentation. It is part of the human psychological architecture to integrate the different intrapsychic and interpersonal experiences that individuals live into a unity. As a result, the need for autonomy clashes with situations in which dynamics of coercive force develop.

Regarding the need for connection, this refers to the need and desire to feel connected to others, to love and feel loved, to care for people and to be cared for (Deci & Ryan 2000: 231). Finally, the need for competence takes into account the human wish to bring about effects on the surrounding environment as a consequence of one's actions. However, in order to act, people need to feel like they possess the necessary skills and abilities to be able to influence their environment and thus generate an impact on it.

The innate psychological needs theorised by Deci and Ryan (2000) would be universal since they concern the most archaic and profound architecture of the human psyche. Self-determination theory therefore argues that the satisfaction of these three primary psychological needs is associated with a general well-being of the individual. On the contrary, the inability to satisfy them is associated with a deficit in the person's psychophysical well-being.

Combining CMT with SDT proves useful in order to investigate the psychological implications of a medical condition on the people suffering from it. Since it is crucial to satisfy basic psychological human needs for one's well-being, metaphors can contribute to signaling whether those essential needs are met or not. In this sense, CMT was chosen since it regards metaphor in language as related to metaphor in thought and it underlines its significant framing function, which is remarkably relevant to the context of serious illnesses (Semino *et al.* 2017).

### 3. Methodology and Data

In order to identify and analyze the metaphors associated with depressive disorders, four online *fora* dealing with mental illness have been selected. Online *fora* were chosen because they can provide a genuine representation of a disease: in these virtual discussion platforms individuals suffering from an illness can find a space where they can be understood and where their feelings and emotions are not inhibited, but rather expressed freely. This online tool represents a valuable resource to rebuild one's identity when it is disrupted by a disease. Online *fora* therefore contribute to the construction of the self and the construction of a community. In this way, the typical dynamics of these virtual tools make it possible to create support groups among individuals who share the same life experience.

Regarding the data gathering process, the four online *fora* chosen are: *Mental Health Forum*, *Depression Understood*, *Beyond Blue* and *Mind*. 71 users were selected in order to collect data on how individuals generally represent their experience of depression. Users were divided as follows: 33 users from the forum *Mental Health Forum*, 21 users from *Depression Understood*, 12 users from *Beyond Blue* and 5 users from *Mind*. The number of users varies among the *fora* since some criteria of selection were adopted and if a post did not satisfy them (e.g. users dealing with aspects of depression that were not of any interest for the

purpose of this article) it was not taken into account. The total number of words analysed and that composes the corpus is 15473. Data collection took place between February 2019 and August 2019. The most recent post dates back to 15<sup>th</sup> August 2019, whereas the least recent dates back to 5<sup>th</sup> August 2015. The criteria of selection that were adopted considered the fact that online *fora* had to be in English – any variety – and they had to be open-access for privacy reasons. Moreover, users who wrote about other aspects of depressive disorders (e.g. medical treatment) were not selected: the main aim of this article is to investigate the experience of depression as described by individuals who suffer from it; as a consequence, I considered posts who could answer the following questions: how do they describe their experience of depression? How do they describe what depression provokes to their mental and bodily health? How do they describe the feelings and emotions they experience when living with depression?

With regard to the process of metaphor identification, the MIPVU procedure was followed (Steen 2010). This method was chosen as one of the most used and precise in the field of metaphor study. It includes various stages of analysis: first of all, it recommends to read the entire text in order to reach a general understanding of it; secondly, it suggests establishing the meaning in context of each lexical unit; thirdly, it should be determined whether each lexical unit may have a more basic meaning in other contexts of use (that is, more concrete, related to bodily action, and historically older). If the lexical unit has a more basic meaning in other contexts, consider whether its significance contrasts with that basic meaning; in this case, flag it as ‘word used metaphorically’.

As for the examples that will be reported, they will display the exact words used by the users taken into account. This is the reason why, for the sake of authenticity of the data collected, there could be grammatical and/or spelling mistakes. Moreover, neither the nicknames nor the dates will be reported in order to preserve the privacy of individuals.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

According to Ryan and Deci (2000: 68), the most all-encompassing representation of humanity exhibits the human being as a creature that is naturally curious, vital, and self-motivated. In their best and most primordial form, human beings are generally actors of their own lives, inspired to act and animated by a constant desire to learn, improve, and master different skills. The theoretical framework of SDT exposes the essence of human nature and is fundamental to understand that the metaphors associated with depression show that this disorder entails a progressive withdrawal of the depressed individual from what most makes him/her vital. In this context, metaphors become key indicators to understand whether individuals exhibit a general tendency towards what fully develops their human nature or whether, on the contrary, they signal a tendency towards a maladaptive psychological dimension that affects their mental health. In the table below I list the metaphors associated with depression that were more frequently found in my corpus. On the left, I list the conceptual metaphors found in the data, and on the right I indicate the number of expressions related to a specific metaphor per number of words – that is, as mentioned in Section 3, 15473 words:

Metaphor	Number of expressions per number of words
DEPRESSION IS A DOWNWARD MOVEMENT	47
DEPRESSION IS DARKNESS	38
DEPRESSION IS A CONFLICT	27
DEPRESSION IS A BOUNDED SPACE	25
DEPRESSION IS DISINTEGRATION OF THE SELF	23
DEPRESSION IS AN OPPRESSIVE FORCE	22
THE DEPRESSED PERSON IS A CONTAINER	19
DEPRESSION IS EMPTINESS	19
DEPRESSION IS INCAPACITY TO MOVE	16
DEPRESSION IS ISOLATION / DISCONNECTION	14
DEPRESSION IS A PATH	13
DEPRESSION IS LACK OF CONTROL	11
DEPRESSION IS A LIVING CREATURE	11
DEPRESSION IS BEING LOST	10
DEPRESSION IS DROWNING	9
DEPRESSION IS BEING TRAPPED	9
DEPRESSION IS BAD WEATHER	8
DEPRESSION IS BEING LIFELESS	8
THE DEPRESSED MIND IS A MACHINE	8
DEPRESSION IS AN ACTIVE FORCE	7
RECOVERY FROM DEPRESSION IS LIGHT	6
THE DEPRESSED MIND IS A CONTAINER	5
DEPRESSION IS COLDNESS	3
DEPRESSION IS LACK OF DIRECTION	2
RECOVERY FROM DEPRESSION IS ABILITY TO MOVE	2

The metaphors more frequently found are those that represent depression as involving a DOWNWARD MOVEMENT. Moreover, some metaphorical expressions also described depression as generating a feeling of DROWNING. Even though the implications and emotions involved may be different, these two metaphors convey a great consistency in their structure given that they both represent depression as going downwards, rather than upwards. The second most found metaphor (DEPRESSION IS DARKNESS) portrays depression as a condition conceptually dominated by dark colours. Also, individuals writing about their RECOVERY from depression sometimes described it as a return to LIGHT and the ability to lift oneself up (DEPRESSION IS ABILITY TO MOVE). These examples demonstrate that metaphors create a consistent network of conceptualisations used to talk about a given topic.

Consider now some different metaphorical conceptualisations derived from the data:

1. *I feel trapped by my anxiety and depression on the inside I feel numb, lifeless and empty.*
2. *Without a job or the ability to go out and socialize and meet new people my life is going nowhere.  
I don't want to be stuck in this situation for ever.*
3. *So today is one of those really depressing days where I feel as though my life is stuck in an eternal fixed position. I'm experiencing so many setbacks which is just destroying my mental health and making me feel as though my life is going nowhere at all.*

The underlined figurative expressions are manifestations of the more general metaphor DEPRESSION IS INCAPACITY TO MOVE. In the data, users sometimes complain of an inability to move from where they are: they are trapped, they feel stuck in a position from where they cannot move, they think that their life is not progressing ahead. Conceptually, the depressed person cannot move forward. The frame of reference of these conceptualisations is MOTION ALONG A PATH, which we can consider as a primary conceptualisation since it is not based on a perceived analogy between two domains, but rather on human interaction with their own environment. One's life purpose becomes moving forward along the path in order to reach the final destination, which is the purpose of the route. What is interesting is that in the corpus I found both the metaphor LIFE IS A PATH and DEPRESSION IS A PATH; however, one excluded the other: moving forward in the depression path meant being stuck in the life path, whereas progressing in the life path meant that one could recover from depression and leave it behind. The depressed person therefore cannot move forward and /or feel lost in their life journey:

4. *You [depression] have made me have to reassess everything I know, to feel lost without hope of being found.*
5. *[...] Next time I might not be able to find my way back.*
6. *I know it's hard sometimes, and you lost motivation and seem to be lost.*

Depression, therefore, alters one's perception of what it means to live meaningfully. Examples 4, 5, and 6 are metaphorical expressions that reflect the conceptual metaphor DEPRESSION IS LACK OF DIRECTION, which is consistent with the LIFE IS A PATH frame. Depression becomes a symptom of the incapacity to satisfy one of the three human psychological needs: the need for competence. As mentioned above, one of the metaphors associated with depression is DEPRESSION IS INCAPACITY TO MOVE; the depressed person does not believe that s/he possesses the necessary skills and abilities to progress on his/her own life journey. Accordingly, the need for competence is not satisfied and, as a consequence, as predicted by SDT, individuals experience negative psychological consequences, which alter their state of well-being. This situation is potentially very harmful: when a person feels stuck in a position without any possibility of progress because s/he does not see any possible direction, s/he



might have the feeling of not seeing any future ahead of him/her. Moreover, some users also seem to think that one of the tools necessary to act and feel competent in their life is not working properly: their mind. This is testified by the THE DEPRESSED MIND IS A MACHINE metaphor found in the corpus: some users described their mind as being a broken machine that no longer could work properly, thus making them feel unable to live efficiently.

Here are some examples from the data of metaphorical expressions associated with improving one's mental state:

7. *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.*

8. *My journey through depression; from falling in to clambering out, and what I clung onto that helped.*

The metaphorical expressions in examples 7 and 8 describe actions to be taken in order to get out of one's depressive state. They designate an active effort and a capacity of movement from which it derives that RECOVERY FROM DEPRESSION IS CAPACITY TO MOVE: the need for competence is therefore re-established. Healing from depression restores one's need for competence because it displays that the individual is able to put into practice the necessary moves to improve one's state.

Thanks to the analysis of metaphors of depression, it is possible to identify the lack of satisfaction of another primary psychological need of the human being: the need for connection, that is, to connect with others and with one's environment. Indeed, the metaphors DEPRESSION IS ISOLATION and DEPRESSION IS DISCONNECTION are quite frequently found in the data analysed, as in the examples below:

9. *I always feel a barrier exists with everyone I meet, one i can never break down and progress into closeness.*

10. *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.*

11. *Recently had my birthday and I've never felt so cold and disconnected, it made me realize how badly things have deteriorated over time.*

12. *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.*

The metaphorical expressions underlined in the examples 9 to 12 show how depression leads to a disconnection, resulting in an isolation from the social environment of interaction. This generates a situation of otherness in which depressed people feel alienated from their environment and the people around them, and causes a perceived separation between themselves and the world. This is also clear from some other expressions found

in the corpus and concerning the metaphor THE DEPRESSED PERSON IS A CONTAINER since this metaphor was often used to underline a disconnection between what was occurring *inside* the depressed individual and what was perceived *outside*. Moreover, this container is often empty (DEPRESSION IS EMPTINESS) which denotes a lack of emotional resonance in the depressed subject. Bearing in mind that the human being is, as often mentioned, a social animal, this disconnection can lead to a psychological malaise since one of the innate psychological needs most ingrained in the human psyche is not satisfied. These examples also include a feeling of being confined since depressed individuals feel trapped as if inside a goldfish bowl (example 10) or a bubble (example 12). As a consequence, the individuals feel that they cannot even generate an impact on their environment through their actions, which is instead an essential feeling to preserve one's psychological well-being. Example 11 also highlights an important link between perception and metaphor: the social exclusion and disconnection implicated in the experience of depression can truly make one feel cold (DEPRESSION IS COLDNESS), as also examined by Zhong and Leonardelli (2008).

The boundaries between the different psychological human needs are very blurred. The examples analysed so far, which reveal a dissatisfaction of the need for connection or the need for competence – or both –, also reveal a dissatisfaction of the need for autonomy. The latter is closely related to the concept of individual freedom which, however, cannot be achieved in depressive states. Some metaphorical expressions portray depressed individuals in the process of experiencing a feeling of being trapped. This is the case of all those figurative expressions that can be classified within the metaphorical conceptualisation DEPRESSION IS BEING TRAPPED, but also DEPRESSION IS A BOUNDED SPACE metaphor since it generates a feeling of being imprisoned in a confined space:

13. *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.*

14. *Depression obviously isn't a cave but METAPHORICALLY it sure is. [...] My depression cave is good for temporary shelter but not long-term residence. [...] My depression cave is useful to consign unneeded and unwanted negative thoughts and emotions to deep pits.*

15. *They could do nothing to save me, but watch me crumble into my pit of darkness [...] but, that was where you [depression] wanted me, wasn't it?*

The metaphorical expressions highlighted in examples 13 to 15 show how depressed subjects live with a constant feeling of being trapped within a confined space from which they struggle to get out. This space is normally a dark, suffocating, narrow, and isolated place. Accordingly, the individual's need for autonomy is not satisfied since the feeling of being trapped does not allow them to feel free to self-develop. This self-development incapacity is also exacerbated by the fact that depressed people feel unable to maintain control over themselves and their lives: some of their figurative expressions point towards the metaphor DEPRESSION IS LACK OF CONTROL, as in the following examples:

16. I feel like the darkness is taking over, I have lost all hope of getting through this and don't feel like it's worth the effort.

17. I thought I would never make it back from the darkness because this time the darkness took control of everything in my life.

18. Its mainly just my thoughts i cant control them i always try to think possitive but i could be having a realy good day and suddenly my thoughts take over and twist my head about and make things bad.

These examples indicate that depressed subjects struggle to maintain control over their thoughts and life. Depression is thus portrayed as a strong force that fights against a weak one – that is, the person suffering from depressive disorders. The third most used metaphor found in the corpus is indeed DEPRESSION IS A CONFLICT: in this battle depression is often described as a general ACTIVE FORCE or takes the form of a LIVING CREATURE. In the representation of depression, the fight metaphor involving two opponents is a clear manifestation of the most basic conceptualisation EMOTIONS ARE FORCES. As previously mentioned, the satisfaction of the need for autonomy is lacking in contexts where dynamics of coercive force develop. This is therefore the case of depression denoted as an OPPRESSIVE FORCE:

19. Every time i flirt with the idea of hope the wave of dread washes over me, almost paralyzing me.

20. Its like my own personal natural disaster leaving me utterly destitute of hope.

21. It can wrap you in a coil so tight, you can feel nothing good around you.

The need for autonomy requires that the human psychic architecture develops a vision of the self as a unity that tends towards cohesion and coherence of one's ideas, values and life experiences. As a consequence, living situations that disrupt one's feeling of unity of the self can have serious implications on their psychological dimension, leading to alienation and disintegration of the self. In the data analysed in this study, it is evident that this necessary psychic unity is lacking during the experience of depression, thus revealing a dissatisfaction of one of our most basic psychological needs. This lack is reflected through language in the form of different metaphors, such as DEPRESSION IS DISINTEGRATION OF THE SELF, which is the fifth most found metaphor of the corpus:

22. It just feels as if I'm falling to pieces and those pieces are majority broken.

23. I've always felt like something's important is missing from my life. Like, 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.

These examples show that the experience of depression leads to an alteration of the

unity of the self. The metaphors in the examples above create an imagery of disintegration, separation, and shattering that becomes one of the symptoms of a deteriorated psychological dimension.

## 5. Conclusions

This article identified and analysed the main metaphorical conceptualisations resulting from the experience of depression as communicated by individuals writing online. To this end, four online *fora* dealing with mental disorders were selected and data gathered in order to investigate whether and how their users represent depression through the use of metaphors. The total number of users selected was 71 and the total number of words analysed was 15473. The data collected were interpreted by means of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Self-determination Theory (SDT). Combining a linguistic theory (CMT) with a psychological one (SDT) allowed to understand what the metaphors associated with depression could disclose about the consequences of this mental disorder and which patterns of metaphor use were more frequently found in people living with depressive disorders and writing in online fora.

This study demonstrate that metaphor analysis can potentially help to discern between a harmonic psychological dimension and a problematic one, hence it could contribute to diagnosing psychological conditions. In this sense, it may be possible to make predictions on which metaphorical patterns could emerge in optimal mental conditions and which ones could instead signal a tendency towards a psychological malaise. This sheds light on the potential force of metaphors to reveal aspects of the mind that otherwise could not be examined empirically.

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