How we think about depression: Metaphors matter

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The metaphors we use to describe abstract ideas and emotions influence the way we reason about them (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Recent empirical work shows that subtle instantiations of metaphorical frames influence how we conceptualize social matters. For example, metaphors used to describe *crime* affect how people form opinions about it (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011).

Descriptions of emotional disorders vary according to culture and historical context. Framing mental illness as *brain disease* – as opposed to a reaction to or consequence of psychosocial factors – has been proposed as a strategy to fight stigma in recent years. However, this framing may also cause undesired attributions to patients (Corrigan & Watson, 2004).

Here we explore whether metaphorical framing influences how we conceptualize *depression*. First, we conducted a corpus analysis using the *CREA* corpus of written Spanish to investigate how people refer to depression, using texts from Argentina, Chile and Colombia. We searched for the target domain lexical item *depresión* (depression). Phrases in which the target word was embedded in metaphorical expressions were extracted – 151 cases in 735 total occurrences distributed over 160 documents published in press, magazines, fiction, and non-fiction books. The identification of metaphorical expressions was done according to methodological guidelines described in Stefanowitsch and Gries (2006). Three main conceptual mappings were identified: DEPRESSION IS HOLLOW PLACE (42,3% – metaphorical expression example: El estaba *sumido* en *profunda* depresión); DEPRESSION IS DISEASE (37,8% – example: La *enfermedad* de depresión […]); DEPRESSION IS ADVERSARY (17% – example: Me *atacó* una depresión). Other mappings accounted for less than 2% of the total.

Recent work shows that when emotional disorders are framed as brain disease, people make attributions not only about the *onset* of the disorder (biology) but also its *offset* (Corrigan & Watson, 2004) – Will the patient get better to live a normal life? Using a similar experimental paradigm to Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011), we investigated whether metaphorical expressions influence people´s estimates of likelihood of recovery from depression. Sixty participants were given a case description where four typical symptoms were listed. Depression was metaphorically described either as a *disease*, an *attacker/adversary*, or *hollow place*. Symptoms were identically described in all three conditions. The results revealed that participants exposed to the *disease* metaphorical frame rated long-term recovery as a less likely event than the other two groups ($F(1,58)=9.1$; $p = .004$), while participants exposed to *hollow place* metaphorical frame perceived greater likelihood of short-term recovery ($F(1,58)=5.07$; $p=.028$). Results are discussed in relation to the role of metaphor in abstract concepts and knowledge structure.

References

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