

Reframing breast cancer experience through metaphors: A new operative system to enhance patients' healing processes



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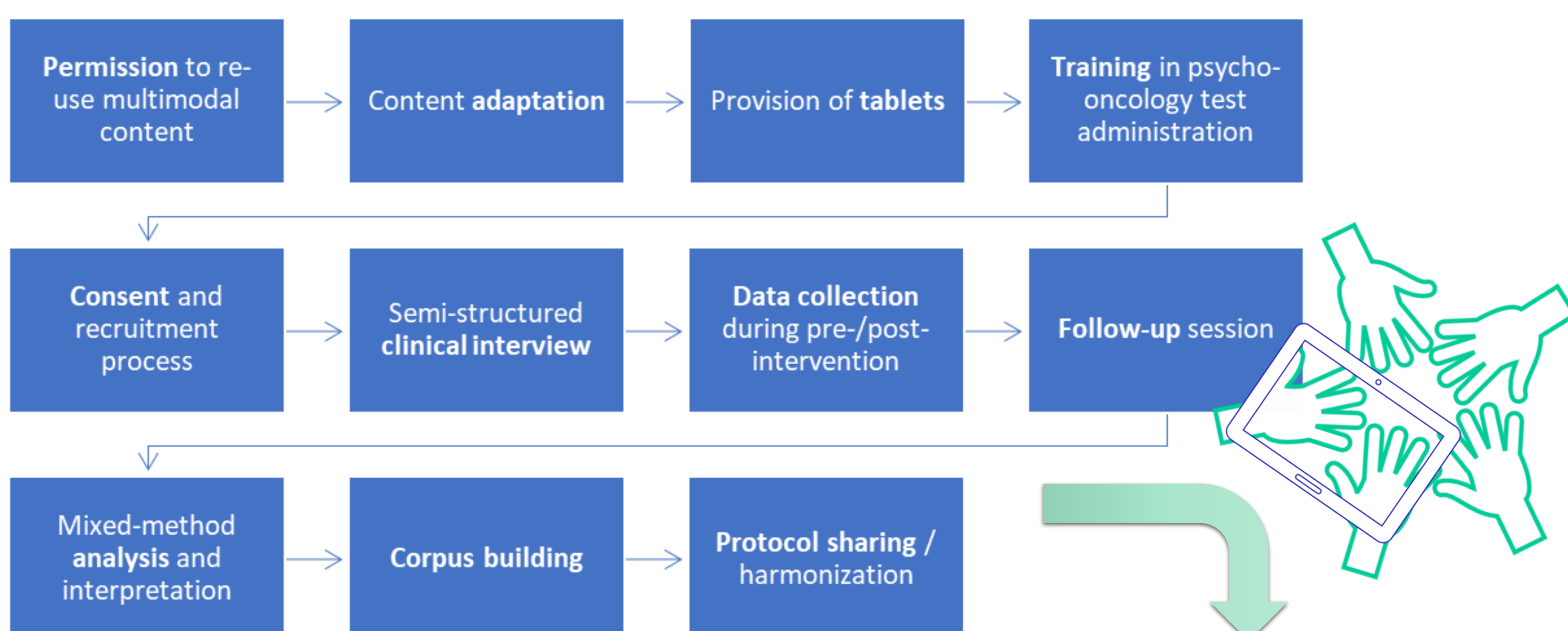
BACKGROUND

Adapting healthcare to patients' metaphor use is key in understanding how language may both reflect and affect patients' emotional and cognitive processes, with considerable impact on their healing trajectories (Hommerberg, Gustafsson & Sandgren, 2020). Inspired by Sontag's work (1978), several studies criticized the use of bellicose metaphors for cancer as they provide reductive or stereotypical narratives (Holmes, 2011) that negatively frame illness experience, with the risk of inducing a sense of fatalism or self-blame in patients who are likely to 'lose' their 'battle' (Semino et al., 2018). Comparing cancer to an 'enemy to be fought' may even compromise adherence (Hauser & Schwarz, 2020), unfolding the need for further cross-disciplinary research aimed at avoiding disempowering communication between health professionals and patients as well as to bridging the gap between cognition and discourse (Maglie, 2015; Maglie & Abbatantuono, 2020; Semino, 2017).

Spurred on by patients' demand for personalized communication while coping with breast cancer and related diagnostic-therapeutic implications (Putignano et al., 2020), the authors have pledged to yield a shared perspective on patients' manifold illness experience through the assessment of their illness representations, emotional status, and cognitive-discursive strategies. To this end, a systematic protocol is being adopted within the Breast Care Unit (BCU) of Bari University Hospital, with the opportunity of extending the proposal to further Apulian clinics. The design and implementation of the patient-tailored protocol meets the criteria provided by the World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki.

PROJECT PRESENTATION

Protocol procedures involve the administration of psychological screening inventories together with visual-verbal cards retrieved from Semino's Metaphor Menu (2019)



1st stage → Application for permission to re-use content retrieved from *A Metaphor Menu for people living with Cancer* obtained by Semino's team based at Lancaster University.

Content adaptation required:

(1) the translation ENG → ITA, on inter-rater basis; (2) cultural adjustments of metaphors, based on a focus group where N=6 informed participants agreed about the need to: (1) use 10/17 metaphors, considered to be 'the most representative of their condition' and matching each image; (2) avoid repetitions of "cancer", in favor of synonyms, e.g., "tumore", "malattia".

Supplement → 3 items concerning the 'current', 'desired', and 'expected' health condition; a blank space fillable with a personal cancer metaphor (word/sentence).

All BCU patients gave their informed consent to be administered the protocol (pre-/post-surgery + a 2-month follow-up). A team of well-trained psychologists provided women with tablet computers and digitalized tools. Demographic, anamnestic and clinical data were collected through semi-structured interview. The pre-intervention protocol is also used for follow-up purposes. In addition, DT is administered two days after tumor removal (on inpatient basis).

The creation of two separate multivariate models will allow for: (1) the detection of differences in the potential predictability of psychological variables involved in pre-/post-intervention; (2) the comparison of predictive psychological domains (among coping strategies, distress, mood, body perception, internalizing/externalizing symptoms) with dichotomous variables extracted from the Metaphor Menu (positive/negative discourse prosody; string length; medical/lay register). Authors will also seek to build a corpus of patients' metaphors to establish a personalized procedure of assessment based on linguistic-cognitive features that may affect patients' therapeutic processes.

Brief Cope (BC; Carver et al., 1997)

28-item Likert scale used to assess coping strategies through the measurement of 14 dispositional and situational factors underpinning stress response

Distress Thermometer (DT; Roth et al., 1998)

One-item Likert scale specifically designed to measure psychological distress in people affected by cancer

Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck et al., 1996)

21-item Likert scale representing the gold standard in screening for depression among subjects aged <65 years.

Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS; Yesavage et al., 1982)

Self-report measure of depression based on 30 items specifically designed for people aged 65 years or over

Body Uneasiness Test (BUT; Cuzzolaro et al., 2006)

Self-report tool aimed at assessing body image disturbance and body concerns made up of part A (BUT-A consisting of 34 items) and B (BUT-B consisting of 36 items)

Symptom Checklist - Rev. (SCL-90; Derogatis, 1977)

90-item Likert used to detect psychological issues across 9 primary symptomatological dimensions

Metaphor Menu (Semino et al., 2019)

- Adapted version of Semino's collection of metaphors inspired by a range of different people who have experienced cancer, supplemented by 4 specific items

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<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/melc/the-metaphor-menu/>