The Categorization of Thought Disorder

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We describe the development of a new system for categorizing thought disorder. In the development phase (Study 1), we examined the degree to which speech samples and definitions of thought disorder subtypes taken from: (1) the Scale for the Assessment of Thought, Language, and Communication (TLC); (2) the Thought Disorder Index (TDI); and (3) the Assessment of Bizarre-Idiosyncratic Thinking (BIT), reflected disturbances in form versus disturbances in content. Ratings were provided by naive judges, experienced clinicians, and linguistic experts. The results contributed to the development of a new system dividing thought disorder into disturbances in (1) fluency, (2) discourse coherence, (3) content, and (4) social convention. In the validation phase (Study 2), 21 schizophrenic and 19 manic subjects were interviewed, interpreted proverbs, and responded to Rorschach cards. Subjects' speech was rated using the TLC, TDI, and BIT. We also measured hallucinations, delusions, and digit span performance. The results of Study 2 provided evidence supporting the validity of our new categorization system.

Disturbances in thought and speech have long been a central focus for researchers interested in understanding the etiology of schizophrenia. As

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pointed out by Maher (1972), "Psychopathologists have tended to regard the phenomena of schizophrenic language as reflections of a more basic disturbance of thought" (p. 3). Although a wealth of research has been conducted on thought disorder, confusion abounds concerning its definition (Andreasen, 1982). This difficulty defining thought disorder is not surprising when one considers that both of the following samples of schizophrenic speech have been presented as examples of thought disorder: (1) "After John Black has recovered in special neutral form of life the honest bring back to doctor's agents must take John Black out through making up design meaning straight neutral underworld shadow tunnel" (Chaika, 1990, p. 24); and (2) "When I first looked at it, it looked like a bat flying away, then I looked at it again, it looked like a bat coming toward me" (Solovay, Shenton, & Holzman, 1986, p. 494). Several psychopathologists (e.g., Andreasen, 1982; Cutting & Murphy, 1988) have pointed out that "thought disorder" is not a unitary construct, but rather encompasses several different components.

The question of how to conceptualize and measure thought disorder is analogous to the question of how to conceptualize and measure intelligence. Like thought disorder, intelligence is comprised of several different components. Just as the different facets of intelligence tend to covary, so do the different facets of thought disorder. Almost any reliable measure of intelligence can distinguish between individuals with profound developmental disabilities and control subjects. Similarly, almost any reliable measure of thought disorder can distinguish between schizophrenic and nonpsychiatric individuals. Even though different intellectual skills tend to covary, and almost all intelligence tests can distinguish between extreme groups, there can be little doubt that conceptualizing intelligence as being comprised of several different skills has enabled researchers to advance our understanding of those skills. For example, it is unlikely that the neural mechanisms underlying visuospatial skills and verbal comprehension would have become clear if researchers had never measured anything more specific than general intelligence. In our view, it is as important to distinguish between the different facets of thought disorder as it is to distinguish between the different facets of intelligence. We believe that a complete understanding of the varying phenomena labeled as thought disorder will probably never be achieved if we do not move beyond examining measures of global thought disorder.

Unfortunately, even if one agrees that thought disorder is an amalgamation of several different deficits, it is not entirely clear what the different components are or how they should be defined. An early distinction concerning the different facets of thought disorder was made by Schilder (1920/1951), who distinguished between disturbances in content and distur-