DEVELOPMENT OF THE GERMAN SCREENING TEST (KKT) FOR CONCRETISTIC THOUGHT DISORDER – A PILOT STUDY

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Abstract

Objective: Concretism is a well-known symptom in patients with schizophrenia. Our aim was to develop a screening tool for the use in in early recognition of psychosis.

Method: Subjects referred to the early recognition centre at the Psychiatric Services in Münsterlingen/Switzerland completed a comprehensive neuropsychological test battery including multiple choice proverb items.

Results: The performance on the multiple choice proverb items of patients in an at risk mental state and first episode patients differed significantly from patients with other psychiatric diagnosis. We optimised discriminant validity and efficiency of the test by deleting items.

Conclusions: The present study suggests that a short proverb test can efficiently and effectively discriminate between patients at risk of psychosis or psychosis and patient controls.

Key words: concretism, schizophrenia, early recognition of psychosis, thought disorder, German Screening Test

Declaration of interest: none

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I. Introduction

For more than a century psychopathologists have observed diverse impairments in language processing in patients with schizophrenia which are commonly regarded as formal thought disorders (FTD). One aspect of these impairments is concretism: patients with schizophrenia often fail to grasp the figurative meaning of metaphors, proverbs, idiomatic expressions or irony (e.g. Finkh 1906). Several scholars, among them Bleuler (1911) and Gorham (1956) regarded concretism (as an example of FTD) as one of the fundamental symptoms of schizophrenia. Although the mechanisms by which FTD translate into psychotic symptoms are still unclear, abnormalities in thinking are classically viewed as the primary disorder, which eventually `find their expression in language´ (Bleuler 1911, p. 121). In contrast, recent approaches (e.g. Hinzen and Rosselló 2015) suggest that linguistic disorganisation itself could be the key element in the pathogenesis of psychotic symtoms. In this view e.g. positive symptoms can be explained by a breakdown of how language configures thought. Concretistic interpretations of speech are thus a result of a failure to integrate word meaning on a sentence-level.

The relevance of formal thought disorder in schizophrenia is also highlighted by a review of Roche and colleagues (2015) since it seems to be very common and associated with increased clinical severity of the illness. Furthermore, difficulties in abstract thinking have been proposed as indicators of developing psychosis in the context of early recognition (Klosterkötter et al. 1987). Therefore, tests for the assessment of concretism could be suitable to effectively and efficiently identify patients with schizophrenia and even persons at risk of developing schizophrenia and measure a relevant aspect of the disease.

Although widely accepted as an important objective in routine psychopathological assessment, concretism is most frequently explored in rather unsystematic ways, e.g. by probing proverb interpretation, which can be criticized for its poor reliability.

More promising are standardized tools (e.g. Gorham 1956) that assess proverb interpretation within a multiple choice format. Barth and Küfferle (2001) for example developed a German multiple choice proverb test. Using a multiple choice format, patients with schizophrenia could be reliably distinguished from patients with depression and normal controls in a number of studies (Barth and Küfferle 2001, Greig et al. 2004, Sponheim et al. 2003, Brüne and Bodenstein 2005). However, as these instruments have

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not generally been used in early recognition, their value for improving prediction remains unclear (Blessing et al. 2006). Furthermore, the applicability of Barth and Küfferle´s test may be limited because of its long administration time that may overstrain patients with imminent psychosis. Other shortcomings concern test construction. The test does not only contain proverbs but also idiomatic expressions and response options vary in numbers across items.

Our aim was therefore to develop a short screening tool, the Short Proverb Test for Concretism (German: "Konkretismus Kurz Test", KKT) to assess proverb interpretation in a multiple choice format that should be optimized to discriminate persons at risk of psychosis or psychosis from person with nonpsychotic clinical conditions.

II. Methods

Participants

In this study we analysed data collected between Mai 2013 and July 2015 at the early recognition service for outpatients in Münsterlingen/Switzerland. The study was approved by the local Ethical Committee. Several subjects were excluded due to hospitalization during the assessments (N = 6), or inappropriate language skills (N = 1), or missing data (N = 3). Two persons refused to participate in the study.

The study included 9 individuals who fulfilled at risk mental state (ARMS) criteria according to either the Comprehensive Assessment of At-risk Mental States (CAARMS (Yung et al. 2006) or the basic symptom approach (Schultze-Lutter et al. 2007), 9 individuals who fulfilled ICD-10 schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder criteria (PS), and 10 individuals with one or more non-psychotic psychiatric disorders (OD, 8 individuals fulfilled criteria for an affective disorder, 4 for at least one anxiety disorder, 2 for a personality disorder, 1 for Asperger's disease and 1 for posttraumatic stress disorder). Participants had no history of neurological disorder, developmental disorder, closed head injury, chronic medical diseases such as diabetes or other significant medical condition.

The mean age of participants was 25.8 (SD=8.54), 13 /28 were female. They reported a mean of 11.3 (SD=1.82) years of education. The respective demographic data and neuropsychological test performance of the three groups as well as group differences on these variables are displayed in **table 1**.

Procedure

Diagnostic procedures included the completion of the Schizophrenia-Proneness Instrument for Adults (SPI-A, Schultze-Lutter et al. 2007), the Comprehensive Assessment of At-Risk Mental States (CAARMS, Yung et al. 2006) and the Mini-International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI, Sheehan et al. 1998). Psychiatric diagnoses were made with ICD-10 checklists and validated by consensus between the senior psychiatrists (R.S.) and two clinical psychologists with long-term diagnostic experience (A.B., A.G.). Family informants and medical records were used as auxilliary sources.

Table 1. *Demographics, clinical features and neuropsychological test performance*

	ARMS (mean/SD)	PS	OD	Total	Kruskal-Wallis p (Chi2)
Age	24.7(7.43)	24.9(8.66)	27.5(9.88)	25.8(8.54)	.50 (1.39)
Gender f/m	3/6	5/4	5/5	13/15	
Education	10.9(1.62)	11.6(2.55)	11.3(1.25)	11.3(1.82)	.81 (.41)
BSI18	16(14.85)	19.75(13.63)	18.3(15.2)	17.96(14.15)	.98 (.04)
BPRS	31.7 (8.14)	33.44 (9.33)	23.3 (13.35)	29.25 (11.21)	.22 (3.06)
KKT 8 Items	4.44(2.65)	4.22(2.28)	6.5(1.78)	5.11(2.41)	.046 (6.16)
KKT 6 Items	3.33(2)	3.22(1.86)	5.3(1.06)	4(1.89)	.01 (8.90)
D2 GZ	395.33(88.84)	382.78 (117.13)	428.78(46.89) N=9	402.3(87.85) N=27	.60 (1.03)
D2 F%	4.06(1.98)	8.91(8.43)	3.66(2.41) N=9	5.54(5.55) N=27	.32 (2.27)
D2 KL	138.67(26.35)	125(48.68)	162.1(21.01) N=9	141.93(36.37) N=27	.33 (2.27)
RWT S	13.1(3.1)	14.1(3.86)	17.1(4.31) N=9	14.8(4.03) N=27	.08 (5.14)
RWT animals	21(3.08)	19.1(4.68)	24(3.7) N=9	21.4(4.25) N=27	.06 (5.55)
AVLGT	51.9(7.8)	52.9(9.7)	58.8(7.45)	54.7(8.62)	.15 (3.76)
WIE-S	25.8(2.49)	23.6(4.93)	28.6(2.37)	26.1(3.92)	.01 (9.51)

Note. BSI-18= Brief Symptom Inventory 18; BPRS= Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale; KKT 8= multiple choice proverb test Konkretismus-Kurz-Test, 8 item version; KKT6= multiple choice proverb test Konkretismus-Kurz-Test, 6 item version; D2GZ= speed performance in the letter cancellation task D2-Aufmerksamkeitsbelastungstest; D2F%= percentage of errors in the letter cancellation task D2-Aufmerksamkeitsbelastungstest; D2KL= error corrected speed performance in the letter cancellation task D2-Aufmerksamkeitsbelastungstest; RWT S= subtest of the verbal fluency test Regensburger Wortflüssigkeitstest; RWT animals= subtest of the verbal fluency test Regensburger Wortflüssigkeitstest; AVLGT= word list learning task Auditiv Verbaler Lern- und Gedächtnistest; WIE-S= similarities subtest of the German version of the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale – Revised;

To assess current levels of psychological distress participants completed the Brief Symptom Inventory 18 (BSI18). Psychopathological status was rated with the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale (BPRS, Gorham et al. 1959)

All patients completed a comprehensive neuropsychological test battery. Tests included the similarities subtest (WIE-S) of the German version of the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale – Revised (WIE, Aster et al. 2006), a German version of the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale – Revised (WAIS-R), to provide a measure of premorbid intelligence. Executive functions were assessed using verbal fluency tasks (Two subtests of the Regensburger Wortflüssigkeitstest, RWT; Aschenbrenner et al. 2000). Memory was assessed using a German word list learning task (Auditiv Verbaler Lern- und Gedächtnistest, AVLGT; Balzer et al. 2011). Concentration/speed was assessed using a letter cancellation task (D2-Aufmerksamkeitsbelastungstest). Finally, patients completed 8 newly developed multiple choice proverb items (KKT).

Development of the Short Proverb Interpretation Test

We did an informal survey among German and Swiss people to identify well known proverbs. For each of the 8 chosen proverbs we devised one correct and three false answers. One of the false answers was completely unrelated to the literal as well as figurative meaning of the proverb; another answer misunderstood the proverb completely literal, while one option took only elements of the proverb literally. To illustrate, "a bad workman always blames his tools" means that a person with lack of skill will find externalizing excuses for his lack of skill. The incorrect answering options would be for example: "when things seem at their worst, they can begin to improve" (completely incorrect) or "a person with deficiencies always has bad tools." (partially literal interpretation) and "bad workmen only have bad tools, for that reason they always blame their tools" (completely literal interpretation).

Data Analysis

The error score, i.e. number of incorrect answers in the KKT was calculated for each participant. Because error scores were non-normally distributed, group differences (ARMS, PS, OD) in KKT performance were tested using one-sided Wilcoxon tests with p = .05. If groups did not differ, they were collapsed into one. Error scores of the resulting groups were analysed using a binary logistic model to assess discriminant validity. In this model test performance (i.e. error scores) were used to predict group classification (e.g. schizophrenic vs. non-schizophrenic). We calculated the percentage of overall correct classifications, sensitivity and specificity rates. An item analysis was carried out to delete items with insufficient discriminatory power. Finally, we used a binary logistic model to assess discriminant validity of the optimised test.

In an exploratory analysis we calculated correlations between KKT performance and demographic variables as well as neuropsychological tests using the Spearman correlation coefficient.

III. Results

The group comparisons of the error scores in the KKT revealed significant differences between ARMS and OD (Wilcoxon-W: 66.000, p = .03), between PS and OD (Wilcoxon-W: 63.000, p = .01) and no significant difference between ARM and PS (Wilcoxon-W: 83.500, p = .86). Therefore the ARMS and PS group were aggregated into one group for further analyses.

Next, we applied a binary logistic model to investigate discriminant power of the KKT. The binary logistic model correctly classified 75% of the participants, sensitivity was 83.3% and specificity 60% (separation value 0.5). We then deleted items 1 and 7 from the test, because they did not contribute to group discrimination because of ceiling or floor effects (see **table 2**).

After deletion of item 7 the binary logistic model correctly classified 82.1% of the subjects, sensitivity was 94.4% and specificity 60% (separation value 0.5). When deleting only item 1 the binary logistic model correctly classified 75.0% of the subjects, sensitivity was 83.3% and specificity 60%. When we deleted both items the binary logistic model correctly classified 82.1% of the subjects, sensitivity was 94.4% and specificity 60% (separation value 0.5).

Table 2. *Error score for each item*

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
ARMS/PS	4	9	7	5	7	12	13	9
OD	2	1	1	0	2	1	6	2

Further analysis yielded that performance of the 8 items version of the KKT significantly correlated with RWT animals (r = .39, p < .05), WIE-S (r = .62, p < .01), BPRS (r = -.46, p < .02). Performance of the new 6 items version of the KKT significantly correlated with WIE-S (r = .61, p < .01), BPRS (r = -.51, p < .01).

IV. Conclusions

Our results suggest that concretism, measured by the incorrect interpretation of proverbs, is already present in an early state of psychotic disorder as evidenced by its presence in first episode and in at-risk patients. The KKT multiple choice proverb test can efficiently and effectively discriminate between patients at risk of psychosis or psychosis and patient controls. Thus, the KKT could be a useful tool in the context of early recognition of psychosis.

More specifically, ARMS and PS patients did not differ with respect to their KKT performance, however they differed from OD. Thus, deficits in the interpretation of proverbs seem to be already present in ARMS. Of note and somewhat unexpected, performance on most neuropsychological measures did not significantly differ between ARMS/PS and OD, which indicates

that concretism might be better suited to discriminate between ARMS/PS and OD than many other reliable performance measures. Since many studies report significant differences on neuropsychological measures between ARMS, PS and OD (e.g. Simon et al. 2007), the missing difference in our study is probably due to low test power. The small sample size can also explain that KKT performance of ARMS and PS patients did not differ, however it is also possible that this aspect of formal thought disorder is affected earlier in the disease process than other symptoms. Due to the limitations of the present study findings of missing differences have to be interpreted very cautious.

The discriminant validity and efficiency of the KKT could be further improved by deleting two items reaching an overall correct classification rate of 82% with only 6 items.

In the field of detection persons at risk of psychosis it seems important to reduce false positives because of possible adverse effects. Using a separation value of 0.5 for the error score results in a specificity of 60% and sensitivity of 94,4% for the final 6 items test version. To increase specificity a higher cut-off could be chosen e.g. using a separation value of 1.5 results in a specificity of 80% and sensitivity of 50%. Specificity could be increased to 100% in our sample using a separation value of 3.5, resulting in a sensitivity of 30%.

The correlational relations of concretism as evidenced by KKT performance scores with the similarities subtest (WIE-S), verbal fluency (RWT animals) and psychopathology (BPRS-score) are in line with other studies that found associations between concretism and executive functioning (Brüne and Bodenstein 2005, Sponheim et al. 2003), intelligence (Brüne and Bodenstein 2005, Sponheim et al. 2003), symptomatology (Langdon et al. 2002) as well.

Several limitations have to be considered. Due to the small sample size our results are clearly provisional and cannot be generalized before replication with a sufficient sample size. Furthermore, groups differed with respect to their performance in the similarities-test (WIE-S) hinting at a possible confounding group difference in terms of premorbid verbal intelligence, even though all groups had attained a comparable educational level. Verbal intelligence has been identified as a limiting factor for proverb interpretation, especially in patients with autism (Dennis et al. 2001, Qualls et al. 2004). Therefore, both proverb interpretation and finding similarities might be causally influenced by verbal intelligence, which as a broad domain encompasses many different capabilities from abstraction to executive functioning. This aetiological question needs to be addressed in larger studies in which education and verbal intelligence can be controlled for.

Independent from this question, the feasibility of the KKT should be substantiated in larger studies, in other German speaking countries and with a healthy control group.

Our study site is located in Switzerland and since cultural effects have to be considered, the results need replication in other German speaking countries. Further investigations with larger sample sizes, a healthy control group, different study sites and groups strictly matched for education and premorbid intelligence are needed to test whether the findings can be replicated when education and intelligence are controlled for. Provided this can be shown, tests for concretism such as the KKT might be able to facilitate the early identification of patients at risk of psychosis and help to reduce the number of false positive predictions with proof of the latter requiring additional prospective analyses in future studies.

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Appendix: Selected test items and instruction

KKT - Sprichworttest

Testanweisung

Es geht bei den folgenden Aufgaben um das Verständnis von Sprichwörtern. Alle Sprichwörter haben eine übertragene Bedeutung. Sie kennen vielleicht das Sprichwort: „Der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Stamm." Bei diesem Sprichwort geht es nicht um Äpfel, sondern darum, dass Menschen die miteinander verwandt sind oft ähnliche Eigenschaften haben.

Bei den folgenden Sprichwörtern sollen Sie die übertragene Bedeutung bzw. den Sinn aus einer Reihe von Antwortalternativen auswählen. Bitte lesen Sie alle Antwortalternativen sorgfältig durch und kreuzen Sie die Antwort an, die Ihrer Meinung nach die Bedeutung bzw. den Sinn des Sprichworts am besten wiedergibt. Sie müssen sich bei jedem Sprichwort für eine Antwortalternative entscheiden. Die Bearbeitungszeit ist nicht begrenzt, versuchen Sie bitte dennoch zügig zu arbeiten.

Hunde die Bellen beißen nicht		
		Hunde die Bellen können aus anatomischen Gründen nicht gleichzeitig beißen, um beißen zu können müßten sie aufhören zu bellen.
		Wer schreckliche Drohungen ausspricht, wird sie wahrscheinlich nicht verwirklichen.
		Leute die drohen beißen niemanden.
		Wenn ein Hund laut bellt und Drohgebärden macht, dann wird er wahrscheinlich nicht ernsthaft angreifen. Ein ernsthafter Angriff wird von einem Hund in der Regel nicht angekündigt.
		Tiere verhalten sich manchmal sehr aggressiv, man sollte sich kein Beispiel daran nehmen.

Wer im Glashaus sitzt soll nicht mit Steinen werfen		
		Man soll niemandem die Fehler vorwerfen, die man selbst macht oder gemacht hat.
		Man kann ein Glashaus leicht beschädigen, wenn man im inneren sitzt und Steine wirft.
		Es ist manchmal besser nichts zu tun und abzuwarten, sonst kann es leicht passieren, daß man alles zerstört.
		Wenn man einen Fehler selbst macht oder gemacht hat, dann sollte man nicht mit Steinen auf andere werfen.
		Glashäuser sind sehr teuer, man sollte vorsichtig mit ihnen umgehen.

Steter Tropfen höhlt den Stein		
		Wenn Wasser lange genug auf einen Stein tropft, dann kann das Wasser den Stein aushöhlen.
		Mit Beharrlichkeit erreicht man sein Ziel.
		Steine sind extrem hart, dennoch können sie zerstört werden.
		Wenn man genug Ausdauer hat kann man sogar Steine aushöhlen.
		Tropfendes Wasser kann sehr viel bewirken.

Man muß das Eisen schmieden, solange es heiß ist		
		Es ist wichtig sofort zu handeln, wenn das Eisen erst einmal erhitzt worden ist.
		Man sollte immer fleißig sein, dann hat man irgendwann auch Erfolg.
		Wenn man Eisen schmieden will muß man sich mit dem Material gut auskennen.
		Eisen ist ein Material das nur verformt werden kann, solange es heiß und somit auch weich genug ist, ansonsten bricht es eher, als dass es verformt wird.
		Man sollte rechtzeitig handeln, da es sonst zu spät sein könnte.

Die dümmsten Bauern ernten die dicksten Kartoffeln		
		Kluge Leute sind meist nicht so geschickt bei der Gartenarbeit, daher ernten sie in der Regel nicht so viel.
		Dumme Bauern haben oft viel Erfolg.
		Dumme Leute ernten oft dicke Kartoffeln.
		Dumme Leute haben oft Glück.
		Dumme Leute geben gerne mit ihren Erfolgen an.

Es ist nicht alles Gold, was glänzt		
		Es gibt verschiedene Metalle die glänzen, nicht alles was glänzt ist aus Gold.
		Man sollte nicht nur auf den Glanz achten, es kommt auch auf innere Werte an.
		Man sollte sich nicht von einem oberflächlichen Eindruck täuschen lassen.
		Hinter einem hellen Glanz verbirgt sich nicht immer etwas wertvolles.
		Wenn einem ein Gegenstand besonders wichtig ist, dann ist es egal aus was für einem Material er ist.