









Answering Questions About the Hierarchical Taxonomy of Psychopathology (HiTOP): Analogies to Whales and Sharks Miss the Boat

Clinical Psychological Science
2022, Vol. 10(2) 279–284
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DOI: 10.1177/21677026211049390
www.psychologicalscience.org/CPS


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Abstract

In this commentary, we discuss questions and misconceptions about the Hierarchical Taxonomy of Psychopathology (HiTOP) raised by Haeffel et al. We explain what the system classifies and why it is descriptive and atheoretical, and we highlight benefits and limitations of this approach. We clarify why the system is organized according to patterns of covariation or comorbidity among signs and symptoms of psychopathology, and we discuss how it is designed to be falsifiable and revised in a manner that is responsive to data. We refer to the body of evidence for HiTOP's external validity and for its scientific and clinical utility. We further describe how the system is currently used in clinics. In sum, many of Haeffel et al.'s concerns about HiTOP are unwarranted, and for those concerns that reflect real current limitations of HiTOP, our consortium is working to address them, with the aim of creating a nosology that is comprehensive and useful to both scientists and clinicians.

Keywords

classification, diagnosis, psychopathology

Received 6/23/21; Revision accepted 9/7/21

Critiques of the Hierarchical Taxonomy of Psychopathology (HiTOP) are welcome, especially because the model aspires to follow the scientific evidence and be practically useful. Critiques are essential for identifying how HiTOP can best achieve these dual missions. Haeffel et al. (2021) raise some important questions. They also display a number of misconceptions about HiTOP. We address their major concerns and misconceptions here and provide more detailed comments on specific

misconceptions in the Supplemental Material available online. HiTOP is based on an extensive body of evidence that we do not have space to review in full here, but it is covered in various publications by the HiTOP

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consortium (e.g., Kotov et al., 2017, 2020, 2021; Krueger et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2022).

What Does HiTOP Classify?

Haefel et al. (2021) repeatedly mischaracterize HiTOP as a system for classifying people. In fact, it classifies signs and symptoms of psychopathology (henceforth we use *symptoms* to refer to observable signs and subjective symptoms). Thus, HiTOP takes a variable-centered approach to classification rather than a person-centered approach. Symptoms are grouped into a hierarchy of dimensions according to their likelihood of manifesting in the same individual. This is very different from nosologies, including the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, that classify people into discrete categories. In HiTOP, people are not classified; rather, they are described by their position on each symptom dimension in the framework. Every level of the HiTOP hierarchy contains dimensional constructs representing patterns of covariation in the symptoms below them; the core of the system is a level containing six dimensions called *spectra*. Haefel et al.'s confusion about the fact that HiTOP classifies symptoms rather than people renders a number of their specific arguments invalid or irrelevant (see the Supplemental Material).

Are Descriptive Nosologies Useful?

Haefel et al. argue that because HiTOP is purely descriptive, it is not likely to be useful. Although we agree with them that a nosology based on valid theories of etiology would be more useful than one based on description alone, an accurate descriptive system can nonetheless be pivotal to advancing science before clear etiological understanding. Haefel et al. contrast HiTOP with biological taxonomies of organisms (e.g., whales and sharks), but in doing so, they conflate the Linnaean classification system with more recent evolutionary taxonomies. Linnaeus developed an atheoretical taxonomy on the basis of the morphology of organisms a century before the theory of evolution. This system was imperfect, but it facilitated systematic study of biology and development of the theory of evolution (Winsor, 2009). In turn, the theory of evolution guided the revision of Linnaean taxonomy, which made it more accurate and useful. Descriptive systems were likewise pivotal in other scientific disciplines, such as the Copernican model, which led to Newton's theory of gravitation, and Mendeleev's periodic table of elements, which paved the way for the Bohr model and modern chemistry. Further, theoretical understanding does not necessarily make description obsolete. For example, in

medical disciplines in which etiology is better understood (e.g., oncology, infectious disease), diagnosis is often made on the basis of symptoms and is followed by medical tests as needed. Evidently, accurate descriptive systems can be useful as both catalysts and complements of etiological models.

In psychology, many fields rely on descriptive classifications, such as taxonomies of intelligence and personality, and these systems have proved fruitful scientifically even when etiological theories are absent (John et al., 2008; McGrew, 2009). These taxonomies—like HiTOP—differ from the Linnaean system by being taxonomies of features (variables) rather than of individuals (people or species). Psychopathology lacked a comprehensive, empirically derived, descriptive system (Kotov et al., 2017), and the HiTOP consortium was launched to address this gap. Core goals of the consortium are to improve the reliability and validity of descriptions of psychopathology. These descriptions can facilitate development of theories that may lead to revisions of HiTOP, just as evolutionary theory led to revisions of the Linnaean system.

Why Is HiTOP Atheoretical, Relying on Covariation Among Symptoms Rather Than on Etiology?

All scientific endeavors involve some theoretical commitments. HiTOP is no different. For example, it relies on the premise that co-occurrence of symptoms within individuals can inform diagnosis and treatment. Haefel et al. criticize HiTOP for being “atheoretical,” in the sense that it is not derived from theories of etiology. However, etiological knowledge is currently insufficient to support theory-based diagnoses of patients with diverse presenting concerns. The danger in imposing an immature theory on data is that if the guiding theory is incorrect, the resulting nosology may be invalid.

HiTOP is therefore guided by data, rather than etiological theory, and organized by dimensions that (a) consistently appear in analyses of patterns of covariation (comorbidity) among features of psychopathology and (b) also show evidence of external validity (Kotov et al., 2017). This approach maximizes coherence of constructs and distinctiveness between them. Moreover, extensive evidence indicates that such constructs capture information about common genetics, risk factors, biomarkers, and treatment response shared by co-occurring forms of psychopathology (Kotov et al., 2020; Krueger et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2022). The *DSM* attempts to achieve something similar, but it often groups symptoms and disorders in ways that do not reflect empirical reality. For instance, *DSM* classifies generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) with other anxiety

disorders even though GAD is much more likely to co-occur with depressive disorders. In contrast, HiTOP follows empirical evidence of co-occurrence.

Haefffel et al. mistakenly believe that HiTOP attempts to “eliminate comorbidity” (p. 262). HiTOP is not designed to eliminate comorbidity, but rather to describe it accurately. The original presentation of HiTOP (Kotov et al., 2017) noted, “Comorbidity conveys important information about shared risk factors, pathological processes, and illness course; a quantitative nosology formalizes this information, making it explicitly available to researchers and clinicians” (p. 458). The hierarchical structure of HiTOP allows for the formal recognition of nonartificial patterns of comorbidity at higher levels of the taxonomy while simultaneously maintaining important distinctions at lower levels.

Note that some psychopathological conditions may be manifested in symptoms that do not typically co-occur because of multifinality, in which the same underlying etiology leads to very different presentations (Haefffel et al. provide several examples from other medical disciplines). Currently, HiTOP will miss such constructs. However, to date, such constructs remain largely hypothetical in psychopathology. If they are verified in future research, HiTOP can evolve to include them. This point highlights the fact HiTOP is not wedded to any single method or type of construct and can evolve to include, for example, nondimensional constructs or constructs manifesting multifinality, should evidence for such constructs emerge.

Is HiTOP Sufficiently Valid to Facilitate Psychopathology Research?

Haefffel et al. question the validity of HiTOP and are skeptical of its ability to aid in scientific discovery. Both structural and validity evidence are considered when evaluating constructs for inclusion in HiTOP (Kotov et al., 2017, 2021). Validation of HiTOP is an ongoing process, but it has already produced a substantial body of evidence reviewed in consortium publications (see especially Kotov et al., 2020; Krueger et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2022). We highlight two specific examples of HiTOP’s validity and utility for research. First, accumulating evidence suggests that environmental exposures, such as childhood maltreatment and discrimination, are risk factors for HiTOP dimensions rather than *DSM* disorders (Conway et al., 2019). Second, efficacy of many treatments, such as antipsychotics, serotonin-reuptake inhibitors, and various psychotherapies, aligns with HiTOP spectra (Hopwood et al., 2020; Kotov et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2022). HiTOP spectra have consistently been found to have meaningful associations with regard to risk factors, biomarkers, and treatment

response, and similar validation efforts are under way for narrower HiTOP dimensions.

Haefffel et al. are especially pessimistic regarding genetic discovery in general and HiTOP’s role in genetic discovery specifically. However, psychiatric genetics is currently making rapid advances. Robust and replicable associations have been demonstrated between many genetic polymorphisms and behavioral phenotypes, including diagnoses (e.g., schizophrenia) and dimensional risk factors (e.g., neuroticism; Nagel et al., 2018; Smoller et al., 2019). Further, studies that have directly compared HiTOP-concordant and *DSM*-concordant phenotypes in the same data sets have consistently found that dimensional and hierarchical assessments lead to discovery of a larger number of relevant polymorphisms and more predictive polygenic risk scores (e.g., Linnér et al., 2019; Otowa et al., 2016; Stein et al., 2021). In addition, substantial evidence from twin studies and molecular research indicates that genetic associations among forms of psychopathology largely parallel HiTOP’s organization (Waszczuk et al., 2020).

Is HiTOP Falsifiable and Capable of Evolution?

Haefffel et al. assert that “HiTOP does not feature the characteristics of a falsifiable, scientifically progressive, and evolving taxonomy” (p. 272). We beg to differ. Many of the studies that underpin HiTOP tested specific hypotheses or compared alternative hypotheses according to their fit to the data and used methods such as structural equation modeling, taxometrics, and other hypothesis-driven analytic procedures. For example, Kotov et al. (2011) compared the ability of seven models to account for associations among 25 psychiatric conditions.

Indeed, the position of every construct within HiTOP is a hypothesis (e.g., hyperarousal is currently part of the distress subfactor but could be moved to the fear subfactor if sufficient data indicate closer links to fear). The structural methods employed by the HiTOP consortium seek constructs that are maximally homogeneous and distinct from each other at each level of the hierarchy, and the hypothesis is that these constructs will account for vulnerabilities and predict outcomes better than the more heterogeneous and overlapping categories of the *DSM*. A growing number of studies have tested this hypothesis by directly comparing the external validity of HiTOP and *DSM* (e.g., Linnér et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2021; Morey et al., 2012).

To update HiTOP as new structural and validation studies become available, the consortium formed a Revisions Workgroup. This workgroup has designed a process for continuous evidence-based revision of the

model (Kotov et al., 2021). The first set of revisions is in development, and anyone interested in proposing a change is encouraged to contact co-chairs of the workgroup (M. K. Forbes and A. G. C. Wright). We seek data to guide revisions of the model, such as clarifying placement of dimensions included in HiTOP provisionally (e.g., mania), incorporating other forms of psychopathology (e.g., autism), and tailoring the model to diverse demographic groups and cultures.

Is the Generalizability of HiTOP Limited?

The HiTOP model is based on structural studies of samples that span from ages 2 to 90 years and include many non-Western societies (for examples, see p. 7 in the Supplemental Material). However, Haeffel et al. are not entirely unwarranted in their concerns about generalizability. Western samples are indeed overrepresented in this literature, and very little research has been done on people over age 60. The consortium's Developmental Workgroup and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Workgroup are seeking data sets to fill these gaps and to identify demographic and cultural differences in the model. HiTOP will be revised according to their findings. The statistical methods that shape HiTOP have well-established procedures for elucidating differences between populations (e.g., tests of measurement invariance). This enables more rapid and transparent adaptation of nosology to new populations than the committee-based process of *DSM*.

Is HiTOP Usable Clinically, and How Does It Compare With *DSM* for That Purpose?

Haeffel et al. (2021) made a number of erroneous claims about the clinical utility of HiTOP, including that there is no way for clinicians to assess it effectively or to use it in their practice. To begin with their claim that clinicians will be unable to interpret a HiTOP profile effectively, we note that HiTOP has been shaped, in part, by research on measures such as the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2003) and the Personality Inventory for DSM-5 (Krueger et al., 2012). Consequently, HiTOP aligns well with various widely used instruments that many clinicians find helpful in their practice. The consortium recommends a number of these instruments for assessing certain elements of the model in applied settings, and many of these have established norms and clinical cutoffs (Kotov et al., 2017). However, multiple existing measures must be combined to achieve good coverage of HiTOP. The consortium's Measure Development Workgroup is

constructing a comprehensive new inventory expected to be ready for clinical use in 2022 (Simms et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the Clinical Translation Workgroup has assembled a battery of existing normed and validated self-report measures that assesses most of the model and requires 40 min to complete. The battery is free, self-administered, and automatically scored. The workgroup also developed manuals, trainings, and online resources (HiTOP Clinical Network, n.d.) to help clinicians with practical questions such as billing. The battery is currently being used in a dozen psychology and psychiatry clinics that participate in the HiTOP Field Trials to test questions about clinical utility of the system. All interested clinics are welcome to join the Field Trials by contacting K. G. Jonas.

Haeffel et al. believe that clinicians should use the *DSM* rather than HiTOP. However, clinicians use *DSM* diagnoses for billing much more than for case conceptualization or treatment decisions (First et al., 2018). Many clinicians report that formal diagnosis does not provide helpful guidance beyond cardinal symptoms. A chief objective of HiTOP is to make nosology more useful for clinicians. Three types of evidence support this aspiration. First, HiTOP dimensions show substantially higher reliability than *DSM* diagnoses (Markon et al., 2011). Second, growing evidence indicates that these dimensions account for about twice as much variance in crucial clinical variables, such as functional impairment, service needs, and risk of suicide attempts, relative to *DSM* diagnoses (e.g., Forbush et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2021; Morey et al., 2012). Third, surveys of clinicians have generally found that they see more utility in HiTOP dimensions than in *DSM* diagnoses (e.g., Bornstein & Natoli, 2019).

Conclusion

We thank Haeffel et al. for raising these important questions. The HiTOP consortium has taken many strides, but its work is only beginning. There is much more to understand, build, and implement. A more valid and useful nosology would benefit the entire field: scientists, clinicians, and trainees. Hence, in addition to the research consortium, we organized the HiTOP Clinical Network for professionals interested in translation to care and the Trainee Network for students working toward a doctorate. We encourage everyone interested to join the effort: <https://renaissance.stonybrookmedicine.edu/HITOP/GetInvolved>.

Transparency

Action Editor: Michael F. Pogue-Geile

Editor: Kenneth J. Sher

Author Contributions

C. G. DeYoung, R. Kotov, and R. F. Krueger conceived the manuscript. C. G. DeYoung and R. Kotov wrote and revised the manuscript. R. F. Krueger, D. C. Cicero, C. C. Conway, N. R. Eaton, M. K. Forbes, M. N. Hallquist, K. G. Jonas, R. D. Latzman, C. Rodriguez-Seijas, C. J. Ruggero, L. J. Simms, I. D. Waldman, M. A. Waszczuk, T. A. Widiger, and A. G. C. Wright provided editorial feedback. All of the authors approved the final manuscript for submission.









Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

Funding

This work was supported by National Institute of Mental Health Grant R01-MH122537.

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Acknowledgments

The following members of Hierarchical Taxonomy of Psychopathology consortium endorsed the positions described in this commentary: Timothy Allen, Bo Bach, Michael Chmielewski, Barbara De Clercq, Anna Docherty, Andrea Fossati, Kristen Gainey, John D. Haltigan, Benjamin Hankin, Phillip Homan, Chris Hopwood, Hyunsik Kim, Holly Levin-Aspenon, Julia Longenecker, Elizabeth Martin, Leslie Morey, Brady Nelson, Jason Oliver, Christopher Patrick, Aaron Pincus, Eunyo Ro, Michael Roche, Lauren Rutter, Liam Satchell, Martin Sellbom, Alexander Shackman, Antonella Somma, Kasey Stanton, Matthew Sunderland, Jeggan Tiego, Ashley Watts, Syla Wilson, David Zald, and Richard Zinbarg.

Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information can be found at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/21677026211049390>

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