



Highly Sensitive Person- A Review

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ABSTRACT

For the longest time, part of Personality research has been dominated by the discussions of introversion and extraversion, sociability or lack thereof, and thin-skinned or thick-skinned. This changed, in part, when a certain concept surfaced and gained traction. Elaine Aron, Ph.D., launched the concept of Highly Sensitive Personality(HSP) and directed research which was, due to lack of exploration, clubbing a myriad of characteristics into one personality type. This paper aims to serve as a summary for any reader who wishes to gain a basic understanding of the ground-breaking HSP term, which, with its mere 20-year history; is far from fulfilling its true potential.

Keywords- Highly sensitive person, Sensory processing sensitivity, Elain Aron, highly sensitive person scale, sensitivity.

ELAINE'S QUEST

For years, the study of personality has been dominated by Jungian introversion and extraversion. Even now, the populace has largely accepted these two categories as a way to classify people-shy for introversion and outgoing for extraversion. (Beebe, 2020)

Anyone, even remotely interested or invested in the study of personality, will accept the classification whilst agreeing there is more to it. Any number of introverts and researchers, or both; would agree that these labels aren't "one size fits all". There are always traits that a person finds are exclusive to her.

One such person, Elaine, who "felt different" all her life; found herself bedridden for months after a surgical operation. After her doctor recommended therapy for her "overreaction" to her surgery; she was told by her therapist that she had had such a tough time because she is a "highly sensitive person". Post enquiring about this novel word, Elaine was told that different people have different reactions to stimulation. In addition, a good number of people that opted for therapy were highly sensitive to all sorts of experiences; they felt deeply, thought intensely, and were generally more sensitive to physical and mental stimulations. (Aron, 2013)

Equipped with this new knowledge, Elaine sought to find mention of such people in literature. In her search, Aron found Jung's description of *innate sensitiveness* a good start. Researchers have quantified a variety of behavior in the Introversion box, having classified individuals primarily on their level of sociability- the social ones were extroverts, and those who weren't were introverts. At the same time, there was also the mention of the concepts of physiological sensitivity and in-depth processing of introversion. (Aron E., 2004).

After extensive research, she wasn't really satisfied; not having found a category of people who evolved to "feel" more than their contemporaries. Although there were sporadic mentions of these highly sensitive people in research (introverted individuals, persons with highly active inhibitory systems, etc); the theories proposed weren't quite satisfactory to Elaine. (Aron, 2004)

She then decided to do some research of her own. She put up a notice at the university where she worked, asking for people who considered themselves highly sensitive to participate in an interview. More people

showed up than she expected. Some of them were troubled, feeling like there was something wrong with them; and others were quite content and found their trait a boon. Thus, began the investigation which would result in seven studies defining and assessing this trait that Elaine Aron, Ph.d. calls “HIGHLY SENSITIVE PERSONALITY/PERSON”.(HSP, for short) (Aron, 1997)

DEFINITION & CHARACTERISTICS

Highly sensitive persons (or HSP) exhibit higher levels of stimulation on account of the trait of **sensory processing sensitivity (SPS)**. It is defined as “...a difference not in the sense organs per se but to sensitivity that occurs as sensory information is transmitted or processed in the brain.” (Aron E. , 1997) They markedly differ from Low-sensitive persons, henceforth, mentioned in this paper as LSP.

Through her research, she identified several characteristics that are discriminating factors of being an HSP- some of them advantageous and others, not so much. (Aron E., 2013) HSPs are better at spotting as well as avoiding making errors; deeply affected by others’ moods and emotions; able to process materials to deeper levels of semantic memory (spend time thinking about their thoughts often); able to concentrate deeply (most prudent when minimally distracted); highly creative and intuitive; especially empathetic; good readers of body language; have an eye for aesthetics; spiritual; develop strategies to deal with problems; dislike competing; are ethical and just; have a high level of processing, ergo, have a ‘sense; about things (also called intuition; which is usually right); able to learn without being aware that learning has occurred; are especially good at tasks requiring vigilance, accuracy, speed, and detection of minor differences; high environmental awareness. (Aron E., 2006) (Aron E. , 2013) (Aron E. , 2004)

On the shortcomings side- they struggle to perform well when being observed; sensitive to critique (hypervigilance is to avoid errors); are more sensitive to additives, medicines, pain, as well as crowded places noise, coarse fabrics, and intense odors; are easily moved; prone to allergies; blurring lines and limits when doing what is ‘right’ or ‘good’; cry very easily; notice smallest faults in relationships; question long-term tolerance and their attachments, ergo, feel shame and guilt; because of the constant existential rumination, tend to appear or feel less happy. (Aron E., 2006) (Aron E. , 2013) (Aron E. , 2004)

Let this be clear that the characteristics are sorted in a culturally defined way (for instance, crying easily is considered a sign of weakness in many cultures but is also considered a sign of a secure individual in others).

(Aron, 2006)



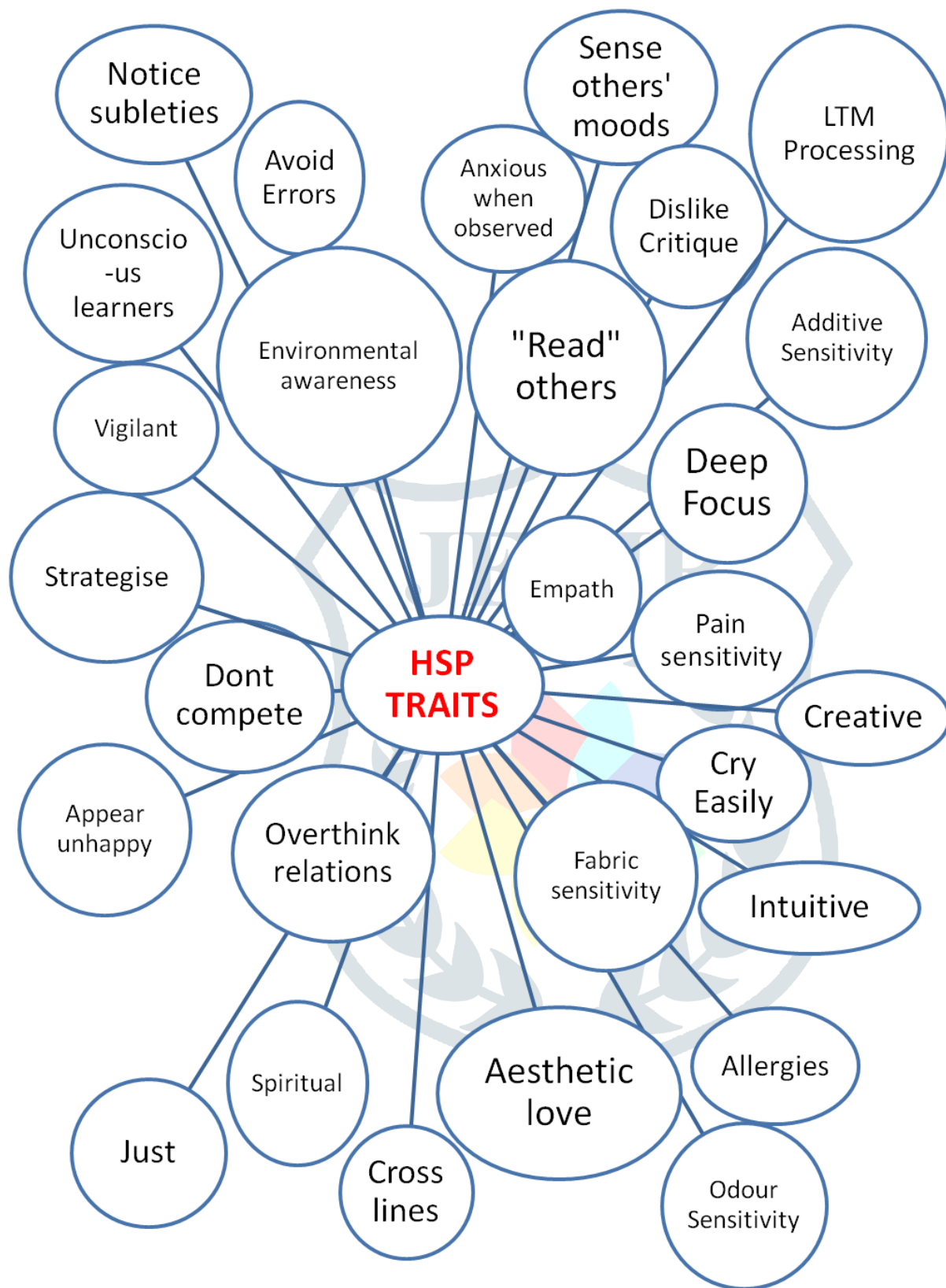


FIGURE I A chart enlisting all the characteristics of an HSP

A good way to understand the prominent HSP traits is by the Broadbent filter theory (Broadbent, 2013). For the uninitiated; this theory elucidates that stimulations in the environment are filtered out and only select few

reach processing, which becomes the object of our attention. This is the same for HSPs, except if four stimuli are filtered in a Low –sensitive (or LS) brain; 12 stimuli are being filtered by the ‘more permeable’ Highly Sensitive (or HS) filter. (Aron, 2013) This has implications, both positive and negative. HSPs, as a result, have more information. This information, in turn, takes more time and resources to process. ((O'Rourke, 2012) as cited in (Jovanka, 2019))HSPs also avoid taking risks and unnecessary excitement. They prefer routines and predictable situations. (Aron E., 2006)

The crudest difference between HSPs and LSPs is, as Elaine put it so fittingly- “..like those machines that sort fruits into sizes; others sort them into 2 or 3 and HSPs sort it into 10.” (Aron E., 2013)

Furthermore, HSPs often appear less happy and/or more annoyed than LSPs due to their troublesome childhood. That can be explained by lives spent being misunderstood and/or rejected. (Aron E., 2013) Therefore, quite a number of HSPs seek therapy. In her book, Aron claims the number to be about 50 percent. (Mcmanus, 2012) Elaine explains that that is because HSPs lack a sense of belonging and require a ‘fixing’ for being misfits. They are unaware of who they are and what their trait is. (Aron E., 2011) On the plus side, HSPs are more perceptive to therapy and it is as useful to them. All in all, this highlights the importance of practitioners needing to learn about the HSPs. (Mcmanus, 2012)

A number of books written on the subject, by clinical practitioners, researchers, experts, or self-identified HSPs; are a helpful guide for the masses to understand what an HSP is. Most of them have sources of scientific evaluation and assessments as well. (Kelley, 2005) (Jaeger, 2004) (Zeff, 2004) (Sand, 2018) (Arabi, 2020) (Lo, 2018) (Ward, 2018) (Hass, 2018)

In her primary research, Aron found that about 30 percent HSPs were extravert. (Aron E. , 1997)She explains the reason behind this in her paper on Clinical practices regarding HSPs; Extraverted HSPs often are brought up in a supportive environment with a social family/guardians and hence, find society preferable. This is in stark opposition to the majority of HSPs, Introverted in nature; who struggled with the presence of companions. These HSPs were either shamed for being sensitive or felt guilty for it. No matter the type, both need time away from others to recharge.

HIGH SENSITIVITY- PERTINENT OR IMPERTINENT?

In her book, *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person* published in 2011; Elaine mentions that throughout the history of the world, this trait has not escaped scientific curiosity. Many people throughout time and history have studied the concept of SPS, albeit under different names, such as Low Sensory Threshold, Inhibitedness, Affective Negativity, “slow to warm up”, etc. Bottom line, SPS has been around for a long time, masquerading as other similar concepts.

As previously mentioned, conducted research has labeled sensitivity depending on the culture it originates from. Certain aggressive and competitive cultures have no place for the sensitivity of any kind. In such situations, some HSPs adopt a hard outer shell to shield the ‘soft’ inside. (Aron E., 2004) At the risk of poking the controversial bear, Mr. Darcy from Jane Austen’s beloved *Pride and Prejudice* comes to mind- arrogant and displeasing outside; timid and sensitive on the inside. (Rytting, 2001) Others, who are unable to ‘Darcy’ their way out of their ‘affliction’, find themselves over-aroused and ailing (psychosomatic illnesses due to the struggle of daily life, that is commonplace for their peers). Once again, Aron sums it up nicely, “*..even though nurture beats the sensitive out, it cannot be completely removed or obliterated.*” (Aron E., 2004)

Let’s consider the argument- High sensitivity is a weakness and a drawback. Going by the basics of Natural Selection; any organism that doesn’t adapt in accordance with the changing environment will be eliminated. The question then arises- is High sensitivity an unsuccessful personality type? If we go by the past, SPS has been around for the longest time and hasn’t been eliminated so far. (see the beginning of this section) Therefore, it must be by design and not just happenstance. Nature isn’t one to waste.

The next question to answer is – where is this trait going, evolution-wise? To answer this, a research was conducted to map the progress of SPS on a time scale. All the factors were varied one by one in each simulation. The result was that neither is this trait the kind that will be eliminated nor will the evolutionary line culminate into all organisms being highly sensitive (if that were a possibility, it will not be a successful one, survival-wise). The most interesting part of such a research was the implication of this trait maintaining exclusivity to a minority of organisms. (Wolf, et al., 2008; as cited in Aron, E., 2013)

The best way to explain the why would be to quote the villain SYNDROME from the beloved animated Pixar movie, THE INCREDIBLES, “ *When everyone is super; no one will be.*” (Bird, 2004) The HSPs and LSPs form two perspectives of a group survival strategy; only together can they survive best. Either of the types, by themselves; cannot.

Aron further explains that both types of sensitive individuals are two sides of the same coin; like day and night, yin and yang, Harry Potter, and the Dark Lord. Each needs the other to survive. One is the ‘wait and see’ and the other is the “think later, act first’ type. At any given time, either of the two strategies will be successful. (Aron E. , 2006) One strategy is successful for when you are a predator and the other when you are a prey.

KEY RESEARCHES

When Aron set out to study this concept in 1997, she recruited people who identified as highly introverted or were highly overwhelmed. 39 people were chosen for interview (17 females) and were asked to candidly participate in a discussion, taking it wherever they felt was relevant. The basic discussion itinerary included background data, life history, preferences, their understanding of sensitivity and what the flyer meant, etc. In the second study, 319 students (200 females); Aron found many participants who were extraverted. Some participants had great childhoods, were successful, and found being highly sensitive a virtue. Those with unhappy childhoods were maladjusted and found their sensitivity to be problematic. Still, a good number of respondents felt that they were indeed different; they required time off when busy, found shocks/surprises unpleasant, gave importance to their inner life, and were overly conscious on professional, personal, and social levels. Aron’s purpose in conducting this research was to identify if there was a pattern or factors of high sensitivity and if they were related to introversion, emotions, and childhood experiences.

Study three had a different set of students, 285 in total (168 females), and study four entailed a telephonic survey of 299 people (165 females). In both these studies, respondents were asked questions that were a part of the under-construction Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS). These studies were essential in forming a skeletal structure of the concept that is SPS by the calculation of internal consistency, reliability, and a relationship with introversion as well as emotionality.

The first thing discovered was the *uni-factor* structure of HSPS. Next, Aron found that there wasn't much difference between HSPs and LSPs, if HSPs had a happy childhood; HSPs who had a difficult time in childhood reported a higher level of unhappiness, especially for males. Additionally, SPS was related to social introversion and emotionality but wasn't cancelled by them.

Study five was conducted to test convergent validity of HSPS with Eysenck's extraversion- introversion scale (1981) and Mehrabian's low screening (1976); a correlation of 0.27 and 0.64 was found with each, respectively. Study number six found the alpha coefficient to be 0.87 with the final tally of items to be 27. In study seven, the final alpha was 0.85 and a validation test to Big 5 personality inventory and Eysenck's extraversion-introversion scale was conducted. The correlation of HSPS with the aforementioned scales was weak but the correlation between these scales was high. There was also a correlation of SPS with social introversion and emotionality, but wasn't identical to them.

Through this series of studies, Aron constructed the HSPS while establishing HSP a separate construct to introversion and emotionality. Most interesting find of these studies was the two groups of HSPs that clearly formed. A bigger one, where the HSPs had a happy childhood and who were virtually indistinguishable from LSPs. A second smaller group of HSPs with unhappy childhoods, scored higher on social introversion and other concepts; had high emotionality as well.

In order to validate the findings of Aron's 1997 studies, Smolewska, et al., conducted a study in 2006 using HSPS on 851 university students (594 females). This study discovered a three-factor solution model for SPS, vis. a vis., *Ease of Excitation (EOE)*, *Aesthetic Sensitivity (AES)*, and *Low Sensory Threshold (LST)*. The first factor concerns the ease of arousal and stimulation; the second is with attention to pleasing artistry and surroundings and the third is associated with external stimuli causing unpleasant activation.

The next aim of this study was to compare HSPS to Big 5 factors. (Costa & McCrae, 2008); such as the factor EOE and LST were highly correlated to neuroticism, extraversion and LST had a weak negative correlation and AES correlated to Openness. Also, in agreement with Aron's findings, the second group of HSPs with high

levels of neuroticism and openness was found. This particular study was another landmark in HSP research as future research was focused on confirming or denying the two types of factor solutions proposed.

WHY IS IT RELEVANT?

Even though quite a bit of the population is comprised of HS men and women, enough to not be unnoticeable; the idea of sensitivity clashes with multiple cultures where sensitivity is a trait that is entitled to women exclusively and some others, where the idea of sensitivity altogether is unwelcome. There is a dire need for further study on HS men and their problems. (Miller, 2021)

As discussed in this paper, there is a stigma attached to being 'sensitive'. The case for men especially, in this regard, is abysmal. In a study where 14 HS males were interviewed regarding their life as an HSP; four themes emerged. First, they all had a constant feeling of being 'different'. This, unfortunately, is the case for most, if not all; HSPs. Second, they mention the burden of shame that comes with a male being 'sensitive'. Third, if a male is perceived as not 'tough'; there is certain ostracism that men have to deal with when they are labeled sensitive, the label almost always along the lines of 'weak'. Fourth, the added burden encompasses the social and psychological stress that follows the aforementioned issues. Fifth and finally, since society is explicit about 'men being strong'; most HS men faced an identity crisis. If society tells them they are not allowed to be 'sensitive', then who are they?

Another research realized the problem of men being unjustly left out of HSP research and attempted to remedy it. Semistructured interviews of 12 HS men were conducted and certain significant facts came to light:

- Most men created a life around their sensitivity; their acceptance of their traits was vital in achieving Well Being (WB).
- They highlighted the importance of their place in society and its significance in helping them be accepting of their sensitivity.
- They felt their sensitivity a bane and struggled with it, seeing the negative only. Once they accepted it, they began to see the positives of their trait.

→ These men felt that HSP information was more readily available and accessible to women. They wished for an increase in awareness and in a number of male studies so that the men who aren't confident or aware can have support in accepting their sensitivity.

Additionally, in a research where 25 HSPs were interviewed, they shared that they found knowledge of HSP life-altering. They added that this information should be spread and the masses should be educated. (Cater, 2016)

In another research where 944 HSPs were asked how they fared in a corporate setting, it was found that survival for them in an office was difficult because they felt diversity is not quickly and readily accepted by the masses. HSPs tend to not stick to the majority's view of a good employee, hence, find it difficult to work and be successful in workplaces that are decidedly 'low sensitive' in nature. The same research found support for HSPs being good employees or bosses on account of their high empathy and emotional intelligence. (Suja, 2020)

A Finnish research where 4 teachers were interviewed to ascertain how HSCs are cared for in the classroom; showed the teachers favored an individually supportive environment. They also showed interest and motivation to undertake an initiative to provide the necessary support of HSC. (Miliya, 2018)

Bakker (2012) stated that research has focused on the negative of HSP, considering only the overwhelm faced by 'sufferers' of such a personality.

In a nutshell, HSP is a topic that needs further understanding for the WB of persons with HSP so that their full potential can be realized and utilized. There is all the more need to study SPS as there is a dearth of researchers discussing more positive traits of HSP. Finally, the putative stigma associated with sensitivity needs to be addressed.

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