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Sensitive Career Management & Sensitive Workplace Design

Employers' perception of highly sensitive people at work: a qualitative study in Spain

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Psicología Aplicada a la Salud y Comportamiento Humano



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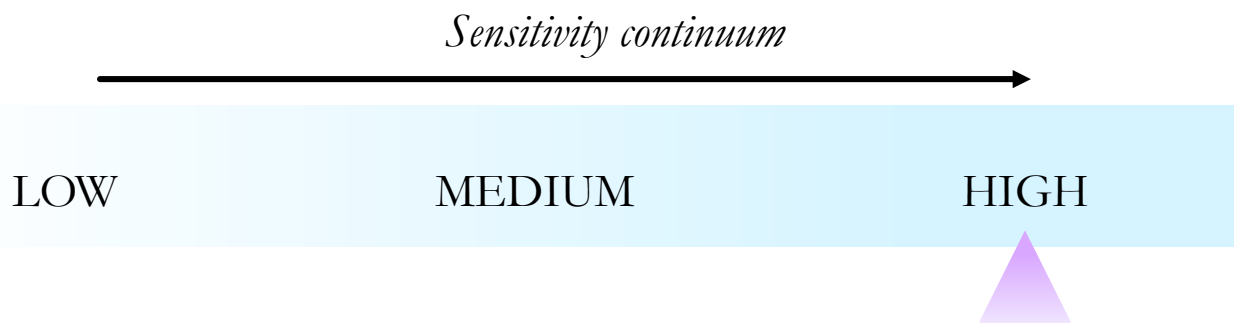
1. Introduction

SPS is a personality trait that represents the differences among individuals in relation to the perception of environmental stimuli

SPS is associated with a more deeply cognitive, sensory and emotional information processing; maybe due to a more sensitive central nervous system

1. Introduction

SPS is a continuum, not a disorder

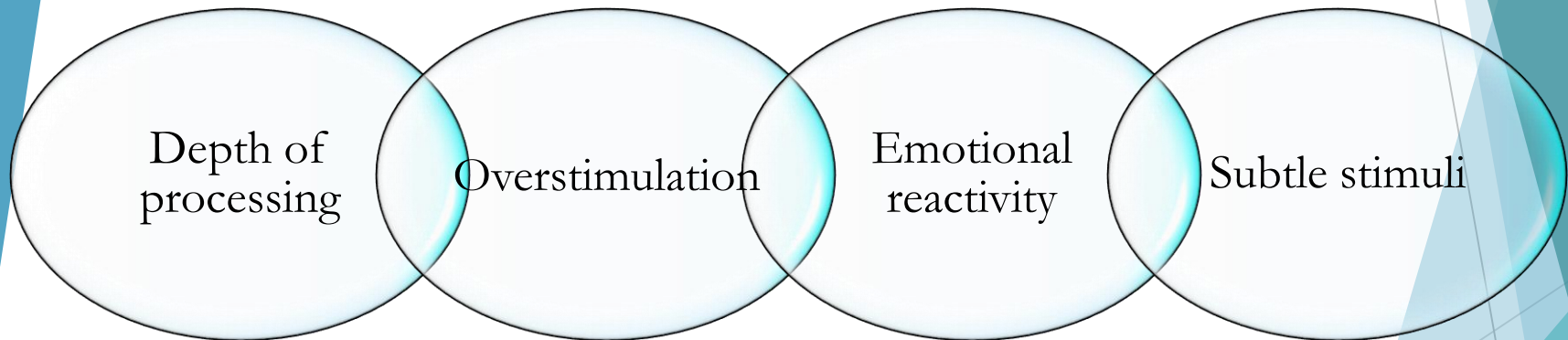


SPS does not imply communicating, socializing and mobility complications, nor lack of coordination or disorientation to sensory signals either

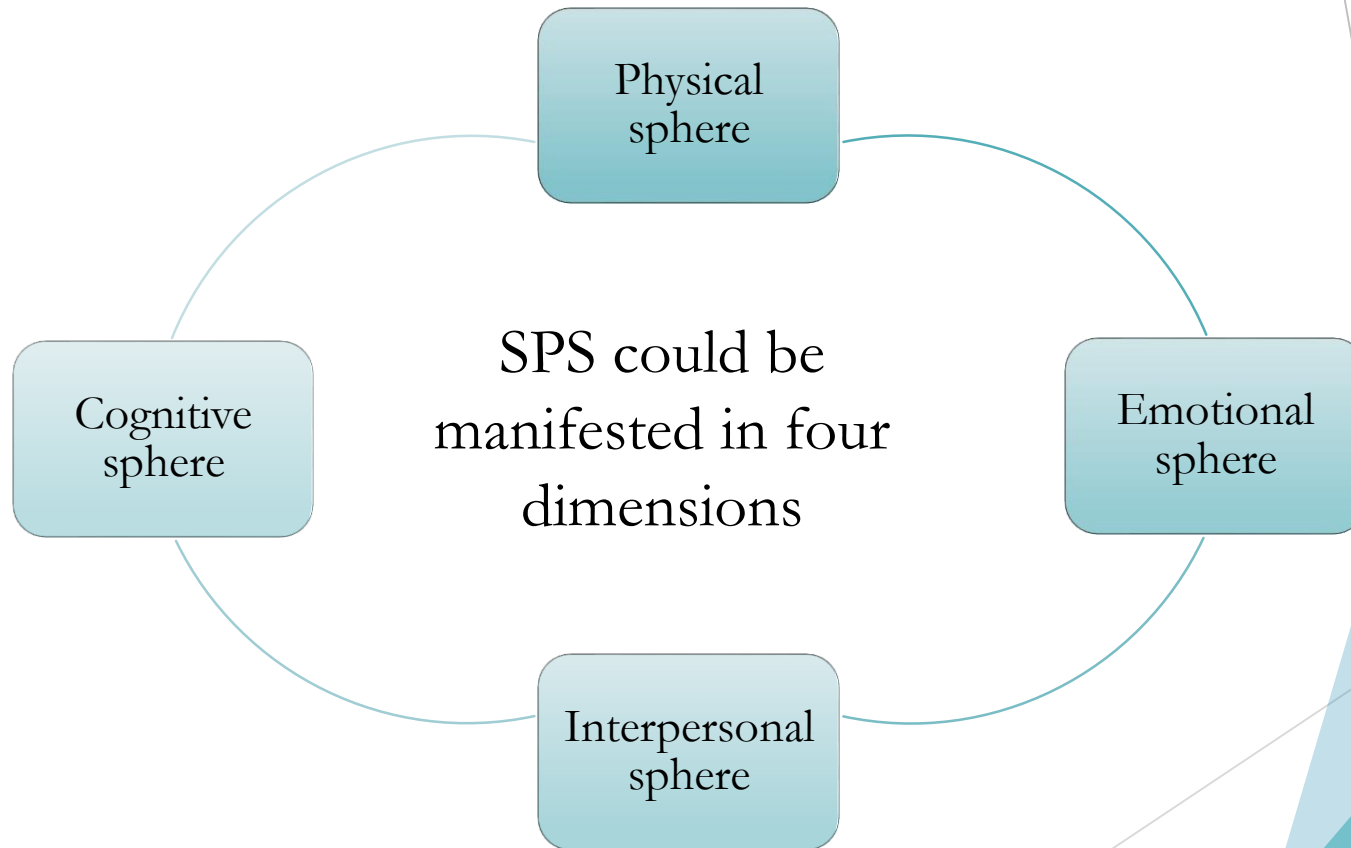
SPS has a variety of degrees and people may find their own threshold modulated by the environment

1. Introduction

SPS could present four dimensions:



1. Introduction



1. Introduction

SPS could be manifested in physical, emotional, interpersonal and cognitive spheres

Physical sphere

- More reactive to both external and internal stimuli (odors, sounds, changes in tone of voice)
- Low sensitivity threshold
- Physical fatigue
- Well-developed sensory perception abilities



1. Introduction

SPS could be manifested in physical, emotional, interpersonal and cognitive spheres

Emotional sphere

- Maladaptive emotional responses
- Low self-esteem
- High emotional intelligence
- Well emotional coping strategies



1. Introduction

SPS could be manifested in physical, emotional, interpersonal and cognitive spheres

Interpersonal sphere

- HS parents facilitate non-optimal parenting styles
- Social distraction, poor social relationships
- Supportive environment promotes resilience and resistance to stressful events and negative health consequences



1. Introduction

SPS could be manifested in physical, emotional, interpersonal and cognitive spheres

Cognitive sphere

- Cognitive inflexibility, need of control
- Control fatigue
- Enhanced creativity, enriched imagination
- Highlighted ability of detecting subtleties and memorizing a great number of details



2. Highly sensitive person at work

HSP display a series of characteristics which may be useful in the company/enterprise. However, their characteristics may also be associated with more perceived stress and burnout.

The style of leadership as well as time demands and interaction with colleagues are the main sources of stress for HSP (Cadogan et al., 2022)

It is important to assess the level of emotional exhaustion that has been linked with the values of ease of excitation in various researches (Lindsay, 2017; Vander-Elst et al., 2019)

2. Highly sensitive person at work

Baryla-Matejczuk & Wawrzenczyk-Kulik (2023) identified some of the benefits of the HSP at work:

1. They are extremely attentive and innovative when working conditions are favorable.
2. They make careful decisions, being usually loyal and conscientious.
3. They may focus on details and be more aware of the long-term consequences of the decision they make.
4. It's easy for them to learn from their own past experience.
5. They can easily identify the expectation of their boss and adapt to the rules and norms

3. Method

Design

A qualitative exploratory descriptive design was performed using a thematic approach for data analysis.

Participants

A total of 20 participants were recruited and took part in a total of 5 focus groups. The majority of participants were female (n=14) with a mean age of 42.1 years old.

The sample included:

- 4 primary education teachers
- 6 health care professionals (including nurses and psychologists)
- 10 university teachers and researchers.



3. Method

Procedure

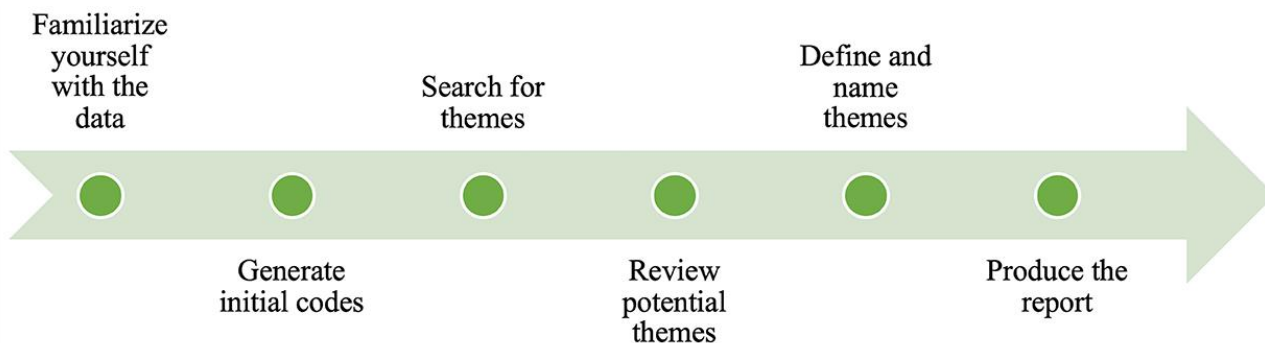
All focus groups were conducted through recording online videocalls using Google Meet platforms. Verbatim transcriptions were made of each of them. Participants completed an online consent form and had information about the main objective of the research before their participation in each of the focus groups.

The research has been conducted in the context of the “PRO-MOTION. Sensitive career management” project (Reference:621491-EPP-1-2020-1-PL-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN).

3. Method

Data Analysis

For the thematic analysis, the proposal by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed and an inductive coding procedure was used. The analysis was made in Spanish and the main quotations were back-translated into English.



4. Results

Theme 1: Characteristics and management of HSP	Theme 2: Motivation of HSP	Theme 3: Importance of relations	Theme 4: Physical working conditions	Theme 5: Implications for Management
Stereotypes	Assessment of the process	High social competences	Appearance of distractors	Participative style
Devotion	Use of praise	Preference for working with individual responsibility	Light	Task-oriented
Responsibility	Creative work	Emotional climate	Noise	Predisposition to work with people
Emotional Reactions			Levels of temperature	
Good Manners				
Future orientation				

4. Results – Theme 1 Characteristics and management of HSP

Participants identified a series of **stereotypes about HSP** that they have found in their interaction with families and with other students. They include the empathy as the main trait that characterize HSP, the difficulties to cope with work-related stressors, their perfectionism and susceptibility.

"The first thing that comes to mind when thinking about sensitivity are emotions. They are people with emotional lability who get involved and empathize" (FG 1).

When asked about the main characteristics that define highly sensitivity, participants outlined the **devotion and sacrifice of the employees**, the sense of responsibility, **the emotional reactions** provoked by tasks, the **good manners** and the orientation towards the future. HSP tend to spend a lot of their time and energy in order to fulfil their tasks and duties. In some cases they may face problems to set limits to work in order to disconnect and to relax themselves.

"They have difficulty disconnecting since they do not know when their professional life ends and when their personal one starts" (FG 2)

4. Results –Theme 1 Characteristics and management of HSP

The strong emotional reactions were associated to the **high capacity for empathizing** with others and in the cases that they witness arguments or disagreements between other teammates.

"Empathizing so much could be unnecessarily overwhelming and makes it difficult for them to work properly" (FG 2)

HSP may also be characterized by their **trust and closeness** that may positively impact on the work-related satisfaction of their peers. In addition, their capacity to prevent and to anticipate the future consequences of an action was identified as a main strength of HSP.

"They can see a problem where it has not yet manifested itself. It is a strength to be ready for whatever may come" (FG 3)

4. Results –Theme 2 Motivation of HSP

Three main strategies were identified for motivating HSP: an assessment of the work that is based on **quality-terms** and is not rigid; the **use of positive instructions** and praise when the work is correctly done and the **preference for the creative and innovative** work and/or tasks.

"When directing them in their final career project, giving information is reassuring for them" (FG 4)

"We reinforce strengths and we try to see how the weaknesses can be strengthened" (FG 1)

"Due to insecurities, we need to encourage them and to reinforce what they are good at" (FG 4)

4. Results –Theme 3: Importance of relations

In general, participants in the focus groups commented that for HSP the emotional bonds in the work are really important. They identified high social competences associated with their **ability to help others and to cooperate with other** mates in order to reach a specific aim or objective. Nevertheless, **working in group** may also provoke some emotional reactions in HSP, mainly feelings of **overwhelmed and fear**. Finally, the emotional climate in their work seems to have an impact on how they perform their tasks. They may be motivated for promoting a good atmosphere between mates.

"Concerning the relationship with their teammates they do not have problems. They are caring and close, and try to get along with everyone. It is easy for them to socialize because they get along with their teammates" (FG 1)

"They could be overwhelmed due to having to work in group, but cooperation could benefit them" (FG 3)

"They are people who care about the existence of a good atmosphere" (FG 2)

4. Results –Theme 4: Physical working conditions

Participants identified four main areas associated to work that may influence the performance and effectiveness of HSP:

- (1) the appearance of distractors (including small talks, the use of mobiles phones,etc.)
- (2) light (bright and artificial light)
- (3) noise (especially when concentration is needed)
- (4) levels of temperature

4. Results –Theme 5: Implications for management

Participants emphasized that a directive style of management won't be adequate considering the characteristics of HSP. In contrast, styles that foster **participation, consultation and empathic resources** seems to be more adequate.

"The best way to manage highly sensitive people is by listening to them. They need to vent emotionally, so they need to know you will be there listening, even if you cannot add anything to what they had said" (FG 1)

It was important to be able to **adapt some of the tasks and functions**, such as giving them extra time or be more flexible when explaining them their mistakes.

"The fact of identifying the trait and letting them know they can have as much time as they need to do tasks helps them a lot" (FG 4)

"When than person reaches their limit, you tread carefully because you do not want to hurt them" (FG 1)

5. Conclusions

- In conclusion, the results of the present research highlight the main characteristics of HSP from the point of view of teachers and health-care professionals.
- The characteristics of HSP (such as commitment, perfectionism, creativity, teamwork, as well as responsibility) can be valuable resource in their future job.
- In favorable work environment and climate HSP tend to be very creative and very good at finding solutions to difficult situations.



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Thank you for your attention



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