

# TEACHERS PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTION OF HIGHLY SENSITIVE PEOPLE: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Highly sensitive people (HSP) are characterized by different aspects that include: a great awareness of subtleties, overstimulation, depth processing of information and high emotional reactivity. HSP in their work environment will show a series of characteristics that, if properly understood, can be of great benefit for the enterprise and for the rest of the workers. It is also important to understand how employers from the areas of education perceive and manage HSP at work. The objective of the research was to explore the perceptions and experiences of teachers with HSP.

**Method:** A qualitative descriptive design was performed using a thematic approach for data analysis. A total of 14 participants were recruited in 3 focus groups. The majority were female (n=8) with a mean age of 41.94 years old. Regarding their educational level four of them have reached the level of Master and the rest had a Ph.D. With regard to their profession, four of them were teachers from primary education and ten were university teachers and researchers. All focus groups were performed online through the Google Meet platform and were recorded in audio and in video to make the verbatim transcripts. For the thematic analysis the proposal by Braun and Clarke was followed using an inductive coding procedure and integrating the codes into initial themes that were triangulated between the researchers.

**Results:** A total of 5 main themes were identified after the analysis: (1) Characteristics and management of HSP, (2) Motivation of HSP, (3) Importance of relations, (4) Physical working conditions and (5) Implications for Management. HSP were perceived as employees and students with a high capacity to sacrifice themselves and with high responsibility despite they may show strong emotional reactions to some situations at work. Participants outlined the importance of reinforce them and to give them tools to regulate their sensitivity. Their emotional abilities help them to connect and establish emotional bonds with other partners.

**Conclusions:** HSP, due to their characteristics, may be really useful in work environments where teachers professionals could adapt and identify their main obstacles and problems. Educational implications and recommendations, based on the results of the research, will be presented.

**Keywords:** Highly sensitive people, teachers, education, evaluation.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) has been described as a personality trait characterised by the ability to register and process both internal and external stimuli. Therefore, SPS can be defined as a continuum representing individual differences in responding to internal and external information [1] [2]. There are significant differences in the way people react to environmental stimuli, with some individuals being more sensitive and reactive than others, thus being Highly Sensitive Persons (HSP). HSP tend to have a deeper cognitive, sensory and emotional processing of perceived information from environmental experiences.

Regarding external and internal physical stimuli, HSP are able to perceive subtle stimuli easily and tend to pay more attention to perceived interoceptive stimuli [3] [4]. In the cognitive sphere, HSP often present characteristics such as inflexibility, cognitive overload, deep cognitive processing, perfectionism and fearful and/or anxious thoughts [5]. However, HSP also exhibit other positive cognitive attributes such as greater creativity, conscientiousness, openness, rich imagination and a high reflective capacity [6]. The emotional domain is associated with a deep experience, intense expression, somatic manifestation of emotions, high levels of stress, attachment to objects, and emotional interactions with animals, art and nature [1]. HSP tend to show positive emotional aspects such as empathy and sensitivity towards others, intensity in experiencing feelings and an intelligent sense of humour [3]. Finally, in terms of social relationships, HSP tend to be more influenced by the environment around them. They sometimes lack

communication skills to meet their needs and often find it more difficult to adapt to new situations and people. However, in positive and supportive environments, HSP often achieve higher levels of social competence and resilience that allow them to benefit from positive parenting and teaching [6] [7].

In the educational field, previous research in the relationship between characteristics of the environment and sensitivity indicates that the quality of the environment in which children grow up is of particular importance [1]. HSP in their work environment will show a series of characteristics that, if properly understood, can be of great benefit for the enterprise and for the rest of the workers. It is also important to understand how employers from the areas of education perceive and manage HSP at work. However, there is a lack of studies that inquire in how teachers perceive and interact with their students with high sensitivity. Thus, the objective of the present research was to explore the perceptions and experiences of teachers with HSP.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

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

A total of 14 participants were recruited in 3 focus groups through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were: to work as teacher in primary/secondary schools or at the University and having experience with students that could have a high level of highly sensitivity.

The majority of the participants were female (n=8) with a mean age of 41.94 years old. Regarding their educational level four of them have reached the level of Master and the rest had a Ph.D. With regard to their profession, four of them were teachers from primary education and ten were university teachers and researchers.

All focus groups were performed online through the Google Meet platform and were recorded in audio and in video to make the verbatim transcripts. 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).

For the thematic analysis the proposal by Braun and Clarke [8] was followed using an inductive approach. Firstly, an in-depth reading of each focus group was carried out to obtain an overall sense of each one. Secondly, inductive line-by-line coding was performed. In this initial phase, a large number of codes were generated, which were progressively revised and merged together. Finally, the main codes were grouped into a total of five main themes. Where there were doubts about the codes, they were discussed within the research team to ensure that they adequately represented the participants' experience, using researcher triangulation to ensure the trustworthiness and rigour of the study.

## 3 RESULTS

A total of 5 main themes were identified after the analysis: (1) Characteristics and management of HSP, (2) Motivation of HSP, (3) Importance of relations, (4) Physical working conditions and (5) Implications for Management (see Table 1).

Table 1. Main themes and codes identified in the thematic analysis.

<b>Theme 1: Characteristics and management of HSP</b>	<b>Theme 2: Motivation of HSP</b>	<b>Theme 3: Importance of relations</b>	<b>Theme 4: Physical working conditions</b>	<b>Theme 5: Implications for Management</b>
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				

### **3.1 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).

"It is hard for them to work under pressure due to that empathy" (FG 4).

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.

"Some people do not know when to stop working. They tell you they are exhausted but they keep working" (FG 1)

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

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)

"Sometimes we have to intercede when some teammates are irascible due to an argument or because they feel overwhelmed during exam's season" (FG 3)

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)

### **3.2 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)

### **3.3 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.

"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)

"Some workers work in pairs. They know their partner's weaknesses and strengths and they make a good duo" (FG 2)

"They are people who usually connect really well with new teachers" (FG 3)

Nevertheless, working in group may also provoke some emotional reactions in HSP, mainly feelings of overwhelmed and fear.

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

Finally, the emotional climate in the school and 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.

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

"When there is a hostile environment caused by an argument between teachers, they feel overwhelmed and tend to be emotionally blocked" (FG 3)

### 3.4 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) and (4) levels of temperature. An example of quotations in each of these conditions is included in Table 2.

*Table 2. Main quotations for Physical Working Conditions theme.*

<i>Code</i>	<i>Quotation</i>
Appearance of distractors	"To avoid sound distractions and focus on the task, some HSP use headphones or earplugs" (FG 5)
Light	"Natural light is very much appreciated" (FG 3)
Noise	"One highly sensitive person I know works in silence. She does not like noises. If she is somewhere noisy, she leaves to go home and rest" (FG 4)
Levels of temperature	"I think one worker is more sensitive to environmental conditions because in summer it is hard for that person to work because of the heat" (FG 2) "I think temperature could affect them. They could really have a hard time, above all in summer" (FG 3)

### 3.5 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.

"Something authoritarian does not work with these people, nor with anyone" (FG 2)

"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. Finally, the educational area was suggested as a good option to work for HSP because of the positive aspects of this trait.

"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)

"Taking care of gatherings of families, teachers and students would be a good option for them. Mainly because highly sensitive people have certain emotional skills which will help in this case" (FG 3)

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the results of the present research highlight the main characteristics of HSP from the point of view of teachers, both in primary education and at the University. It is important that teachers may have the tools and knowledge to adequately identify this trait in their students given that some adaptation measures may be needed. In this sense, interventions where teachers can help to normalize children's feelings and to promote a particular way of performing tasks and activities may be useful for students. The characteristics of HSP (such as commitment, perfectionism, creativity, teamwork, as well as responsibility) can be valubles resource in their future job.

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