

Highly Sensitive Persons' Complicated Self-Identification and Generalized Social Anxiety

Qianhui Zhang^{1,*}

¹ Education International
Cooperation Group, Shenzhen
518000, China
*qianhui.z0723@gmail.com

Abstract:

Highly sensitive persons (HSPs), who are characterized by their sensory processing sensitivity (SPS), often exhibit a heightened awareness of emotional and environmental stimuli. As more HSPs have begun to recognize their differences, and society has not yet developed sufficient understanding of HSPs, the societal marginalization and pathologization within extravert-centric cultures have led to negative self-perception and social anxiety among HSPs. Existing research suggests that HSPs frequently score high in neuroticism and introversion, yet exhibit openness to experiences. However, more in-depth, multidimensional characteristics of HSPs are needed to explore. Thus, the paper reviews several empirical studies, focusing on the self-identification of HSPs and their social anxiety. Key findings confirmed a correlated relationship between the self-identification of highly sensitive individuals and their social difficulties. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that self-acceptance and tailored lifestyle choices among HSPs enhance well-being, while unresolved challenges include compassion fatigue and emotional loneliness. Despite contributions, limitations such as small sample sizes and cultural biases underscore the need for further research. This paper synthesizes current knowledge, highlights gaps, and proposes directions for further studies to better support HSPs in diverse social contexts.

Keywords: Sensory Processing Sensitivity, Highly Sensitive Persons, Self-Identification, Social Anxiety

1 Introduction

The society is developing rapidly and entering the post-truth era, suggesting that the core movement has gradually shifted from materialism construction

to spiritual and psychological exploration due to the declined authenticity of information and an expanded sense of nothingness among the population. Thus, the tendency for self-exploration, as measured by popular tools such as the 16 Personalities test, has

significantly increased due to a higher demand for clear self-identification. The current societal climate offers a larger platform for individuals with talents in the psychological aspects, providing more opportunities for them to be recognized. Thus, those creative and highly sensitive individuals, who make up approximately 20% of the population, are able to step into the audience's view and find their peers. These individuals were defined as Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) by Aron and Aron, characterized by their Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) [1]. While HSPs indicate advantages such as creativity and empathy [2]. They are also more likely to experience exhaustion, social anxiety, and compassion fatigue due to their sensitivity to external cues [3].

The increasing body of research on HSPs reveals multidimensional but conflicting perspectives. Firstly, while SPS is defined as a distinct trait including dimensions such as aesthetic sensitivity and ease of excitation, current debates suggest that the distinction between SPS and measures such as neuroticism and introversion within the Five-Factors Model (FFM), remains unclear [4,5]. Secondly, societal norms in extrovert-centric cultures often marginalize and pathologize the introversion of HSPs, increasing the gap between self-identification and social expectations [2,6]. This indicates the challenging situation faced by HSPs, requiring further intervention. Thirdly, HSPs are prone to be more susceptible to past negative experiences, which might influence their pattern of interpersonal relationships [6]. For example, HSPs might repeat the traumatic connection which they have experienced during their childhood. The over-awareness towards others and the fear of being criticized might drive HSPs into social difficulties such as social anxiety and avoidance [7]. Moreover, prolonged exposure to emotional stimuli in social contexts might lead HSPs to experience compassion fatigue [3].

These findings indicate that the social problems of HSPs are commonly examined. However, the explanation of the links between social issues and sensitivity remains to be ambiguous. Therefore, understanding HSPs' situation is critical for fostering societal environments that help leverage their strengths while mitigating the biases.

By reviewing recent findings, this paper aims to clarify the complexities of SPS, critique methodological limitations, and advocate for inclusive interventions. Specifically, the paper focuses on HSPs' self-identification and social anxiety, exploring how these aspects intersect with their sensitivity trait.

2 Main Concepts

2.1 Sensory Processing Sensitivity and Neuroticism

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) is defined as a heightened awareness and sensitivity to emotional and empathetic stimuli or subtleties in others and the environment, leading to difficulty in filtering out extraneous information and resulting in energy exhaustion [2,6]. Individuals can be categorized into low, medium, and high levels of sensitivity. The concept of Highly Sensitive Persons (HSP) is measured using the Highly Sensitive Persons Scale (HSPS), which encompasses several dimensions. These dimensions are subsequently specified and labeled as aesthetic sensitivity, a low sensory threshold, and ease of excitation [4]. However, it remains controversial whether HSPS is merely another construct similar to extraversion (social dimension) and neuroticism (emotional dimension) as measured by the Five-Factors Model (FFM). Despite numerous studies indicating that individuals classified as HSPs score high in neuroticism, introversion, and openness, it suggests that HSPs exhibit heightened sensitivity to emotional stimuli and tend to be more introverted in interpersonal relationships, yet they are open-minded and receptive to a variety of different thoughts. social contexts, SPS is still considered as a more complex and independent characteristic, including more complicated dimensions and personal traits [4].

2.2 Self-Perception and Self-Identification of HSPs

Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) are more prone to perceive themselves as lonely and misunderstood, as they are generally pathologized as carriers of mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, autism, and depression) and marginalized in societies that are predominantly extrovert-centric. This can lead to a negative group image of HSPs [2,6]. Some HSPs choose to alter their original traits to fit in social norms and enhance their interactions with others. Consequently, the excessive processing of external stimuli and the resulting empathy fatigue may lead to HSPs experiencing exhaustion [3]. People who identified themselves as HSPs include several characteristics: On the one hand, they find it hard to block extra information and manage the emphatic responses, leading to overstimulation and exhaustion; On the other hand, they can easily gain happiness by staying alone or in a low-intensity environment (e.g., a quiet library, a nature park). Moreover, some HSPs may develop protection mechanism when they are exposed to high-intensity environment (e.g. spiritually withdrawing when exposed to noise). Self-acceptance and

in-depth analysis by HSPs clarify their self-identification, helping them better understand their traits better and gain a sense of belonging, which helps contribute to a more complete group image and more positive outcomes [2-4].

2.3 Social Difficulties: Anxiety and Avoidance of HSPs

Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) are also more prone to experiencing social issues and exerting negative impacts. For instance, they may be shy from greeting others or find it difficult to be fully understood, which can lead to diminished social desires and low self-esteem [2,6]. Previous studies indicate that humans inherently fear being assessed by others. Consequently, the heightened awareness of HSPs towards others and their environment may be generalized within social contexts, as they are more susceptible to others' judgment, resulting in avoidance behaviors such as withdrawing from social events or avoiding eye contact. Furthermore, the scarcity of general social connections and emotional support due to avoidance might lead to specific feelings of solitude and alienation, driving HSPs towards self-doubt and social anxiety [6].

3 HSPs and Self-Identification

3.1 Background

HSPs often face many difficult situations in broad social contexts. In West, Educated, Industrial, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) societies, HSPs are more likely to be pathologized and marginalized, considered outsiders [2]. Some HSPs might feel invalidated and pressured due to a lack of acceptance in extrovert-centric environment, which will lead to avoidance of presenting real characteristics in order to fit in social norms. Self-identification of HSPs may gradually become more ambiguous and less authentic, making it difficult to change the stereotypical public image of HSPs, and thus reinforcing the stereotypical introverted persona of HSPs [2]. If the congruence between self-narrative identity and real characteristics cannot be demonstrated, it might lead to decreased well-being for individuals [2]. For instance, people with SPS tend to feel comfortable in the low-intensity environment (e.g., park, library, quiet coffee shop, humorous workplace) or stay independently in study or work when concentrate. In contrast, some competitive HSPs may suffer from emotionally draining and superficial workplace interactions due to their high extraversion, especially when they participate in corporate social events. The high-intensity environment, characterized by elements such as loud noise, board games, and alcohol, can result in overstimulation

and exhaustion for HSPs. Moreover, the internalization of stereotypes that label HSPs as vulnerable can distort the direction of personal development. For example, the competence and efficiency of HSPs are frequently underestimated in the workplace, leading individuals with SPS to cease competing for higher positions and remain in their comfort zones. However, to cultivate stable and authentic self-identification, it is crucial for HSPs to comprehend the unique aspects of their sensitivity and embrace them [3,4]. Previous studies have shown a correlation between the degree of self-acceptance and well-being, indicating that the more highly sensitive persons accept their traits, the happier their life experiences tend to be [2].

3.2 Overview of Previous Researches (Self-Identification)

Numerous studies were conducted to explore the generation and development of self-identification of high sensitivity individuals. The overview will focus on the impact of the definition of highly sensitive traits on individuals, the coherence of self-narrative identity with well-being, and the conflict between self-expectation and external outcomes.

First of all, Roth et al. conducted experiments to explore why some people would regard high sensitivity as a core part of their self-identification and tried to analyse how this label would help them to explain their differences [4]. The experiments were conducted as a survey using the Highly Sensitive Persons Scale (HSPS) and the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) on the website to identify self-narrative HSPs. Subsequently, 40 participants were randomly selected to undergo an online interview, with 38 of them completing all the procedures, regarding their self-perception and understanding of their sensitivity. As a result, most participants reported that the intensification of emotional stimuli and the diversity of reactions are core characteristics of high sensitivity (HS). Some participants elaborated on these sensory experiences, such as difficulty in blocking out extraneous information, the ability to sense others' emotions upon entering a room, and the need for time to process the absorbed stimuli. Moreover, over half of them found that processing positive stimuli easily (e.g., walking in the forest, listening to music) is an advantage of HSPs, while negative descriptions, empathetic fatigue, or exhaustion are the disadvantages [4]. The key finding is that participants experience a sense of belonging and relaxation when they first hear about HS, suggesting that identifying with the HSP label can help alleviate the discomfort caused by differences of HSPs and turn this awareness into personal empowerment or growth. This indicates that HS is not merely a measure of

personality traits, but also a means of empowerment and identity consolidation.

Secondly, Black et al. conducted experiments to explore the experiences and construction of HSPs within WEIRD societies, and to reveal how HSPs achieve happiness through low-intensity positive emotions, self-awareness, and connection with nature [2]. 12 participants (1 male and 11 females, aged 19 to 69) with high scores in sensitivity and happiness were chosen to complete the Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS) and the Positive and Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement (PERMA-Profilier) measure. The participants were invited to an online interview lasting between 25 to 110 minutes, during which they discussed their understanding and experiences of happiness in response to guided and open-ended questions. In general, participants think that happiness is multidimensional, including feelings, cognition, body, spirit and social relationships. The factors reported to contribute to happiness (increased well-being) include emotion regulation, connecting with nature, and listening to soft music, among others [2]. The findings indicate the significance of balancing multiple dimensions of emotions and low-intensity positive emotions, giving an anchor and a new perspective for HSPs to understand their differences and well-being. Moreover, the results provided useful suggestions for highly sensitive individuals to enhance their psychological well-being. For instance, embracing the traits of SPS to complete self-identification and finding a more suitable lifestyle and approach to managing interpersonal relationships can aid in enhancing the well-being of HSPs.

Thirdly, Mohammadian et al. conducted experiments to explore the impact of perfectionism, interpersonal relationship sensitivity, and anger on predicting social anxiety [7]. The results obtained through the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS) among 131 participants indicate the connection between self-expectation and over-awareness of external judgment. Dimensions of perfectionism such as overemphasis on mistakes, skepticism towards action, and parental criticism all contribute to increased pressure on highly sensitive individuals, leading to higher self-standards and expectations. As a result, when actual outcomes fail to meet these highly sensitive individuals' demands, their self-esteem diminishes as individuals begin to question their capabilities and worth [7]. Critically, there are some limitations to these studies. The experiments mentioned above are relatively limited in sample size (i.e., 40, 12, and 131 participants, respectively), suggesting that the results are not generalizable enough [2,4,7]. In particular, participants with pre-existing labels and self-identification as HSPs were selected [2]. This approach overlooks the potential for highly

sensitive individuals who lack an understanding of their own traits or attempt to conceal their true characteristics to fit into social norms. The differences in behavior and performance between HSPs in WEIRD societies and non-WEIRD societies have not been sufficiently explored to encompass cultural variations [2]. Roth et al. encountered the challenge of differentiating and clarifying the measurement scales between SPS and FFM (specifically neuroticism, agreeableness, and extraversion) [4]. They employed both the HSPS and IPIP in their research, indicating that additional metrics free from controversy are needed in this field. Moreover, the neurotic explanation influencing mechanism of SPS have not been discussed in the aforementioned papers.

4 HSPs and Social Difficulties

4.1 Background

As mentioned above, HSPs are often pathologized especially in extrovert-centric societies, suggesting that general people might show less friendly attitude towards HSPs and causing social anxiety among HSPs [2]. Moreover, HSPs are found to be more susceptible to their negative childhood experiences, which might lead them to repeat the traumatic pattern of relationship and cause negative impacts on interactions with others [6]. Subsequently, the information processed by HSPs can be overwhelming and complex due to the high sensitivity in various social contexts. These suggest that HSPs require in-depth shared thoughts and understanding of their feelings (cognitive and emotional empathy) in order to help gain a sense of security. Consequently, the interpersonal relationships of HSPs often exhibit characteristics of intimacy, which is not typically found in general groups [2]. However, it can be challenging for HSPs to establish and maintain deep connections with others. Their sensitivity towards interpersonal rejection may lead to an excessive awareness of others' behavior, causing discomfort and anxiety. This can result in social anxiety disorder (SAD) and even social phobia [7,8].

4.2 Overview of Previous Researches (Social Anxiety)

Previous studies have developed various perspectives on the social issues of HSPs. The overview will focus on the loneliness of HSPs from various perspectives and which specific characteristics contribute to their social anxiety and compassion fatigue.

Firstly, Meckosky et al. conducted research to discuss the relationships between SPS and emotional loneliness,

social loneliness, and social isolation. 3,247 participants, aged 18 to 80, were recruited to complete the Sensory Processing Sensitivity Questionnaire (SPSQ) and the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale [6]. The result reveals that the highly sensitive group scored significantly higher in emotional loneliness than both the medium and low sensitive groups; however, they did not exhibit a substantial difference in the social loneliness dimension. Regarding social isolation, the medium sensitivity group exhibited the greatest willingness to help others, whereas the low sensitivity group demonstrated the least. The findings indicate that HSPs are more likely to exhibit greater emotional loneliness, even though the experiments controlled for factors such as age, gender, education, neuroticism, and extraversion [6]. This suggests that HSPs might be more likely to lack a sense of intimacy and understanding in interpersonal relationships compared to the general population. The results emphasize the difficulty for HSPs to build and maintain in-depth relationships and point out that HSPs do not need a wide range of social web, giving the guide for general population to understand and improve the relationships with highly sensitive individuals better.

Secondly, as mentioned above, Mohammadian et al. aim to explore how interpersonal sensitivity and anger (as personal characteristics and emotional states) will contribute to social anxiety [7]. 131 students were recruited as participants and were measured using the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale-Self Report (LSAS-SR), Interpersonal sensitivity measure (IPSM), and the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory-2 (STAXI-2). These tools encompass various dimensions and perspectives of social anxiety behaviors, such as the extent of avoidance in social interactions, the over-awareness of others' judgment, and the tendency to hesitate and to excessively focus on mistakes. As a result, individuals who have frequently encountered anger and are used to expressing it inappropriately are more prone to social anxiety. At the same time, those who have better control over their anger are less inclined to shun social interactions. Furthermore, individuals who are prone to anger without specific triggers often exhibit heightened fear in social contexts [7]. This suggests that the quality and manner of expressing anger could be factors contributing to social anxiety. For instance, expressing anger directly in social situations might increase the likelihood of being criticized by others, thereby triggering anxiety in HSPs. Consequently, HSPs may limit the expression of their negative emotions to avoid being judged, which could lead to other social or mental issues over time.

Thirdly, Yang reviews numerous studies and points out the concept of compassion fatigue, which signifies a diminished ability to empathize with others due to pro-

longed exposure to empathetic contexts (encompassing both cognitive and emotional empathy) [3]. This phenomenon frequently occurs in medical and educational professionals, exhibiting symptoms such as difficulty concentrating and feelings of numbness or anxiety. Yang conducted online surveys using measures such as the HSPS and additional questions about compassion fatigue on 23 participants aged 17-21 to explore the connection between HSP and compassion fatigue, and attempted to summarize the methodology to alleviate this fatigue [3]. As a result, 16 participants who scored higher on the SPS displayed symptoms of compassion fatigue. This indicates a positive correlation between the intensity of sensitivity and compassion fatigue. Moreover, the research found that HSPs' emotion regulation ability has generally been more vulnerable, and they tend to use restriction strategies rather than cognitive reinterpretation, leading to a greater likelihood of persistent depressive and anxious symptoms. Consequently, the accumulation of negative emotions might trigger compassion fatigue more easily over time [3].

Critically, while the studies mentioned above contribute significantly to the observations of social difficulties faced by HSPs, several limitations for further exploration remain. Firstly, the small sample sizes in some studies (e.g., Yang's work with only 23 participants) may limit the generalizability. Further studies involving larger and more diverse demographic populations are needed to confirm these findings. Additionally, while the studies explore the relationships between HSPs and different social difficulties among HSPs, they often focus narrowly on specific outcomes such as emotional loneliness, social anxiety, and compassion fatigue [3,6,7]. More comprehensive research is required to investigate the broader causes and impacts of SPS on social functioning and well-being. Furthermore, the studies typically use self-report measures, which might cause biases such as social desirability or recall errors. Incorporating objective measures or longitudinal designs could provide a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the complex relationships between HSPs and social difficulties. Despite these limitations, the existing research highlights the importance of considering HSP traits when addressing social difficulties and emphasizes the need for targeted interventions to support HSPs in navigating their social environments effectively.

5 Discussion

The paper summarizes current empirical research and presents several significant conclusions related to the self-identification and social difficulties of HSPs, providing a comprehensive analysis of HSPs and their psycho-

logical experiences.

A core finding of this review is the crucial role of self-acceptance in HSPs' well-being. Numerous studies reveal that highly sensitive individuals who alter their characteristics to conform to social norms often resort to negative coping strategies, which can lead to a decline in well-being [9]. Conversely, individuals who accept their sensitivity traits experience greater life satisfaction and psychological health. This self-acceptance appears to mitigate the negative effects of marginalization that some HSPs face in extrovert-centric societies. Black et al. particularly highlights how HSPs can increase their well-being by developing a lifestyle that accommodates to their traits, such as seeking low-intensity environments and engaging meaningful solitary activities [2].

The social challenges faced by HSPs constitute another major theme in the literature. Current evidence suggests that HSPs are particularly vulnerable to emotional regulation and information filtering, leading them to social anxiety, avoidance behaviors, and compassion fatigue. These problems often emerge due to heightened sensitivity to social evaluation, perfectionistic tendencies, and difficulties in regulating intense emotional responses [7]. The work provides important insights into how interpersonal sensitivity and anger regulation interact to predict social anxiety symptoms [7]. Meanwhile, the research on compassion fatigue reveals the occupational hazards faced by HSPs in care-giving roles [3]. Notably, HSPs appear to experience a distinct form of emotional loneliness that persists even when they are not socially isolated, suggesting a need for intimate, more understanding relationships rather than simply more social contact [6].

The essence and structure of SPS remain a topic of discussion. While some debate persists about whether SPS represents a distinct and independent construct or merely reflects aspects of neuroticism and introversion, recent studies increasingly support its unique status [5]. The work of Roth et al. demonstrates that SPS encompasses dimensions like aesthetic sensitivity and ease of excitation that are not fully observed by traditional personality frameworks [4]. This has important implications for both assessment and intervention, suggesting that HSPs may benefit from approaches specifically tailored to their sensitivity rather than generic treatments for anxiety or social difficulties.

Several practical implications emerge from these findings. At the societal level, there is a clear need for greater awareness and accommodation of HSPs' needs. For example, in specialized settings like libraries and art galleries, quiet hours or designated zones can be implemented to prevent noise and overstimulation for HSPs. Subsequently, educational campaigns could help reduce the pathologi-

zation and marginalization of introversion and sensitivity. Moreover, therapeutic approaches should focus on helping HSPs develop self-acceptance, emotion regulation skills, and positive strategies for managing social interactions. At the individual level, HSPs can transform negative emotions into positive artistic outcomes, such as painting and writing. Additionally, staying close to nature, like mountains and rivers, can help HSPs achieve a sense of peace.

Despite these significant findings, the current research has several limitations that future studies should address. Firstly, many existing studies are limited in their generalizability due to small sample sizes and a notable gender imbalance (with most participants being females). Notably, Hudson's indicated study on highly sensitive men addresses this gap, demonstrating the male HSPs achieve self-acceptance by redefining traditional masculinity norms, offering new insights into gender differences [10]. Secondly, existing research focuses narrowly on single outcome variables such as loneliness and empathy, failing to comprehensively examine the multidimensional external manifestations of SPS. Jauk et al. conducted experiments to explore whether HSPs would display vulnerable narcissism [11]. As a result, this identified a key distinction between SPS and hypersensitive narcissism, with the former involving genuine empathy, whereas the latter lacks this trait [11]. Thirdly, existing studies rely heavily on self-report measures which might cause potential biases. Sommerfeld and Shechory address this by combining behavioral experiments with self-report scales, demonstrating that self-compassion effectively mitigates defensive aggression in HSPs [8]. This methodological innovation serves as a model for further research.

Thus, future directions could include investigations into the neurobiological underpinnings of SPS, cross-cultural examinations of sensitivity, and the development of more precise assessment tools. Moreover, there is also a need for intervention studies testing the efficacy of various therapeutic approaches for HSP-specific challenges. Additional research could be conducted to explore the strengths associated with sensitivity, which helps provide an in-depth understanding of HSPs.

6 Conclusion

This view underscores HSPs' unique strengths (e.g., empathy, creativity) and challenges (e.g., loneliness, fatigue). It also helps clarify the characteristics and factors contributing to the aforementioned symptoms, with a focus on self-identification and social difficulties among HSPs. While progress has been made in understanding SPS, future research should address methodological limitations, cultural variability, intervention efficacy, and the neurobi-

ological mechanisms contributing to SPS.

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