

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE CONSTRUCT OF THE HIGHLY SENSITIVE PERSON
AND THE PERSONALITY TRAITS WHICH MAKE FOR AN EFFECTIVE COUNSELLOR

by

Lisa M. Clarabut

A Capstone Research Project submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Counselling (MC)

City University of Seattle

Victoria, B.C., Canada Site

April 9, 2021

APPROVED BY

Danelle Kabush, M.A., R.C.C., Capstone Supervisor, Counsellor Education Faculty

Brenda Adams, M.A., R.C.C., Faculty Reader, Counsellor Education Faculty

Division of Arts and Sciences

Abstract

The purpose of this Capstone Research Project is to explore the concept of the Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) traits and to examine the personality traits that make for an effective counsellor. Any overlaps between the Highly Sensitive Person and effective counsellor traits will be identified when discovered in the research. To begin, the background of this topic as well as the significance and purpose of the paper will be offered. This will include a brief explanation about why this is an area of interest to me and how this research can be beneficial to the counselling field. This will be followed by some of the defining terms and examples of common personality traits, both generally and specifically to counsellors, and the traits of a Highly Sensitive Person. The literature review will include an analysis of effective counselling skills, an investigation into personality, and will conclude with an examination of the Highly Sensitive Person construct and scale. Chapter 3 will contain suggestions of practical tools that counsellors may choose to implement into their practice. This includes ideas for working with HSP clients and suggestions for counsellors who themselves might identify as a HSP. Finally, this project will conclude with a summary of the findings and suggestions for further research.

Acknowledgements

I want to express my gratitude towards the many people who have supported me on my journey to complete this project. Firstly, I would like to thank Danelle for supporting me along each stage of the writing process from conceptualization to completion. She graciously took the time to get to know the HSP construct and spent hours reading my writing, attending zoom meetings, and teasing out my ideas together. I also want to acknowledge Brenda for her thoughtful and knowledgeable guidance as my faculty reader. Her gentle and curious suggestions have added so much to the quality of my paper. I have many wonderful friends and family members who have cheered me on from the sidelines. I am appreciative of the support with editing and the provision of childcare which allowed me to complete this project. I also want to specifically thank my children; Riely for always encouraging me to pursue my educational dreams. To my little Avery, for giving me the gift of raising a sensitive soul. Finally, I want to acknowledge my husband Andy, for his endless contributions of humour, support, and acceptance. I am so lucky that he is my 'external regulating person' who loves every part of me, especially my sensitivities.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this Capstone Project to my sister, Stephanie. We have always shared a passion for self-improvement and continued education and your support in these areas means the world to me. Watching you accept your sensitivities has allowed me to grow into acknowledging mine. I appreciate your support and encouragement with my pursuit of this degree and my research. Thank you for always honoring the gifts of our sensitivities, I hope that this project represents that.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Dedication.....	4
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	7
Background.....	7
Purpose of this Paper.....	8
Significance of this Paper.....	9
Definition of Personality Traits.....	11
Definition of the Highly Sensitive Person.....	12
Outline of the Remainder of the Capstone.....	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	14
Personality Traits & Effective Counselling Skills.....	14
Common Factors & Required Counselling Skills.....	16
Personality.....	19
Personality Theory.....	19
Personality Assessment & Measurement.....	20
Personality & Vocation.....	22
Personality Relevance in the Counselling Field.....	23
Highly Sensitive Person.....	25
Highly Sensitive Person in the Workplace.....	25
Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS): Development, Validity & Reliability.....	28
Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) & Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS) Critiques.....	30
Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS).....	31
Brain Research on Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS)/ Highly Sensitive Person (HSP).....	33
Chapter 3: Suggestions for Counselling Practice.....	35
Considerations for Working with HSP Clients.....	35
Initial Assessment.....	35
Client History.....	37
Intake.....	37
Therapeutic Interventions.....	39
Counselling Environment.....	39
Role of Therapist.....	40

Modalities that Offer Best Fit for HSP Clients.....	41
Goals of Therapy	42
Considerations for Counsellors Identifying with High Sensitivity	42
Workplace Demands.....	43
Compassion Fatigue	44
Self-Care.....	45
Clinical Consultation & Personal Therapy	46
Chapter 4: Summary and Conclusions.....	47
HSP Traits & Effective Counselling	48
Gaps & Recommendations.....	49
Conclusion.....	51
References.....	53
Appendix A: Workplace Case Samples	58
Appendix B: Sample of the HSP Scale.....	59
Appendix C: Areas of Brain Activation in SPS.....	61
Appendix D: Sample of ‘Reframing Your Shy Moments’ Activity.....	62

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Gelso and Fassinger (1992) identify that there is a profound connection between the field of counselling psychology and the study of personality and development. Therefore, it is important for counsellors to have some knowledge of personality psychology. Knowledge of the psychology of personality constructs can contribute to our understanding of how therapeutic interventions may interact differently, as well as more or less effectively with specific personality traits (Gelso & Fassinger, 1992). The investigation into the significance of the HSP trait in the counselling field cannot be explored without looking at the construct of personality.

Research into the HSP construct came from the study of high sensitivity, where spouses, Elaine Aron, Ph. D. and Arthur Aron, Ph. D. (1997) developed a measurement scale for adults, called the Highly Sensitive Person Scale. Aron (2015) defines the Highly Sensitive Person as someone who has a high sensitivity to their environment and processes on a deeper level. Aron (2010) explains that this research interest came from her clinical experiences of working with individuals who thought they had a disorder, when in fact they were highly sensitive. Clients would report troubled childhoods and present with issues such as depression, anxiety, strong emotional reactions, and feelings of being overwhelmed with life (Aron, 2010). After testing the scale on many individuals, she distinguished it from related traits such as introversion. The early definition of introversion came from Eysenck (1957) and is defined as a trait that is slow to inhibit, with “inhibition in this case referring to something like stimulus satiation” (as cited in E. Aron & A. Aron, 1997, p. 346). Introverts tended to avoid high levels of arousal and protect themselves from overstimulation, resulting in a slower process of introducing stimulus (E. Aron & A. Aron, 1997). Although both introvert and HSP traits share similarities, Aron (2015)

explains that the results of her studies allowed her to differentiate HSP traits, thus labelling it the Highly Sensitive Person.

In the literature on neuroscience, the HSP construct is termed Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) (Aron, 2015, p. xii). E. Aron and A. Aron (1997) define SPS as “a basic trait that captures individual differences in sensitivity to internal and external stimuli” (as cited in Lionetti et al., 2019, p. 138). Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), studies have shown that there is an association between SPS, and increased activity in areas of the brain involved in social processing, empathy, and reflective functioning (Lionetti et al., 2019). These brain areas include the cingulate, insula, inferior frontal gyrus [IFG], middle temporal gyrus [MTG], and PMA (Acevedo et al., 2014). These regions of the brain allow for processing of attention, action planning, recognition of other’s actions, and moment-to-moment awareness (Acevedo et al., 2014).

Purpose of this Paper

The intention of this Capstone paper is to research the traits that contribute to a HSP and the personality traits that contribute to effective counsellors. Through investigation, the research did reveal commonalities between the personality traits of effective counsellors and HSP traits. Observing an overlap in these traits may offer new self-awareness for HSPs, both as counsellors and clients. HSP traits can provide both strengths and challenges. For those identifying with the traits, this insight may contribute to better self-management and wellbeing. More specifically, this awareness may be helpful when HSPs are examining what type of vocation to pursue, perhaps the field of counselling could offer an arena to employ these traits in a positive manner.

Significance of this Paper

Within the counselling field there is an interest in personality development, behaviour, and traits. Gelso and Fassinger (1992) offer that counselling psychology has been informed by the fields of personality and developmental psychology. When considering the influence of the HSP trait on personality and behaviour there are certain aspects to look for. These include increased sensitivity to stimuli, environment, overstimulation, increased empathy, emotional reactions, and deeper levels of processing (Aron, 2015). Aron (2015) describes the aspect of being easily overwhelmed as “a person who is more aware of everything going on outside and inside and who also processes it more thoroughly” (p. xv). Therefore, information about HSP traits may be helpful for counsellors who might identify with these traits in themselves, as well as offer some new awareness about client traits. If a counsellor themselves has HSP traits, this may be important understanding for him or her as they manage the workload and self-care habits to prevent burn out or compassion fatigue.

In a field that works towards understanding human traits, relational interactions, and development, insight into HSP traits adds to a counsellor’s repertoire of knowledge. Counsellors who lack awareness of HSP traits may perpetuate the negative narratives about sensitivity and this could contribute to further suffering (Cooper, 2015). If counsellors have some awareness of the HSP traits, they may be able to offer this information to their clients. This awareness provides the opportunity for psychoeducation and normalization of HSP traits. Knowledge of HSP traits may be helpful in the counselling field to encourage therapeutic work that is non-pathologizing and seeks to understand the client’s world views. Another aspect for counsellors to consider is the cultural differences that impact the desirability of HSP traits. HSP traits are less valued in Western cultures such as North America where extroversion is highly valued. For

example, “stereotypes of sensitive people, and identifying with that stereotype could (at least in Western culture) lower a man's status and sense of well being” (E. Aron & A. Aron, 1997, p. 357). HSP traits can have an impact on gender stereotypes for both men and women, which can lead to fears and consequences associated with identifying with being a HSP.

The topic of HSP and effective counselling traits is of interest to me because I identify with many of the HSP traits. As a child I was labelled as a shy, quiet, worrier and it has taken me some time to grow into accepting my personality traits and to be able to see them as a gift or a strength. Exploring the research about HSP traits provides an opportunity to educate others. For myself, learning about the HSP construct was validating and brought a new understanding of how I process my environment. I was able to reframe the “shy, quiet, worrier” personality labels into traits that represent my thoughtful, observer, and deep-thinking self. My personal experiences with sensitivity provide both positive and negative aspects to my life and I can relate to Cooper’s (2015) statement that “I have always known intrinsically that I was different, more sensitive to all experience than others, and tended to feel and think deeply” (p. 3). Cooper (2015) provides case examples in his research about HSPs and he also offers his own experience of being in unfulfilling careers that led to his research of HSPs and temperament-appropriate careers.

In my work and studies as a counsellor, I have learned about the importance of the therapeutic relationship and have come to notice that some of my traits have allowed me to be more in tune with my clients. One example of this is being highly aware of subtleties in my clients, such as noticing a client’s slight facial change, or silences within the session. Another example is my deeply empathetic side allows me to notice my client’s non-verbal cues. I can attend to what might not be spoken by checking in with my client and offering them space to

articulate themselves. While other traits, such as being affected by other people's moods, have made my work with clients more difficult and emotionally draining. This is because I have taken in the interaction on a deeper level, leaving me with a strong emotional response to my client's suffering. At times, this means that I feel sensations in my body such as the prick of tears in my eyes, an aching heart, or a tense stomach. It is important to acknowledge that HSP traits can offer both strengths and challenges. For me as a counsellor, it is significant to have this personal awareness of the areas where I might need to do more self-care to regulate my sensory processing. Therefore, a lack of understanding of the HSP traits may present a problem for counsellors in terms of their own self-awareness, as well as regarding what they might be able to offer their clients. I will address these ideas further in Chapter 3 when looking at considerations for HSP counsellors.

Definition of Personality Traits

There have been many studies into personality traits, which have allowed for tools and assessments to be developed to determine how to categorize these traits (Roberts et al., 2008; Spangenberg et al., 2019). When defining personality traits, Roberts et al. (2008) offer that patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours explain personality traits that distinguish individuals from one another. Gelso and Fassinger (1992) provide the definition that "personality itself is defined broadly as the durable characteristics of the individual, for example, traits, values, attitudes, beliefs, needs, and dispositions" (p. 276). There is contradictory evidence as to whether personality traits can change over time as people gain new experiences and go through developmental phases. It has been found that some studies support the theory that personality traits change over the life course, while others oppose this theory and posit that personality is stable (Spangenberg et al., 2019).

Definition of the Highly Sensitive Person

The concept of the Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) trait has been represented in psychology since 1997 when it was coined by E. Aron and A. Aron. They revealed that “this trait is distinguished by depth of processing of all stimulation, a propensity for feeling easily overaroused as compared to others, high empathy and emotional reactivity, and sensitivity to subtle stimuli” (as cited in Cooper, 2015, p. 1). E. Aron and A. Aron (1997) based their study of the HSP on the concept of Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) explaining that this is a “difference not in the sense organs per se but to something that occurs as sensory information is transmitted to or processed in the brain” (p. 347). E. Aron and A. Aron (1997) developed the HSP Scale to assess for SPS using constructs such as psychobiological reactivity, biological sensitivity to context, and low sensory threshold (Smith et al., 2019). They developed the HSP Scale, which is a Likert Scale containing “27 statements each rated from 1 to 7 (1= “totally disagree”) to 7 (7= “totally agree”)” (Ershova et al., 2018, p. 2). Examples of some of the questions they use to determine if the HSP trait is present include: Do you seem to be aware of subtleties in your environment? Do other people's moods affect you? Are you easily overwhelmed by strong sensory input? (E. Aron & A. Aron, 1997, p. 352). Using the HSP Scale, Lionetti and colleagues’ (2018) completed a study on the different levels of sensitivity and found that “40% of the population can be characterized as medium sensitive, while 30% reached particularly high and additional 30% specifically low scores on the HSP scale” (as cited in Tillmann, 2019, p. 95). Aron (2015) continued with her research on the HSP and further developed it to include literature on parenting a highly sensitive child and being in a romantic relationship with a HSP. She has taken her original definition of the HSP and created an acronym (D.O.E.S.) of four aspects that she defines. D.O.E.S. refers to “Depth of processing, being easily Overstimulated,

being both Emotionally reactive generally and having high Empathy in particular, and being aware of Subtle Stimuli” (Aron, 2015, p. xii). This acronym allows a for quick recall of the main observations of someone with HSP traits.

Konrad and Herzberg (2019) explain that 15-25% of people can be identified as highly sensitive within the general population. Within this 25%, there are different subtypes of HSP, including introverted, extroverted, and high sensation seekers. Cooper (2015) offers that “seventy percent of HSPs are introverted, while 30 percent are extraverted” (p. 5). Awareness of these subgroups may be helpful for understanding the behaviour of HSPs. For example, “introverted HSPs, due to their quiet demeanors and propensity for thinking before acting may appear to others as complex, aloof, unfriendly, and even unintelligent” (Bendersky & Shaw, 2013 as cited in Cooper, 2015, p. 6). Whereas HSPs who are more extroverted might not appear as a typical HSP because of their more outgoing and social personality, yet they can still become overwhelmed by too much stimulation and need time to withdraw (Cooper, 2015). Jaeger (2004) introduces a third subtype of HSP, the high sensation seekers. Cooper (2015) explains that “these individuals actively seek out stimulation and crave the novelty of new and exciting activities” (p. 6). High sensation seekers can struggle with the push and pull of desiring stimulation while also feeling overwhelmed by it and needing to retreat.

Outline of the Remainder of the Capstone

In Chapter 2, a review of the literature will examine what personality traits make for effective counsellors. This will include an exploration of the common factors in effective counselling relationships and subsequent counselling skills. The constructs of personality will be explored, looking at theory and measurement. Furthermore, the connection between personality and choosing counselling as a vocation will be brought to light. More specifically, the literature

review will also include research about the HSP, examining the HSP Scale for validity and reliability, as well as identify any evidence of critiques of the HSP Scale. The HSP in the workplace and Sensory Processing Sensitivity will also be examined.

Chapter 3 will address suggestions for counselling practice, including considerations for counsellors who identify with the HSP trait, as well as recommendations for working with HSP clients. The paper will conclude with a summary and discussion in Chapter 4.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will provide a thorough literature review which will begin with the examination of what personality traits make for effective counsellors, including the common factors and skills needed for effective counselling. The theory and measurement of personality will be explored, as well as the influence of personality on choosing counselling as a vocation. This is especially interesting when looking at the HSP personality traits and the correlation with counselling skills. This literature review will examine the research about the HSP, analyzing the validity and reliability of the Highly Sensitive Person Scale, as well as identify any critiques of the HSP Scale. A further explanation of Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) will also be offered, including an investigation into the brain research on SPS.

Personality Traits & Effective Counselling Skills

Counselling provides an opportunity to increase self-awareness, acquire new skills, gain new perspectives, and receive support. Onyekuru and Ibegbunam (2015) explain that “counselling is intended for the acquisition of understanding of the origins and development of personal, social, academic, family, marital, psychological and emotional challenges, leading to an increased capacity to take rational control over feelings and actions” (p. 64). The counselling interaction is relational, as two or more unique personalities come together to discuss presenting

concerns. It is important to acknowledge that everyone brings their individual personality traits into the counselling room when they engage, including the counsellor.

For years, researchers have been studying what skills are required for effective counselling outcomes for clients. Given that counselling is an exploration into the various aspects of a client's life, Akpana (2003) reveals that "effective counselling or counselling effectiveness can therefore be defined as a system of counselling that leads to realization of substantial amount of the counselling objectives" (as cited in Onyekuru & Ibegbunam, 2015, p. 64). The curiosity in this literature review is to look for insights into whether some counsellor personality traits contribute to a more effective counselling experience. It has been determined by Onyekuru and Ibegbunam (2015) that personality traits are one of the many factors that influence the effectiveness of counselling services. They conducted a research study that collected data from registered counsellors using the Personality Traits Assessment Scale and Counselling Effectiveness Inventory. The findings of Onyekuru and Ibegbunam (2015) revealed that there was a significance in the positive joint relationship between the counsellor's personality traits and counselling effectiveness. Of the personality traits that they studied (extraversion, openness to experience, neuroticism, conscientiousness, and agreeableness), they found that that "extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness are regarded as good personality traits on their own and any single counsellor who rates high in them will most likely have a significant counselling effectiveness" (Onyekuru & Ibegbunam, 2015, p. 69). Onyekuru and Ibegbunam (2015) explain that based on the results of their study, they recommend that counsellors should endeavour towards the personality traits that relate positively with counselling effectiveness.

Just as personality traits can contribute to an effective counselling experience, so do the skills that build a safe relationship within the counselling context. One of the most influential theoretical approaches “has been Rogers's (1951, 1957) pioneering effort to define the active components of the therapeutic relationship (empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence)” (as cited in Horvath & Greenberg, 1989, p. 223). The underlying premise is that using the components of the therapeutic relationship, the counsellor provides a safe space for clients to address their concerns. It is within the basis of this relationship that the counsellor can provide an effective experience for the client. Another theory that has contributed to the concept of an effective counselling experience is Strong’s (1968) theory of interpersonal influence, as this theory suggests “that the degree to which a client believes that the counselor is trustworthy expert, and attractive is proportional to the likelihood of successful counseling outcome” (as cited in Horvath & Greenberg, 1989, p. 223-224). A third theory contributing to the idea of what makes an effective counselling experience is that of Bordin’s (1976) working alliance theory. Bordin (1976) understood this as an integrated relationship with the client, which allows for the client to accept and follow treatment (as cited in Horvath & Greenberg, 1989). A strong working alliance allows for the client to feel mutual trust, acceptance, and confidence, which “provides the context that promotes and interacts with specific counseling strategies” (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989, p. 224). Therefore, developing a solid rapport with clients is what leads to the ability to implement counselling skill interventions, thus providing an effective counselling experience.

Common Factors & Required Counselling Skills

During training, counsellors are taught the theory behind what makes for effective counselling sessions, including the skills and interventions that pertain to certain modalities.

Teachings also include an emphasis on creating rapport with the client by using empathy, body posture, regular eye contact, and tone of voice. The purpose of these non-verbal attending skills is to heighten attention and communicate a genuine interaction. Carkhuff (1969) and Truax (1962) explain that the “facilitative qualities in counseling include empathic understanding, genuineness, respect, and intensity” (as cited in Hermansson et al., 1988, p. 149). It has been found that the sharpening of these counselling skills with years of experience is correlated with counselling effectiveness and more positive change in client behaviour (Onyekuru & Ibegbunam, 2015, p. 69-70).

Rogers’ (1957) theory has guided the field of psychotherapy by bringing attention to how therapists can interact with clients in the best way to facilitate change, using his proposed necessary and sufficient conditions (as cited in Watson, 2007). Rogers (1957) “highlighted the importance of a facilitative, responsive relationship with another human being to promote change in psychotherapy” (as cited in Watson, 2007, p. 268). Some critics have argued that Rogers’ (1957) theory is lacking since it does not account for a variety of variables influencing the counselling interaction. Farber and Lane (2002) and Gelso and Hayes (2001) reveal that other variables may be contributing to client change, besides the role of the counsellor, these could be “environmental and social contexts extraneous to therapy, and the demands of different phases of treatment” (as cited in Watson, 2007, p. 270). It is also important to remember Lambert’s (1992) common factors, which offer that client change is influenced by multiple factors including client characteristics (40%), therapeutic relationship (30%), hope and expectancy (15%), and counselling techniques (15%) (as cited in Cormier et al., 2017).

Despite there being critiques of Rogers’ (1957) theory, there is much evidence supporting the importance of these core conditions as contributing to effective counselling. For example,

Watson (2007) explains that “therapist attitudes of empathy, acceptance, and congruence can facilitate clients’ awareness, labeling, reflection, and communication of their affective states to others” (p. 272). As well as many studies have shown that working alliance and client factors are the best predictors of a positive outcome in psychotherapy (Watson, 2007). An interesting aspect to note is that Beutler et al., (2000) reveal that there is an “optimal ratio of empathy, acceptance, and congruence to guidance, stimulation, and structure that facilitates clients’ changes” (as cited in Watson, 2007, p. 271). They explain that the optimal balance of counsellor behaviours is dependant on client personality factors (Watson, 2007). Therefore, the counsellor will need to adapt their style to meet the client’s representation of “resistance, perfectionism, coping style, as well as chronicity and severity of clients’ problems, their level of functional impairment, quality and quantity of social support, and affect regulation skills” (Beutler et al., 2000, as cited in Watson, 2007, p. 271).

Conveying empathy is a skill that has been taught throughout counselling training programs to build a therapeutic alliance and trust with clients. The word empathy comes from German origin and means ‘feeling into’ the experience of another person (Duan & Hill, 1996; Hartley, 1995 as cited in Feller & Cottone, 2003). Hartley (1995) explains that “Kohut referred to empathetic resonance to describe the therapist’s sharing the client’s deep meanings and the significance of the client’s experiences” (as cited in Feller & Cottone, 2003, p. 55). Empathy is one of the core conditions theorized by Rogers (1957) as necessary and sufficient to person-centred counselling (Feller & Cottone, 2003). Studies by Truax and Mitchell (1971) have shown that there is a high correlation between the use of core conditions and positive therapeutic outcomes, as well as a strong relationship between empathy and positive outcomes (as cited in Feller & Cottone, 2003). It is significant to note that Rogers (1957) identified that the connection

between empathy within the counsellor-client relationship is consistent across all theories in counselling (as cited in Feller & Cottone, 2003). Therefore, empathy is a skill, or possibly even a personality trait, related to providing effective counselling. To summarize, important aspects that counsellors need to bring into the therapeutic relationship include empathy, genuineness, and positive regard to provide effective connections with their clients.

Personality

Personality Theory

Gelso and Fassinger (1992) define personality psychology “as the study of the nature, stability, origins, and consequences of human personality” (p. 276). There are many different tools that can be used to evaluate the construct of personality through conducting a trait assessment. Trait assessments can capture patterns of behaviour, as well as “the average or expected value of behavior or states, or a frequency of behavior over a given time” (Augustine & Larsen, 2012, p. 131). The study of personality in the counselling field began in the 1900s with Freud and “then unfolded through the development of a variety of theories” (Gelso & Fassinger, 1992, p. 276). Butcher (2010) explains that the beginnings of personality assessments started with the development of the Rorschach and self-report inventories, and then progressed to the most widely used measure of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). The early theories started with psychodynamic and behavioural approaches, and other theories started to emerge in the early 1950s when humanistic approaches were developed by scholars such as Carl R. Rogers and Abraham H. Maslow (Gelso & Fassinger, 1992). At the same time as humanistic theory was developed, typological and trait-factors theories were appearing (Gelso & Fassinger, 1992). Cognitive approaches to personality psychology emerged later, during the mid-1950s.

Watkins et al. (1986) claim that humanism, behaviorism, and psychoanalysis have been the three main theories that have dominated counselling psychology, particularly with counselling intervention specific to nonvocational issues (as cited in Gelso & Fassinger, 1992). Humanistic theory provides an emphasis on humans' growth potential as a positive aspect, instead of focusing on client's personalities as deficient and as something to be pathologized. When considering the humanistic approach, "it should be noted that both gestalt therapy and especially client-centered (now person-centered) therapy did incorporate theories of personality and development as part of their overall conceptualization of human functioning" (Gelso & Fassinger, 1992, p. 278). Gelso and Fassinger (1992) explain that "the behavioral approach (including the cognitive therapies and cognitive-behavioral counseling) has also evidenced a close fit with counseling psychology, as this approach has focused on clients' assets" (p. 277). With regards to the psychoanalysis theory, "no theoretical approach to counseling is so clearly and deeply connected to personality and development as is psychoanalysis" (Gelso & Fassinger, 1992, p. 278). Knowledge of theory is relevant to how counsellors work with and view their clients since their theoretical orientation informs their hypothesis. The personality of the client needs to be accounted for when counsellors are considering which treatment approach to utilize.

Personality Assessment & Measurement

Augustine and Larsen (2012) explain that "although several definitions exist, a personality trait can be defined as the average or expected value of personality-relevant behaviors" (p. 131). It is interesting to note that trait personality assessments "may contain judgments of one's self-concept, or the personality that an individual believes (or wants to believe) they possess" (Augustine & Larsen, 2012, p. 132). Therefore, the answers to assessment

questions may be impacted by participants lacking self-awareness of their behaviours and responses.

One example of a personality trait assessment includes the Big-Five. Cooper (2015) explains that the Big-Five was developed through the analysis of language terms that people used to describe themselves (Allport & Odbert, 1936; Baumgarten, 1933; Klages, 1926). What started as a list of 18 000 terms used to describe people's behaviour, has now been narrowed down to five constructs (Cooper, 2015). Goldberg (1981) determined that these traits are stable and internally caused and he labelled the Big-Five as "extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness" (as cited in Cooper, 2015, p. 9). Another example of a personality assessment includes the Self-Directed Search-Revised (SDS-R) tool, which was developed by Holland in 1994 (Ding et al., 2015). Holland studied the relationship between personalities and environment, and he found that people seek out environments that fit their personalities (Ding et al., 2015). He revealed that there are six dominant personality types, including the categories of Realistic (R), Investigative (I), Artistic (A), Social (S), Enterprising (E), or Conventional (C) [RIASEC] (Holland, 1985 as cited in Ding et al., 2015). The Swedish Universities Scales of Personality (SSP) was developed as another self-reporting instrument for assessing personality traits (Spangenberg et al., 2019). Spangenberg et al. (2019) offer that the SSP "measures universal personality traits and they have been shown to correspond to trait dimensions of the FFM [Factor Five Model or Big-Five] of personality" (p. 309). This personality assessment tool has been represented within a wide range of research, including an investigation into how personality correlates with biological factors (Spangenberg et al., 2019).

It is important to note some impacting factors and limitations when measuring for personality in trait assessments. For example, trait assessments tend to rely more on participants

self-concept at the time that they are taking the assessment and can give insight into client functioning. Self-concept is defined as one's understanding or view of themselves, while self-discrepancy is when there is a difference between a person's self-concept and what they think they should be identifying with (Augustine & Larsen, 2012). Augustine and Larsen (2012) reveal that their "findings regarding personality self-discrepancy suggest that the potential ability of trait ratings to tap into self-concept is very important, as personality self-concept has consequences for affective functioning" (p.136). The type of questions and the context surrounding the timeline of the questions being asked also influences how clients respond. Robinson and Clore (2002) explain that "judgments involving longer time periods (i.e., trait assessments) are made more quickly than those involving shorter time periods" (as cited in Augustine & Larsen, 2012, p. 132). Augustine and Larsen (2012) conclude that personality trait assessments are primarily capturing the mean of personality relevant behaviour. The formation of one's personality can result from the influence of many factors, including biology, temperament, environment, childhood experiences, behaviour, and self-concept.

Personality & Vocation

Ding et al. (2015) used Holland's RIASEC theory to examine some of the vocational personality traits associated with students who were studying to enter the counselling profession. Of the six RIASEC profiles, it is noted that counselling students were high in the Enterprising characteristic. The Enterprising characteristic can be explained as a trait that includes the ability to be persuasive, strategic, and business orientated (Ott-Holland et al., 2013). Ding et al. (2015) posit that high Enterprising scores could be because "it is expected that school and mental health counselors might frequently offer treatment suggestions and persuade and influence others by using research- and evidence-based practice" (p. 165). Many students in the study also identified

with the Artistic personality type. Ding et al. (2015) believe the Artistic type “reflects counseling skills, such as being creative and open about ideas and treatments to accommodate individual differences” (p. 167). When considering the relationship between personality traits and counselling careers, it is important to understand the values of the profession and the person. Research has also revealed that the theories of trait-factor/person-environment fit are relevant in counsellor vocations. Gelso and Fassinger (1992) explain that “vocational behavior is a reflection of the personality and that well-adapted individuals in occupations share particular psychological characteristics, which can be measured and differentiated from those of other individuals in other occupations” (p. 281). Wille and De Fruyt (2014) posit that “in the work domain in particular, there is now evidence showing that people are interested in and tend to gravitate toward occupational environments that—at least to a certain extent—fit their personality traits” (p. 262). This explanation makes sense when thinking about the connection between the HSP traits of high empathy, and increased environmental awareness, and a potential vocation as a counsellor.

Personality Relevance in the Counselling Field

Theories of personality have played a vital role in the counselling psychology field and have contributed to counsellor’s understanding of their clients. Tillmann (2019) explains that “Eysenck (1981), for example, describes personality as an important part of every field of applied psychology due to people’s individual differences and their consequent variations in behavior given identical situations” (p. 35). Gelso and Fassinger (1992) echo the profound connection between counselling psychology and developmental psychology, stating that “it is difficult to imagine counseling psychologists functioning effectively as scientists or practitioners without grounding in these fields” (p. 275). They explain that there are four areas where personality and development has influenced psychology. These four areas are “career behavior,

cultural identity, psychoanalytic work, and adult development” (Gelso & Fassinger, 1992, p. 275). The study of career development is an area in which personality concepts have greatly influenced the research in this field by counselling psychologists since clients can be matched with career options based on their traits (Gelso & Fassinger, 1992).

Personality in counselling is also relevant when considering the personality traits of both the counsellor and the client. With regards to the counsellor, one of the ways that personality is applicable is when considering ‘use of self’ within the sessions. This is explained as having an awareness of the connection between our identities and our actions and how this influences the professional role of counsellor (Amundson & Smith, 2016). Use of self acknowledges that we bring ourselves into every interaction we have. Meier and Davis (2011) explain that “in no other profession does the personality and behaviours of the professional make such a difference as it does in counselling” (as cited in Amundson & Smith, 2016, p. 170). Gladding (2018) explains that even though a counsellor may identify as more introverted, “the interpersonal nature of counselling requires counsellors to be skilled at the extraverted qualities of initiating and building relationships, communicating assertively, and maintaining energy and enthusiasm for their work and their clients’ success” (as cited in Holden, 2020, p. 191). Regardless of the counsellor’s personality traits, the requirements of the job are that the counsellor can arrive to the session in a manner that can build relationships using their ability to be genuine, and to create trust and emotional safety for their clients (Corey, 2017; Gladding, 2018 as cited in Holden, 2020).

It is important to consider the personality traits of the client and how this may influence the approach that a counsellor might use with a client. For example, if a counsellor is observing a client who appears shy and soft-spoken, they may choose to moderate their interactions with a

calm demeanour, a quiet tone of voice, and body language that mirrors that of the client. Client personality can also influence a counsellor's chosen modality as well. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is an example of this since there is "an interest in understanding the client's personality (especially as it reflects cognitions) and developmental issues" (Beck & Weishaar, 1989 as cited in Gelso & Fassinger, 1992, p. 278). This is because "personality constructs contribute to the understanding of effects of certain interventions" (Gelso & Fassinger, 1992, p. 277). If a client presents with a personality type of someone who is conscientious and open to new ideas, the counsellor may decide to use interventions that include homework tasks. Using the client's openness could create an environment where the pair could design the homework tasks in collaboration. Knowing the client is conscientious may allow for homework tasks to be better executed and prove to be a useful intervention, based on their personality.

Highly Sensitive Person

Highly Sensitive Person in the Workplace

When considering a workplace environment, it is important to remember the unique profile of a HSP as someone who experiences the world in a way that includes an increased depth of processing, awareness of the environment, and heightened empathy, often resulting in overstimulation. The way a HSP interacts with external stimuli may influence the types of jobs they pursue and how they function in the workplace. In the modern-day workplace, certain traits are associated with what is needed to climb the corporate ladder, such as dominance, aggressiveness, and assertiveness (Cooper, 2015). Cooper (2015) explains that the HSP is "often perceived as quiet and reserved, [and] this would seem to represent a major issue in terms of advancement, engagement, and career satisfaction" (p. 12). Since these more aggressive traits

tend not to be exhibited by HSPs, this could result in employers developing beliefs about their HSP employee, such as job unhappiness, lack of motivation, or anti-social behaviors.

Cooper (2015) conducted a study about HSPs and temperament-appropriate careers and discovered that there were specific areas of the work itself and the interpersonal and physical aspects of the workplace environment that were important for HSPs. The research was conducted using a qualitative semi-structured interview process. To understand how HSPs experience their work, Cooper (2015) was interested in examining the participants context, point of view, and the meanings they attached to their experiences. For examples of participants interviews from his research, refer to Appendix A.

The first workplace area to note is that HSPs have a strong desire for authentic and meaningful work, with a need to be fully engaged in the work (Cooper, 2015). HSPs also reported that the structure of the work was important to their functioning, for example, most preferred autonomous work that offers “flexible working hours; dislike of repetition; need for mentally stimulating work; and having time to focus intently on the task at hand” (Cooper, 2015, p. 87). With regards to the interpersonal aspects of a workplace environment, Cooper (2015) discovered that HSPs preferred workplaces that offered flexible social interactions at work, meaning that they could interact with others for a short time while also being able to find quiet times away from others to do their work independently. Respondents of his study also revealed that self-care practices within the workplace were essential when identifying as a HSPs (Cooper, 2015). Cooper (2015) noted that HSPs in this study expressed a strong dislike for “aggressive or highly competitive individuals” and “superficiality in conversation or interaction” (p. 83). Overall, most participants preferred to have one-on-one interactions with co-workers and clients which allow for deeper, more meaningful interactions (Cooper, 2015). Another positive

interpersonal attribute that can be useful in the workplace is that sensitive people think carefully about consequences, which tends to allow for them to pause and evaluate a situation before reacting (Aron, 2015).

Physical workspace is also an important factor to consider for HSPs in the workplace environment, especially given their ability to take in external stimuli on a deeper level. Cooper (2015) found that themes developed when respondents spoke about their physical workspaces, these included a dislike for open-office space floor plans, disordered and cramped workspaces, unpleasant noises and smells, and extreme fluctuations in temperature. It was discovered that respondents preferred “natural light over artificial with light levels varying from low to high” (Cooper, 2015, p. 87). Insight into the many aspects of the workplace environment may be helpful for counsellors identifying with HSP traits as they are assessing how to best meet their own workplace needs. As well, this knowledge can be offered to HSP clients who may be struggling with their workplace settings.

Specifically, within the profession of counselling, HSP counsellors will be in a workplace setting where they will be offering help to others and could use their HSP traits to aid in their success in the field. Aron (2010) explains that “highly sensitive people subjectively process experience before acting, may be overstimulated by sensory input, are aware of subtleties before others, are highly creative, intuitive, empathic, and conscientious (as cited in Cooper, p. 5). It has been noted that HSPs show more activity than others in their mirror neuron system (Aron, 2015). As a HSP counsellor working with a client in session, “the mirror neurons help us know deeply what the other person plans or feels” and we may then respond with heightened levels of empathy (Aron, 2015, p. xviii). Ding et al. (2015) report that

as prospective professionals in these [three] helping professions, students' social traits might serve as a fundamental vocational quality, and related undergraduate courses might require students to be able to apprehend individual differences, value service to others, have empathy, and enjoy working with others. (p. 168)

These aspects of noticing individual differences, meeting the needs of others, and providing empathy are qualities of the HSP trait, as well as important aspects involved in providing counselling. Next, the focus will shift to examine how the HSP trait was developed and how it is measured.

Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS): Development, Validity & Reliability

The Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS) was developed by E. Aron and A. Aron in 1997 as a tool to assess for Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) as they hypothesized about the likelihood that humans are born with a sensitivity to environmental and emotional stimulation (as cited in Smith et al., 2019). The scale is designed as a 27-question Likert Scale questionnaire, allowing participants to rate their answers from 1 to 7 depending on how strongly they identify with each question, a sample can be viewed in Appendix B. Not only did they ask the questions from the HSPS, but they also inquired about behavioural tendencies as well. This included questions about hobbies, their environment during their childhood, social contacts, beliefs, personal experiences, and characteristics that may be in line with the trait (Tillmann, 2019). E. Aron and A. Aron (2018) explain that scale items are scored in the same direction and the scoring method is determined by taking the mean (as cited in Smith et al., 2019). Aron (2010) also acknowledges that the HSPS is a self-reporting scale, therefore, there are always some biases influencing how people rate themselves. More recently, Aron (2015) has developed a 12-item self-reporting HSPS for school-aged children as well.

E. Aron and A. Aron (1997) used a qualitative design to first develop a study to identify SPS, this was followed by six quantitative studies which examined the SPS construct more deeply (as cited in Smith et al., 2019). These included exploring social introversion, emotionality, family environment, and childhood experiences (E. Aron & A. Aron, 1997). Within these studies, E. Aron and A. Aron (1997) have concluded that the HSPS has “adequate psychometric properties for research applications” and “the measure's discriminant, convergent, and overall construct validity was supported by the entire set of studies” (p. 364). Tillmann (2019) explains that “although SPS was originally not being conceptualized as a weakness or an issue of psychological ill-health (E. Aron & A. Aron, 1997), its association with negative affect is important to consider, especially when investigating the HSP scale's discriminant validity” (p. 363). Smith et al. (2019) offer that the use of the HSPS can aid practitioners in addressing confusion between screening for diagnostic symptoms and disorders with temperament or trait characteristics. Aron (2010) provides further information in her book, *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person: Improving Outcomes for that Minority of People who are the Majority of Clients* about how counsellors can distinguish SPS from disorders listed in the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Such as,

neurodevelopmental disorders, bipolar and related disorders, depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive and related disorders, trauma and stressor-related disorders, somatic symptom and related disorders, personality disorders, and disorders that might differ in appearance or cause in some persons with SPS. (Smith et al., p. 234)

Counsellors may use their clinical assessment and the HSPS to understand a case conceptualization that accounts for the influences of the HSP temperament.

Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) & Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS) Critiques

There have been some critiques presented about the scale that need to be addressed as well. Konrad and Herzberg (2019) conducted a “study [is] aimed to clarify the factor structure of the HSPS, to test measurement invariance across sex and high and low sensitivity individuals” (p. 365). When E. Aron and A. Aron (1997) developed the HSP Scale, they revealed that it was a unidimensional structure with moderate to high convergent validity, “however, empirical findings do not convincingly support the authors’ original assumption that the postulated factor structure of the HSPS is unidimensional” (as cited in Konrad & Herzberg, 2019, p. 364). The idea that the HSPS is a multi-dimensional structure has been confirmed by other researchers (Ershova et al., 2018). For example,

others have determined that two factors (negative emotionality [NE] and orienting sensitivity [OS]; Evans & Rothbart, 2008), three factors (ease of excitation [EOE], aesthetic sensitivity [AES], and low sensitivity threshold [LST]; Booth et al., 2015; Smolewska, McCabe, & Woody, 2006; Sobocko & Zelenski, 2015), or four factors (general sensitivity/overstimulation, adverse reactions to strong sensitivity, psychological fine discrimination, and controlled harm avoidance; Meyer, Ajchenbrenner, & Bowles, 2005) may underlie the items. (Smith et al., 2019, p. 223)

Since there are so many factors contributing to what can make a person highly sensitive, it would appear that a multidimensional structure could be more appropriate when studying HSP traits, perhaps the development of a broader scale could be useful.

Smith et al. (2019) conducted clinical research into the utility of the HSPS by analyzing and summarizing the psychometric properties of the HSPS in terms of reliability and validity. This is the first study to examine the psychometric properties of the 20-year-old HSPS, and

“evidence exists to support both unidimensional and three-factor models underlying the HSPS items, but from a practical perspective, counselors and clients are best served by interpreting the unidimensional model” (Smith et al., 2019, p. 233). Although, Smith et al. (2019) does note that there was no ability to conduct a gender comparison due to no studies reporting male/female results. Smith et al. (2019) recommend that further studies need to occur with the HSPS to address any potential gender, racial, and ethnic differences, as well as continued study to examine the convergent validity. Finally, it has been determined that personality traits can be measured and observed, yet they do not offer insight into the inner workings of a person (Cooper, 2015). Therefore, the self-reporting of the person answering the questions creates the potential for self-reporting bias. Since E. Aron and A. Aron (1997) have based their HSP research on the construct of Sensory Processing Sensitivity, a further explanation will be offered next.

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS)

Sensory Processing Sensitivity is the construct that is defined as a trait belonging to people who present with lower thresholds for environmental and social stimuli, resulting in a greater sensitivity (Acevedo et al., 2014). Greven et al. (2019) state that the HSPS was the first measure to assess for SPS, asking about “positive and negative cognitive and emotional responses to various environmental stimuli including caffeine, art, loud noises, smells and fabrics” (p. 288). Greven et al. (2019) provided research that shows that those with high SPS scores benefit more from positive experiences and have heightened responsivity to negative experiences as well. Research by E. Aron and A. Aron (1997) and Wolf et al. (2008) has shown that SPS is a strategy that has evolved to promote the survival of the species, allowing for species to be more responsive to their environments by noticing opportunities and threats (Acevedo et

al., 2014). Aron et al. (2012) explains that “SPS is becoming increasingly associated with identifiable genes, behavior, physiological reactions, and patterns of brain activation” (as cited in Acevedo et al., 2014, p. 580). This increased awareness of surroundings and processing has been shown to be useful both in the present moment and in assessing future situations before approaching them too quickly, since SPS is characterized by ‘pausing to check’ (Acevedo et al., 2014). Acevedo et al. (2014) reveal that “SPS is a trait associated with enhanced awareness and responsiveness to others’ moods as it engages brain systems involved in sensory information processing and integration, action planning, and overall awareness” (p. 590). Further research into SPS has provided evidence that people fall within three levels of sensitivity groups (low, medium, and high) along the sensitivity continuum (Lionetti et al., 2018).

While SPS may provide positive aspects to a person’s life, it can also reveal challenges that come with being highly aware and deeply affected. Tillmann (2019) offers that “empirical evidence suggests the importance of a person’s environment (e.g., childhood experiences, parental support, cultural context), positive and negative in nature, in the individual development process, particularly with regard to people high on SPS” (p. 104). SPS is not labelled as a disorder, it is identified as a trait, yet it has also been linked with several negative outcomes which are associated with disorders. These can include “higher levels of psychopathology-related traits, including internalising problems, anxiety, depression, and traits of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and alexithymia” (Greven et al., 2019, p. 299). These challenges may result in more difficulties with stress management, emotional regulation, work distress, and lower levels of life satisfaction (Greven et al., 2019). Although, it is interesting to note that even with these challenges, people with high SPS respond well to treatment. An example of this is an intervention study with adolescent girls. Pluess and Boniwell (2015) “found that girls high

(versus low) in SPS responded more favourably to a school-based resiliency programme based in concepts of cognitive-behavioural therapy and positive psychology techniques” (as cited in Greven et al., 2019, p.289).

Brain Research on Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS)/ Highly Sensitive Person (HSP)

Research on SPS brain activity is still in the early stages, with current research only dating back ten years. It is important to understand the brain research on HSP/SPS traits because it offers evidence towards the theory that certain people process their environments differently. There have only been five functional MRI (fMRI) studies (Acevedo et al., 2014, 2017; Aron et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2011; Jagiellowicz et al., 2012) conducted on humans to determine brain activity of SPS (as cited in Greven et al., 2019). These studies used the HSP Scale to measure SPS brain responses. The first two studies examined perceptual tasks, while the other two studies determined SPS responsivity to emotional stimuli, and the last studied the “differences in resting-state brain activity in association with SPS” (Greven et al., 2019, p. 295).

High sensitivity was associated with increased brain activity in certain areas, refer to Appendix C for an image of the brain and activation areas. These areas were involved with attention, action planning, awareness, integration of sensory information, and empathy (Acevedo et al., 2014). The regions responsible for processing this type of information included the cingulate, premotor area [PMA], insula, inferior frontal gyrus [IFG], middle temporal gyrus [MTG], and angular gyrus [AG] (Acevedo et al., 2014). The cingulate (in conjunction with the insula) “is most important for the recognition of other’s actions [and increase in] moment-to-moment awareness” (Acevedo et al., 2014, p. 590). The PMA is responsible for unconscious behavior control, attention, and action planning (Acevedo et al., 2014). An example of this is when someone high in SPS “pauses to check” prior to responding to their environmental stimuli.

Acevedo et al. (2014) explain that “the insula shows connectivity with other regions of the brain associated with emotion detection and interpretation, such as the IFG” (p. 590). The IFG is suggested to be part of the Mirror Neuron System (MNS) (Iacoboni et al. 1999; Jabbi & Keysers, 2008; Van Overwalle & Baetens, 2009, as cited in Acevedo et al., 2014). This is significant when considering the HSP trait as one that may contribute to the role of an effective counsellor because the MNS allows humans to “rapidly and intuitively sense others’ goals and intentions” (Acevedo et al., 2014, p. 590). Greven et al. (2019) confirm this theory as their data suggests “that high SPS individuals may readily intuit, ‘feel’ and integrate information, and respond to others’ affective states” (p. 296).

The MTG is the region where emotional meaning-making takes place, and this area demonstrated stronger activation in individuals who also have higher HSP scores (Acevedo et al., 2014). The final area to note which had higher activation in HSPs is the AG region. The AG is responsible for “self-representation, understanding of metaphors, cognition (specifically internal dialogue), and abstract representation of the self” (Blanke et al., 2002; Arzy et al., 2006 as cited in Acevedo, 2014, p. 591). Again, this is important to note when considering the depth of processing of HSPs and some of the skills required for counsellors to be able to access self-reflection and analysis. Overall, the study conducted by Acevedo et al. (2014) was successful in proving that people with SPS traits typically respond to their physical and social environment with increased awareness and behavioral readiness. This research provides context which can be applied to suggestions for counselling practice, both for clients and counsellors identifying with the HSP trait in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Suggestions for Counselling Practice

Considerations for Working with HSP Clients

Initial Assessment

Understanding the HSP traits may be beneficial to counsellors working with HSP clients because it can inform their practice, especially since HSPs may have difficulty asking for help when it relates to personal or personality-related concerns (Tillmann, 2019). Tillmann (2019) explains that,

if therapists and medical doctors would include an assessment of SPS by applying the HSP scale, as well as information about childhood experiences, individuals with the highest need for an intervention could be identified. This would lead to more efficient treatment. (p. 409)

There are many resources available to professionals who are interested in educating themselves further in the research about how to work with clients who may be high in sensitivity. Aron (2020a) includes information on her website about how to be listed as an HSP-knowledgeable professional. For this to happen, a practitioner must access the available HSP training and provide documentation to Aron's organization. Practitioners may also access useful information about using the HSPS in their own research by consulting a document compiled by E. Aron and A. Aron (2018). Smith et al. (2019) suggest that "mental health counselling research should consider how individuals with SPS may be misdiagnosed" (p. 235). Therefore, as a counsellor it may be helpful to have some context about the HSP trait and assessment when supporting clients in exploring themselves and their diagnosis. In their study of the clinical and research utility of the Highly Sensitive Person Scale, Smith et al. (2019) found that "mental health counselors are

well suited to use the HSPS within their regular practice of assessing and valuing normal human development in addition to diagnosing and treating mental health disorders” (p. 221).

In Elaine Aron’s book titled *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person: Improving Outcomes for that Minority of People who are the Majority of Clients* (2010), she offers clinicians the idea of assessing for the HSP trait using the D.O.E.S. framework. The D refers to depth of processing and she recommends looking at indicators in the client’s behavior when assessing. When assessing for depth of processing, clients may present with a self-report of having trouble making decisions or they may have trauma related to decisions they have made (Aron, 2010). This aspect can be examined in therapy by asking clients questions about decision making, such as do they have difficulty making decisions or how much time do they spent reflecting. Another example is to notice if clients are more distressed by events than others might be, do they have lower self-esteem, or are they preoccupied with deep thoughts and feelings as markers of items to be aware of (Aron, 2010). Their depth of processing may make it more difficult for them to move past the concern without first allowing time to understand the issue, deeply reflect on it, and attach meaning to it.

The O refers to the experience of overstimulation or arousal in a HSP. Aron (2010) notes that clinicians can notice any client behaviours that would signal effects of the nervous system. For example, HSP clients may present with greater nervousness, make minimal eye contact, have more tears, and longer silences than other clients. Common presenting problems include having trouble sleeping, experiencing anxiety, and feelings of stress and overwhelm, especially with life transitions (Aron, 2010). As part of the assessment, Aron (2010) recommends that therapists ask about their client’s physical symptoms, if they avoid highly arousing situations, and do they have a strong need for downtime.

The E signifies the higher levels of empathy and emotional reactivity of HSPs. Aron (2010) has found that these intense emotions can be both strong positive and negative effects generally, and not towards specific things. Being heightened to emotions not only means that HSPs experience their own emotions intensely, but it also effects how HSPs respond more to the emotions of others. An important item for counsellors to note is that Aron (2010) identifies that the client's presenting problem is typically a concern about their overreaction of emotions.

Finally, the S in D.O.E.S. represents the sensory sensitivity or awareness to subtle stimuli. Behaviours that counsellors might notice include clients who are hyper-aware of noises and office décor, they may comment on changes in the office space, as well as notice changes in appearance (Aron, 2010). This is important for counsellors to note because HSP clients will pick up on subtle facial expressions which could lead the client to question how the counsellor feels about them, as they are often highly critical of self and others. Aron (2010) identifies the common presenting problem as clients coming into therapy wondering if their sensitivity is normal.

Client History

Intake

An important part of the assessment involves accounting for the client's history to allow for context and understanding. This may begin with asking the client if they have participated in counselling before and learning what was helpful or helpful for them. Aron (2010) notes that if a previous experience was bad, the HSP can overgeneralize and avoid future counselling.

Therefore, as counsellors, the establishment of a solid rapport with a HSP client is imperative to them overcoming a previously difficult therapeutic relationship. Or perhaps this is their first experience in counselling, and it may be important to note that HSPs could struggle with the

process. E. Aron and A. Aron (1997) found that “new and unknown situations are challenging for [HSPs], because they cannot access learned behavior or automatic patterns, but rather have to process all details, which leads to a risk of overstimulation” (as cited in Tillmann, 2019, p. 377). Managing expectations from others and expectations that HSPs might put on themselves is also a common problem and asking about this can add to the context. This could translate into perceived expectations from counsellors in terms of the change process or expectations that clients may put on themselves. Therefore, the counsellor may appeal to the sensitivities of the client by spending a significant amount of time establishing the boundaries and expectations within the counselling relationship, as well as continuously checking in about this. Aron (1999) explains that “since we [HSPs] are more easily over aroused, we have more experiences of ‘failing’ under pressure and not enjoying what we are ‘supposed to’ enjoy” (p. 14). Another important consideration for counsellors is the client’s cultural context since some cultures value high sensitivity and a quiet demeanor. For example, “a study found that Chinese elementary children who are ‘sensitive and quiet’ are among the most respected and liked by their peers, but in Canada they are among the least respected and liked” (Aron, 1999, p. 14). Tillmann (2019) explains that perceiving one’s trait as a negative aspect in the cultural context can result in decreased self-confidence. Therefore, asking questions about the client’s cultural background and family of origin beliefs about sensitivity may offer useful information for the counsellor.

It is also important to inquire about any history of trauma in the client’s childhood. It is noted that HSPs who have had trauma in childhood are more likely to have emotional challenges, and “issues includ[ing] shame, fear, serious self-doubts about one’s abilities, and learned helplessness” (Jaeger, 2004, p. 19). Aron (1999) explains that HSPs with difficult childhood experiences can be more susceptible to becoming depressed or anxious than those people who

are non-sensitive and who grew up in similar situations. This may be because sensitive children absorb any tense family dynamics and exposure to unhealthy situations more so than non-sensitive children. Tillmann (2019) concludes that there is evidence suggesting the importance of one's environment, including childhood experiences, parental support, and cultural context to the individual development process, especially with people high in SPS. Greven et al. (2019) revealed that positive social responses can help to counterbalance negative experiences for those with high sensitivity. Coates and Wade (2016) explain that blame and misdiagnosis can be the result of negative social responses from others. Therefore, it could be useful to inquire about the quality of the social responses that clients have received in response to difficult childhood experiences and their sensitive presentation.

Therapeutic Interventions

Counselling Environment

Aron (2010) makes many recommendations for counsellors if they choose to adapt their treatment to accommodate the needs of HSP clients, she explains that the counsellors themselves do not need to be a HSP to provide a goodness of fit. Examples of these recommendations include showing respect for the sensitivities, being calm and soothing, being patient with the slow process, and turning down the volume and intensity (Aron, 2010). Silences may be more common in therapy with HSPs due to over-arousal and deeper processing. Aron (2010) also suggests that counsellors ask about these silences and provide plenty of time for clients to respond. Practical suggestions for working with HSP clients include being intentional with office space, providing soft lighting and furniture, and a welcoming environment. A final suggestion is that counsellors should plan more regular meetings with clients instead of infrequently since this can allow for depth of processing and over-arousal to be better contained (Aron, 2010).

Role of Therapist

There is evidence showing that people high in SPS benefit from psychological interventions when distressed and overwhelmed (Greven et al., 2019). Many specific interventions may be used to support HSP clients, while one that is of importance to note is the presence of an external regulating person. Greven et al. (2019) note that having a supportive person with a medium sensitivity can “promote the ability of the highly sensitive one to gradually learn on his/her own on how to cope with upsetting stimuli” (p. 299). This regulating person could be the counsellor themselves, or the counsellor could work with the client to examine their options for supportive people in their lives. Other interventions include increasing the client’s self-efficacy for managing emotions, using mindfulness-based training and meditation (Greven et al., 2019).

Counsellors may support their HSP clients in many other ways and a starting place might be to help clients better understand and accept their sensitivities. Often, HSPs will have experiences of shame and embarrassment due to their sensitivities, and Aron (1999) explains the importance of the client getting to know their sensitivity and she offers activities for clients to develop this awareness. One exercise Aron (1999) suggests is to conduct “the inventory of an HSPs assets” to bring awareness to the positive aspects of the trait (p. 141). This can create space for clients to reframe their sensitivities as gifts and to allow for more understanding and self-compassion. Examples of questions that clinicians could use to guide a client through this process of reframing are demonstrated in an excerpt taken from *The Highly Sensitive Person’s Workbook* (Aron, 1999), found in Appendix D. A situation where reframing may be useful could be if a client describes themselves as shy and has many reasons why their shyness has caused them problems in life. Whereas this ‘shyness’ could be reframed as a desire to have a few close

friends that provide meaningful relationships, instead of multiple ‘surface type’ friendships. Tillmann (2019) supports reframing work, explaining that “knowledge about the trait already helps individuals to understand and possibly reframe their experiences. It may also help them to listen to their own needs more closely and alleviate the sense of feeling misunderstood, lonely or different” (p. 405).

Modalities that Offer Best Fit for HSP Clients

Smith et al. (2019) explain that mindfulness interventions may help to bring awareness to thoughts of self-judgment about HSP traits, as well as provide an opportunity to examine the cultural and societal influence associated with HSP negativity. Teaching and practicing grounding techniques is a useful intervention when working with HSP clients. This practice can help reduce overarousal and restore calm which is best for facilitating change in clients (Aron, 2010). Smith et al. (2019) offer that interventions that work best with HSP clients are “based upon accepting the client’s innate uniqueness and learning how to tailor life patterns and coping skills in more helpful ways” (p. 234). Examples of these therapies include “acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT; Beck, 1967), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993), narrative therapy (NT; Epston & White, 1990), feminist theory, and multicultural theories” (as cited in Smith et al., 2019, p. 235). When working with unhelpful cognitions of HSPs, the benefits of CBT were proven effective even 12 months after treatment when it was found that the information processing characteristics of SPS led to better internalization and use of the coping strategies (Tillmann, 2019). Other strategies that have proven to be successful include a focus on behavioral prevention, which involves teaching emotional regulation skills and abilities for better coping with stressful and challenging situations (Tillmann, 2019).

Goals of Therapy

A final aspect that may be supported within the counselling relationship is helping HSP clients address communication skills, assertiveness, and boundary setting. Jaeger (2004) notes that “many HSPs lack positive-entitlement to express their needs” (pp. 125-126). This refers to how HSPs value the process of negotiation and equally meeting people’s needs, yet they may be hesitant to stand up for their own needs for fear of infringing on another’s (Jaeger, 2004). This support can be offered in individual counselling or within the group settings as well. Aron (1999) explains that groups can be helpful because they may offer a place for HSPs to come together to honour sensitivities and relate to one another. This can be a place where HSPs can “learn, grow, heal, deal with difficulties, or explore the meaning of life and the depths of the psyche” (Aron, 1999, p. 267). Although Aron (1999) does caution practitioners when creating groups to keep these aspects in mind, such as to properly screen the members, provide a structured group experience, and limit groups to six two-hour sessions to allow for contained stimulation.

Considerations for Counsellors Identifying with High Sensitivity

Should a counsellor themselves identify with the traits of a HSP, there are many considerations that can be offered to mitigate the stressors of being in a role that provides care to multiple clients daily. Aron (1999) explains that “overstimulation leads to a physical state of overarousal that is uncomfortable and can cause anyone to perform worse professionally, socially, athletically, mentally, sexually, [and] financially” (p. 73). Therefore, not managing overstimulation can impact client care, and considerations such as attending to the workplace environment and self-care may contribute to increased well-being for the HSP counsellor.

Workplace Demands

Most jobs have a component of ‘being on’, meaning that the worker needs to interact with others, perform in a required manner, and provide customer service. With a career in counselling, these components are frequent and often intense. HSP counsellors need to understand and be prepared to be interacting with multiple people daily, both clients and colleagues. It is also important to acknowledge that although the work of counsellors is rewarding and fulfilling, it can also be emotionally draining and intense. Jaeger (2004) explains that in jobs with a lot of ‘facetime’ HSPs can experience more stress and will need more regular breaks to recharge. Walsh (2006) explains that people often enter work environments due to their personalities and choose to remain in them because of interactions that provide reinforcement and satisfaction (as cited in Tillmann, 2019). This strengthens the notion that people stay in their chosen profession because there are positive aspects, in counselling an example of this may be seeing a client achieve their goals throughout the counselling process. Terhart (2010) provides the example of HSP teachers, stating that,

selecting teaching as a profession would, therefore, not only align well with HSPs’ characteristics, but also includes an important responsibility and role in society as teachers prepare students for their future lives in society through helping them to learn and develop. (as cited in Tillmann, 2019, p. 367)

Bordin's (1980) theory of working alliance accounts for “concepts of bond, goal, and task involve collaboration and hinge on the degree of concordance and joint purpose between the counselor and client” (as cited in Horvath & Greenberg, 1989, p. 224). Perhaps a similar correlation could be drawn with the counselling profession, whereby HSP counsellors may tune into client needs to provide guidance for learning and growth.

Jaeger (2004) highlights the importance of self-awareness for HSPs as a tool to better understand their needs and to be able to accommodate these needs to prevent burnout and overwhelm. Raising consciousness about personal sensitivities can allow for “use of their HSP ability to detect early signs of stress” (Jaeger, 2004, p. 73). Along with increasing self-awareness, other tools that can be helpful in workplace settings are establishing boundaries and self-advocacy. Jaeger (2004) explains that it is important for HSPs to be clear with their boundaries, since too much stimulation can create a ‘crash and burn’ experience, resulting in exhaustion and frustration. For counsellors, it is important to establish a work balance that is manageable and sustainable. One of the tasks suggested by Aron (1999) is to complete “an inventory and celebration of the ways you cope with overarousal” (p. 75). For example, booking clients back-to-back could present a situation where the HSP counsellor does not have enough time to process the events of the session or to self-regulate prior to the arrival of the next client. This might mean that an HSP counsellor would need to be mindful when booking clients to allow for more space in between client sessions within their daily schedule to meet their own needs.

Compassion Fatigue

Brain research has shown that HSPs have increased awareness of subtleties, deeper processing, and empathy abilities, thus leaving the HSP counsellor with a greater vulnerability to be affected by the work with their clients. An example of this is represented in an fMRI study conducted by Acevedo et al. (2014) which examined the neural correlates of SPS in response to “emotionally evocative face images of a partner or stranger” (as cited in Greven et al., 2019, p. 296). The purpose of this study was to measure empathetic processes and it was found that those high in SPS had increased brain activation in regions associated with attention and action

planning (Greven et al., 2019). When participants viewed an image of someone in distress, they had a response of caring and action. Therefore, the connection may be made that counsellors high in HSP/SPS may respond with greater feelings of empathy towards their clients and a desire to take action to help clients find solutions that will ease their suffering.

Self-Care

The work of self-care needs to be a priority for all counsellors, especially when they identify with high sensitivity. This can take on many forms, including those previously mentioned about establishing boundaries, adjusting workplace environment, and work/life balance. There may also be a need to have increased attention towards sleep and rest, exercise, grounding activities, and journaling to maintain wellness. Aron (1999) recommends ideas for ensuring that HSPs get enough rest time, these include getting 8-10 hours of sleep nightly, “plus 2 hours of additional downtime to meditate, contemplate, or putter. . . plus 1 hour of outdoor exercise” (p. 83). She also suggests HSPs give themselves one day a week with no errands or work to ensure that they get enough downtime. Another self-care aspect includes attending to things that create overarousal, such as dealing with noise exposure. This is impactful since “research shows that even on the way to the brain, the auditory input of HSPs is being ‘augmented’” (Aron, 1999, p. 89). Ideas for managing noise intake include using earplugs, intentionally purchasing quiet appliances, considering soundproofing your residence, requesting quiet spaces at work and restaurants, reframing your thoughts about the source of the noise, and developing the ability to shut out the sound (Aron, 1999).

Another consideration for counsellors who identify with living with high sensitivity is to role model how to live with this trait. Aron (2010) explains that given their real lived experience, HSP counsellors understand the needs better and there is less adaptation required. Although, she

notes that it is important for HSP counsellors to not assume that their HSP clients experience stimulation the same as them, and these differences and preferences need to be recognized. Although HSP counsellors may be better able to role model the strengths and challenges of living as a HSP, it would be important for counsellors to be mindful of their levels of self-disclosure about their HSP experiences. Using appropriate self-disclosure can be a tool to help clients see that counsellors can relate to their experiences, yet the HSP counsellor would not want to over disclose about their trait since this could take away from the client's experiences.

Clinical Consultation & Personal Therapy

Tillmann (2019) explains that it is common for HSPs to self-reflect on aspects of their life including their behaviour, performance, and the demands and expectations of others. For HSP counsellors, having the opportunity for case consultation may lead to increased confidence and validation about their work with clients. As with any counsellor, it is imperative that a HSP counsellor take the time to work on any unresolved issues in their own therapy. Aron (1999) explains that it is important for HSPs to have insight into their childhoods and acknowledges that not all assets and problems come from being highly sensitive. Lionetti et al. (2018) reveal that sensitive "individuals are more vulnerable to the negative effects of contextual adversity (e.g. childhood maltreatment, negative life events), while less reactive individuals prove to be resilient in the face of the same negative experience" (p. 1). The home environment and attachment style with parents can greatly influence sensitive children (Aron, 1999). In her book titled *The Highly Sensitive Person's Workbook* (1999), Aron offers activities for HSPs to connect with their inner child in a way that nurtures and affirms their sensitivity needs. Working through the childhood experiences either on one's own or in therapy may provide some relief to those who might have been carrying a negative self-narrative of being 'too sensitive'. Aron (2020b) has a list of

suggestions of self-care ideas for HSP therapists on her website, which includes tips like ensuring downtime and seeking consultation. The final chapter of this paper will conclude with a summary of the findings and any suggestions for future research that may clarify the role that HSP traits may have on effective counselling practices.

Chapter 4: Summary and Conclusions

There are many factors that influence the development of personality and temperament in a person's life. These include aspects such as genetics, environment, experiences, and relationships. The research proposes that "higher sensitivity would be associated not only with increased vulnerability to adverse exposures but also with a heightened propensity to benefit from positive environmental influences, such as psychological intervention" (Lionetti et al., 2018, p. 2). Given the positive impact of psychological intervention, it may be beneficial for counsellors to have a contextual understanding of HSP knowledge. Much of the narrative about the HSP trait has been negative and having a better understanding of HSP client experiences may help counsellors to change this narrative to one that celebrates the HSP qualities of relating in the world. Aron (1999) puts emphasis on supporting clients to see their HSP traits as gifts and strengths. Smith et al. (2019) support this idea as they explain that the role of the counsellor is to help clients "identify their temperament (e.g., through screening), recognize their unique strengths and vulnerabilities, and tailor self-care and coping strategies that are most effective given their temperament" (p. 222). The importance of HSP knowledge for counsellors can also be identified in the role of conceptualization skills, as Whiston (2017) explains that "counsellors can use client personality information to assist them in structuring the counseling relationship and in selecting specific interventions for the client" (p. 238). This knowledge could aid

counsellors with treatment planning, and assisting “clients with learning choices, career plans, and developing life roles” (Smith et al., 2019, p. 222-223).

HSP Traits & Effective Counselling

It has been well established that there are common factors and core counselling skills that contribute to effective counselling. Whiston (2017) states that “counselor training is typically designed to produce individuals with refined observational skills”, something that HSPs are inherently aware of (p. 239). These include the ability to develop client rapport with the use of empathy, attunement, and genuineness within the counselling relationship (Hermansson et al., 1988). Having the ability to establish trust and safety within the counselling relationship is significant because the therapeutic relationship contributes to 30% of the effectiveness of client change (Cormier et al., 2017). Given that HSPs tend to be more attuned to their environment, more empathetic, and more emotionally responsive, perhaps these effective counselling skills come more naturally to them. The brain research by Acevedo et al. (2014) has highlighted “how the highly sensitive brain may mediate greater attunement to others’ and responsiveness to others’ needs” (p. 592). Thus, confirming that these sensitivities can allow a person to respond in a more connected manner, something that is necessary within the counselling relationship.

Other overlaps between HSP traits and effective counselling skills include the evidence of brain activation related to the “regions implicated in self-other processing, the mirror neuron system, self-awareness, and higher order cognitive processing” (Acevedo et al., 2014, p. 592). Some of these brain areas are responsible for processing relational interactions, which are at the core of counselling relationships. This may allow for the HSP counsellor to offer “greater attunement and action planning needed to respond to the environment, particularly relevant social contexts” (Acevedo et al., 2014, p. 590). Tillmann (2019) conducted a research study with

HSP teachers and how they interact with and respond to the needs of their students. These results revealed that HSP teachers were slightly more attuned to their students who needed help (Tillmann, 2019). Tillmann (2019) concluded that the HSP teachers,

became more upset themselves when their students are upset and perceived to sense more accurately when students need help than non-HSPs do. These findings closed an important research gap with regard to SPS and HSPs' empathy and care for other people. It also supports the existing assumptions suggesting enhanced empathy, reflective ability and enhanced responsiveness to others' moods. (Acevedo et al., 2014; E. N. Aron et al., 2012, p. 366)

Although teaching and counselling consist of different skills and competencies, there are correlations between the aspects of providing care, being of service, and providing educational supports. Perhaps this study could provide a reference point for future studies specific to the role of HSP counsellors and how they manage the demands of the job, self-care, and their ability to relate to clients effectively.

Gaps & Recommendations

Research of the HSP construct has been underway since the late 1990s, yet there are still various aspects that could be investigated further. For example, one recommendation is to study the role that the HSP trait plays in counselling, both for clients and counsellors. As mentioned previously, it might be interesting to conduct research into client experiences with a counsellor who identifies with high sensitivity. Tillmann (2019) notes that "given the existing and new results as well as the remaining question about the exact predictors of therapeutic success (e.g., Norcross & Lambert, 2011), it may be useful to include SPS and other temperament traits into

future analyses” (p. 410). Perhaps the outcomes might correlate with a more effective experience because of the high empathy and attunement that a HSP counsellor could offer.

Further investigation into HSP clients in counselling could provide interesting information as well, such as what is the client retention rate in the counselling process. For example, as a comparison of the general population, some studies have found that roughly 50% of clients drop out by session three, whereas approximately 35% of clients only attend one session (Barrett et al., 2008). Aron (1999) explains that HSPs tend to be more self-critical and may find it difficult to face the embarrassment and overwhelm of the trait, the question could be are HSPs more or less likely to engage in counselling. Tillmann (2019) suggests that “including HSPs in these further investigations might help to understand better who benefits from certain interventions (i.e., such as HSPs) and who does not” (p. 410).

Although some research has been done on HSP and the cultural differences of Chinese and Canadian children (Aron, 1999). It could be interesting to explore other demographic differences in HSP representation. For example, looking at HSP experiences across different cultures or genders. There are existing narratives and stereotypes about being a highly sensitive person that may not fit with what is desired within a particular culture or gender expectation. For example, Cooper (2015) identified his personal challenges as a male HSP when finding an appropriate career fit for himself, he noted that,

being a male HSP has exacerbated the issue because in the traditional view of masculinity men are expected to be competitive, strong, risk taking, aggressive, and powerful, as well as display sexual prowess, be emotionally distant, and be dominant over women.

(Kimmel & Kaufman, 1994, p. 3)

A final recommendation is to continue to bridge the gap between the public and the scientific community, making the research about the HSP construct more accessible. This work has already begun with books such as *The Highly Sensitive Person's Workbook* (Aron, 1999) and *The Highly Sensitive Child: Helping Our Children When the World Overwhelms Them* (Aron, 2015). With the advancements in fMRI studies and brain research, the scientific community continues to gain insight into the inner workings of how the sensitive brain functions which can then be shared with the public. Tillmann (2019) demonstrates this with “the first German conference on SPS, organized by Kathrin Sohst in 2017, was a good example for a first step toward bridging scientific findings and the general public’s interest” (p. 404).

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to present an investigation into the construct of HSP traits and the personality traits that make for an effective counsellor. Throughout this investigation, many overlaps have been identified between HSP traits and effective counselling experiences. These include aspects of counselling that HSPs generally attend to more easily, such as empathy, reading non-verbal cues, noticing their environment, deeper processing, and being more emotionally responsive. Examples have also been offered about the benefits of counsellors having an awareness of HSP traits and suggestions for how to work with these traits, both for themselves and with clients. The evidence laid out in this paper has shown the value of SPS measurements in psychotherapy to allow for individualize treatment, specifically in terms of frequency and duration for HSP clients (Tillmann, 2019).

Finally, it is my hope that the information compiled in this paper will offer new learning for my colleagues in the field of counselling. When working with the HSP construct, using evidence-based practices as well as referring to the ongoing research in this area can provide the

best outcomes for HSP clients (Smith et al., 2019). By choosing this topic, I have also endeavoured to offer validation for anyone who may identify with HSP traits and may have felt like there is something wrong with them. May this be an opportunity to see these traits in a different light, one that acknowledges the uniqueness of being a HSP and honours the gifts that this might bring.

References

- Acevedo, B. P., Aron, E. N., Aron, A., Sangster, M.-D., Collins, N., & Brown, L. L. (2014). The highly sensitive brain: an fMRI study of sensory processing sensitivity and response to others' emotions. *Brain and Behavior*, 4(4), 580–594. doi: 10.1002/brb3.242
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*. (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Amundson, N., & Smith, B. (2016). Metaphoric case supervision. In B. Shepard, L. Martin, & B. Robinson (Eds.), *Clinical supervision of the Canadian counselling and psychotherapy profession* (pp. 206-220). Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association.
- Aron, E. N. (1999). *The highly sensitive person's workbook*. Broadway Books.
- Aron, E. N. (2010). *Psychotherapy and the highly sensitive person: Improving outcomes for that minority of people who are the majority of clients*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Aron, E. N. (2015). *The highly sensitive child: Helping our children thrive when the world overwhelms them*. Harmony Books.
- Aron, E. (2020a). How to Be Listed as an HSP-Knowledgeable Professional.
<https://hsperson.com/resources/professionals-knowledgeable-about-high-sensitivity/how-to-be-listed/>
- Aron, E. (2020b). Just for Highly Sensitive Therapists (and Coaches). Retrieved from
<https://hsperson.com/resources/just-for-highly-sensitive-therapists-and-coaches/>
- Aron, E. N., & Aron, A. (1997). Sensory-processing sensitivity and its relation to introversion and emotionality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(2), 345-368.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.1037/0022-3514.73.2.345>
- Aron, E., & Aron, A. (2018, July 24). Tips for researchers. Retrieved from <https://hsperson.com/>

wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Tips_for_SPS_Research_Revised_July24_2018.pdf

Augustine, A. A., & Larsen, R. J. (2012). Is a trait really the mean of states? Similarities and differences between traditional and aggregate assessments of personality. *Journal of Individual Differences, 33*(3), 131-137.

doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.1027/1614-0001/a000083>

Barrett, M. S., Chua, W. J., Crits-Christoph, P., Gibbons, M. B., Casiano, D., & Thompson, D. (2008). Early withdrawal from mental health treatment: Implications for psychotherapy practice. *Psychotherapy, 45*(2), 247–267. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-3204.45.2.247>

Butcher, J. N. (2010). Personality assessment from the nineteenth to the early twenty-first century: Past achievements and contemporary challenges. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 6*, 1-20.

doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.121208.131420>

Coates, L., & Wade, A. (2016). ‘We’re in the 21st century after all’: Analysis of social responses in individual support and institutional reform. In Hydén, M., Wade, A., & Gadd, D. (Eds.), *Response based approaches to the study of interpersonal violence* (pp. 176-195).

Palgrave Macmillan. doi.org/10.1057/9781137409546

Cooper, T. M. (2015). *The integral being: A qualitative investigation of highly sensitive persons and temperament-appropriate careers*. ProQuest LLC.

Cormier, S., Nurius, P. S., & Osborn, C. J. (2017). *Interviewing and change strategies for helpers* (8th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Ding, Y., Salyers, K., Kozelka, S., & Laux, J. (2015). Vocational personality traits in counselor education and school psychology students. *American Counseling Association Journal of Employment Counseling, 52*, 158-170. DOI: 10.1002/joec.12021 2

- Ershova, R. V., Yarmotz, E. V., Koryagina, T. M., Semeniak, I. V., Shlyakhta, D. A., & Tarnow, E. (December 2018). A psychometric evaluation of the highly sensitive person scale: the components of sensory-processing sensitivity. *Electronic Journal of General Medicine*, 1-7. DOI: 10.29333/ejgm/100634
- Feller, C. P., & Cottone, R. R. (2003). The Importance of Empathy in the Therapeutic Alliance. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education & Development*, 42(1), 53–61. <https://doi-org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.1002/j.2164-490X.2003.tb00168.x>
- Gelso, C. J., & Fassinger, R. E. (1992). Personality, development, and counseling psychology: Depth, ambivalence, and actualization. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 39(3), 275-298. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.1037/0022-0167.39.3.275>
- Greven, C. U., Lionetti, F., Booth, C., Aron, E. N., Foxe, E., Haline E. Schendang, H. E., Pluess, M., Bruiningh, H., Acevedoi, B., Bijttebierj, P., & Homberga, J. (2019). Sensory processing sensitivity in the context of environmental sensitivity: A critical review and development of research agenda. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 98, 287-305. doi:10.1016/j.neubiorev.2019.01.009
- Hermansson, G. L., Webster, A. C., & McFarland, K. (1988). Counselor deliberate postural lean and communication of facilitative conditions. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 35(2), 149-153. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.1037/0022-0167.35.2.149>
- Holden, C. L. (2020). The ‘perfect’ counsellor: Personality factors and multidimensional perfectionism. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 48(2), 183-194, DOI: 10.1080/03069885.2019.1682122
- Horvath, A. O., & Greenberg, L. S. (1989). Development and validation of the working alliance

- inventory. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 36(2), 223-233.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.1037/0022-0167.36.2.223>
- Jaeger, B. (2004). *Making work work for the highly sensitive person*. McGraw-Hill.
- Konrad, S., & Herzberg, P. Y. (2019). Psychometric properties and validation of a German high sensitive person scale (HSPS-G). *European Journal of Psychological Assessment*, 35(3), 364-378. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.1027/1015-5759/a000411>
- Lionetti, F., Aron, A., Aron, E. N., Burns, G. L., Jagiellowicz, J., & Pluess, M. (2018). Dandelions, tulips and orchids: Evidence for the existence of low-sensitive, medium-sensitive and high-sensitive individuals. *Translational psychiatry*, 8(1), 1-11. doi: 10.1038/s41398-017-0090-6
- Lionetti, F., Pastore, M., Moscardino, U., Nocentini, A., Pluess, K., & Pluess, M. (2019). Sensory processing sensitivity and its association with personality traits and affect: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 81, 138-152.
- Onyekuru, B. U., & Ibegbunam, J. (2015). Personality Traits and Socio-Demographic Variables as Correlates of Counselling Effectiveness of Counsellors in Enugu State, Nigeria. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(35).
- Ott-Holland, C., Huang, J. L., Ryan, A. M., Elizondo, F., & Wadlington, P. L. (2013). Culture and vocational interests: The moderating role of collectivism and gender egalitarianism. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 60(4), 569-581.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.1037/a0033587>
- Roberts, B. W., Wood, D., & Caspi, A. (2008). The development of personality traits in adulthood. In O. P. John, R. W. Robins, & L. A. Pervin (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research*. 375–398. The Guilford Press.

- Smith, H. L., Sriken, J., & Erford, B. T. (2019). Clinical and research utility of the highly sensitive person scale. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 41*(3), 221-241. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.17744/mehc.41.3.03>
- Spangenberg, H., Ramklint, M., & Ramirez, A. (2019). Long-term stability of personality traits in a clinical psychiatric sample. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry 73*(6), 309-316. <https://doi-org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.1080/08039488.2019.1623316>
- Tillmann, T. (2019). *Sensory-Processing sensitivity in the context of the teaching profession and its demands: Blessing, curse or both?* (Doctoral dissertation, lmu).
- Watson, J. C. (2007). Reassessing rogers' necessary and sufficient conditions of change. *Psychotherapy, 44*(3), 268-273. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.1037/0033-3204.44.3.268>
- Whiston, S. C. (2017). Appraisal of Personality. In *Principles and applications of assessment in counseling*. (5th ed., pp. 237-266). Cengage Learning.
- Wille, B., & De Fruyt, F. (2014). Vocations as a source of identity: Reciprocal relations between big five personality traits and RIASEC characteristics over 15 years. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 99*(2), 262-281. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.cityu.edu/10.1037/a0034917>
- Wolf, M., Van Doorn, S., & Weissing, F. J. (2008). Evolutionary emergence of responsive and unresponsive personalities. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 105*(41), 15825-15830. DOI: 10.1073/pnas.0805473105

Appendix A: Workplace Case Samples

These are case examples from the research conducted by Cooper (2015, p. 84). Participants are explaining their experiences with their workplace environment as HSPs.

That is the thing. If you had your space that you can go and close the door and think better, because that is something I have noticed. At the volunteer place, I have my own email now and my own desk and stuff, so. When I go to work and I check my email and then like if somebody is behind me talking I can't... wouldn't be able to tell you, because I don't know what happens in my brain. I just tend to, the information does not go in when there is too much going on like people talking. I just can't concentrate. (Zoe)

All the complex emotions and stuff that can go on and frequently does go on in the workplace comes across to three or four times more strongly, and does and is that much more difficult to deal with. (Evelyn)

It's a little draining being around people. I'm also a little introverted. So it's a little draining. Being around people all the time at work. I would like to leave the option open that's why when I do write I go to a coffee shop or something. I like to be around people, but not talking so I don't feel so inclined. But I was kind of forced into another room to talk to other teachers and chat so I hated it. (Colleen)

Appendix B: Sample of the HSP Scale

QUESTIONNAIRE (HSP Scale)

INSTRUCTIONS: This questionnaire is completely anonymous and confidential. Answer each question according to the way you personally feel, using the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at All			Moderately			Extremely

- ___ 1. Are you easily overwhelmed by strong sensory input?
- ___ 2. Do you seem to be aware of subtleties in your environment?
- ___ 3. Do other people's moods affect you?
- ___ 4. Do you tend to be more sensitive to pain?
- ___ 5. Do you find yourself needing to withdraw during busy days, into bed or into a darkened room or anyplace where you can have some privacy and relief from stimulation?
- ___ 6. Are you particularly sensitive to the effects of caffeine?
- ___ 7. Are you easily overwhelmed by things like bright lights, strong smells, coarse fabrics, or sirens close by?
- ___ 8. Do you have a rich, complex inner life?
- ___ 9. Are you made uncomfortable by loud noises?
- ___ 10. Are you deeply moved by the arts or music?
- ___ 11. Does your nervous system sometimes feel so frazzled that you just have to go off by yourself?
- ___ 12. Are you conscientious?
- ___ 13. Do you startle easily?
- ___ 14. Do you get rattled when you have a lot to do in a short amount of time?
- ___ 15. When people are uncomfortable in a physical environment do you tend to know what needs to be done to make it more comfortable (like changing the lighting or the seating)?

- ___ 16. Are you annoyed when people try to get you to do too many things at once?
- ___ 17. Do you try hard to avoid making mistakes or forgetting things?
- ___ 18. Do you make a point to avoid violent movies and TV shows?
- ___ 19. Do you become unpleasantly aroused when a lot is going on around you?
- ___ 20. Does being very hungry create a strong reaction in you, disrupting your concentration or mood?
- ___ 21. Do changes in your life shake you up?
- ___ 22. Do you notice and enjoy delicate or fine scents, tastes, sounds, works of art?
- ___ 23. Do you find it unpleasant to have a lot going on at once?
- ___ 24. Do you make it a high priority to arrange your life to avoid upsetting or overwhelming situations?
- ___ 25. Are you bothered by intense stimuli, like loud noises or chaotic scenes?
- ___ 26. When you must compete or be observed while performing a task, do you become so nervous or shaky that you do much worse than you would otherwise?
- ___ 27. When you were a child, did parents or teachers seem to see you as sensitive or shy?

HSP Scale © 1997 E. Aron (For additional information see Aron & Aron, JPSP, 1997 or email aron@ic.sunysb.edu)

Appendix C: Areas of Brain Activation in SPS

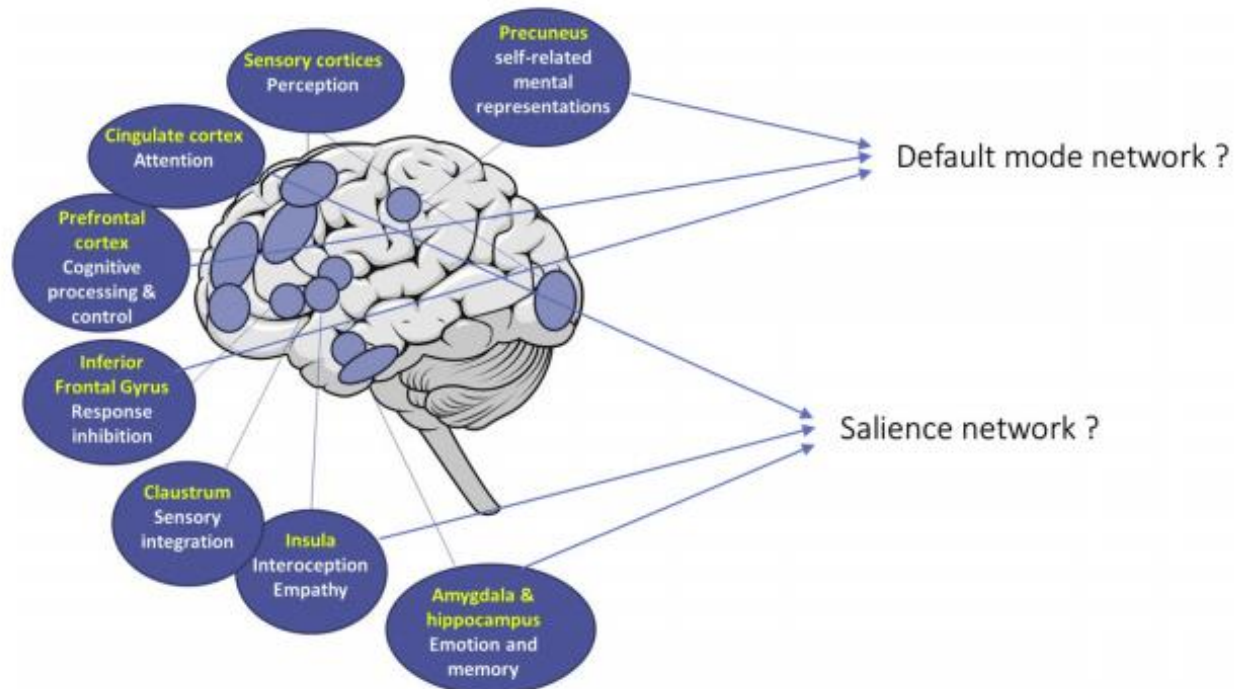


Fig. 3. Neural signature of SPS.

SPS is characterised by a 'hypersensitive' brain, reflected by heightened reactivity of the areas indicated in response to social-emotional or other environmental stimuli. Together, the activity patterns in the brain of high SPS individuals point towards deep information processing (e.g. precuneus, prefrontal cortex, inferior frontal gyrus), and increased emotionality and empathy (e.g. insula, claustrum, amygdala, cingulate cortex), the core facets that characterize SPS. Interestingly, these clusters of brain regions correspond to the default mode and salience networks, respectively, which mediate internal mentation and attention towards salient and emotional stimuli.

(Greven et al., 2019, p. 296)

Appendix D: Sample of ‘Reframing Your Shy Moments’ Activity

Below are the familiar steps you learned in “Reframing Your Past” (page 24). Think about a time when you felt *very* shy, socially uncomfortable, or awkward (*everyone* has in some situation, although it can be hard for us to remember-we try to forget them as soon as they happen). If there’s one that seems to stand out as a decisive in developing whatever low spots you have in your social self-esteem, pick that one. This is more than a social “flop”. This might be a single moment that has deeply shaped who you are, such as when you were speechless the time you were supposed to give a speech. Or it might be a whole category of events, such as every time you have to do something formal, like give a toast or make introductions.

The experience needs to be one that you can eventually see in a new light, knowing about your trait. But don’t consider that at first-just think about the most decisively upsetting event or class of events, even if it doesn’t seem related to your sensitivity. Chances are it was, because you were probably overaroused.

Write here the shy moment you wish to reframe:

Now let’s reframe it. I have not given an example this time, as you by now you know what to do.

1. Recall how you responded to the event-as many emotions, behaviors, images as you can bring up.

2. Recall how you have always tended to feel about that response.

3. Consider your response in light of what you now know about your trait.

4. Think about whether the negative parts of the event might have been avoided or would have gone differently if you or others had known you were an HSP and had made adjustments for that.

5. If this knowledge would have prevented your suffering or wasting a portion of your life, take time to feel whatever you feel about that.

6. Write down your new understanding of the event and read it over often until you have absorbed the full meaning of it.

(Aron, 1999, pp. 134-137)