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Unveiling Self-Cursing Patterns in Sensitive Individuals: A Qualitative Inquiry from a Pakistani Context

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Abstract

Being sensitive means being overwhelmed and easily affected by little things happening in the environment. Sensitivity is usually considered negative trait in humans and sensitive people are being treated negatively and harshly in society, such individuals are usually observed to curse themselves. This qualitative study was designed to explore the meanings and perception of sensitivity. Triangulation of data sources was selected to find the results. This study recruited 21 participants for interview and 56 documents for data collection. The participants in this study were inducted purposefully having ages between 18 to 29 years. WhatsApp interviews, aligned best with the objectives of the research study that lasted from 20- 30 minutes. Data collection was started after the formal approval of research protocol from the departmental research committee. Three veterans of qualitative research were involved in the recording and transcription of data; memos and code book were also incorporated along with the data. Phenomenological analysis for interviews and content analysis for documents were used to analyze the data through the lens of Rubin (2021). Methodological Integrity was maintained through triangulation of data sources. The findings exhibit six main themes; intensive feelings, personality traits, expectations, prioritizing relations, emotions and extreme reactions. Researchers faced an increment in sensitivity during data collection. To deal with this problem few pauses were taken during data collection, so it took longer than usual to collect data. Implications of the study have been discussed.

Keywords: highly sensitive persons, self-cursing, triangulation, qualitative inquiry, Pakistan

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Introduction

It is well observed that people respond differently to common events and environmental exposures, some getting affected a lot while others don't. This also shows the personality differences in people. Many factors can influence general personality differences, it could be the physical and social environment, or the learning and difference in trainings for learning various skills, and also can be the genetics that different inherited traits of individuals (Stamps, 2007) and individual's physical body and strength (Lukaszewski & Roney, 2011).

Responding to environmental cues by comparing them to past experiences with same cues may end up in taking more time to observe and reacting less quickly, showing one less "bold" or impulsive and more afraid of risks, especially in unique situations or when there are situations where conflicts possibility is high. However, after observing a responsive strategy may cause in future behavior that appears to be unusually daring or hazardous since there would be greater certainty about how to respond in comparable situations. Nonetheless, the strategy of higher sensitivity is frequently named for easily observe-able behaviors related to stopping during the process, such as giving up, while overlooking what may be the underlying cognitive behavior, which we see as a common difficulty for research on this trait in human personality (Eron et al, 1997).

According to Aron and Aron (1997), the more responsive strategy in humans end up employing deeper or more complex processing strategies for planning effective action and later revising cognitive maps, all of which are driven by stronger emotional reactions, both positive and negative. The importance of emotional responsiveness was not explicitly stated in 1997, but it reflects data from that time and subsequently (Aron et al., 2005), as well as suiting the idea that emotionality aids learning and memory by providing feedback and retrospective appraisal (Baumeister et al., 2007).

A number of researchers have found that sensitivity is associated with high stress levels, ease of weariness, depression, anxiety, autism symptoms, sleep and physical disorders, and vulnerability to negative impacts usually leading towards self-cursing behavior (Benham, 2006; Evers et al., 2009 & Hofman et al., 2009). Sensitivity has been examined as a fear predisposition factor (Chernavsky, 2007; Smirnova et al., 2005) or as an internal driver of adolescents' marginal socialization (Nikishina et al., 2009). It has been observed that sensitive people have talent, good intuition, and

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high levels of integrity (Aron et al., 2012) as well as social creativity (Banyukhova et al., 2010).

To assess sensitivity, Aron and Aron (1997) created the Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS). According to their findings, sensitivity is a one-dimensional construct characterized by a high susceptibility to both exterior (e.g., light, noise) and interior (hunger, pain) stimuli (2013). The sensory processing sensitivity scale (SPS) has a one-dimensional structure, according to Hofmann and Bitran (2007) and Neal et al. (2002); however, other investigations utilizing the HSPS disagreed.

The rationale behind this study is that people react differently to ordinary situations and their environment. Some people react more strongly to these things than others. This topic has been studied for a while and is related to how people receive environmental information. It also depends on their personality. People have various personalities according to their upbringing, skills, and genetic traits. In this study, we're interested in Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS), which makes people more environmentally aware. SPS indicates some people are more detail-oriented, react intensely to pleasant and bad emotions, and need more time to deliberate in unfamiliar situations. This study was designed to know more about SPS in highly sensitive people. The underlying aim was to improve our understanding of SPS and its effects on people's life to better understand why people react differently to the world.

Methodology

❖ Research Design Overview

Understanding sensitivity in Pakistani culture was the main aim of the study (Eron et al, 1997). A qualitative research design with pragmatic approach to inquiry was used for this study. Pragmatic approach focuses on evaluating existing models, theories, paradigms and research methods, and selecting appropriate ones for their inquiry (Hanson, et al., 2005). For research strategy, Triangulation of data sources was used.

In-depth interviews were collected using WhatsApp as data collection technique. Phenomenological analysis for interviews collected and content analysis for documents were used with interpretative coding. About coding Bazeley (2013) characterizes qualitative coding as a rigorous process which involves making meaning of the data collected. For this study interpretative focused coding strategy

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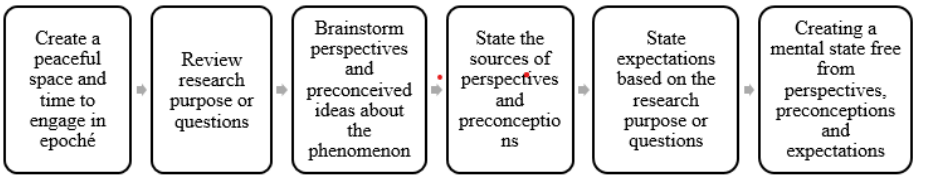
was selected. As for the interpretation- focused coding strategy, it is informed that this coding is used by "the interpretation of texts and in general the theory of interpretation and understanding" (Bentz, et al., 2001).

❖ Study Participants or Data Sources

• Researcher Description

Pragmatic research inquiry approach was used in this study. Pre-conceptions were bracketed so they won't affect during research process. In particular, to bracket researchers' perspective during participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis following steps explained by Adu (2019) were used.

Figure 1
Steps to Bracket Pre-Conceptions



This also included deliberately involving conservatives in reviewing my interview protocol to achieve neutral language. An additional review of preliminary findings by two experts was done, as well as member check to ensure that researcher was articulating both sides fairly.

• Participants and Data Sources

Interviews were conducted from overall the Pakistan. Emerging adults were interviewed for this study. Total 21 participants were interviewed 10 of them were Males and 11 were females.

Table 1.
Participants' Demographics

Participant ID	Age	Gender	City
P1	28	M	Islamabad
P2	23	F	Islamabad
P3	28	M	Burewala
P4	25	F	Lahore
P5	24	F	Punjab

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P6	26	F	Arifwala
P7	26	M	Faisalabad
P8	Discontinued	-	-
P9	24	F	Okara
P10	26	M	Chishtian
P11	25	M	Skardu
P12	23	F	Chichawatni
P13	Discontinued	-	-
P14	23	F	Bahawalpur
P15	23	F	Bahawalpur
P16	29	F	Chishtian
P17	28	F	Chishtian
P18	28	F	Ahmad Pur
P19	18	M	Lahore
P20	20	M	Lahore
P21	19	M	Mandi Bahauddin

Beside the data collected from participants, the documents from the literature that were mainly covering "Sensory processing sensitivity", "Highly Sensitive Persons" were considered during the designing of Strategies. These documents were mainly the research studies from the streamlined pioneers; Elaine Aron, Jay Belsky, Michael Pluess and Tom Boyce, of Highly Sensitive Persons (trait).

For data sources' Google Scholar, SSRN, ResearchGate, PsycINFO and other such research engines were visited. A website hsperson.com mainly focuses on highly sensitive persons was used for data search. Two books "Highly Sensitive Persons" and "Highly Sensitive Person's Survival Guide" were used as data sources.

- **Recruitment Process**

At first a screening tool was disseminated among 56 through online and physical modes both. The screening tool was sent through WhatsApp groups of students in online mode. Some print out copies of screening tool were spread among people to screen highly sensitive persons. The screening tool included eight questions. Eron's (1997) highly sensitive person scale was used to make the screening tool.

Please read these questions carefully and answer with Yes/No, however you feel about them.

1. Are you easily overwhelmed by such things as bright lights, strong smells, coarse fabrics, or sirens nearby?

کیا حسی اعصاب پر حاوی ہونے والی چیزیں آپ پر جذباتی طور پر اثر انداز ہوتی ہیں؟ مثلاً روشن بتیاں، تیز بو، موٹے چبھنے والے کپڑے، نزدیکی سائرن کی آواز وغیرہ۔

2. Do you get rattled when you have a lot to do in a short amount of time?

کیا مختصر وقت میں زیادہ کام سے آپ پریشان ہو جاتے ہیں ؟

3. Do you make a point of avoiding violent movies and TV shows?

کیا آپ پر تشدد فلموں اور ٹی وی شوز کو دیکھنے سے کتراتے ہیں

4. Do you need to withdraw during busy days, into bed or a darkened room or some other place where you can have privacy and relief from the situation?

کیا آپ مصروف دنوں میں، اپنے بستر، تاریک کمرے یا کسی اور جگہ جہاں آپ اکیلے اور صورتحال سے دور رہ سکیں، جاتے ہیں ؟

5. Do you make it a high priority to arrange your life to avoid upsetting or overwhelming situations?

کیا آپ اپنی زندگی کو پریشان کن حالات سے بچانے کے لیے، اسے ترتیب میں رکھنے کو ترجیح دیتے ہیں؟

6. Do you notice or enjoy delicate or fine scents, tastes, sounds, or works of art?

کیا آپ عمدہ خوشبو، ذائقے، آوازیں یا فن پارے دیکھ کر لطف اندوز ہوتے ہیں؟

7. Do you have a rich and complex inner life?

کیا آپکی اندرونی زندگی پیچیدگیوں سے بھرپور ہے ؟

8. When you were a child, did your parents or teachers see you as sensitive or shy?

بچپن میں کیا آپ کے والدین اور اساتذہ آپ کو حساس اور شرمیلی طبیعت کا حامل سمجھتے تھے؟

Individuals who scored four and more on the screening tool were further asked for an in-depth interview. Snowball technique was also used for screening the

participants, with some participants recommending others whom they thought would be willing to participate and were fulfilling the criteria.

Total of 21 participants were approached for interview and 18 of them did make it to the study. Two interviews were discarded from the data. Participant 08 did leave during the interview without informing. After several unsuccessful tries to reaching him, the interview was excluded from the interview. Participant 13 besides passing the screening test was not sure about his sensitivity so we could not include the interview in the data.

Table 2.
Search Terms for Documents

Search Terms for documents
"Highly Sensitive Person" OR "Highly Sensitive Child*" OR "Sensory Processing Sensitivity" OR "Environmental Sensitivity" "High sensitivity" "Sensitivity" High Sensitivity Issues, high sensitivity management Techniques, High sensitivity coping strategies, Sensitivity effects, Management techniques for HSPs, Self-Management for sensitivity

From August 22, 2022 to December 16, 2022, the following databases were searched: Google Scholar, Web of Science, Academic Search Complete, APA Psych Info, PubMed, ResearchGate., and Hsperson. All databases yielded a total of 86 documents. The reference lists of relevant papers were additionally hand-searched to identify relevant works that were not found in these scholarly databases, i.e., a backwards search.

- ## Participant Selection

The qualitative sampling strategy used for participant selection was purposive (Terral, 2015). Individuals from 17-29 years of age, who passed the screening test were included in the study. All the close friends, relatives and anyone who seemed they could change their views during the interview because of researcher were excluded from our participants. Data were collected from July 2022 to January 2023. Because these interviews were around the country, they were conducted by WhatsApp. Most were about 60 minutes long and most were recorded. The consent forms were sent in advance with the screening tools through the same medium as screening tool.

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For document selection, the researcher reviewed the titles and abstracts of papers found through search engines for relevance, and those judged relevant were chosen for full text study. The initial step was to screen the entire texts, with one team member screening in cases of ambiguity (n=29) and screening 10% of all recognized articles. For final step of recruitment (n=7 studies), the relevant findings were handed to all authors, discussed, and an overall conclusion was achieved.

❖ Data Collection

Glaser and Strauss (1967) pioneered the use of qualitative interviews as a research method in the social sciences and are regarded as pioneers for this methodology within the context of qualitative research.

WhatsApp interviews were used to obtain data. The researchers had the option of contacting participants via phone or cell phone, however due to the sensitivity of the subject, the distance given by an online platform was deemed useful. From all interviews, an average of ten questions were asked.

Documents relevant to HSPs/HSC and SPS with an environmental factor and psychological result were included in the document selection criteria. Articles are only available in English. All other materials in any language, that were not related to the concepts of HSP or SPS, or relating to other types of sensitivities or SPD, containing no mental consequence, and containing no environmental element, were removed from the study documents. For this investigation, we obtained a total of 56 papers, two books, and one website.

• Data Transcription and Recording

The data were recorded and used with participants' permission. Some participants send WhatsApp text messages and others sent voice notes. Only P1 agreed to the WhatsApp call. Voice notes and WhatsApp text messages were saved by participants' consent. All the gathered data were transcribed by using guidelines given by Paulette Garcia Peraza (2019).

Analytic Approach

When you wish to investigate the perspectives and tales of persons who have directly or indirectly witnessed the phenomena. This type of study could be carried out using the phenomenological technique (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological analysis was utilized to analyze the interviews.

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- **Phenomenological Analysis**

In this research study the collected data were analyzed by phenomenological analysis using interpretative coding. Before starting the coding process, experienced coders were asked to provide training to the researchers so they can understand the coding process. All the calls with participants were checked again and again during the coding process.

Following steps (Adu, 2019) were used for analyzing interviews data

- Deciding on a coding strategy
- Assigning labels to Research Questions
- Creating codes from the data
- Compile codes and tally code frequencies
- Developing categories and themes

- **Content Analysis**

To analyze the data attained from documents guidelines given by Ashley T. Rubin (2021) were followed. The basic process behind content analysis has been summarized in five steps:

- Identify a Representative (or a Diverse) Sample Set of Documents.
- Code Everything: Open Coding.
- Pare Down Your Coding List.
- Zero in on What's Important: Closed Coding.
- Rinse and Repeat.

Methodological Integrity

The study's methodological integrity was maintained by triangulation. Triangulation is a research technique that compares different views on the same reality. This mix could contain various entities, times, topics, and spaces (Bellindo-Garcia et al., 2022).

This split of views can be traced back to Denzin (1970) and Campbell and Fiske (1959), Aguilar Gavira and Barroso Osuna (2015), Alzás Garcia et al (2016). We want to practically combine both elements; we use multiple collection tactics in addition to an evolving code comparison matrix, and we include comparisons across categories inside the same coding process (Bellindo-Garcia et al., 2022).

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Aside from that, all ethics were observed during data collecting and the research process. The aims of the research project were explained to the respondents. They were asked to provide informed consent. Respondents who agreed to participate in the study and those referred by other highly sensitive individuals were included. The anonymity and confidentiality of respondents were preserved. Their identities were never revealed to anyone or anywhere throughout the study. Respondents were advised they could opt out of the interviews and study at any moment.

Findings and Discussion

Codes and their respective counts and cases under "Sensitivity (RQ1)"

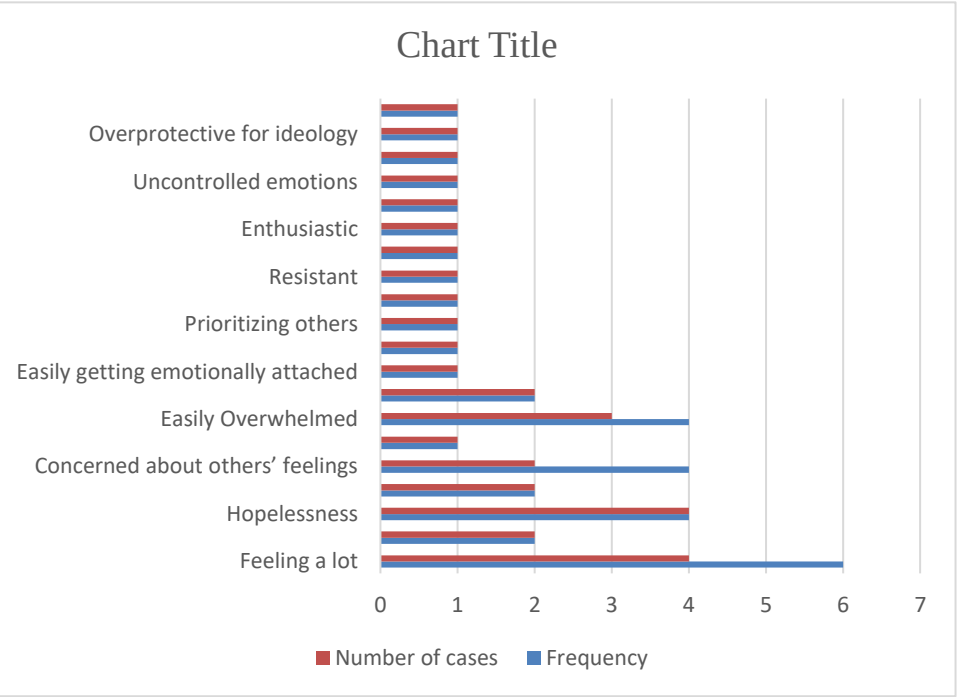


Table 3. Themes and Categories for RQ (From Interviews)

Intensive Feelings	Personality Traits	Expectations	Prioritizing Relations	Emotions	Extreme Reactions
Feeling a lot (f6), Concerned about others	Rigidity (6) Hopelessness (f4), Rigidity (f2)	High expectations (f2), False	Concerned about relationships (f1),	Uncontrolled emotions (f1), Excessive emotions (f1)	Overprotective for dear ones (f1),

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feelings (f4), Easily Overwhelmed (f4), Feeling things a lot (f2), Easily getting emotionally attached (f1)	Solitude (2) Earnest (2) Attentive (f1), keen observation (f1)	expectations (f1)	Prioritizing relations (f1), Prioritizing others (f1)		Uncontrolled reactions (f1)

Table 4. Themes for RQ (From Documents)

Earnestness	Solitary	Intense Feelings
Earnest, Cautious, instantly aware, Spot errors, avoid making errors, Conscientious, deeply appreciate beauty, art and music, Sensitive sense of smell, Intuitive, Deep spiritual experiences, notice potential danger, very aware of safety issues, Compassionate, Understanding, Enthusiasm, Greater awareness, enabling fast responses,	Solitude, Need alone time, Kind, Greater empathy	Hopelessness, worthlessness, easily overwhelmed, poor outcomes

Table 5. Triangulation of Data Sources

Themes from Interviews	Themes from Documents	Overall themes of the Study
Intensive Feeling **Personality Traits** **Expectations** **Prioritizing Relations** **Emotions** **Extreme Reactions**	Earnestness Solitary Intensive Feelings	Intensive Feelings Personality Traits; Rigidity, Solitude, Earnest Expectations Prioritizing Relations Emotions Extreme Reactions

Themes for RQ "Sensitivity"

- Intensive Feelings
- Personality Traits; Rigidity, Solitude, Earnest
- Expectations
- Prioritizing Relations
- Emotions
- Extreme Reactions

- **Intensive Feelings**

First theme for the research question "What is sensitivity?" was found "Intensive Feelings". This theme was emerged from both of the data sources. Highly sensitive

person (HSP) feels a lot more than a non-HSP. There are substantial inter-individual differences in sensitivity and responsivity to the environment in animals and humans; some are much more sensitive and reactive compared to others (Belsky and Pluess, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011).

These intensive feelings were same as well as different for the participants. As P-1 said, *"I think sensitivity – if you ask me about the definition of sensitivity, I think the person who feels a lot."* Another participant said something same, *"I started noticing that I feel a lot about these little things (P-5)."*

HSPs can easily become exhausted, perpetually overstimulated by everything from the proliferation of violence in the media to the cacophony of loud urban noises (Zeff T., 2004). Things like this make us overwhelmed.

"When a sensitive topic starts I can't calm I just have to stop and leave the topic. Even though the topic is pretty normal for others but for me I have to leave the topic leave the venue and go in to have some rest (P-6)."

Besides getting overwhelmed by stimulus participants have also mentioned that they also get concerned about other's feelings a lot as well.

"No because when it is hurting me I try that other person doesn't get it. And if sometimes some irritation hits I try to keep myself distanced from it so I won't say something to hurt them (P-12)."

HSPs process stimulus so deeply that they become overwhelmed significantly more quickly than non-HSPs. They may have difficulty tuning out irrelevant stimuli, but who decides what is unimportant? Noticing the location of an escape sign may seem insignificant until there is a fire (Zeff, 2004). HSPs must learn to ignore or defend themselves from distracting stimuli. Those of us who had a traumatic upbringing, in particular, report a chronic, agonizing inability to prevent overstimulation (Aron, 1996).

The dominant, non-HSP culture sometimes evaluates our sensitivity negatively. The HSP is a minority in all civilizations, which typically favor non-HSPs. Everyone, sooner or later, faces stressful life circumstances, but HSPs react more strongly to such stimuli. When you consider this reaction as part of a fundamental defect, you

amplify the tension that is already present in any life situation. Then there are sentiments of worthlessness and pessimism (Aron, 1996).

- **Personality Traits; Rigidity, Solitude, Earnest**

Some personality traits have been found more than others in highly sensitive persons.

Rigidity. HSPs showed rigidity in their personality. They would accept one thing and would not think otherwise. In HSPs the type of rigidity found was that related to hopelessness. Four of the participants clearly showed it.
"For me sensitivity is being weak for and because of something. You keep thinking that this can't work (P-11)."

The same way P-12 said,
"I get silent [when I get hurt] but others don't even care they are just chill when something happens to them, they do remember what is happening but still they are just fine."

Solitude. Data showed HSPs liked staying alone and they enjoyed it more than the company.
"I like being alone, dark rooms so this is just my personality type. Sometimes I feel if I talk to someone it is okay but mostly I am fine otherwise (P-10)."
"I like to stay at home more specifically in one room (P-19)."

Our trait of sensitivity means we will also be cautious, inward, needing extra time alone. Because people without the trait (the majority) do not understand that, they see us as timid, shy, weak, or that greatest sin of all, unsociable (Aron & Aron, 1997).

Earnest. HSPs are mostly found earnest, enthusiast, eager and attentive to their environments. Their level of concentrations and working on little details is amusing. One of the participants said, *"I notice others' behavior very soon (P-9)."*

HSPs can be instantaneously aware of the mood, friendships and enmities, freshness or staleness of the air, and the personality of the person who arranged the flowers, whether they want to be or not (Aron, 1996).

Aron et al. (2012) says sensory processing sensitivity is heightened emotional response that deepens cognitive processing and increases environmental awareness. Most people go into a place and only observe the furnishings and the people (Aron, 1997).

However, if you are an HSP, it can be difficult to recognize that you have a special talent. What is the best way to compare inner experiences? Not so quickly. You realize that you don't seem to be able to tolerate as much as other individuals (Aron, 1997). Among the several advantages of being an HSP are the following: We are diligent and capable of deeply appreciating beauty, art, and music. Because of our sensitive taste buds, we can also appreciate good cuisine, and our sensitive sense of smell allows us to fully enjoy aromatic, natural smells such as flowers. We are perceptive and have profound spiritual experiences. We will detect potential danger sooner than non-HSPs, such as feeling a tick crawling on our skin. We are particularly concerned about safety and will be the first to know how to escape a building in the event of an emergency. We are concerned about the treatment of animals in a humane manner. We are naturally counselors, instructors, and healers because we are gentle, sympathetic, and understanding. We have a zest for life and can so experience love and joy more fully than non-HSPs if we are not overwhelmed (Zeff, 2004).

- **Expectations**

HSPs mostly have a lot of expectations. They feel more, they give more attention and they also expect more. A participant about his sensitivity said, *"As they do for others, they expect from others the same as well (P-5)."* Again, Participant five explained the way expectations work for HSPs. *"Sensitive person thinks how I have been treated and lived in an environment – they treat others the same [with same care, feelings] so it becomes problematic for them."*

- **Prioritizing Others**

"When it is hurting me, I try that other person doesn't get it. And if sometimes some irritation hits I try to keep myself distanced from it so I won't say something to hurt them." This is what participant-12 said talking about her sensitivity and relationships. Like her HSPs mostly prioritize others or their relationships with other people even if they are getting hurt. Participant 17 also said something relevant; *"And for me you can say prioritizing others over you, thinking and caring for others more [than yours]."*

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- **Emotions**

Sensitivity also relates with emotions. Like feelings, HSPs has excessive and uncontrolled emotions. *"High sensitivity for me like this that they attach emotions with little things like if that person is doing very little they attach their feelings with it (P-5)."* In another point Participant 5 talked about emotions that, *"They have high level of feelings and emotions they get hurt easily."*

- **Extreme Reactions**

Last but not least theme of sensitivity is "Extreme reactions". Highly sensitive people do show extreme reactions. Like the excess of feelings and emotions, data showed "Extreme reactions" are one of the HSPs' characteristics. *"Like if you are in a gathering and something happens that gathering gets spoiled, your mood gets spoiled and because of you, others' mood gets bad as well (P-6). "That you react much on that matter that happened in life either it's positive or negative (P-20)*

Conclusion and Implications

Sensitivity for highly sensitive people means having intense feelings, high emotions, extreme reactions, and expecting a lot from others. Sensitive people are typically rigid, making it difficult to accept change. They are eager to do what they enjoy and give their all. They require rest after exhausting work routines. They use their alone time at the end of the day to recharge their batteries for the next day's activities. This study has highlighted the meanings and perceptions of sensitivity in Pakistani culture very well. This study is filling the gap in literature relevant to this specific lens. This research can be helpful for students, sensitive people; who are struggling to understand themselves, and non-sensitive ones; who need help with understanding their sensitive close ones. This study can be a help for the future researchers working on the same topic.

Limitations and Suggestions

These finding from the research are only applicable to those between the ages of 18 and 29. It's possible that these findings don't apply to someone who isn't within the given age range. Interviews were used as the primary method for collecting data, which was a time-consuming process. Researchers reported an increased level of sensitivity as a result of their ongoing work with this subject. In order to get over this obstacle, we took a few pauses here and there throughout the study process. As

a direct consequence of this, the completion of this study took a bit more time than is typical.

Several additional cohorts and additional regions within Pakistan can be added to the study. The results of the current exploratory investigation can be confirmed by using a quantitative method. There are several methods of analysis that can be utilized to learn more about sensitivity. It is possible to conduct an experimental study to test the effectiveness of suggested methods.

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