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The Potential of Highly Sensitive Persons in Leadership Roles: Strengths, Challenges, and Implications for Organizational Behavior and Leadership Practice

This paper examines the potential of highly sensitive persons (HSPs) in leadership roles. It explores their key strengths as well as the challenges they may face in organizational environments. Furthermore, the paper discusses implications for leadership practice and organizational behavior.

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THE POTENTIAL OF HIGHLY SENSITIVE PERSONS IN LEADERSHIP ROLES: STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR AND LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

Leonie Sophie Schmidt
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ABSTRACT:

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) describes individual differences in how strongly people respond to sensory and emotional information in their environment. Individuals high in SPS are often referred to as Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) and tend to be more susceptible to both supportive and unsupportive environments. SPS is associated with greater depth of processing, emotional reactivity, sensitivity to subtle stimuli, and susceptibility to overstimulation. To examine how this trait relates to leadership, this study explored the experiences of seven HSPs through qualitative semi-structured interviews and interpreted the data with reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were constructed: (1) SPS as a leadership resource, (2) navigating misaligned leadership norms, and (3) experience, understanding, and regulating SPS in leadership. The findings provide insights into how HSPs perceive and manage sensitivity in leadership roles and suggest that SPS may function as a leadership resource when supported by favorable environmental conditions, self-acceptance, and effective coping strategies. This research contributes to the emerging literature on SPS in leadership and highlights the need for greater awareness and organizational support for highly sensitive leaders.

KEYWORDS:

Sensory Processing Sensitivity, Highly Sensitive Person, Leadership Experiences, Differential Susceptibility, Coping Strategies

JEL classification: M12, D91, M14

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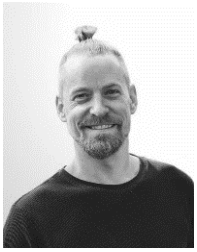

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1 Introduction

What makes a good leader? This question seems simple, but there is no universal answer across all times and contexts. Leadership ideals are not set in stone, they change over time and are influenced by social, cultural, and economic conditions (Liden et al., 2025). Whereas leadership effectiveness was historically associated with authority, decisiveness, and control, contemporary organizations increasingly emphasize cooperative, adaptable, and inclusive leadership in response to globalization, digitalization, and diverse workforces (Northouse, 2016). Research on implicit leadership theories suggests that people hold mental prototypes of who is "fit to lead," and these prototypes evolve over time (Reichard et al., 2021). As relational and emotionally intelligent leadership becomes more valued, qualities such as empathy, openness, and sensitivity to interpersonal cues may be increasingly relevant.

Sensitivity is described in psychological research as Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS)**,** a temperament trait characterized by intensified processing of internal and external stimuli, including deeper cognitive activity, stronger emotional reactions, heightened perception of subtleties, and susceptibility to overstimulation (Aron & Aron, 1997). Individuals high in SPS are often referred to as Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs)**.** Importantly, sensitivity can be associated with both strengths and challenges: in demanding settings, highly sensitive individuals may experience overstimulation and stress, whereas in supportive contexts, they may benefit more strongly from favorable environmental conditions (Belsky & Pluess, 2009a; Pluess & Belsky, 2013). This dual nature suggests that sensitivity may function as a vulnerability in adverse conditions but as a resource when supported by context and effective coping.

Despite the increasing recognition of SPS as a personality trait (e.g., Greven et al., 2019; Pluess, 2015), SPS has rarely been examined in the context of leadership. Previous research has focused mainly on sensitivity in relation to stress, coping, and well-being at work, leaving open how HSPs experience

leadership roles, what challenges they face, and what strengths they may bring to organizations. This gap is striking given that contemporary leadership approaches increasingly emphasize relational awareness, ethical sensitivity, and responsiveness to others (e.g., Goleman & Boyatzis, 2013; Northouse, 2016). At the same time, leadership trait research continues to focus largely on established dimensions such as the Big Five (Judge et al., 2009; Shahzad et al., 2020) which may overlook sensitivity-related capacities relevant to modern leadership demands.

This study explores how individuals with high SPS experience and navigate leadership roles in the workplace. In particular, it examines how sensitivity-related traits shape leaders' perceived strengths and challenges, how highly sensitive leaders experience alignment or misalignment with prevailing leadership norms, and how they cope with and regulate sensitivity in demanding organizational contexts. To address this aim, the study adopts a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis to capture the lived experiences of highly sensitive leaders.

2 Theoretical Foundation

2.1 SENSORY PROCESSING SENSITIVITY: DEFINITIONS AND ORIGINS

SPS refers to the underlying trait (Aron & Aron, 1997), while the term HSP is commonly used to describe individuals high in this characteristic (Aron & Broermann, 2014). Given the growing prominence of SPS in psychological research (Morales-Botello et al., 2025), it is essential to clarify the core concept before considering its relevance for leadership and workplace contexts. Sensitivity does not manifest uniformly across individuals but is shaped by biological predispositions, co-occurring traits, and situational contexts in which stimuli occur (Acevedo et al., 2018). Aron and Aron (1997) conceptualized SPS as a distinct trait characterized by heightened responsiveness to environmental cues and deeper cognitive processing. Importantly, they demonstrated that sensitivity cannot be reduced to related traits such as introversion, neuroticism, fearfulness, or shyness, although these constructs are often confounded in everyday interpretations (Aron & Aron, 1997; Smolewska et al., 2006). Instead, SPS captures a unique dimension of responsiveness that explains individual differences in how strongly people perceive and process sensory and emotional information. The core characteristics of SPS have been summarized in the DOES framework, encompassing Depth of Processing, Overstimulation, Emotional Reactivity, and Sensing the Subtle (Aron, 2016; Gubler et al., 2025). These features help explain why high sensitivity can be experienced both as a strength and a challenge, depending on contextual demands, personal history, and regulatory capacities. Together, these characteristics provide a conceptual foundation for understanding how SPS may shape experiences and behavior in complex social and organizational contexts, including leadership roles.

2.2 SENSORY PROCESSING SENSITIVITY IN WORK AND LEADERSHIP CONTEXTS

SPS plays a significant role in how individuals experience and function within professional environments, particularly in contexts characterized by high demands and complex social dynamics. One core characteristic of SPS is susceptibility to overstimulation, which arises when the volume or intensity of sensory and emotional input surpasses an individual's regulatory capacity (Aron & Aron, 1997; Aron, 2016). Because highly sensitive individuals process information more deeply and have a lower threshold for sensory input, they may experience heightened internal arousal and stress in demanding environments, even when outward task performance remains unaffected (Gerstenberg,

2012; Marzolla et al., 2024). Research suggests that this strain often accumulates over time, such that sustained exposure to high demands without sufficient recovery may increase the risk of exhaustion and burnout (Evers et al., 2008). Given this heightened reactivity, emotional regulation and coping strategies are particularly important for individuals high in SPS. Increased emotional intensity can enhance awareness and empathy, but without effective regulation it may also lead to emotional exhaustion (Acevedo et al., 2014). Adaptive regulation and coping strategies, such as boundary-setting, attentional control, and recovery routines, are therefore essential for maintaining well-being and functioning at work (Friedrich & Lomas, 2024; Gross, 2008). However, the effectiveness of coping strategies depends on environmental conditions.

From a person environment fit perspective, individuals function optimally when their personal attributes and needs align with the demands and resources of their work environment (Caplan, 1987; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Individuals high in SPS are particularly responsive to contextual factors and tend to react more strongly to both adverse and supportive environments, consistent with differential susceptibility (DS) theory (Belsky & Pluess, 2009b; Pluess, 2015). Empirical findings indicate that supportive leadership, autonomy, and psychological safety can buffer the negative effects of job stressors and enhance engagement among individuals high in SPS, whereas unsupportive or high-pressure climates may intensify stress and strain (Onesti et al., 2024; Vander Elst et al., 2019). Leadership roles represent a specific professional context characterized by sustained interpersonal engagement, responsibility for others, and complex emotional demands (Northouse, 2016). Within such contexts, heightened sensitivity to emotional and relational cues may support empathetic communication, ethical reflection, and attentiveness to group dynamics (Acevedo et al., 2014; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). At the same time, the intensity and continuity of leadership demands may increase the need for effective regulation and recovery, particularly for individuals high in SPS. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the expression of SPS in leadership roles is strongly shaped by the interaction between individual sensitivity, regulatory capacities, and environmental conditions. SPS in leadership is therefore neither inherently advantageous nor disadvantageous but context-dependent.

3 Methods

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative study examined how individuals who identify as highly sensitive experience and make sense of leadership roles. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The study was guided by an interpretivist perspective that views meaning as co-constructed through the interaction between researcher and participant.

3.2 PARTICIPANTS AND RECRUITMENT

Purposive criterion-based sampling was used. Inclusion criteria were (a) self-identification as highly sensitive and (b) current or prior leadership experience. Seven participants (five women, two men; age range 40–68) took part, with leadership experience ranging from eight to 30+ years. Participants had backgrounds including business development, HR/organizational development, executive leadership, recruitment, consultancy, and pharmaceutical consulting. While most participants were based in the

United States, the sample also included individuals with Canadian, Italian, and Slovak-American backgrounds.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

Online interviews were conducted via video conferencing (37–61 minutes), audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim (content-focused). The interview guide covered leadership background, awareness of sensitivity, perceived fit with leadership norms, experiences of overstimulation, and coping/regulation strategies. Identifying information was removed during transcription.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six phase approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019). Transcripts were read repeatedly to support familiarization and initial analytic note taking. Coding was conducted inductively across the dataset, while being informed by existing theoretical perspectives on SPS and leadership and focused on meaningful features related to leadership and SPS. Codes were treated as provisional tools and were iteratively developed into themes that captured shared patterns of meaning across participants. Theme construction was interpretive and reflexive, resulting in themes that reflected both strengths and challenges associated with SPS in leadership contexts.

3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND REFLEXIVITY

The study followed common ethical guidelines. All participants received written study information and provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary and data were anonymized and stored securely. Reflexivity was maintained throughout data collection and analysis.

4 Results and Discussion

Figure 1 provides an overview of the themes and sub-themes and serves as an orientation for the results and discussion section. As illustrated in Figure 1, the themes and their sub-themes are analytically distinct yet interconnected, together illustrating how SPS is experienced as a leadership resource, navigated in relation to leadership norms, and understood, experienced, and regulated over time.

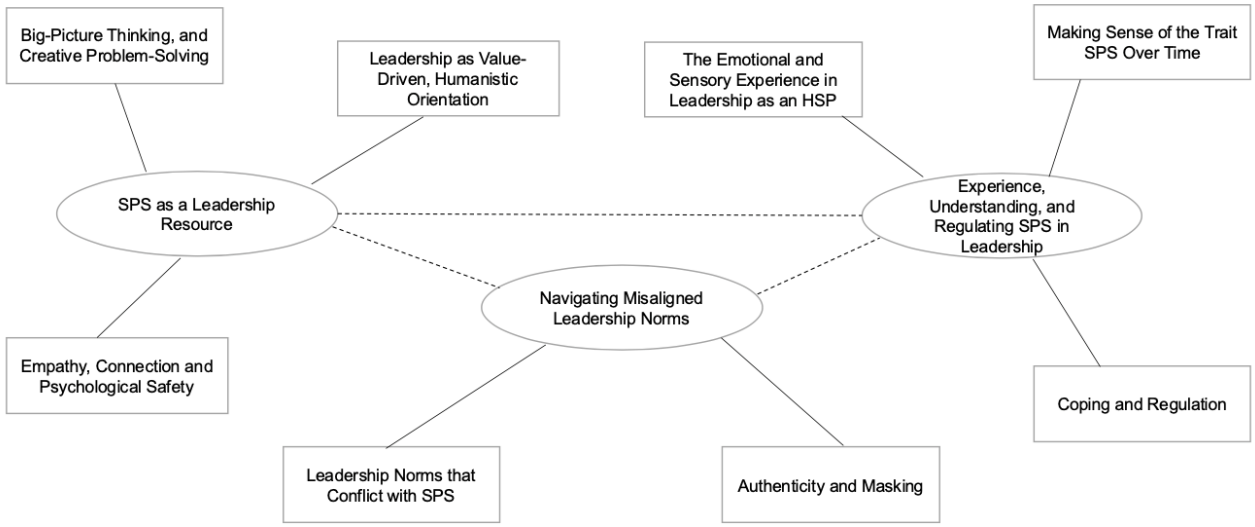

Figure 1: Thematic map illustrating three distinct but interconnected themes and their sub-themes

4.1 SPS AS A LEADERSHIP RESOURCE

4.1.1 Empathy, Connection, and Psychological Safety

The first sub-theme captures how SPS is constructed as a leadership resource through empathy-based relationship building. In this meaning pattern, leadership is framed as creating trust and emotional safety by noticing interpersonal dynamics, responding with care, and engaging with employees as individuals. Empathic responsiveness therefore becomes central to how these leaders approach leadership relationships and shape the interpersonal climate of their teams. Participants constructed empathy as a heightened sensitivity to others' emotional cues that shaped how leadership relationships were sensed and entered. Empathic responsiveness was described as enabling leaders to notice subtle interpersonal dynamics and to respond with attentiveness and care. This was reflected, for example in one participant's description of a "*high empathy filter*," explaining that they could quickly *"feel what they're feeling"* in group settings (P7, 55-57). Through active listening, individualized engagement, and checking in when emotions were sensed, leaders described fostering trust and psychological safety, understood as a relational climate in which employees feel able to speak openly about concerns or difficulties without fear of negative consequences (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). One participant illustrated how rebuilding trust with an employee who had been fearful under a previous leader led to „*exceptional contribution"* (P5, 222) and later promotion. Empathy functions as a leadership resource by supporting influence through connection rather than authority, aligning with conceptualizations of SPS as involving heightened responsiveness to subtle social cues and deep interpersonal processing (Aron & Aron, 1997; Smolewska et al., 2006). At the same time, participants hinted that this relational attunement could also make leadership emotionally demanding, a tension developed further in later themes.

4.1.2 Big-Picture Thinking and Creative Problem-Solving

The second sub-theme can be interpreted as positioning SPS as a leadership resource through integrative sensemaking and contextual responsiveness. Within this sub-theme, leadership is framed as making sense of complexity by connecting information and anticipating consequences. Participants

illustrated this by describing an ability to see the bigger picture, recognize interdependencies across situations, and come up with workable solutions. One leader explained, *"I could connect the dots… take that from over here and bring it over here"* (P4, 280–282), while another described moving between *"dream big"* thinking and breaking ideas down into practical steps (P6, 141). Creativity was framed as pragmatic synthesis rather than abstract inspiration. This pattern can be interpreted as reflecting the deep processing associated with SPS (Aron et al., 2010). Research has also suggested heightened engagement in neural systems linked to awareness and integration in response to socially meaningful stimuli (Acevedo et al., 2014). While such findings do not explain leadership behavior directly, they support the plausibility of interpreting participants' accounts of connecting interdependencies and developing solutions that fit the situation as aligned with such processing tendencies (Guo et al., 2016). These cognitive strengths appear context-dependent and more accessible under supportive conditions than under overload, consistent with DS perspectives (Belsky & Pluess, 2009a, 2009b; Pluess, 2015)

4.1.3 Leadership as a Value-Driven, Humanistic Orientation

The third sub-theme positions leadership oriented toward what is experienced as responsible in how people are treated at work. Within this pattern, leadership is constructed as purposeful influence that seeks to shape working environments in ways that feel more humane and socially responsible. Participants constructed leadership as ethical and relational responsibility rather than positional authority. One participant described entering leadership to *"create the employee experience that I would have wanted"* (P3–36–37), while another emphasized wanting to *"make a difference, having an impact on people directly"* (P5–70–71). Heightened sensitivity appeared to intensify awareness of the human impact of leadership decisions. At the same time, leading strongly from values was not always socially smooth. One interviewee reflected that they were perceived as *"somewhat polarizing," "very intense, very passionate,"* and not *"bland or neutral"* and *"always transparent"* (P4–195–201). When leaders communicate values with clarity and conviction, this may be experienced as honest and trustworthy because others know where they stand, yet it may also generate strong reactions. In this sense, polarization can reflect the relational impact of leading with intensity and conviction rather than striving for neutrality. This tension is explored further in Theme 2. At the same time, this orientation resonates with leadership approaches emphasizing ethical influence and relational responsibility, such as transformational and servant leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2005; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Nevertheless, participants' narratives suggest that enacting such value-based leadership may depend on organizational norms and cultural expectations, highlighting the context-dependent expression of SPS in leadership roles.

4.2 NAVIGATING MISALIGNED LEADERSHIP NORMS

4.2.1 Leadership Norms that Conflict with SPS

Participants commonly described misalignment between dominant leadership norms and the ways they led and showed up at work. Organizational expectations were framed as prioritizing efficiency, hierarchy, business metrics, and emotional restraint, while relational awareness and people-centered engagement were positioned as secondary. Participants described tension because their preferred ways of leading did not align with what was treated as legitimate leadership. Emotional responsiveness or visible care was sometimes perceived as excessive or inappropriate. This misalignment was often subtle rather than openly conflictual. One participant illustrated this through everyday interactional norms in executive meetings: "*When you go into the executive top meetings… my CEO… doesn't say hello to anybody… I'll say hi… good morning. And I kind of get grunts… I don't quite feel like I fit in… with that level of leadership*" (P6–191–197). Here, emotional distance and limited relational engagement signaled what counted as appropriate leadership behavior. Some participants described dismissal when raising

relational or contextual concerns, particularly when these were perceived as slowing decision-making. Gendered expectations intensified this misalignment in certain contexts. One participant reflected that, as *"a woman and a highly sensitive person,"* she was perceived as *"too caring, too soft,"* and that even asking *"what about the people"* was seen as threatening efficiency (P3–198–203). Leadership responsibilities became especially difficult when organizational expectations required compliance with top-down decisions that conflicted with personal values. One participant described feeling *"really uncomfortable"* when they could not explain decisions to their team and felt *"squeezed into the layers of the organization,"* creating internal friction (P5–292–303). These situations required acting in ways that conflicted with how they preferred to lead. Overall, this sub-theme shows how leadership norms structured the conditions under which participants could enact SPS-related leadership qualities. Expectations around speed, hierarchy, and emotional restraint shaped what was recognized as legitimate leadership, often limiting relational and explanatory approaches.

This sub-theme suggests that SPS-related leadership qualities are not inherently incompatible with leadership but become difficult to enact when organizational leadership norms privilege efficiency, hierarchy, speed, and emotional restraint, thereby shaping what is recognized as legitimate leadership. This aligns with research on implicit leadership theories, which indicates that shared images of legitimate leadership shape who and what is recognized as credible (Reichard et al., 2021). While contemporary leadership discourse increasingly emphasizes empathy, openness, and adaptability, the present theme suggests that organizational practice may continue to reward more traditional expectations, creating a gap between emerging leadership ideals and the norms that structure leadership enactment in practice. Misalignment can further be interpreted as a form of person environment fit tension, reflecting discrepancies between leaders' values and relational needs and organizational demands (Caplan, 1987; Edwards & Rothbard, 1999). From a DS perspective, such mismatches may be experienced more intensely by individuals high in SPS due to increased responsiveness to contextual conditions (Aron & Aron, 1997; Pluess, 2015). Strain thus appears not as a function of SPS alone, but as emerging from leadership cultures that define legitimacy narrowly.

4.2.2 Authenticity and Masking

Building on this misalignment, the second sub-theme captures how leaders responded when their preferred ways of leading conflicted with organizational expectations. Most participants described engaging in strategic self-presentation and masking in order to remain credible and function effectively. Leadership environments were experienced as exerting pressure toward emotional control, neutrality, and assertiveness, leading participants to withhold aspects of their sensitivity or regulate visible emotional expression. Masking was described not merely as impression management but as an ongoing negotiation between external credibility and internal integrity. For some, this adaptation reflected longstanding efforts to monitor and adjust to others' expectations. One participant described having *"spent my life reading other people and trying to figure them out so I could fit in"* (P1–45), positioning masking as a learned strategy of social navigation. Others framed masking more explicitly as a response to organizational pressure. Reflecting on leadership in a large public organization, one participant stated, "*I do a lot of masking… adaptation to what you have to do in the organization to survive… the biggest challenge was the inability to be authentic"* (P4–84–90). Masking was particularly salient in situations where leaders felt evaluated against narrow behavioral norms. One participant described coaching herself before meetings to appear more neutral and to not draw attention, deliberately *"fall into that model"* (P6–228), while another explained having to *"come off as authoritative… more stoic, in order to be heard"* (P3–208–209). In these accounts, masking enabled continued performance and influence, yet required sustained self-monitoring and emotional regulation.

Still, the limits to such adaptation were also visible. Prolonged incongruence between internal values and external expectations was described as emotionally depleting and, in some cases, leading to withdrawal. Interpreted through DS perspectives, such strain may be amplified among individuals high in SPS due to heightened sensitivity to social evaluation and organizational climate (Belsky & Pluess, 2009a). Research on sensory overload further supports the possibility that outward task performance can remain stable while internal effort and fatigue increase under demanding conditions (Marzolla et al., 2024). In this sense, masking reflects a socially shaped strategy for maintaining leadership legitimacy, while simultaneously contributing to internal strain.

4.3 UNDERSTANDING, EXPERIENCE, AND REGULATION OF SPS IN LEADERSHIP

4.3.1 Making Sense of the Trait SPS Over Time

Understanding SPS emerged as a foundational process in participants' leadership development, shaping how subsequent emotional experiences were interpreted and later regulated. This sub-theme captures how SPS becomes meaningful in leadership through processes of interpretation and re-framing. Participants described understanding SPS as a gradual and often non-linear process rather than immediate self-knowledge. Sensitivity was frequently sensed early but remained unnamed, misunderstood, or framed negatively until later in life. Without a clear explanatory framework, emotional intensity or overstimulation was often interpreted as personal weakness or being too much. Across accounts, participants reflected on developing an understanding of their sensitivity retrospectively, often reinterpreting earlier experiences through new language and reflection. One participant described a pivotal reframing moment after being told: *"there's nothing wrong with you… it's a gift… you're a highly sensitive person"* (P3–126–129). Reading about SPS led them to *"reframe everything"* and to begin *"the learning path… the healing journey,"* eventually recognizing it as *"a leadership superpower"* (P3–130–133). Another participant recounted a more gradual integration process. They reflected that earlier in their career *"I wasn't able to kind of manage my own sensitivities and emotions,"* and *"used to beat myself up a lot"* because she reacted differently than others (P6–169–173). With growing understanding of themself *"as an HSP,"* this shifted toward greater self-forgiveness and coherence. For two participants, increasing awareness of SPS also led to structural changes in their working lives, including stepping away from corporate leadership roles to create space for their needs.

This sub-theme suggests that SPS does not automatically function as a leadership resource. Rather, it becomes workable through awareness and integration. Without language for the trait, emotional reactivity and overstimulation may be evaluated as failure, reinforcing self-criticism. Once named and reframed, earlier experiences could be reinterpreted in more coherent and self-compassionate ways, thereby supporting greater self-acceptance and more intentional engagement with leadership demands. This aligns with arguments that sensitivity becomes a strength through awareness and acceptance (Friedrich & Lomas, 2024) and with qualitative findings that recognition can feel validating and reduce alienation (Bas et al., 2021; Cater, 2016). Awareness may also help identify unhelpful cognitive patterns such as perfectionism or worst-case thinking (Sand, 2016, as cited in Holma, 2022). In leadership contexts characterized by heightened stimulation and responsibility, such integration may be particularly necessary, as sustained misfit can otherwise lead to withdrawal (Ollila & Kujala, 2020, as cited in Holma, 2022).

4.3.2 The Emotional and Sensory Experience in Leadership as an HSP

This sub-theme constructs leadership as emotionally and sensorially demanding in ways that feel immediate and cumulative. Participants emphasize how leadership situations are felt emotionally,

physically, and mentally at the same time. Emotional and sensory input are presented as mutually reinforcing, creating sustained intensity over time. Emotional reactions were described as arising in the moment of interaction and sometimes becoming difficult to regulate. One participant reflected, *"I was aware I was crying, and I didn't understand why I couldn't hold it together. But the emotion was so strong*" (P1, 73–74). Leadership was also framed as requiring continuous attunement to interpersonal dynamics and subtle cues. As one participant expressed, they feel *"very aware"* and exhausted from *"tuning into the whole room,"* particularly when sensing *"tension or unspoken issues"* (P2, 196–201). Leadership contexts are described as demanding not because of single events, but because activation remains high across meetings, prolonged social engagement, and ongoing availability. This pattern can be interpreted as suggesting that leadership intensifies SPS primarily through sustained exposure. Given deeper processing and lower sensory thresholds, a greater volume of interpersonal and environmental cues may be registered, potentially bringing highly sensitive leaders closer to overarousal in demanding contexts (E. N. Aron, 2016; Aron & Aron, 1997; Greven et al., 2019). From a DS perspective, some individuals may be more responsive to contextual conditions and thus more affected by high-demand environments (Boyce & Ellis, 2005).

Importantly, the strain described here is constructed as largely internal and not necessarily visible in outward performance. Leaders may function competently while experiencing elevated internal effort and fatigue. Experimental findings similarly indicate greater overload under demanding conditions among individuals higher in SPS, even when performance remains stable (Gerstenberg, 2012; Marzolla et al., 2024). When stimulation remains high and recovery opportunities are limited, internal strain may accumulate gradually (Evers et al., 2008).

4.3.3 Coping and Regulation

This sub-theme captures how HSP leaders describe coping with and regulating the emotional and sensory intensity of leadership. Regulation is presented as active, learned, and ongoing rather than automatic. Participants describe developing strategies over time that make sustained engagement in leadership possible, integrating coping practices into everyday functioning. Several interrelated forms of regulation were described. Some participants emphasize embodied practices such as movement, breath work, or exercise to release accumulated tension and restore balance. Others focus on structuring time, for example by protecting periods of solitude, avoiding consecutive meetings, or separating social interaction from recovery phases. Boundary-setting also appears central, including limiting availability or reducing exposure to overstimulating environments. At an internal level, coping involves differentiating one's own emotions from those of others. As one participant explained, practices such as *"taking three deep breaths"* or meditation function as *"little anchors for centering,"* helping them *"separate myself from what else is going on"* (P2, 329–333). Similarly, another participant described staying *"fully grounded"* in decision situations, which reduced concern about others' judgments and supported clarity (P5, 424). Participants also reflected on limits of coping, particularly earlier in their careers. Increased hierarchy, dense schedules, and limited autonomy are described as constraining recovery. One participant recalled that the workday became *"meeting to meeting to meeting … every single minute is scheduled"* (P6, 240–251). Others described retrospective recognition of less sustainable forms of coping, framed as insufficient for protecting well-being. Across accounts, regulation is portrayed as developing over time and unevenly available depending on context.

Interpreted alongside the previous sub-theme, coping can be understood as the process that makes continued engagement possible when stimulation and emotional responsivity remain high. Rather than eliminating intensity, regulation appears to involve managing arousal, protecting recovery, and maintaining emotional boundaries before depletion accumulates. This aligns with SPS research

suggesting that emotional arousal may be experienced with greater depth and duration (Acevedo et al., 2014; Aron & Aron, 1997; Jagiellowicz et al., 2011, 2016). Gross's process model (1998, 2008) helps clarify why shaping conditions in advance, such as managing stimulation or planning recovery, may support well-being. Consistent with DS perspectives, the sustainability of regulation also appears to depend on contextual support and autonomy (Belsky & Pluess, 2009b; Roth et al., 2023).

4.4 INTEGRATIVE REFLECTION OF THEMES

Taken together, the three themes suggest that SPS becomes meaningful in leadership through the interaction of individual capacities, organizational norms, and the need to sustain functioning over time. Theme 1 constructs SPS-related traits as enabling relational responsiveness, integrative thinking, and values-based influence, positioning sensitivity as compatible with leadership approaches that emphasize psychological safety and thoughtful decision-making. Theme 2 indicates that the expression of these qualities depends on what organizations recognize as legitimate leadership. Where speed, hierarchy, and emotional restraint function as markers of legitimacy, responsiveness and deliberation may be treated as secondary. The experience of leading with high SPS is therefore shaped not only by the trait itself, but by whether SPS-related ways of leading are recognized and supported in practice. A broader tension becomes visible between contemporary leadership models that emphasize empathy and inclusion and workplace norms that continue to reward speed and composure. Within this context, SPS-related strengths can be interpreted as socially valuable because they support care and attention to human impact yet may also require selective self-presentation when such qualities are not treated as legitimate. Theme 3 extends this by showing that sustaining leadership under these conditions involves understanding and integrating SPS through boundary-setting, recovery practices, and self-awareness in response to cumulative emotional and sensory load. The analysis thus suggests that SPS-related capacities can make leadership both valuable and demanding, pointing to implications for how leadership cultures support well-being and functioning over time.

4.5 IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP THEORY AND PRACTICE

4.5.1 Implications for Organizations

First, SPS should be normalized, and sensitivity-related strengths explicitly legitimized as leadership resources. Participants emphasized that empathic responsiveness, attentiveness to subtle interpersonal cues, and relational engagement can support trust and psychological safety. When such behaviors are not treated as credible or leader-like, leaders may feel pressure to conceal them. Aligning organizational norms with contemporary relational leadership perspectives (Northouse, 2016; Reichard et al., 2021) may therefore help create conditions in which reflective and relational leadership practices are socially acceptable and valued. Second, psychological safety and constructive feedback norms are essential. Participants described noticing subtle shifts in team climate, such as emerging tension or disengagement, but indicated that these perceptions only become useful when leaders can raise them without credibility risk. Supportive feedback cultures enable voice and interpersonal risk-taking (Carmeli et al., 2010; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006), whereas evaluative or punitive environments may reinforce masking and silence. Third, leadership environments should reduce unnecessary cognitive and emotional load. Participants recommended practical adjustments such as clear meeting structures, buffer time between meetings, scheduling autonomy, and access to quiet spaces. Given evidence of lower sensory thresholds and increased risk of overarousal under sustained

stimulation (Aron & Aron, 1997; Greven et al., 2019) and findings that overload may occur even when performance remains stable (Marzolla et al., 2024), recovery and cognitive load should be treated as organizational design issues rather than solely individual responsibility.

4.5.2 Implications for Leaders High in SPS

Developing an SPS-informed leadership identity may strengthen self-trust and reduce self-blame. Recognition and reframing of sensitivity have been described as affirming and protective (Bas et al., 2021; Cater, 2016; Friedrich & Lomas, 2024). Boundary-setting and proactive regulation practices are central for sustainable functioning, consistent with emotion regulation theory (Gross, 1998). Finally, person–environment fit remains critical: sustained misalignment between individual needs and organizational demands may intensify strain (Caplan, 1987; Edwards & Rothbard, 1999; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Overall, SPS-related leadership appears most sustainable when individual regulation and organizational recognition are aligned.

5 Conclusion

This study explored how individuals high in SPS experience and navigate leadership roles. The findings suggest that SPS can shape leadership as both a resource and a source of strain. Sensitivity-related capacities such as empathic responsiveness, attentiveness to subtle interpersonal dynamics, and reflective decision-making may support relational and value-driven leadership. At the same time, their enactment appears contingent on organizational norms that define what counts as legitimate leadership. In contexts where speed, hierarchy, and emotional restraint are prioritized, highly sensitive leaders may experience misalignment and engage in selective self-presentation. Sustaining leadership under these conditions requires ongoing regulation, boundary-setting, and recovery, particularly when emotional and sensory demands accumulate over time, even when performance appears stable.

The findings should be interpreted cautiously. The small qualitative sample, reliance on self-identification as HSP, and concentration of participants in U.S.-based contexts limit transferability. Future research could examine SPS in more diverse cultural and organizational settings and combine qualitative inquiry with standardized SPS assessment to deepen understanding of how sensitivity shapes leadership experiences over time.

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