

ENVIRONMENTAL SENSITIVITY: INQUIRY INTO
A POSSIBLE LINK WITH APPARITIONAL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Psi researchers often use the term 'sensitivity' when theorizing that certain persons may be more apt to register anomalous influences than others. Through a review of the literature it is argued that some individuals are disposed toward a range of innate sensitivities that, in novelty as well as intensity, distinguish them from the general population. It is hypothesized that such persons will exhibit greater susceptibility to a range of environmental factors, including allergies, migraine headache, chronic pain and chronic fatigue, and that they will also report a higher than average degree of psi perception as well as apparent electromagnetic influence. A 54-item survey was designed by the author and completed by 112 individuals (62 self-described sensitives and 50 controls), to evaluate the following issues: the extent to which persons who describe themselves as 'sensitive' appear to be affected by such factors; whether their immediate family members may be similarly affected; to what extent environmental sensitivity parallels apparitional experience; and how such findings compare or contrast with replies to questions asked of a control group. On the basis of both the literature and the survey results, the author argues that sensitivity is a bona fide neurobiological phenomenon. While no single factor in a person's background is likely to distinguish him or her as 'sensitive', eight demographic or personality factors are found to be statistically significant. If further studies were to document similar results, a more tangible basis would be provided for the study of apparitional experience than has been possible to date.

INTRODUCTION

Psi researchers often use the word 'sensitivity' when theorizing that certain persons may be more readily affected by anomalous influences than others (e.g. Cornell, 2000). But what does it mean to be sensitive? The dictionary offers a four-part definition: (1) Capable of perceiving with a sense or senses; (2) Responsive to external conditions or stimulation; (3) Susceptible to the attitudes, feelings, or circumstances of others; and (4) Registering very slight differences or changes of condition (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, p.1180).

Evidence points to a wide variability of sensitivity, both *among* individuals and *within* the different stages of a person's life. The differences between individuals are well known. For example, women exhibit markedly greater sensitivity across all five senses (Velle, 1987). The perception of pain varies considerably from person to person (Coghlan, 2003), as does acuity in taste, smell and colour perception (Hollingham, 2004). Changes within a given person's lifespan are equally noteworthy (Smith, 1989; Watson, 2001), with sensitivity fluctuating due to the influence of hormones (e.g. a woman during ovulation), personal circumstances (e.g. following an injury sustained or a disease suffered), pre-programmed genetic conditions (e.g. the onset of nearsightedness), and age (e.g. the acuity of smell declines as both women and men get older). Additionally, it has been found that individuals who are

disadvantaged in one sense may enjoy greater sensitivity in another (Khamisi, 2005).

In recent years, researchers have begun to focus on the idea that certain types of people are seemingly predisposed toward extraordinary sensitivity, and to try to explain why. This body of research regards sensitivity from two equally valid perspectives: as a responsiveness to changing conditions *outside* of the individual; and as a reaction to minute changes in his or her *internal* state (Palmer, personal correspondence, March 11, 2003). Aron (1996), for instance, has coined the term 'Highly Sensitive Persons' (HSP), describing such individuals as prone, from birth, to be easily overwhelmed by sensory stimuli, deeply reflective, and unusually empathetic. Heller (2002) proposed the term 'sensory defensiveness' to describe individuals who demonstrate a notable inclination toward fearfulness, shyness, stress, and withdrawal. She notes that sensory defensiveness is often evident in infancy but that it can be brought on at virtually any age through severe trauma.

These observations echo earlier work by Bergman and Escalona (1949), who noted that certain children—ranging in age from 3 months to 7 years—were extraordinarily sensitive to stimulation (odours, sounds, colours, textures, temperatures), while their feelings were also easily hurt. Such children were observed rhythmically rocking themselves or covering their eyes and ears from unwelcome stimuli.

Recent findings have uncovered overlaps between four types of conditions that seem related to heightened sensitivity: migraine headache, chronic pain (clinically termed fibromyalgia), chronic fatigue syndrome, and depression. In each case, women are disproportionately affected (Center for the Advancement of Health, 2001, 2002). Persons with fibromyalgia often experience moderate to severe fatigue (Center for the Advancement of Health, 2001), people who suffer from depression are more likely to get migraine headaches—and vice versa (Center for the Advancement of Health, 2002), and both fibromyalgia and migraine appear to run in families (Center for the Advancement of Health, 2001), suggesting that a genetic predisposition may be present. Such overlaps lead researchers to suspect that the above conditions have a similar neurobiological basis. Hypersensitivity of various forms may be the result (Center for the Advancement of Health, 2001).

Hartmann (1991) has attempted to explain a broad range of sensitivities through the organizing principle of 'boundaries'. He proposes a spectrum of personality types from thick boundary to thin; persons with thick boundaries are 'solid', 'thick skinned' or even 'rigid', whereas thin boundary individuals are 'open', 'vulnerable' and 'sensitive'. A strong ability to immerse oneself in something (whether a personal relationship, a memory or a daydream) also characterizes the thin boundary person, according to Hartmann.

This ability to *immerse* oneself, occasioning the loss of one's normal sense of time and space, is termed 'absorption'. Tellegen and Atkinson (1974) found that absorption is closely related to both hypnotic susceptibility and dissociation. Along parallel lines, Wilson and Barber (1983) explored the phenomenon of fantasy proneness, sounding out individuals who, from an early age, immersed themselves in such vivid fantasy that the products of their imagination are experienced as 'real as real'. Just as Tellegen and Atkinson note that the