

Kluwer Mediation Blog

What makes mediators tick? A lot of us seem to share one trait

Charlie Irvine (University of Strathclyde) · Sunday, November 26th, 2023 · Research



Soon after I started mediating, a client said “This must be a really satisfying job, *when it’s successful.*” I remember thinking it’s really satisfying even when it isn’t. This was my first glimpse of a question that has fascinated me ever since: what makes mediators tick? Why would anyone place themselves in midst of other people’s conflicts? Personally I found what I did totally absorbing, each setback counterbalanced by new insights and lessons learned. Yet many others, including friends and family, recoiled at the idea. One uncle said my job sounded like “a bloody nightmare.”

I wasn’t the first to wonder about why mediators do what they do. Robert Benjamin noticed four traits in himself that were useful for the work (if not flattering): confused, voyeuristic, compulsive and marginal.^[1] Here’s one lovely quote: “A mediator does not so much do disputing parties a favor by helping them settle conflict, but is rather being honored by being invited by them to aid in managing some of the most intimate matters of their lives.” There’s a clue here: we seem drawn to the work despite its evident trickiness.

More recently a friend and I were sharing stories of being called “over-sensitive”. She stumbled on Elaine Aron’s “Highly Sensitive Person” questionnaire, and drew some comfort from knowing she wasn’t the only one like this. We started to wonder if this was part of what made *us* tick as mediators, and thus emerged the idea for a research project. If we could administer the questionnaire to a sample of practising mediators, what would we find?

Sensory processing sensitivity

Why did we choose the trait of sensitivity? Elaine Aron’s writing about the “highly sensitive person” (HSP) rang bells for us both. Such individuals can experience difficulties in childhood and beyond, yet are clearly a significant subset of human populations. Aron speculates that evolution has produced two strategies for dealing with novel situations: “either exploration or a quiet vigilance, which may lead to retreat.”^[2] She calls those adopting the latter approach *highly sensitive people*.

A couple of her claims caught our attention. First, the underlying trait HSPs share, known as *sensory processing sensitivity*, involves extracting more data from situations than the average person. That can be overwhelming, explaining the urge to withdraw and the link to introversion. Some later researchers assert: “This doesn’t mean HSPs have more acute senses, but that their brain refines the data into much more detail than other brains.”^[3]

Aron’s second claim goes further, proposing an evolutionary up-side to explain the persistence of the trait: “What this difference in arousability means is that [HSPs] notice levels of stimulation that go unobserved by others.”^[4] And, despite the possibility of being overwhelmed, Aron finds that these individuals often want to be on the front line of challenging interpersonal work.

We wondered if other mediators shared this trait. Our study was a simple effort to find out whether mediators were more or less likely to be highly sensitive people than the rest of the population.

The study

First we had to find practising mediators. Starting with our own UK professional groupings we invited practitioners to complete Aron’s questionnaire. To avoid the risk that people would give us the answers they thought we were looking for we didn’t name the questionnaire. We simply said we were interested in understanding more about mediators. Next we extended the sample to a US professional body while asking participants to pass the questionnaire along to others. Eventually 181 participants completed the anonymous online survey, nearly half from the USA and over 40% from the UK. A psychology colleague helped us analyse the results.^[5]

The findings

Our aim was to discover the prevalence of the trait of high sensory processing sensitivity among mediators. Aron claims that HSPs make up around 20% of the population. Some later researchers put the figure higher, at nearer 30%. Among our sample the figure was 62%. In other words, a sample of

practising mediators from across the English-speaking world was two or three times more likely to be highly sensitive people than the general population.

The implications

The tough question, which our study could not answer, is why? Are those high in sensory processing sensitivity working in mediation because the trait gives them a particular aptitude for it? This was at least plausible. That enhanced, even obsessive, attention to detail could be helpful in making sense of the highly complex human interaction unfolding in mediation.

On the other hand, might HSPs be in the profession because they are attracted by the role of mediator? Much of the writing by Aron and others suggests the work itself would be pretty challenging, given HSPs' tendency to over-arousal. Studies of other people-oriented roles like teaching and social work found a link between high sensory processing sensitivity and the risk of burnout. One clue came from our demographic data: the highest proportion of HSPs was among those mediating for two years or less. Replicated over a larger sample this would suggest that these individuals are more likely to drop out than those without the trait. Given how many of our sample appear to be HSPs, perhaps mediation organisations should take steps to avoid burnout; e.g. peer support groups or short sabbaticals.

Our study raises some challenging questions for the profession. Training courses around the world imply that anyone can acquire the skills of a mediator, perhaps in as little as 40 hours. Yet if nearly two thirds of a sample of practitioners share a similar trait, should we be less focused on skills? Perhaps being a mediator is less about what you do than about who you are.

And what about the sizeable group of mediators who do *not* share the trait of sensory processing sensitivity? What do they bring to the table? We asked conference participants to complete Aron's questionnaire, with almost identical results. A friend whose score placed him firmly outside the "highly sensitive" category told me this made perfect sense. He said the outside world had very little impact on him. As a self-identified HSP I marvelled at the clarity of thought this must offer amid the jangle of interpersonal conflict. Perhaps we should co-mediate together!

Next steps

Sensory processing sensitivity is by no means the only trait we could have tested for. Further research could investigate others, like empathy or introversion/extraversion. Researchers could also attempt to replicate our findings with different mediator groups. Are commercial mediators, for example, as likely to be HSPs as family mediators? What about gender? Women in our sample were much more likely to be HSP while most males were not. Is this the case more widely?

Completing this research has made me think deeply about my own practice. Rather than suggesting that highly sensitive people make good mediators, it has confirmed that self-knowledge is key. Does my practice reflect my personality rather than any formal model? I'd like to issue a challenge: why not complete the [Highly Sensitive Person Questionnaire](#) and reflect on the implications for you?

If you fall into the “HSP” category, what do you need to do to improve your practice? How can you make the most of your particular capacities, and what do you need to do to protect yourself from its downsides, like burnout? If, on the other hand, you don’t share this trait, how do you play to your strengths? How can you capitalise on a capacity to remain calm in the midst of other people’s conflict, and what support can you offer to those who do not? What can you learn from HSPs and what can they learn from you?

Conclusion

I suspect we are not much closer to knowing what makes mediators tick. The profession is too diverse, the work too varied, to say anything conclusive. However, we hope our study offers some clues. Whether because we like the work or because we’re made for it, what we can say is that many of us share a trait that seems to help with attention. Perhaps it’s as simple as this: people in conflict like to receive attention, and HSPs like to give it.

I would like to thank my fellow authors for the time and support they provided in this research. The full article can be found [here](#).

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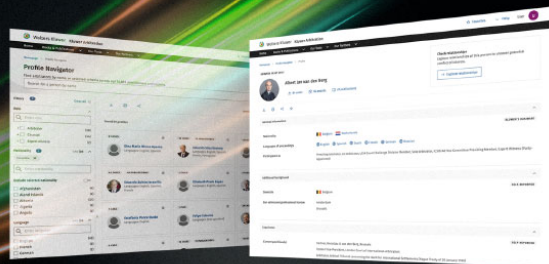
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