

Conscious perception – gift or burden?

A new approach for studying sensitivity and sensory processing problems

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Introduction

Due to the high mental demands in complex environments there is increasing interest in the research of the highly sensitive personality (HSP). Highly sensitive patients with psychosomatic symptoms are challenged in a special way. For clinical treatment of highly sensitive people it is important to discriminate between salutogenetic and pathological aspects of sensory processing sensitivity. However, the widely used Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS, Aron & Aron, 1991) seemed not practical for us. Therefore, we have developed a novel inventory for the assessment of a person's sensitivity and the corresponding sensory processing problems separately. The model discriminates between external, internal, emotional, and social sensitivities as well as the openness for new experiences. The inventory was assessed in a psychosomatic clinic on more than 4000 participants.

The SV12: a clinical inventory

An initial 30-item questionnaire for sensitivity and processing problems was reduced to 12 items after validation on about 1100 non-clinical and 1100 clinical participants. It addresses six categories of sensitivity and corresponding processing problems as listed in Table 1. Cronbachs alpha was 0.84 and 0.77 in a confirmatory analysis on further 1200 patients.

Table 1. The German SV12 questionnaire. Sensitivity and processing problems can be clearly separated in a two-factorial solution. Further factors separate the emotional aspects from the other categories.

Categories	Sensitivity	Processing problems
Environmental sensitivity	1. Ich nehme viele Feinheiten in meiner Umgebung wahr	9. Wenn viel um mich herum los ist, reagiere ich schnell gereizt oder fühle mich unwohl
Social field	2. Ich spüre sehr schnell die Stimmung, wenn ich in einen Raum mit Menschen komme	12. Stimmungen und Launen von Menschen übertragen sich sehr schnell auf meine eigene Stimmung
Openness/flexibility	3. Ich bin neugierig und will immer neue Dinge ausprobieren	10. Veränderungen in meinem Leben können mich schnell aus der Bahn werfen
Emotional perception	4. Ich mag lieber gefühlsbetonte Personen	11. Oft überwältigen mich meine Gefühle.
Emotional control	5. Ich ziehe Schlussfolgerungen lieber aufgrund meiner Gefühle, Menschenkenntnis und Lebenserfahrung	8. Oft werde ich von meinen Gefühlen hin- und hergerissen
Intrinsic impulses	6. Ich habe viele Ideen und viel Fantasie	7. Ich habe oft das Gefühl, dass ich mehr Zeit brauche, um gewisse Eindrücke oder Erlebnisse zu verarbeiten

Results

We found that psychosomatic patients are not more sensitive than healthy people, however they show more processing problems and higher emotional instability. Processing problems are highly correlated with psychosomatic symptom load, predominantly with depression and anxiety. People with posttraumatic stress disorders show also increased sensitivity due to their hyperattentiveness. Generally, sensitivity of patients is correlated with resilience, experience of meaning, positive feelings and success. In contrast, processing problems are strongly correlated with burnout symptoms, depression, anxiety and negatively correlated with resilience. Patients with processing problems show less life competences while a high sensitivity positively correlates with resilience life competences.

Conclusion

Our results clearly demonstrate the importance of discriminating between sensitivity and the processing problems that results from various kinds of sensory perceptions. Psychopathological factors seem to be closely connected to problems in the processing of external, internal, social and emotional perceptions and sensations. In contrast, mental health, happiness and salutogenetic states of consciousness seem to be related to the experience of a rich sensory capability. Thus, a high sensitivity seems to be a resource for a fruitful and mentally healthy life. As psychosomatic symptoms seem to be closely related to processing problems, those aspects should be addressed in therapeutic interventions. Mindfulness methods focussing on a state of non-judgemental presence could be suitable for enhancing ones sensitivity while reducing sensory processing problems.

Literature

Hinterberger, T., Galuska, D. and Galuska, J. (2019). „Der SV12: Entwicklung eines klinischen Inventars zur Erfassung von Sensibilität und deren Verarbeitungsproblematiken“, *Complementary Medicine Research*. DOI: 10.1159/000497283

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SV12 and psychosomatic symptom load

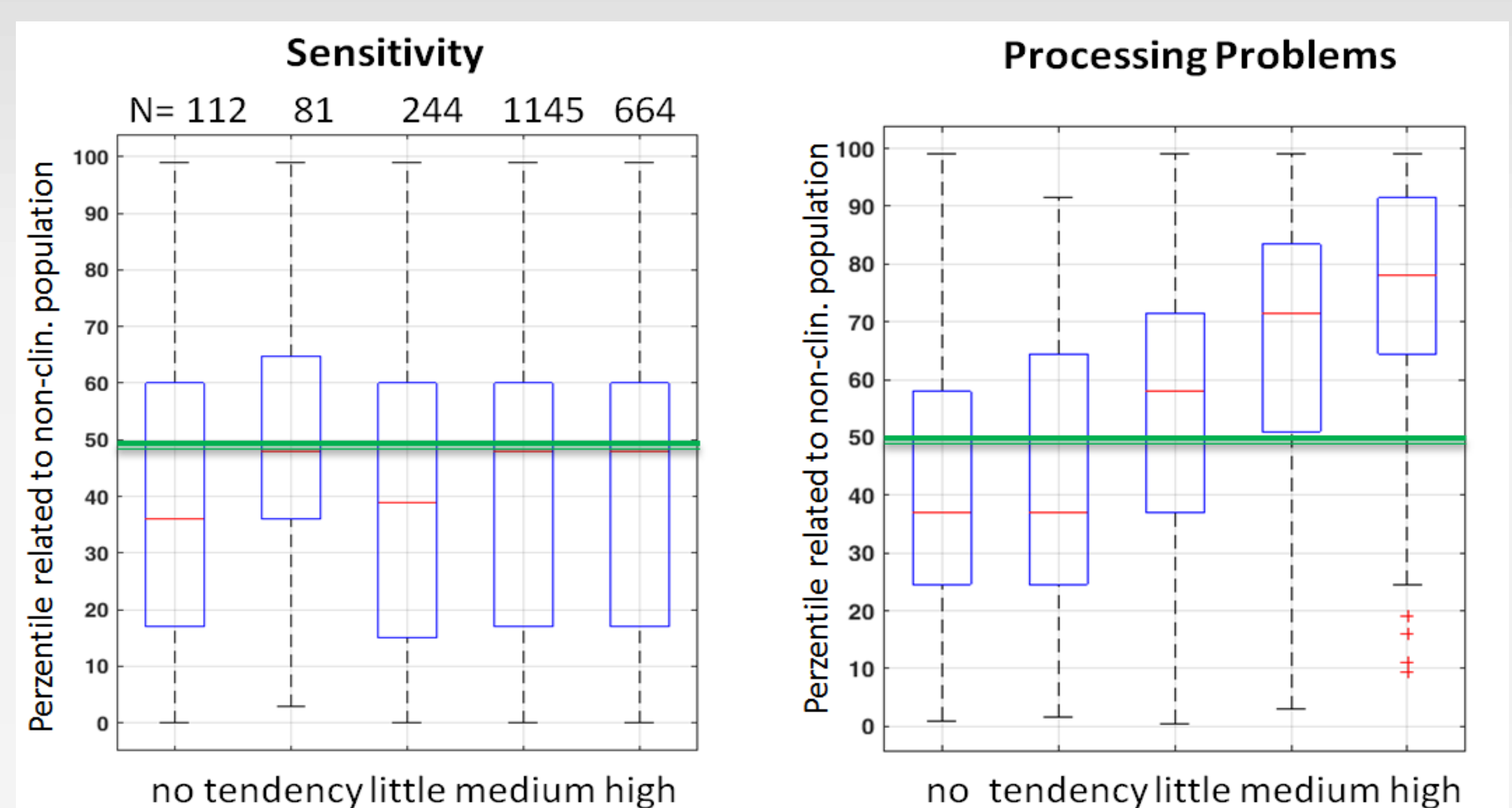


Figure 1. Percentile ratings of patients (N>2200) in comparison with the non-clinical sample. 50 corresponds to an average value. A value of 80 in processing problems means that only 20% of the non-clinical sample showed higher values. This also means that most patients with only a tendency for psychosomatic symptoms show less processing problems than a non-clinical sample.

SV-12 and life competences

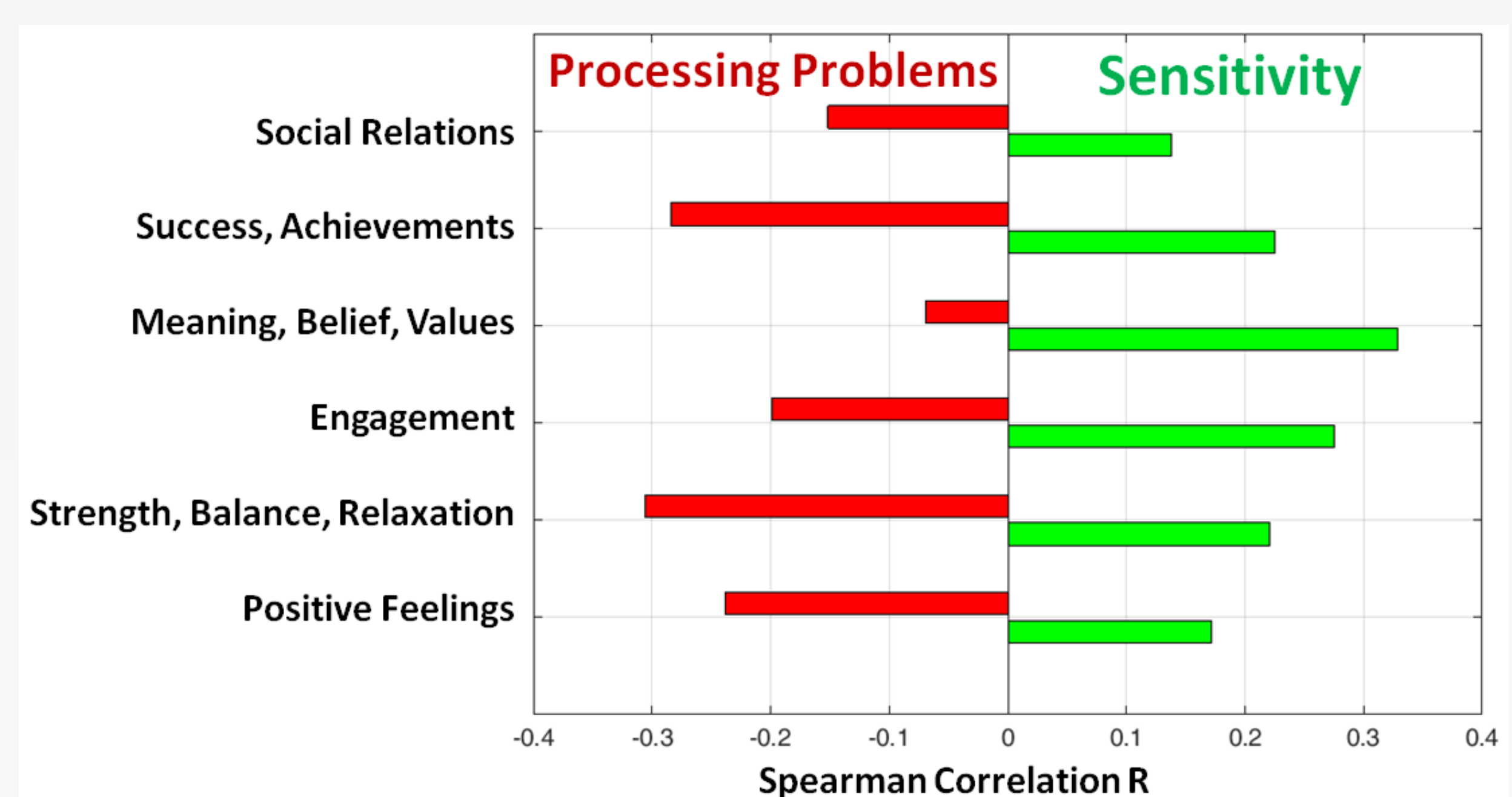


Figure 2. Correlation coefficients between SV12 and the facets of life competences assessed in an 18-item self-rating questionnaire. N>4000, all correlations were significant on a .05 level.

SV12, resilience and burnout

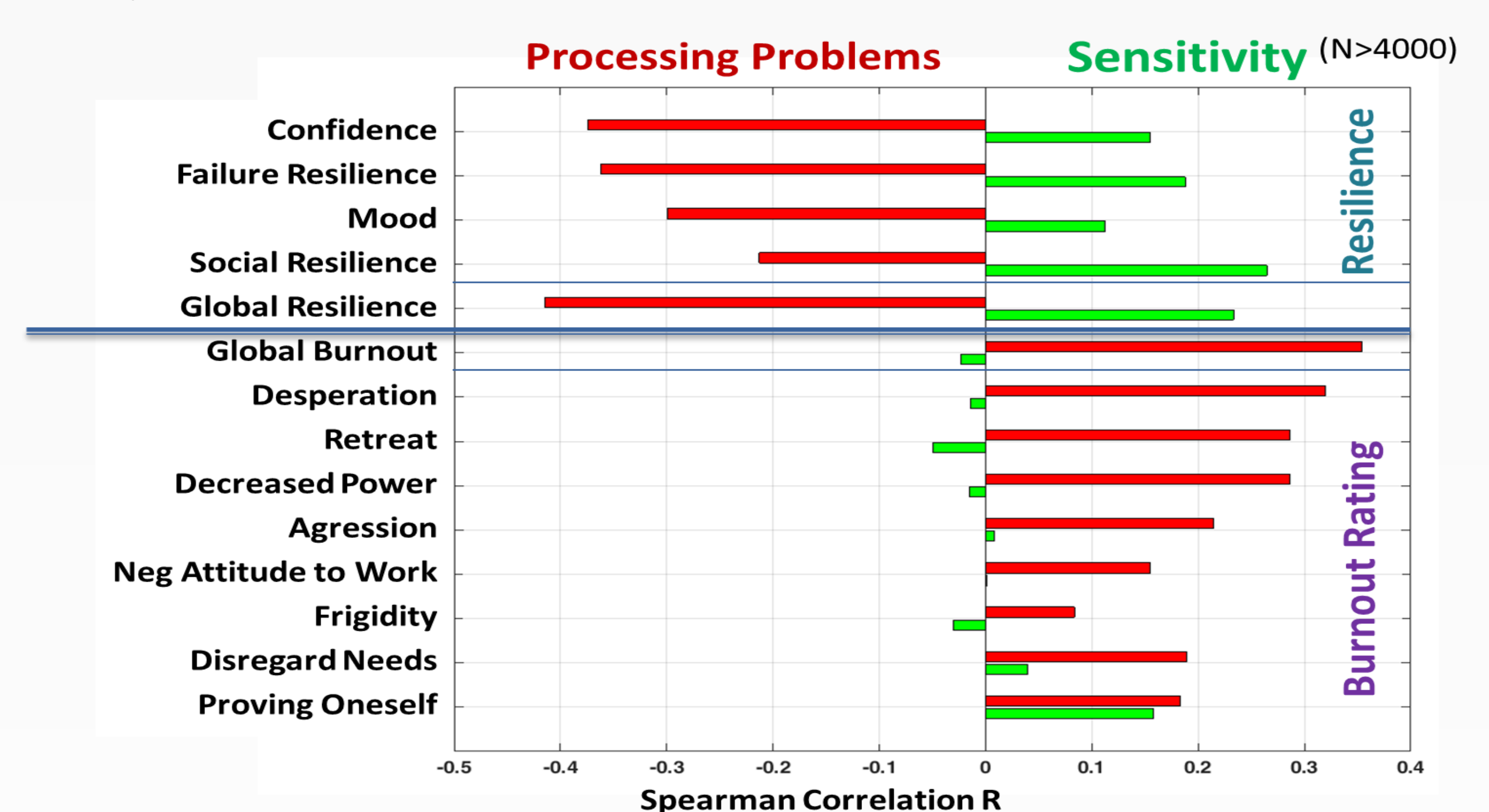


Figure 3: Correlations between SV12 and Burnout or Resilience ratings. N>4000.

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