

# THE INFLUENCE OF THE WORK ENVIRONMENT ON HYPERSENSITIVE EMPLOYEES

*Armand Veleanovici, psiholog, psihoterapeut, dr.,  
expert judiciar, Romania*  
*Anca Elena Oncioiu, psiholog, psihoterapeut, Romania*  
*Monika Baryla-Matejczuk, dr., UEIL, Poland*

## INFLUENȚA MEDIULUI DE MUNCĂ ASUPRA SALARIAȚILOR HIPERSENSIBILI

*Armand Veleanovici, PhD,  
Psych., Expert Psy, Romania*  
**ORCID: 0009-0002-7463-5255**  
*psiconsulting@gmail.com*  
*Anca Elena Oncioiu,  
Psych. Expert Psy, Romania*  
**ORCID:0009-0004-3991-7104**  
*anca.oncioiu.89@gmail.com*  
*Monika Baryla-Matejczuk, PhD,  
Psych.WSEI University, Poland*  
**ORCID: 0000-0003-2321-9999**  
*Monica.Baryla@wsei.lublin.pl*

**CZU: 316.334.22**

**DOI: 10.46727/c.v1.24-25-03-2023.p201-208**

**Abstract.** The purpose of this study is both to characterize and gain insight about the highly sensitive people (HSP) in the workplace, with the main goal of a better integration of them into the labor market and enhancement of their professional wellbeing. This research is part of the High Sensitivity (HS) series which approached the feature of sensory processing sensitivity in children (E-MOTION Project), adults (High Sensitivity – Inovative Module in Human Sciences Project) and employees (PRO-MOTION – Sensitive Career Management Project).

Knowing the characteristics and the functioning of the HSP as employees may lead to much more efficient and effective career planning for them. Thus, we conducted both a qualitative and a quantitative study in order to gain insight and knowledge about the integration and wellbeing of the HSP on the labor market. The qualitative analysis addresses both the employer and the employee level and the quantitative analysis the employee level only. The further goal is to use these findings to value the resources and potential of the HS employees to achieve better work and organizational adaptation and performance on the labor market. The active participation in the study of the end users will assure that the results are based on real needs and real life situations encountered on the labor market.

**Keywords:** high sensitivity; sensory processing sensitivity; professional integration and wellbeing; work performance; labor market; environmental sensitivity

### **Introduction**

Human behavior is fundamentally context-dependent; humans (and other species) are sensitive to environmental influences to varying degrees with those with high sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) being exceptionally sensitive to the environment [12] sensitivity (HS) is considered to be an innate trait present in 15-30% of the population [14,22] consists of a high sensitivity of the central nervous system, a deep processing of stimuli, both external and internal, and a cognitive style characterized by the tendency to process information in an elaborate way [1]. This specific temperamental feature [2] involves behavioral specificities at the wor-

place which require customized solutions to deal with potential difficulties. It is also important to note that sensory processing sensitivity is a real condition (but not an impairment, disease by itself) that can affect an individual quality of life [8] and it is not something that can be easily controlled or overcome. It is essential that we recognize and respect a person's sensory needs and that steps are taken to provide facilities that support their well-being and success in the workplace.

According to the works of Elaine and Arthur Aron [2], HSPs exhibit the following traits, coded with the acronym DOES: depth of processing, overstimulation (the ease of being overstimulated), emotional reactivity and empathy, subtle stimuli (sensitivity to subtle stimuli). Deep processing of information is about trying to grasp the essence and meaning of a given experience. Highly sensitive persons analyze, think and reflect deeper than their peers. Also, HSPs notice a lot more than others in the same situation or environment, including other people's emotions (although they may remain unexpressed), noise levels, smells, and other aspects of the environment [1, 2]. Emotional reactivity, empathy and vibration to subtle stimuli shows sensitivity to other's experiences and environment.

Because of some overlapping characteristics an important distinction should be deepened regarding SPS, namely, it is not a disorder. SPS is related to personality and other constructs of temperament as the personality refers to individual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving (apa.org) (Personality, n.d.) and the temperament is the basic foundation of personality, usually assumed to be biologically determined and present early in life, including such characteristics as energy level, emotional responsiveness, mood, behavioral inhibition, and willingness to explore (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.).

Interest in researching SPS and Environmental Sensitivity enables the theoretical development of the concept, and also offers a high practical application value. Considering the special importance of the quality of development conditions for highly sensitive people, this paper approaches the characteristics and the functioning of the HSPs at the workplace. According to the above mentioned, the PRO MOTION Project created a pathway through which proper understanding and adequate psychological and non-psychological support for the HSP employee may be provided, thus assuring the proper/adequate resources for a successful adaptation in the environment turning their sensitivity into a virtue and/or a skill that works for them, other people and society, not against. Providing adequate ways for proper development of the human beings equates with avoiding waste of human potential which impacts every area of human functioning serving to better lives and brighter futures.

High sensitivity is rarely listed as a characteristic of an efficient employee. Highly sensitive people are valuable, although unacknowledged/ underappreciated employees. Their sensitivity to the details, depth of processing, emotionality and empathy makes them extraordinarily committed, dedicated and creative. On the other hand, they tend to be a little less resilient to stress in unfavorable working conditions, but, in turn, under favorable conditions, they cope better than others [2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20].

This paper includes two exploratory studies using both qualitative and quantitative research designs aiming to emphasize real workplace dynamics of HSPs with the purpose to characterize and gain insight about HS employees regarding their professional integration and wellbeing on the labor market. Afterwards, essentially, we propose to use the results to find ways to enhance adaptation and performance of the HSPs employees. The results may be used as immediate applicability solutions on similar samples, for further development of solutions in this area and for further research, as appropriate.

## Study 1

The objective of the research was to explore how highly sensitive people function in the workplace, both from the perspective of a highly sensitive employee and an em-

ployer from various sectors. For this purpose, a series of focus groups and individual interviews were conducted. Professionals from various sectors of activity were selected. After data collection, an inductive qualitative analysis was conducted based on previous codes identified in the qualitative analysis. The report of the qualitative part highlights the main characteristics of the participants and the most important codes identified in the analysis, for both employers and employees. Data collection was completed also by forms with open questions filled by HR specialists who work with HSP and by HS employees. The areas for prepared questions were selected after a literature review on professional well-being and groups of factors important for building job satisfaction.

In order to conduct this qualitative study, we organized characteristics of HS into themes and codes and then filtered the information from the interviews, focus groups and forms through them where this approach was possible. Also, when the answers did not fit the codes already established, we extended the description by relating them as they were mentioned. The main themes are described in the following. Associated subcategories – codes – for the themes as well as definitions and explanations for them were also established.

Regarding the research made at the employee level, the themes were organized on six main domains as follows: beliefs about high sensitivity (1), the importance of sensitivity for the work performed (2), management (3), relations (4), conditions (5) and practical implications for management (6). In the same manner, at the employer level, the themes were also organized in six main domains as follows: beliefs about high sensitivity (7), management of the HSP (8), motivating HSP (9), relations (10), physical working conditions (11), implications for employee management (12). For the purpose of this research we conducted 8 focus groups and individual interviews with employees and 4 focus groups and individual interviews with employers.

On the analyzed sample, in the employees discourse, the predominance of the codes in descending order from the largest to the smallest, was: great care for relationships, strong emotionality, need for a supporting climate, need to count on support, great need for independence/autonomy, need to adequate space to work, the importance of communication in relations, distraction by sound stimuli, stereotypes, high need to structure the task performed, preference for predictability, aversion to confrontation, need to participate in decision making, need of trust in getting things done, intensive reaction to criticism, ease of overloading, overresponsibility, focusing on details and nuances, the high need of transparent communication. high adaptation cost, work-related overload perceived as somatic complaints, avoiding monotony, the importance of temperature for performance (air conditioning), increases the quality of teamwork, commitment to the implementation of the task, high responsibility, strong influence of the negative evaluation on the performance of tasks, searching for external sources of confirmation, stiffening in the event of overload, strong influence of the environment on the quality of work, high efficiency of remote work / high efficiency of work from home; procrastination, high loyalty, getting special satisfaction from the creative process, feeling of loneliness, misunderstanding, optimal work pace, the aesthetics of the environment, disseminating reliable and in-depth knowledge on high sensitivity, delegating responsibility for the implementation of the task, supporting monitoring in the supervision of the implementation, impostor syndrome, perfectionism, flow state, conscious selection of employees for team work in the implementation of tasks and attentiveness to loading with tasks.

The predominance of the codes in descending order from the largest to the smallest, this time in the employers discourse, on the analyzed sample, was: stereotypes about HS, good performance in remote work, participatory style, single-tasking preference, strong emotional reactions in work, high social competences, responsibility, motivating through praise, low effectiveness with unclearly defined tasks, the importance of the composition of the team for the effectiveness / efficiency of work, responsibility in the selection of words / messages, tendency

to overinterpretation (in the case of unclear messages), sensitivity to distractors, sensitivity to light, devotion, assessment of the process, conflicts avoidance, preference for working with individual responsibility, excessive agreeableness, overload at work in open space, harmful autocratic - directive style, respecting needs, resignation approach, loyalty, need to make sense of the task/ seeing sense in the tasks undertaken, adjusting the conditions, repeatedly assuring the correctness of performing tasks, preference for creative work, no go-ahead and expansive approach, importance of emotional climate, sensitivity to noise, sensitivity to temperature, flexibility at the expense of your own comfort, the particular cost of adapting to unfavorable conditions, good manners, prospective orientation/future orientation, more effective tasks performed independently, subordination, the preference of constancy and order, creating a culture of an organization / institution conducive to the perception and rumination of high sensitivity, providing reliable knowledge on high sensitivity, task oriented style, high competences in managerial positions, not dividing employees into highly sensitive and low-sensitive, predisposition to work with people and need to prepare for particularly emotionally demanding work.

Two individual forms with open questions were completed by one HS employee and by one experienced HR specialist. According to the employee, HS were characterized as persons who need justice and who possibly not fight for the defense of some human rights. According to the HR employer, the relationships with HS were characterized as difficult due to the highly competitive environment with significance pressure on results.

Agregating and interpreting the information made available to us by employees and employers who participated in interviews, focus groups or filled the forms, a series of measures were outlined. These measures can be adopted to increase professional integration and well-being of hypersensitive employees on the labour market and thus their adaptation and work performance. These measures are listed below, as follows:

- knowing the characteristics and the specificities in functioning of these employees both by themselves and by peers and employers, together with the popularization of this knowledge with the purpose to rise awareness about it and made this typology more recognizable, understandable and accepted
- development of some specific instruments and guides which will allow both employers and employees to find specific ideas and possible solutions to particular situations when confronted with the hypersensitivity at the workplace
- assuring the access of the employee to career counseling, psychotherapy, training and resources to learn how to manage reactions and emotions (e.g. stress management, emotional intelligence, communication skills etc.)
- promoting an organizational culture based on empathy and care for the people, that reflects a true desire among the members for the performance and wellbeing of the other
- shaping attitudes and values such as a supportiveness, a true desire to have patience, to know and to understand the other and his strenghts as a prerequisite for a very good working relationship
- assuring assertive communication based on active and emphatic listening; assuring constructive and customized feedback, avoiding criticism, aggressiveness or attacking the person
- promoting a democratic, participative and inclusive leadership with increased attention to the individual needs of each team member; frequent one on one discussions; use of the power of example through an appropriate and inspiring role model
- creating a work environment characterized by justice, trust, support, respect, positivity, which promotes safety and can function as a buffer for stress and negative affects of the employees



- minimization or elimination of the triggering factors for exaggerated reactions of the HS employees when appropriate and possible; flexibility regarding work programme and ways of accomplishing tasks or goals, thus assuring confort and respect for employee needs; providing sufficient and accurate information for the employees, thus assuring a sense of safety and a basis for accomplishing tasks and for decision making.

## Study 2

The second study aims to describe/characterize the relationship regarding high sensitivity and both integration into the labor market & professional wellbeing of the individuals with Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS). According to this purpose we used 4 questionnaires, as follows: High Sensitivity Scale – Brief Version – HSP-12, Maslach Burnout Inventory Human Services Survey – MBI HSS, Satisfaction with Life Scale - SLS and Job Satisfaction Survey – JSS.

The Highly Sensitive Person Scale – Brief Version (HSP-12) is a 12-item self-report measure designed to assess Environmental Sensitivity in adults; each of the 12 items is rated on a 7-point Likert scale; results across four individual studies (total N = 1,140) suggest that individual differences in sensitivity to the environment can be reliably and easily assessed with a short self-report measure (HSP-12), confirmed and validated by empirical studies according to which the scale predicts heightened reactivity to both negative and positive experiences [17]. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is a psychological assessment instrument comprising 22 symptom items pertaining to occupational burnout [16]. The MBI Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS) is the original version of the MBI; the items were designed to capture feelings of burnout whose elevated levels seems to be correlated with various self-reported indicators of personal dysfunction, including physical exhaustion, insomnia, increased use of alcohol and drugs, and marital and family problems the items were designed to capture feelings of burnout whose elevated levels seems to be correlated with various self-reported indicators of personal dysfunction, including physical exhaustion, insomnia, increased use of alcohol and drugs, and marital and family problems [9]. The questionnaire consists of three subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment; various psychometric analyses showed that the scale has both high reliability and validity as a measure of burnout [15, 16]. Satisfaction with Life Scale - SLS is a brief questionnaire that measures global life satisfaction (*The Satisfaction with Life Scale*, n.d.). The structure of subjective well-being has been conceptualized as consisting of two major components: the emotional or affective component and the judgmental or cognitive component [9]. Precisely SLS is a 5-item scale designed to measure global cognitive judgments of one's life satisfaction (not a measure of either positive or negative affect) [11] with good psychometric properties including internal high consistency and high temporal reliability [21].

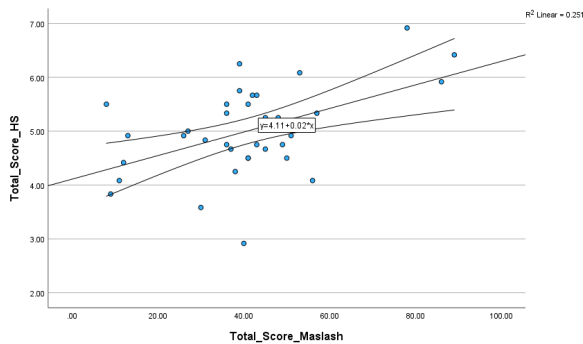
Job Satisfaction Survey - JSS is a 36 items questionnaire written in each direction, both positive and negative used to evaluate nine dimensions of job satisfaction related to overall satisfaction [16]. The dimensions of the questionnaire which items are scored on a Likert 1 to 6 scale are: Pay, Promotion, Supervision, Fringe Benefits, Contingent Rewards, Operating conditions, Coworkers, Nature of work, Communication.

A sample of 37 people (N=37), adults, employees, with ages ranging from 22 to 62 years, 18 males and 19 females with varying educational levels was analyzed with the above-mentioned psychometric measures and sundries statistical analysis were performed. On the analyzed sample a significant positive correlation was found between the total score of HSP – 12 Scale and the total score of MBI HSS Scale ( $r=.501$ ). Also, a significant negative correlation ( $r= -.511$ ) was found between Total Score of HSP-12 Scale and Total Score of JSS Scale. The

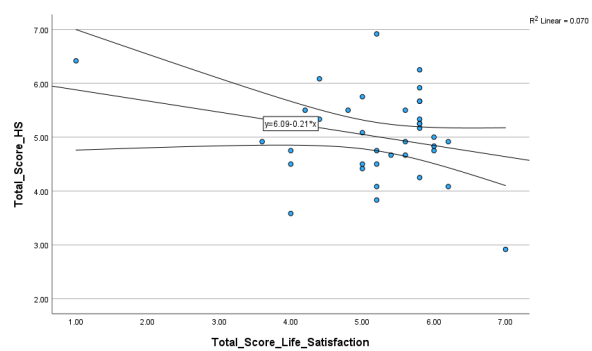
corresponding coefficients of determination,  $r^2$ , which values were 0.251 and 0.261, respectively, show that approximately 25% - about a quarter of the variability of the high sensitivity can be associated with the burnout level and approximately 26% - a little bit more than a quarter of the variability of the high sensitivity, can be associated with job satisfaction. An alpha level of 0.01 was used for this specific statistic. Taking into account the scores on the subscales, the major elevations were found between HSP -12 Total Score and Emotional Exhaustion ( $r=.405 - \alpha \text{ level } 0.05$ ) and Depersonalization ( $r=.451 - \alpha \text{ level } 0.01$ ). Regarding the HSP - 12 Total Score and JSS Scale the major elevations were found with Contingent Rewards Subscale ( $r=-.503 - \alpha \text{ level } 0.01$ ), Coworkers ( $r=-.485 - \alpha \text{ level } 0.01$ ), Nature of the work ( $r=-.615 \alpha \text{ level } 0.01$ ) and Communication ( $r=-.513 \alpha \text{ level } 0.01$ ).

The graphs below show the regression line together with the associated regression equations that can be used for prediction for similar samples, where high sensitivity (x) is the predictor variable and burnout, life satisfaction and job satisfaction are the criterion variables (y).

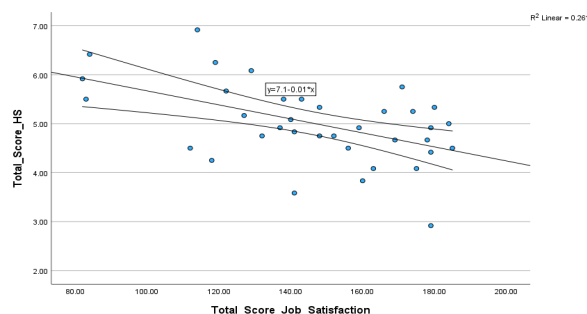
**Graph 1 Correlation between HS and burnout**



**Graph 2 Correlation between HS and life satisfaction**



**Graph 3 Correlation between HS and job satisfaction**



In conclusion, high levels of SPS (sensory processing sensitivity) positively correlates with high levels of burnout and negatively correlates with job satisfaction, with approximately 25% of the amount of shared variance for both constructs. The relation between the variables is statistically significant for the analyzed sample.

These results show a general and a specific architecture regarding the way SPS construct of the employee is related to burnout and job satisfaction providing valuable information not only about predicting future behavior, but about what specific variables might be modified when addressing ways of enhancing integration of the HSP on the labor market and their professional wellbeing. For example, adjusting Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, Rewards, Coworkers, Nature of work and Communication via specific intervention may adjust the burnout and job satisfaction levels, thus enhancing overall integration and wellbeing of the HSP on the labor market.

### Conclusions and further research

As shown above by the two types of research conducted, particular measures to achieve better work and organizational adaptation and performance on the labor market for HSP may be adopted. Even if the solutions come from research and are rooted in reality, further research

may be undertaken in order to extrapolate the results on other samples and to validate and measure the efficacy and effectiveness of the above-mentioned measures.

Highly sensitive people usually have stronger reactions even to weak stimuli and need more time to return to a state of equilibrium after experiencing emotional arousal. Specific psychophysical features enable highly sensitive people to process stimuli more deeply at all physical, interpersonal, emotional and cognitive levels compared to other people, and these processes can lead to significant overload. These traits make them more sensitive to the influences of the work environment which requires special attention to the issue and further development of this research area.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. ARON, E. N. *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person: Improving Outcomes for That Minority of People Who Are the Majority of Clients* [On-line]. Routledge (USA), 2010. [citat 19 ianuarie 2023] Accesibil pe Internet: <URL: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203879085>
2. ARON, E. N., ARON, A. Sensory-processing sensitivity and its relation to introversion and emotionality. În: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1997, nr. 2(73), pp. 345–368
3. ARON, E. N., ARON, A. ȘI JAGIELLOWICZ, J. Sensory Processing Sensitivity: A Review in the Light of the Evolution of Biological Responsivity. În: *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. 2021. nr. 3(16), pp. 262–282
4. BAS, S., KAANDORP et al. Experiences of Adults High in the Personality Trait Sensory Processing Sensitivity: A Qualitative Study [On-line]. Bethesda (USA), 2021, [citat 23 ianuarie 2023] Accesibil pe Internet: <URL: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8584340/>
5. BELSKY, J., & PLUESS, M. Beyond diathesis stress: Differential susceptibility to environmental influences. În: *Psychological Bulletin*, 135(6), 2010, 885–908. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017376>
6. BOOTH, C., STANDAGE, H., & FOX, E. Sensory-processing sensitivity moderates the association between childhood experiences and adult life satisfaction. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 2015, 87, 24–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.07.020>
7. BOYCE, W. T., ELLIS, B. J. Biological sensitivity to context: I. An evolutionary–developmental theory of the origins and functions of stress reactivity. În: *Development and Psychopathology*. 2005. nr. 2(17), pp. 271–301
8. COSTA-LÓPEZ, B. et al. Relationship between Sensory Processing and Quality of Life: A Systematic Review. În: *Journal of Clinical Medicine*, 2021, nr. 10(17)
9. COULTAS, C. Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual, 2023.
10. DIENER, E. Subjective well-being. În: *Psychological Bulletin*, Washington (USA), 2005. nr. 3(95), pp. 542–575
11. DIENER, E. et al. The Satisfaction With Life Scale. În: *Journal of Personality Assessment* [On-line]. New York (USA), 1985. nr. 1(49), pp. 71–75. [citat 10 ianuarie 2023] Accesibil pe Internet: <URL: [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13)
12. GREVEN, C. U., HOMBERG, J. R. The Highly Sensitive Brain. Sensory processing sensitivity—For better or for worse? Theory, evidence, and societal implications., 2020. pp. 51–74. Academic Press (USA). [citat 20 ianuarie 2023] Accesibil pe Internet: <URL: <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-818251-2.00003-5>
13. GREVEN, C. U. Et al. Sensory Processing Sensitivity in the context of Environmental Sensitivity: A critical review and development of research agenda. În: *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, Elsevier (USA). 2019. vol. 98, pp. 287–305. [citat 7 februarie 2023] Accesibil pe Internet: <URL: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2019.01.009>
14. LIONETTI, F. et al. Dandelions, tulips and orchids: Evidence for the existence of low-sensitive, medium-sensitive and high-sensitive individuals. În: *Transnational Psychiatry*. 2018. nr. 1(8), [citat 17 ianuarie 2023] Accesibil pe Internet: <URL: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41398-017-0090-6>

15. MASLACH, C., JACKSON, S. E. The measurement of experienced burnout. În: *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. 1981, nr. 2(2), pp. 99–113. [citată 8 februarie 2023] Accesibil pe Internet: <URL: <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.4030020205>
16. MASLACH, C., JACKSON, S. E. ȘI LEITER, M. P. Evaluating stress: A book of resources- Maslach Burnout Inventory.. Scarecrow Education, USA, 1998. pp. 191–218.
17. PLUESS, M. et al. *People Differ in their Sensitivity to the Environment: An Integrated Theory and Empirical Evidence*. [citată 17 februarie 2023] Accesibil pe Internet: <URL: <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/w53yc>
18. PLUESS, M. Individual Differences in Environmental Sensitivity. În: *Child Development Perspectives*, 2015, 9(3), 138–143. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12120>
19. PLUESS, M. & BONIWELL, I. Sensory-Processing Sensitivity predicts treatment response to a school-based depression prevention program: Evidence of Vantage Sensitivity. În: *Personality and Individual Differences*, 2015, 82, 40–45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.03.011>
20. SLAGT, M., DUBAS, J. S., ELLIS, B. J., AKEN, M. A. G. van, DEKOVIC, M. Linking emotional reactivity “for better and for worse” to differential susceptibility to parenting among kindergartners. În: *Development and Psychopathology*, 2019, 31(2), 741–758. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579418000445>
21. The Satisfaction with Life Scale. [citată 18 ianuarie 2023] Accesibil pe Internet: <URL: <https://pro.positivepsychology.com/tools/the-satisfaction-with-life-scale/>
22. TILLMANN, T., MATANY, K. E., & DUTTWEILER, H. Measuring Environmental Sensitivity in Educational Contexts: A Validation Study With German-Speaking Students. În: *Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology*, 2018, 8(2), 2. <https://doi.org/10.5539/jedp.v8n2p17>