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Emotional Intelligence in Incarcerated Sexual Offenders with Sadistic Traits

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The perception and subsequent understanding of emotion in others is an essential aspect of human social behavior. Being able to process and regulate both internal and external emotional information dictates how we think, act, and react in social interactions. Emotional intelligence (EI) is generally defined as the ability to perceive, manage, and reason about emotions, both in oneself and in others. We have previously found EI deficits among incarcerated criminal offenders with psychopathic traits, which is in line with the established emotion processing deficits and callous/lack of empathy traits that characterize the disorder. Comparatively less work has focused on sexual sadism, which shares several characteristics with psychopathy such as callousness and propensity for violence. There has also been a lack of research examining EI in sexual offenders. While some research has reported no significant differences in EI between sexual offenders and non-sex offenders, generalization has been limited by small sample sizes.

The goal of the present study was to examine EI in a large sample of sexual offenders and non-sexual offenders, as well as the association between EI and sexual sadism.

EI was assessed in adult male incarcerated sexual (n = 93) and non-sexual (n = 211) offenders using the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), a well-studied ability EI measure with strong psychometric properties. The MSCEIT distinguishes two primary domains of EI, each being divided into two subdomains: experiencing emotions (Experiential EI: Perceiving Emotions and Facilitating Thought), and emotional skills (Strategic EI: Understanding Emotions and Managing Emotions). Sexual sadism was

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measured using the Severe Sexual Sadism Scale (SeSaS). Results showed that sexual offenders had significantly higher Managing Emotions (ME) scores relative to non-sex offenders. In addition, ME scores were significantly positively correlated with SeSaS scores in the sexual offenders. These results provide novel insight into our understanding of emotional intelligence in sexual offenders, suggesting that both sexual sadists and sexual offenders more generally may possess enhanced emotion management abilities.

Daniella Greenfield is a Research Assistant at the Mind Research Network (MRN) and an honorary associate at the UW-Madison Department of Psychiatry. Her work involves conducting research interviews with inmates in several correctional facilities across the state of Wisconsin to collect data for NIH-funded grants headed by Carla Harenski, PhD (MRN - Albuquerque, NM), Kent Kiehl, PhD (MRN - Albuquerque, NM), and Michael Koenigs, PhD (UW-Madison Department of Psychiatry - Madison, WI). Daniella obtained her Bachelor of Science in Psychology with Honors from the University of Wisconsin - Madison in Spring 2018. Daniella's primary research interests lie in the realm of paraphilia research, specifically focused on the etiological foundations and clinical implications of cognitive processing in sexually deviant individuals. She plans to start her graduate career in a clinical psychology doctoral program in the fall of 2020.