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## Emotional Intelligence in Child Molesters

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### ABSTRACT

Various studies have examined intelligent quotients (IQs) in samples of pedophiles and child molesters. However, intelligence is not a monolithic construct; rather, it is made up of different dimensions, including emotional intelligence (EI). Although emotional intelligence has been studied in relation to criminal behavior, there is little knowledge available on EI in samples of child molesters. The aim of the present study is to fill this gap by looking at a sample of convicted Italian child molesters. The Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), Big Five Questionnaire (BFQ-2), and the Scale Wechsler Adult Intelligence (WAIS-IV) were administered to an all-male sample of 10 incarcerated child molesters. Cognitive functioning was below the general population average. The EQ-i scores were average or above and very high in one case. There were no statistically significant relationships between EQ-I and IQ. In our sample, the EQ-i scores are higher for EQ than IQ. The individuals in the sample present scores that are comparable to or higher than the general population in EI measures. The data seem to confirm the hypothesis that some child molesters may use their emotional skills to facilitate the abuse of minors. The data confirm the tendency for IQs to be lower in this population. Furthermore, the data do not support a correlation between IQ and EI.

### KEYWORDS

Child molesters; emotional intelligence; inmates; paraphilia

## Introduction

In the literature, various studies from numerous countries have investigated the intelligence of the sexual offender population. Although not always in agreement, the studies tend to show that sexual offenders, especially child molesters, present a lower intelligence quotient (IQ) than non-sexual offenders (Arslan et al., 2016; Cantor et al., 2005). However, most of the studies focused on the cognitive aspects of intelligence.

It is widely agreed upon among theoreticians that intelligence is no longer a monolithic construct; rather, it can have different components. Alongside cognitive intelligence, we find emotional intelligence (EI). According to some theoreticians, cognitive and emotional intelligence are forms of more general intelligence that is specialized into a specific domain. Therefore, EI represents

the specialization of general intelligence in the area of emotions in ways that reflect experience and learning about emotions, whereas cognitive intelligence represents the specialization of general intelligence in the domain of cognition in ways that reflect experience and learning about cognitive processes such as memory (Brody, 2004).

Nevertheless, although in the studies on those committing sexual offenses cognitive intelligence is widely investigated, EI has received little attention in the analysis of sexual offenders, especially pedophiles and child molesters.

## **Emotional intelligence**

EI is defined by Mayer and Salovey (1997) as “the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (p. 10). The study of the EI construct has emerged from two different (but related) research traditions. The first conceptualizes EI as a personality trait (TEI; Petrides et al., 2007). On the other hand, the second conceptualizes EI as an ability (AEI; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Trait EI (TEI) refers to the cluster of emotion-related self-perceptions and dispositions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies. EI as a cognitive- emotional ability (AEI) concerns actual emotion-related abilities. In the latter meaning, EI is considered a specific form of intelligence, one that is distinguishable from others, which enables individuals to use their emotions in an adaptive fashion. From a psychometric point of view, TEI is measured using a self-report instrument, while AEI is assessed using maximum-performance tests.

## **EI and criminal behavior**

EI seems to play a role in criminal behavior. Criminals, and to a greater degree those who have committed violent crimes such as murder, present an EI deficit (Megreya, 2015). EI is strongly correlated with criminal thoughts and tends to decrease as the severity of the crime committed increases (Megreya, 2013, 2015). EI is shown to present a negative relationship with various forms of aggressive behavior (aggressive humor, partner abuse, physical abuse, etc.) but not to other kinds of violence, such as verbal aggression and sexual offending (García-Sancho et al., 2014).

Various components of EI, such as emotional stability, facial expression recognition, personal control, self-regulation, and social problem solving, have been identified in the literature as lacking or problematic in offenders (Megreya, 2015). Among these components, particular attention has been given to the construct of empathy.

Empathy is central in the social process and in inhibiting aggressiveness. For instance, studies on bullying show that bullies have low levels of empathic responsiveness, while the defenders of bullying victims present high levels of empathy (Gini et al., 2007). Therefore, a lack or low levels of empathy is correlated with offending. More specifically, various studies have shown that the cognitive element of empathy is more associated with criminal behavior than with the affective component (Van Langen, Stams et al., 2014; Van Langen, Wissink et al., 2014).

### **EI in sexual offenders**

In the literature, the hypothesis that sexual offenders have a deficit in their emotional functioning has proved to be controversial. Some studies have documented that sex offenders display deficits in particular emotional functions (e.g., Hudson et al., 1993; Kåven et al., 2019). For instance, Hudson et al. (1993) provided evidence to suggest that sex offenders display general deficits in emotional function. In a first study with a sample of sex offenders composed by rapists and pedophiles, they found that both the rapists and pedophiles were significantly less sensitive to the perception of emotion displayed in photographs of target faces of both males and females compared to violent offenders. In their second study with a sample composed only by pedophiles, they found that pedophiles were less accurate in the perception of emotions in both adult and child target compared to controls group. Similarly, in a qualitative study, Kåven et al. (2019) found that male child sex offenders ( $N = 10$ ) reported problems with emotion regulation and the establishment and maintenance of intimate relationships in adulthood. In addition, the majority of the participants described varying degrees of difficulties with self-regulation such as impulse control and regulation of emotions.

Nevertheless, other studies have found that the capacity for empathy and general ability to perceive emotion are normal in sexual offenders when compared with the general population or non-sex-offenders (e.g., Fernandez et al., 1999; Puglia et al., 2005). For instance, Moriarty et al. (2001) found that adolescent sex offenders ( $N = 15$ ) were similar to non-offending adolescents in many EI variables. In this regard, there were no significant differences between adolescent sex offenders and non-offending adolescents in the recognition of emotions in others, as measured by the Toronto Alexithymia Scale Revised (TAS-R), in the components of empathy such as perspective taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress, as assessed by the Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index overall scale score (IRI) in the interpersonal relationships problem, as measured by the Inventory of Interpersonal problems (IIP-32). Nevertheless, those offenders showed a deficit in “attention to feelings” as measured by the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS) and higher aggression as measured by IIP-32.

Likewise, Puglia et al. (2005) found that the sex offenders were not significantly different from the non-offenders in emotional functioning as assessed by these three branches of the Mayer Salovey Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT). In addition, sex offenders scored higher than non-sex offenders on the MSCEIT Perception Scale.

Consequently, it has been hypothesized that this deficit lies not in global emotional functioning, but rather that sex offenders present a context-specific empathy deficit (Pithers, 1999). For instance, Fernandez et al. (1999) showed that pedophiles empathized with the suffering of children after a road accident but were less able to recognize and empathize with the emotions of the child victims of sexual abuse. Hence, it may be that the emotional functioning of sexual aggressors is deficient only under the pressure of specific circumstances that may lead to sexual aggression, such as an interpersonal crises (Puglia et al., 2005).

There is empirical evidence that in child predators, there are higher levels of depersonalization and maladaptive emotional regulation strategies that can make interesting contributions to the understanding of the dynamics of abuse, especially as a mood- alleviating strategy (Lichev & Wolfradt, 2016). Some sexual offenders may display dissociative symptoms during the perpetration of the abuse to combat memories and feelings about personal abuse suffered during their childhoods, which are experiences often found in this population (Lichev & Wolfradt, 2016).

For Bumby (2000), who referred to the concept of defensive externalization as first formulated by Tangney (1995), the specific deficit toward the victim that is revealed in sexual aggressors is the outcome of a defense strategy that protects the offender from abuse-related feelings of shame and guilt. If child predators had a generalized empathy deficit, we would expect certain levels of psychopathy and a variegated career of criminal acts similar to those of non-sexual-offenders. Instead, sexual offenders, especially child molesters, differ from other criminals in the exclusiveness of their behavior and the fact that they could presents a better functioning in social and work contexts (Rosso et al., 2010).

In general, child sexual offenders, although relatively prosocial, tend to present lacking social skills and interpersonal competence. Some research, for example, highlights that child sexual offenders characterized by emotional congruence with children tend to substitute children with adult partners for sexual and social partners (Hermann et al., 2017). In this way, it is possible that emotional intelligence, in average or upper levels, is a key to maintaining the relationship with the child.

Working within the theoretical framework of attachment, Wood and Riggs (2008) showed that together with anxious attachment and cognitive distortions, high general empathy but low victim empathy may predict child molester status. Puglia et al. (2005) found that adult sexual offenders not

only preserve an emotional functioning in a normal setting when compared with the general population and to non-sex-offenders, but also are more capable of recognizing emotions. This indicates that EI could be used by pedophiles and child predators to carry out abuse, especially in the strategies used to groom children. It is possible that child molesters use their EI to more effectively lure in their victims, involve them in sex games and unclear relationships, get them enthralled, and bind them to secrecy by manipulating them, fostering a sense of guilt, joint participation, and shame in the young victim.

However, although there are theoretical and conceptual associations between deficits in empathy, participation in criminal behavior, and the potential efficacy of victim empathy training treatment within of sexual offenders, as Morrow (2019) points out, there is no empirical evidence that provides support to such an approach. In this regard, including victim empathy interventions in the treatment of sexual offenders does not appear to be quantitatively effective (Carich & Mussack, 2014; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). For instance, the meta-analysis conducted by Hanson and Morton-Bourgon (2005) did not find a relationship between a lack of victim empathy and sexual and nonsexual recidivism among sexual offenders.

On the other hand, qualitative studies with sexual offenders about their experiences with treatment programs show that sexual offenders invariably report that victim empathy work was one of the most powerful components of treatment (e.g., Levenson et al., 2009; Wakeling et al., 2005). Therefore, it seems that the perceived impact of this portion of treatment is greater than its efficacy (Morrow, 2019).

### **The aim of the study**

The aim of the current study is to assess the dimensions of EI in a sample of Italian males convicted of sexually abusing children. In addition, because the literature shows a low IQ in individuals with a history of child abuse (Arslan et al., 2016; Cantor et al., 2005), we will use the Wechsler Scales to assess the cognitive functioning of child predators, comparing their IQs to their emotional quotients. Starting from some evidence suggesting a poor correlation between IQ and EI measurements, probably as a result of the fact that they are measured by instruments evaluating different constructs (Derksen et al., 2002; Furnham, 2016), we want to test whether there is a correlation between IQ and EI in this particular population. Although sexual offenders of children tend to have a lower IQ than the general population, considering the above, we hypothesize that EI could fit with values in the norm or higher than the general population and that this characteristic could be straightforward in

the dynamics of perpetration of the abuse. In this direction, we hypothesize that the IQ of child predators is lower than average, while their EI will show average or above-average levels. We also hypothesize that there is no association between the IQ and emotional quotient of child molesters.

## **Methods**

### ***Design***

To test our hypotheses, we utilized a cross-sectional, mixed methods study. Quantitative data were collected using self-report instruments and performance tests, while qualitative data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Both the qualitative and quantitative data were collected in a single step and presented separately. In the conclusions, the data were completed and compared to respond to our research questions. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Turin.

### ***Participants and procedure***

After attaining approval of the ethics committee, the study was examined by the director of the Turin prison. The director spoke favorably of the study and gave the researchers permission to enter. With the help of the prison staff, adult prisoners sentenced for sexual crimes against minors were invited to participate in the research. At the time of the study, the prison held  $N = 18$  individuals corresponding to the selection criteria. The modalities and aims of the present study were presented to the child molesters, and it was explained that participation was voluntary and would not hold any kind of compensation. The detainees were allowed to ask the researchers any questions about the study, and agreements to participate were collected. Of the  $N = 18$  individuals meeting the research criteria, 10 voluntarily decided to take part in the study. Finally, participants who had borderline cognitive dysfunction (i.e., 4 participants with lower IQ) were assisted with filling out the questionnaires to ensure that they had not struggled to interpret and respond to questions.

Therefore, the sample consisted of 10 subjects, all males (since at the time of the research, there were no female detainees with such charges), with an average age of 47 years (min = 26, max = 75). 50% of them committed a sexual offense against some member of their family (40% abused their nieces, and 60% their daughters or stepdaughters) and 50% against strangers.



## **Instruments**

### ***Big Five Questionnaire (BFQ-2)***

The BFQ-2 (Caprara et al., 1993, 2007) contains 134 items that form five domain scales: energy/extraversion, friendliness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness. The response scale varied from 1 (very false for me) to 5 (very true for me). High correlations between the analogous scales of the BFQ and the NEO-PI in both Italian and American samples confirmed the construct validity of the five scales. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from .73 (energy/extraversion) to .88 (emotional stability). The sum of the responses to the single items on the subscales gave raw scores that had to be converted into "T" scores with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10.

### ***Bar-on emotional intelligence inventory***

To assess TEI, the Bar-On Emotional Intelligence Inventory (Bar-On, 1997) in the Italian version (Franco & Tappatà, 2009) was administered. The questionnaire has 133 items with Likert scale response options ranging from 1 = *Not at all true for me* to 5 = *Absolutely true for me*. The measure yields a total emotional quotient (EQ) and scores for five subscales: intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, stress management, and general mood. The reliabilities were examined using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the Italian version of the EQ-I, and they are the following: .95 for the total score, .91 for intrapersonal, .84 for interpersonal, .81 for adaptability, .87 for stress management, .83 for general mood (Franco & Tappatà, 2009). As for the IQs, the EQ scores were converted into standard scores with a mean of 100 and standard deviation of 15. The expected scores ranged from 55 to 145 (with a standard deviation of about three compared with the mean), but most of the participants obtained total EQ scores of around 100.

### ***Scale Wechsler adult intelligence–fourth edition (WAIS-IV)***

The WAIS-IV (Wechsler, 2008) is a comprehensive test of intellectual functioning in adolescents and adults ages 16 to 90, in addition to specific domains of cognition, through the administration of 10 core subtest and 5 supplemental subtests. These 10 subtests allow for the computation of a global Full Scale IQ score and four, more specific, index scores.

Subtests measuring similar aspects of cognitive ability are combined to derive one of four index scores: verbal comprehension (VCI; similarities, vocabulary, and information), perceptual reasoning (PRI; block design, matrix reasoning, and visual puzzles), working memory (WMI; digit span and arithmetic), and processing speed (PSI; symbol search and coding). The supplemental subtests associated with these indices are comprehension (VCI), figure weights and picture completion (PRI), letter–number sequencing (WMI), and cancellation (PSI); these are meant to replace a core subtest



when performance on the latter has been compromised because of factors that are unrelated to the participant or task in question. For example, a participant's arithmetic score may not be reflective of his or her true ability if during the administration of the test, he or she was distracted by loud noises (Lichtenberger & Kaufman, 2009). In this instance, the test administrator could use the letter–number sequencing score instead of the arithmetic score to calculate the WMI for this participant. Participants were administered the 10 subtest core battery of the WAIS-IV, and the measures were scored using the standard scoring methods set forth in the test manual (Wechsler, 2008). The WAIS-IV is scored by summing the raw scores for each subtest. The raw subtest scores are converted into scaled scores corrected for age group.

Subtest scaled scores are standardized to a normative mean of 10, with one standard deviation reflected in 3-point increments. To obtain each index score, the sum of scaled scores is computed for the core subtests that comprise each index and then converted to a standard score. To obtain the Full Scale IQ Index score (FSIQ), the sum of scaled scores is computed for the 10 core subtests and then converted to a standard score with a normative mean of 100, with one standard deviation reflected in 15-point increments.

### *Qualitative data coding and analysis*

The interviews were conducted before the administration of the tests used to obtain quantitative data. In the first stage of the interview, the aim was to win the trust of the interviewee, create a positive atmosphere for the administration of the subsequent tests, and verify the screening criteria. A semi-structured interview was conducted for the purpose of this study. The main aim, however, was to obtain information about the hypotheses being studied. With the child molesters, the interviewers discussed the experience of the abuse committed. In particular, the interviewer initially collected data about the prisoner and the motive that led him to prison, and subsequently asked respondents to comment on their relationship with the victim and their experience related to the perpetrated abuse. The interviews were conducted by forensic psychology experts and transcribed verbatim by an experienced professional transcriber. To organize the data during the coding stage, the qualitative software package ATLAS.ti (Muhr, 2005) was used. The authors conducted the coding and, to ensure quality control, two independent raters coded 10% of the raw data. A 92% level of agreement was derived. A thematic analysis was used to identify and record the main themes and patterns emerged from the interview transcripts. The paragraph devoted to the qualitative results in the results section gives for the main themes that complete or support the results obtained at the quantitative stage.

## Results

### Findings from the quantitative analysis

#### Profile of the sexual offenders' personalities

Table 1 presents the T-scores of the child predators based on dimensions of the BFQ-2. It can be noted that the scores on energy ranged from 35 to 68, with a mean score of 50.9 ( $SD = 11.71$ ); friendliness ranged from 40 to 67, with a mean score of 59.3 ( $SD = 8.99$ ); conscientiousness ranged from 34 to 75, with a mean score of 52.8 ( $SD = 11.04$ ); emotional stability ranged from 33 to 73, with a mean score of 54.9 ( $SD = 11.76$ ); openness ranged from 33 to 73, with a mean score of 50.3 ( $SD = 14.98$ ); and lie ranged from 32 to 63, with a mean score of 53.10 ( $SD = 9.05$ ).

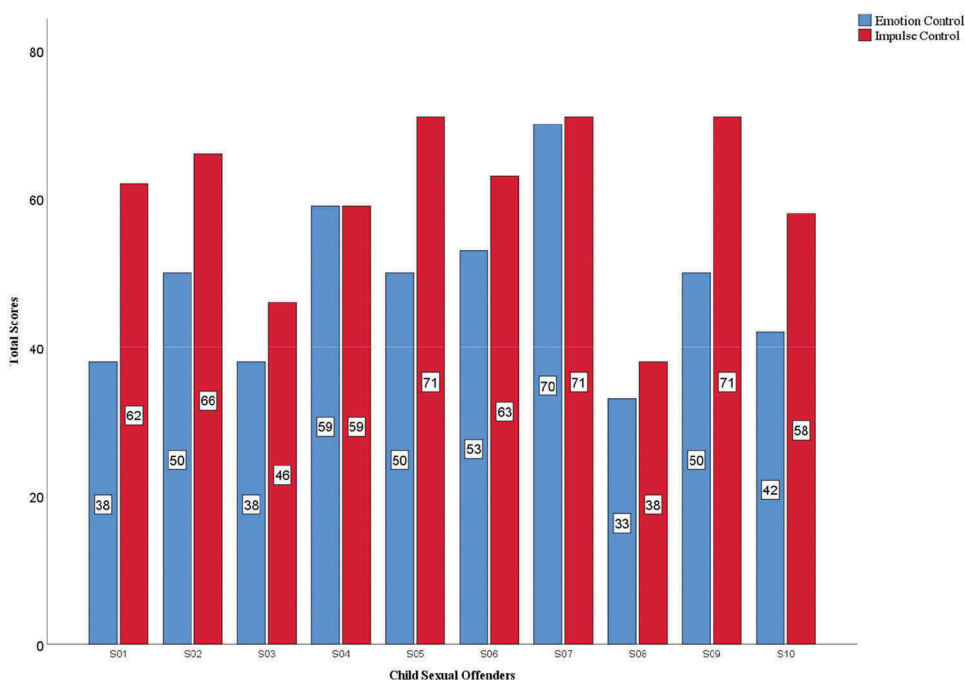
Starting from the assumption that the mean for every scale and subscale ranges from 45 to 55 T points, we see that the scores obtained by almost all the participants were within the average or slightly above average. Here, closer attention should be paid to the emotional stability dimension. All the participants obtained scores around average or above average, except for detainee 3, whose score was slightly below average, and detainee 8, who scored well below.

Figure 1 shows the total scores on the two facets of the emotional stability dimension: emotional control and impulse control. It can be seen that the participants stated they had greater competence in managing their impulses rather than their emotions. Therefore, we can hypothesize that the participants are very skilled at recognizing and understanding their own and others' moods, but they are not able to control emotions that are too strong.

**Table 1.** T-scores of the child sexual offenders on dimensions of the Big Factor Questionnaire (BFQ-2).

Subjects	Energy	Friendliness	Conscientiousness	Emotional Stability	Openness	Lie
S01	64	65	60	50	61	60
S02	47	59	53	59	54	59
S03	52	65	52	41	49	52
S04	47	62	43	60	68	56
S05	68	67	75	65	74	57
S06	35	66	50	56	53	55
S07	45	40	46	73	28	53
S08	65	54	56	33	34	32
S09	51	66	59	62	47	63
S10	35	49	34	50	35	44
Whole Sample ( $N = 10$ )						
<i>M</i>	50.90	59.30	52.80	54.90	50.30	53.10
<i>SD</i>	11.71	8.99	11.04	11.76	14.98	9.05
Sample without subject 7 ( $N = 9$ )						
<i>M</i>	51.56	61.44	53.56	52.89	52.78	53.11
<i>SD</i>	12.29	6.27	11.44	10.49	13.54	9.60

*M* = Mean. *SD* = Standard deviation.



**Figure 1.** Total scores on the two facets of the emotional stability dimension: emotion control and impulse control by participant.

**Table 2.** T-scores of the child sexual offenders on dimensions of the Emotional Intelligence Inventory (EQ-i).

Subjects	Intrapersonal Intelligence	Interpersonal Intelligence	Adaptability	Stress Management	General Mood	EQ-i	II
S01	117	130	124	119	130	124	
S02	99	130	91	110	82	102	
S03	93	105	109	88	104	100	
S04	99	122	91	94	99	101	
S05	107	130	113	107	95	110	
S06	76	118	93	108	80	95	
S07	121	102	113	117	97	110	17
S08	104	88	100	98	80	94	
S09	99	130	97	113	104	109	
S10	85	105	72	108	78	90	
Whole Sample (N = 10)							
M	100	116	100.30	106.20	94.90	103.48	
SD	13.53	15.08	14.90	9.98	16.04	10.07	
Sample without subject 7 (N = 9)							
M	97.67	117.56	98.89	105	94.67	102.76	
SD	12.03	15.12	15.08	9.79	16.99	10.40	

M = Mean. SD = Standard deviation. II = Incoherence Index

### EQ and IQ

Table 2 presents the T-scores of the child predators based on dimensions of the Emotional Intelligence Inventory (EQ-i) and total EQ-i scores. Also, it

shows descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for the participants and the whole sample ( $N = 10$ ) and sample without prisoner 7 ( $N = 9$ ). It can be noted that the EQ scores ranged from 90 to 124, with a mean scores of 103.48 ( $SD = 10.07$ ); the scores on the intrapersonal subscale ranged from 76 to 121, with a mean score of 100 ( $SD = 13.53$ ); the interpersonal subscale ranged from 88 to 130, with a mean score of 116 ( $SD = 15.08$ ); the adaptability subscale ranged from 72 to 124, with a mean score of 100.30 ( $SD = 14.90$ ); the stress management subscale ranged from 88 to 119, with a mean score of 106.20 ( $SD = 9.98$ ); and the general mood subscale ranged from 78 to 130, with a mean score of 94.90 ( $SD = 16.04$ ).

As Table 2 shows, sexual offenders as a group obtained average or slightly above-average scores on the EQ-i overall scale score and on each of the five dimensions, except for General mood dimension scores, where they obtained scored slightly below average ( $M = 94.90$ ). Moreover, the participants obtained average or above-average scores on total EQ-i, with the exception of three prisoners (6, 8 and 10), who obtained EQ-i total scores slightly below average. In addition, similar results can be noted when subject 7 is removed from analysis, except for Adaptability and Intrapersonal dimensions that decrease to slightly less than average.

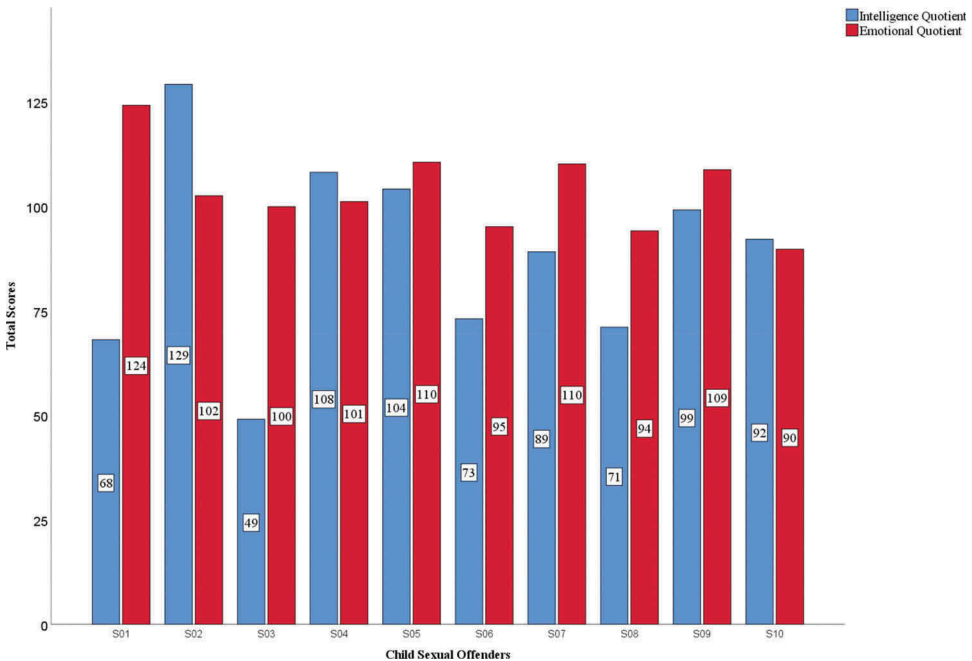


Figure 2. Total scores on IQ and EQ-i by each participant.

Figure 2 shows the total scores of the IQs and EQs of the child molesters. Overall, the total IQ scores ranged from 49 to 129, with a mean score of 88.2 ( $SD = 23.36$ ), which puts them in a band slightly lower than the average of the general population, with a mode of 49 and a median of 90.50. Regarding their EQs, the child predators' scores ranged from 90 to 124, with a mean score of 103.48 ( $SD = 10.07$ ), a mode of 104, and a median of 104.

As Figure 2 shows, the child predators' IQ scores are overall around the mean or slightly lower than the general population, while their EQ scores are higher than the IQ scores, with the exception of three prisoners (prisoner 2, 4 and 10).

Table 3 shows the Pearson's correlation analysis between the total IQ score and dimensions of EQ and total EQ score for the whole sample ( $N = 10$ ). Also, it presents Pearson's correlation analysis between the total IQ score and dimensions of EQ and total EQ score for the whole sample without prisoner 7 given that he obtained results from the Incoherence Index that was suggestive that they were responding to items at random ( $N = 9$ ). These analyzes showed that there were no statistically significant relationships between the total IQ scores and dimensions of EQ-I and the total EQ scores in this sample.

### Control of social desirability

To check the honesty of the interviewees, self-report measures of the scales or indexes were provided for both tests. For the BFQ-2, the Lie Scale has been used in past studies, and for the EQ-I, we had the Incoherence Index (II) as an indicator of validity.

**Table 3.** Intercorrelation matrix between total IQ scores and dimensions of EQ-i and total EQ scores.

EQ-i	<i>r</i>	Total score IQ	
		95% CI	<i>p</i>
Whole Sample ( $N = 10$ )			
Intrapersonal Intelligence	.08	-.58,.68	.827
Interpersonal Intelligence	.51	-.18,.86	.137
Adaptability	-.38	-.82,.33	.275
Stress Management	.28	-.43,.77	.436
General Mood	-.29	-.78,.41	.410
Total Score EQ-i	.02	-.63,.64	.953
Sample without subject 7 ( $N = 9$ )			
Intrapersonal Intelligence	.09	-.61,.71	.824
Interpersonal Intelligence	.54	-.19,.89	.132
Adaptability	-.41	-.84,.35	.279
Stress Management	.30	-.46,.80	.439
General Mood	-.30	-.80,.46	.441
Total Score EQ-i	.02	-.65,.67	.961

The Lie Scale (BFQ-2) measures the individual's tendency to offer a falsely positive self-profile. This is a matter of unconscious bias common to those who are more likely to trigger protective or defense mechanisms to minimize anxiety and maintain good self-esteem. As Table 1 shows, our sample obtained the following results: a) Only one prisoner out of 10 offered a distorted profile; b) 5 out of 10 offered an essentially honest profile; and c) 4 out of 10 falsified their profile in a positive way.

For the EQ-I, we used a validity index – the Incoherence Index (II) – that works by comparing the responses to 10 pairs of items, enabling the interviewee's coherence to be measured when reacting to statements. Scores over 12 show a random response pattern or poor self-awareness. Only one of the interviewees (prisoner 7) obtained an incoherence score of 17, so his test must be regarded with caution. Two detainees obtained a score of 10, while the others had lower scores.

### ***Findings from the qualitative analysis***

The qualitative analysis of the interviews shows that a particularly frequent theme is owning the responsibility for the sexual abuse committed. Most of the interviewees acknowledged their guilt, although for some of them, this came only after a long period of reflection and/or psychological support in prison. Others ( $n = 3$ ) refused to talk about their experience of abuse, and one actively denied having sexually abused children. Denial and minimization are aspects found not infrequently in clinical work with sexual aggressors and are fiercely debated in terms of planning interventions for the rehabilitation and treatment of these sexual offenders (Rossi-Renier & Lamberti Bocconi, 2016). Another theme that emerged is that of the strategies adopted by the child molesters and pedophiles to groom their victims and make them remain silent, mainly by making them feel responsible for what happened. One participant said the following:

I told the girl that our relationship was special. “You are a special girl; I love you more than any others.” The girl understood that if she told anyone this relationship would come to an end.

And another stated the following:

I told her that we both knew that what we were doing was very wrong and bad and that nobody must know about it. I explained to the girl how sad her parents would be if they found out about the bad things we were doing together and that I knew we would never say a word to a soul. Again, the girl chose not to make her family unhappy or to cause them pain.

Another participant said the following:

I told my victim that if somebody found out, I would probably be in trouble, I would have to go away, and she would never see me again. I also reminded her that she would get into trouble too. I went on to say, "I'd miss you and I wouldn't be able to give you all those special presents." So I reminded her of everything I'd given her.

The stories recorded in the interviews show that child molesters adopt strategies that enable them to lure their young victims in and then bind them to silence, bringing out the victims' feelings of fear, shame, and guilt. From the interviews analyzed, it seems that the child molesters have knowledge of a child's relational and emotional functioning and a competence in using their EI in perpetrating their abuse.

In line with theorizations of a specific empathic deficit toward the victim, although the child molesters examined present EI scores similar or higher than those of the general population, some of them tend to minimize the suffering and damage done to their young victims because of their actions. Emblematic of this third theme is the statement of a prisoner convicted of exploiting underage prostitution, who said that prostitution is just another job, so he did nothing wrong.

## Discussion

The current study examined the dimensions of EI in a sample of Italian men convicted for sexual offenses against children. As can be seen from the interview quotes, child molesters are skilled at arousing feelings of guilt, fear, and shame in child victims. Specifically, the child predators examined in our study gave the victim the idea that their relationship was special or advantageous and that revealing the abuse would involve damage to the child, her family, and/or for the relationship with the aggressor or for the aggressor himself, thus instilling feelings of fear, shame, and guilt.

Regarding IQs, overall, the IQ scores were average or slightly below average when compared with the general population, which suggests that sexual offenders have lower than average cognitive functioning, which is in line with the current literature (Arslan et al., 2016; Cantor et al., 2005). In fact, we observed that 4 out of 10 detainees had a much lower than average score, putting them on the verge of a deficit. The other four were average, with only one obtaining an excellent result that was much higher than the average.

Interestingly, as we expected, sex offenders as a group obtained EQ-i total scores slightly above average ( $M = 103.48$  for whole sample and  $M = 102.76$  for sample without detainee 7). Moreover, for most of the participants (7/10 or 6/9), EQ-i total scores were average or above average, and in only one case was EQ very high (detainee 1, who, however, had a lower than average IQ). These findings seem to suggest that, overall, sex offenders have a normal emotional function, in line with prior studies conducted with adult and



adolescent male sex offenders (Fernandez et al., 1999; Moriarty et al., 2001; Puglia et al., 2005). In conclusion, our data support the hypothesis that child molesters do not show a generalized deficit in emotional competence, but rather have an EI with scores ranging from normative levels to levels above those of the general population's average. By adding the qualitative data collected to the quantitative data, we can see that child predators use their emotional competence to carry out sexual abuse, especially through the strategy of grooming, maintaining the abusive relationship, and/or binding the victim to silence so as not to reveal the abuse.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations that we should acknowledge in relation to the interpretation of the findings. First, our sample cannot be considered as representing the general population of child molesters because of the small number of participants.

Specifically, the current study used a sample of Italian male prisoners, so it is not possible to generalize the findings to child molesters located in other cities or who are from different cultural backgrounds. Many cognitive variables are subject to cross-cultural differences, and gender differences in criminal thinking and EI are well-established (e.g., Bar-On, 2004; Megreya, 2015; Walters, 2002). Therefore, further studies are needed on a wider sample of this population to obtain more significant results that can be used to design a more adequate treatment for these offenders. Consequently, diverse samples should be used to test the generalizability of our findings in the future.

Other limitations of this study are also related with research design. For instance, the small sample size available for analysis might decrease the statistical power to identify statistically significant relationships, which led us to inconclusive results. Also, a potential bias from the self-selected sample might affect the results. It is not known if people who participated in the study have greater EQ than people who did not participate. Therefore, it is possible that people with higher EQ were more motivated for participating in the studying (thus, they participate in it) than people with lesser EQ. As a consequence, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution. Further studies with larger groups of offenders (e.g., people with different levels of EQ) are needed to achieve more reliable results. Finally, as we said earlier, it should take into account the possible effect of social desirability on the findings given that at least half of the sample might have answered the self-report questionnaire in a socially desired manner; that is, they might have “falsified” or “distorted” their responses. However, the interviewer tried to minimize these biases by having an empathic and supportive interviewing style, as has been done in prior studies (e.g., Kåven et al., 2019).

The current study has implications for clinical interventions and forensic assessments of those committing sex crimes on children. In assessing child molesters, it is important to assess emotional and cognitive intelligence to design an appropriate treatment plan, working in particular not only on cognitive patterns and cognitive distortions, but also on their emotional equivalents, which could aid child molesters in their deviant sexual behavior. In this direction, it would be useful to challenge the cognitive distortions of those committing sexual crimes on children and, at the same time, promote a more adaptive use of their emotional skills and regulation strategies in difficult areas. From the forensic point of view, the assessment of EI not only provides a more detailed global assessment of the psychological aspects of the sexual aggressor, but also offers preliminary information for drawing up a treatment program in prison, which can be used in predicting the risk of re-offending.

## Conclusions

Despite the limitations identified above, the findings of the current study are consistent with those of prior research. In this way, our findings provide support for the literature regarding the cognitive functioning of child molesters, which appears to be lower than the average of the general population. In fact, most of the studies individuals have a below-average IQ. However, this does not play a role in determining their EQs because they appear to be particularly competent at the emotional level, attaining above-average scores. This confirms our initial hypothesis that this category of individuals was expected to have good emotional competence and that their EIs would be at least average or above average.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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