

# Defining and delimiting grooming in child sexual exploitation

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*It is generally acknowledged that the sexual exploitation of children is often preceded by a grooming phase that is designed to prepare a child, and significant others in a child's life, for the sexual exploitation of that child. Although an understanding of the grooming processes is critical for prevention, detection, and intervention there is no generally agreed upon understanding regarding how grooming should be defined and delimited. In this context, the present paper proposes an intentional definition of grooming before going on to explore the implications of this definition for the way in which grooming, and the grooming process itself, can be more comprehensively understood and delimited.*

**Keywords:** grooming; definition; delimiting; child sexual abuse; sexual exploitation

## INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that the sexual exploitation of children is often preceded by a grooming phase that is designed to prepare a child, and significant others in a child's life, for the sexual exploitation of that child (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Berliner, 2018; Craven, Brown & Gilchrist, 2006; O'Leary, Koh & Dare, 2017; Potgieter, 2001; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). Available studies indicate that grooming may occur in both online and offline settings (Williams & Hudson, 2013); with the grooming process being designed to either prepare a child for sexual abuse by a groomer, or to prepare a child for other forms of sexual exploitation including prostitution, sex trafficking, or exploitation by sex rings. (Ost & Mooney, 2013; Taylor, 2017; Williams & Hudson, 2013).

Although an understanding of the grooming processes is critical for prevention, detection, and intervention (Berliner, 2018; McElvaney, 2019; Wolf, Linn & Pruitt, 2018) there is no generally agreed upon understanding regarding how grooming should be defined and delimited (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014). In the absence of such information, professionals working with sexually exploited children are likely to lack the necessary evidence-based understanding required to: (a) develop comprehensive and effective primary and secondary prevention programmes designed to address the causes and psychological consequences of grooming, and (b) confidently employ the concept of grooming in order to counter the stigmatisation and discrediting of sexually exploited children that frequently occurs in courts of law and in the "court of public opinion" (Berliner, 2018; McElvaney, 2019).

However, if we hope to capture the essence of a term such as *grooming* we require an intentional definition that gives the meaning of the term by specifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for when the term should be used (and, by implication, when the term should not be used); with available definitions of grooming (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014) providing no clear indication of what the sufficient and necessary conditions may be for the use of the term. For example, some definitions assume that the groomer is a paedophile (Howitt, 1995) with other definitions making no assumptions regarding offender psychopathology (Elliott, 2017). Similarly, while some authors have used the term grooming to encompass preliminary targeting behaviours as well as post-offence maintenance behaviours (Olson, Dags, Ellevold & Rogers, 2007), others have restricted their definition of grooming to the post-targeting and pre-abuse phase (Elliott, 2017). Further, while some definitions of grooming focus exclusively on tactics designed to prepare a *child* for sexual exploitation (Knoll, 2010), other definitions focus on grooming tactics directed not only at the child but also at the environment and at significant adults in the child's life (Craven et al, 2006). Most importantly, attempts to define grooming have largely neglected the question of how grooming should essentially be construed; with grooming having been variously described in the literature as being: a form of seduction (Lanning, 2018), a non-violent form of manipulation (Elliott, 2017), or a process that may involve physical coercion (Wolf & Pruitt, 2019).

In this context, the present paper proposes an intentional definition of grooming before going on to explore the implications of this definition for the way in which grooming, and the grooming process itself, can be more comprehensively understood and delimited.

## DEFINING AND DELIMITING GROOMING

Drawing on contemporary understandings of self-regulatory control (Vohs & Baumeister, 2017) and on insights provided by process models of grooming (Elliott, 2017; O’Connell, 2003; Olson et al, 2007; Webster et al, 2012) the following definition of grooming is proposed:

*Grooming exists when an individual employs tactics of psychological manipulation – directed at a child, the child’s caretakers and/or the broader social environment – in order to potentiate the dual goals of sexually exploiting a child and of doing so with immunity.*

This definition is based on a number of assumptions that need to be made explicit:

### Grooming as goal directed behaviour

In terms of the proposed definition, grooming behaviours represent attempts to increase the likelihood of (i.e., to potentiate) goal attainment in relation to two quite distinct goals (approach and avoidance goals) that serve quite different needs. *Approach goals* involve a need to sexually exploit a child – with *sexual exploitation* being used as an umbrella term to encompass not only the sexual abuse of a child by the groomer but also other forms of sexual exploitation (e.g., preparing a child for sex trafficking, prostitution, and/or exploitation by sex rings) that have been found to involve a grooming phase (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2011; House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2013; Ost & Mooney, 2013; Williams & Hudson, 2013). By way of contrast, *avoidance goals* involve a need to minimise risk, with such risk including detection by others, disclosure by the child, and/or undesirable social sanctions such as public humiliation or even possible imprisonment (Craven et al, 2006).

With respect to the way in which goals are structured, it is generally acknowledged that people’s goals tend to be hierarchically organised (Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Eskreis-Winkler, Gross & Duckworth, 2017); with higher-order goals (i.e., the primary motivation for goal pursuit) being located at the apex of this hierarchy and lower-level goals (i.e., sub-goals that facilitate the achievement of higher-order goals) being located further down the hierarchy. With respect to the grooming process, groomers are likely to have two co-existing higher-order goals (sexually exploiting a child and doing so with immunity), with the number and complexity of lower-order goals being determined by contextual factors. For example, in cases of domestic abuse, where a groomer may already have privileged and isolated access to a child, there are likely to be few if any lower-level goals (other than ensuring that the non-abusing caretaker or other family members are not aware of the grooming process). However, in situations where the groomer does not have privileged or isolated access to a child they are likely to have a number of lower-level goals, some of which do not involve grooming (e.g., identifying family systems or institutions that are vulnerable to grooming, and identifying vulnerable children within targeted families or institutions) and some of which involve a grooming phase (e.g., grooming caretakers or institutional personnel in order to obtain isolated access to children).

### Grooming as psychological manipulation

In terms of the proposed definition, a key defining characteristic of grooming is that it involves tactics of *psychological manipulation*; with psychological manipulation constituting a form of social influence that involves neither coercion nor rational persuasion (Noggle, 2018). According to Braiker (2004), psychological manipulation is directed at attempts to change the behaviour and perceptions of targeted individuals through the use of tactics that could be considered exploitative, devious, deceptive and/or abusive. Although there are occasions where psychological manipulation may be used to serve the best interests of targeted individuals (Noggle, 2018), this is clearly not the case in relation to grooming, in which manipulation is used to advance the interests and needs of the protagonist, at the expense of targeted individuals.

At a broader level, psychological manipulation can be conceptualised as occupying an intermediate point along a continuum of influence anchored at the left extreme by rational persuasion (i.e., no undue influence) and at the right extreme by coercion (i.e., overwhelming influence). Seduction involving two adults can be conceptualised as falling towards the ‘rational-persuasion’ end of the continuum, as: (a) adults are generally assumed to be rational agents who have the competence to provide (or to not provide, as the case may be) consent that is truly informed and voluntary, and (b) tactics of persuasion employed in seduction (e.g., impression management and/or ingratiation) could be regarded as morally acceptable, as long as they do not stray too far from the standard of “no undue influence”. By way of contrast, grooming can be conceptualised as falling somewhat further towards the “overwhelming-coercion” end

of the continuum, as there are a number of features of grooming that are intrinsically abusive in nature. First, due to children's relative immaturity, and the marked power imbalance between adults and children, children cannot be assumed to be competent to provide truly informed and voluntary consent for their participation in the grooming process (Kimmel, 2007). And second, strategies employed in grooming (including disempowerment, betrayal of trust, and blame diffusion) have a strong potential for activating harmful traumagenic dynamics such as powerlessness, betrayal, and stigmatisation (Berliner, 2018; Finkelhor & Browne, 1986; Wolf et al, 2018).

With respect to the scope of grooming, groomers have been found to employ some tactics that do not involve psychological manipulation, and which therefore cannot be described as grooming; with such tactics taking a number of forms, including (a) the pre-selection of children, families and institutions who are likely to be vulnerable to the grooming process, (b) the use of tactics designed to totally incapacitate the child, and (c) strategies employed by groomers to address cognitive dissonance they may experience as a result of engaging in behaviours that are both illegal and potentially harmful to children:

*Selection tactics.* According to Buss and associates (Buss, 1985; Buss, Gomes, Higgins & Lauterbach, 1987: 1220), psychological manipulation is often preceded by a process of selection involving “*nonrandom choices of interpersonal and physical milieus*” (Buss et al, 1987: 1220), with such forms of pre-selection having been noted in the grooming literature. It has, for example, been found that groomers often target: (a) children who have desired demographic characteristics (age, gender, or physical appearance) and/or psychological vulnerabilities (including poor self-esteem, emotional or mental health problems, or a tendency to engage in risk-taking behaviours) which allow the child to more easily be manipulated by the groomer (O’Leary et al, 2017; Quadara, Nagy, Higgins & Siegel, 2015; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachristis, Beech & Collings, 2013; Winters & Jeglic, 2017); (b) family systems – including single-parent families or families characterised by substance abuse or child neglect – that are likely to be particularly susceptible to manipulation (Kloess, Beech & Harkins, 2014; Olson et al, 2007; Winters & Jeglic, 2017); and/or (c) institutions in which the institutional culture provides an enabling environment for the sexual exploitation of children (Astbury, 2013; Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2017; Spröber et al, 2014). As Buss and colleagues (1987: 1220) point out, such forms of selection differ from psychological manipulation in the sense that “*selection involves choosing to enter existing habitats, whereas manipulation entails altering those environments already inhabited*”. Thus, while selection may be viewed as forming part of the broader sexual exploitation process, it cannot be defined as grooming.

*Overwhelming influences:* At its most extreme form, coercion involves tactics that are designed to overcome any resistance on the part of the targeted individual. With respect to the sexual exploitation of children, such forms of coercion may involve a number of tactics, including forcible abduction, holding the child in captivity, the use of physical force, and/or the use of alcohol or other substances in order to totally incapacitate the child. Such coercive tactics do not involve efforts to modify the beliefs or perceptions of individuals and can therefore not be described as forms of manipulation, and, by extension, cannot be described as grooming. This is not to say that tactics involving overwhelming influence may not occur in the context of preparing a child for sexual exploitation: with there being evidence to suggest that a small proportion of groomers do employ physical force as a strategy for disempowering targeted children (Smallbone & Wortley, 2001; Sullivan & Beech, 2002; Wolf et al, 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019). It is simply to say that such tactics cannot be described as *grooming* tactics.

*Emotional self-regulation.* Interviews with convicted child sexual offenders indicate that some proportion of groomers experience undesirable emotional states (related to guilt or self-recrimination) as a result of their participation in the grooming process (Craven et al, 2006; Van Dam, 2001). In addition to causing subjective distress, such emotional reactions can impact negatively on the efficiency of goal-directed behaviour (Scholar & Higgins, 2011; Tamir, 2016). Although there are, no doubt, some groomers who may terminate grooming activity on account of these adverse emotional reactions, there are others who have been found to employ a range of cognitive distortions – such as blame diffusion (e.g., blaming the victim) or abuse denial (e.g., reframing grooming as an act of love) – in order to rationalise and justify their behaviour in ways that are likely to produce more positive and goal-congruent emotional states (Chiang & Grant, 2017; De Santisteban et al, 2018; Green, 2001; Webster et al, 2012). Although these efforts at emotional regulation have been described as *self-grooming* (Craven et al, 2006), they do not involve attempts to manipulate another person and therefore cannot be described as grooming, but can more accurately be construed as instances of emotional self-regulation (Eldesouky & English, 2018; Gross, 1999; Tamir, 2016).

## A systemic perspective on grooming

Consistent with previous definitions of grooming (Craven et al, 2006, McAlinden, 2006), the proposed definition acknowledges that grooming tactics may be directed not simply at a targeted child, but also at caretakers/parents, institutional personnel, and/or society in general (cf, Chiang & Grant, 2017; Coetzee, 2011; Craven et al, 2006; McElvaney, 2019; O’Leary et al, 2017; Plummer, 2018; Williams, 2015; Winters & Jeglic, 2017; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019).

*Grooming the child.* In both online and offline forms of grooming the psychological preparation of targeted children for sexual exploitation has been found to involve a variety of manipulative tactics, including: (a) the groomer ingratiating themselves with the child in order to gain the child’s confidence and trust (Elliott, 2017; McAlinden, 2006; McElvaney, 2019; Plummer, 2018); (b) offering the child incentives (gifts, attention, and/or affection) in order to foster trust and dependency (Bennett & O’Donohue, 2014; Craven et al, 2006; Elliott, 2017; McAlinden, 2006; Plummer, 2018; Williams, 2015; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019); and/or (c) desensitising the child to sexual content by encouraging the child to talk about sex, reframing sexual exploitation as a normative (educational or loving) experience, or sharing pornographic material with the child (Green, 2001; Marcum, 2017; Pranoto, Gunawan & Soewito, 2015). Moreover, in situations where the groomer has direct (as opposed to virtual) access to a child, tactics of systematic desensitisation may be used in order to condition the child to tolerate increasingly intrusive forms of sexual touch (Craven et al, 2006; Elliott, 2017).

With respect to the groomers avoidance goals, efforts deigned to ensure secrecy and non-disclosure have been found to involve: establishing an exclusive and secretive “relationship” that distances a child from potentially protective relationships (Kloess et al, 2014; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019), threats that any disclosure will not be believed or will result in harm to the child or to significant others in the child’s life (Craven et al, 2006), and/or threats to withhold inducements, in order to encourage continued compliance and nondisclosure (Rigg & Phippen, 2016; Webster et al, 2012).

*Grooming parents/caretakers.* In situations where groomers do not have privileged or isolated access to a child, they may make efforts to obtain such access through the process of grooming the parents or caretakers of a targeted child. Tactics employed by groomers in such a process include: (a) manipulating caretakers and other family members into seeing the offender as an honest, reliable person who can be trusted to have isolated access to their child (Chiang & Grant, 2017; McElvaney, 2019; Sullivan & Beech, 2002), (b) creating opportunities to be alone with a child through the use of tactics such as offering to babysit the child, taking the child on unaccompanied outings, or encouraging the mother to agree to their child sleeping over at the groomer’s home (Lanning 2010; Winters & Jeglic, 2017), and/or (c) encouraging caretakers to develop an alcohol or substance dependency, or criticising a caretakers parenting abilities in front of family and friends, so that any future disclosures will lack credibility (Craven et al, 2006).

*Grooming institutions.* In situations where groomers are employed in institutions, a number of tactics may be used to obtain isolated access to children, including groomers: (a) ingratiating themselves into organisations as “insiders” (Craven et al, 2006), with this insider-status subsequently being exploited by offenders to obtain isolated access to children (Craven et al., 2006; O’Leary et al, 2017); (b) exploiting the comparative lack of oversight/accountability afforded to persons endowed with institutional authority in order to obtain exclusive access to children (Green, 2001; McElvaney, 2019); (c) offering to take children away from the institution (e.g., on field trips) or offering after hour lessons to the child in order to obtain unsupervised access to a child (Bennett & O’Donohue, 2014; Gallagher, 2000; Shakeshaft, 2004; Winters & Jeglic, 2017); and/or (d) denigrating, intimidating, insulting, and/or blackmailing institutional staff members in order to ensure their unquestioning compliance and silence (Green, 2001; Sloan, 1988).

*Grooming society.* Some groomers make efforts to ingratiate themselves with members of the broader community of which they are a part – e.g., doing volunteer community service or presenting themselves as honest, reliable, and respectable citizens (Craven et al, 2006) – in order to gain societies confidence and trust; with such confidence and trust subsequently being exploited by groomers to challenge the credibility of children’s disclosures (Collin-Vézina, De La Sablonnière-Griffin, Palmer & Milne, 2015; Ost & Mooney, 2013; Plummer, 2018; Stokes, McCord & Aydlett, 2013; Ullman, 2007; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019).

## Some additional delimiting factors

*When does grooming start and end?* Regarding the point at which grooming starts and ends, it is increasingly becoming acknowledged that grooming does not necessarily start at a point at which a

groomer has obtained isolated access to a child and end at a point where that child is sexually abused by the groomer. As indicated above, a groomer's initial grooming strategies may be directed, not at a targeted child, but rather at efforts to ingratiate themselves with institutional personnel or with families of targeted children (Elliott, Browne & Kilcoyne, 1995; Lanning, 2010; McAlinden, 2006; Plummer, 2018; Smallbone & Wortley, 2001; Webster et al, 2012; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). Similarly, with respect to the point at which grooming ends, there are likely to be cases where the sexual abuse of a child constitutes no more than a subordinate goal for the groomer, with grooming activities being likely to continue beyond initial sexual contact in order to ensure ongoing compliance and non-disclosure in relation to superordinate goals, such as: (a) maintaining an ongoing sexual relationship with the child, or (b) introducing the child to other forms of sexual exploitation such as participation in sex rings. (Bennet & O'Donohue, 2014; McAlinden, 2006; Wolf et al, 2018).

*What are the demographic and psychological characteristics of groomers?* With respect to defining a groomer it is generally acknowledged that a groomer can be either a male or female (Lambert & O'Halloran, 2008) who has reached the age of maturity (which is conventionally taken to be 18 years; McCue, 2018). Although some authors maintain that groomers are likely to suffer from mental disorders such as paedophilia, there is no consistent support for this assumption (O'Leary et al, 2017). In sum, a groomer can be defined as anyone over the age of 18 years, who: (a) formulates a goal designed to prepare a child (or significant others in a child's life) for the sexual exploitation of that child, and (b) employs tactics of psychological manipulation in order to realise this goal.

*How can a targeted child be defined?* With respect to grooming, a targeted child can be defined as a male or female, who has not attained a developmental level at which they are regarded as being competent to provide voluntary and informed consent to engage in sexual activity (generally taken to be < 16 years; World Atlas, 2019).

*Is (or should) grooming be regarded as an illegal activity?* Although some grooming tactics are crimes in their own right (e.g., exposing a child to pornography or masturbating in front of a child), many key grooming tactics (e.g., a groomer ingratiating themselves with a child) do not, in and of themselves, constitute illegal behaviours. Further, the fact that grooming behaviours do not necessarily lead to the sexual exploitation of a child – a groomer may, for example, abort a grooming process if they feel that a child is not responding to grooming tactics in an anticipated manner (Elliott, 2017) – suggests that evidence of grooming does not, in and of itself, provide conclusive evidence that sexual exploitation has taken place. However, in situations where there are credible allegations of sexual abuse, evidence of a preliminary grooming phase is likely to provide important contextual information that Van Zyl (2018) argues needs to be considered in the sentencing process.

## DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this paper was to define and delimit the grooming process in a way that clearly operationalises the construct; with the proposed conceptualisation appearing to have relevance for: clinical and counselling interventions, the way in which children's behaviour is evaluated by courts of law, and research.

With respect to interventions, it is generally acknowledged that a child's participation in a grooming process can be a traumatic experience for children (Berliner, 2018; Van der Merwe, 2009; Van Zyl, 2018), with there being a consequent need for therapists to have an evidence-based understanding of the grooming process, as well as a clear understanding of the nature and delimitations of grooming, that can be used to effectively challenge children's distorted cognitions (especially relating to shame and self-blame) that can be induced by the grooming process (Berliner, 2018).

A clear understanding of the nature and dynamics of the grooming process can also be used to challenge unfounded legal assumptions regarding the dynamics of child sexual abuse – for example the assumption that: (a) a child's *compliance* with an abuser's demands could be construed as *consent*, (b) nondisclosure by a child implies that the child wants their abuse to continue, and (c) an absence of physical violence implies some degree of voluntariness on the part of the child (Aucamp, Steyn & Van Rensburg, 2012; Van Zyl, 2018). In the context of a comprehensive grooming process – which is designed to not only systematically isolate and disempower children, but also to reduce the child's sense of agency to a minimum – there can be no meaningful sense in which a child's behaviour can be regarded as being consensual, voluntary, or in any way indicative of a desire for sexual abuse to take place. In other words,

an evidence-based understanding of grooming provides a basis for challenging popular and legal conceptions of sexual abuse which continue to be used to discredit children and to minimise perceptions of the seriousness of their abuse (Aucamp et al, 2012; Van Zyl, 2018).

Finally, research on grooming has been hampered by the absence of a generally agreed upon definition of the construct (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014). Although the proposed definition represents an attempt to provide a comprehensive evidence-based understanding of grooming, there is no guarantee that the proposed definition will be accepted by all clinicians and researchers in the field. At the very least, however, it is hoped that the proposed definition will spark a much needed debate on the issue, which in turn may finally lead to the development of a generally accepted definition of the grooming process.

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