

On the Origin of Grooming

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Abstract

The concept of grooming has long been identified with language in child sexual abuse. This article reviews a brief history of child sexual abuse with regard to efforts to identify and classify abuser and victim behavior. We examine the evolution of terms used to label different behaviors particularly those used to obtain initial control over the child victim including grooming.

Keywords

child sexual assault, seduction, grooming

The language of sexual assault has long been influential in the clinical and legal treatment of children by how victims and offenders are described, discussed, and formalized in reports and testimony. It has been a challenge coping with the terminology in the field. Over 40 years ago, professionals used the terms *sexual abuse*, *sexual assault*, *sexual misuse*, and *sexual molestation* interchangeably, they still do today.

The concept of grooming has gained significant popularity in the last two decades. As such, a question was recently raised as to the origin or first use of the term in the professional literature. Sometimes in the expansion of a concept, the early historical articles are not cited and credit for the original work is lost. For example, in discussing factors related to sex offenders, Dietz gives

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credit to the modern consideration of sex offenses being dated back to the publication in 1886 of *Psychopathia Sexualis* by Richard von Krafft-Ebing (Dietz, 1983). In the service of preserving the historical context of the term *grooming*, Ken Lanning, one of the first if not the first to use the term, searched back through his files for his use of the term.

Ken Lanning in his conference presentations as well as writings has always been credited with requiring precision in definitions. One that quickly comes to mind is his eloquence on the difference between a pedophile and a child molester. Now, with a question from the field, Lanning weighs in on his definition of “grooming” from the law enforcement perspective.

Lanning’s position that language has evolved in the discussion of grooming in child sexual abuse is clear and the history he outlines is certainly consistent with our recollections. His major thesis is that the term of grooming has mainly helped explain the impact on victims and, in particular, the compliance of the victim with the offender. This conceptualization in part has come about to help educate the public to the complicated reactions during and post event since most of our knowledge is arrived at after the abuse itself has occurred. His major conclusion is that the emphasis on seduced or groomed is less important than the nature and development of the relationship between the abused and the abuser. We agree.

Lanning’s perspective comes from his work with offenders and information on victims that he could derive to understand how, when, where, and possibly why the abuser targeted the victim, gained access and maintained control. There is the subtle long-term involvement and the shock and awe strategies that told him something about, first, the access to the victim and, second, the long-and/or short-term control methods. This was basic to his profiling efforts.

Our clinical work with child victims was equally if not more complicated. First came the awareness that the abuse was happening, where it happened, by whom, and how long. These data were then tied in with the issue of the child’s memory and whether (or not) the victim’s account was true and accurate. In tracing the legal success of court cases, the demand to answer legal questions of guilt and compensation language developed combining the forensic and clinical information.

We cannot overemphasize how difficult it was to study child sexual abuse from the victim’s perspective. For historical perspective, prior to the 1970s, it was often impossible for professionals to gain access to children to examine or even interview them without prior parental consent. Collecting evidence in an incest case generally required a judicial custody order. However, there was one exception in that in most states minors could obtain diagnosis and treatment for venereal disease. In 1977, physician Suzanne Sgroi published an article on gonorrhea as an indicator of child sexual abuse. She cited the

Branch and Paxton data where of 20 cases of genital gonorrhea infection in children aged 1 to 4 years, a history of adult-child sexual contact was obtained in 19 of the 20 cases. In the cases of children 5 to 14, all 141 cases confirmed infected children gave a history of sexual contact (Branch & Paxton, 1965).

Concurrent with Lanning's work with offenders in the legal arena, in 1972-1973, Burgess and Holmstrom gained access to a group of sexually victimized persons coming into the Emergency Ward or Pediatric Walk-In Clinic at Boston City Hospital with a complaint of "rape." They quickly realized there were different types of victimizations experienced by the 146 persons, aged 3 to 73 years, whom they personally interviewed. We divided the cases into three types of sexual trauma: *rape* or no consent and force, *accessory-to-sex* as pressured sex, and *sex-stress* where there was consensual sex but then something went very wrong.

The *accessory-to-sex* pattern included children and adolescents who were pressured into sexual activity by a person who had some power position over them, such as through age or position of authority. The victims were incapable of consenting because of their level of cognitive or personality development. Their emotional reaction resulted from being pushed into sexual activity, and in those cases where they were pledged to secrecy, they had the added tension of keeping the secret. These victims agreed to go along with the sex—as an accessory—to the offense. The pressure and the victim's assistance made it very easy for their behavior to be viewed as "consensual" and for professionals and others to say the child wanted it or initiated it (Burgess, Groth, Holmstrom & Sgroi, 1978). To some extent, this group of underage persons provided data similar to the grooming behavior specific to how the offender gained access to them, pressured them into sexual activity, and silenced them for the activity to continue. Of course, somehow the silence was broken for the child to be seen at the hospital and thus we wrote on patterns of disclosure, most often delayed.

The extent of the abuse became more public in the 1980s, particularly the nursery school cases, where very young children were being abused, and clergy abuse, where children in religious settings were being abused. The concept of sex rings and child pornography then surfaced and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children became involved in identifying child pornographers. The field then moved to understand child sexual abuse to prostitution and human trafficking, an expansion of the construct of grooming to larger criminal activity. The link between the types of abuse and the forensic investigations rounded out the context in which to confront these issues for clinical, prevention, and adjudication reasons.

Lanning's article traces his observation of how offenders accessed and controlled the victim, and he emphasized how victim information helped in

profiling the abuser and the need to understand victim compliance. The bottom line has always been the undeniable fact that a crime had been committed regardless of victim behavior and the method of control.

What we do know in earlier days and currently is that it was often hard to convince others that a crime had occurred and the burden to prove anything rested on the victim. Physician Suzanne Sgroi wrote in 1977 that sexual abuse of children is a crime that our society abhors in the abstract but tolerates in reality (Sgroi, 1977).

Typologies of sexual victimization cases are critical. The process of organizing data by distinct categories promotes communication between professionals and advances concept development and theory. We note how the specialty groups working with victimized children and adolescents tended to develop their own typologies. Lanning's concept of "grooming" is an accurate reflection of the process whereby some sex offenders nonviolently access and control their child victims to facilitate sexual victimization; however, he is clear to point out that the use of threats and force is still most often obtained in cases perpetrated by strangers.

To continue the history of the early published typologies was Nick Groth's work with convicted offenders on motivational intent of sexual offenders against underage people. Using the Burgess and Holmstrom victim sample and Groth's offender sample, two basic categories were developed: *pressured sexual contacts* and *forced sex contacts*. The premise of the motivational intent construct was viewing child sexual assault equivalent to a symptom, and like the dynamics of any symptom, it serves to gratify a wish, to defend against anxiety, and to express an unresolved conflict. The nature of the interaction between the offender and his victim reveals his motivational intent and the determinants prompting his selection of a child for sexual contact (Groth & Burgess, 1977).

The *sex-pressure offenses* are characterized by a relative lack of physical force in the commission of the offense; in fact, the offender usually behaves in counter-aggressive ways through persuasion of reward, attention, affection, money, gifts, or entrapment. His aim is to gain sexual control of the child by developing a willing sexual relationship. Often the victim and offender know each other and sometimes they are related.

The *sex-force offenses* are characterized by the threat of harm and/or physical force in the commission of the offense. The offender uses intimidation, verbal threat, restraint, manipulation, and physical strength to overcome any resistance on the part of the victim. This category of assaults has two groups: (a) the exploitative assault where threat or force is used and (b) the sadistic assault in which force becomes eroticized (Groth & Burgess, 1977).

There is no lack of professional literature on the concept of grooming. Over the years, numerous articles and definitions have been proposed (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006). Grooming, according to Colton, Roberts, and Vanstone (2012), is a complex incremental process involving three main stages—gaining access to the victim, initiating and maintaining the abuse, and concealing the abuse. McAlinden (2006) refers to grooming as the behaviors that an offender employs in preparation for committing sexual abuse against a child. These behaviors, write Bennett and O'Donohue (2014), are understood as methods child molesters use to gain access to and prepare future victims to be compliant with abuse. However, there is a lack of consensus regarding exactly what this process entails and how it is clearly distinguished from normal adult–child interactions (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014).

Winters and Jeglic (2017) write that empirical research has found that nearly half of the offenders who commit sexual acts against children utilize what are known as “grooming” behaviors (Craven, Brown & Gilchrist, 2006).

Terry and Tallon (2004) reviewed the child sexual abuse literature to put into perspective the problem of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church as compared with its occurrence in other organizations. This John Jay College research team defined grooming as a premeditated behavior intended to manipulate the potential victim into complying with the sexual abuse.

The concept of “grooming” has come of age. There are many definitions of grooming, and the construct is used as a noun, a verb, and an adjective. Researching the term on the Internet produced some of the articles available with the following titles:

- Grooming children for sexual molestation;
- Stages of sexual grooming;
- 8 ways a predator might groom your child;
- Grooming dynamics of CSA;
- A profile of the child molester and grooming techniques;
- Warning signs you child is being groomed by a predator;
- Could you spot a groomer?
- Victim grooming;
- Psychological impact of sexual and grooming;
- The grooming process in father-daughter incest;
- Personal, familial, and institutional grooming in the sexual assault of children; and
- Identifying sexual grooming themes used by Internet sex offenders.

In conclusion, some lingering questions include the following:

- Is there a better term to describe this concept?
- Is there a preference for the term “seduction” or “grooming” to describe this concept?
- Is “grooming” seen in some types of cases or with certain types of offenders more than others?
- Does the relationship between the offender and the victim play a significant role in the method used to access and control the child?
- Is the concept of “grooming” useful to help understand and explain victim behavior?

To answer the question posed to the field, Ken Lanning gave hundreds of dynamic training presentations to both law enforcement, clinicians, legal groups, and the public and used the terms *grooming* and *seduction* interchangeably. Although he might not want to take credit for originating the term, we can say we heard it first from him at the FBI Academy’s Behavioral Science Unit in the 1970s and would credit the term to him.

Authors’ Note

Drs. Hartman and Burgess, long time colleagues, began their collaboration on the impact of sexual abuse in the 1980s. This was a time when the clinical and early research came together regarding a wide range of traumatic situations (rape, domestic violence, combat stress to name a few). These efforts began the identification and study of post-traumatic disorders and their role in mental health. Part of the early child sexual abuse study was the identification of child sex rings. Of particular concern both clinically and legally was how was it possible for offenders to gain such control over children that they could or would not tell someone what was happening. This brought focus on the earliest contact strategies used by offenders on their victims. Combining early investigations by Ken Lanning and the FBI profilers and clinical observation and statements of both offenders and victims, behavioral patterns were described that could identify characteristics of the perpetrator and lead to preventive measures as well as help direct the course of therapy. What emerged were the concepts of grooming and seduction.

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