



Commentary

The Evolution of Grooming: Concept and Term

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Abstract

This discussion is not intended to be a detailed analysis of the complexities and dynamics of *grooming*. Instead, it will focus on the evolution of the concept and the term. More than an historical narrative, however, this evolution provides valuable insight into recognizing the diverse nature of contact sex offenses against children and important differences among types of cases. In this victimization context, the term *grooming* generally refers to specific nonviolent techniques used by some child molesters to gain access to and control of their child victims. The techniques a child molester employs are most influenced by the relationship between the offender and the victim. Although acquaintance child molesters are sometimes violent, to avoid discovery, they tend to control their victims primarily through this *seduction* or *grooming* process. I believe the term was first used by a group of law enforcement investigators beginning in the late 1970s to describe aspects of a seduction pattern of offender behavior that was poorly understood by most professionals. The term *grooming* then evolved, as language does, and spread into more common usage by law enforcement, other professionals, and then by the media and laypersons. The term *grooming* has pretty much supplanted *seduction* as the term of choice for this behavior pattern. Hopefully, understanding the evolution of the concept of *grooming*, the diversity of cases, the need for precise and consistent definitions, and the use of nonviolent *grooming* techniques to access and control victims will help interveners to better respond to and evaluate cases.

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Types of Cases

This discussion is not intended to be a detailed analysis of the complexities and dynamics of *grooming*. Additional analysis is contained in some of the referenced publications. This article will instead focus on the evolution of the concept and the term. More than an historical narrative, however, this evolution provides valuable insight into recognizing the diverse nature of contact sex offenses against children and important differences among types of cases.

As an FBI agent and consultant, I have been involved in training, research, and case consultation concerning the *sexual victimization of children* for more than 40 years. During this time, I have occasionally been asked how and when the term *grooming* came to be applied to such cases. Based on my experience, the answer is related to the evolving historical recognition of different types of cases. My long-term (1973-2017) and broad-based experience (interaction with a wide range of cases and disciplines) spans this transformation and evolution. In an effort to bring greater clarity and insight, I offer the following relevant observations.

The word *grooming* has obviously been around for a long time and has been applied to a wide variety of human behaviors and activities. In this victimization context, the term *grooming* generally refers to specific techniques used by some child molesters to gain access to and control of their child victims. The techniques a child molester employs are most influenced by the relationship between the offender and the victim.

When I first began to study *sex crimes* as an FBI agent in 1973, the sexual victimization of children centered on cases perpetrated by strangers (i.e., *stranger danger*). Such cases had been the focus of prevention, awareness, and investigative efforts for a long time. The concept of *grooming* had little application to such cases. Strangers most often obtained and maintained access and control of victims by the use of force or threats of force. The term *lure* is often used to describe the short-term control mechanism commonly employed by these stereotypical child molesters to initially get physically close to their victims. Such lures are not, as some believe, a form of *grooming*. Concern over such stranger cases continues today, especially those involving missing and abducted children.

Around the late 1970s, there was growing awareness and emphasis placed on cases perpetrated by family members (i.e., *sexual abuse of children*). Such

intrafamilial cases became the focus of study and publications by early experts and scholars in the field (e.g., Nicholas Groth, Susan Sgroi, Roland Summit, Jon Conte, David Finkelhor, etc.). Intrafamilial cases can in theory involve the concept of *grooming* as a control mechanism but such behavior is hard to clearly identify as such because most parents normally and regularly engage in the most commonly used indicators of *grooming* (e.g., attention, affection, gifts, money, privileges). The term *coercion* is often used to describe the control mechanism generally used in these intrafamilial cases. I have no recollection of the term *grooming* being applied to the control dynamics of intrafamilial cases, during this growing recognition in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The concept and use of the term *grooming* gradually emerged during the 1980s with the growing recognition of cases perpetrated by extrafamilial acquaintance offenders (i.e., *sexual exploitation of children*). Between 1975 and 1985, law enforcement in the United States became increasingly aware of acquaintance offenders and the special investigative challenges they presented. As a large department, in 1977 the Los Angeles (California) Police Department (LAPD) was even able to establish a specialized unit, the *Sexually Exploited Child Unit*, to specifically investigate cases in which offenders from outside their family who were not strangers (i.e., acquaintances) sexually victimized children. Several other law enforcement agencies around the country soon learned from and copied the specialized work of this unit.

With this growing awareness of acquaintance offenders came increased realization that some of them would gravitate to the target rich environment of youth-serving organizations (Lanning & Dietz, 2014). A few insightful professionals had recognized the problem of acquaintance child molesters even earlier. Although not using the term, the 1939 Boys' Club handbook even discussed the need for their leaders to be "on guard" for certain behaviors by their volunteers that today would be considered part of the grooming process (Atkinson, 1939).

In August 1980, the Illinois Legislative Investigating Commission submitted a report about the sexual exploitation of children to the Illinois General Assembly. This report states,

Most of the child molesters whom we encountered during our investigation follow certain patterns. Frequently, these individuals will look for children involved in legitimate groups—Boy Scouts, summer camps, the Big Brothers—and the molesters will become involved in these groups themselves, thus providing freer access to a wide range of children. (Illinois Legislative Investigating Commission, 1980, p. 286)

In 1982, the Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America published a monograph about child sexual abuse, addressing the issue of child molesters becoming involved in their organization (Wolf, 1982). In 1983, forensic psychiatrist Park E. Dietz observed, "For every paraphilia, there is some job or hobby that provides exposure to the preferred imagery, and paraphiliacs selectively gravitate to these activities as witnessed by the periodic scandals about pedophiles working with youngsters" (Dietz, 1983, p. 1490). In January 1984, the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* published a special issue about "Pedophilia." In this issue, two articles specifically addressed the sexual exploitation of children and discussed the issue of offenders gaining access to victims through their occupation or vocation (Lanning, 2010).

As this awareness grew, the LAPD Sexually Exploited Child Unit and other investigators began using the term *seduction* to describe the nonviolent way in which such acquaintance offenders typically gained access to and control of their child victims. Instead of force, children were manipulated through the most effective combination of attention, affection, kindness, gifts, alcohol, drugs, money, and privileges. The two previously mentioned articles in the January 1984 *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* specifically described offenders gaining control of their victims through well-planned *seduction* and children being *seduced* by games, gifts, and trips (Goldstein, 1984; Lanning & Burgess, 1984).

During the mid-1980s, the FBI allowed me in my assignment at the Behavioral Science Unit to bring together at several seminars at the FBI Academy in Quantico, VA, most of the few investigators then specializing in such extrafamilial sexual exploitation of children cases. At these gatherings, the concepts of *seduction* and *grooming* were increasingly discussed and formalized. The emerging law enforcement experts in this area increasingly disseminated these concepts through networking and training presentations at seminars and conferences around the country. They were not likely, however, to write books and journal articles on the topic. In 1982, Lloyd Martin, a detective sergeant formerly assigned to the LAPD's Sexually Exploited Child Unit, did co-author a book focusing on sexual exploitation of children cases (Martin & Haddad, 1982). In that, he describes in great detail and with many case examples the seduction process as used by acquaintance molesters. He did not, however, specifically label the process with the term.

In spite of this new insight into its application to these cases, this technique was really no great mystery. These offenders essentially seduced children much the same way as adults seduce one another. Between two adults or two teenagers, it might be considered part of dating. Use of these nonviolent techniques increased the likelihood of cooperation of and continued access to the victim and, very important to the offender, decreased the likelihood of

disclosure even of a nonfamily offender whose identity is well known to the victim. Use of violence would increase the likelihood of early discovery and disclosure of such acquaintance offenders (Lanning, 2010).

Seduction Versus Grooming

Although acquaintance child molesters are sometimes violent, to avoid discovery, they tend to control their victims primarily through this *seduction* or *grooming* process. In early training (e.g., Advanced Seminar on Sexual Exploitation of Children, 1987; Dallas Child Sexual Exploitation Seminar, 1987; National Law Enforcement Seminar on Sexual Exploitation of Children, 1983; Protecting Our Children: The Fight Against Molestation: A National Symposium, 1984; Sexual Exploitation of Children Seminar, 1985) and publications (e.g., Campagna & Poffenberger, 1988; Frost & Seng, 1986; Goldstein, 1984, 1987; Lanning, 1986; Lanning & Burgess, 1984) on the sexual exploitation of children, the term *seduction* was used most often to refer to this particular access and control technique. It is important to recognize that at this time it was understanding of the technique and process and not a specific name or label that was most important.

In a 1984 article, Jon Conte pointed out that in most sexual abuse of children cases, except those involving abuse by a stranger, "the perpetrator involves children in sexual abuse through a grooming process in which a combination of kindness, attention, material enticement, special privilege, and coercion are expertly applied." Conte footnoted this process description to a 1979 book written by Nicholas Groth. In his 1979 book, however, Groth clearly described what has become known as the grooming process but he did not specially use the term *grooming* to name it. Therefore, it appears Groth provided the first published description of a grooming process although Conte provided the first published naming of the process as grooming (Conte, 1984, p. 558; Groth & Birnbaum, 1979).

Today this technique is more commonly referred to as *grooming*, but historically the process was more often called *seduction*. Although some people see a subtle distinction, I view the two terms as essentially the same. I actually prefer the term *seduction* because I believe it is more clearly known and plainly understood (Lanning, 2010). Considering this evolution, determining when the term *seduction* was first used to refer to the process would seem to be just as noteworthy as when the term *grooming* was first used and is therefore being discussed.

When I started developing my own typology of child molesters in the early 1980s, one significant pattern of behavior I identified involved what I termed the "Seduction Type" preferential child molester. I first described the

seduction process associated with this type of offender in training presentations I was increasingly giving. In 1985, the FBI disseminated a free monograph I authored in which I set forth this process in writing (Lanning, 1985). Eventually, five editions of my typology were published and widely disseminated by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC; Lanning, 1986, 1987, 1992, 2001, 2010). Each with expanding explanations and analysis, literally hundreds of thousands of copies of my various publications discussing these offenders and their use of the *seduction* process were disseminated in print and online from 1985 to 2017.

During the 1980s, I also began using the term *grooming* in my many presentations and on my accompanying 35-mm word slides (pre-PowerPoint) to describe this *seduction* process. I believe I first used the term in writing in a 1989 NCMEC publication titled *Child Sex Rings: A Behavioral Analysis* (Lanning, 1989). In describing the "Seduction Process," I stated, "Some molesters may even start grooming a potential victim long before the child has reached his age preference." As seen from this context, at this time I considered grooming to be simply a descriptive part of the overall *seduction* process. I did not (and still do not prefer to) use it as the label or name of the process itself as so many do today. Eventually, I started using the terms *seduction* and *grooming* together and interchangeably in my presentations and publications.

In my opinion and based on my interactions in this area since 1973, it would be almost impossible to identify the specific person who first used the term *grooming* as it is applied today in this context. I believe it was first used by a group of law enforcement investigators beginning in the late 1970s to describe aspects of a *seduction* pattern of offender behavior that was poorly understood by most professionals. The term *grooming* then evolved, as language does, and spread into more common usage by law enforcement, other professionals, and then by the media and laypersons. As the term *grooming* became increasingly popular, it eventually found its way into more publications starting in the 1990s (e.g., Castillo, 1998; Leberg, 1997; van Dam, 2006). It has pretty much supplanted *seduction* as the term of choice for this behavior pattern.

The concept of *grooming* has also been similarly and appropriately applied to many of the growing numbers of more recent online child solicitation cases. However, possible application of the term to the methods used by "pimps" to recruit and control their child victims in sex trafficking cases (e.g., child prostitution) must be viewed in the light of some significant distinctions. The primary intended purpose of the recruitment and control by traffickers is not for their own sexual gratification but that of potential customers. In addition, such traffickers are far more likely to progressively

gravitate to using threats and violence as their primary control technique. The *grooming* is used more as a short-term lure than a long-term seduction technique.

The term *grooming* has also increasingly been used in expert testimony in criminal and civil cases to educate the court concerning certain offender behaviors and seemingly puzzling victim behaviors (e.g., compliance, prior denial, delayed disclosure); see *United States v. Hayward*, 2004) and *State v. Torres* (2009). Some experts have tried to use the “Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome” developed by Dr. Roland Summit in the early 1980s as the basis for such grooming testimony (Summit, 1983). This syndrome was intended to help explain certain patterns of behavior exhibited by child victims of sexual abuse. Because it originated from the study of only intrafamilial cases, however, it has limited, if any, application to extrafamilial sexual exploitation cases and the current concept of *grooming*. In addition, referring to basic human responses to attention and affection as some kind of a “syndrome” or “brain washing” complicates and confuses the issue.

Definitions

Although increasingly used, there is still much confusion and disagreement over the precise meaning of the term *grooming*. It does not have one official, legal, mental health, or even lay definition. Anyone using the term, therefore, should clearly define it and consistently use their definition. Especially problematic for a clear understanding of communication are common terms with a wide range of possible definitions—all correct but often different (Lanning, 2010). The term *grooming* has become one of these terms. To make this problem even worse, there is essentially no real difference between the definitions of the terms *seduction* and *grooming*. This is what I refer to as confusion created by calling the same thing by different names or different things by the same (Lanning, 2010). Often what seems to be disagreement (e.g., “alternative facts”) is actually confusion over precise definitions.

I define *grooming/seduction* as the use of *nonviolent* techniques by one person to gain sexual access to and control over potential and actual child victims. The grooming or seduction process usually consists of identifying preferred or acceptable child targets, gathering information about interests and vulnerabilities, gaining access (i.e., sports, religion, education, online computer), filling emotional and physical needs, lowering inhibitions, and gaining and maintaining control (i.e., bonding, competition, challenges, peer pressure, sympathy) (Lanning, 2010). Use of these techniques requires ongoing access, time, interpersonal skill and the offender being, or at least perceived as, a nice guy. To assist with their access to and control of children,

offenders often use related grooming techniques with parents, guardians, caretakers, and youth-serving organizations.

The precise nature of the *grooming/seduction* process used is partially dependent on the developmental stages, needs, and specific vulnerabilities of the targeted child victims and the nature of the relationship with the offender (Lanning & Dietz, 2014). However, all children are to varying degrees vulnerable and the significance of the process applies to all child victims, not just those who are somehow innocent or from poor or from dysfunctional families. If the techniques work, the resulting *compliance* of the child victims is often improperly interpreted by some as constituting consent and a lack of true victimization (Lanning, 2005). Age of consent can vary depending on the type of sexual activity and individuals involved. There are legal variations in the age at which a child can consent to engage in sexual activity with whom, appear in sexually explicit visual images, get married, or leave home to have sex with an unrelated adult without parental permission. An acquaintance child molester may wind up abducting or not returning a child because he wants or needs the child all to himself away from a judgmental society. Such missing children often voluntarily go with the offender. Abducting or running away with a child with whom you can be linked is high-risk criminal behavior.

Based on my observations and experience (e.g., interactions in consulting on thousands of cases, requests for my education testimony, the responses I have gotten when I have discussed or written about compliant child victims, and the common emphasis on sexually violent predators), it is clear to me that many child advocates and society seem to have a need to believe all child victims are characteristically threatened or forced into any sexual activity. This can result in a confirmation bias that is more about exactly how the sexual victimization of the child occurred than an overall belief that victimization did occur. They frequently do not understand the diversity of cases and have a hard time reconciling the concept of grooming with their concept of violence. They often define and limit *grooming* to make cases fit their perception of the sexual victimization of children. *Grooming* is an explanation to help understand the reasonable behavior of some child victims. It is not an excuse to help maintain an unreasonable stereotype of all child victims. The most important thing is to identify and understand the behavior involved and recognize these children are real victims of crime. In addition, *grooming* may be the most common reason children are compliant but not the only reason.

As I define the terms, *grooming/seduction* and *violence* are generally incompatible. If you define violent crime as involving the use of force or threats of force to access and control victims, many cases of sexual

victimization of children are not violent. Children can be considered victims under the law because of their developmental immaturity and age. The law does not require threats, force, incapacitation, or violence in all cases. It makes little sense to control a child for an extended time period through *grooming* if you are going to eventually just drug or force the child into sexual activity. Offenders proficient in *grooming/seducing* their victims, typically use threats and physical violence only as a last resort to avoid imminent disclosure or to prevent a victim from leaving before they are ready to terminate the relationship. Although it is possible to manipulate and control child victims through the infliction of nonviolent stress, pressure, and suffering, I generally do not consider such behavior to constitute grooming/seduction (Lanning, 2010).

Some *grooming/seduction* activities (e.g., affection, touching, hugging, massaging, etc.) can also provide sexual gratification for the offender and may even constitute sex offenses by themselves. *Grooming* activity is not always just a prelude to sex but can be sex. The goal of the *grooming* is not always to eventually engage in sexual intercourse with a child. Some offenders are content with or even prefer sexual gratification from these less obvious types of behavior (e.g., paraphilias).

An important aspect in many cases is the implication of the *grooming* process in considering the appropriate punishment of offenders using it and the possible culpability of child victims accessed and controlled by it (Lanning, 2010). What victim behavior does *grooming* explain and what victim behavior does it excuse? Cases involving *grooming* are often viewed as lesser offenses. In my experience, many of the most persistent and prolific (and therefore dangerous) sex offenders primarily groom and seduce their child victims and rarely use violence. For many youth-serving organizations, most problematic is the difficulty in distinguishing *grooming* from *mentoring* (Lanning & Dietz, 2014). The results of the process are often easier to identify as grooming than the process itself.

Summary

In summary, knowledge of the evolution of the term and concept of *grooming* is thought-provoking and provides insight into society's historical recognition of the sexual victimization of children. More importantly, understanding of it helps to reinforce the recognition of important variations in types of cases. The process of *grooming* should be objectively defined, and appropriately applied, and not used merely as a means to maintain emotional stereotypes about the nature of the sexual victimization of children. Understanding of the concepts of *grooming* and *compliance* must be applied to all child

victims and not just those who fit some preconceived stereotype of innocence. Whether children come from a "good" or dysfunctional home and do or do not get attention and affection at home should not be the determining factors in accepting their vulnerability to *grooming/seduction*.

Child victims cannot be held to idealistic and superhuman standards of behavior. The varying degrees of cooperation by some children do not mean they are not victims. A child's response to grooming must be viewed as an understandable human characteristic and addressed when developing investigative and prevention strategies. Children can be considered victims of sex crimes not only because they may have been forced, groomed, manipulated, brainwashed, or come from poor and dysfunctional families, but also simply because of their age.

I have no simple solutions for the concerns being discussed. Hopefully, understanding the evolution of the concept of grooming, the diversity of cases, the need for precise and consistent definitions, and the use of nonviolent grooming techniques to access and control victims will help interveners to better respond to and evaluate cases.

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