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What is This?

'Setting 'Em Up': Personal, Familial and Institutional Grooming in the Sexual Abuse of Children

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Abstract

The term 'grooming' has been used to describe the offender's actions during the preparatory stage of sexual abuse. This article will argue that current discourses on grooming have created ambiguities and misunderstandings about child sexual abuse. In particular, the popular focus on 'stranger danger' belies the fact that the majority of children are abused by someone well known to them, where grooming can also occur. Current discourses also neglect other important facets of the sex offending pattern. They fail to consider that offenders may groom not only the child but also their family and even the local community who may act as the gatekeepers of access. They also ignore what can be termed 'institutional grooming' – that sex offenders may groom criminal justice and other institutions into believing that they present no risk to children. A key variable in the grooming process is the creation and subsequent abuse of trust. Given that the criminal law may be somewhat limited in its response to this type of behaviour, ultimately concerted efforts must be made to foster social and organizational awareness of such processes in order to reduce the offender's opportunity for abuse.

Key Words

grooming; institutional grooming; sexual abuse; trust

INTRODUCTION

ONE OF the most recent debates in the area of sexual offences against children has centred on behaviour known as 'grooming'. This term usually refers to the situation whereby a potential offender will set up opportunities to abuse by gaining the trust of the child in order to prepare them for abuse either directly or, as is the case more recently, through Internet chat rooms (Gillespie, 2001, 2004; Gallagher et al., 2003). It has recently been claimed that 'grooming is a ubiquitous feature of the sexual abuse of children' (Thornton, 2003: 144). However, despite the significance of this process in the onset of sexual abuse and the recent prominence of the term in public consciousness, it is a term which has not featured all that heavily in academic and policy-making debates.

Cases of sexual exploitation of children involving the Internet are risks to children that have received widespread official attention only in the last few years. Of these cases, those involving child pornography, or 'child abuse images' as the often preferred term, have by far received the greatest amount of attention.[1] By way of contrast, Internet initiated grooming and subsequent sexual abuse of children have lagged someway behind. Several jurisdictions have recognized the extent of the dangers of 'Internet grooming' for some time.[2] In the United Kingdom, however, the term 'grooming' has only just recently found expression in Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which covers the offence of meeting a child following sexual grooming. Moreover, the dangers of sexual grooming have also been recently recognized by the judiciary.[3] However, despite the fact that society as a whole is becoming more focused on grooming and its role in the sexual abuse of children, difficulties remain.

This article seeks to critically discuss some of these issues. It will be demonstrated that there are uncertainties and misconceptions about what sort of behaviour is covered by the term 'grooming'. In particular, the recent association of the term with the Internet and on-line abuse in both the popular imagination and official discourses is based on the image of the sex offender as a sexual predator or so-called 'stranger danger'. In fact, it has been well documented that children are most likely to be sexually abused by those with whom they have a family relationship (Grubin, 1998), where grooming can also take place. Moreover, the use of the Internet for 'on-line grooming' is simply one way in which offenders can get to know children and be no longer regarded as a 'stranger' by them. Many more offenders, however, make contact with victims and gain acceptance via off-line methods – through schools or clubs or by getting to know particular families. These ambiguities surrounding what amounts to sexual grooming also have implications for the criminalization of such behaviour.

Indeed, the current focus on the grooming of children has been largely reactive in nature and neglects other important facets of the sex offender's behavioural pattern. This behaviour, in fact, is much more pervasive than has previously been acknowledged: the sociological process of grooming has

resonance in terms of not only extra-familial sexual abuse by strangers but also within the context of intra-familial abuse where children may be persuaded that inappropriate sexualized relationships with family members are 'both natural and common place' (Ost, 2004: 148). Moreover, current discourses do not fully consider that sex offenders may also groom not just the child but also their family or the wider community as a necessary pre-requisite to gaining access to the child. In addition, far more significantly perhaps, these discourses do not appear to recognize that sex offenders may also seek to groom criminal justice and other institutions into viewing them as posing no danger to children.

The structure of the article will be as follows: the first section will outline developments and difficulties to date within the area of grooming. These include the lack of settled meaning of the term and the consequent problems associated with a criminal law response. The second section will examine the sociological literature on the abuse of trust as a key variable in the grooming process. The third, fourth and fifth sections will critically examine the role and significance of grooming in the onset of child sexual abuse at the personal, familial and institutional levels respectively. They will analyse the importance of trust within these processes in preparing the child, their family and the wider community, and institutions in order to facilitate the abuse. Finally, the sixth section will endeavour to put forward a constructive solution to the problems associated with grooming. It will be argued that social and institutional awareness of the dynamics of grooming, particularly how sex offenders seek to create and then abuse trust, must be promoted in order to reduce the offender's opportunity to abuse and respond to the problem in a more proactive and holistic way.

DEVELOPMENTS AND DIFFICULTIES TO DATE

Grooming is not a new concept. The term has been in use for some time by psychologists who have sought to analyse patterns of deviant sexual behaviour. However, the area has generally been under-researched and there is a good deal of confusion as to the exact meaning and scope of the term.

LACK OF SETTLED MEANING

In general terms, the verb 'to groom' has been defined as 'to prepare, as for a specific position or purpose' (*Oxford Illustrated Dictionary*, 1975) or 'to prepare for a future role or function'.[4] However, within the context of sexual offending against children, the term 'grooming' has never been properly defined. As Gillespie (2004) argues, grooming is a transient process that is difficult to capture and virtually impossible to pinpoint when it begins and ends.

The problems of definition associated with this term may be due to a number of factors: first, some of the uncertainty is in part attributable to the

fact that since only a relatively small amount of research has been carried out, understanding of the area is still fairly rudimentary. Second, as mentioned earlier, a related problem is that within popular and even official discourses grooming is immediately linked to the Internet and is used mainly to refer to on-line behaviour.[5] Crucially, this is contrary to the reality that the vast majority of abuse takes place by someone known to the victim rather than a predatory stranger (Grubin, 1998) and where the grooming is most often off-line. This latter misconception in the common usage of the term is due largely to media portrayal of the risk of sexual abuse and recent public education and awareness campaigns on the dangers of chat rooms and safe use of the Internet. Third, the enactment of recent legislation on grooming in several jurisdictions has not done anything to remove these ambiguities from the debate over the sexual grooming of children.[6] In fact, it may even be said to have added to the confusion. In the United Kingdom, for example, within the Sexual Offences Act 2003, the term grooming is nowhere defined. Moreover, this provision continues to be known as the grooming offence, even though it is not intended to be so. In fact, as will be explained further later, it is the behaviour following grooming that is to be captured by the offence, and not the grooming process itself.

THE CRIMINAL LAW RESPONSE

Section 15 of the 2003 Act introduces the offence of meeting a child following sexual grooming. It covers the behaviour of an offender who meets, or seeks to meet, a child with the intention of committing a sexual assault, if he has met or communicated with that child on at least two earlier occasions. This offence, however, is not restricted to on-line behaviour. It requires face-to-face meetings to either occur or be arranged in order for the offence to be triggered. It is the communication surrounding this meeting which can take place either on-line or off-line. This means that no actual abuse need take place before this offence is invoked. The purpose of Section 15 is not to act against those who have sexually abused children but to criminalize the preparatory acts involved in abuse and allow intervention well before actual physical exploitation takes place.

To this end, a further complementary measure under the Act may be invoked to address this particular form of predatory sexual behaviour. Sections 123–9 introduce the risk of sexual harm order – a new civil preventative order which can be used to prohibit specified behaviours, including the 'grooming' of children. It may be made by a magistrates' court on application by the police where a person has on at least two occasions engaged in sexually explicit conduct or communication with a child and where this is deemed necessary to protect the child from physical or psychological harm. It is possible for such an order to be made irrespective of whether such a person has previously been convicted of a sexual offence. This order effectively criminalizes acts which may be carried out for the purposes of sexual

grooming, but only after an individual has been identified as posing a risk to children.

In debates about social ordering, the concept of risk increasingly furnishes a discursive framework within which 'responses-to-problems' are being considered (Beck, 1992). Indeed, 'risk penalty' which has characterized contemporary criminal justice debates more generally (Feeley and Simon, 1992, 1994; Braithwaite, 2000; Shearing, 2000) has been particularly evident in relation to concerns over the risk posed by sex offenders in the community where assessing, managing and reducing those risks has become a central concern (Kemshall and Maguire, 2003). Indeed, it has been argued that the concepts of risk management (Parton et al., 1997) and, more recently, preventative governance (Ashenden, 2004) have become the key signifiers for the regulation of child (sexual) abuse and managing sexual offenders in the community, both in terms of policy development and practical decision-making.

In tandem with these concerns, the general aim of these provisions is to prevent or deter contact between children and would-be abusers and, if it does occur, to make it more liable to detection and reporting. Since they will, in effect, empower the police to identify and tackle abusers before they are able to physically abuse a child, they have generally been welcomed as a positive advancement in child protection (Ost, 2004).[7] However, they have also been criticized from a practical standpoint.

Critics point to the potential difficulties of gaining sufficient evidence and of proving the existence of the requisite *mens rea* of harmful intent (Gillespie, 2002; Ost, 2004; Spencer, 2004). These difficulties stem from the fact that it may be very difficult to make a clear distinction between friendly behaviour towards a child and something that has a more sinister motive, especially in the early stages of the grooming process. This could lead to innocent conversations and actions being criminalized, which are outside the ambit of the danger it was intended to address (Gillespie, 2002: 419).[8] Alternatively, it may be impossible to use in practice, particularly in cases where the individual has no prior convictions.

Many sex offenders can now be tracked, to some degree at least, by examining the Internet and computer usage of those who may have been reported.[9] As discussed earlier, it is generally accepted, however, that the danger of on-line solicitation by a stranger is thought to be much lower than off-line risk from someone known to the victim. In cases of intra-familial and institutional child abuse, in particular, it is highly unlikely that the police will be able to detect all instances of grooming which occur prior to the actual abuse (Gillespie, 2002; Ost, 2004). These arguments point strongly towards the conclusion that sexual grooming is not easily captured by the criminal law which, as a result, will be somewhat limited in its response to this form of deviant sexual behaviour.

Indeed, sex offenders are often devious and manipulative and expert at avoiding detection or suspicion. Offenders can be very inventive in the way in which they obtain access to children, within their own or other families,

or via the community and even organizations. Whatever the mode of deception, the establishment and breach of trust play a central role in the grooming process.

AN ABUSE OF TRUST

In the past decade, the topic of trust has captured the attention of a number of scholars. Friedrichs (1996: 11–12) points out that although trust is a central cultural concern, there is no single meaning of the term. Many of the available definitions, however, can be related specifically to the behaviour of sex offenders as they groom both people and institutions. Luhmann (1988), Johnson-George and Swap (1982) and Coleman (1990) all define trust as a behaviour, or attitude, which permits risk-taking behaviour. The level of faith placed in sex offenders by parents or carers allows them to take risks with their children's well-being which in turn provides the offender with opportunities to undermine this trust. Luhmann (1988) and Cook and Wall (1980) centre their definitions on the concept of confidence, while both Dasgupta (1988) and Good (1988) focus on predictability. Similarly, Gambetta (1988) and Kee and Knox (1970) suggest that trust is inversely related to the willingness to become vulnerable to the actions of another person or group. All of these concepts are evidenced by the often unquestioned faith placed in sex offenders by children, parents and staff in institutions and their unwitting cooperation with the offender's deviant agenda. Moreover, the totality of these factors – confidence, predictability and the willingness of others to take risks – allows the offender to deliberately suspend suspicion and facilitate the continuum of abuse.

   Ben-Yehuda is one of the most notable of the recent scholars in the area of betrayal and trust. In this respect, it is useful to consider some of the themes highlighted by his work and examine how they might aid an understanding of the dynamics of grooming.

VARIED SOCIAL CONTEXTS

First, Ben-Yehuda (2001: 6–7) argues that trust is influenced by social structures and societal institutions and that violations of trust and loyalty – betrayal – can appear in varied and different social contexts including inter-personal, group, organizational (and even national) contexts (see also Luhmann, 1988; Friedrichs, 1996; Kramer et al., 1996; Oliver, 1997). This factor illustrates that trust has resonance not only at the micro-level within inter-personal relationships – such as those between offenders and children and their carers – but also at the macro-level in terms of how relationships operate between the offender and wider society and the institutions within which they may work (Coleman, 1990).

ESTABLISHING INTIMATE AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Second, Ben-Yehuda (2001: 6–7) argues that trust involves a particular type of relationship where the participants perceive that a genuine, authentic and truthful interaction exists. He further argues in this respect that trust invokes the concepts of reliability, faithfulness and responsibility and assumes such relationships as loyalty, friendship and belief (Ben-Yehuda, 2001: 11–13). These are the necessary pre-conditions that the offender must construct in order to establish intimate and social relationships with those he wants to groom. The offender pretends to be friendly and trustworthy to the specified relevant audience and manages to deceive them into believing that his falsified presentation of self is true. He tries to create shared interests and identities on a personal level and an imagined sense of community at the collective level. It is this sense of belonging or shared membership of the same group that makes the betrayal possible (Ben-Yehuda, 2001: 27–8).

THE USE OF DECEPTION

Third, there are a few basic characteristics of a culture that mask reality and which make betrayal possible. A breach of trust typically involves deception devices such as secrecy, manipulation, lying, cheating or concealment and the specific and deliberate motivation to do so (Ben-Yehuda, 2001: 6–7). As will be discussed later, sex offenders employ a range of devious techniques in the grooming process. With institutional grooming, in particular, it is the offender's job and related status which provide a ready vehicle for this deception. Offenders may use their work with children to facilitate and disguise their sexually abusive behaviour and are able to make use of existing environments of pervasive secrecy (Sullivan and Beech, 2002).

A MORAL AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Finally, Ben-Yehuda (2001: 6–7) argues that trust is not only morally but also socially constructed. Even though trust may have different meanings in different contexts, because trust is considered sacred, its violation amounts to an infringement of a moral code which may be deeply engrained within society. This argument may help to explain why society has such a strong emotional and often punitive reaction to sex offenders generally. These reactions are typically more severe, however, towards those offenders who commit institutional abuse, where the very act of betrayal becomes a form of deviance in itself (p. 311). When sex offenders offend at the institutional level, they have misused their position and the trust placed in them by sexually offending against a child in their care. They have also violated inter-personal relationships and defaulted on their moral obligation and commitment to ensure the care, safety and well-being of the children for whom they are responsible.

Many of these themes are reflected in the actual process of grooming at the personal, familial and institutional levels. Sex offenders actively seek to create and abuse 'trust' in varied social contexts. They try to establish intimate and social relationships which will facilitate abuse by making use of a range of deception techniques.

'PERSONAL GROOMING'

One of the most important findings to emerge from the wider research literature on sex offending against children is an understanding of the process of victimization for the many children who are sexually assaulted by both strangers and intimates. Information has come from the study of offenders in treatment programmes who have frequently acknowledged the grooming process (Budin and Johnson, 1989; Conte et al., 1989; Christiansen and Blake, 1990; Elliott et al., 1995; Smallbone and Wortley, 2000) and of victims (Berliner and Conte, 1990, 1995) and from both taken together (Phelan, 1995). Understanding this process may help to explain why a child may cooperate or even acquiesce in abusive sexual acts.

In this respect, several commentators have attempted to locate the term grooming within the overall framework of the onset of sexual abuse. Finkelhor (1994) has proposed the following four factors as being required for the sexual abuse of a child to occur: the offender's predisposition towards sexual contact with children; the ability to overcome their own inhibitions; the ability to overcome the victim's resistance to abuse; and the opportunity to offend. As will be explained further later, it is the latter two factors – overcoming the victim's resistance and providing the opportunity to offend – which bring 'personal grooming' into play.

The term 'grooming' itself was first underlined by Salter (1995). The expression is generally used to refer to the process by which a would-be abuser skilfully manipulates a child into a situation where he or she can be more readily sexually abused and is simultaneously less likely to disclose (Wyre, 2000; Van Dam, 2002). Salter (1995) alternatively uses the term 'emotional seduction' in this context:

> The establishment (and eventual betrayal) of affection and trust occupies a central role in the child molester's interactions with children . . . The grooming process often seems similar from offender to offender, largely because it takes little to discover that emotional seduction is the most effective way to manipulate children. (p. 74)

The grooming process can occur over a short period but more commonly occurs over a longer period to allow the child to feel comfortable. The patience of the offender can also be partly explained by the fact that it is not uncommon for them to be grooming several children at once. In this way, even if the child begins to feel uneasy and breaks off the relationship, there will be other potential victims readily available.

Consistent with Matza's (1964, 1969) 'techniques of neutralization', sex offenders do not fully internalize any set of sexual or behavioural norms. Rather they have a learnt set of 'definitions favourable to violation'. As noted at the outset, the meaning of grooming in a legal context is uncertain which does seem to reflect something of the phenomenon itself. Personal grooming, however, involves a series of what are, in terms of the literature, fairly well-established stages for manipulating children and normalizing deviant sexual relationships (Budin and Johnson, 1989; Conte et al., 1989; Berliner and Conte, 1990, 1995; Elliott et al., 1995; Gallagher, 2000; Ost, 2002).

First, grooming the child can typically include befriending a potential victim by getting to know their interests and being helpful and confiding in order to gain their confidence and trust. Second, the offender will cultivate a 'special' friendship by bestowing a variety of inducements such as money, comics or sweets or even unexpected treats such as trips to the cinema or fast-food restaurants. This emphasis on the exclusivity of the relationship helps to 'distance' the child from their parents or others who may represent a source of safety and prevent the abusive behaviour from being discovered. It also enables the offender to control the victim through the giving or with-holding of rewards. In some cases the use of bribes or rewards may escalate into threats or the use of force to ensure the child's continued secrecy and compliance. Third, the offender will often use 'forbidden fruit' type activi-ties such as cursing, telling 'dirty jokes' or showing the child pornography to introduce sexual themes into their conversations. This latter stage not only begins to normalize sexual behaviour but may also be used to entrap the child further. The use of pornography in particular may encourage feelings of shame and guilt which the offender may exploit by persuading the child that they were willing accomplices in their activities. These factors in turn may also make the child less willing to tell others. Finally, the offender will exploit the child's naïvety and trust by introducing increasingly intimate physical contact such as play acting, tickling or wrestling and even hugging to grad-ually sexualize contact with the child. The use of touch is particularly import-ant as this determines whether or not the child is receptive and begins the process of desensitization – gradually the abuser will escalate boundary violations of the child's body which eventually culminates in enticing the child to acquiesce to engaging in sexual activity. Victims have also been groomed to introduce further victims to the process of grooming and abuse.[10]

The grooming procedure is extremely effective as the vast majority of children do not disclose the abuse. Recent research shows that fewer than 5 per cent of sex offenders are ever apprehended (Salter, 2003). Estimates also suggest that only 3 per cent of all cases of child sexual abuse (Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994) and only 12 per cent of rapes involving children (Hanson et al., 1999; Smith et al., 2000) are ever reported to the police. As discussed earlier, a complex range of emotions such as fears of retribution or abandonment, and feelings of complicity, embarrassment, guilt and shame all conspire to silence children and inhibit their disclosures of abuse. Boys seem to have a particularly difficult time dealing with sexual abuse as they are even

less likely to report it than girls (Hunter et al., 1992; Watkins and Bentovim, 1992).

The process is also significant, for to invoke the much-used phrase 'monsters do not get children, nice men do' (Long and McLachlan, 2002: 6). Contrary to the media-inspired popular belief, a sex offender is not instantly recognizable as the 'dirty old man in the raincoat'. Part of their skill is to ingratiate themselves with children and infiltrate themselves into unsuspecting families, communities and organizations. To do this successfully, they must pass themselves off as being very nice, usually, men who simply like children.[11] In fact, sex offenders, if they are to avoid suspicion, need to find ways in which they can legitimately have contact with children and acquire power over them. In this respect, sex offenders may not only groom children but also their families and local communities perhaps as the means of beginning an association with a child.

'FAMILIAL GROOMING'

The ambiguities surrounding the grooming process in both legal and sociological terms do not become that much clearer for being extended into the familial and institutional contexts. However, once more, indicators of the sex offender's behaviour in the preparatory stages of abuse are to be found in the literature.

Skilful offenders may also seek to gain access to the child by establishing a friendship with the child's parent or adult caretaker rather than, or in addition to, that with the child. In this respect, adults may be primed and controlled for victimization in similar ways to children.

In Salter's (2003) more recent work she explains how sex offenders, who often have good social skills, act with careful premeditation and use sophisticated deception techniques to avoid suspicion, sometimes playing double roles in the community. In this respect, the grooming of the child's family or community has a dual purpose: securing the confidence and trust and thus the cooperation of their carers in gaining access to the child; and reducing the likelihood of discovery or disclosure by creating an atmosphere of normality or acceptance.

Grooming behaviour, as with the ultimate child victim, is intended to make the victim's guardians feel comfortable with the offender. This causes parents and others to drop their guard, allowing the sex offender easy and recurring access to their children. This has worked to the extent that some offenders have been successful in persuading the child's parents to consent to their child having an unaccompanied outing or an overnight stay with the offender, which provides the abuser with an opportunity to offend with impunity (Salter, 2003: 5).

One of the first stages in the offender's deviant cycle which precludes the onset of sexual abuse is victim identification or selection. Aside from choosing a victim that has general appeal, ease of access and vulnerability play

a pivotal role. Sex offenders sometimes plan their assaults around a category of child whom they believe they can safely victimize. This includes children with special needs and learning disabilities (Gallagher, 1998: 807–11). Research also suggests that sex offenders appear to single out and target children and families with obvious vulnerabilities (Conte et al., 1989; Elliott et al., 1995). For instance, they may select a dysfunctional family where the parents are having marital problems (Gruber and Jones, 1983; Finkelhor, 1984), where the mother is ill (Herman, 1981; Finkelhor, 1984) or where the child is being emotionally neglected in some way (Finkelhor, 1984; Bagley and Ramsey, 1986). Elliott et al. (1995) in interviews with 91 child sex offenders reported that they most often chose children who had family problems, were alone, lacked confidence and were indiscriminate in their trust of others. In other words, offenders will find and fill a void in the child's life.

Sex offenders will often select single-parent families where usually the woman herself is vulnerable either economically or emotionally (Herman, 1981; Bagley and Ramsey, 1986).[12] These include women who may be looking for a 'father figure' for their children or those who are drug-addicted who will trade their children for drugs (Salter, 1995: 39). One of the easiest ways to make contact with a child is to live with one. Offenders may target single mothers by placing or responding to advertisements in 'lonely hearts' columns in the eventual hope of forming a family relationship – either moving in with or even marrying that person in order to gain access to their children (NCIS, 2003). They may even aspire to find a partner with whom they can have their own children which, in their terms, would provide ready access to victims whom they can abuse.

Aside from the child's family, the community itself can also be primed and controlled through the grooming process. Many offenders tend to adopt a pattern of socially responsible and caring behaviour in public. They endeavour to build a good reputation and to create a strong social perception of themselves as being an upstanding member of the local church or community, as a nice man who is exceptionally kind to children or the type of person who would usually help out when needed (Salter, 2003).

Typical access methods also include choosing a career or volunteering for work that will place them in close proximity with children. Indeed, sex offenders are skilled in the process of what I will term 'institutional grooming' – in targeting and grooming entire organizations, as much as individual children, and those who work within them.

'INSTITUTIONAL GROOMING' AND ABUSE

The issue of 'professional perpetrators' (Sullivan and Beech, 2002) – sex offenders who use their employment as a cover to target and sexually abuse children with whom they work – has attracted widespread media publicity, provoked public outcry and provided the impetus for legislative and organizational change. However, despite the psychological literature which exists on

grooming and the legislative and policy framework which exists to prevent unsuitable people from working with children, the two have never been properly integrated. Indeed, most of what is known about institutional abuse derives from case studies and official reports.

INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE

In the last two decades a number of tragic cases of 'institutional sexual abuse' in England and Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have demonstrated the vulnerability of children in environments traditionally considered secure such as homes, clubs and schools (see *The Times*, 1996; *Guardian*, 1998a, 1998b; *Irish Times*, 1998). In Northern Ireland and the Republic some of the most high profile of these cases have, for the most part, centred on the wrongdoing of individuals rather than institutions. In relation to the former jurisdiction, the Kincorra scandal (DHSS (NI), 1982; HMSO, 1985; Moore, 1996)[13] and the cases of care worker Martin Huston (DHSS (NI), 1993)[14] and head master Lindsay Brown (DENI, 1999)[15] resulted in a series of public inquiries, reports and guidelines which underlined the importance of developing effective procedures to prevent unsuitable people from working with children. One of the most recent cases in Northern Ireland was the Barnardo's case in 2004 where Margaret Hewitt and Robert Anderson were found guilty of a total of 70 sexual offences against eight children which took place at a Barnardo's home between 1977 and 1981 (*BBC News On-line*, 2004). In the latter jurisdiction, paedophile priests in particular have been the objects of media concern (see *Irish News*, 1996; *Sunday Times*, 1999; *Irish Times*, 2000), with the highly publicised 'Fr Brendan Smyth affair' attracting the most widespread attention (Ferguson, 1995; Moore, 1995).

An examination of these and other cases suggests a number of common themes. The abuse normally took place over a number of years and its extent went unrecognized for some time; usually more than one victim was involved, and often more than one offender (Finkelhor et al., 1988; White and Hart, 1995; Gallagher, 1998, 1999; Waterhouse, 2000); the victims were afraid to disclose the abuse; or when they did, no action was taken, either because there was a conspiracy to keep allegations quiet or a ready acceptance of the denial by the alleged perpetrator (Sullivan and Beech, 2002: 161). The latter criticisms have been made in particular within the context of sexual abuse within churches or faith communities (Berry, 1992; Nolan, 2001). These factors are confirmed by the available literature on the prevalence of abuse within child care institutions which suggests that, predominantly, the complaints appear to be of a sexual nature, involving both boys and girls, and that the majority have not been reported (Gallagher, 1998; Barter, 1999).

In England and Wales the picture has been framed largely in terms of a number of public inquiry reports or official reviews, which have resulted from the disclosure of institutional physical and sexual abuse in care homes

(see Corby et al., 2001). The inquiries have included the Leicestershire Inquiry into allegations of sexual abuse by management and staff in children's homes (Kirkwood, 1993); the Ty Mawr Inquiry following allegations of misconduct in Gwent children's homes (Williams and McCreadie, 1992); and the Waterhouse Report (2000) of the tribunal of inquiry into the abuse of children in care homes in North Wales. The reviews have included the Warner Report (1992) on the selection, development and management of staff in children's homes; the Utting Report (1998) on the safeguards for children living away from home; and the Nolan Committee Report (Nolan, 2001) on child protection policies in the Catholic Church in England and Wales. These inquiries and reviews have all highlighted systematic failures to respond to reports of abuse and have concluded that the extent of institutional abuse and the implications for the management of the problem are extensive.

As is typical of all child abuse inquiries, many of these appear to have made similar recommendations to protect children in the future, which have not always been acted upon (Parton, 2004). For example, several inquiries have questioned the accuracy of vetting procedures and the consistency with which various agencies use the system. The Warner Inquiry (1992) found that 10 per cent of the heads of homes and a third of care workers were able to take up their posts before any references were received. The Utting Report (1998), around six years later, also expressed serious concerns about the manner in which police checks were handled and highlighted that insufficient consideration was given to references. The Waterhouse Report (2000) also listed a catalogue of inadequate procedures and breaches of policy from recruiting staff informally without obtaining references to failure to check foster families or employees before they commence work. Indeed, the recent report of the Bichard Inquiry (2004) arising from the 'Soham murders' also highlighted 'systemic and corporate failures' in the way in which the police managed their intelligence systems (para. 8). As Sullivan and Beech (2002) argue, this raises questions not only about the speed and process of organizational change but also, more worryingly, whether any lessons have actually been learned.

Other recommendations have resulted in a plethora of recent legislative developments within a short few years, which have attempted to improve child care practice and prevent offenders from making contact with children through organizations. These have included the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 2000 which made it an offence for an adult to engage in any sexual activity with a child if they are in a position of trust.[16] The Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 made it a criminal offence for convicted abusers to seek employment with children or for employers to knowingly appoint such people. The majority of the recent measures, however, are based on pre-employment vetting. For example, Part V of the Police Act 1997 established the Criminal Records Bureau to provide a more effective means of carrying out criminal record checks. In addition, the Protection of Children Act 1999 combined the Department of Health Consultancy Service Index and the Department of Education and Employment 'List 99' to make it easier for

employers to check whether those who wish to work with children are known or suspected abusers.

Therefore, it would appear that given the body of legislation which exists and the number of public inquiries which have taken place, it has long been recognized that individuals may use their employment in order to gain access to children. The danger is that these developments have largely been reactive responses to the problem. Moreover, they have also been focused on developing external controls to prevent known sex offenders from making contact with children. What is needed, however, is greater understanding of the internal process of institutional grooming in order to develop proactive responses to problems before they occur.

The Utting Inquiry (1998), for instance, as one of the major reports in the last few years proposed a 'protective strategy' comprised of four main elements as follows: (1) a threshold of entry to paid and voluntary work with children which is high enough to deter committed abusers; (2) management which pursues overall excellence and is vigilant in protecting children and exposing abuse; (3) disciplinary and criminal procedures which deal effectively with offenders; and (4) an approved system of communicating information about known abusers between agencies with a need to know. However, this strategy does not fully acknowledge the characteristics of the offender and the nature of their behaviour within institutions on a number of levels. The focus on an entry threshold misses the point that sex offenders will use grooming techniques in order to cross any threshold in their quest to access children. Moreover, the emphasis on a vigilant management and swift disciplinary measures does not take account of the fact that sex offenders may actually constitute the management in an institution which may allow the subsequent onset of abuse to go undetected or unpunished. Finally, the value placed on information sharing is based on the known, identifiable and preventable risk and not the unknown, hidden and therefore the most dangerous one.

'INSTITUTIONAL GROOMING'

All of the inquiries and high-profile cases of institutional abuse cited earlier verify that sex offenders often actively seek situations that bring them into contact with children. It would appear that in common with the Internet, which has been used as a ruse to groom children for abuse, certain forms of employment may allow an abuser to gain ready access to children in a way that would not otherwise be possible.

These occupations relate to a wide variety of settings (Stanley, 1999). They go beyond the obvious religious work to include also secular paid and voluntary work (Smith, 1993) within schools (La Fontaine and Morris, 1991; Brannan et al., 1993) residential homes (Corby et al., 2001) and a range of community-based child care settings, including foster care placements (Browne and Lynch, 1999; Waterhouse, 2000) and nursery schools (Finkelhor

et al., 1988; Hunt, 1994). Indeed, the picture painted by the inquiries and reviews is that the problem of institutional abuse is confined mainly to residential contexts. The reality, however, is that probably every profession or organization that has contact with children in terms of their care, education or social or leisure activities is vulnerable to infiltration by those who wish to abuse.

Within the institutional context, the relationships created with the child and other adult carers who might protect them are also based on the creation of loyalty and trust and their subsequent violation. As discussed earlier, a breach of trust typically involves a range of deception techniques that make betrayal possible. In this vein, sex offenders appear to use the special features of the institutional environment to facilitate abuse and prevent disclosure by children and other professionals (Brannan et al., 1993). These particular dynamics include features such as opportunity, anonymity, secrecy and power.

Indeed, institutions can create multiple opportunities for the manipulation and abuse of children and can allow the offender to take on a different persona and remain anonymous in terms of their deviant sexual tendencies. The organizational culture itself may be conducive to abuse of power and erosion of the primary functions of care and protection. Child care institutions appear to be self-protective, secretive and closed by nature. As such, they discourage the drawing of attention to any deficiencies in policies and procedures and the signs of abuse (Westcott, 1991: 15–17; Waterhouse, 2000; Sullivan and Beech, 2002: 162). Furthermore, if these organizations are held in high esteem by local agencies or parents, children may experience added difficulties in both resisting and disclosing the abuse (Gallagher, 2000: 810).

Moreover, the particular role which these offenders play within certain institutions may also make the environment more facilitative of abuse. The offender may be in a primary management position with free reign over the institution, with little checks and balances on their behaviour. It is this status or authority that may give them the necessary control over the organizational culture. In short, it may give them 'the power to betray' (Ben-Yehuda, 2001: 28) – it may provide an opportunity for those minded to abuse children to do so in a way that exposes them to less risk, thus reducing the likelihood of detection and potentially leading to an increase in abuse. Indeed, it has been said that it is this facet of the institutional setting which makes the behaviour of the professional offender closely akin to that of the intra-familial offender (Sullivan and Beech, 2002: 164).

As discussed earlier, a system of pre-employment vetting has been introduced for those working with children and young people. It can only ever be effective, however, where there is a clear record of offending and where the identity of the person being vetted is known and assured. The procedures put in place to date can do little to stop offenders when they are at their most dangerous – when their deviant sexual behaviour remains hidden and when they have managed to persuade those responsible for children, through grooming, that they are genuine, respectable and worthy of belief.

<u>A CONSTRUCTIVE SOLUTION</u>

Given the dichotomy between the widespread confusion surrounding the term grooming and the associated weaknesses of a legal response on the one hand, and the centrality of the grooming process to the sexual abuse of children on the other, there is a pressing need to think more constructively about devising an effective social response to this behaviour.

It has been demonstrated that recent attention afforded to the grooming of children for sexual purposes has focused almost exclusively on the Internet and the dangers of predatory sex offenders procuring victims on-line. It has been a central argument of this article, however, that this focus has been largely misplaced in that grooming can and usually does occur independent of the Internet. Moreover, it has also been argued that it is not only the child that is groomed in the first step to sexual abuse, but quite often their family, the community in which they live and even institutions in which there are children such as clubs, schools or care homes. With each of these forms of grooming, the abuse is made possible by the level of trust placed in offenders.

It is our misconceptions about sexual offenders, in large part generated by the media (Silverman and Wilson, 2002; Greer, 2003), that make us so vulnerable to them. Sex offenders rely on these mis-assumptions to carefully gain access to children. Societal acceptance of these myths assists sex offenders by silencing victims and encouraging public denial about the true nature of sexual assaults. It is only by dispelling the myths surrounding sexual offenders – including how they deceive their victims and manipulate them in order to gain their trust – that we can effectively deflect sex offenders and protect children (Salter, 2003). Part of the solution is educating children themselves to be wary. However, at the same time given the way in which sex offenders operate, society as a whole must also be informed.

There is a real need, therefore, to demythologize sexual offending and work together with all groups in the community to achieve a more effective, safer way of protecting children and of reducing the offender's opportunity to abuse. This underlines the need for a rigorous public-education programme driven by government and designed to provide accurate information. This would hopefully shift cultural attitudes, dispel the commonly held mistaken beliefs, and inform the public about and increase the understanding of the real nature of sexual offenders and sexual offending.

While it is wholeheartedly recognized that the enormity of this task cannot be underestimated, some tentative suggestions can be made. In this respect, Home Office research (Grubin, 1998) suggests that there are a number of issues which the community could usefully be educated about including: that contrary to media portrayal and popular belief, the abuser is rarely the 'dirty old man in the raincoat' whom we imagine lurking in the corner of the local playground or park; that the vast majority of sexual abuse – approximately 80 per cent – is perpetrated by people known to the child rather than a predatory stranger; that sex offenders typically offend alone rather than in networks or 'rings'; that sexual abusers are men and women and, in a growing

number of cases, adolescents or children; and that there are different levels of risk and that not all sexual offenders pose the same degree of high risk.

Perhaps the most important of these findings is the one highlighted at the outset of this article – that most perpetrators assault children known to them, with these offences taking place in the home of either the offender or the victim. A further interesting study in this respect is another prepared for the Home Office which looked at 94 cases of physical and sexual abuse (Davis et al., 1999). All but one of the complainants knew their alleged abusers, of whom 48 per cent were family members or relations, 20 per cent were family friends or neighbours, 15 per cent were professionals (youth workers, teachers, doctors), and 6 per cent were acquaintances. In view of this stark reality, it is essential that children and all those responsible for them are also made aware that the danger often may not lie with strangers but with those closest to them. In this way, vigilance would be increased and risk and the opportunity for offending reduced.

Indeed, the theoretical logic behind such an approach is well grounded in the wider debates about risk and governance, as outlined earlier. Ericson and Haggerty's (1997) model of 'knowledge–risk–security', in particular, emphasizes the proactive 'management' of knowledge about offenders and the production of compensatory measures against risk (Hebenton and Thomas, 1996). In line with this model, the public, through community education and awareness programmes, would be admitted as consumers of this knowledge (Reiss, 1989). However, whereas legal responses to managing sex offenders in the community focus on knowledge of the whereabouts of known 'risky' *individuals*, such social responses would be based on knowledge of 'risky' *behaviour or methods*, which could also encompass previously unknown offenders. Such social knowledge, therefore, could add a further layer of protection between children and abusers.

At a practical level, the purpose behind this approach is much more fundamental. This 'opening-up' of knowledge and awareness on the part of the community is especially important when one considers the grooming process – that many sexual offenders are manipulative and devious by nature and will seek to infiltrate unsuspecting families for sexual purposes. Criminal justice interventions can do little to prevent this unless the offender has already come to their attention. Communities can, however, help by arranging networks of support and control where necessary (McAlinden, 2005: 388). Braithwaite (1999), for instance, uses the example of 'Uncle Harry', as a 'significant other' of the offender and says that 'Uncle Harrys' have a much more plural range of incapacitative keys that they can turn than a prison guard who can turn just one key.

Challenging the media's image that sex offences are committed exclusively by strangers, however, raises a number of difficult issues. Grooming has been the subject of a 'moral panic' (see Cohen, 1972; Hall et al., 1978) in the media and among politicians, and the new legislation common to many jurisdictions is in part a reflection of this. In extending the public understanding of grooming to familial and institutional contexts, there is a danger of simply

increasing levels of suspicion, mistrust and surveillance (Foucault, 1977). If society is encouraged to look very closely for abuse, there might be an associated danger of undermining trust rather than seeking to safeguard it. This might further heighten the moral panic surrounding sexual crime, thus creating a society where no one trusts anyone (Hudson, 2005: 183).

Furthermore, it has also been argued that the public already accepts that the risk of sexual victimization by a stranger is slight but is reluctant to visualize the risk in domestic terms (Greer, 2003). They deliberately choose to construct 'sites of danger' as being linked firmly to the public space since any alternative undermines the traditional views of the family and home as the given sphere of safety and protection (Saraga, 2001). In short, care will need to be taken, therefore, to deliver this information in a sensitive and responsible way so as to avoid a compounding of current problems and, above all, to make sure that one panic about sex offending is not simply replaced by another.

CONCLUSION

We are still very much only at the infancy stages in terms of understanding the entire grooming process, its role and significance in sexual deviance, the risk this behaviour poses to children and in constructing an adequate response to the problem. This analysis has argued that particularly because of the difficulties of drawing clear boundaries between innocent and more deviant relationships with children, criminal law and policy are somewhat limited in their response to what has become a dominant factor in the sexual abuse of children.

Given the centrality of trust to the grooming process, a key focus within child protection discourses must be to raise public consciousness of how sex offenders operate, in particular how they gain our trust. Such a collective response would represent proactive and anticipatory responses to grooming and not just reactive responses after specific problems occur. It would also hopefully increase the safety and welfare of children by limiting the offender's scope for offending. This knowledge has the potential to make children safer on a wider scale, not only within the community and within institutions, but also crucially within their own families where they are most at risk.

NOTES

1. One of the most high profile cases in this respect was the 'Wonderland' investigation involving several countries and police forces (*BBC News On-line*, 2001).
2. For example, Australia, Canada and the United States have various offences to cover on-line grooming based on either coercion, enticement or luring a child with the intention of having sexual relations (for Australia's Northern Territory Law, see s. 201 of the Northern Territory of Australia Criminal Code Act, para. 3.4.2; for US Federal Law, see 18 USC 2422: Coercion and Enticement; for Georgia State Law, see Ga. Code Ann. § 16-12-100.2 (1999); for Canada, see s. 172.1 of the Criminal Code enacted by The Criminal Amendment Act 2001). However, for the most part, grooming in these jurisdictions remains firmly linked to the Internet and legislation has yet to be enacted to cover grooming which takes place off-line. Scotland and New Zealand, however, have also proposed legislation along similar lines to that in the United Kingdom.
3. In *Re Attorney General's Reference (No. 41 of 2000)* [2001] 1 Cr App R (S) 372, one of the reasons why the Court of Appeal increased the defendant's original sentence for indecent assault and making indecent photographs of children was because he had sexually groomed a vulnerable child with special needs.
4. *Web Dictionary*. See http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=groom.
5. Grooming was also associated primarily with on-line behaviour in parliamentary debates on the 2003 Act. See for example Baroness Blatch, *Hansard*, HL Debs, 13 February 2003, cols. 788–9; Lord Alli, *Hansard*, HL Debs, 13 February 2003, col. 795.
6. See p. 340 and Note 2 above.
7. These assumptions about the supposed benefits of the legislation also appear to have underpinned the legislative debates on the 2003 Act. See for example Sir Paul Beresford, *Hansard*, HC Debs, 12 June 2000, cols. 699–700; Lord Falconer, *Hansard*, HL Debs, 1 April 2003, col. 1257.
8. These potential difficulties were also recognized when the legislation was being considered by Parliament. See, for example, Mr Oliver Letwin, *Hansard*, HC Debs, 19 November 2002, col. 508; Baroness Noakes, *Hansard*, HL Debs, 13 February 2003, cols. 777–8; Baroness Gould, *Hansard*, HL Debs, 13 February 2003, col. 786.
9. Although statistics regarding the extent of on-line grooming are difficult to establish and evaluate, there have been some surveys of children's experiences on-line. A US survey found that approximately 1 in 5 youths aged between 10 and 17 'received an unwanted sexual solicitation or approach over the Internet in the last year' (NCMEC, 2000: 14). A similar figure, approximately 20 per cent, has also been produced in the UK (ICF, 2001).
10. One commentator has argued that the term 'grooming' is not a wholly appropriate one in light of what children are subjected to and should be replaced with the word 'entrapment' (Gallagher, 1998). Other jurisdictions have proceeded along similar lines. See Note 2 above.
11. In relation to the gendered nature of offending, less than 5 per cent of sex offences against children are known to have been committed by women (see Grubin, 1998; NCIS, 2003).
12. Several other studies, however, have identified separation from the father as a risk factor (see Finkelhor, 1984; Russell, 1986).
13. The Kincorra case involved the systematic abuse of boys through vice rings and prostitution in Kincorra hostel in East Belfast which finally came to light in the early 1980s but which could be traced back at least two decades.
14. Huston was convicted in 1992 on 25 counts of sexual offences against children. He had been on probation for two years between 1987 and 1989 for committing

sexual offences, yet was able to find employment with a voluntary agency involving work with children.

15. Brown, the vice principal of a Bangor Grammar School, was convicted in 1999 of abusing nine boys over three decades.

16. This offence has now been extended considerably by the Sexual Offences Act 2003, ss. 16–24.

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