

# A politics of naming and sharing: One therapist's personal journey of traumatic grief, grooming, and sexual abuse in the workplace

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## Abstract

This paper provides insight into the experiences of a psychotherapist exploring societal issues within the workplace related to grooming and sexual abuse. It explores the process of adult grooming via theory and lived experience, also giving insight into the aftermath of disclosing and exposing the abuse, which incorporates the culture of victim blaming and grooming myths. Its aim is to raise awareness of adult grooming and abuse and to highlight how anybody can be vulnerable and susceptible to grooming, even those within the profession of psychotherapy. It concludes with the acknowledgment that recovery is possible.

## KEYWORDS

abuse, adult grooming, psychotherapy, society, victim blaming, workplace

## 1 | SETTING THE SCENE

It is coming towards the end of a calendar year. I am a psychotherapist who experiences traumatic grief within my personal life. A traumatic and sudden death in the family has completely broken my entire world, and everything I have ever known from childhood. Traumatic grief has left me experiencing a lack of security and stability, dissociation, anxiety, uncontrollable crying, and depression, amongst other things. Due to this, I take a short period of time away from the workplace (the organisation will remain unnamed). After this period of leave, I return and continue in my work-based roles.

Fast-forward three years, I am a psychotherapist who begins to disclose to others what has been happening to me in this workplace—and my utter confusion. I have been groomed and sexually abused by my line manager for three years.

## 2 | WHAT IS GROOMING?

Generally, when we discuss grooming and sexual abuse, we are talking about children. In society and the legal system, the word 'groomed' is not a well-used or understood term when speaking of adults. There seems to be lots of information and awareness-raising in relation to children being groomed, albeit some of it is victim-blaming, but very little specifically in relation to adults. It is as though, once you are in adulthood, you are no longer at risk of being groomed, and the word itself isn't salient. Society often seems to infer or state outright there are particular "types" of individuals who are at risk of abuse, that only a particular "type" of person (usually a particular "type" of child—a "risk-taking" child) would be at risk of being psychologically manipulated, coerced, and abused. In fact, anyone is at risk at any age; we all have vulnerabilities that can be manipulated by predators. There may be periods in our lives when we are all more vulnerable than other times, such as the time I'm describing to you. The words for our experiences matter, they are political acts; I claim "grooming" for adults.

Sinnamon (Petherick & Sinnamon, 2017) says that the misunderstanding around grooming of adults is often brought about by victim-blaming, humiliation, stigmatisation, reluctance to report, and the legal, social, and emotional weight brought against victims by the institutions in which the adult sexual abuse often takes place. The stigma of sexual abuse also deters survivors from reaching out and disclosing. When you have been groomed, it can make it even more difficult to recognise that abuse is happening. It is also hard for outsiders to perceive anything is particularly wrong (SurvivorsUK, 2020). And yet, grooming of adults is happening. These factors, alongside others, are often responsible for silence. I can identify with these factors. When I exposed my abuser and sought to protect others in the workplace, I was subjected to victim-blaming, shame, and social and emotional burdens brought about by the organisation in which the abuse took place.

After time spent in therapy and utilising an incredibly supportive network of family, friends, and colleagues as well as my faith, I have come to a place now in my personal/professional life in which I desire to give a voice to what is normally silenced or dismissed. I wish to talk about my lived experience of grooming and abuse and to connect the word "grooming" to adults in professional workplaces. It is my strong belief that it is time to educate others and raise awareness. I aim to bring what is hidden in the darkness out into the light. These are political acts.

Adult grooming involves the targeting of people and engaging in predatory processes to instigate and maintain sexually exploitative and abusive relationships. Those of us who are groomed and abused are no different from others, but also susceptible. I carry specific vulnerabilities with me from childhood; and my level of vulnerability was heightened incredibly when I was experiencing traumatic grief. It was the combination of these factors with others, that enabled me to become an "easier" target.

Grooming is an act of preparation, preparing another for a specific purpose (Petherick & Sinnamon, 2017). Sinnamon's model of adult sexual grooming clearly categorises the seven stages applied by predators:

- 1 Selecting the victim
- 2 Gathering information
- 3 Gaining personal connection
- 4 Meeting the needs and establishing the credentials
- 5 Priming the target
- 6 Creating the victim by instigating sexual contact
- 7 Controlling the victim.

The predator, who can effectively be anyone, is skilled at identifying the needs and wants of targets. Psycho-emotional vulnerabilities such as low self-esteem, self-worth, and efficacy are among the most vulnerable traits open to being exploited by a predator. Other areas include physical, emotional, and financial vulnerability. A predator is experienced at capitalising on vulnerabilities.

### 3 | GROOMING AT WORK

The workplace is just another environment where a person can be manipulated by a predator in order to achieve the ultimate goal of sexual exploitation. Grooming is a step by step, gradual and calculated process aimed at entrapping the victim into an exploitative and abusive relationship (Petherick & Sinnamon, 2017). For example, my line manager (the predator) gathered more and more insight into my personal vulnerabilities at the time through building, step by step, what appeared to be a trusting and safe relationship. This was conducted through supervision sessions, time in the office, an increase in email communications, and—later—constant daily texts to my personal phone from his phone. These would all be used to encourage me to share personal details around my life, priming me to do so. Authority in a management role provides a foundation in which another can be primed and exploited within the workplace. As part of building this “bond” and establishing trust, other predatory tactics were used such as claiming to have a special connection and relationship, encouraging secrets to be kept, and claiming that he was sharing things that he would not normally share. It all sounds very familiar from what we know of predators grooming children.

Predators can use their social position to ingratiate themselves into society by being in what seem to be helpful and caring roles. Individuals are not suspected of being abusive as they are “just too nice” (Petherick & Sinnamon, 2017, p. 463). Social position is just one of the “power characteristics” of the predator that impacts on the extent to which they can exert power over their victims. For example, within my workplace the line manager portrayed himself as a helper, a support to the staff, one who was in a trusted social position within the work he does. He worked in a place that aimed to support vulnerable individuals in the community and would present himself as honourable and trustworthy. During times alone with him in the office, he would expand on these aspects of self—for example, by claiming he was the only sibling in his family who would be selfless enough to help out his elderly mother each week.

Grooming happens over a period of time and can be very subtle. The predator not only “blinds” the victim to what is happening, they also blind those around the victim. In my workplace, any questions from other staff about time I spent with the line manager would be overridden as he would give other staff seemingly legitimate reasons for it. Extended meetings between us, according to him, were because I was struggling with traumatic grief and he was supporting me. He would often describe to others how my grief would cause me to be upset or struggle with certain emotional states which he, as my line manager and supervisor, was able to support me with in the workplace. His role and authority were used as ways to provide “excuses” for frequent times spent together. He also found opportunities within his role to exploit me by coercing me to disclose much about my vulnerabilities. This provides a significant example of using power and authority as management to deceive and exploit others, enabling him to exhibit dominance and superiority.

Characteristics that are commonly found in those of us who enter caring professions can be used by the predator to facilitate manipulation of the other. By being empathic the predator would often use this knowledge to play the victim role within our dynamic as a way of manipulating and preparing me, knowing I'd want to “help” him. He would tell stories of his past; how poor his family were and how his dad had left them all. He would also bring into conversation discussions around feeling in certain ways that he knew would “pull” me in. The drama triangle (Karpman, 1968) would play out between us. This model is based upon human interaction and demonstrates the type of destructive interactions that can take place when we fall into three specific roles—victim, rescuer, or persecutor. The predator would often play the victim and I would play the rescuer. This is one example of many in which manipulation and coercion were used. Other tactics by predators include “gaslighting” in order to gain more power, causing the victim to question themselves and their reality. It is a form of psychological manipulation in which an individual or group covertly undermines a person's sense of self-belief, and as a result that person begins to doubt and question themselves. Another method is “love bombing,” which is used to influence a person by showing attention and affection—such as showering you with gifts. The attention you receive is “intoxicating” (Sarkis, 2018). You are getting attention and treatment you've never experienced before. “Hoovering” is also another tactic in which the predator “sucks” you back in if they feel you are falling away from them, distancing yourself more from them. The predator

will do everything they can to get you back under control (Sarkis, 2018). The predator makes carefully calculated steps towards the goal of sexual exploitation, and then works to maintain this.

It is so easy to fall into a predator's trap. Grooming and abuse are so carefully and collectively predetermined, and predators are skilled in how to manipulate and exploit their victims. Through grooming, the predator is able to prime, manipulate, and coerce the victim into things they would never normally tolerate. Through grooming, the victim is constantly being prepared for the next stage of the sexually exploitative process. The predator is constantly working to break down boundaries and blur the lines of appropriateness. The predator paces themselves to push the victim into carrying out activities that are not comfortable for them. The predator has no respect for healthy boundaries. Patrick (2018) states how grooming involves "desensitizing a victim to inappropriate social or sexual advances through progressive boundary-probing."

## 4 | THE ESCAPE AND AFTERMATH

After escaping the abuse and being awoken to reality comes the battle with society, which breeds myths regarding victims of rape and sexual abuse: for example, blaming the woman's behaviour, appearance, decisions, and so on, rather than directing blame towards the male perpetrator (Burt, 1980). Many cultural and social norms support abuse and violence. Laws are often found to be lacking in supporting victims of abuse. It took a vast number of women to come forward to accuse Harvey Weinstein, and the verdict could still have gone either way.

Alongside these myths, there are also myths specifically about therapists. Often, it is overridden that a therapist is human too. We are seen as being exempt from life's traumas, losses, and pain, and we are seen as able to analyse others—meaning we could not readily be abused. During my battle to expose the abuse within the workplace, both victim-blaming myths and myths about therapists arose. An individual involved in the grievance process made assumptions, exclaiming: "You know about safeguarding!" But therapists are not exempt from life regardless of therapeutic training, no more than a doctor is exempt from illness.

## 5 | CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

This piece has sought to raise awareness of adult grooming and abuse in the workplace and how they might take place, and to make clear that therapists can be groomed and abused just like any other adult. Victims of abuse are routinely silenced or not given a voice, and if they try to have a voice they are often not believed. As a therapist I seek to hear my clients' voices, to empower them, to believe them. I cannot state enough how valuable it was to have a therapist during the aftermath of abuse who supported and believed me and helped me with my confusion about what had taken place. I encourage you all to be that therapist to your clients who bring testimony of grooming and abuse. I feel I am able to empathise at a deep level of understanding with clients who have been abused, and am able to role-model through my own recovery journey how life can change and how there is hope for a future, a good future. I hope, too, that I can enlighten other professionals on this topic.

I end my article with this image, that metaphorically I was once in a "coma." I was not present and things were happening around me and to me which I couldn't understand. I was in a dark, smoky, fog, I couldn't see. The significant moment in which I was prompted to disclose—a moment I have not chosen to disclose here (because we move at our own pace, and I wish to model that in my writing as well as in my therapy practice) led me to wake from the "coma"-like state and back into reality, alive again and breathing. Now that I was "awake," it was time to expose this man, "clean my wounds" from the experiences, work on recovering, and try to rebuild my life. It can be done.

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