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Toward a Universal Definition of Child Sexual Grooming

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ABSTRACT

It is estimated that 30–45% of child sexual abusers use sexual grooming tactics. While sexual grooming is considered integral to the child sexual abuse process, there has yet to be a universally accepted definition of the construct that condenses and summarizes this complex process. Based upon a thorough evaluation and critique of prior definitions and research on a content validated model of sexual grooming, a new operational definition of sexual grooming is proposed. An easily understood and applied definition of sexual grooming is needed for measurement of the construct. Further, having a common language to describe sexual grooming is necessary for research, communication, detection, prevention, and intervention of child sexual abuse.

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Toward a Universal Definition of Child Sexual Grooming

Sexual grooming is a relatively new construct, having first been identified in the early 1980s when law enforcement agencies observed that extrafamilial child sexual abusers gravitated to child-serving organizations to gain access to victims and engaged in pre-offense behaviors prior to the commission of the abuse (Lanning 2018). Given the nonviolent nature of these patterns of behavior, the term "sexual grooming" has been used interchangeably in the literature with "entrapment," "engagement," "subjection," "emotional seduction," or "enticement" (Bennett and O'Donohue 2014; Gallagher 1998; Howitt 1995; Kierkegaard 2008; Lanning 2018; Salter 1995). Research on sexual grooming started to proliferate in the 2000s (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; McAlinden 2007), but it was not until 2011 following the arrest of Pennsylvania State University assistant football coach, Jerry Sandusky, for numerous counts of child sexual abuse (CSA) that the concept of sexual grooming gained widespread public notoriety (Coburn et al. 2019; Gladwell 2012). Subsequently, sexual grooming has been implicated in numerous other high-profile cases of sexual abuse, such as those involving the Catholic Church (Spraitz and Bowen, 2018; Terry 2008), the Boy Scouts of America (Shon and Jihee 2016), and, most recently, the case of the USA Gymnastics doctor, Larry Nassar (Mountjoy 2019).

While there have been significant developments in the field of sexual grooming research in the past 20 years, the construct still remains somewhat nebulous. Generally speaking, sexual grooming refers to a process by which an offender skillfully manipulates a potential victim into situations in which abuse can be more readily committed, while simultaneously preventing disclosure. Importantly, however, within the literature there are numerous definitions for the term – none of which have been universally accepted. An operational definition of sexual grooming is necessary for researchers to better understand the construct and its relation to CSA, as well as to inform prevention, detection, assessment, and treatment efforts (Bennett and O'Donohue 2014; Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; McAlinden 2013; Orrill and Cohen 2016). To this end, we thoroughly reviewed the extant literature on sexual grooming behaviors in order to critically evaluate the commonalities and limitations of existing definitions.

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Ultimately, we will then propose a new definition based on this critique, and further informed by a model of sexual grooming which has established content validity (Winters, Jeglic, and Kaylor 2020).

The complexities of sexual grooming

Experts agree that sexual grooming has been deemed a significant component of the cycle of CSA, (Finkelhor 1984; Hall and Hirschman 1992; Ward 2002; Ward and Siegert 2002; Williams 2015), as the few empirical studies that have examined the use of sexual grooming tactics found these were used by approximately 30–45% of child sexual abusers (Canter, Hughes, and Kirby 1998; Groth and Birnbaum, 1978). The goals of sexual grooming are to gain initial cooperation by the victim, decrease the likelihood of discovery, and increase the likelihood of future sexual contact (Lanning and Dietz 2014; Plummer, 2018). Sexual grooming has been thought of as a ubiquitous process in CSA (Salter 1995; Thornton 2003), that is complex and nuanced (McAlinden 2013). Indeed, it is often difficult to differentiate normal adult/child interactions from those that are sexually motivated, as the behaviors may appear similar on the surface, but the underlying purpose of sexual grooming is deviant in nature. For example, buying a child gifts or playing child-like games are not overtly worrisome or exclusively precursors to sexual abuse, though these are examples of common behaviors child sexual abusers who are engaged in sexual grooming may employ.

One of the complexities of identifying and assessing sexual grooming results from varied behaviors that can comprise sexual grooming and that these behaviors may differ by offender or by context. Patterns of sexual grooming behaviors are thought to vary based on the age and gender of the offender and victim, the relationship between the victim and offender, and contextual factors (e.g., cultural elements, "effectiveness" of the sexual grooming strategies; Kaufman et al. 2006). For example, while most sexual grooming literature is based on male offenders, there may be differences in the tactics used by male and female offenders who sexually groom their victims (Johansson-Love and Fremouw 2009). Additionally, it has been suggested that sexual grooming would vary depending on whether these behaviors were enacted in-person versus online (Davidson and Gottschalk 2011). Not only is there variation in the behaviors employed, but there also appears to be variability in the length of time used to groom a victim (i.e., days, weeks, or years; Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2007; McAlinden 2006). Given that sexual grooming behaviors can look different depending upon the offenders and type of situation (i.e., in-person, online, child sex trafficking; Elliott 2017), this paper will specifically focus on in-person sexual grooming. Taken together, it is evident that sexual grooming is a highly nuanced process involving varying types of behaviors and lengths of time depending on the offender and the context.

Research has shown that sexual grooming is not limited to the behavior of the perpetrator directed toward the child. Four broad categories of sexual grooming have been introduced in the literature: child, self, family, and community/institutional. The term child sexual grooming refers to the typical conceptualization of sexual grooming, in which the offender grooms the potential victim (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006). Self-grooming involves the process whereby offenders cognitively/psychologically groom themselves in order to justify, minimize, or deny their behaviors (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; Katz and Field 2020; McAlinden 2006). Familial grooming involves gaining the trust of caregivers in order to increase access to the victim and decrease the likelihood of disclosure (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; Katz and Barnetz 2016; Leberg 1997; McAlinden 2006; McElvaney 2019). Lastly, an offender may groom the community by becoming a respected and established member of the community before sexually abusing children (Van Dam 2001, 2006; Winters and Jeglic 2017). Offenders may also engage in institutional grooming whereby they seek careers or volunteer positions that provide access to children (e.g., Catholic Church, Boy Scouts of America, schools, foster care, sports teams, babysitting; Lanning and Burgess 1984; Leclerc and Felson 2016; McAlinden 2006; Sullivan and Beech, 2002) thus circumventing the need to gain access to or groom the child's family, or exploiting organizational weaknesses to facilitate child sexual abuse (O'Leary, Koh, and Dare 2017).

Given that sexual grooming is a multifaceted process in which many of the behaviors in and of themselves are harmless or appropriate adult/child interactions, it is unlikely that law enforcement would detect many of the sexual grooming behaviors prior to the commission of the sexual abuse, especially in intrafamilial and institutional cases (Gillespie 2002; Ost 2004; Seto et al. 2015). Indeed, recognizing sexual grooming behaviors following the disclosure of the sexual offense is much easier than prospective identification (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; Winters and Jeglic 2017). There is empirical evidence to suggest that there is a hindsight bias associated with child sexual grooming, in that individuals had a tendency to overestimate the likelihood that they could have predicted these sexual grooming behaviors were taking place after they learned CSA has occurred (Winters and Jeglic 2016). Building upon this literature, Winters and Jeglic (2017) found the individuals have difficulty identifying potentially predatory sexual grooming behaviors, as to be expected given the similarity to normal adult/child interactions. The inability to differentiate sexually versus non-sexually driven behaviors with children poses a significant limitation to understanding and researching sexual grooming. And thus, it is imperative that models and definitions of sexual grooming identify behaviors and tactics that are more easily measurable and observable in order to facilitate prevention and intervention efforts.

Development of a validated model of sexual grooming

A good definition of sexual grooming should be based on a model of sexual grooming that has some support for its validity. While there had been numerous previous models of sexual grooming proposed (i.e., Berliner and Conte 1990; Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2007; Harms and Dam 1992; Lanning 2010; Leclerc, Proulx, and Beauregard 2009; McAlinden 2006; Olson et al. 2007; Sgroi 1982; Van Dam 2001), most focusing on male offenders, there were none that were validated until recently. Based on the similarities and limitations of prior models, Winters, Jeglic, and Kaylor (2020) developed a comprehensive model of sexual grooming that is comprised of observable and measurable behaviors. The Sexual Grooming Model (SGM) proposed five overarching stages: 1) victim selection, 2) gaining access and isolating a child, 3) trust development, 4) desensitization to sexual content and physical contact, and 5) maintenance following the abuse. The first step involves the potential offender seeking out a vulnerable victim, which may be based on the child's emotional or environmental vulnerabilities. Second, the individual attempts to gain access to the child and isolate him/her from others. Next, in the third stage, the would-be offender seeks to deceptively develop the trust and cooperation with the child, resulting in the formation of an emotional attachment. Fourth, sexual content and contact are introduced to the child over time, with the goal of gradually desensitizing them to sexualized behaviors. Finally, in the fifth stage, the offender may continue to groom the child after the initial abuse in order to avoid disclosure and/or continue abusing the victim. Please see Winters, Jeglic, and Kaylor, 2020 for further explanation for the five stages and behaviors.

In their validation study, Winters, Jeglic, and Kaylor (2020) conducted a thorough review of the literature to identify these overarching stages, as well as develop a comprehensive list of specific behaviors (n = 77). Then, 18 experts in the field completed a survey which asked them to rate the extent to which each of the stages and potential sexual grooming behaviors were relevant to the sexual grooming process. The results supported the SGM stages and select behaviors (n = 42; see Winters, Jeglic, and Kaylor 2020) considered to be identifiable grooming tactics used in CSA. The SGM is the first model of sexual grooming to have received empirical support for its content validity and serves as the foundation in the formulation of a new operational definition of the construct.

Definitions of sexual grooming

The majority of the literature on in-person sexual grooming tends to include theoretical reviews (e.g., Bennett and O'Donohue 2014; Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006), with only a few empirical studies of convicted offenders (e.g., Christiansen et al. 1990; Conte, Wolf, and Smith 1989; Elliott, Browne, and

Kilcoyne 1995) and victims of CSA (e.g., Berliner and Conte 1990). While these reviews and empirical studies provide vital information, there is still great variation within the field on how to define the sexual grooming process and much of the literature is outdated. To move the research forward in a cohesive and systematic way, it is necessary to develop a common language of sexual grooming to further our empirical knowledge of these behaviors. There have been several attempts to define sexual grooming in past literature (See Table 1), none of which have ultimately been widely accepted.

Table 1. Definitions of Sexual Grooming.

Source	Definitions of Sexual Grooming
Salter (1995)	"The establishment (and eventual betrayal) of affection and trust occupies a central role in the child molester's interactions with children." (p. 74)
Howitt (1995)	"Grooming. . .the steps taken by pedophiles to 'entrap' their victims and is in some way analogous to adult courtship." (p. 176)
Leberg (1997)	"The offender's plan to make the victim less likely to resist, to make others unaware of what he is doing, or even to make them likely to help him, without their knowledge, to molest a child." (p. 25)
Gallagher (1999)	"Entrapment. . .involves the use of an array of material, illicit and emotional `inducements' to draw children into abusive situations and increases their difficulty in disclosing." (p. 359)
McAlinden (2007)	"The process by which a would-be abuser skillfully manipulates a child into a situation where he or she can be more readily sexually abused and is simultaneously less likely to disclose." (p. 86)
Brackenridge (2001)	"The process by which a perpetrator isolates and prepares an intended victim." (p. 35)
Gillespie (2002)	"The process by which a child is befriended by a would-be abuser in an attempt to gain the child's confidence and trust, enabling them to get the child to acquiesce to abusive activity." (p. 411-412)
Spiegel (2003)	"The process of predisposing a boy to sexual abuse by means of subtle or blatant interactions that lead to boundary diffusion and role confusion." (p. 139)
Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist (2006)	"A process by which a person prepares a child, significant others, and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance, and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offender's abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions." (p. 297)
Sheldon & Howitt (2007)	"The sequence of behaviors employed by the offender in order to make the victim less resistant to the eventual sexual abuse." (p. 58-59)
Knoll (2010)	"Process by which sex offender carefully initiate and maintain sexually abusive relationships with children. Grooming is a conscious, deliberate, and carefully orchestrated approach used by the offender. The goal of grooming is to permit a sexual encounter and keep it a secret." (p. 374)
McAlinden (2012)	"(1) The use of a variety of manipulative and controlling techniques (2) with a vulnerable subject (3) in a range of inter-personal and social settings (4) in order to establish trust or normalise sexually harmful behaviour (5) with the overall aim of facilitating exploitation and/or prohibiting exposure."
Bennett &O'Donohue (2014)	"Antecedent inappropriate behavior that functions to increase the likelihood of future sexual abuse." (p. 969)

Limitations of past definitions

Drawing upon past definitions of sexual grooming is an important step in accurately defining the construct. An examination of the long history of attempts to define sexual grooming has highlighted some problems with defining the term which are summarized below and contributed to the formulation of the new definition proposed in this manuscript that seeks to properly operationalize the construct of sexual grooming.

Lack of specification of child sexual abuse. A definition of sexual grooming should include that the *intended* outcome of sexual grooming behaviors is child sexual abuse (regardless of whether the abuse is ultimately committed or not). Some definitions failed to state the intended goal of the sexual grooming behaviors is to enact sexual abuse (e.g., Brackenridge 2001; Howitt 1995; Leberg 1997; Salter 1995; Spiegel 2003). Similarly, some definitions stated grooming facilitates "abusive" activities or situations (e.g., Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; Gallagher 1999; Gillespie 2002), which fails to stipulate that sexual grooming is used in cases of potential *sexual* abuse, not child

abuse in general. In order to have a clear definition that can be easily understood by those not familiar with sexual grooming, the definition must stipulate that the desired outcome of the behavior is child *sexual* abuse.

Sexual grooming as a conscious process. Some of the definitions of sexual grooming state that sexual grooming is a conscious process. These definitions describe that the offender "skillfully manipulates a child" (McAlinden 2007), engages in a "conscious, deliberate, and carefully orchestrated approach" (Knoll 2010), or enacts a "plan" (Leberg 1997). While it is generally understood that sexual grooming does involve purposeful actions, there is a lack of empirical research to support this notion. It may be that sexual grooming is not an overtly and entirely conscious decision. For example, a would-be offender may select a vulnerable victim, but not fully understand their reasons for doing so. Indeed, Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist (2006) note that offenders may act out offense-related scripts without any conscious awareness. It has also been suggested that an offender may not be cognizant of their sexual motivations until late in the process, possibly immediately before the sexual abuse (Smallbone n.d.). This may be partly attributable to an offender's self-grooming process, whereby they justify or deny their offending behaviors to themselves to overcome any inhibitions (McAlinden 2006). Thus, a definition not explicitly denote this as a *completely* conscious process for every offender, as there is a lack of empirical evidence thus far to support the notion that offenders act in a completely conscious manner in all sexual grooming cases.

Restricting the type of offender and victim. Some of the prior definitions have narrowly defined the type of offender or victim involved in the sexual grooming process. For example, Howitt (1995) used the term "pedophile," which typically refers to individuals who are primarily or exclusively sexually attracted to prepubescent children (Hall and Hall 2007). Using this term in a definition for sexual grooming is not accurate as not all offenders have deviant sexual arousal to children; for example, some cases of CSA may be opportunistic or situational (e.g., easy access to child, offender is intoxicated; Nicholas, Hobson, and Gary 1982) and not driven by pedophilic interests. Another concern is using outdated terminology, such as "child molester," (e.g., Salter 1995), as there has been a shift toward using alternative words, such as child sexual abuser (Darkness to Light 2019). Definitions should not limit the victim gender, as was done by Spiegel (2003) who specifically noted the victim of sexual grooming is a "boy." Similarly, sexual grooming can also take place with older children and young adults (McAlinden 2013). Given that sexual offenders are a heterogeneous group and any child or adolescent may be at risk to be victimized, a definition should not specify the exact type of offender or victim so as to limit the application of the term.

Compliance terminology. Another point of concern with some of the definitions of sexual grooming is the implication that grooming somehow creates a situation in which the victim complies with the abuse. For example, Howitt (1995) suggested grooming is analogous to "adult courtship," which we believe implies a mutual desire and consent for the relationship. Similarly, phrases like "gaining the child's *compliance*" (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006) and "get the child to *acquiesce* to abusive activity" (Gillespie 2002), as the definitions of these terms refer to voluntary participation (i.e., *complying* is "to conform, submit, or adapt;" Merriam-Webster 2021a; *acquiesce* is "to accept, comply, or submit tacitly or passively;", 2021b). Likewise, phrases such as "permit a sexual encounter" (Knoll 2010) implies the child authorized or consented to the abuse (i.e., permit is "to consent to expressly or formally;" Merriam-Webster 2021c). Research has shown that victims may experience guilt or shame following their sexual abuse due to feeling they should have stopped it or were somehow compliant (MacGinley, Breckenridge, and Mowell, 2019); however, the sexual grooming process itself is utilized to deceptively, manipulatively, and coercively facilitate the sexual abuse and thus, a definition should reflect this notion rather than using language that may place the blame on the victim. While grooming does increase the likelihood of abuse, the definition needs to highlight that the process is deceptively creating situations in which abuse may be more readily committed.

Specifying particular sexual grooming behaviors. Some definitions of sexual grooming have tried to specify the exact behaviors that are used in sexual grooming, which can be problematic given that sexual grooming strategies can change between different offenders and varying contexts. As Bennett and O'Donohue (2014) noted, a definition must be specific, but not overly inclusive, in order to

minimize false negatives and false positives. Some specific behaviors that have been noted in definitions include showing affection (Salter 1995), use of inducements (Gallagher 1999), and befriending a child (Gillespie 2002). It is problematic to include specific behaviors in a definition given that the sexual grooming behaviors used may vary by offender and victim characteristics, and the context in which the sexual grooming occurs (e.g., the "effectiveness" of the tactics used, relationship between the adult and child, cultural differences; Kaufman et al. 2006). While these tactics may be commonly used, a definition of sexual grooming should avoid making specific behavioral statements, but rather focus on the overarching stages that may be involved in the process for all offenders.

Sexual grooming of caretakers and the community. There appears to be inconsistencies across definitions of sexual grooming regarding the incorporation of the sexual grooming of caregivers and the community (i.e., Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; Leberg 1997). For example, the definition of sexual grooming put forth by Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist (2006: 297) appeared to require the grooming of others, noting the process involves preparing "a child, significant adults, and the environment". Though many offenders may groom the child's family and the community, this is not *necessary* in the sexual grooming process. A definition of sexual grooming should be sure to note others *may* be brought into the grooming process, though it is not necessary in all situations.

Omitting post-abuse victim maintenance. Many definitions of sexual grooming exclude the possibility that sexual grooming involves maintenance behaviors following the sexual abuse (e.g., telling the victim to not disclose, making the victim feel responsible for the abuse). While some definitions incorporated the maintenance of victims post-abuse (e.g., Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; Knoll 2010), which has been deemed a significant aspect of the sexual grooming process (Plummer, 2018; Van Dam 2001; Wyre 2000), others described sexual grooming behaviors as solely pre-offense actions thereby limiting the scope of sexual grooming tactics employed by offenders (e.g., Brackenridge 2001; Howitt and Sheldon 2007). Therefore, a definition of sexual grooming should note that maintenance behaviors *may* be enacted after the sexual abuse has occurred.

Common themes in past definitions

Just as the definitions can assist in identifying points for improvement, they have also been useful in identifying underlying themes when conceptualizing sexual grooming. Examining these similarities is useful in developing a new, comprehensive definition.

Sexual grooming as a process. Existing definitions of sexual grooming have identified that sexual grooming involves "steps" (Howitt 1995) or a "sequence" of behaviors (Howitt and Sheldon 2007). Therefore, there is general agreement that sexual grooming is a "process" (Brackenridge, 1999; Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; Gillespie 2002; Knoll 2010; McAlinden 2007; Spiegel 2003), which refers to "a systematic series of actions directed to some end" (Dictionary.com n.d.). Designating sexual grooming as a process accurately describes the overarching structure of sexual grooming.

Specifying stages involved in sexual grooming. Current definitions of sexual grooming have specifically outlined some of the important steps that may be involved in the process. In particular, some of definitions elucidated the importance of the sexual offender selecting a victim (McAlinden 2013), isolating and gaining access to the child (Brackenridge 2001; Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006), developing trust with the victim (Gillespie 2002; McAlinden 2013; Salter 1995), and maintaining secrecy after the abuse (Bennett and O'Donohue 2014; Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; Knoll 2010). These overarching stages were subsequently supported in a content validation study of experts in the field by Winters, Jeglic, and Kaylor (2020) and thus, are important to help conceptualize the process given it is founded in empirical data.

Sexual grooming as deception. There is a theme across the definitions that sexual grooming involves a form of deception. The deception has been described using terms such as "entrapment" (Gallagher 1999: 359), "betrayal of affection and trust" (Salter 1995: 74), and "manipulates" (McAlinden 2007:86;

2013). The use of manipulative tactics has been outlined by various definitions as an important and central facet of sexual grooming. Thus, it can be concluded that sexual grooming is a deceptive process used to manipulate the victim.

Goals of sexual grooming. Definitions of sexual grooming have largely supported there being three main goals of the sexual grooming process. First, grooming is used to create a situation in which the sexual abuse can be more easily enacted, with the goal being to reduce the resistance of the child in the enactment of the sexual abuse (Bennet and O'Donohue, 2014; Howitt and Sheldon 2007; Knoll 2010; Leberg 1997; McAlinden 2007, 2013). The second aim of the sexual grooming process is to facilitate future sexual acts against the child, in that the offender seeks to engage in repeated sexual behaviors with the child (Bennett and O'Donohue 2014; Knoll 2010). Lastly, sexual grooming aims to decrease the likelihood of disclosure following the perpetration of sexual abuse (Bennett and O'Donohue 2014; Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; Gallagher 1999; Knoll 2010; Leberg 1997; McAlinden 2007, 2013), such as encouraging secrecy or suggesting the abuse is normal or accepted (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; McAlinden 2006).

Toward a new definition of sexual grooming

A critique of the previous attempts at defining sexual grooming provided a framework by which to establish a new operational definition of the term. Taking the concerns of past definitions together, a definition should: 1) specify that sexual grooming is used to facilitate child sexual abuse; 2) avoid stating sexual grooming is strictly a "conscious" process; 3) apply to a broad range of offenders and victims; 4) avoid terminology that blames the victim; 5) avoid stating specific sexual grooming behaviors; 6) specify that sexual grooming may or may not include sexual grooming of caretakers or the community; and 7) specify that sexual grooming can be used post-abuse to maintain victims. Furthermore, an examination of common themes suggests a definition of sexual grooming should address that: 1) grooming is a "process"; 2) which utilizes various steps; 3) that are deceptive in nature; 4) with the aim of more easily enacting sexual abuse, facilitating future sexual abuse, and avoiding disclosure. These various guidelines are helpful in forming a new definition of sexual grooming.

A major obstacle in operationalizing sexual grooming is that it is difficult to precisely pinpoint when the sexual grooming process starts and finishes and, as noted earlier, the process and behaviors may vary across individuals and contexts (Gillespie 2002). McAlinden (2013) argued that sexual grooming is a term that deserves a place in the lexicon of CSA. However, she cautions against the term being a "catch-all" category that undermines the complex nature of sexual grooming. The development an operational definition of sexual grooming is necessary in order to have a measurable and well-defined construct, which can inform research, prevention, policy, and clinical work (Bennett and O'Donohue 2014; Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006; McAlinden 2013; Orrill and Cohen 2016). A definition of sexual grooming must encapsulate the nuances (or complexities) of the construct of sexual grooming; the process is a multidimensional construct as there are various underlying behaviors that come together to constitute sexual grooming. Ultimately, the process of operationalizing involves defining the construct and associated components in concrete, precise terms, in order to guide what may be included and excluded within this definition (Pelz n.d.; Strauss and Smith 2009). In the case of sexual grooming, a definition should therefore not be overly inclusive (i.e., a definition that fails to include broad categories of behavior that may be involved in the sexual grooming process) as to produce false positives, but not unduly narrow (i.e., a definition that requires that specific behaviors be met in order to constitute grooming) that it results in false negatives (Bennett and O'Donohue 2014). As noted above, in an effort to conceptualize sexual grooming, Winters, Jeglic, and Kaylor (2020) reviewed the literature and surveyed experts to create a comprehensive model, thus identifying observable and measurable behaviors and tactics that are encompassed under the construct of sexual grooming. This recently content validated model, along with the critique of prior definitions, should serve as the foundation of a universal definition of sexual grooming.

Of note, Bennett and O'Donohue (2014) highlighted the conceptual and measurement issues associated with the construct of sexual grooming of children. The authors outline valuable definitional meta-criteria that should be included in the construct of sexual grooming. According to Bennett and O'Donohue (2014) a definition must minimize false negatives to ensure sensitivity to all instances of sexual grooming, although the definition must also be specific and not overly inclusive, thereby minimizing false positives. Further the definition should be nonjudgmental and precisely worded, and form the basis of the development of instruments to validly and reliably assess the construct; however, any definition should be sufficiently flexible to allow for the nuances and complexity of sexual grooming. Based on these recommendations, our proposed definition seeks to be broad, yet cover the specific components essential to the sexual grooming process. Moreover, this definition is informed by the only content validated, comprehensive model of in-person sexual grooming – the SGM – which is an evidence-based framework grounded in expert content validation and meets the criteria set forth by Bennett and O'Donohue (2014). To this end, we propose the following definition of child sexual grooming:

> "Sexual grooming is the deceptive process used by sexual abusers to facilitate sexual contact with a minor while simultaneously avoiding detection. Prior to the commission of the sexual abuse, the would-be sexual abuser may select a victim, gain access to and isolate the minor, develop trust with the minor and often their guardians, community, and youth-serving institutions, and desensitize the minor to sexual content and physical contact. Post-abuse, the offender may use maintenance strategies on the victim to facilitate future sexual abuse and/or to prevent disclosure."

Implications

Our definition of child sexual grooming is based upon the commonalities and limitations of prior definitions, as well as the clear and observable stages of the SGM in order to operationally describe the construct of child sexual grooming. Ultimately, this new definition can facilitate a common language between researchers, clinicians, law enforcement, and community members, given knowledge of sexual grooming has important implications for all of these stakeholders. Of note, a limitation of the present definition is that further support and validation would be needed to ensure its applicability across a broad range of sexual grooming cases; nonetheless, we believe this definition provides an important next step toward a more universal understanding of sexual grooming that is based on a content validated model and critical analysis of prior definitions.

Given the prevalence of sexual grooming in cases of CSA having both a validated model and operational definition is imperative for research. With the development of an operational definition of sexual grooming based upon a model that has established content validity, the next step is to empirically examine the proposed definition for construct validity by conducting a survey of experts in the field of CSA. Additionally, the field should direct research toward continued validation of the newly proposed definition and the SGM to support the use of these in research and prevention. For example, the definition and model should be empirically validated through the examination of pre-offense behaviors from a sample of child sexual abusers and victims. These types of research endeavors would assist in further establishing reliability and validity for the SGM, and in turn its associated definition, beyond the findings from the content validation study involving expert feedback. Moreover, one important research endeavor is utilizing the proposed definition as the foundation for the development of a valid and reliable assessment instrument. As such, these authors have developed a standardized measure of sexual grooming based upon the newly proposed definition in combination with the behaviors and stages outline in the SGM which is currently in the process of being validated on a sample of child sexual abusers. Ultimately, we seek to examine the psychometric properties of this measure to provide empirical support for the definition and model. We hope that a valid and reliable assessment instrument developed to measure sexual grooming can allow for the

quantification of sexual grooming behaviors, consequently aiding in the understanding of sexual grooming as well as efforts toward prevention and risk assessment.

A definition of sexual grooming is required to create a universal understanding of the topic not only for researchers, but also for criminal justice professionals and policy-makers, clinicians, organizations/institutions, and parents/community members. This information can be used by criminal justice professionals for investigating and prosecuting child sexual abusers. Law enforcement can better identify sexual grooming behaviors in investigations of CSA, while attorneys can use evidence of these tactics when prosecuting defendants. Should CSA be disclosed, knowledge of sexual grooming may assist in substantiating the claims by examining evidence of these predatory behaviors (Bennett and O'Donohue 2014). If a person's deviant intentions behind their interactions with children could be established, it may provide evidence of possible guilt, especially if an offender has a prior history of sexual offenses with similar patterns of behaviors (Williams 2015). Having a common understanding of sexual grooming can also inform decisions post-conviction, such as sentencing, protection applications, or supervision (e.g., parole or probation) of those who have committed CSA.

Regarding policy and laws, as of 2017, there were 63 countries who had sexual grooming legislation (International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children 2017); however, many of these focus on online offending behaviors or sex trafficking, and neglect to account for the in-person sexual grooming in the absence of committed abuse. Bennett and O'Donohue (2014) noted that "legal definitions of grooming are both varied and limited" (p. 958), and argued these laws generally fail to accurately capture these behaviors. While beyond the scope of the present article, which is focused on a definition based on theoretical and empirical literature, an important area for future examination is the notable differences across legal definitions of sexual grooming. Further down the line, with additional empirical support, a definition such as the one proposed above could potentially inform policy-makers in the creation of legislation that would deem these pre-offense sexual grooming behaviors as an offense, even if a contact sexual offense was not committed. Indeed, Bennett and O'Donohue (2014) suggest a key to moving toward more clear and applicable laws related to sexual grooming is to first clarify the definition of this construct more generally.

Treatment providers working with child sexual abusers who groomed their victims can use the proposed definition of sexual grooming to identify sexual grooming behaviors to prevent future offending (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2007). Given that there is evidence that offenders plan their offenses (Colton, Roberts, and Vanstone 2010; Laws 1989) and engage in consistent patterns of offense-related behaviors with multiple victims (Abel et al. 1987), it is necessary to target these pre-offense sexual grooming behaviors in treatment. Furthermore, the presence of sexual grooming behaviors in the offense process can impact survivors, by causing feelings of betrayal and manipulation. This definition can be used in treating victims of CSA, as a means of providing psychoeducation about CSA and possibly reducing the self-blame a victim may experience (Briere and Eliott 2003; Dorahy and Clearwater 2012).

Youth-serving organizations and institutions strive to provide a safe environment for minors to grow, learn, and have fun. Institutions must create a culture where CSA is discussed, addressed, and prevented (Saul 2007). The newly proposed definition, along with the SGM, can serve as the foundation for staff trainings to educate employees and volunteers to recognize behaviors and tactics employed by those who engage in sexual grooming. Guidelines for interactions between staff and children during one-on-one, as well as group activities, can utilize the definition to discourage behaviors associated with sexual grooming and implement prevention efforts. Specifically, sexual grooming behaviors and tactics from the SGM can be outlined in the organization's or institution's code of conduct as behaviors that are inappropriate or harmful (Saul 2007). Institutions can use this universal language to develop policies and procedures and incorporate it into their overall risk management plan.

A greater understanding of sexual grooming behaviors can educate parents and community members on how to recognize sexual grooming behaviors and contribute to efforts to identify the

abuse before it has occurred (Bennett and O'Donohue 2014). While this can be challenging as many of the behaviors on their own can be innocuous and indicative of a caring individual, identifying multiple behaviors that cluster together in stages or recognize especially concerning acts (e.g., watching a child undressing, talking about sexual content with a child, showing a child pornography) can help to identify high risk situations or potential abusers before the abuse occurs (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2007). The development of educational materials can be important in informing potential victims, parents, and communities about sexual grooming in efforts toward prevention.

Overall, there is a clear need to increase knowledge of sexual grooming for victims, caregivers, community members, law enforcement, and treatment providers. This knowledge can have important implications for prevention, investigations, punishment, and treatment. The first step in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of sexual grooming is developing an operational definition of sexual grooming and, as such, the newly proposed definition of sexual grooming can be valuable in forwarding knowledge regarding the CSA offense process.

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