



Conceptual Ambiguity, Methodological Limitations, and Definitional Inconsistency in the Sexual Grooming Literature: A Critical Scholarly Review

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Abstract: The construct of sexual grooming has achieved substantial legal, clinical, and policy influence over the past three decades, yet the empirical foundations upon which this influence rests remain significantly underdeveloped. This article presents a systematic critical review of the peer-reviewed literature on sexual grooming, examining four interconnected areas of scholarly concern: definitional inconsistency across research and legal contexts; methodological limitations in the empirical evidence base; conceptual boundary problems between grooming behaviors and normative relationship initiation; and the neurodevelopmental assumptions embedded in age-based vulnerability frameworks. Drawing on published critiques from criminology, developmental psychology, social work, and legal scholarship, this review argues that the grooming construct as currently operationalized in research and applied in law and clinical practice lacks the definitional precision, measurement consistency, and empirical rigor required of constructs with such significant legal and social consequences. The review does not contest that predatory exploitation of vulnerable individuals occurs and causes serious harm. Rather, it argues that the scientific and legal utility of the grooming construct depends on the resolution of foundational definitional and methodological problems that the field has not yet adequately addressed. Implications for research design, legal application, clinical practice, and policy are discussed.

Keywords: *sexual grooming, construct validity, definitional inconsistency, methodological critique, developmental vulnerability, relationship initiation, operationalization.*

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1. Introduction

Few constructs in applied psychology and criminology have achieved the simultaneous legal, clinical, and popular influence of sexual grooming in the span of a single generation. From its relatively modest origins in the clinical literature on child sexual abuse in the 1980s, the “grooming” construct has expanded dramatically in scope, application, and legal consequence. It now appears in criminal statutes across dozens of jurisdictions, informs clinical risk assessment frameworks, shapes child protection policy, guides prosecutorial strategy, and features prominently in public discourse about predatory behavior (Craven et al., 2006; McAlinden, 2006; Ost, 2009).

This trajectory of influence is, in one sense, a testament to the construct's intuitive appeal and practical utility. The idea that adults who seek to exploit younger or vulnerable individuals engage in systematic preparatory behaviors - building trust, establishing access, overcoming resistance - resonates with clinical observation, survivor testimony, and common sense reasoning about how exploitation typically unfolds (Finkelhor, 1984; Salter, 1995). Law enforcement professionals, clinical practitioners, and child protection advocates have found the construct practically useful in identifying patterns of concerning behavior, organizing professional judgment, and communicating risk to courts and policymakers.

Yet, the very speed and breadth of the grooming construct's expansion across legal and clinical domains, has outpaced the development of its empirical foundations, in ways that demand scholarly attention. A substantial body of methodological criticism has accumulated within the peer-reviewed literature, raising questions about the construct's definitional precision, measurement consistency, theoretical coherence, and the validity of its application across the diverse contexts in which it is now routinely deployed (Craven et al., 2006; Gillespie, 2004; Olson et al., 2007; Ost, 2009; Webster et al., 2012; Rees and Ichikawa, 2024). These are not peripheral concerns. They go to the heart of whether the grooming construct, as currently operationalized, meets the scientific standards we should expect of any construct with such significant consequences for individuals, families, and the justice system.

Researchers have documented that “grooming” lacks a universally agreed clinical or legal definition (Craven, Brown, & Gannon, 2006). This is the most robust area of legitimate scholarly criticism. The construct has been operationalized differently across studies, making replication and meta-analytic synthesis difficult. Several scholars have argued the construct has been applied so broadly in legal and clinical contexts that it risks losing analytical precision. The field has moved from loose, intuitive descriptions of grooming toward trying to build a shared operational definition, because for roughly two

decades researchers used the term inconsistently. This is a genuine methodological criticism.

A 2023 paper aiming for consensus notes that despite roughly 20 years of research, the construct still remains somewhat nebulous, and while sexual grooming generally refers to a process by which an offender skillfully manipulates a potential victim into situations where abuse can be more readily committed while preventing disclosure, no single definition has been universally accepted in the literature (Winters, Kaylor & Jeglic, 2021).

“Grooming” is not a phenomenon that is scientifically contestable - the systematic process by which adults build trust with, isolate, desensitize, and manipulate younger individuals to facilitate exploitation is documented across thousands of peer-reviewed studies, meta-analyses, and clinical outcome research (Winters, et al. 2023). But the scholarship is fundamentally skewed in examination of “child - adult” dynamics, with a renewed application to “internet interactions” (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006; Dumitriu, Dudu, & Nănău, 2023-2024; Landman, 2023; Bloin Helgheim & Roar Frøyland, 2025). One paper in the *Journal of Human Rights Practice* argues grooming research has been unduly associated with online contexts and that it broadly refers to how perpetrators interact with and engage a child, and sometimes others around the child, to enable abuse while decreasing the likelihood of disclosure, including in organizational settings (Rees & Ichikawa, 2024).

More recent work has started applying similar frameworks to adults in power-imbalanced relationships. A systematic review of “adult sexual grooming” (ASG) defines it as a situation where an adult becomes susceptible to abuse or exploitation for sexual satisfaction through emotional and psychological manipulation tactics, while explicitly flagging that this extension is not settled science - the same review notes it assumes similar underlying mechanisms regarding agency, power differentials, and consent for children as for adults, and there is very little research validating that assumption. It's also being applied to institutional/organizational settings (Rees & Ichikawa, 2024).

This article presents a systematic critical review of the peer-reviewed literature on sexual grooming, organized around four interconnected areas of scholarly concern. Section 2 examines the definitional landscape of the grooming construct, documenting the extent and consequences of definitional inconsistency across research, clinical, and legal contexts. Section 3 reviews the methodological limitations of the empirical evidence base, including problems of retrospective reporting, sample selection, measurement heterogeneity, and the absence of control conditions. Section 4 addresses the conceptual boundary problem - the difficulty of reliably distinguishing grooming behaviors from

normative relationship initiation behaviors in the empirical literature. Section 5 examines the neurodevelopmental assumptions embedded in age-based vulnerability frameworks and the extent to which these assumptions are supported by the developmental science. Section 6 discusses implications for research, clinical practice, legal application, and policy. Section 7 offers conclusions.

Several important clarifications about scope and intent are necessary at the outset. This review does not contest the existence of predatory exploitation or the serious harms it causes. The clinical and survivor literature documenting the psychological consequences of sexual exploitation is extensive, methodologically varied, and broadly convergent on the severity of harm (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Kendall-Tackett et al., 1993; Putnam, 2003). Nor does this review argue that systematic preparatory behavior by adults seeking to exploit younger or vulnerable individuals does not occur. Clinical observation, survivor accounts, and offender disclosure studies provide substantial evidence that such behavior patterns exist (Elliott et al., 1995; Salter, 1995; Smallbone & Wortley, 2001).

What this review does argue is that the grooming construct as currently operationalized in peer-reviewed research and applied in legal and clinical practice is insufficiently precise, methodologically problematic, and conceptually underdeveloped in ways that have significant practical consequences. The field's rapid translation of an underspecified construct into high-stakes legal and clinical applications has created a gap between the construct's influence and its empirical foundations that responsible scholarship requires us to examine honestly and rigorously.

2. The Definitional Landscape: Inconsistency and Its Consequences

2.1 The Origins and Evolution of the Grooming Construct

The concept of grooming in the context of sexual exploitation emerged in the clinical literature primarily through the work of Finkelhor (1984) and Salter (1995), though neither author used the term "grooming" with the definitional precision it has subsequently been expected to carry. Finkelhor's four-preconditions model identified motivational and disinhibitory factors that precede child sexual abuse, including overcoming the child's resistance, but did not delineate a discrete behavioral sequence that could be operationalized as a clinical or legal construct. Salter's (1995) clinical observations of offender behavior added important qualitative detail but were based primarily on offender self-report in treatment contexts, a methodological limitation discussed further in Section 3.

The construct's migration from clinical description to legal definition accelerated significantly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, driven partly by the expansion of internet-facilitated sexual solicitation and the legislative responses it

prompted (Gillespie, 2004; Ost, 2009). As jurisdictions began criminalizing grooming behaviors, the definitional question became not merely academic but legally consequential - the boundaries of the construct determined the boundaries of criminal liability.

2.2 Definitional Heterogeneity Across the Literature

There is legitimate academic debate within the literature on several dimensions of how grooming is defined, measured, and applied. The most thorough systematic examination of definitional inconsistency in the grooming literature remains the work of Craven et al. (2006), who reviewed the existing literature and documented extensive variation in how grooming was defined across studies, legal frameworks, and clinical guidelines. Their analysis identified fundamental disagreements on several dimensions: whether grooming requires a specific behavioral sequence or merely preparatory intent; whether it applies only to children or extends to vulnerable adults; whether it encompasses online as well as offline behavior; whether third-party grooming of parents or caregivers constitutes a core feature or a peripheral variant; and whether grooming is best understood as a discrete phase of the abuse process or as a continuous feature of exploitative relationships.

These are not minor variations in emphasis. They represent fundamentally different conceptualizations of what the construct is and does. A definition centered on behavioral sequence produces different empirical predictions, different clinical assessments, and different legal applications than one centered on preparatory intent. A definition limited to minor victims produces different boundary conditions than one extending to vulnerable adults. The consequence of this heterogeneity, as Craven et al. (2006) noted, is that studies purporting to examine "grooming" may be examining substantially different phenomena while sharing a label - a condition that makes cumulative scientific knowledge impossible and meta-analytic synthesis unreliable.

2.3 Legal Definitions and Their Divergence from Research Constructs

The relationship between research definitions of grooming and legal definitions is complex and frequently inconsistent in ways that create significant problems for both scholarship and justice (Gillespie, 2004; Ost, 2009). Legal definitions of grooming, where they exist, tend to be drafted for prosecutorial utility rather than scientific precision, and they vary substantially across jurisdictions.

In England and Wales, the Sexual Offences Act 2003 defined grooming in terms of communication with a child with intent to facilitate a sexual offense - a definition centered on intent and communication rather than behavioral sequence. In various U.S. jurisdictions, grooming statutes have been drafted with different age thresholds, different behavioral specifications, and different intent requirements,

producing a patchwork of legal definitions that does not map coherently onto any single research construct (Ost, 2009). In several jurisdictions, grooming statutes extend to behavior toward adults in certain circumstances, further complicating the relationship between the legal and clinical constructs.

This divergence between research and legal definitions has practical consequences. When clinical experts testify about grooming in legal proceedings, they may be applying a research construct that does not correspond to the legal definition at issue. When researchers attempt to examine the prevalence or impact of legally defined grooming, they may find that the legal category does not correspond to the empirical construct they have operationalized. Webster et al. (2012) noted that this definitional fragmentation creates particular problems in risk assessment contexts, where tools developed on the basis of research definitions may be applied in legal settings governed by different definitional frameworks.

2.4 The Expansion Problem: Conceptual Drift and Construct Validity

A related concern is what might be termed the expansion problem — the tendency for the grooming construct to expand over time to encompass increasingly diverse behaviors, relationships, and contexts, raising questions about whether construct validity is being maintained as the concept grows (Ost, 2009). The term "grooming" has been applied in the literature and in public discourse to describe behavior in offline adult-child relationships, online solicitation of minors, behavior toward adult women with cognitive impairments, institutional grooming of organizations by offenders seeking access to victims, and cultural or community grooming processes - each of these representing a genuinely different phenomenon with potentially different dynamics, different empirical correlates, and different implications for intervention.

This expansionism reflects, in part, the genuine complexity of exploitative processes, which do operate at multiple levels simultaneously. But it also reflects a tendency in applied constructs to grow by analogy rather than by theoretical specification, attaching a familiar and evocative label to new phenomena without verifying that the underlying mechanisms are sufficiently similar to justify the shared designation. When a construct encompasses phenomena as diverse as an adult's online communication with a twelve-year-old and an organization's failure to notice suspicious employee behavior, the question of whether it retains sufficient theoretical coherence to be scientifically useful deserves serious examination (Craven et al., 2006; McAlinden, 2006).

2.5 A Dominant Process Model Emerges

Winters, Jeglic, and Kaylor's Sexual Grooming Model (SGM) reviewed prior models and scales and established a

five-stage model of the sexual grooming process: victim selection, gaining access and isolation, trust development with the child and others, desensitization to sexual content and physical touch, and maintenance behaviors occurring post-abuse. A related scoping review notes the model includes 77 identified grooming behaviors across those five stages. This model is now the closest thing the field has to a common reference point, though it was built primarily from cases involving minors (Winters, Kaylor & Jeglic, 2023).

The model eschews apparent compliance or participation. This is a point emphasized most sharply in the current literature: a person's outward behavior - going along with something, appearing willing, later feeling "complicit" - is not treated as evidence against grooming having occurred. One recent analysis of consent in coercive-control contexts puts it directly: apparent participation is often later read as evidence of consent, while the deception, manipulation, and abuse of power that shaped that participation remain largely invisible, so survivors often do not initially describe what happened as abuse and instead describe confusion, self-doubt about their own role, or shame from believing they chose it. The same piece frames this as an "and/both," not "either/or": someone can feel invested, believe they chose it, and simultaneously be the target of coercion and exploitation.

3. Methodological Limitations in the Empirical Evidence Base

3.1 The Retrospective Reporting Problem

Some methodological critics have noted that much grooming research relies on retrospective self-report, which introduces well-documented memory and attribution biases. The empirical literature on grooming behavior is built substantially on three categories of data: retrospective self-report from survivors, self-report from identified offenders in treatment or custody, and clinical observation. Each of these data sources carries well-documented methodological limitations that the field has not always adequately acknowledged in interpreting and applying the research.

Retrospective self-report from survivors is subject to multiple sources of bias that are particularly acute in the context of traumatic experience. Memory for complex emotional events is reconstructive rather than reproductive, meaning that recall is shaped by subsequent experience, current emotional state, available cognitive schemas, and social and therapeutic context (Loftus, 1993; McNally, 2003). In the context of grooming specifically, survivors who have subsequently received therapeutic intervention, legal system involvement, or psychoeducation about grooming are likely to reconstruct their memories of prior events partly through the lens of the grooming framework - a process that may increase apparent correspondence between recalled behavior and grooming models without

necessarily reflecting the original experience more accurately. This is not a claim that survivor accounts are fabricated or unreliable in general terms. It is a methodological observation about the limitations of retrospective reconstruction as a basis for establishing the empirical characteristics of a behavioral phenomenon.

Offender self-report in treatment contexts presents complementary problems. Offenders in treatment have strong incentives, both social and legal, to frame their behavior in terms consistent with therapeutic expectations, which in many treatment contexts explicitly incorporate grooming frameworks (Smallbone & Wortley, 2001). Research drawing on offender disclosure studies - including influential work by Elliott et al. (1995) and Salter (1995) - must be interpreted with awareness that offenders describing their behavior in treatment settings may be producing accounts shaped partly by the treatment framework itself. Furthermore, incarcerated or treatment-mandated offenders represent a highly selected sample - those who were detected, prosecuted, and sentenced or diverted to treatment - whose behavior may not be representative of the broader population of individuals who engage in exploitative conduct.

3.2 Sample Selection and Generalizability

The generalizability of grooming research is severely constrained by sample selection problems that the field has not adequately resolved. The populations most extensively studied - incarcerated sex offenders, clinical samples of identified victims, and cases that entered the legal system - are systematically unrepresentative of the broader universe of exploitative relationships in ways that are theoretically important, not merely statistically inconvenient.

Detection and prosecution of sexual offenses is known to be highly selective, with the majority of offenses never reported and a substantial proportion of reported offenses never resulting in prosecution or conviction (Langan & Harlow, 1994; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). The characteristics of offenders who are detected, prosecuted, and incarcerated - and who therefore populate most research samples - likely differ systematically from the broader population of individuals who engage in exploitative behavior, on dimensions including socioeconomic status, relationship to victim, use of violence, and offense characteristics. Research findings from incarcerated samples cannot be straightforwardly generalized to the broader phenomenon without confronting this selection problem directly.

Similarly, studies of identified victims - whether through clinical referral, criminal justice involvement, or child protection services - are drawing on populations that have come to institutional attention, which itself reflects selection processes that may be correlated with case characteristics, offense severity, family circumstances, and other variables.

The grooming processes that lead to institutional identification may differ substantially from those in cases that never come to attention, which is precisely the portion of the phenomenon we most need to understand for prevention purposes.

3.3 Measurement Heterogeneity and the Absence of Standardized Instruments

A fundamental limitation of the grooming literature is the absence of standardized, psychometrically validated instruments for measuring grooming behavior. Unlike many constructs in clinical psychology - depression, anxiety, trauma symptomatology - where multiple validated instruments exist and researchers can report standardized scores that facilitate cross-study comparison, grooming research has largely relied on study-specific behavioral checklists, coding schemes applied to case files or interview transcripts, or categorical judgments by researchers whose reliability is inconsistently reported (Webster et al., 2012).

This measurement heterogeneity makes it extremely difficult to determine whether studies are measuring the same construct, whether findings replicate across studies, and what the distribution of grooming behaviors in the population actually looks like. When Study A defines grooming as a five-stage behavioral sequence and measures it with a researcher-developed checklist, and Study B defines it as any preparatory behavior and measures it through content analysis of court records, the fact that both report "grooming" in their findings does not mean they have studied the same phenomenon or that their findings accumulate into coherent knowledge.

The development of validated, psychometrically evaluated instruments for assessing grooming behavior - with established reliability, known sensitivity and specificity, and normative data from representative samples - is a basic scientific prerequisite for the kind of cumulative knowledge base the construct's legal and clinical applications require. The field has not yet produced such instruments, and the absence of this methodological foundation deserves acknowledgment in how research findings are interpreted and applied.

3.4 The Absence of Control Conditions and Comparison Groups

Perhaps the most fundamental methodological limitation in the grooming literature is the near-universal absence of appropriate control conditions or comparison groups. The behaviors identified as constituting grooming in the research literature - trust building, affection expression, gift giving, progressive boundary testing, establishment of secrecy, emotional intimacy development - are identified as such in the context of cases known to have involved exploitation. The question of whether these same behavioral patterns occur in relationships that do not involve exploitation - and

if so, at what frequency and in what form - has rarely been systematically investigated.

This is not a trivial methodological concern. Without comparison data from non-exploitative relationships, it is impossible to determine what proportion of variance in the "grooming behaviors" identified in the literature is actually specific to exploitative relationships, as opposed to reflecting features of relationship initiation and development more generally. If behaviors categorized as grooming are common in both exploitative and non-exploitative relationships, the discriminative validity of the construct - its ability to identify exploitative relationships prospectively - is substantially compromised.

Olson et al. (2007) raised a version of this concern in their analysis of online predatory behavior, noting that many of the communication strategies identified as grooming in solicitation cases overlap substantially with strategies characteristic of normative online relationship development among adolescents and young adults. Discriminating between grooming and courtship on the basis of behavioral pattern alone, without knowing the outcome of the relationship, may be less straightforward than the clinical literature has generally assumed.

3.5 Publication Bias and the Evidentiary Base

The grooming literature, like applied clinical research generally, is subject to publication bias - the tendency for studies with positive findings to be published and studies with null or contradictory findings to remain unpublished. In a field where the construct has achieved strong normative consensus and where challenging the consensus carries social and professional costs, publication bias may be particularly acute. Studies that fail to find the predicted behavioral patterns, that find high rates of apparent grooming behaviors in non-exploitative relationships, or that identify significant measurement problems in existing grooming assessment approaches are less likely to reach publication than studies confirming established frameworks.

The consequence is that the published literature likely overstates both the prevalence and the discriminative validity of identified grooming patterns. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses drawing on the published literature inherit this bias and may report effect sizes and prevalence estimates that are inflated relative to the true parameters. Acknowledging this limitation does not require claiming that the entire evidence base is unreliable - it requires recognizing that the published evidence base is a selected sample of the full evidence base and interpreting it accordingly.

4. The Conceptual Boundary Problem: Grooming and Normative Relationship Initiation

4.1 The Behavioral Overlap Problem

One of the most substantive theoretical challenges to the grooming construct as currently operationalized is the behavioral overlap problem: the behaviors identified in the literature as constituting grooming - attentiveness, affection, gift giving, complimenting appearance, progressive physical contact, emotional intimacy, requests for secrecy or privacy - are also characteristic features of normative relationship initiation and development across a wide range of relationship types and age configurations (Olson et al., 2007; Ost, 2009).

This observation does not minimize the significance of these behaviors in exploitative contexts. Rather, it raises the question of what distinguishes them in exploitative from non-exploitative contexts, and whether that distinction can be operationalized in ways that are empirically reliable and legally precise. The clinical literature's typical answer - that the distinguishing feature is intent to exploit - is theoretically coherent but practically problematic, because intent is not directly observable and must be inferred from behavior that is, by stipulation, superficially similar in exploitative and non-exploitative cases.

The behavioral overlap problem has particular salience in the context of relationships involving legal adults. When the parties to a relationship are both adults - even when there is a significant age difference, a difference in social power, or a difference in life experience - the behavioral features identified as grooming in the clinical literature become even more difficult to distinguish from normative relationship development on the basis of behavioral observation alone. The literature's application of grooming frameworks to adult relationships, or to relationships involving older adolescents and young adults, has proceeded with less empirical scrutiny than its application to clearly defined child sexual abuse cases.

4.2 Age Asymmetry and the Application of Grooming Frameworks

The question of how grooming frameworks apply to relationships with age asymmetry - particularly those involving young adults rather than children - has received insufficient empirical attention relative to the legal and social weight placed on these frameworks in such contexts. While age asymmetry is widely recognized as a risk factor for power imbalances in romantic and sexual relationships, the relationship between age asymmetry, power asymmetry, and grooming as a specific behavioral process is more complex than the clinical literature has generally acknowledged.

A philosophy-of-consent paper on this distinguishes an important epistemic point: victims of predatory grooming are often strategically placed in bad epistemic positions by their abusers - meaning part of the tactic is engineering the target's own understanding of the situation, not just their behavior. This is why researchers treat grooming as categorically different from a target simply making an unwise choice: the whole point of the process, as modeled, is to shape the conditions under which a "choice" is even being made (Rees & Ichikawa, 2024).

Research on age-disparate relationships among consenting adults - relationships that are lawful, that both parties describe as voluntary, and that do not involve the categories of vulnerability (cognitive impairment, dependency relationships, institutional authority) associated with highest exploitation risk - suggests that these relationships vary substantially in their dynamics, outcomes, and the power configurations they involve (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006; Presser & Whiting, 1999). The assumption that age disparity *per se* constitutes a grooming-relevant vulnerability requires empirical rather than merely theoretical support, and the evidence base for this assumption is less robust than is sometimes assumed in clinical and legal contexts.

The scholarship in this area attempts to draw a legitimate distinction between inherent power dynamics in relationships and manipulation versus "grooming" and its more sinister implications. And this is actually one of the more contested lines in the current literature, because power differentials are present in most relationships (parent/child, teacher/student, doctor/patient, boss/employee, mentor/mentee), yet obviously not all of those are grooming. The research doesn't treat "power asymmetry" and "grooming" as synonyms. It treats grooming as a specific *use* of asymmetry, identified by a handful of features that ordinary authority relationships lack.

Academics do not treat this as a universal, symmetric phenomenon that could apply to any two people who make bad choices around each other. The research consistently frames grooming as requiring (a) a deliberate, patterned process by the more powerful party, and (b) structural or developmental asymmetry that the process exploits. What separates it from "poor decision-making" is precisely that the model treats the target's decision-making capacity itself as the thing being manipulated - which is also why researchers say self-reports of "I chose this" from someone in that position aren't reliable evidence that grooming didn't occur (Bull & Page, 2021; Aletky, 2025). The distinction is legitimate and the literature actively works to maintain it — the marker isn't "a power gap exists" (true of almost every professional or care relationship) but whether that gap is being used to conceal an exploitative intent, isolate the target from correction or support, and produce a "yes" that wouldn't have been given without that engineering. Where the field is honestly still working things out is exactly how

far down the ladder of ordinary influence (firm mentorship, high expectations, persuasive authority) that threshold sits, and how much the child-focused model can be validly extended to adult relationships.

Where the literature itself is uncertain is "applying" adult context to a phenomenon extensively studied in a non-adult context. The adult-grooming systematic review is candid that most of this apparatus was built for child sexual abuse and that extending it to adults assumes similar underlying mechanisms regarding agency, power differentials, and consent for children and adults, while noting there is very little research that validates such an assumption. So even researchers using the term for adults acknowledge the transplant from child-development contexts to adult contexts hasn't been empirically justified yet - it's more conceptual borrowing than validated science.

4.3 Power, Consent, and the Empirical Literature on Adult Relationships

The concept of power asymmetry is central to grooming frameworks but is itself inadequately operationalized in the empirical literature. Power in intimate relationships is multidimensional, dynamic, and not straightforwardly determined by age or social position (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). Age-older partners do not uniformly hold power advantages in intimate relationships; resource control, emotional investment, dependency, and relational alternatives all contribute to power dynamics in ways that may counteract or complicate age-based power asymmetries.

What emerges from the "younger adult – older adult" examination is the concept of structural asymmetry - differences in power, dependency, information, or developmental capacity - that the more powerful party deliberately manipulates. Legal and institutional scholarship extends this same distinction to specific asymmetric relationships (mentor/mentee, clergy/congregant, caregiver relationships) rather than treating manipulation as evenly distributed across any relationship. UK safeguarding literature on adults with cognitive vulnerabilities frames it similarly, noting that courts weigh factors like a co-occurring vulnerability such as a learning disability, and grooming through gifts, insincere compliments, or false promises, when assessing whether real consent was possible. (Landman, 2023).

A parallel literature on sexual boundary violations in healthcare settings defines the phenomenon as harmful and exploitative sexual transgressions in the professional–client relationship, but notes these can be clear-cut cases of sexual abuse, but may also be more subtle boundary violations such as unnecessarily inquiring about a client's sexual history, physical touching, unwarranted comments, and inappropriate jokes - language that itself signals a spectrum rather than a bright line, and different fields (education,

healthcare, clergy, sport) haven't converged on identical thresholds (Kröger, et al, 2022).

The empirical literature on adult relationship dynamics has generally found that perceived power in intimate relationships is poorly predicted by demographic characteristics including age asymmetry, and that the subjective experience of power and autonomy within relationships shows considerable variation that is not well captured by structural predictors (Lennon et al., 1994; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). This finding does not mean that power asymmetries in intimate relationships are unimportant or that they cannot contribute to vulnerability in specific circumstances. It does suggest that the inference from age asymmetry to power asymmetry to exploitation risk is less direct and reliable than grooming frameworks have sometimes implied.

Caution, however, must be exercised when pundits specifically target relationships between "young female adults and older adult men" as the subject of a rebuttal. Such an argument suggests an intent to produce content that could be used to normalize, justify, or defend exploitative relationships or to undermine the legal and clinical protections that exist for young people, including those who are technically adults but whose developmental vulnerability is well-documented in the neuroscience literature on brain development through the mid-twenties. Content framed as peer-reviewed scholarship in academic packaging that challenges grooming as a construct can be, and has been, weaponized in legal proceedings, custody disputes, and public discourse to discredit survivors and protect perpetrators.

4.4 The Role of Context in Behavioral Interpretation

A consistent finding across social and cognitive psychology is that identical behaviors carry different meanings and different implications depending on the relational, social, and institutional context in which they occur (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). The context in which grooming frameworks are applied - retrospective analysis of relationships known to have involved exploitation - creates systematic interpretive pressures that may inflate the apparent coherence and distinctiveness of the behavioral patterns identified.

When researchers, clinicians, or legal professionals examine the behavioral history of a relationship in which exploitation occurred, they are engaged in a retrospective pattern recognition task that is subject to well-documented cognitive biases including hindsight bias (the tendency to see past events as more predictable than they were), confirmation bias (the tendency to attend to evidence consistent with a predetermined framework), and narrative coherence pressure (the tendency to construct retrospective accounts that are more orderly and sequential than the original experience). These biases do not reflect bad faith or inadequate professional skill - they are well-documented

features of human cognition that operate systematically in retrospective assessment tasks (Fischhoff, 1975; Kahneman, 2011).

The implication for grooming research is that the apparent coherence and sequential structure of grooming behavior patterns identified in retrospective studies may partly reflect the cognitive and interpretive processes of the researchers and practitioners conducting the analysis, rather than being entirely a feature of the original behavioral sequence. Prospective studies - which track relationship development in real time without prior knowledge of outcomes - would be considerably more informative about the actual behavioral patterns that distinguish exploitative from non-exploitative relationships, but such studies face obvious ethical and practical constraints that have limited their development.

5. Neurodevelopmental Assumptions and Age-Based Vulnerability Frameworks

5.1 The Neuroscience of Adolescent Development and Its Policy Applications

The concept of sexual grooming of children and young people by older adults is well-established in the empirical literature across psychology, criminology, social work, and neurodevelopmental science (Steinberg, 2008). A significant component of the scientific foundation for grooming frameworks, particularly as applied to relationships involving adolescents and young adults, is the neuroscientific literature on adolescent brain development. The basic empirical finding - that the prefrontal cortex, which supports executive function, impulse control, and long-term decision-making, continues developing into the mid-twenties - has been widely cited in legal and clinical contexts to support the proposition that individuals in this age range have diminished capacity to recognize and resist manipulation (Casey et al., 2008; Steinberg, 2008, 2010).

This neuroscientific literature is empirically robust at the level of basic brain development findings. The structural and functional development of the prefrontal cortex through adolescence and early adulthood is well-documented across neuroimaging, neuropsychological, and longitudinal studies (Giedd, 2004; Luna et al., 2004). The policy applications drawn from this literature, however, have been subject to substantive criticism from within the neuroscience and developmental psychology communities that deserves careful attention.

5.2 The Gap Between Neuroscientific Findings and Legal/Clinical Applications

In the context of "young adult – older adult" dynamics, there is legitimate neuroscientific debate about where precisely developmental vulnerability thresholds fall, particularly for individuals in their late teens and early twenties. Steinberg's

work on adolescent brain development is influential but not without critics who argue the policy applications outrun the neuroscience. And some researchers have examined the behavioral overlap between what is characterized as grooming and normative relationship initiation behaviors, arguing that the distinguishing features are not always empirically clean in the literature (Olson, Daggs, Ellevold, and Rogers, 2007).

Several leading developmental neuroscientists have cautioned that the translation of developmental brain research into legal and clinical policy has frequently outpaced the evidence, drawing conclusions from neuroimaging information that the data does not support (Morse, 2006; Steinberg & Scott, 2003; Roper et al., 2005).

There are three core methodological concerns:

First, group-level findings about average developmental trajectories do not straightforwardly apply to individual assessments. The finding that prefrontal cortex development continues on average into the mid-twenties is a statement about population-level distributions, not about any particular individual's cognitive or decision-making capacity. The variance around developmental averages is substantial, and many individuals in their late teens and early twenties demonstrate cognitive and decision-making capacities fully comparable to older adults on standard neuropsychological assessments (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000).

Second, the relationship between neuroanatomical development and functional decision-making capacity in real-world contexts is less direct than is sometimes assumed in policy applications. Laboratory measures of executive function and decision-making, while showing age-related differences, may not straightforwardly predict the capacity to recognize and respond to interpersonal manipulation in everyday social contexts, which involves different cognitive processes including social intelligence, emotional regulation, and experiential learning (Reyna & Farley, 2006).

Third, the contexts in which neurodevelopmental vulnerability arguments are most consequential - relationships between young adults and older adults - involve individuals who are typically beyond the ages at which the most dramatic developmental changes occur. The neuroscientific literature documents the largest developmental differences between early adolescence and late adolescence; differences between older adolescents or young adults and mature adults, while real at the population level, are considerably smaller and more variable (Steinberg, 2010).

5.3 Competence, Autonomy, and the Legal Adult Framework

The legal framework for adult decision-making capacity creates a threshold rather than a continuous competence

determination - at the age of majority, individuals are presumed to have full legal capacity to make decisions about their relationships, including sexual and romantic relationships, absent specific incapacitating conditions. The neurodevelopmental literature documents that brain development continues beyond this threshold, which has been used to argue for the extension of protective frameworks beyond the age of majority in various contexts.

However, the relationship between ongoing brain development and the specific capacities relevant to relationship autonomy is not as straightforward as this argument requires. The legal adult threshold, while admittedly somewhat arbitrary from a neuroscientific standpoint, reflects a policy judgment that the costs of denying adults autonomy over their personal decisions outweigh the benefits of protection in the absence of specific identified vulnerabilities. The neurodevelopmental literature, which documents population-level trajectories of average development, does not in itself determine where this policy threshold should be set, and the use of population-level developmental data to override individual autonomy assessments raises significant ethical and legal concerns that the clinical literature has not always adequately engaged (Morse, 2006).

5.4 Individual Differences and the Limits of Age-Based Frameworks

Developmental psychology has increasingly emphasized the importance of individual differences in developmental trajectories, life experience, and competence development in ways that complicate simple age-based vulnerability frameworks (Arnett, 2000; Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000). The period Arnett (2000) termed "emerging adulthood" - roughly ages 18 through 25 - is characterized by substantial heterogeneity in experience, responsibility, and psychological development, with some individuals in this age range managing independent households, careers, and families while others remain in more dependent life circumstances.

The implication is that age alone, in the absence of assessment of individual circumstances and capacities, is a poor proxy for the specific vulnerabilities that grooming frameworks are designed to identify and address. A framework that treats all individuals in a given age range as equivalently vulnerable risks both over-inclusion - identifying as victims individuals who exercised genuine autonomous agency - and under-inclusion - failing to recognize vulnerability in older individuals whose circumstances create genuine exploitation risk. The clinical and legal value of age-based frameworks depends on their discriminative accuracy, which requires empirical evaluation against individual-level competence and vulnerability assessments rather than assumption from demographic characteristics.

5.5 The Inadequate Legal Manifestation

There is a distinction, drawn from actual statutory language and case law rather than the psychological literature alone, establishing that criminal grooming statutes and "adult relationship behavior dynamics" are not in the same legal category. The former is a defined criminal offense with elements a prosecutor must prove beyond reasonable doubt; the latter is largely a psychological/sociological description that, standing alone, is not independently criminal in most jurisdictions unless it satisfies the elements of some other offense (fraud, stalking, coercive control, assault, etc.).

The legal bright line is drawn primarily by the legal status of the target (minor vs. adult), rather than by the presence or intensity of manipulative tactics. The psychological "grooming" literature describes tactics that *can* appear in both contexts, but the criminal law only treats those tactics as an independent offense *against minors*. Against adults, the same tactics are criminally relevant only if they're channeled through a separately defined offense, essentially meaning that a great deal of what researchers' term "adult grooming" or "coercive control" in a non-domestic, non-intimate setting (e.g., academic mentorship, clergy relationships, workplace power) currently falls into a civil/institutional accountability issue, rather than a criminal one. This is exactly the gap several of the academic papers cited as an open policy problem.

Criminal grooming statutes are constructed as a "specific intent, conduct based offense." U.S. Federal enticement statute - 18 U.S.C. § 2422(b), makes it a crime to knowingly persuade, induce, entice, or coerce a minor to engage in illegal sexual activity, or to attempt to do so, and courts have held that federal courts interpret this section as criminalizing attempts to influence a minor's mental state or willingness, even if the defendant never meets the child. That's a critical structural feature: it criminalizes the *inducement itself*, not the completed sexual contact. Per case law, if an offender intended to complete the crime and took a "substantial step" toward its completion (establishing intent), the government must prove that the defendant intended to cause assent on the part of the minor, not that he acted with the specific intent to engage in sexual activity himself. A "substantial step" is described as more than mere preparation, but less than the last act before the crime is committed (citing *United States v. Chambers* and related case law). The government is not required to prove that the defendant actually completed a sex act with the minor to support a conviction, per *United States v. Bailey*, 228 F.3d 637, 638–39 (6th Cir. 2000), and *United States v. Wilkerson*, 702 F. App'x 843 (11th Cir.).

So, the criminal law's threshold is: (a) intent to cause a minor's assent to unlawful sexual activity, plus (b) a substantial step toward that goal. Because the statute specifically cites "a minor," the "victim's assent" is legally irrelevant, as a minor cannot legally consent under the law.

In essence, the statute criminalizes *persuasion toward assent* as crime.

This is a fundamentally different concept from any adult-adult dynamic, where the target's capacity to consent (absent incapacity, fraud, or force) is presumptively intact as a matter of law. Where the law *does* criminalize exploitation of adults through relational manipulation, it does so through separate, specifically defined offenses rather than through an extension of "grooming."

6. Implications for Research, Clinical Practice, Legal Application, and Policy

6.1 Implications for Research Design

The methodological limitations reviewed in this article point toward several specific priorities for future research that would substantially strengthen the evidentiary foundation of the grooming construct.

The most pressing research need is the development of prospective, longitudinal studies that track relationship development in real time, without prior knowledge of outcomes, and compare the behavioral patterns of relationships that do and do not involve exploitation. While such studies face obvious ethical and practical constraints, carefully designed research examining the early development of relationships in contexts associated with elevated exploitation risk - institutional settings, significant age asymmetry, online communication - could provide the comparison data that retrospective studies cannot. Only with such comparison data can the discriminative validity of proposed grooming behavioral indicators be empirically established.

A second priority is the development and validation of standardized assessment instruments with known psychometric properties. The field's reliance on researcher-developed checklists and ad hoc coding schemes has produced a measurement landscape that makes cross-study comparison extremely difficult. Investment in the development of validated grooming assessment tools — with established interrater reliability, test-retest reliability, known sensitivity and specificity, and normative data from representative samples - is a basic scientific infrastructure need that the field has not adequately addressed.

A third priority is the systematic investigation of the behavioral overlap between grooming and normative relationship initiation, using methodologies that allow behavioral comparison across exploitative and non-exploitative relationship dyads matched on relevant structural characteristics including age asymmetry, relationship type, and social context. Such research would provide the empirical foundation for claims about the distinctiveness of grooming behavioral patterns that the

current literature, based overwhelmingly on cases known to have involved exploitation, cannot support.

6.2 Implications for Clinical Practice

The definitional and methodological limitations reviewed here have direct implications for how grooming frameworks are applied in clinical assessment and treatment contexts. Clinical practitioners using grooming frameworks in risk assessment, case formulation, or forensic evaluation should be aware that the behavioral indicators they are applying derive from a literature with significant methodological limitations, that the discriminative validity of these indicators has not been established against appropriate comparison populations, and that the retrospective nature of most supporting research creates interpretive challenges that affect the confidence with which grooming-based inferences can be drawn.

This awareness does not require abandoning grooming frameworks in clinical practice - the clinical utility of organizing frameworks does not depend entirely on their psychometric precision, and experienced practitioners may draw on pattern recognition developed across cases in ways that have genuine predictive value even when the underlying research literature is methodologically limited. What it does require is appropriate epistemic humility in communicating clinical conclusions based on grooming frameworks, particularly in forensic contexts where clinical conclusions carry significant legal weight.

The risk of confirmation bias in retrospective grooming assessments - the tendency to find grooming evidence in behavioral histories of cases already identified as involving exploitation - deserves particular attention in forensic practice. Blind assessment protocols, structured professional judgment tools with known psychometric properties, and explicit consideration of alternative explanations for behavioral observations are methodological safeguards that clinical practice standards should incorporate more consistently.

6.3 Implications for Legal Application

The legal applications of the grooming construct are perhaps where its definitional and methodological limitations have the most consequential implications. Criminal prosecution and civil legal proceedings based on grooming frameworks carry severe consequences for defendants, and the reliability of the evidentiary frameworks supporting these consequences deserves sustained scrutiny.

Several specific legal application concerns merit attention. First, expert testimony about grooming in criminal and civil proceedings frequently presents behavioral pattern evidence derived from the methodologically limited literature reviewed here. Courts and juries may not be aware of the extent to which the research basis for grooming frameworks is contested, the degree to which identified grooming

behaviors overlap with normative relationship behaviors, or the methodological limitations of the retrospective studies from which grooming behavioral indicators are derived. More explicit judicial scrutiny of the scientific foundations of grooming expert testimony - consistent with the standards articulated in *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals* (1993) and its progeny - would be appropriate given the current state of the evidence.

Second, the divergence between research definitions and legal definitions of grooming creates a specific evidentiary problem: expert witnesses drawing on research-based grooming frameworks may be offering opinions about a construct that does not correspond precisely to the legal definition at issue. More systematic attention to the correspondence between research constructs and legal definitions in jurisdictions where grooming is criminalized would reduce the risk of evidence-based confusion in legal proceedings.

Third, the application of grooming frameworks in contexts involving legal adults - including civil proceedings, custody disputes, and some criminal cases - raises additional concerns about the boundaries of appropriate application that are not adequately addressed in the current literature. The extension of a construct developed primarily in the context of child sexual abuse to relationships between adults requires empirical validation specific to that extended application, not merely analogical reasoning from the child abuse literature.

6.4 Implications for Policy

At the policy level, the limitations reviewed here suggest the value of a more cautious and evidence-based approach to the expansion of grooming-based legal frameworks, particularly in the direction of application to relationships involving legal adults. The rapid translation of underspecified clinical constructs into criminal law - driven partly by legitimate public concern and partly by political dynamics that make restriction of protective frameworks politically costly even when the evidence base is uncertain - has produced a legal landscape that may not optimally serve either the protective goals grooming frameworks are designed to achieve or the principles of legal precision and individual liberty that should constrain criminal law.

Policy development in this area would benefit from more systematic investment in the research priorities identified in Section 6.1, so that legal frameworks can be grounded in a more robust and methodologically sound evidentiary base. It would also benefit from more explicit engagement with the cost-benefit tradeoffs involved in extending grooming frameworks - acknowledging that both under-inclusive frameworks (that fail to protect genuinely vulnerable individuals) and over-inclusive frameworks (that criminalize behavior that does not warrant criminal sanction) impose real costs that the empirical literature should inform.

7. Discussion

7.1 The Construct Validity Question

The foregoing review raises a fundamental question about construct validity - whether the grooming construct, as currently operationalized across research, clinical practice, and legal application, is measuring a coherent, discriminable phenomenon with sufficient empirical support to justify its current level of influence. Construct validity, in the classic formulation of Cronbach and Meehl (1955), requires that a construct be embedded in a nomological network of theoretical relationships that are empirically supported, that it be operationalized through measures with known reliability and validity, and that those measures demonstrate convergent and discriminant validity against relevant comparison constructs.

By these standards, the grooming construct faces significant construct validity challenges. Definitional inconsistency across the literature undermines the coherence of the nomological network. The absence of standardized, validated measures prevents systematic reliability and validity assessment. The lack of comparison data from non-exploitative relationships compromises discriminant validity. And the retrospective, selected-sample methodology of most supporting research creates pervasive threats to internal and external validity that limit confidence in the findings.

These are serious concerns that the field's momentum and the construct's policy influence should not be permitted to obscure. A commitment to scientific rigor requires acknowledging them explicitly, even when - perhaps especially when - the construct in question addresses phenomena of genuine social importance.

7.2 The Relationship Between Scientific Caution and Victim Protection

It is important to address directly the concern that critical scholarly engagement with the grooming construct's limitations may be perceived as undermining victim protection or providing intellectual cover for those who seek to minimize exploitative behavior. This concern is understandable given the history of how psychological and sociological research has sometimes been misappropriated in legal contexts to discredit survivors and minimize offender accountability.

Scientific rigor and victim protection are not in tension - they are complementary values whose alignment is a precondition for a justice system that operates fairly and effectively. A legal and clinical framework based on a poorly operationalized construct with limited discriminative validity may fail victims in both directions: by failing to identify exploitation in cases where it occurs (because the behavioral markers are too common to be diagnostic) and by

mischaracterizing non-exploitative relationships as exploitative (because the behavioral overlap with normative relationship development has not been adequately studied). Neither failure serves victims well, and neither is consistent with scientific responsibility.

The scholarly community's obligation is to describe the evidence as it is - including its strengths, its limitations, and the genuine uncertainties it leaves unresolved — and to invest in the research that would resolve those uncertainties. That obligation is not discharged by deferring to the construct's policy influence or by treating its limitations as too sensitive to examine rigorously.

7.3 Toward a More Rigorous Grooming Research Program

The critiques advanced in this review are intended constructively - as an argument for investing in the methodological development of the grooming research program so that its legal and clinical applications can rest on a more secure empirical foundation. The path forward requires, at minimum, the following:

- Definitional consensus through structured expert consultation processes that produce operationally precise definitions with explicit scope conditions — specifying what categories of relationship and what categories of behavior are encompassed, and what is excluded;
- Instrument development through psychometric research programs that produce validated assessment tools with known reliability and validity properties and normative data from representative samples;
- Prospective research designs that permit behavioral comparison across exploitative and non-exploitative relationships, providing the discriminant validity evidence that retrospective designs cannot supply;
- Representative sampling strategies that address the selection problems created by exclusive reliance on detected, prosecuted, and clinically identified cases;
- Systematic engagement with the behavioral overlap question, investigating the distribution of identified grooming behaviors in the general population of age-asymmetric and other structural risk relationships;
- Explicit attention to developmental heterogeneity in vulnerability assessments, moving beyond age-based thresholds toward individual-level competence and circumstance assessments that can more precisely identify the conditions under which exploitation risk is elevated.

8. Conclusion

This review has examined four interconnected areas of scholarly concern regarding the sexual grooming construct: definitional inconsistency, methodological limitations, conceptual boundary problems, and contested neurodevelopmental assumptions. Across each area, the review has identified substantive challenges to the construct's current level of legal and clinical influence that deserve serious scholarly attention.

The grooming construct emerged from genuine clinical observation and has been elaborated by researchers and practitioners with legitimate concern for the protection of vulnerable individuals from exploitation. The seriousness of the harms it seeks to address, and the genuine clinical value of having frameworks for understanding exploitative processes, are not in dispute. What is in dispute - and what this review has argued deserves more systematic scholarly engagement - is whether the construct's current operationalization meets the scientific standards appropriate for constructs with such significant legal and social consequences.

The specific conclusions of the review are as follows. First, definitional inconsistency across research, clinical, and legal contexts is extensive and consequential, preventing the accumulation of coherent scientific knowledge and creating evidentiary problems in legal applications. Second, the empirical evidence base is characterized by methodological limitations - retrospective reporting, sample selection, measurement heterogeneity, and absence of appropriate comparison groups - that substantially constrain the confidence with which findings can be interpreted and applied. Third, the behavioral overlap between identified grooming behaviors and normative relationship initiation is insufficiently studied, creating unresolved questions about the discriminative validity of grooming behavioral indicators. Fourth, the neurodevelopmental assumptions embedded in age-based vulnerability frameworks, while based on genuine empirical findings about average developmental trajectories, have been applied in legal and clinical contexts in ways that go beyond what the developmental science supports, particularly with respect to individuals in the legal adult age range.

These limitations do not invalidate the grooming construct or undermine the protection of vulnerable individuals from exploitation. They do require acknowledgment, scholarly engagement, and investment in the methodological development that would place the construct's legal and clinical applications on a more secure empirical foundation. The scientific community's responsibility to pursue this agenda - even when the construct in question addresses phenomena of genuine social and moral importance - is a basic commitment of scientific integrity that this review has attempted to honor.

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