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Grooming: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, legislation recognizing the grooming of a child for the purposes of sexual abuse as a criminal offense has been introduced. However, there is a limited evidence base on the mechanisms involved in grooming behavior, particularly from the perspective of those who have experienced grooming. This article, drawing on an in depth case study of a 52-year-old man, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, explores the experience of grooming from childhood into adulthood. Four key themes were identified: abuser as benefactor, a substitute parent, abuser as mind controller, and facilitating system. The findings suggest that two key relationship dynamics are helpful in understanding the process of grooming; the traumatic bond established between the abuser and the abused and relationships within the child's wider system that facilitated the child's silence. These dynamics illustrate how the sexual abuse experience is normalized, and how the occurrence of abuse and maintenance of the secret is facilitated by those in the victim's wider ecological system over a number of decades. A better understanding of the process of grooming can enhance professionals' responses to those who have experienced grooming, in particular helping to alleviate self blame associated with experiences of sexual abuse and non-disclosure.

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Despite the increased awareness of the phenomenon of grooming as a strategy used by perpetrators of child sexual abuse (CSA) to recruit and ensure the silence of their victims, little has been written about the mechanisms involved in grooming behavior, in particular from the perspective of those being groomed. Much of our current knowledge about grooming emanates from studies on offenders (Plummer, 2018). This knowledge has primarily focused on providing descriptions of what constitutes grooming behaviors. Few studies have elucidated the relationship dynamics involved in grooming and the impact of these dynamics on delayed disclosure and reporting the abuse to relevant authorities. Such information is important for mental health professionals (in order to guide clinical interventions), child protection professionals (to ensure appropriate responses to child

victims), law enforcement personnel (to inform preparation for prosecution), and legislators (to ensure appropriate implementation of legislation).

The common elements involved in grooming behavior include befriending the child in order to gain access to the child, gaining the child's compliance with the abusive behavior and ensuring the child's silence to avoid discovery (Gillespie, 2002). The role of the environment in the grooming process has also been identified, whereby significant adults in the child's environment are "groomed" to facilitate easy access to the child and deter disclosure (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006; Plummer, 2018). Three studies have explored grooming from the victim's perspective. Berliner and Conte's (1990) study of 23 child sexual abuse victims aged 10 to 18 years noted that 57% received special privileges from the abuser and 61% said their abuser had told them that they were "special." Katz and Barnett (2015) investigated grooming in a sample of 95 children aged 5 to 13 years. They found that 68.4% of victims reported that their abuser had manipulated their family. Both of these studies consisted of predominantly female child/adolescent samples. Plummer (2018) interviewed 11 male survivors of childhood sexual abuse about their experiences of grooming and distinguished between behaviors intended to facilitate the abuse and post-abuse grooming behaviors that ensured the child's compliance and secrecy. Three factors have been identified as facilitating the abuser's success in grooming: (a) participants' vulnerabilities and the abuser's exploitation of those vulnerabilities; (b) the abuser's social position of trust and authority that minimized suspicion from families or communities; and (c) the broader social avoidant context in which the abuse occurred, which served to limit survivors' access to support (Plummer, 2018). One construct put forward to help understand how parents and other adults may avoid the reality of abuse is "cognitive dissonance" (Craven et al., 2006). A parent may be concerned about an adult's interest in their child. At the same time, they see this adult as a helper in the community, someone to be trusted. As Craven et al. note, a desire on the part of the parent to avoid this "cognitive dissonance" results in the parent changing their thoughts (dismissing their concerns by justifying the abuser's interest in their child) to be consistent with the behavior. Thus, according to van Dam (2001), offenders gain insider status long before they proceed to abusing the child.

Gaining knowledge about the dynamics involved in grooming is essential to combat many adults' reactions to children's (and adults') disclosures about CSA. Studies have shown that disbelief of the child or adult is not an uncommon reaction to disclosure of CSA (Collin-Vézina, De La Sablonnière-Griffin, Palmer, & Milne, 2015). Recipients of disclosure may struggle to understand why the child went along with the abusive behavior, why they did not cry for help, how the abuse could continue over many years and the child appear to behave in a "normal" manner toward the abuser. Self-blame and shame are common experiences of adult survivors as they reflect back on their experiences and question why they went along with the abuse (Berliner, 2018). According to

Berliner, in the absence of understanding how children are coerced into complying with the abuse, parents and professionals may struggle to believe the child – or adult – and even blame the individual, adding to this sense of guilt and shame. She argues that educating survivors about grooming can facilitate trauma processing; understanding the intentionality of the offender's behavior can alleviate shame and self-blame. This can also be useful for parents to enable them to support their children. Understanding grooming experiences can help professionals assist victims identify the seemingly innocuous incidents that trigger trauma responses, as many of these incidents are associated with the grooming process, rather than the abuse itself.

Knowledge about grooming is also important in the legal arena as differences in definitions of grooming can lead to discrepancies in sentencing in different jurisdictions. In New South Wales in Australia, the grooming offense is limited to either exposing a child to indecent material or giving the child intoxicating substances, while in Victoria the offense is inclusive of the establishment of the grooming relationship, the use of inducements and behaviors targeted at the environment (Plummer, 2018). Plummer found limited evidence in her sample of 11 individuals of the use of intoxicating substances and no evidence of exposure to indecent material. However, she did find support for grooming as including the relationship, the inducements, and environmental grooming, highlighting the need for more research in this field that would assist the legislators in defining grooming.

Recent court cases in Ireland have taken account of grooming when passing judgement in CSA cases. In *M.N. v. S.M.* [2005] 4 I.R. 461 at 472, Denham J. recognized the concept of a “continuum of sexual abuse.” She noted that where abuse takes place over a duration of years, the consequences of such abuse are greater than the sum of the individual assaults. In Ireland, it is now a criminal offense to pay, give, offer, promise to pay money or any other form of payment for the purpose of sexual exploitation (Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017). It is also an offense to meet a child for the purpose of sexual exploitation or to use information and communication technology to facilitate the sexual exploitation of a child (online grooming). However, there is no reference to the establishment of a relationship for the purpose of exploitation in Irish legislation.

According to Plummer (2018), there is limited research on male survivors' experiences of grooming. Each individual's experience of grooming is different as offenders adapt their strategies to each individual child (Craven et al., 2006). Due to the subtlety of grooming behaviors, it is often not possible to determine whether an act is conducted with the intention of facilitating sexual abuse without the benefit of hindsight (Winters & Jeglic, 2016), as the sexually motivated behavior is so similar to normal interactions between adults and children (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2007). More research on grooming, particularly from the perspective of those being groomed, can shed light on this process and inform both our understanding of the process itself and inform

professional responses to children, adolescents and adults who have been groomed. This manuscript focuses on one individual man's lived experience of being groomed as a child, adolescent, and adult, how this grooming process unfolded for him, his family and his community and how this impacted on disclosing the abuse. In particular, the case study seeks to illuminate the relational dynamics, from the perspective of the victim, that constituted the grooming process.

Method

Participant

Tom, aged 52 and married with three children at the time of this study, was a younger child in a family of 8 children; the family lived in a rural community in a small town in Ireland, where his parents struggled to make ends meet. Tom was abused by a local man (referred to in this article as Mr. Y), a school teacher and local band leader (of which both Tom and his father were a member). Mr. Y had spent time in a seminary training to be a priest, although he did not complete this training. He was therefore a well-known individual and person of status in the local community. Tom was sexually abused by Mr. Y from the age of 11 until he was 16 or 17. The sexual abuse consisted of inspecting Tom's genitals "for tics," masturbating Tom "to gather sperm samples" allegedly according to doctors' advice. The CSA occurred in the context of an exceptionally "close" relationship that extended over a period of several decades, through adolescence and adulthood. Tom first disclosed these experiences to his wife, approximately 31 years after the beginning of the abuse. He described the experience, "It just came out – erupted like a volcano." Tom was having a crisis in his work where he felt unable to cope. At that time, his son was approximately the same age as he had been when the abuse began.

Two years after disclosing to his wife, Tom confronted Mr. Y. He had no intention of making a formal complaint at that time. He audio-recorded this conversation and the transcript supports Tom's description of Mr. Y accepting responsibility for the abuse. He reassured Tom that it was not his fault, stating "Not your fault it never was. It was my fault." Tom believed that he would take this secret "to the grave." However, over time, Tom continued to experience significant psychological difficulties, he engaged in psychotherapy and some eighteen months later made a statement to the police. He felt at this time that Mr. Y needed to be made accountable for his actions and that reporting the matter would resolve his own psychological difficulties. The protracted legal proceedings took approximately 7 years,¹ resulting in the conviction and imprisonment of Mr. Y. According to Tom, Mr. Y had a previous conviction of sexually abusing young boys, the sexual abuse dating back to before the first episode of sexual abuse of Tom.

Procedure

This manuscript is based on a psychological assessment conducted as part of the legal proceedings in IEHC 414 (2015). The author met with Tom on two occasions and was given access to a range of materials including a DVD of a TV documentary in which Tom had participated, Tom's own notes about his experiences, a copy of his garda (police) statement, a victim impact statement, and an audiotape and typed transcript of the recording of the conversation he had with Mr. Y before he made a formal complaint. The interviews with Tom were semi-structured. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was used to elucidate Tom's story of the experience of grooming, the evolution of the relationship between himself and Mr. Y., how Tom made sense of his story, and how he came to make a formal complaint to the authorities.

Data were analyzed using the six stages of IPA analysis, outlined by Smith et al. (2009): immersion in the data through reading and re-reading the data; coding what is important to the participant; making connections between codes, and developing themes that capture the essence of the participant's story; examining the relationship between themes and identifying a hierarchy of themes, where appropriate; repeating these steps with each set of data; and finally, identifying the map of themes that best captures the participant's experience. Ethical approval was granted for the publication of this article by Dublin City University. Consent was obtained from Tom, both at the time of the assessment and two years after the completion of the court case. Tom was provided with the final draft of the paper prior to submission.

Findings

Four key themes were identified in the analysis of data from this case study: abuser as benefactor, a substitute parent, abuser as a mind controller, and facilitating system.

Abuser as benefactor

Tom described the experience of his relationship with Mr. Y as like having someone akin to a benefactor in his life, from childhood, through adolescence into adulthood. His first encounter with Mr. Y was at the age of 9 years. He accompanied his father to visit Mr. Y and was given 2 large chocolate bars. Tom described his awe at Mr. Y's generosity. Later, Tom joined a local band, where Mr. Y was the band leader; band practice was held three times a week. A routine quickly developed whereby Tom would travel home with Mr. Y. Mr. Y brought Tom and other boys on trips regularly, when he was 11, 12, 13 years of age, and bought him expensive gifts (an expensive bicycle). Tom believed Mr. Y was "the

greatest thing since sliced bread.” He recalls feeling he was “special” and that their relationship was special. When Tom did not achieve the school grades needed to pursue his chosen career, Mr. Y arranged for him to attend the school where he, Mr. Y, was teaching. This was some distance from Tom’s home and so he traveled in Mr. Y’s car each day to school. While attending college, Tom studied for his exams in Mr. Y’s “office.” Mr. Y got him his first job and when he moved away from home to work, Mr. Y drove him there on a Monday morning and collected him on a Friday evening. Mr. Y arranged his accommodation for him. Tom spent a lot of time at weekends with Mr. Y. When Tom started dating, he brought his girlfriend to see Mr. Y where they “spent many hours on the couch.” When he married, Mr. Y gifted Tom a site on his land so that he could build his house there. Mr. Y was best man at Tom’s wedding. According to Tom, he thought Mr. Y was God.

A substitute parent

Tom believed Mr. Y loved him as a son. According to Tom, the message from Mr. Y was: “Any problem you have, come to me, I’ll sort it out.” He was the person Tom went to whenever he needed advice or help. As a young teenager when Tom began to masturbate, Mr. Y was the person he went to for advice. Tom described “educational lectures” as being a common feature of the relationship. Mr. Y taught him about “the birds and the bees” claiming that it was better that he taught him rather than Tom learning it from “the lads in school.” When he suffered from a swollen testicle, it was to Mr. Y he turned for help. Following surgery, Mr. Y visited him daily in hospital. According to Tom, Mr. Y told him that he had consulted with the doctors and it was on the doctor’s advice that Mr. Y subsequently had to take regular sperm samples to check on his fertility. Mr. Y often brought Tom to the pub as an adolescent, and bought him a “Smithwicks shandy.” According to Tom, the conversation would always turn to sexual problems, or what was described by Mr. Y as Tom’s sexual problems, “he effectively stood into my father’s shoes.” At the age of 24 years, when he experienced his first episode of depression while living alone, it was to Mr. Y that Tom turned, to seek advice. According to Tom, Mr. Y attempted to divert his attention from his girlfriend by “turning me into a homosexual,” giving him autobiographical books to read about homosexuality (Tom had mentioned to Mr. Y that he was having doubts about his sexuality).

On balance, he believed Mr. Y had done more good than bad for him. Tom described how he rationalized the abusive behavior to himself: “I needed the attention. I was special. I needed him to survive, to manage my life. This is what I had to put up with in order to have that.” He felt a sense of obligation to and appreciation for what Mr. Y had done for him and his family “I wouldn’t be where I was without him.” He had nurtured an interest of traveling in Tom; Tom believed he would never have traveled the world in his adult years – Venice,

Paris, Monte Carlo, London – had it not been for Mr. Y. He described how he always balanced this with what he had done to him. He didn't recall ever saying to himself "that was wrong." Tom provided the audiotape and transcript of his conversation with Mr. Y when he confronted him about the abuse. Mr. Y spoke with a gentle reassuring tone, referring to Tom as "love" as he entreated him not to blame himself for what had happened. The dynamic of the caring adult was evident from this transcript – Mr. Y was very much still in the role of carer and presented as "wanting to do the best thing" for Tom.

Abuser as a mind controller

Tom described his belief as a child that Mr. Y was all knowing and controlled him in every way, even being able to read his mind. Mr. Y once told him he knew when he was masturbating "I can see it in your eyes." According to Tom, "he took away my ability to reason." When he thinks back on his own behavior, he castigates himself, seeing himself as "stupid." He described how he can listen to an argument and agree entirely, then listen to the counterargument and agree with that point of view entirely, contrasting this with his view of his own son who has such "definite views on everything." Tom now describes the experience as akin to being brainwashed. For the first few weeks that Mr. Y was in prison, Tom was plagued with thoughts of what he was doing, did he have a radio or TV? Or what was he having for dinner? This abated over time but at the time of interview, he noted "he's still in here (pointing to his head), I'll never get rid of him." He had thought that the court case "would be the end of it." "Far from it," he noted. He found himself counting the days that Mr. Y was in prison. He described how conversations so easily trigger memories because Mr. Y was such an important part of his life. He referred to the "tarnished memories" he now has, such as bringing his family abroad and on pointing out an iconic landmark to his children, realizing that Mr. Y had shown him this landmark and sexually abused him on that trip.

Tom's understanding of his ability to disclose the abuse and finally report it to the authorities was linked with what he saw as Mr. Y's gradual relinquishment of control over him and his own efforts to remove himself both physically and psychologically from Mr. Y's control. The sexual abuse stopped, according to Tom, because "(Mr. Y) lost interest in me completely." "He realised he had no more control over me, I was past my sell-by date." However, the emotional bond continued to the extent that Tom invited Mr. Y to be his best man and accepted a gift of land on which he built his home.

Facilitating system

Tom described the impact of his relationship with Mr. Y on relationships within his own family. Even if his own father was driving from an event, Tom traveled

with Mr. Y. This was accepted as the norm in the club community. Tom recalled having arguments with his father about this, when Tom insisted on accompanying Mr. Y, against his father's wishes. He said that his father would not have been able to get him away from Mr. Y's influence: "I wouldn't have come." Tom credited Mr. Y with "rescuing" his father from alcoholism. When he was 13 years old, he recalled going to Mr. Y's home and waiting for him until dark. Tom told him "my Daddy hasn't come home." Mr. Y went around to different pubs, brought Tom's father home and convinced him to seek treatment, driving him up to the hospital in a nearby city to get help.

Tom regularly slept over in Mr. Y's home, when some of the sexual abuse occurred, insofar as Mr. Y would waken him and masturbate him "to take sperm samples." He didn't recall ever asking for permission from his parents or anyone at home ever questioning this. When Tom was hospitalized for the operation on his testicles, Mr. Y was his first visitor. When his parents arrived at the hospital, Mr. Y was sitting on his bed. According to Tom, this upset his mother. Tom recalled one occasion when he was brought for a tetanus injection following an accident. Mr. Y brought him home after the injection and his older sister then aged approx 14/15 answered the door. His sister recently told Tom that she had challenged Mr. Y at that time, saying "I know what you're at. It's not right' and that in reply he had said "Yeah, but who's going to believe you over me?" According to Tom, many people in his family and the local community suspected something untoward in the relationship with Mr. Y. No one (except his mother) was surprised when he finally made it public, many of his family saying they already knew.

Beyond the family, Tom described how accepted their relationship was in the band club and the local community. In showering favors on Tom, Mr. Y also treated other boys in a similar fashion, buying them gifts, leading Tom to believe this was "normal." When inspecting his genitals on a camping trip, Mr. Y called each boy into the tent individually, claiming he needed to check their genitals for "tics." Whether he inspected each boy's genitals is unknown; nevertheless, it served the purpose of confirming for Tom that nothing untoward was happening. From Tom's perspective, much of this behavior did not appear to be singularly directed at Tom. None of the boys spoke of this among themselves, to Tom's knowledge.

Mr. Y was open about his relationship with Tom in front of Tom's peers. He would sometimes wait outside Tom's school to collect him. Tom recalled feeling embarrassed about walking away from his friends toward Mr. Y, wondering what they were thinking about him, but never said it at the time. According to Tom, "He took me away from my family, took me away from my friends." Tom noted that in recent conversations with other band members, he discovered that some of his bandmates thought of him as Mr. Y's "toyboy," believing something sexual was going on. He recalled one night when he went into the local chipper for a bag of chips where one lad from a group called out to him "hey (Tom), will

you ask (Mr.Y) has he got any spare Vaseline?” He went into the chipper and cried but subsequently got into the car with Mr. Y and said nothing about it.

Tom described how Mr. Y was “still abusing me today” through his public denial in the locality that he has sexually abused Tom, indicating that “he’s been stitched up,” despite the public trial and successful prosecution. Tom still hears local people referring to the court case: “Isn’t it awful the way all that stuff was said about (Mr. Y),” implying he was falsely accused.

Discussion

Tom never disclosed the sexual abuse in childhood. Mr. Y, perceived by Tom as benefactor, parent substitute, omnipotent, and omniscient, lavished him with presents, money, holidays, got him his first job in the city, “rescued” his father from alcoholism, and gifted him the land on which he built his first family home. The abusive nature of the behavior was never acknowledged by either party – there was always a rationale given for the behavior – i.e. that it was for the boy’s welfare. Many studies in recent years have highlighted the delay in disclosure, particularly for boys and men, with many not disclosing CSA until adulthood. McGee, Garavan, deBarra, Byrne, and Conroy (2002) found that 47% of Irish adults had never told anyone about childhood CSA prior to the survey. McElvaney (2002) described delays of 40–60 years in a small sample of 10 adults (seven of whom were men) who made formal complaints to the police of childhood CSA. Studies on disclosure have consistently highlighted the disproportionate delays in disclosure evident in samples of boys and men (Alaggia, Collin-Vezina, & Lateef, 2017; Collin-Vézina et al., 2015; Easton, 2013; Easton, Saltzman, & Willis, 2014; King & Woollett, 1997; LeMaigre, Taylor, & Gittoes, 2017; McElvaney, 2015; O’Leary & Barber, 2008). The relationship with the abuser in intrafamilial abuse has been found to be a predictor of delayed disclosure in children and adolescents (Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003). Although grooming behaviors have been described as ensuring that abuse is less likely to be reported (Canter, Hughes, & Kirby, 1998), no studies have investigated the impact that relationships with non-familial abusers, which are nurtured through the grooming process, has on disclosure. In this case study, through examining the psychological dynamics operating in the grooming process, we can better understand how and why Tom was unable to disclose the abuse until he did.

The findings from this case study suggest that two key relationship dynamics are worthy of consideration: the traumatic bond evident in the grooming relationship and systemic factors that facilitate the grooming process, the subsequent abuse, and the inhibition to disclose and report the abuse. Traumatic bonding in this study is evident in the child, adolescent, and adult’s perception of the abuser as benefactor, substitute parent and mind controller while the facilitating system is seen in how the family, and local community

response contributed to the delay in disclosure and reporting the abuse to the authorities. Understanding these dynamics will better enable professionals from child protection, therapeutic, and legal systems to respond to victims of grooming from an informed position that takes account both of the relationship between the child and the abuser and the various ecological layers of influence on the disclosure process (Collin-Vézina et al., 2015).

As a younger child in a large family where his father had alcohol problems and the family were socioeconomically disadvantaged, Tom was vulnerable when he first met Mr. Y, a man who showered him with attention from the very first encounter in a relationship that depicted him as, in Tom's words, a substitute father figure. The combined dynamic of building the child's trust by showering attention on him while gradually violating the child's boundaries is reflected in the literature on grooming. As Wolf (1985) points out, children are groomed to want to be around the person who is abusing them. The use of bribes in the form of gifts, treats, and trips is used not only to gain access to the child but to maintain a child's compliance (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Christiansen & Blake, 1990; Plummer, 2018). The "special relationship" described by Tom is also reflected in the narratives of Plummer's participants: "I liked the attention I was getting from him" (Larry, E, p. 48); "I certainly had the impression that he loved me" (Adrian, E, p. 48).

Traumatic bonding

The construct of traumatic bonding, it is suggested here, helps us understand how the nature of the relationship nurtured by the grooming process impacts on disclosure. Two key features represent the distinguishing characteristics of a relationship that is described as a traumatic bond: firstly, the relationship involves emotional dependency and a power differential; and secondly, the abuse is intermittent in that periods of abuse alternate with periods of non-abusive, if not loving, periods of interactions (Berliner & Conte, 1990; deYoung & Lowry, 1992). Such emotional bonding has been described between concentration camp internees and prison guards (Bettelheim, 1941), hostages and their captors in kidnapping situations (Kuleshnyk, 1984; McClure, 1978), and domestic violence relationships (Dutton & Painter, 1993). Graham and Rawlings (1991) have used the concept to explain the seemingly illogical actions of battered women who either stay with or return to their abusive husbands.

deYoung and Lowry (1992) describe characteristic feelings of intense attachment, cognitive distortions and behavioral strategies on both the part of the victim and the victimizer that paradoxically strengthen and maintain the bond. The emotional dependency explains why the child may continue to experience and express positive and even protective feelings about the abuser (Golden, 1990). The particular features of abuse that appear to contribute to this phenomenon are the prolonged, unpredictable and repetitive nature of the abuse.

Behavior theory helps to explain the conditioning of the child who experiences abuse. The bonding is reinforced through the intermittent schedule whereby both abuse and “love” are perpetrated in the form of a reward/punishment schedule that instills strong behavioral patterns that are difficult to extinguish (Dutton & Painter, 1993). It has also been described as a “physiological imprint” that violence leaves on the person (Van der Kolk, 2014).

In reflecting back on his experiences, Tom described his powerlessness, berating himself for his “stupidity.” The literature on traumatic bonding also illuminates the struggle that victims engage in to make sense of the abusive experiences. Tom’s accepting without question Mr. Y’s explanation for the abusive behavior, embedded as it was within apparent caretaking behavior, his experience of “sex education talks,” which served to normalize the experience, notwithstanding the lack of a logical explanation, and blaming himself for the abuse are all recognized strategies in grooming behavior (Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2006; Craven et al., 2006). These lead victims to not even realize they are being abused (McAlinden, 2013), making it difficult to identify at the time and in themselves exacerbate feelings of self-blame.

In the grooming process, the victim’s sense of agency is compromised by the perpetrator’s “kind” gestures (Herman, 1992). The perpetrator becomes a “source of solace” for the child. For Tom to reject the relationship, he would also have had to reject all the positive benefits he perceived that he got from this relationship – the trips, the gifts, having someone in his life who he believed cared about him. It is noteworthy how Tom came to the point of disclosing the abuse. His first disclosure, to his wife, was precipitated by significant psychological distress, reflective of McElvaney, Greene, and Hogan (2012) “pressure cooker effect” whereby pressure builds up and individuals disclose unintentionally, more from an inability to hold it in any longer than from any conscious decision to disclose. A number of features of Tom’s life had changed by the time he made a formal complaint of sexual abuse: he had confided in his wife, his son was of an age similar to his own age at the time he was abused, he had engaged in psychotherapy, and finally, he had removed himself from the physical orbit of Mr. Y in that he had gradually reduced contact with him. He had thus made several attempts to remove himself both physically and psychologically from the control of Mr. Y, although this is an issue he continued to struggle with to the present day. Nevertheless, his increasing sense of indignation and outrage at what had happened to him are emotions that have been documented as features that are absent from those who have experienced sexual abuse and result in a forfeiture of agency, thus contributing to non-disclosure. According to Stein (2012), drained of self-righteous anger, the child and adult victim is “rendered impotent in the face of incursions into their physical and mental integrity” (p.40).

Drawing on the concept of traumatic bonding in understanding the grooming process is particularly helpful given the focus in traumatic bonding literature not

only on child-adult relationships but also on adult-adult relationships. Professionals – child protection, mental health professionals, law enforcement and legal – continue to struggle to understand the reluctance of adults to report abusive experiences. Tom’s case illustrates how the grooming relationship evolved across the lifespan. During childhood, Mr. Y showered him with attention, gifts and outings; during adolescence, Mr. Y was his confidante, his career advisor, his chauffeur who gave him daily lifts to school; and during adulthood, Mr. Y was the person he brought his girlfriend to, who provided him with the land on which to build his home. Thus, as Tom developed from child to adolescent to adult, so too did the grooming relationship with Mr. Y evolve according to Tom’s developmental needs. Mr. Y, in adapting his response to Tom according to Tom’s developmental needs, reinforced the bond and consolidated his standing in Tom’s eyes. Although Tom’s needs changed as he got older, his need for affection remained. While Tom was glad of the abuse ending, he also described it as a rejection of sorts “[Mr. Y] lost interest in me completely. I was past my sell-by date.” Mr. Y was able to capitalize on Tom’s relational needs until Tom succeeded in having these relational needs met in other ways in his life.

Facilitating system

Tom was particularly vulnerable to this relationship developing in this way as he experienced a strained relationship with his own father. Sex offenders target children who are vulnerable, for example those with a poor relationship with their parents (Berliner & Conte, 1990). Offenders capitalize on a child’s vulnerabilities to build trust and dependency with the child and his or her family, which is often facilitated by their social position (Gallagher, 2000; Sullivan & Beech, 2004). As an individual with authority both in respect of Tom’s family, and the local community, Mr. Y’s social position as a teacher and an ex-seminarian would have garnered him the respect of others. Clearly, the abuser’s position vis a vis the child’s family as a benefactor and person of standing in the local community facilitated both his unregulated access to Tom and his assurance that no one would object. According to Craven et al. (2006) “Offenders groom the community so well that if a victim discloses their abuse, the community may support the offender rather than the victim, because they deem the offender to be more believable than the child” (p.293).

According to Plummer (2018), more calculated approaches are required for extrafamilial offenders (McAlinden, 2013) than for those who abuse a child within their own family. Access to children is often facilitated by positions of status or authority in organizations (Goode, McGee, & O’Boyle, 2003; Hartill, 2009; Holt & Massey, 2012). In Plummer’s (2018) study, those who were abused by someone outside the family described grooming strategies such as befriending survivors’ parents, giving their parents gifts, or spending time with the family. In Tom’s case, the relationship between Mr. Y and Tom’s family did not appear to be close;

however, it was clear that neither Tom's mother nor his father felt able to stand up to Mr. Y, for example when his father wanted to give him a lift home from band practice and Tom insisted on traveling with Mr. Y, or when his mother was upset at seeing Mr. Y in the hospital when they went to visit Tom after his operation. Intrafamilial survivors in Plummer's study described how their abusers focused on gaining the trust of their community through involvement in community organizations. This often serves to distract the "perceptions of others about potential risk" (McAlinden, 2013, p. 2). Abusers' standing in the community has long been recognized as a deterrent for children to disclose experiences of abuse (Colton, Roberts, & Vanstone, 2010; Craven et al., 2006; Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne, 1995; Goode et al., 2003; Katz & Barnett, 2015; McAlinden, 2006; McElvaney et al., 2012; Olsen, Daggs, Ellevold, & Rogers, 2007; Smallbone & Wortley, 2001).

In addition to providing treats as a means of accessing Tom and ensuring compliance, Tom also described Mr. Y's attempts (and success) in isolating him from his friends and family. According to Olsen et al. (2007) "the child's vulnerabilities" (e.g., lack of social support, desire for affection) coupled with attention from the offender separates them from sources of support (family, friends) such that the child becomes "more susceptible to abuse" and "more entrenched in the relationship" (p. 243). Drawing children away from home serves a dual function for the abuser: to gain access to the child and to physically isolate them from other potential sources of support (Plummer, 2018). Psychological isolation is achieved through relationship development. Two of Plummer's participants described psychological isolation through relationship development with the abuser: "I was spending less and less time at home, more and more time with him, and...the trips continued" (Ruben, E, p. 48).

Less has been written about the extent to which others in the community, such as peers, may have been aware that something was going on but did not speak out about it, the "bystander effect"; thus, isolating the child/adolescent even further through engendering feelings of shame. In Tom's case, his peers were aware of the "special relationship" between himself and Mr. Y and based on comments shouted at him, it seems safe to assume that it was known this relationship was sexual. Studies of sexual abuse that took place in institutional settings, such as schools or residential settings, have described a culture of sexual abuse (McElvaney, 2002). As one of Plummer's (2018) participants noted "I was terrified that the other boys and that might find out. I saw him in the playground and if it looked like he was coming my way, I'd just ... get away from there" (John, E, p. 51). Another participant described how people in the local community knew what was happening, "They knew. And this is the era. People knew, and it was a joke" (Butch, E, p. 50). Thus, as in the bystander effect, the non-intervention of others contributed to Tom's victimization and inability to disclose. The overt behavior of Mr. Y both in front of Tom's peers and in the local community constituted grooming of the environment and consolidated a belief on Tom's part that the behavior was "normal."

Conclusion

Tom was a 52 year old man who experienced child sexual abuse and emotional abuse in the context of a traumatic relationship with Mr. Y, a neighbor and person of standing in his community. The concept of traumatic bonding helps to elucidate the process underpinning an individual's entrapment in the relationship with the abuser, ensuring compliance, silence, and ambivalence about their relationship with the abuser and their own part in the abusive experience. Previous literature highlights the emotionally dependent relationship common in intrafamilial sexual abuse contexts that serves to engender shame and responsibility for the abuse, contributing to an inhibition to disclose the experience (Campbell, 2009; Conte, Wolf, & Smith, 1989; Craven et al., 2006; Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Katz & Barnett, 2015; McAlinden, 2006; Olsen et al., 2007; Smallbone & Wortley, 2001). Less is known about the relational aspects of the grooming process for children abused by extra-familial figures. Most research has focused on describing grooming behaviors and drawn on the perspective of the perpetrator. Examining the lived experience of grooming from one adult male's perspective highlights two key dynamics that are suggested as core features of the grooming process that in turn contribute to difficulties in disclosure: conceptualizing the relationship between victim and perpetrator as a traumatic bond and highlighting the influence of the facilitating system in both facilitating the abuse and facilitating non-disclosure. It is clear that the relationship described by Tom can be considered a traumatic bond whereby abusive experiences were intermittent in the context of a power differential relationship that involved emotional dependency. The sexual abuse described by Tom was intermittent over a period of years and always couched under the guise of caring, shrouded in duplicity and apparent concern for Tom's welfare. The sexual abuse took place in the context of long term individual and community grooming whereby Mr. Y acted as Tom's benefactor to whom he turned to for his emotional needs. The developmental nature of the grooming process has also received limited attention in the literature, focusing primarily on the adult-child relationship and how the adult grooms the child. Tom's experience of grooming throughout childhood, adolescence and well into adulthood and his perception of his relationship with Mr. Y helps to elucidate the ongoing relational needs that can be met in the grooming relationship. Tom continued to feel a sense of gratitude toward Mr. Y as an adult: he would never have got to visit the countries if it had not been for Mr. Y. Tom was and still feels at the time of this study, to some extent indebted to Mr. Y for his generosity and his interest in him. His perception of Mr. Y as benefactor, parent substitute and mind controller set the context for the sexual abuse to occur and for a very high likelihood that Tom would not disclose the abuse.

In addition to the traumatic bond Tom experienced in this relationship with Mr. Y, it is clear that the grooming of the environment also contributed

to Tom's silence over the years. Tom was always clear that this was not something he wished to disclose – his own sense of guilt and self-blame about the abuse was sufficient to act as a strong inhibitor to disclosure. This was, however, coupled with his sense of obligation and appreciation for the good that Mr. Y had done for him and his family. The abusive behavior was in many ways normalized by Mr. Y in the early years of the abuse period – a) it was done in the boys' interests; and b) it was happening to all of them. Clearly, many people suspected that he was being sexually abused yet no one intervened. As in the case of bullying, this bystander effect contributes to the abuse continuing and the silencing of the victim. The lack of any surprise reaction (with the exception of Tom's mother who was the only one he described as being surprised when he told her of the abuse) underscores the "normality" of his experience. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between mechanisms involved in grooming a child and those involved in grooming the environment. Tom's story highlights in particular the relational needs that can be met in the grooming relationship. A focus on environmental grooming can mask these relational needs.

It must be acknowledged here that case study methodology has its limitations. As a source of scientific inference, it does not meet the requirements of experimental investigation, yet historically, it has contributed significantly to the fields of clinical psychology, psychotherapy and stimulated subsequent research (Kazdin, 1992). As an intensive investigation of an individual, it can provide detailed descriptions and explore the meaning-making process that the individual engages in to make sense of his life experiences. This in turn can help us understand others who have had similar experiences. Caution is needed in drawing inferences here about either individuals who have been sexually abused or the grooming process. Use of the case study, however, can contribute to the development of theoretical constructs as is evident in the discussion above on elucidating the experience of grooming and the relational aspects of this process from the perspective of the victim. In exploring the systemic influences in particular, it is important to acknowledge the potential cultural differences that may pertain between Tom's context and that of others. Tom grew up in a small rural area in Ireland; cultural norms in relation to authority figures in the community, the role of religion, and attitudes to homosexuality were not explored in this case study and may have a bearing on the impact of facilitating systems on Tom's experiences and those of others from different cultural contexts.

Plummer (2018) suggests that there is a distinction between grooming behaviors pre-abuse and post-abuse that serve different functions and are experienced differently. For example, she points out that maintaining secrecy and maintaining compliance are both fulfilled through inducements and relationship development, while efforts to deter disclosure are realized through emotional or violent coercion. The use of coercion and verbal threats such as suggesting the

child will get into trouble, will be harmed or abandoned by the abuser during and following the abuse is well documented (Elliott et al., 1995; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Smallbone & Wortley, 2001). However, it is important to note that for many children, threats are not necessary, particularly where there is a relationship such as that which existed between Tom and Mr. Y and that this situation may pertain well into adulthood. Any theoretical framework for understanding the impact of grooming needs to take account of how the grooming process may change as the child develops through adolescence into adulthood and the relational needs that are being met in the grooming relationship. The grooming process is an essentially unique experience for each individual. Learning from case studies such as that presented here helps to illuminate this uniqueness and the complex psychological dynamics inherent in the experience of being groomed. In particular, such learning will hopefully influence how others respond to those who have experienced grooming with more empathy and understanding in relation to how the traumatic bond that has been deliberately nurtured by the abuser can lead to the child, adolescent or adult wanting to maintain the relationship above all else, not seeing the behavior as abusive, being reluctant to disclose or report the abuse, and following disclosure, feeling responsibility for colluding with the abuse and the secret.

In Ireland, as a result of the case brought by Tom to the High Court in Ireland, the understanding of the impact of childhood sexual abuse has been extended to acknowledge the “continuum of oppression,” incorporating not only the abuse experience itself but the ongoing relationship between the child and the abuser that facilitated the abuse. This was confirmed by Justice Michael White as a tort in itself:

In this case, the mental trauma suffered by the plaintiff, is not just confined to the acts of assault and battery, but arises also as a result of the consequences of the breach of trust of the defendant who had played such an important role in the plaintiff's life. The courts objective consideration of the purpose of the defendant's kindness, concern and considerable investment of time, to the period when the abuse stopped was for the insidious purpose of satisfying his own sexual desire. For those reasons, it is appropriate to extend the law of tort, to cover what is now a well-recognised and established pattern of wrongdoing, where a child is befriended, where trust is established and where that friendship and trust is used to perpetrate sexual abuse. (High Court Judgement, IEHC 414, (2015), 22 of, p. 26).

One individual's story can make a difference.

Note

1. This judgement was delivered in 2011; a subsequent civil case was taken against Mr.Y and while the outcome of that case was delivered in 2015, Tom is still awaiting financial compensation.

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Disclosure of interest

The author was engaged on a private basis to conduct the psychological assessment on which this paper was based.

Ethical standards and informed consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Written informed consent for the publication of this article was obtained from "Tom."

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