

Predatory Grooming and Epistemology with Lauren Leydon-Hardy

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University. Please note that this episode contains discussions of sexual exploitation and other forms of predatory abuse.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Single Still]

Grooming is a practice used to lure victims into an exploitative relationship. The philosopher Lauren Leydon-Hardy explores the ways that predatory grooming can interfere with the very way that a person thinks about themselves and the world. She calls this form of harm "epistemic infringement."

Lauren Leydon-Hardy: The right way to understand the locus of harm in epistemic infringement is much more globally at your epistemic agency. So it really is the person qua epistemic agent that is the locus of the epistemic harm. And so, one way that I talk about this is victims of epistemic infringement can become really robustly epistemically estranged from themselves. So there's a way in which epistemic infringement can change you.

Christiane: Stay tuned for our discussion on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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[interview begins]

Christiane: Welcome to the show, Lauren Leydon-Hardy. We're here to discuss your piece, "Predatory Grooming and Epistemic Infringement." So there are a couple phrases in the title that we probably need to talk about just a little bit before we dig into the details. So let's start with predatory grooming. Could you give us just a broad strokes definition of what predatory grooming is?

Lauren Leydon-Hardy: Predatory grooming I think is most recognizable to folks who haven't thought about this very much, if we can point to some sort of really high profile cases of serial sexual misconduct. So I think most recently the case of Larry Nassar, who was a physician involved with USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University.

So grooming is that preparatory process. Grooming is not the downstream exploitation. So in Nassar's case that downstream exploitation was sexual in nature. Grooming is the process that would-be predators invoke in trying to situate their target individual or individuals. A metaphor that was really helpfully suggested to me by forensic psychologist Ian Elliott is, "inoculated," so

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that they're inoculated against the introduction of either goal relevant information or goal relevant conduct. So it's a process that involves several behavioral mechanisms that can interact with one another in complicated ways that we can talk about the details. But the goal is to situate a targeted individual such that they're immune to or in a way unaware of the downstream exploitation that grooming is used in the service of preparing a target individual for. I'll just add one more detail. One thing that's really important about predatory grooming is the downstream exploitation, whatever it may be, whether it's sexual in nature, financial in nature, whatever it may be, the process of grooming is aimed at eliciting a response of either complicity or participation in that eventual exploitation.

Christiane: So something that I found fascinating reading about your article is, on the first page, I'm learning that predatory grooming isn't always about sexual exploitation, although it often is. It doesn't always involve children, although it often does. It can involve elders, it can involve high school students who are being recruited by the army. And so if it can happen to almost anyone and it can encompass things beyond sexual exploitation, what are some of the other key characteristics of predatory grooming?

Lauren Leydon-Hardy: It's in a way a difficult question to think about for that very reason. So because the goals of predatory grooming can be so disparate, it can be financial exploitation, it can be sexual exploitation, it can be the sheer joy of exerting an undue degree of influence over another person or over persons, it can be political in nature. So the goals are so disparate, which means that the target audience or target individual or individuals, those groups or those targets are going to be so variable. And so what that forces us to do when we're trying to think about what is a maximally generalizable model of grooming going to involve? It forces us to step back and really tackle it at a pretty high handed theoretical level. The forensic-psychological model of grooming that I like and that I have worked with comes from this work that Ian Elliott, who's a forensic psychologist with the UK Ministry of Justice has been doing.

And Elliott noticed something that I noticed when I first started trying to think about "What is predatory grooming?" and seems like there's a distinctively epistemic element here, what is that? He also noticed that when you dig into the empirical literature, you get all these different models because people are zeroing in on really hyper focused examples of grooming. So you'll get a robust literature on predatory grooming online for the purposes of sexual exploitation for boys between the ages of 12 and 15, super hyper specific little pieces of the grooming picture. But the big grooming picture is so much more complicated. And so Elliott tried to develop an actually generalizable model. Of course, even in his own work, he was initially conceiving of the model as just being constrained to grooming for the purposes of sexual exploitation.

We've corresponded about this. I think we both agree that there's no reason to think that his model or a model very, very similar to it won't generalize both just across all cases of grooming for sexual exploitation, but also to grooming for other disparate target exploitations. And so what that model involves is, first of all four behavioral mechanisms. So the first behavioral mechanism is, we'll start with security management. So security management are those behaviors in the context of a grooming relationship that aim at protecting the true nature of the relationship from

third party disclosure, but also at protecting the true, or what I would say is the illicit nature of the relationship from becoming especially clear in that dyadic context, so in the context just between groomer and groomee. So security management might involve cultivating relationships with the people around the groomee, groomee's parents, groomee's friends, groomee's other mentors.

It might involve just double checking that groomee doesn't leave her phone unlocked on the kitchen table when she goes to the washroom. We don't want to see those text messages popping up for other people, so that kind of security management. A second behavioral mechanism is rapport building. So rapport building encompasses those behaviors in the context of the grooming relationship that are all about establishing that bedrock connection. So it's about establishing shared interests, establishing shared experiences, building that set of resources that groomer can draw on in really emphasizing the ways in which this relationship is special. This relationship is deep, this relationship isn't like those other relationships.

A third behavioral mechanism involves incentivization. So incentivization, these are the behaviors in that relationship that give groomee extra reason to want to be a part of it, to want to stay in it. So this is going to be related to rapport building, since having a solid rapport with somebody is itself incentivizing and engaging in that relationship. But it's also going to involve things like gifts, special compliments, extra time.

A fourth and really important behavioral mechanism in all of this is disinhibition. Disinhibition is that behavioral mechanism that serves to turn up the heat on groomee ever expressing reluctance or resistance. And in particular to expressing reluctance or resistance to the introduction of goal relevant information or goal relevant behaviors. So disinhibition can look like a lot of things. Natural disinhibitors might include things like the introduction of alcohol or drugs. More complicated or maybe more nuanced examples of disinhibiting behavior can involve things like expressions of woundedness. So just really quick example, suppose groomer introduces an incentive like "I'm going to pay your way to this conference, you're a student, you can't afford to go, this is a great professional opportunity, so I'm going to pay your way." It's doubly incentivizing. There's an opportunity and there is an offer for special funds, but I don't want you to tell anybody that I'm going to pay your way to the conference. If groomee gets a little ooky about that last move, oo, I don't know, the special treatment and the secrecy of it makes me a little uncomfortable, the groomer has an opportunity now to respond.

So this is an example of what forensic psychologists call the test-operate-test cycle. So in test-operate-test, what a predator will do is they'll engage in one of those behavioral mechanisms and then they'll sit back and they'll see what information they get. They'll test, they're just seeing what information they get back. And based on the information that they get back, they'll operate, they'll cycle into another one of those behavioral mechanisms. So in our hypothetical case here, where the groomer operates, groomer incentivizes, and then the groomer engages in security management, "keep this a secret," and then they get that information back, oo, this makes groomee a little uncomfortable. Now the groomer has to

operate again. So they tested, they got that information, a little bit like a thermometer takes the temperature of the room, and now they have to decide how to respond.

Well, they could respond with disinhibiting behavior like feigning being wounded, “oh my—I can't believe you would suggest that I would ever be inappropriate in that way, wow.” That reaction is disinhibiting. That reaction sends a signal to groomee, you just expressed a little bit of discomfort, you just pushed back, you tried to set a boundary and that did not go well. And now what's at risk? All of those incentivizing opportunities, the specialness of the relationship, because there's been all this rapport building. So disinhibition, it's those behaviors that in different ways put pressure on groomee not to resist the kind of controlling, overriding force that the groomer has.

Christiane: This I think matches with things that I've experienced and things that maybe folks in the audience might have experienced before. And certainly most of us have heard stories about Larry Nasser and Jerry Sandusky and how they went down that checklist of, test, operate, tested. But what was new to me was hearing your account of how predatory grooming is an epistemic kind of abuse. And just for new listeners to the show, epistemology means related to knowledge or knowing. So it's what we believe, how we know things, what we know, things like that. So you're saying that this is an epistemic type of abuse. So just briefly outline for us how it's an epistemic abuse.

Lauren Leydon-Hardy: So I always want to say two things can be true at once. And I think it's really clear that grooming and other social phenomena that I would describe as epistemically infringing, we can get to that in a minute. But these are also moral harms too, that there are clear moral, in some cases political, harms that also come to these victims and survivors. What my contribution, I think is to thinking about the collection of social phenomena that I'm interested in, is in trying to isolate the distinctively epistemic harm. Because I think one thing that comes out really vividly to me, obviously I'm an epistemologist, so I see the epistemology where it leaps out at me from the world. But what I see when I listen to and when I read the testimony of survivors of predatory grooming, I see them reaching always for the language and the resources to articulate, not the downstream violation. Remember predatory grooming, it's a preparatory process. It's not equivalent to this sexual misconduct. It's not equivalent to the financial misconduct or in elderly care, in dependency settings, the medical misconduct. That's the downstream goal. That's the thing that victims are being prepared for, that they're being inoculated against recognizing right through the grooming process.

Grooming itself, I think has this distinctively epistemic harm. And one place where we see it is in victim testimony where what they want so much to be able to articulate is how it could be possible that one could have an experience, in the Nassar case, as of being serially sexually abused for many of Nassar's survivors over the course of years without understanding the abuse as such. And so one place where thinking about predatory grooming really comes apart from other social-epistemological concepts, particularly social-epistemological concepts that are geared towards illuminating various kinds of epistemic harms is in the case of grooming victims, as they come into what I sometimes call the fog, what we can think about somewhat more, I think technically as a unknowing, as they come into that place of unknowing with respect to their

experience, they're actually drawing on the very concept of what's happening then to argue themselves out of a clear picture of it.

So this is unlike what Miranda Fricker has called hermeneutical injustice, where there's just a gap in their conceptual resources so they don't know what to call what they're experiencing. It's not that. They have the concept, the concept is deployed in the internal argument for the conclusion, "that's not happening to me."

Christiane: So you laid out some of the stages or the four stages of predatory grooming, and so help us understand how that fog enters into each of those four stages or how each of those four stages might be epistemically harming the victim.

Lauren Leydon-Hardy: One technical point of clarification, I'm not sure how important this is, but just out of an abundance of respect for my colleague, Ian Elliott, and the work that he's done. So where Elliott talks about things coming in stages, well, there's phase one, which involves the four behavioral mechanisms that I sketched earlier where the test-operate-test mechanism is enabling the groomer to reactively cycle back and forth between those behavioral mechanisms as the groomer is continually getting new and more information about receptivity of groomee. Phase two is what Elliott calls the disclosure phase. So groomer can test disclosures and based on receptivity in the disclosure phase, groomer can decide whether or not, okay, it's time to end grooming process and go to downstream exploitation or groomer has cycled out of phase one where I'm engaged in these behavioral mechanisms, cycled into phase two, tested some disclosure. Disclosure didn't go super well, I'm going to cycle back to phase one and go back to those initial behavioral mechanisms.

So the phases are really, there's the behavioral mechanisms and then there's disclosure. And everywhere, either within phase one between those four behavioral mechanisms, we're using that test, operate, test strategy to get information. And occasionally we're cycling over into phase two disclosure and seeing how that's going to go. And then, so it's this big unwieldy complicated model. But I think when you see the structure of the model and then you look at the cases, it's like, oh my gosh, this is so illustrative, this is so illuminating.

Okay, so the question was going back to the four behavioral mechanisms, where do we see the epistemology and the cultivation of the unknowing through them. So good. So I think that there's a lot to be said here. For one, I think just starting with security management, again, there's a lot to be said for having your perspective in the context of a relationship be really isolated from the community's perspective on the nature of that relationship. A lot of what we see in security management really is about isolation. So in the context of elderly care dependency studies, where what we often see is in-home workers isolating elderly folks from their family saying she can't come to the phone right now, or he's not well enough to receive visitors or something like that, that isolation, it both serves to just give direct control, direct power over somebody.

But it also I think has this epistemic upshot, which is you can't check your intuitions against those of other people you trust when you're isolated. If you are discouraged from sharing certain aspects of your relationship with somebody or certain experiences in the context of your

relationship with somebody through manipulation or something like that, you are alone with those experiences and you're alone with the responsibility to think about how to interpret them. So there's one example that I discuss in the paper that comes from the first personal testimony of an actress, Eliza Dushku, who describes having been abused as a child actress on set by, I believe it was one of the stunt coordinators. And one of the things that Dushku recalls is that after she was abused by this man, he referred to what had happened as their secret.

So this is ours, now we share it, now we have equal responsibility for this. And he says, "we probably shouldn't tell anybody, so it's ours, we shouldn't tell anybody." So there's security management there. There's also in a really grotesque way, some rapport building, because remember, rapport building also involves just those shared experiences. So the fact of it being ours means that we're using this abuse to also deepen the relationship. And the fact of it being ours means I also get some security management out of this, so we shouldn't tell anybody. So now, this child is in a position where to understand the nature of the experience, she is either on her own or with her abuser, who then can shape the way she can think about it. So there's a distinctively epistemic element there in security management.

Another way that we can think about how the specific behavioral mechanisms play this important epistemic role in the inner life of victims is to think about the ways that the behavioral mechanisms can be leveraged off of one another using that test, operate, test mechanism. So I want to go back again to thinking about disinhibiting behaviors. So let's go back to, in the paper, I call this "professor-student conference." So again, we're imagining the professor has offered to pay the student's way to a really exciting conference, a professional opportunity, but that professor has asked student to keep the funding a secret from their colleagues. And student expresses some discomfort about this. Professor responds by feigning woundedness and rescinding the offer of support. So that's the disinhibiting piece of things, "I'm so wounded, how could you suggest that?" And also, incentives are now being rescinded.

Now think about what that would feel like from students' perspective. It's very easy to imagine student feeling a lot of self doubt, maybe some regret, maybe some sadness. That was really exciting for a second there, I thought I was going to get to go to this big conference. Then I experienced this queasy feeling of discomfort, which I gave voice to. That led to that exciting thing being rescinded. Also, now it looks like my relationship with this person who before was willing to do this really exciting thing for me might have taken a hit because was I right? Was that actually inappropriate that professor asked me to keep that funding a secret? That on its own is an emotional roller coaster. But now I want to imagine right after the introduction of the disinhibitor, imagine professor says, "All right, let's just move past it." And introduces another exciting professional incentive.

"Let's coauthor a paper," or "let's talk about your dissertation," or whatever. That emotional roller coaster itself can be epistemically unsettling in as much as it's super disorienting. The emotional roller coaster feeling of it, the up and down, left is right feeling of having disincentives leveraged immediately off of incentives in the context of a relationship that again, always there's this

rapport building so the relationship feels really special, it feels really meaningful. That can make it really hard to trust your own judgment, particularly when that's happening systematically. So the individual behavioral mechanisms can play a role in disorienting or disrupting epistemic competencies going forward. We can imagine student thinking, well, now this makes me uncomfortable, but the last time I felt uncomfortable that went off the rail, so I just shouldn't say anything about this, I just don't need to speak up.

And notice too that, that silence, that that unwillingness to give voice to one's feelings or anxieties of discomfort going forward, that's not merely practical. That also means that certain kinds of conversations, certain kinds of hypotheses are not going to be entertained, are not going to be discussed, are not going to be explored. So just different questions aren't going to get taken up. And all of that downstream is going to redound really unhealthily to the epistemic life of a groomee.

Christiane: I'm not an ethicist and not a philosopher, but when I first learned about epistemology, I loved the thought that it's not just we are logical and we know our thoughts from high or from within, it's that we make knowledge together and we're constantly making it together. And so the isolation piece of that is heartbreaking. I'm just thinking of if the student and her professor with this relationship, if she maybe dared to say something maybe to a friend of hers, the friend could either call that relationship into question or the friend could be like, I don't know, it seems like you're being weird about this, why don't you just take the money or something like that.

Lauren Leydon-Hardy: The first thing you said was the friend could call the relationship into question, which I think would be really epistemically healthful for groomee. So if groomee is like, I don't know, I think something ooky's going on here. And friend is like, "hell yeah, something ooky is going on here, trust yourself, trust your instinct, trust your experiences, trust your perceptions." That would be really epistemically healthful. The reason that so often doesn't happen is precisely because of that security management behavioral mechanism. So one really, I think, difficult, but important piece of testimony from one of Nassar's survivors came from this woman, Kyle Stevens, who was not a gymnast, but had been abused by Nassar from a very, very early age. Their families were very close friends.

Stevens tried to tell her parents that Nassar was abusing her at a very early age. And Nasser's response was very loving and very caring in the way that an adult should be loving and caring towards a child. And he said to her that she must be mistaken or confused, but that if that ever did happen to her, that she should tell an adult. That is paradigmatic security management. Nassar did this in front of her parents. So her parents see Nassar engaging with her according to the licit norms of a child, adult relationship. And they interpret that interaction according to those norms. Why is Nassar down on a knee? Why is Nassar being so gentle with her? Oh, because that's how adults are supposed to be with children. So it's the very norms that he's in fact, transgressing in that moment that are serving as cover, that are playing that role of hiding him in plain sight.

And so what happens in Stevens' case is that the security management is so effective that her parents don't believe what happened to her. And it's because she's now in this really normatively rich context, their families are super close friends, they're all doctors. "Doctors help, not harm." All of these norms associated with adults, family friends, physicians, these all play this complicated story in isolating a young person who loses confidence in her perceptual competencies, loses confidence in her memorial competencies, loses knowledge of what has happened to her for much of her life. And part of it is because there is no ability to get that third personal check, that outside looking in context that we get from being fully enmeshed in communities where there is healthful disclosure.

Christiane: This might be too broad of a question, but I feel like you've set us up very well to explain to us now what epistemic infringement is. What kind of harm is epistemic infringement?

Lauren Leydon-Hardy: Epistemic infringement has really four central pillars in the analysis. It's relational, so epistemic infringement can arrive in dyadic relationships between professors and students or between doctors and their patients. It can also be group oriented. So more recently I've been thinking about propaganda and the ways in which propaganda can be epistemically infringing. That would be an example of epistemic infringement that's directed at a group. It's relational, whatever the shape of that relationship is. And it's systematic. So one-off instances of somebody just gas-lighting you or somebody just saying, "who are you going to trust, me or you're lying eyes?" That's probably not going to have the epistemic intervention that I'm interested in capturing. So the behavior that's epistemically infringing is going to be systematic, and it particularly is going to involve the systematic contravention of the licit and healthful social and epistemic norms that typify the relationship in which the misconduct is happening.

So if it is a coach epistemically infringing on one of their athletes, the relevant norms that are going to be systematically contravened are going to be the norms that are typical or are healthful of that coach-athlete relationship. And then the fourth pillar is that I argue that epistemic infringement can't be understood as striking at a belief or some subset of your beliefs, and neither can it be understood as striking at some particular belief for a mechanism. So it's not just that there's a bad belief that's being inculcated to you, and neither is it that something about the shape or functionality of your belief-forming mechanisms is being warped. Instead, I think the right way to understand the locus of harm in epistemic infringement is much more globally at your epistemic agency. So it really is the person qua epistemic agent that is the locus of the epistemic harm. And so, one way that I talk about this is victims of epistemic infringement can become really robustly epistemically estranged from themselves. So there's a way in which epistemic infringement can change you.

Christiane Wisehart: All of this is really heartbreaking, but I'm finding especially heartbreaking the fact that it can change the way that you think about yourself, but just the way that you think, period, the way that you understand the world. So what are some of the other long term effects that epistemic infringement might have on a victim?

Lauren Leydon-Hardy: So the way I talk about the epistemic harms of epistemically infringing misconduct is, I think about this as it comes in two phases. So there's the first phase, which is just the epistemic harm that accrues to you during the grooming process. There's a sense in which you're being epistemically harmed just by being isolated from your community. There's a sense in which you're being epistemically harmed just by having somebody manipulate you by implying that you were wrong to think that there really was something untoward about that invitation or that you messed up in a way that's pretty high stakes. You can imagine student walking home from school or whatever, I don't know, and you're just like, "oh, stupid, like, oh, what if you screw up that, if they're not going to your mentor anymore!"

You're berating yourself for having made a healthful epistemic move. You rightly inferred that there was something untoward about this, and now you're losing confidence in yourself, you're losing out on a true belief. You're both kicking out a true belief that that was untoward behavior, and you're berating yourself for having exercised an epistemic competency well, which is going to lead you to continue to not exercise that epistemic competency well. So there we just see the epistemic harms that are occurring to you in the grooming process.

The second locus of epistemic harm comes downstream. And this tends to emerge, particularly when one realizes that one has been predatorily groomed. At the time that one realizes that one has been predatorily groomed, there's an epistemic crisis. There's the realization that one has been complicit in one's abuse, but more than just that one has been abused, that complicity piece redounds pretty catastrophically to many survivors of predatory grooming. Because it's not just that you have been taken advantage of or something like that, it's often that you argued yourself into it. A really profound example of this, again, from the sentencing hearing of Larry Nasser comes from one of Nasser's survivors, Rachael Dehollander.

Denhollander, like so many of Nasser's survivors, did not want to talk about the sexual misconduct. Instead, what she wanted to explain for herself, seemingly as much as for her fellow survivors who were in the room, for the judge, was how it could be that for so many years she just kept seeing a doctor. And she really explicitly articulates this in her testimony, "I thought several things had to be true. Clearly he had done this many times, clearly if he'd done this so many times, he'd done it to other girls. If he'd done it to other girls and it was inappropriate, surely they would've spoken up to somebody. But if they'd spoken up to somebody and it wasn't appropriate, then somebody would've done something about it. And since none of that has happened, then I'm wrong. This is not bad, this is not inappropriate, this is not sexual exploitation."

You might think the reason he would've gone in the other direction, "this feels terrible. If he feels terrible, he shouldn't be doing it. He is doing it so he's terrible." But we see this reversed reasoning. And so what we see in the testimony, what we see in the experiences is that there is a sense in which one has been manipulated through the grooming process, through the systematic transgression of the norms that animate the relationship to reason themselves out of a healthful understanding of their experiences. And to see that one has been so profoundly

epistemically unmoored, even knowing that all of that was abuse, one is nevertheless left with the sense that it's possible to become so epistemically unmoored. And this leaves a cavern of self doubt. It also leads to, and I think this connects really nicely with some of what you were talking about earlier, about the sense that epistemology is not just about me and my little logical self and my rational little brain alone with my books.

So much of what we know and so much of what epistemic flourishing and health requires is social. And so another deep and lasting, very serious epistemic cost of predatory grooming is the loss of an ability to form trusting relationships with others. So the sense that A, I can become so epistemically unmoored, and B, that that can happen in and through relationships with others, redounds to a lack of self trust and related to that lack of self trust, a lack of an ability or a severely diminished ability to form trusting relations with others. And in the wake of self trust and in the wake of trust in others, one is pretty epistemically poorly off at that point.

[Interview ends]

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Cran Ras]

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