

Narcissistic Sexual Predation: Keith Raniere's Grooming Strategies in NXIVM

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Abstract¹

The 2019 trial of NXIVM founder and leader, Keith Raniere, detailed various forms and aspects of his exploitative practices, including those of a sexual nature. In this article I address a particular component of the sexual abuse process: the grooming of women for sexual exploitation. Many of Raniere's teachings and behaviors prepared—or groomed—female members of NXIVM for his increasingly coercive and humiliating sexual demands. In addition to forms of grooming directed through group teachings, Raniere also established personal relationships with numerous women, during which he groomed them on an individual basis. Using Grant Sinnamon's (2017) research on the grooming of adults for sexual abuse, in conjunction with Janja Lalich's (1997) work on the psychosexual exploitation of women in cults, I analyze the many ways that Raniere groomed women in NXIVM. Furthermore, I integrate Sinnamon's (2017) specific observations regarding narcissistic sexual predators to explore Raniere's probable narcissism and how this manifested in his grooming practices.

The 2019 trial² of Keith Raniere revealed the range of his abusive practices and the extent to which he victimized many of his

to which he victimized many of his followers—especially those who were most dedicated to him. Raniere's catalogue of exploitations, abuses, and crimes are wide-ranging, and it is evident both from court documents and from other sources that Raniere's proclivity for abusive and criminal behaviors extended beyond NXIVM, characterizing many of his prior interpersonal and business relationships.³ In this article, I focus on a particular facet of Raniere's manipulative practices—the grooming of women for sexual exploitation and abuse. Many of Raniere's teachings and behaviors prepared—or groomed—women for his increasingly coercive and humiliating sexual demands. Moreover, in addition to forms of grooming directed through teachings, he also formed personal relationships with numerous women during which he groomed them on an individual basis.

Raniere employed multiple grooming strategies. From his outdated assertions about sex and gender, he proceeded to progressively offer more extreme teachings, using the curriculum in Executive Success Programs (ESP), Jness/Jness Tracks, the Society of Protectors (SOP), and *Dominus*

¹ The author would like to thank Ashley McLean MSc., without whose generosity, this article would not have been the same. By providing me with copies of the court transcripts of Keith Raniere's trial, she allowed me to engage in more nuanced and detailed discussions and analyses. I would like also to thank Dr. Stephen Kent for providing feedback on my draft copy. I continue to benefit from his wealth of experience and his eye for detail.

² Raniere was convicted of "racketeering and racketeering conspiracy; sex trafficking, attempted sex trafficking and sex trafficking conspiracy; forced labor conspiracy and wire fraud conspiracy" (United States Department of Justice, 2019). NXIVM cofounder and president, Nancy Salzman, pleaded guilty to "racketeering conspiracy." Her daughter, Lauren Salzman, and actor Allison Mack (both first-line slave masters in DOS), pleaded guilty

to "racketeering and racketeering conspiracy." Seagram Liquor heiress, patron, and high-ranking member, Clare Bronfman, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to "conceal and harbor aliens for financial gain," and also to "fraudulent use of identification documents"; and NXIVM's bookkeeper, Kathy Russell, pleaded guilty to "visa fraud" (United States Department of Justice, 2019). On October 27, 2020, Judge Nicholas Garaufis sentenced Raniere to 120 years in prison (Hong & Piccoli, 2020). In September 2020, Clare Bronfman was sentenced to 81 months in prison (Hong, 2020).

³ Other sources include investigative journalism (for example, see Freedman, 2003; Grigoriadis, 2018; and Meier, 2017) and former-member accounts (Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019; Natalie & Hardin, 2019; and Oxenberg & Stoyanoff, 2019).

Obsequious Sororium (DOS) to disseminate his ideas.⁴ This latter organization came under particular scrutiny during the trial (and in the media) because of the extremely coercive practices—especially sexual ones—that Raniere implemented in it; moreover, it is evident that many of his earlier teachings groomed women in preparation for entry into this elite “sorority.”

Grooming women and establishing female submission were interconnected processes in NXIVM. To examine these dual strategies, I draw on Grant Sinnamon’s (2017) research on grooming adult women,⁵ in conjunction with Janja Lalich’s (1997) research insights on the psychosexual manipulation of women in cults.⁶ Sinnamon’s work includes a discussion of extreme grooming and predatory practices—that is, those that characterize the behaviors of narcissistic predators. Thus, his observations are extremely useful for my analysis of Raniere, who likely is a narcissist. Sinnamon’s landmark research on adult grooming is the *only* academic work of its kind that I have been able to locate. Lalich’s article (1997) offers a critical guide to the core strategies of sexual control and female submission in cultic environments, the features of which dovetail with many of Sinnamon’s (2017) observations of the grooming process.

I begin this article with a brief overview of Sinnamon’s research on adult grooming and

its value to the study of an ideological setting such as NXIVM. Then, I discuss sexual control in cults and the ways in which women especially often are subject to mechanisms that foster and/or enforce their submission to male authority. In the next section, I offer an overview of Raniere. In it, I examine his claims to brilliance, the way in which he presented himself to others, and how, in turn, his followers came to revere him. A deliberation of his apparent narcissism is integral to this discussion.⁷ A summary of the key characteristics of narcissistic sexual predation follows, after which I include an analysis of how Raniere incorporated measures that fostered and even demanded female submission (Lalich, 1997) throughout the grooming process (Sinnamon, 2017).

In this article I draw primarily on the court transcripts from Raniere’s trial in 2019. Former-member memoirs (see Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019; Natalie & Hardin, 2019; & Oxenberg & Stoyneff, 2019), news media, investigative journalist reports, and websites all contribute further to my discussion.

Grooming

Scholarly literature on grooming focuses mostly on the grooming of children for sexual abuse, and those with expertise in the field consider it a growth area (Craven et al., 2006;

⁴ See Raine (2020) for a fuller discussion of NXIVM’s constituent organizations.

⁵ Although Raniere mostly targeted adult women, in two cases—sisters, Daniela and Camilla—his victims were adolescent minors who lived separately from their parents. The girls’ parents and their older sister, Marianna, also were members of NXIVM.

⁶ NXIVM exemplifies Lalich’s (2004, p. 4) definition of *cult* (Raine, 2020).

⁷ Without Raniere being subject to clinical assessment, one cannot assert conclusively what psychopathology might ail him, but narcissism seems likely. It is beyond the scope of this article to address narcissism in its entirety. Rather, I draw mostly on Sinnamon’s use of the term in the context of grooming. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V* (2013) outlines current psychiatric criteria for *narcissistic personality*

disorder and is essential also to my discussion. Raniere has manifested many of the *DSMV* criteria, including the following: a “pervasive pattern of grandiosity,” a “grandiose sense of self-importance,” and a “sense of entitlement.” Certainly, Raniere “requires excessive admiration” and views himself “as special.” Furthermore, he clearly is “interpersonally exploitative” and seems to “lack empathy” (For a discussion of these features of narcissism, see American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp. 669–672). For analyses of narcissism in the context of cultic and sectarian leadership, see Anderson (1999), Clarke (1988), Lane & Kent (2008), Oakes (1997), and Zeider & Devlin (2020). Of course, in any given cult setting, multiple contributing factors influence beliefs and practices, the structure of the group, and the interpersonal relationships therein.

Winters et al., 2017).⁸ The literature on grooming children appears expansive, however, when compared to that which focuses on the grooming of adults for sexual abuse. Sinnamon's (2017) research remedies this absence by focusing specifically on adult grooming. Moreover, websites offering support and services for victims/survivors⁹ of adult grooming are of additional value, and I supplement Sinnamon's work with some of their observations.

Sinnamon (2017) defines adult sexual grooming as "any situation in which an adult is primed to permit themselves to be abused and/or exploited for sexual gratification of another." Furthermore, he notes that, like the grooming of children, the grooming of adults involves "emotional and psychological manipulation tactics" (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 462). Compared to children, adults have a greater capacity for drawing on prior life experiences and situations. As well, they have better access to supportive institutions and significant others. Consequently, the abuser must carefully groom the adult and her environment. This process may be extensive and often unfolds over a series of stages during which the abusers will "mask their intentions" and "prime their target for abuse" (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 463). Because groomers typically establish themselves as decent, caring, and trustworthy individuals, they are able to situate themselves in the lives and communities of others. Their apparent compassion and sincerity results in the

people around them "dropping their guard," allowing for an escalation of "intimate contact" (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 463). Abusers often occupy positions of importance in their victims' lives, and they use this familiarity and trust to intentionally use "charm, ingratiation and manipulation" to further their goals (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 463).¹⁰

In the case of adult grooming, perpetrators "are characteristically motivated by a desire to maintain or restore their self-esteem through the manipulation and control of others, and by the prospect of excitement and the opportunity to deviously exhibit their dominance and superiority" (Petherick & Sinnamon, 2013, as cited in Sinnamon, 2017, p. 464). As such, Sinnamon posits that most adult groomers display characteristics typical of narcissistic or antisocial personality types (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 464).

Furthermore, at the core of the grooming process is the perpetrator's aspiration to exercise complete power over his victim(s). The ability to exert power at both individual and environmental levels is contingent upon the abuser's personal qualities (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 465). Hence, "notoriety, charisma, social status, personal standing and the perpetrator's willingness and ability to translate the potential power they have from these factors into action" influence the extent to which he succeeds (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 465).

⁸ Scholars define *child grooming* in various ways. Although consensus exists around several significant characteristics within the process, some definitions offer additional nuances and perspectives. Predator behaviors that appeal to children—including tickling, playing, gift giving, special trips, and access to "grown-up" activities and products—are particular to child grooming. Abusers may groom children for extensive periods before attempting sexualized physical contact (see, for example, Craven et al., 2006; Lanning, 2018; McAlinden, 2012; Ost, 2004; Salter, 2013; van Dam, 2001; and Winters et al., 2017).

⁹ According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN, 2019), both *victim* and *survivor* are appropriate terms. The

organization, however, typically uses *victim* in reference to someone recently subjected to sexual violence or when referring to a specific crime. Conversely, *survivor* often is used when discussing an individual post recovery. Critically, RAINN identifies that individuals have their own language preferences (RAINN, 2019). In this article, I use *victim* for consistency and because of the recency of the court case.

¹⁰ As with child grooming and abuse, when a perpetrator of adult grooming and abuse is revealed, often individuals and communities exhibit skepticism, certain that the person could not have committed these acts (see Minto, Hornsey, Gillespie, Healy, & Jetten, [2016]; see also Craven et al. [2006], and Sinnamon, 2017, p. 464).

Important also are the characteristics of the victims: Perpetrators target the vulnerabilities of the adults whom they groom.¹¹ Consequently, they find ways to fulfill the needs of their victims; by doing so, the initial grooming stages typically are characterized by benefits and rewards for the victims (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 468). Thus, the abusers employ a great amount of “positive reinforcement to seduce their victim” (MOBIEG, 2019).¹² Victims of grooming may initially have positive experiences with their abusers because of the abusers’ seeming consideration, sensitivity, and compassion. The victims may enjoy the attention, and consequently dispel any concerns that might arise. Clinical psychologist Dawn Hughes, who is an expert on interpersonal violence, testified at Raniere’s trial, stating that by the time negative experiences dominate such relationships, the victim is “psychologically compromised” (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 3729). Moreover, if victims do display doubts or question their abusers, the perpetrators may employ gaslighting

tactics to undermine them (Campaign Against Adult Grooming, 2019).¹³

Sinnamon’s research focuses on adult grooming that occurs in broader society. Thus, he elaborates on the grooming trajectory as it occurs in that setting. In the present article, grooming occurred in a very specific context—that of a multilevel marketing cult offering human-potential courses (see Raine, 2020; Edmondson, & Gasbarre, 2019, pp. 50–51, 53; Natalie & Hardin, 2019, pp. 91–92; & *United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 1514). Consequently, in this article I account for the ideological—and extremely insular—nature of the NXIVM environment.¹⁴ Raniere groomed women who were already members of an ideological group setting that he had established. He was their leader and guide—and they admired and trusted him on all matters. Whilst Sinnamon’s research does not examine grooming in cults, his findings—on which I elaborate further in this article—are eminently applicable to Raniere and NXIVM.

¹¹ The British website, Campaign Against Adult Grooming (CAAGe) (2019), argues that victims are not always as vulnerable as Sinnamon (2017) has suggested. Whilst victim vulnerabilities may be present, this resource identifies that strong, successful, and financially stable women often fall victim to predation, precisely because predators are able to present themselves as credible, genuine, and caring individuals. Drawing on Sinnamon (2017) and CAAGe (2019), I assume in this article that some members of NXIVM joined with multiple, preexisting vulnerabilities, whilst others may have had very few or no discernible ones.

¹² MOBIEG is a South African organization that offers a variety of counseling services. It assists individuals who have experienced, or are experiencing, sexual abuse, mental illness, substance abuse, and more.

¹³ Hughes discussed various facets of coercive control in sexually abusive relationships at Raniere’s trial—including gaslighting. She explained that abusers who use gaslighting techniques frequently tell their victims that they are wrong about their observations. This psychological manipulation leaves the victims doubting the accuracy of their own experiences and perceptions (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 3720–3721). Paige L. Sweet has argued that gaslighting operates within key social inequalities, particularly those pertaining to sex and gender. Hence, “when perpetrators mobilize gender-based stereotypes, structural

inequalities, and institutional vulnerabilities against victims with whom they are in an intimate relationship, gaslighting becomes not only effective, but devastating” (Sweet, 2019, p. 852).

¹⁴ In a previous article, I and my second author focused on the little-studied area of grooming children for sexual abuse in religious settings. In our research, we discussed those features of religion that make that particular environment unique in terms of the grooming process (Raine & Kent, 2019). Although not a supernaturally, otherworldly focused *religious* cult, NXIVM did, however, manifest a number of quasi-religious characteristics. Raniere promoted the belief that he had mystical qualities—for example, that he could control both the weather and electronics because of his special “energy” (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 1533–1534). He claimed his semen had magical properties, and that sex with him was curative (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 2395–2396). Moreover, he cultivated an “aura of sainthood,” his followers believing him to be a “renunciate” (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 2303). Raniere was a charismatic leader who commanded religious-like devotion and adoration. Moreover, he incorporated an end-times scenario into his teachings, proposing that only dedication to NXIVM would prevent global catastrophe (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 2305–2306, 2311, 2313).

Sexual Control in Cults

Most cults are male led and patriarchal; and, within these settings, women often “are groomed to be subservient to men” (Whitsett & Post Rosow, 2020, p. 358). Religious cults frequently draw on key tenets to justify patriarchy, and this practice has consequences for grooming (Raine & Kent, 2019). Because patriarchy is not limited to religious settings, its influence is found in secular or quasi-religious cults such as NXIVM.

Despite their patriarchy, some religious cults present themselves as sites of female equality and empowerment (for example, see Kent, 2001, p. 163), including sexual empowerment (Puttick, 1995, pp. 33–34); and NXIVM appeared also to value the role of women within its structure. Women occupied numerous positions of apparent authority and often were recognized for their contributions. This façade, however, belied Raniere’s misogynistic beliefs and his long-term goals to groom and coerce women for abuse. Moreover, Raniere had expressly manipulated many of the women in his life previously; long before he founded NXIVM, several women and minors alleged that he sexually assaulted them.¹⁵

Cultic environments typically foster control over most facets its members’ lives—including their sex lives—and many regulations are gendered within charismatic and patriarchal leadership structures (see Dayan, 2018; Jacobs, 2000; Kent, 2012;

Lalich, 1997; Palmer, 1994;¹⁶ Raine, 2005, 2007; Whitsett & Post Rosow, 2020; Williams Boeri, 2002, 2005). Regulating sexuality and sexual relationships are particularly potent forms of social control because the cult leader may be able to manipulate individuals into breaching their previously held values and norms (Lalich, 1997, p. 6; Raine, 2007, p. 1). Hava Dayan (2018) has observed that, under the conditions of charismatic cults, women often are unable to give informed consent to sexual relationships with the group leader. Instead, the high-demand environments of such groups result in “impaired” or “flawed” consent (Dayan, 2017, p. 25).¹⁷ Dayan’s concept of *flawed consent* speaks to the importance of examining the role that the ideological environment plays—and, as I argue—the role that *grooming* plays within that particular context. Moreover, in court, Hughes testified that women cannot give consent when they feel like they cannot say *no*. She stressed that when women believe that a refusal to participate in sexual activity will result in “negative consequences,” then “that’s not consent” (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 3738; see also Sinnamon, 2017, p. 466).

The relatively commonplace sexual abuse of women in cults occurs when “those who wish to dominate others” acquire greater levels of power when they control the most “intimate and personal” aspects of group members’ lives (Lalich, 1997, p. 8).¹⁸ Some cult leaders employ key strategies to achieve the sexual

¹⁵ *The Albany Times Union* reported on prior allegations of Raniere’s sexual assaults of a 12-year-old girl, and, of two girls aged 15. The newspaper article discussed also his sexual manipulation of women (Odato & Gish, 2012). Raniere’s former partner, Tony Natalie, has alleged that Raniere raped her on a number of occasions (Natalie, & Hardin, 2019, p. 86). Furthermore, one of Raniere’s former employees filed a sexual-harassment suit against him, which he settled out of court (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 60).

¹⁶ Susan J. Palmer (1994) examined gendered roles and sexuality in new religious movements, but her work differs from the other

preceding sources in that is less critical of the structural conditions and outcomes of these movements—a position that she acknowledges in her work.

¹⁷ Dayan (2017) discussed a recent legal ruling in Israel, whereby a court found that women who were sexually abused by their religious leader were not able to give consent to sexual acts with him because of the highly controlling, ideological nature of the group.

¹⁸ Lalich (1997, pp. 8–9) suggested also that many cult leaders manifest psychopathic traits.

submission of women, including the following: “the application of specific group rules”; “endowing sexual intimacy with the leader with special status and honour”; “testing women’s loyalty”; and “imparting expectations of female subservience” (Lalich, 1997). These strategies are evident in Raniere’s grooming practices, and I incorporate them in my analyses later.

Keith Raniere: The Smartest Man in the World

An examination of Raniere’s interpersonal relationships, along with assorted NXIVM course materials, reveals a sustained trajectory of grooming. Whilst Raniere groomed and subjected the women of DOS to his most extreme ideas and demands, he did, however, groom, sexually manipulate, exploit, and abuse many women prior to establishing DOS in 2015. How members of NXIVM viewed Raniere is critical to understanding the influence that he had on them—and how he was able to successfully groom many of the women of NXIVM to accept, or at least tolerate, increasingly abusive practices.

Raniere had spent years crafting a mystique around himself. Moreover, Raniere needed—indeed, demanded—attention and recognition (see American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp. 669–670). These needs began early in his life. According to Barbara Bouchey (a former intimate partner of Raniere’s and a high-ranking member of NXIVM), Keith’s father, James Raniere, told her that his son’s perception of his own superiority started when he was a child. Raniere Sr. recalls that his son took an intelligence test when he was around eight years old: the test identified Keith as “gifted.”

This outcome prompted an immediate change in Raniere: From then on, he considered himself superior to others, and even God-like (Bloch et al., 2018).

Raniere’s propensity for self-promotion and self-aggrandizement continued—both are typical features of narcissism (see American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp. 669–670). Allegedly a child protégé, he contends that he spoke in full sentences as a one-year-old, and that by age 2 he could read. Raniere characterizes himself as a judo champion; as a self-taught, concert-level pianist; and a math genius. Majoring in mathematics, biology, and physics from the Rensselaer Polytechnic in New York state, Raniere claims a record of academic excellence (Grigoriadis, 2018, p. 34; Meier, 2017; Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 20). His transcripts, however, reveal that he obtained mostly C, D, and F grades, and that he eventually graduated with a modest 2.26 GPA (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 5131). Unperturbed by official outcomes, Raniere would go on to describe himself as “a great philosopher, an ethical man and a scientist” (Grigoriadis, 2018, p. 32); as the “smartest man in the world” (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 26; Bloch et al., 2018)¹⁹; and as “one of the 3 top problem solvers” globally (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 20). His ostentatious self-assessments indicate his sense of superiority and a clear exaggeration of his achievements (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 670), a pattern that persisted over time.

Many people *believed* him. He had established a level of “positive notoriety” that appeals to others (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 466). His claims attracted individuals who joined his early business venture, Consumers

¹⁹ Raniere completed an unsupervised, unofficial, “take-home” IQ test that gave him a score of 240 (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, pp. 14, 108; Parlato, 2017).

Buyline (Natalie & Hardin, C2019, p. 26, 59).²⁰ Additionally, his early inner circle of colleagues and sexual partners, Karen Unterreiner, Pam Cafritz, and Kristen Keefe, all revered him and were extraordinarily loyal to him (for numerous examples, see Natalie & Hardin, 2019). By the time he and Nancy Salzman met and started offering ESP intensives, he had positioned himself as the *Master* of the ESP ranking system (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 93); and he taught his acolytes to recognize his superiority from their very first class (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 243).

Ranieri thrived on an audience's adoration (Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019, p. 74; Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 15), but he also could be extremely attentive to individuals (Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019, p. 74; Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 55). During V- Week (the annual 10-day celebration of Ranieri's birthday), Ranieri clearly reveled in attention; moreover, he "visibly enjoyed being upheld as the one with all the answers" (Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019, p. 74). During the extravagant birthday celebrations, hundreds of Nxians praised and paid tribute to Ranieri, often performing and dedicating songs and skits to him (see Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019, pp. 71–76). The need for such displays of admiration is a common feature of narcissism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 670).

Many members of NXIVM were willing to meet Ranieri's psychological, sexual, and financial needs and demands, genuinely believing that they were in the presence of greatness. When he told them that he was a

genius (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 62), that he was never wrong (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 67), and that he could save the world (thus, positioning himself as a *savior*) (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 142; *United States of America v. Ranieri*, 2019, pp. 2305–2306; 2311), his followers accepted these claims as absolute truth.

Group members compared Ranieri to Bill Gates and Steve Jobs (Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019, p. 55), whilst ESP promotional pamphlets likened him to history's greatest scientists, educators, politicians, humanitarians, and adventurers (Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019, pp. 40–41). Ranieri was successful in his self-promotion. And, of note, often narcissists "compare themselves favorably with famous or privileged people" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 670). On occasion, he even was referred to as possessing otherworldly characteristics and mystical properties (*United States of America v. Ranieri*, 2019, pp. 1533–1534; 2349; 2395–2396). With these claims and accolades, and with Nancy Salzman's help, Ranieri attracted prestigious clients, including actors, directors, writers, musicians, and heiresses.²¹ His followers revered Ranieri as a humanitarian life coach who would save the world. As such, they trusted his guidance and knowledge on *all* matters as they pursued their goals for self-actualization and reinvention (Raine, 2020).

Given Sinnamon's (2017) assessment that those who groom, and abuse adults often are narcissistic, along with current psychiatric criteria (American Psychiatric Association,

²⁰ Ranieri established his first business, Consumers' Buyline, in 1991. The company, which he co-owned with Karen Unterreiner (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 44), sold cut-price food and other products to paying members. In 1993 the New York attorney general suspected Ranieri of operating a pyramid scheme. He filed a civil suit against Ranieri, who paid only a portion of the \$40,000 penalty (Freedman, 2003).

²¹ Nancy Salzman had an impressive corporate clientele list, including credit-card company American Express and energy giant Con Edison (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 85). Ranieri's *collateral* (discussed later; see also Raine, 2020) on her was that she was not a qualified psychologist (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 89). She would have lost her reputation and her clients had he revealed this information.

2013, pp. 669–671), it is quite possible that Raniere’s behaviors stemmed from his own narcissism. Indeed, many former members and other observers have described him as a narcissist (see, for example, Bloch et al., 2018; Helmore, 2019; Humphreys, 2018; Natalie & Hardin, 2019, pp. 62, 86; & Oxenberg & Stoyanoff, 2019, p. 92). And psychologist, Charles Zeider and psychotherapist Peter Devlin (2020) include him in their list of group leaders whom they identify as malignant narcissists (Zeider & Devlin, 2020, pp.105–108).

The Narcissistic Sexual Predator

Sinnamon (2017) has suggested that narcissistic sexual perpetrators have intense self-esteem requirements that they attempt to maintain or repair through predatory sexual practices and the fulfillment that this abuse provides them. These individuals seek to resolve the issue of having “a high, but fragile, or a low self-esteem” (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 464; for further discussion, see also American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 670). Consequently, they display “compensatory behaviors aimed at dominating others and being the centre of attention are sexually channeled into the predation and exploitation of others.” Moreover, believing that they are superior to all others, narcissistic predators assume that “their needs and desires are ultimately more deserving of fulfilment” (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 464). Sinnamon notes that the perpetrator’s self-esteem issues often are at odds with assumptions of superiority, such that the predator specifically pursues sexualized forms of “praise and admiration,” thus creating scenarios in which this adulation occurs (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 464).

Raniere’s probable narcissism manifest across most domains of his life as he constructed himself as the figure his followers came to believe him to be. Furthermore, I propose that his narcissism

extended to the sexual realm that Sinnamon discusses. Sinnamon has submitted that when the predator’s “fantasies and exaggerations are sexualized” along with his need for accolades, then “the drive for recognition and dominance are synthesized into sexually oriented objectives” (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 464). Significantly, the narcissist maintains/restores self-esteem by taking great pleasure in the grooming process, basking in the veneration that his victims bestow upon him (p. 464). Sinnamon has posited that “deliberately dominating the victim during their sexual encounters in a manner that is degrading and contrary for the victim” is a feature of the narcissist’s attempts to restore esteem (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 465). This characteristic behavior is evident in much of Raniere’s sexual demands, especially as he groomed members for the ever-more-demeaning practices in DOS. I further elaborate on Sinnamon’s observations on narcissistic predation throughout this article.

Instilling Submission: Raniere’s Grooming Practices

Beyond establishing himself as an intellectual elite worthy of great praise, admiration, and unquestioned authority, Raniere successfully groomed many members of NXIVM at the individual and group levels. As becomes evident, although Raniere often groomed women into initial sexual relationships with him, in other cases he groomed women further, *after* initial sexual intimacy, as he prepared them not just for ongoing sexual encounters with him, but rather for increasingly degrading and exploitative forms of sex that speak to the “flawed consent” that Dayan has identified (Dayan, 2017, p. 25). Instilling submission (Lalich, 1997) was integral to Raniere’s grooming behaviors, and he fostered it through the following measures.

A. Rules and Regulations

Most group members who were not a part of the “inner circle”²² living in close proximity to Raniere were not subject to scrutiny of their interpersonal relationships. Those members closest to Raniere, however, experienced rules constitutive of grooming and that contributed to explicit control measures.

Early in her NXIVM career, Sarah Edmondson—who would become the group’s top recruiter—realized that most of the high-ranking, inner-circle female members were single (Edmondson, 2019, pp. 100–101). Raniere had ensured that each of these women remained in relationships with him only; thus, they didn’t develop conflicting loyalties from having long-term intimate partners and children who would consume their time and also their physical and emotional energy.²³ Conversely, as is often the case with cult leaders (Lalich, 1997, p. 11), Raniere engaged in multiple sexual relationships (Oxenberg & Stoyanoff, 2019, p. 165; Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 149; see also *United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 2094, 2447–2448).

Raniere enforced many other regulations. He insisted that women refrain from any form of modification to their pubic hair (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 1537;

2377), and he frequently berated the inner-circle women if they ate “too much” or gained any weight (2019, pp. 133, 2379–2380). As part of the grooming process, he explicitly indicated his preference for thin women; consequently, many of the women adopted highly restrictive diets and numerous food controls (Berman, 2018; Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019, pp. 9, 65, 75, 99; Oxenberg & Stoyanoff, 2019, pp. 128, 198; *United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 133–136; 1530–1531; 2462).²⁴ In some cases, he required that women lose weight before he would have sex with them (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 2379–2380). His humiliating comments and frequent admonishments ensured that many of the women closely regulated their food, thus complying to his sexual preference for thin, calorie-deficient women whom he could control and groom more easily.²⁵

Raniere established other rules and regulations pertaining to sex. Proclaiming that sex with him was a form of “energy exchange,” and that his semen bound his sexual partners together, Raniere refused to wear condoms (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 149). Hence, many women who became pregnant by him were told to have abortions (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 150; *United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, 2631; see

²² The “inner circle” who lived in close proximity to Raniere were known by the extent of their “loyalty,” and “commitment” to him (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 1571). Clare Bronfman, Lauren Salzman, Nancy Salzman, Pam Carfritz, Barbara Jeske, Barbara Bouche, Karen Unterreiner, Allison Mack, Nicki Clyne, Dawn Morrison, Kristin Keeffe, Kathy Russell, Daniela, Marianna, Camila, Loreta Garza, Monica Duran, Ivy Navares, Jim del Negro, Mark Vicente, Emiliano Salinas, Rosa Laura Junco, Alex Betancourt, and Jack Levy all were a part of this ‘elite’ group (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 1564–1570). He had sexual relationships with all of the women (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 1572, 2447–2448).

²³ For example, Lauren Salzman explained to the court Raniere’s requirement that she remain committed to him only—even when he put their relationship on “hold.” She knew he was sexually intimate with other people and when she conveyed her desire to establish a relationship with someone else, he threatened to remove his promise that one day they would have a child together—something that

Salzman badly desired (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 1552; 1526–1528). Moreover, Raniere punished her when he perceived her to have violated his rule, labelling her as disrespectful and unworthy of having his child (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 1546–1553).

²⁴ Throughout her memoir, Catherine Oxenberg (Oxenberg & Stoyanoff, 2019) discusses her daughter India’s weight loss. As Raniere effected greater control over India and her commitment to him grew, she became dangerously thin, experiencing numerous detrimental health outcomes.

²⁵ The effects of extreme levels of calorie restriction include physical and mental deficits. After talking to a nutritionist, journalist, Sarah Berman (2018) followed a NXIVM style diet of 800 calories per day for seven days. She reported her experiences in *Vice*. For a discussion and analysis of food restrictions in cults, see Meikle (2005).

Lalich, 1997, p. 10).²⁶ He even indicated that abortions presented opportunities for weight loss (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 2636). Raniere's long-time business associate and sexual partner, Pam Carfritz, organized the terminations—as documented at the clinic that performed them (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 3307–3308).

The aforementioned examples represent just a sample of Raniere's rules regarding sex. He legitimated these and others with ideological justifications and, at times, with humiliating bullying. Throughout, he rationalized his regulatory practices as being essential to the women's achieving personal growth (see Lalich, 1997, pp. 10–11), whilst in reality they served to bolster Raniere's power over them (see Sinnamon, 2017, p. 465).

B. Sex With Raniere As Special

The belief that sexual experiences with the group's leader is an honor, or “a special gift, a way of achieving further growth,” is indicative of the institution of female submission (Lalich, 1997, p. 11). Raniere alleged that, when he was “working with someone” (a euphemism for having sex with a woman), he contributed to her personal growth and could resolve her disintegrations (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 2395–2396).²⁷ Oxenberg recalls one of Raniere's followers telling her that “‘the only way to true enlightenment is by having sex with Keith’” (Oxenberg & Stoyanoff, 2019,

p. 96; see also Edmondson, & Gasbarre, 2019, p. 185). Raniere claimed that his semen had “mystical” properties that caused women to see a “blue light” after he ejaculated (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 2395). Purportedly, sex with Raniere could even help women recover from the trauma of sexual abuse (Oxenberg & Stoyanoff, 2019, p. 165). These and other so-called teachings permeated NXIVM culture, contributing to Raniere's ability to groom women into believing that sex with him was both special and transformative. Moreover, in terms of a member's status, sexual relationships with Raniere brought women into his elite inner circle (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 2400).

Former member Daniela²⁸ explained in her court testimony that she went from being a dedicated high-school student in Mexico—with acceptance into a prestigious university in Switzerland—to becoming a member of NXIVM who, at Raniere's behest, would eventually be isolated in a bedroom for 2 years (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 1508).²⁹ At age 16, she joined NXIVM after her parents paid for her to take courses (they had joined already). By age 18, Raniere expected her to perform fellatio on him daily—sometimes more frequently (2019, p. 2392). Daniela's experiences illustrate well the influence of the mythologizing around the unique honor that sex with Raniere conferred upon women and,

²⁶ Raniere did, however, have two sons: one each with inner circle members, Kristen Keffe and Marianna.

²⁷ According to Raniere, ‘disintegrations’ are a person's faulty perceptions of the world due to the failure of adults to evolve beyond their childhood comprehension of reality. He claimed that NXIVM's ‘Rational Inquiry’ method offered the first scientific means of resolving this problem (Martin, 2003).

²⁸ Daniela's is a complex story, and I am unable to include her or other members' full narratives here. Their histories and experiences emerged during the trial and the media reported many, but certainly not all, of the details. In Daniela's case, Raniere had sexual

relationships with both her sisters, Marianna and Camila. Camila was just fifteen years old when Raniere first established a sexual relationship with her (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 3312).

²⁹ Raniere banished Daniela to a single room as punishment for her relationship with Ben—a member of NXIVM. Daniela provided extensive court testimony on the events leading up to her isolation and her harrowing experience of it (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019).

consequently, the role it played in his grooming strategies.

Daniela revered Raniere as an enlightened, intellectual superior. She believed in his alleged scientific and mathematical propositions, and in his claim that members of NXIVM would be better prepared to guide humanity and avert global disaster than anyone else (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 2305–2306; 2313). Initially, she was flattered by his attention (2019, pp. 2309; 2316; 2336; 2366); and, over time, she considered him a mentor and confidant (2019, pp. 2360; 2369–2371), and even her “best friend” (2019, p. 2709). She described the grooming process to the court—one that began with seemingly innocent email and in-person conversations, but that would progress to flirtation and discussions about sex and intimacy, including Raniere’s direct questioning of Daniela’s experiences, or lack thereof (she confided to him that she was a virgin) (2019, pp. 2366–2377). Capitalizing on her naiveté and her evident veneration of him (see Sinnamon, 2017, pp. 469–470), he groomed her, eventually coaxing her to *ask him* for sex for her 18th birthday (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 2376).

When Raniere first kissed Daniela, she did not want to reciprocate at all. A sheltered and inexperienced teenager, after the incident, she interpreted his kiss as an indication that she was “chosen,” that she was “special.” She wanted to understand him in positive terms (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 2371–2372; see Sinnamon, 2017, p. 470). She perceived that their “increasing intimacy” was part of her journey to greater growth (see Lalich, 1997, p. 11). A common part of grooming (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 479), Raniere discussed his sexual experiences with her (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 2375). He peppered the grooming process with questions about her pubic hair (*United States of America v.*

Raniere, 2019, p. 2376), recommendations about her weight, and, critical to most grooming scenarios, he cautioned her of the need to keep their relationship secret (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 2373). Secrecy and increasing intimacy are typical grooming strategies that allow the abuser to “positively reinforce the excitation and elements of fear felt by the target when their interactions begin to stretch the boundaries” (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 477).

Daniela testified that she started to feel more “grown up” (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 2374). When their sexual relationship began, however, Raniere took full control over Daniela. She told to the court that she felt that he “owned her” (2019, p. 2389), and that he had deliberately set a trap for her (2019, p. 2376). Daniela was a minor (age 16; the age of consent is 17 in New York State) when Raniere first started to groom her, but he used a more adult approach to grooming, likely because of her age as an older teenager. Clearly, he was aware of her inexperience. Later, Raniere even used Daniela’s immigrant status to his advantage—especially when her visa ran out (2019, p. 1508), a scenario that allowed Raniere to make himself essential to Daniela and to use intimidation based on her fear of being deported (see Sinnamon, 2017, pp. 470–471).

Daniela was a vulnerable adolescent who transitioned into young adulthood in NXIVM. Raniere adeptly groomed her not only into sexual intimacy with him, but also to believe that their sexual relationship was normal or typical. Daniela had no point of reference, and once Raniere and the inner-circle environment became her everyday life, he was able to subject her to an unhealthy relationship whereby he derived daily sexual gratification from her, whilst she received none (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 2708–2709). His constant need for sexual satisfaction and attention (Sinnamon,

2017) was evident as he convinced her that it was her “role” to perform oral sex on him daily (2019, p. 2401). Moreover, Raniere sulked and became petulant when scolding Daniela for her failure to write him love letters as frequently as he desired. And he told her she *must* fantasize about him (2019, p. 2708). Eventually, Daniela was recruited into DOS.

C. Female Subservience

Establishing female subservience is critical to instilling female submission in cults (Lalich, 1997), and this is one of the most compelling aspects of Raniere’s grooming. By integrating the dichotomous theme of male superiority and female inferiority into many of his teachings, he provided the foundation and rationale for female subservience.

Women as a “problem” has pervaded NXIVM teachings. Cults often vilify women—and, as Lalich has noted, cult leaders frequently identify women as the “cause of all evil” (Lalich, 1997, p. 13). In this tradition, Raniere penned *The Fall* during the early 2000s in which he described his former partner, Toni Natalie, as the devil—as Lucifer incarnate, who had, in her prideful state, disavowed him and his teachings. All subsequent group members were aware of her apparent sins, and that Raniere’s nemesis was a woman (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, pp. 101–102; 168–169).

Then, in 2006, Raniere founded Jness as a women-only organization that allegedly addressed men’s and women’s relationships (Grigoriadis, 2018, p. 56). In 2013, he added new Jness curriculum (Jness Tracks), which

included course options for men (Edmonson, 2019, p. 129). Purportedly a female empowerment group, Jness/Jness Tracks instead laid the foundations for female subservience in NXIVM. Members who enrolled were taught that women lack discipline and morals, and that women are needy, impulsive, spoiled, weak, and self-obsessed. Furthermore, the curriculum reproached women for being devoid of honor and loyalty (Oxenberg & Stoyoff, 2019, 42–43). Counter to their stated goal of empowering women, Jness and Jness Tracks identified women as *less than*, and for many women these teachings had damaging consequences: grooming them to accept further degradations.

Sylvie, a member of NXIVM for 13 years, testified in court that, although Jness did offer some positive content and experiences (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 322),³⁰ it taught women that they are “materialistic and self-absorbed” (2019, p. 168). Programming imparted men’s need for multiple female sexual partners whilst teaching women to remain loyal to one man (2019, p. 168). Jness left Sylvie despising herself. The teachings reprimanded women for “crying victim” whenever they (allegedly) wanted to avoid responsibility for their situations—and Raniere told women that they are not *victims*; rather, they are *victimizers* (2019, p. 292), and that anything that happens to a woman is her own fault, including abuse (2019, p. 307).

This rhetoric continued in SOP Complete³¹—a six-day “boot camp” during which

³⁰Clare Bronfman recruited Sylvie when she was an 18-year-old, aspiring equestrian in England (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 90). Although she initially did not want to take Jness curriculum, Raniere informed her that she needed to take it; otherwise, she would remain “coldhearted” and any children she might have would never be able to love her (2019, pp. 164–165).

³¹In 2013, Raniere also introduced curriculum for men in a group called the Society of Protectors (SOP). He established this “men’s movement” as a venue for men to “grow up,” develop character, and to become more noble, honorable, and capable (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 790). Raniere offered SOP Complete as a course for women to take, allegedly so that they could learn

participating women were tasked with extreme physical and emotional experiences (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 808–811). The program required that each woman needed “to learn that no matter what you do, you’re going to be wrong” (2019, p. 811). Sylvie explained to the court that the program was an “exercise in humiliating women” (p. 174). According to former member Mark Vicente’s testimony, SOP Complete left women like “shells of themselves” (2019, p. 818). He testified that they “looked like they were beaten in [to] submission,”—an outcome that Vicente believed Raniere intended. Women had to be completely subservient to men, even when it was detrimental to their well-being, “following orders no matter what” (2019, p. 818).

In another course, Raniere proposed that women like sex when men are angry (Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019, p. 132), an idea that he took further when he claimed that many women experience their first orgasm only when they are raped (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 5169). Moreover, during a Jness Tracks workshop, women watched a videotaped lecture of Raniere questioning American age-of-consent laws, stating that the age of sexual consent is 12 in some countries (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 308),³² indicating his preference for such rulings.

more about the men in their lives (Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019, p. 129).

³²During a 1998 lecture, Raniere questioned what “molestation” is (Natalie, 2019, p. 99). Then, in an audiotaped lecture, Nancy Salzman taught her listeners about cross-cultural age-of-consent variances, indicating that in the United States, society is “abusing” young children by telling them that sex with adults is “bad” (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 100).

Natalie discusses a series of email communications from a Mexican woman who worked in Raniere’s Rainbow Cultural Gardens children’s school in Mexico. Apparently established to teach multiple languages to children aged 10 and under (including his own

Research indicates that “one of the ways cults subjugate women is by tearing down their self-esteem” (Whitsett & Post Rosow, 2020, p. 359). Raniere’s teachings and personal interactions with many Nxian women did just that: Women evaluated themselves negatively, whilst being groomed to accept men’s apparent virtue and superiority. Raniere’s message was clear: Women needed to change their attitudes and behaviors—and he required that they recognize their inherent inferiority and submit to men—and, more specifically, to *him*.

D. Raniere’s End Game: Dominus Obsequious Sororium

By the time new DOS initiates uttered the words, “Master, please brand me, it would be an honor, an honor I want to wear for the rest of my life” (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 2064), they had been groomed, manipulated, and coerced into accepting a wide array of distasteful and abusive situations. Though they did not realize it at the time, Raniere was in control of the alleged female-empowerment sorority to which they had just pledged themselves.³³ With the branding of Raniere’s initials—also unknown to them—near their pubic regions, he had cleverly and deceitfully taken full control. Each painful branding ceremony was just the beginning of his plans to groom them for further humiliation. Translating to “master over the slave women,” the group’s name, *Dominus Obsequious Sororium*,

son, Gaelen), the unlicensed schools employed nannies and others who were unqualified to teach. The woman contacted Natalie with her concerns about children being exposed to discussions about sex at an early age. She alleged that young girls were being taught (i.e., groomed) how to become sexual partners, and that sex with adults is acceptable (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, pp. 2016–2220). Natalie has proposed that the normalization of sexual abuse was a recurrent theme in NXIVM curricula (Natalie & Hardin, 2019, pp. 99–100).

³³ Raniere kept his position as founder and leader of DOS hidden from converts other than the first line (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 1509, 1602).

clearly is indicative of his intentions.³⁴ Moreover, in the contemporary era, branding can represent ownership and sometimes indicates “a message of submission” (Rush, 2005, p. 104). Vows of secrecy, commitments to nondisclosure, and promises to a “lifetime vow of obedience” to their masters consolidated Raniere’s power over the women and their environment (see Sinnamon, 2017).

Raniere established a hierarchy within DOS whereby members also became groomers. Each new master had to groom her slave to have sex with Raniere. The following text message—from October 2015—the year of DOS’ inception, from Raniere to a first-line slave is revealing: “I think it would be good for you to own a fuck toy slave for me, that you could groom, and use as a tool, to pleasure me...” (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2018, p. 14; Edmondson & Gasbarre, p. 208). Initially, most new slaves were recruited from the inner circle; others, such as Sarah Edmondson, were on the periphery of it, recognized for their achievements and commitment. The DOS environment continued and also intensified the inner-circle environment. Hence, subservience, physical and psychological manipulations (and punishments), starvation diets, lies, secrecy, and surveillance characterized the sorority. These circumstances left the women in perpetual states of anxiety, self-doubt, and self-loathing. Indeed, the FBI affidavit submitted prior to Raniere’s arrest identified that weight control and other slave obligations “appeared designed to groom slaves sexually for RANIERE” (*The United States of America v. Raniere*, 2018, p. 9; capitalization in the

original). Whilst Raniere had always believed in his own superiority and had continually put himself first, the details of DOS would reveal the full extent to which he believed that his “needs and desires are ultimately more deserving of fulfilment” (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 464).

The first-line slaves who reported directly to Raniere—their Master—became masters of their own slaves. Raniere, and each subsequent master, secured (or rather, extorted) slave loyalty by procuring “collateral” from each new member (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 1602). Collateral could be any disparaging, revelatory, or sensitive piece of information (true or fictitious), or a valuable possession, the magnitude of which was so great that the slave would not want to give it up or have it made public. Indicative of his cruelty, Raniere wrote that collateral “should be so distasteful to break . . . that they’d rather die than break their vow” (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 1653–1654).

Raniere required explicit photographs of new recruits that incorporated both their vaginas and their faces as initial collateral prior to branding. Once they were in DOS, banking information, additional explicit photographs, and filmed “confessions” met the conditions of further collateral (Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019, p. 9). Raniere’s propensity for taking explicit images of women began long before DOS (for example, see *United States of America v. Raniere*, pp. 1535–1536)—and even before NXIVM (see Natalie & Hardin, 2019, p. 128); but he increased the frequency of his demands for such photos once he established the sorority.³⁵ The collection of

³⁴ Raniere wrote a DOS guidebook outlining his philosophy for master-slave relationships. More than 100 pages long, this book covered a large array of concepts, expectations, and rules so that slaves might perform “appropriately,” including the following: the necessity of daily acts of self-denial and the principle of total submission (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 1654);

the role of discipline, obedience, and surrender (2019, pp. 1655–1656); the purpose of sharing one’s deepest secrets and fears, of confession, and of being vulnerable (2019, pp. 1657–1658).

³⁵ The first-line slaves met three times a week at the DOS sorority house. Raniere required that each meeting begin with a group

collateral can be part of the grooming process, whereby “the victim finds themselves willingly handing over money or assets, engaging in inappropriate, illegal, or morally ambiguous activities (for example, sharing nude photos or videos of themselves)” (MOBIEG, 2019, para. 19).

Each DOS slave was beholden to hermaster’s requests *at all times*—as embodied by “readiness drills.” This arduous procedure necessitated complete obedience and loyalty to one’s master. Raniere and other masters would text, “?” to a slave, who then had 60 seconds to respond. Occurring day or night (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 1606), Raniere designed this demeaning practice to discipline women (2019, p. 1611) and he punished those who failed to reply to the text. Edmondson reports that paddling, whipping, and other physical reprimands were typical (Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019, p. 181; *United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 1636–1637); although, at times, Raniere and other masters exercised vindictive psychological torments too.³⁶

Raniere frequently tested the inner circle and DOS women’s sexual loyalty (see Lalich, 1997), acquiring greater power in the process. Regulating “sexual preferences or relationships” (Lalich, 1997, p. 12) is an example of such testing. As noted previously, Raniere demanded monogamy from his partners whilst he maintained multiple sexual

relationships. Frequently, Raniere requested, coerced, and or initiated sex with more than one female partner at once (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 2417–2420; 2442; 2460); and on one occasion he tried to initiate sex with sisters Daniela and Marianna (2019, p. 2418).³⁷

According to Lalich, with every loyalty test, women’s esteem deteriorates, as does their sense of personal autonomy (Lalich, 1997, p. 12). Moreover, testing loyalty “may be done in a sexually sadistic manner, further debilitating the follower and increasing personal confusion and dependency on the leader” (Lalich, 1997, p. 12). Raniere intended to install a “three and a half feet tall by four feet wide” steel “sex cage” in a “dungeon” in the DOS sorority-house basement. Raniere planned to cage women so that they would surrender themselves to *indefinite* periods of isolation and *unpredictable* conditions, so that they might further their “growth.” Raniere planned to use “nipple clamps, handcuffs, and bondage” in this dungeon setting (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 1637–1640).³⁸ To exhibit this level of loyalty to Raniere was a fearful prospect for first-line slave Lauren Salzman, who indicated to the court she did not want to participate in this forthcoming feature of DOS (2019, p. 1638).

Sinnamon proposes that sometimes the narcissistic sexual predator is characterized

photograph in which each slave had to pose naked, pubic brands on view, and looking happy. The image was sent to him for his approval. Sometimes Raniere attended the meetings, always sitting on a chair above the women as they sat on the floor below him (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, pp. 1510–1511).

³⁶ Edmondson & Gasbarre (2019), Natalie (Natalie & Hardin, 2019), Oxenberg & Stoyneff (2019), and testimonies heard during Raniere’s court trial revealed Raniere’s various cruel psychological tactics, many of which caused women a great deal of anxiety, pain, and humiliation. For example, he made jokes of a sexual nature about specific women in front of others (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 2452); he often emotionally isolated women by refusing to talk to them when they fell out of his favor (2019, p.

2461); and, as previously noted, in Daniela’s case he literally imprisoned her for 2 years.

³⁷ Raniere claimed that all women are bisexual, and he made fun of Siobhan, a married lesbian (*United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 2459).

³⁸ Whilst it may appear (if one is generous) that Raniere might have been planning a consensual BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism, and masochism) den, the evidence shows that he held all of the power and deliberately planned the experience to be one in which slaves had no say. Full consent is critical in healthy BDSM relationships (Dunkley & Brotto, 2019, pp. 1–2; *United States of America v. Raniere*, 2019, p. 1501).

by “unarticulated anger,” which can manifest in the abuser’s need to “dominate and humiliate the victim in some sexualized manner” (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 465). Often, this anger stems from the perpetrator’s perception that he has not been adequately recognized within broader society—that others in society somehow “owe” him. The complete subjugation and humiliation of the victim provides a greater sense of esteem for these types of predators (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 465); and as evidenced by his own actions, Raniere had a “high, but fragile” self-esteem (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 464). With DOS, Raniere’s status as Master (and Grand Master) confirmed his position of absolute power. His behaviors therein represent his dual needs for domination and for being the center of attention. Clearly, he funneled these demands into the sexual abuse and manipulation of DOS women (see Sinnamon, 2017, p. 464). Moreover, his plans for a cage likely represent the apex of his anger, frustration, esteem issues, and need to dominate and humiliate women.

Conclusion

Raniere’s ESP course, *Human Pain*, taught that, in order to experience greater love, people need also to feel loss. He identified that pain needs to take priority over selfish needs for security and well-being, as the latter are evident signs of “weakness of character.” *Human Pain* taught adherents of NXIVM to expressly *choose* pain so that they might foster the ability to love more profoundly, establishing “the foundation for someone to confuse pain with pleasure and vice versa” (Oxenbergs & Stoyanoff, 2019, pp. 84–86). Raniere manipulated, shamed, and humiliated the women whilst still maintaining their dependency on him. He confused their sense of what love and respect are. As a skilled manipulator and groomer, Raniere did what many in his position do: He took “pleasure in **skillfully causing pain** to increase his sense of control,” thus ensuring

that the women that he abused were “anxiously focused on not upsetting or angering him” (MOBIEG, 2019, para. 21; *emphasis in the original*).

Sinnamon (2017) has proposed that predators who groom and exploit adult women typically are narcissistic (or antisocial). To access women, these abusers typically insert themselves into environments that will yield desired targets. Looking for admiration and respect, they seek to establish themselves as valuable and honest members of the community. Sinnamon’s research focused on grooming within broader society. In Raniere’s case, *he created* the environment; his victims already were a part of the group that he had established. Thus, he integrated practices of adoration, respect, and trust from the outset: He created conditions ripe for grooming and for achieving flawed consent (see Dayan, 2017).

Predators often choose helping, teaching, or coaching roles to develop status and trust (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 475), allowing them to assist individuals whilst surreptitiously gaining insights into their needs and vulnerabilities. Feeling helped, the victim garners further respect and trust for the predator—essential for narcissists (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 476). When individuals yearn for a particular thing or outcome, often they are more susceptible to the manipulations of any person who is seemingly able to help them fulfill their goals (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 468). Raniere positioned himself as a genius life coach and savior. Thus, committed women in NXIVM who sought and prioritized reinvention and self-actualization (Raine, 2020), were susceptible to overlooking their own personal well-being in favor of what they perceived to be a greater set of goals for themselves. Cultic ideologies often occupy significant importance in members’ lives, especially for more devoted members. Hence, the grooming process is strengthened not only by the abuser’s

position of authority in the cult, but also by the strength of the members' commitment both to the leader and to the group's teachings and lifestyle (see Sinnamon, 2017).³⁹

Ranieri's teachings sometimes caused concern or doubt in his followers. Adept groomers, however, can manipulate their targets further by using the veiled threat of removal of their mentorship, friendship, and support. Consequently, the victim may conclude that despite the unsettling nature of the behaviors, they "are worth putting up with due to the higher prices of losing whatever benefits, real or perceived, they receive through the relationship" (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 480). Court testimonies and former-member accounts are replete with such scenarios (see Edmondson & Gasbarre, 2019; Natalie & Hardin, 2019; Oxenberg & Stoynoff, 2019; and *United States of America v. Ranieri*, 2019).

Intimidation and fear-based submission varies from relatively subtle forms to more flagrant ones. Irrespective of intensity, this approach allows the perpetrator to groom the individual further "to engage in behaviors| . . . they would previously [have] considered inappropriate or outright unacceptable" (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 480). Moreover, throughout the grooming process, the abuser continues the role of mentor, friend, supporter, and so forth (Sinnamon, 2017). Clearly, Ranieri used these and other strategies as he manipulated his interpersonal relationships with the women in his inner circle and DOS. At times, Ranieri appeared affectionate, concerned, and compassionate; on other occasions he was aloof, cruel, angry, and punitive. Sometimes he appeared caring whilst simultaneously performing sadistic behaviors, claiming they were for the

women's growth and benefit. He seems to have lacked empathy—another trait of narcissism (see American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp. 669–670).

Sinnamon identifies that, when women understand that they have been sexually manipulated and exploited, they may experience intense feelings of guilt and shame (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 482). Typically, conflicting emotions, feelings of guilt, and fear of one's abuser—especially when he infers or issues threats, keep the victims silent (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 462). In the case of NXIVM, despite their reservations and objections, many of the women still admired, respected, depended on, and even loved Ranieri. As their esteemed leader, teacher, and mentor, he was responsible for their well-being and security. He had become central to their sense of selfhood and identity, their perceptions of self-worth and value, and their sense of purpose and meaning. He also blackmailed them with his collection of collateral. Together, these features created a complex combination of contradictory experiences and emotions that likely left many women uncertain of their own decisions and judgments. Thus, for some, commitment and devotion to NXIVM and Ranieri led not to empowerment, but instead to the very opposite.

Of course, given the array of controlling and abusive behaviors that Ranieri implemented, alongside his sense of superiority and other features of his personality, it is possible that narcissism alone may not fully explain him. Other researchers may take a different approach in trying to understand him; whilst still others might find it prudent to assess him using a combination of classifications and traits. (For example, although no longer

³⁹ Raine and Kent (2019) for a discussion of this dynamic in religiously ideological settings.

included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, much has been written about sadism and its comorbidity with personality disorders.) Certainly, it seems likely that much more will be written about Keith Raniere, the world's self-proclaimed smartest man.

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