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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether Social Movement Theory's (SMT) concept of independent mobilisation can adequately explain the radicalisation of Rhianan Rudd, a 14-year-old British girl with autism spectrum disorder who was groomed into far-right extremism and later charged with terrorism offences. Analysis of Rhianan's case reveals that SMT's independent mobilisation lens—centred on behaviours, relationships, and ideology—fails to account for coercion, exploitation, and diminished agency.

Building on grooming and autism scholarship, the study proposes "Exploitative Mobilisation" as a more appropriate framework for understanding how adult predation, systemic neglect, and neurodevelopmental vulnerabilities can manipulate children towards terrorism. Rather than reflecting ideological commitment, Rhianan's engagement with extremism reveals how safeguarding failures can culminate in state criminalisation. The findings highlight the need for frameworks that consider power asymmetries, victimisation, and the structural misrecognition of exploited youth.

KEYWORDS

Social Movement Theory; Exploitative Mobilisation; Grooming; Radicalisation; Sexual Exploitation; ASD; Terrorism

Introduction

Contemporary research on the UKs counterterrorism strategy has increasingly centred on individuals with overlapping vulnerabilities—often referred to as Multiple and Complex Needs (MCN)—including mental illness, neurodevelopmental conditions, social isolation, and exposure to abuse. While the Prevent strand of UK counterterrorism was initially intended to detect and deter individuals moving toward terrorism, its scope now routinely intersects with those facing severe social and psychological disadvantage. Research suggests that, in practice, Prevent sometimes blurs safeguarding with securitisation, inadvertently positioning vulnerable individuals as potential threats rather than subjects in need of care.[1] The challenge is further complicated by a shift in the threat landscape, where large-scale, coordinated plots have given way to fragmented, individualised forms of extremism—often involving socially marginalised or isolated actors[1]. Yet state responses have not always adapted to these nuances. As a result, people grappling with mental health crises, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and histories of trauma may find themselves channelled into counterterrorism systems ill-equipped to respond holistically to their vulnerabilities.

The case of Rhianan Rudd underscores the stakes of this predicament. A 14-year-old British girl with ASD, a history of trauma, and limited social support, Rhianan was drawn into far-right extremism through online grooming, eventually facing terrorism charges. Despite evidence of exploitation and clear markers of diminished agency, she pursued as a perpetrator before recognising her victim status ultimately, prompting questions about how pathways towards terrorism are conceptualised when choice and volition are compromised. Her death by suicide at age sixteen, following repeated safeguarding

failures, has sparked an urgent debate on whether conventional counter-extremism frameworks adequately account for child exploitation, sexual grooming, and neurodevelopmental needs.

In tandem with these dilemmas, SMT has gained traction in terrorism studies as a framework for explaining how individuals mobilise towards terrorism[2]. By highlighting the interplay of radical behaviours, social relationships, and ideological framing, SMT has proven adept at clarifying the emergence of "lone actors" or small cells that bypass conventional hierarchies.[3-5] Yet SMT generally assumes a measure of voluntarism, seeing participants as at least partly invested in the cause they join.[2,6,7] Cases like Rhianan's, marked by grooming, neurodevelopmental fragility, and persistent structural failures, challenge these foundational assumptions. While illuminating, SMT struggles to capture circumstances in which "choice" may be so constrained by coercion and psychological manipulation that typical notions of agency no longer apply.

Grooming can be understood as a strategic process in which an individual cultivates a vulnerable person's trust with the express intention of exploitation.[8] Perpetrators often target children who display signs of vulnerability—such as social isolation, bullying, family conflict, or a lack of support systems.[9] Grooming typically entails a gradual excretion of power recognisable behavioural patterns: selecting a victim, building trust, isolating the child, sexualising the relationship, and maintaining control through secrecy, guilt, or threats.[9] Victims frequently do not recognise they are being abused and may even feel loyalty or affection toward their abuser.[8] This makes detection and disclosure especially difficult. As such, recognising behavioural signs—such as secrecy, unexplained possessions, emotional withdrawal, or sudden changes in language or behaviour—is critical for early intervention and safeguarding.[8]

However, because such behaviours are commonly observed in individuals with ASD, grooming can be difficult to detect.[10] Without specialised training in neurodevelopmental indicators, professionals may overlook early signs—particularly when security agendas overshadow care-based interventions.[10,11] In Rhianan's case, these factors converged with the counterterrorism apparatus, generating a scenario in which safeguarding and securitisation intertwined—occasionally at cross purposes, and often to the detriment of a child whose capacity for independent decision-making was already compromised.

This paper examines the case of Rhianan Rudd through the lens of Social Movement Theory, focusing on the behaviours, relationships, and ideology that contribute to independent mobilisation. It posits that a comprehensive understanding of Rhianan's case requires fusing SMT insights with nuanced perspectives from grooming and ASD research. Specifically, it introduces an alternative conceptual framework, "Exploitative Mobilisation," to capture scenarios where vulnerable individuals can be propelled into extremist channels through methodical exploitation. By illuminating how coercion, systemic neglect, and neurodevelopmental needs shape pathways to terrorism charges, the paper invites further reflection on what "agency" means when the individual in question is, by virtue of age, cognitive profile, and orchestrated abuse, effectively denied any real measure of choice.

The Case of Rhianan Rudd

British citizen Rhianan Rudd experienced multiple and complex needs throughout her life. Diagnosed with ASD at a young age, she found social interactions challenging and often struggled to maintain stable relationships.[12] She frequently masked her true self, adapting her behaviour to fit in with the limited friendships she had, rather than expressing her authentic personality.[13] Like many individuals with ASD, she developed intense "fixations" on specific topics. Her mother described her as "a sponge," absorbing information and allowing it to shape her identity in the moment.[13]

In addition to her neurodevelopmental needs, Rhianan experienced significant mental health challenges. She engaged in self-harm and frequently ran away from home—behaviours that prompted early involvement from social services.[12,14] Yet these difficulties did not define her. Those close to Rhianan described her as affectionate and creative, full of warmth and energy. She loved horses, dancing, cooking, and art.[12] She was more than her struggles—she was a young girl in search of stability, connection, and care.

Following an earlier fixation on the animated series *My Little Pony*, Rhianan's fixations shifted towards the history of the world wars, Adolf Hitler, and eventually, neo-Nazi ideology—a sequential transition that coincided with persistent exposure to extremism.[12-14] At the age of fourteen, she began communicating with Christopher Cook, an 18-year-old American neo-Nazi who was using digital platforms to disseminate white supremacist propaganda and recruit minors into his cause.[15,16]

An FBI counter-terrorism investigation into Cook revealed that, in addition to planning an attack on critical US infrastructure, he had groomed Rhianan both ideologically and sexually. Their communications included exchanges of extremist materials, confessions of love, and explicit images. This information was passed to MI5 six months before any formal investigation into Rhianan began.[16-19]

Rhianan was also subject to extremist influence within her home. Her mother's partner at the time, Dax Mallaburn, was a former member of a white supremacist prison gang in the United States.[14] Mallaburn had entered the family home after meeting Rhianan's mother through a prison pen pal scheme. Although Rhianan's mother maintains she was unaware of any continued extremist affiliations, evidence later confirmed that Mallaburn was in contact with Cook, who allegedly instructed him to teach Rhianan the "right way".[14,18]

The combined influence of Cook and Mallaburn had a profound impact on Rhianan's radicalisation. She became increasingly withdrawn and secretive, expressed admiration for Hitler, and began refusing to engage with peers she perceived as lacking Aryan features. She adopted a German accent and frequently voiced antisemitic and racist beliefs, reportedly asserting that certain groups were inferior and should not be alive.[13,14] She told classmates she wanted to "blow up a synagogue" and "slit people's throats," prompting one concerned peer to alert school staff.[12] Her rhetoric aligned with the glorification of Nazi ideology and was reinforced by sustained online engagement with violent materials, including guerrilla warfare manuals and white supremacist propaganda.[12,18]

In September 2020, concerns escalated after Rhianan disclosed to her mother that she had downloaded a bomb-making manual. The following day, her mother submitted an online referral to the UK's deradicalisation programme, "Prevent".[14,20] Police quickly recovered a USB drive containing the manual, along with other far-right material. Initially, MI5 and police opted not to pursue a terrorism investigation, citing concerns that an arrest could further damage Rhianan's mental health.

However, their position shifted abruptly after Rhianan carved a swastika into her forehead and was hospitalised. The act was interpreted as both a symbolic expression of ideological commitment and a sign of psychological crisis—what some officials later described as ideological branding and a potential indicator of an imminent terror threat.[12,18,19,21] Just weeks following the referral to Prevent, nineteen armed counter-terrorism officers arrested Rhianan with intent to prosecute, effectively ending all further safeguarding interventions.[13]

Following her arrest, Rhianan's involvement with Prevent ended. MI5 and police remanded her into custody, and she was prohibited from returning to school during this period[12]. Despite earlier warnings from the FBI, her case was not referred to the Home Office's modern slavery unit. It was only in April 2021—after she had been formally charged with six terrorism offences—that her legal defence team initiated the referral.[18,22] Seven months later, the Home Office concluded that Rhianan had been trafficked and sexually exploited. In December 2021, all charges against her were dropped.[18,20]

After the charges were dropped, Rhianan chose to remain in care under Derbyshire Council, residing at a residential home operated by Blue Mountain Homes. However, her mental health continued to deteriorate. She eventually resumed contact with extremist networks, and her mother repeatedly warned staff about signs of suicidal ideation, access to ligatures, and marked behavioural changes.[18] Although these concerns were documented, they were not followed by any significant intervention. On 19 May 2022, aged just sixteen, Rhianan was found dead by suicide in her room—more than twelve hours after her last known contact with staff.[12,19] A subsequent inquest criticised multiple state agencies for failing to act on clear safeguarding warnings and for the delayed recognition of her status as a victim.[12,18]

Rhianan's case reveals the complex entanglement of neurodevelopmental vulnerability, online grooming, extremist ideology, and state response. While initially labelled a would-be terrorist, she was ultimately recognised as a sexually exploited minor manipulated by adults both online and within her household. Despite her mother's proactive referral to Prevent, the system oscillated between safeguarding and prosecution—often at cross purposes. That critical intelligence from the FBI reached UK authorities months before any intervention, yet failed to trigger immediate safeguarding, underscores a profound failure in identifying and protecting a child whose agency had been severely compromised.

Contextualising Social Movement Theory

Rhianan Rudd's tragic involvement with neo-Nazi extremism prompts us to test whether independent mobilisation principles can adequately explain how a vulnerable minor was groomed into radical action. SMT has long studied high-risk activism in contexts lacking clear hierarchies.[3,23] Scholars typically explore three interlocking dimensions—behaviours, relationships, and ideology—to understand the process of individual mobilisation.[2,7] Yet Rhianan's experience, shaped by ASD, significant mental health struggles, and systematic adult coercion, reveals both the explanatory power of these frameworks and their inherent limitations in addressing child exploitation.

Indeed, while many aspects of her trajectory mirror standard processes—such as incremental threshold-crossing, reliance on interpersonal ties, and ideological framing—the pivot from voluntary participation to coercive grooming challenges key SMT assumptions about autonomy and reciprocity. Below, I explore how each dimension of SMT—behaviours, relationships, and ideology—aligns with or is subverted by Rhianan's case.

Behaviours

Discussions of behaviour in independent mobilisation have historically oscillated between two poles: early theories that explain radical behaviour through "psychopathology"—emphasising alienation, isolation, low self-esteem, or ideological deficits as motivations for joining movements[4,24,25] and more contemporary perspectives that foreground the interplay of structural, social, and emotional triggers.[26-28] For decades, researchers such as Smelser tended to depict sudden group violence and lone-actor

extremism as evidence of deviant impulses or crowd-induced irrationality.[25] Over time, scholarship evolved to see deviance as shaped by situational cues, social networks, and emotional feedback loops.[29,30]

This shift is especially relevant to Rhianan's story. Her initial mental health vulnerabilities—self-harm, ASD-related challenges, social isolation—might once have been framed as an inherent predisposition to "deviance".[25] Contemporary scholars, however, point to multi-causal pathways, emphasising how personal crises interact with radical narratives, threshold effects, and group-level reinforcement.[31-33] Morgan, Cubitt, and Voce's[27] study of anti-authority protesters, for instance, shows how cognitive radicalisation often emerges in individuals lacking robust social support or institutional trust, not from a disturbed psyche alone. Rhianan's repeated runaways, self-harm episodes, and sense of betrayal by authorities illustrate this intersection of personal distress with structural or situational catalysts. Although standard SMT situates these vulnerabilities in the context of emergent radical behaviours, it rarely contemplates a scenario where adult groomers manipulate the child's psychological fragility to expedite extremist behaviour—an abuse dimension not generally considered in mainstream theories.[26]

One of the best-known formulations in SMT is threshold theory.[32] Individuals, it is argued, cross progressively riskier "thresholds" when they see that enough "people like them" have already done so. In cases of truly independent mobilisation—lone-actor terrorism, loosely structured protests—such small steps can rapidly accumulate.[30] Since no formal leadership sets boundaries, small deviant acts can "cascade" into violence.[23,34] On the surface, Rhianan's trajectory from mild extremist interest (downloading certain materials) to carving a swastika might exemplify threshold-crossing.

However, key differences set her case apart from the typical threshold dynamic. Usually, threshold models assume the individual sees others cross each line, thereby normalising more extreme behaviour[32]. Rhianan did not watch a broad peer group adopt hateful or violent actions in public demonstrations. Instead, she was guided by two older men—Cook online, Mallaburn at home—who intentionally validated each new "micro-escalation." The grooming process effectively replaced the typical group-based synergy with a one-on-one manipulative feedback loop. Unlike the typical threshold scenario, Rhianan had no second thoughts or external reference points because her environment was meticulously curated, with adult groomers "tipping" her at each stage.[30]

Beyond thresholds, emotional catalysts often shape radical behaviour.[28,35,36] People confronted with moral shocks or outrages can respond by adopting new frames that legitimise violent or extreme acts.[37] This perspective helps clarify how Rhianan's sense of isolation by society, might amplify her readiness to accept far-right content. However, typical SMT frameworks see these emotional jolts as more or less spontaneous or emanating from activist narratives.[36,38] Rhianan's "emotional triggers" were actively constructed by adult groomers who harnessed her loneliness and ASD fixations, reinterpreting them as evidence of an urgent racist cause. The grooming component thus shifts the usual trajectory from self-driven moral indignation to externally orchestrated emotional shaping.

Studies have also explored how state repression or institutional failure fosters radicalisation.[29,33] Indeed, repeated "heavy-handed" policing can push participants to adopt more extreme tactics. In Rhianan's case, authorities oscillated between minimal safeguarding and abrupt prosecutorial moves, culminating in armed counter-terror arrests. The abrupt pivot from ignoring her vulnerabilities to criminalising her may well have deepened any resentment toward authority and explains, in part, why she later reconnected with extremist circles.[27] Yet classical radicalisation accounts typically emphasise how adults interpret state violence or injustice, forming "us-versus-them" worldviews over time.[2,7] By

contrast, Rhianan was a child whose worldview was shaped for her by exploitative adults, not by her own reflections on state injustice. Although the eventual crackdown did reinforce her sense of persecution, the grooming dimension again undercuts the idea that radical behaviour primarily arises from voluntary, peer-influenced developments.

In sum, SMT captures crucial aspects of behaviour—threshold-crossing, emotional triggers, institutional missteps—yet the child grooming context reconfigures the usual assumption that extremist behaviour emerges through (semi)voluntary processes of escalation.

Relationships

Social Movement Theory traditionally treats relationships as the heart of movement participation.[2,39] Formal leadership is not required; people join because of trusted interpersonal connections and the desire for belonging or moral validation.[6,7] Some speak of "recruitment calls," in which existing networks ensure the "right people" are invited in.[40] Others emphasise how affective ties—friendships, family, or local associations—anchor individuals to the cause, forging deeper loyalty over time.[29,41] This fundamental insight helps clarify why Rhianan's path hinged so heavily on adult influence: it was not random self-radicalisation, but a personal network dynamic.

Yet while mainstream SMT sees these ties as at least partly reciprocal—i.e., new recruits derive emotional support, acceptance, and a sense of collective identity—Rhianan's case exemplifies exploitation. Cook and Mallaburn capitalised on her need for belonging, systematically removing alternative support systems. Instead of "voluntarily bonding," she was coerced into a single worldview. This forcibly harnessed the same relational dynamics that many scholars regard as positive channels for movement-building.[7,39] As a result, the usual argument that "ties to existing members draw you in"[34] is inverted: these were not typical ties but grooming-based "relationships" that subjugated her autonomy.

If classical SMT emphasises how trust fosters group cohesion and risk acceptance, Rhianan's story complicates that idea.[42] Cook played the role of a confidant, not to build mutual trust but to manipulate her. Hegghammer[42] notes that clandestine groups use "vetting" to protect themselves from infiltration, typically relying on reciprocal trust among members. In this environment, Rhianan alone was tested—through expectations of love and devotion communicated via explicit imagery and discourse—while her "mentors" faced no reciprocal test. The entire process was unidirectional, reminiscent of how grooming perpetrators cultivate a child's dependence rather than forging symmetrical bonds.[43]

Similar distortions appear in the "safe space" or "affinity group" concept. Malthaner[44] and Snow and Cross[41] highlight how small, leaderless groups can intensify radical devotion. Rhianan did experience a version of that "affinity group," but in a profoundly exploitative form.[45] Cook and Mallaburn effectively created a micro-world that validated extremist ideas, isolating Rhianan from peers or family who could question them. This exemplifies the darker side of "safe spaces," where child exploitation can flourish if no protective oversight exists. That scenario rarely appears in standard SMT discussions, which assume participants are at least consenting, if not fully informed.[7]

Social Movement scholars frequently examine brokerage—actors or organisations bridging different segments of a movement.[46-48] Independent mobilisation often depends on brokers who channel resources, unify frames, or link subgroups. In principle, Cook might be seen as such a broker: he connected Rhianan to a broader neo-Nazi network. Yet while typical brokerage fosters synergy and mutual exchange, this arrangement was closer to "perverse brokerage," wherein a predator uses their

bridging position to trap a child.[49] Standard SMT rarely contemplates brokers who intentionally target minors for exploitation, but that is precisely what occurred. Rather than bridging ideological divides or enabling dialogue, Cook and Mallaburn forcibly drew Rhianan into an extremist current that left her no exit route.

Thus, while relationships remain pivotal, the power asymmetry and manipulative tactics contravene the assumption of at least partial voluntarism or peer-based trust. The child exploitation dimension thus requires expanding our theoretical lens to recognise that "close ties" can become a source of entrapment, not genuine recruitment.

Ideology

In typical frame alignment theory, individuals adopt movement ideologies when personal grievances or beliefs "resonate" with the group's interpretive frames.[3,50] Researchers highlight how "moral shocks" can galvanise new adherents and how repeated interactions reinforce ideological convictions.[7,36] Even "independent" or small-cell contexts rely on powerful frames to unify participants around an enemy or cause.[6] Rhianan's abrupt shift from innocent fixations to explicit Hitler fandom may reflect the effects of a "moral shock," not in the form of a singular crisis, but rather as a cumulative reaction to personal vulnerability and online exposure—experiences that were then manipulated and reframed as antisemitic or racist conviction.

But the standard model assumes participants at least partly weigh or internalise frames voluntarily. Cook's role went far beyond "offering a resonant narrative" to an unhappy teen. He deliberately exploited her ASD fixations, sexualised the grooming process, and restricted her worldview so that neo-Nazi frames felt like the only narrative available. Polletta and Jasper[51] caution that identity and ideology must not be conflated, emphasising that ideology implies a more conscious adoption of beliefs. In Rhianan's context, that distinction collapses under manipulation: she never fully "chose" to see the world in Nazi terms but was forcibly taught that these extremist ideas were her route to belonging. This reflects Forster and Pearson's[52] concept of 'mate crime,' in which a perpetrator known to the victim exploits neurodevelopmental differences in social cognition to manipulate and abuse. This underscores how child-targeted grooming converts what might be normal "frame alignment" into a coerced ideological transformation.

One hallmark of independent mobilisation is ideological fluidity: movements remain broad-tent, letting participants project their own values onto a cause.[53] Over time, ideology can either consolidate or fragment.[54] Some recruits begin with minimal conviction but deepen radical beliefs once embedded among like-minded peers.[6,55] Such fluid ideology is ordinarily considered a strength, allowing for wide initial appeal but risking future fracturing. Rhianan's experience, however, shows an opposite dynamic: her ideology was forcibly shaped into a dogmatic, hateful worldview by two adults controlling her social sphere. She had none of the usual "fluid" ideological space to interpret the cause in a personal way, every interpretive angle was dictated.[44]

Priming theory also suggests how exposure to certain rhetorical cues—like "defending freedom" or "protecting one's community"—can prime future acceptance of violent frames.[38] In typical movements, those cues exist in the broader culture. Cook's manipulative grooming meant he personally curated these cues, embedding them in sexual messages and illusions of romantic interest, leaving Rhianan with no neutral vantage. This contravenes the usual assumption that "exposed individuals may or may not adopt the more radical path", her environment offered no alternative script.[38]

Jasper[35] emphasises that ideology resonates emotionally—activists adopt moral imperatives or indignation that galvanise them to act. In the context of "independent" radical cells, such emotional synergy can be even more potent.[41,56] For Rhianan, an environment saturating her in conspiratorial or racist narratives replaced any authentic moral or emotional impetus with engineered extremist sentiment. The usual route, is that experiences of injustice or direct confrontation with authorities push activists toward a "totalising" worldview.[29] Rhianan's worldview was "totalised" from the outset by perpetrators who mapped her emotional longing for acceptance onto their vile ideological frames. This dynamic underscores a crucial shortfall in standard theory: it does not systematically consider how adult abusers might deliberately craft an ideological environment for a minor to inhabit, negating the normal interplay of choice, reflection, or even organic moral outrage.[5,7]

In sum, mainstream Social Movement Theory—especially in its attention to behaviours, relationships, and ideology—illuminates certain aspects of Rhianan Rudd's radicalisation. However, the theory consistently presupposes a degree of voluntarism, reciprocity, and participant agency that vanishes when a child is methodically groomed. Behaviours typically explained via "personal readiness" or "threshold cascades" become adult-orchestrated steps. Relationships praised in the literature for forging solidarity now appear as manipulative channels. Ideological frames normally assumed to be partially negotiable are coerced and enforced upon a vulnerable teen.

Thus, while SMT remains indispensable for capturing fundamental processes, Rhianan's ordeal demonstrates the pressing need to widen its lens to integrate child protection insights, grooming dynamics, and power asymmetries. By recognising that child-targeted grooming short-circuits the typical interplay of behaviour, relationships, and ideology, we begin to address the urgent theoretical gaps exposed by Rhianan's tragic story.

~~Independent~~ Exploitative Mobilisation

In the preceding section, we traced how SMT interprets independent mobilisation through three core dimensions: behaviours, relationships, and ideology. Scholarship identifies how radical behaviours can escalate through threshold effects, how relationships function as pathways for recruitment, and how ideology takes shape through interpretive frames and shared narratives.[3,6,7,32,39] Yet Rhianan's experience highlights a crucial limitation in these frameworks—namely, that a minor with multiple vulnerabilities may be coerced into extremist engagement rather than choosing it, rendering standard notions of agency and voluntary participation problematic. To address these gaps, the concept of "Exploitative Mobilisation" proposes an integrated lens that re-examines behaviours, relationships, and ideology under the shadow of grooming, autism-specific vulnerabilities, and systemic failures.

Exploitative Mobilisation draws on and challenges key insights from SMT by emphasising how a child, rather than engaging autonomously, may be systematically coerced into extremist participation. In Rhianan Rudd's case, the familiar SMT dimensions of radical behaviour, trust-based relationships, and frame alignment were starkly reconfigured by grooming, adult coercion, and a host of unaddressed vulnerabilities associated with autism and wider systemic failures. While SMT scholarship often recognises that 'deviance' can escalate when thresholds are crossed, grooming research underscores how that process can be orchestrated by adult perpetrators who exploit children's need for connection or validation.[23,29,3243,57] Rather than crossing each radical step independently, the child is "entrained," every move shaped and accelerated by an abuser who capitalises on isolation or a longing for acceptance. In this sense, exposure to extremist content is not merely a product of happenstance or minor rebellion; it reflects a calculated campaign in which high-risk actions become normalised through praise, threats, or manipulative affirmations.

Such a pattern becomes even more pronounced when we consider that many autistic youths, including those who navigate social communication challenges, are disproportionately susceptible to manipulative overtures.[58] As autism scholarship has shown, negative stereotypes, misunderstandings during clinical assessments, and limited social support can converge to create situations in which autistic individuals are more likely to trust an adult who offers apparent companionship or shared interests.[52,59-61] These factors, combined with pre-existing vulnerabilities, contribute to autistic individuals experiencing disproportionately high levels of intimate and interpersonal violence and victimisation.[59,60] Likewise, mainstream grooming literature indicates that persistent isolation and relational naivety place children at higher risk.[10,62] An adult predator, embedded in the family or operating online, can thus assume the role of confidant or mentor, concealing exploitative motives behind benevolence and companionship. As a result, the mutuality that standard SMT assumes in social ties—where people unite over shared aims—is replaced by a one-directional dynamic, with the abuser dictating a permissible worldview.

This skewed power relationship casts new light on how ideology crystallises. SMT often assumes that individuals, however marginalised, still exercise some agency in choosing the narratives they adopt.[3,7,63] Yet grooming literature shows that children who are groomed receive their ideological frames from an abuser who drip-feeds extremist ideas through personal messages, altered social experiences, or manipulation of the child's specialised interests.[57,64] In many instances, what might look like personal "frame resonance" is actually the absorption of a single, all-encompassing narrative that the child, out of fear or confusion, lacks the autonomy to question. This phenomenon is especially potent among autistic minors whose restricted or highly focused interests can be harnessed to construct an illusory sense of shared purpose.[65,66] Over time, the carefully curated environment robs them of alternative discourses or support networks, making each step toward extremist views appear inexorable. Rather than voluntary engagement, the child's radicalisation is carefully orchestrated through sexual, emotional, and psychological coercion.

Such manipulative tactics are far from random or occasional. Offenders frequently adapt their methods, exerting either emotional rapport or direct threats to maintain secrecy and compliance.[10,43] While classical SMT may recognise the importance of emotional triggers and moral shocks, it seldom considers a scenario where those triggers are meticulously engineered by an adult focused on retaining control over a child's worldview.[35,36] This abuse dynamic relies on the fact that public discourses around child protection remain fraught with denial or minimisation, a pattern repeatedly observed in child sexual abuse debates.[10,62] Moreover, many social workers, law enforcement officials, and mental health practitioners lack specific training on how neurodevelopmental profiles—such as autism—intersect with grooming.[65,67] As a result, distinct vulnerabilities often go unrecognised—an issue of particular concern given that autistic traits are dispersed throughout the general population, not limited to those with formal diagnoses.[69] In Rhianan's situation, exactly such systemic oversights appear to have prevailed: her increasing isolation, abrupt ideological shifts, and engagement with violent propaganda were explained as incipient terrorism while the underlying grooming went undetected.

Exploitative Mobilisation, therefore, goes beyond explaining this exploitation simply as a statistical outlier or a problem of insufficient child protection. It frames the phenomenon as a coherent process whereby standard tenets of SMT—like peer-driven recruitment, collective meaning-making, and adaptive threshold-crossing—are inverted by the presence of a manipulative adult. The interlacing of grooming tactics with autism-specific vulnerabilities exposes not only the fragility of standard SMT assumptions about autonomy, but also the ways in which misguided safeguarding structures can inadvertently facilitate these abuses. Recent scholarship highlights how digital platforms amplify this

problem, allowing perpetrators to forge rapid connections that mimic friendship or solidarity[11,68]. Parents, likewise, may feel ill-equipped to monitor their child's online interactions, particularly if conventional "stranger danger" advice or blunt screen-time restrictions fail to account for the nuanced exploitative tactics that offenders deploy.[65]

It remains crucial to note that Exploitative Mobilisation is not a blanket theory intended to supplant Social Movement Theory or to insinuate that all youth activism is based on exploitation. Many young people, including those on the autism spectrum, engage in collective protests out of genuine political conviction or personal values. At the same time, the tragic lessons from cases like Rhianan's demonstrate the importance of considering alternative mobilisation paths in which minors' complex needs can be hijacked by perpetrators.

By focusing on the exploitative interplay between grooming, systemic failures, and an absence of robust community oversight, Exploitative Mobilisation shows how adult-led coercion can wholly supplant the usual forms of voluntary participation championed by SMT. In doing so, it draws attention to the broader shortfalls of existing safeguarding approaches, which often fail to detect the manipulative relationships behind a child's seemingly self-directed radical engagement. This perspective invites further exploration into how autism-informed, child-centric practices might intervene earlier, offer clearer guidance to parents or professionals, and prevent the progression from fixated curiosities to coerced extremist acts. It does not purport to be exhaustive but rather offers a conceptual starting point for rethinking how child exploitation might intersect with radical activism in an era of shifting digital technologies and evolving cultural norms.

Conclusion

Rhianan Rudd's case brings into sharp relief the complexities arising at the intersection of child safeguarding, neurodevelopmental vulnerability, and radicalisation. While SMT illuminates how individuals might engage in high-risk activism through threshold-crossing, peer-based recruitment, and ideological alignment, it generally presupposes a degree of voluntary participation. Rhianan's trajectory, shaped by adult-led manipulation and grooming, disrupts these assumptions by demonstrating that "independent mobilisation" can in fact be orchestrated by abusers targeting a child's social isolation and psychological fragility. Central to this dynamic is the role of MCN, particularly autism spectrum disorder, which can amplify a minor's susceptibility to exploitation if systemic safeguards are inadequate or misapplied.

By introducing Exploitative Mobilisation, this paper has argued for a reframing of radicalisation in contexts where grooming converges with neurodevelopmental and mental health vulnerabilities. Far from displacing SMT, this lens complicates it by incorporating grooming scholarship, autism research, and child-protection studies to reveal how the same pathways that foster collective identity in typical movements can be subverted for abusive ends. Understanding exploitative mobilisation demands recognising that individuals in such situations lack genuine agency, ultimately challenging mainstream counterterrorism approaches that often treat them as autonomous threats rather than safeguarding priorities.

Reconceptualising child-targeted radicalisation as exploitative mobilisation carries implications beyond this single case. It underscores the urgent need for interagency collaboration, and autism-specific training for professionals. Moreover, it invites policymakers, educators, and scholars to question the boundaries between security and protection. Only by acknowledging the possibility that grooming

processes can supplant a child's free will can we develop a more nuanced, ethically coherent response to radicalisation.

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