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The fear of sexual boundary violations and false allegations in male counselling practice

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ABSTRACT

While the #MeToo movement appropriately propelled the sexual harassment of women into the spotlight, it has unintentionally created an atmosphere of fear among some men reticent to work alone with women. Focussing on the #MeToo movement as a precipitating factor, this reflective paper considers whether a perceived erosion of the presumption of innocence in cases of sexual misconduct may contribute to such fears among male counsellors. Some men feel that their gender alone provokes an immediate presupposition of their untrustworthiness. Conclusion: No literature was found that suggested that male counsellors actively avoid working with female clients for fear of allegations of sexual misconduct. However, the research does suggest a broader anxiety among men who fear what may happen should any false accusations be levied against them. These findings underscore the need for further research to explore how such fears may influence clinical practice and impact both counsellors and clients.

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Introduction

The response to movements such as #MeToo within the criminal justice system and our society has been relatively swift, fuelled in part by traditional print and digital media platforms (De Benedictis et al., 2019). Pressure on law enforcement, legislators and the courts to deal promptly with accusations of sexual assault and to punish accordingly, has led to a general sense of fear in society that no one is immune to the possibility of being accused of sexual misconduct (Corteen & Steele, 2018). While one might think that it will never happen to them, false accusations and miscarriages of justice of this nature are a significant problem (Brooks & Greenberg, 2021; Burnett et al., 2017). So much so that Goldhill (2014) asserts that they have become a matter of routine within the justice system and, over the past twenty years, there have been clear cases of such, including those concerning historical sexual abuse (Corteen & Steele, 2018) and assault (Burns, 2017).

The #MeToo movement of 2017 rightfully propelled the sexual harassment of women in the workplace into the spotlight, but there have been unforeseen consequences for both women and men (Atwater et al., 2019). The author will discuss the potentially impacted landscape of the relationship between men who counsel women, particularly since the #MeToo movement, the increasing pressures on the criminal justice system to expedite investigations into sexual assault, the increase in fear

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of false allegations among men and what, if any, impact this may have on how safe male counsellors might feel in seeing female clients in a private therapeutic setting. Studies have shown that men in a work context, post #MeToo, are more reticent to spend time one-on-one with female colleagues for fear of claims being brought against them (Smith et al., 2019). How this might impact the gender balance in counselling is also an important question to ask as the implications directly affect the access that girls and women may have to talking therapies facilitated by men. Denying access to services based on gender also raises significant ethical and legal concerns for counsellors and clients alike (Smith et al., 2019).

This paper is a reflective review that attempts to draw from existing literature pertaining to male counsellors' fears of false allegations of sexual boundary violations. As no direct research was found on this subject, it was necessary to explore the changes in society which may have contributed to my clinical supervisor offering strong advice that, as a male counsellor, I should never see young female clients in person, as it is not worth the risk to my career. Implicit in his warning was the concern of being falsely accused of sexual violations; a fear among men that has reportedly increased measurably since 2017 (Fansher et al., 2023; Hail-Jares et al., 2020). His warning led me to question the validity of this fear and to research any literature that may have led to this emphatic opinion. My focus was quickly drawn to the shift from the presumption of innocence to the presumption of guilt (see Burnett et al., 2017; Tadros, 2013; Thaler, 1978), specifically when it comes to crimes of a sexual nature (Davies, 2016). This will be discussed shortly.

A cultural shift

While the #MeToo movement catapulted sexual harassment and abuse into society's collective consciousness, the cumulative impact of reported cases of current and historical abuse before this point cannot be underestimated. For example, between 2012 and 2016 in the UK alone, investigations were launched into The Rotherham child exploitation scandal (Whistine et al., 2020), the Soham murders (O'Leary & O'leary, 2021) and the Jimmy Savile scandal (Basannavar, 2023), as well as allegations of sexual abuse by politicians and church clergy (House of Lords Library, 2016). The advent of instant global news and social media has brought the ills of the world into our homes, simultaneously bringing important cultural movements to the masses, while also helping to create a perception of unsafety, even where it does not reflect the statistical reality (Aitbihiouali & Graham, 2021; Madriz, 2023).

Although the "Me Too" phrase was first used in 2006 (Gill & Orgad, 2018), it wasn't until the latter part of 2017 that it was used in the current hashtag format following allegations levelled against Harvey Weinstein (Smith et al., 2019). The movement has since triggered change in organisations, politics, the law and the culture of our society (Gill & Orgad, 2018) and has undoubtedly been a force for positive change, precipitating an important cultural shift for both women and men (Dockett, 2018). In what Dockett calls a "stunning cultural reversal" (Dockett, 2018, p. 19), women's experiences of sexual harassment are being heard and validated, allowing many others to feel confident and supported in telling their stories (Williamson et al., 2020). It has also been instrumental in making men more aware of the harassment that their female colleagues, friends and partners may be experiencing and their potential role in it (Smith et al., 2019).

Alongside this positive shift towards believing and supporting victims of assault or harassment, there has been a less publicised increase in fear among men when it comes to working with women (Smith et al., 2019; Soklaridis et al., 2018). Some point out the detrimental impact this has had on the opportunities for women in the workplace; having stirred up concern among well-intentioned male mentors who may feel reticent to hire or work with female colleagues (Byerley, 2018; Grant-kels, 2018; Soklaridis et al., 2018) for fear of how their actions may be perceived.

According to Atwater et al. (2019), one in three men surveyed in the immediate wake of #MeToo were reluctant to have one-to-one meetings with female colleagues, with 58% of male respondents

saying that they have a greater fear of being wrongly accused since the movement began (Atwater et al., 2019). In a follow-up study three years later, those numbers had increased (Harvard Business Review, 2019). #MeToo has been a wake-up call for some men who have, for too long, been comfortable with the inequality of the status quo, but also a genuine shock for others who fear that asking a female colleague to join them for lunch may cost them their career (Leopold, 2019). The prevalence of false allegations, upon which some of these fears are based, is rejected by Lisak et al. (2010), Jordan (2011) and Dewald and Lorenz (2021) who assert that the widely accepted belief that false rape allegations are a common occurrence is not supported by their findings. They suggest that the myth of these false allegations has instead led to substantiated fear among women that reporting a sexual crime will result in victim-blaming (Jordan, 2011; Wheatcroft et al., 2009). Although false allegations of sexual assault in the United Kingdom (UK) are rare, (CPS, 2020; Lisak et al., 2010), Bennett and Wragg (2018) assert that they do still happen with some regularity. A review of the literature drawn from the United States, Australia, New Zealand and the UK found that the false reporting rate was between 2% and 10% (Weiser, 2017); arguably a potentially significant number for those who have been accused. Nankivell and Papadimitriou (2023) argue that the rates in prevalence studies of this kind should be considered to be “lower bound estimates” and that actual rates could be measurably higher. The reason, they go on to assert, is that adherence to the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) definition of a false accusation means that researchers do not adjust their estimates to account for cases where alleged offenses have not been, or cannot be, disproven to the necessary level of certainty. Nor do they consider the false reporting of third parties such as family members and friends. Such is the concern over miscarriages of justice in the UK, that in 1997 the Criminal Cases Review Commission was created (Brooks & Greenberg, 2021) to investigate cases of wrongful conviction (Roberts & Weathered, 2009).

While no research was found that specifically addressed how male counsellors have been affected by false accusations of sexual boundary violations, it has been noted anecdotally that many choose to avoid accepting female clients for fear of false reporting about their professional conduct (Smith et al., 2019). This is echoed in other professions where a high level of trust is required or where intimate information is shared (Burnett et al., 2017; Grant-kels, 2018;).

The law and the presumption of innocence

To understand the potential origins of men’s fears around false accusations, one needs to look at the protections and procedures offered in law. The erosion of the presumption of innocence (POI) is perhaps at the heart of any fears that male counsellors may privately harbour when working with female clients. The POI has long been a standard of law¹ in England and Wales (Tadros, 2013) and places, on the prosecution, the burden of proving beyond a reasonable doubt that a defendant is guilty (Campbell, 2013; Tadros, 2013). The perception and efficacy of this policy when it comes to sexual crimes seem to pendulate. Tomlin (2012) and Jordan (2011) argue strongly that the lengths the criminal justice system goes to in order to protect the innocent from wrongful conviction are extreme, and that the burden of proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt risks allowing the guilty to be set free. This would seem to favour strong protections for those falsely accused of sexual assault, alongside the fact that these crimes are very difficult to prove beyond a reasonable doubt (Davies, 2016). Conversely, it is asserted that the inclusion, in the UK, of the victim’s impact statement from allegation to sentencing, and the use of the words “victim” and “offender” throughout the proceedings (Davies, 2016) regardless of the veracity of the investigation, can create a bias against the accused and lead to some jurors feeling that a presumption of innocence is a personal betrayal of the victim (Burnett et al., 2017; Corteen & Steele, 2018). The erosion of the POI has been a source of academic commentary for decades (Graham, 1979; Pernell, 1989; see Lindenmuth, 2019) and crimes of a sexual nature appear to be the source of much of the dissolution (Burnett et al., 2017; Corteen & Steele, 2018; Davies, 2016).

My experience has been in police stations and courts in England [...] and nowhere is the retreat from the presumption of innocence so noticeable as in cases involving sexual offences. (Davies, 2016, p. 47)

In 2014, in a review of how police reporting should be conducted, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary recommended that: "The presumption that the victim should always be believed should be institutionalised" (Henriques, 2016, p. 14). This approach is endorsed by the Metropolitan Police Service who believe that allegations should be wholly accepted until a thorough investigation has taken place which may shed light on the validity of the allegation (Henriques, 2016). Smith (2016) suggests that support for such an approach has its origins in collective claims of wrongdoing and that there is an understandable emphasis on hearing the claims of those who have been historically marginalised. Henriques (2016) contends that the result appears to be that, in sexual cases, there is a tendency to assume that the accused is guilty and that instruction within law enforcement to believe complainants has taken over the duty to investigate cases objectively. As a consequence of this, police officers who were interviewed in 2016 reported finding it difficult to be objective in their investigations while also holding steadfastly to the presumed truth of the allegations (Henriques, 2016).

The research found that rejects the myth of false reporting and justifiably advocates for the protection of a complainant, far outnumbers those that attend to the rights of the accused. This would indicate an epidemic of mistreatment of accusers by both law enforcement and society (Jordan, 2011; Mcmillan, 2018; see Dewald & Lorenz, 2021) that illustrates sweeping changes in the treatment of allegations, proposed or already implemented. An increasing fear is consequently being cultivated around crimes of a sexual nature. Burnett et al. (2017) warn that, in a culture that is highly responsive to allegations of sexual misconduct, there is also a dangerous myth that false allegations and indeed convictions (Corteen & Steele, 2018), are rare (Burnett et al., 2017).

While policies, procedures and legislation exist within law enforcement and in the courts, no such boundaries exist outside of it (see Gray & Watt, 2013; Henriques, 2016; Tuerkheimer, 2019), allowing the court of public opinion to come to their own conclusions about the innocence or guilt of the accused (Alexander, 2019; Tuerkheimer, 2019). Facilitated by new technologies, unofficial reporting systems have been established which bypass traditional legal mechanisms. The internet and social media have made it easier and quicker to disseminate information, as well as accusations. These are important and welcome outlets for any member of society, but especially for those who are marginalised (Gill & Orgad, 2018), and who believe that the process of making a formal complaint is stacked against them (Tuerkheimer, 2019). However, the shadow side of circumventing legal avenues is that there is no accountability for the accusers, and Tuerkheimer (2019) admits that those accused in the court of public opinion lack the protections of due process and have suffered the consequences. Corteen and Steele (2018) suggest that there is an assumption on the part of the public that once an accusation is made, a conviction will follow. This assumption of guilt, the social stigma around sexual offences and difficulty in proving the innocence of the accused have far-reaching consequences even if the accused is not convicted within the criminal justice system (Corteen & Steele, 2018; Williamson et al., 2020). The ensuing damage to reputation has led to the loss of both friend and family relationships and employment (Burnett et al., 2017; Dockett, 2018), and the psychological impact has been found to include depression, anxiety, anger, aggression, hopelessness, paranoia, drug misuse, isolation, somatic complaints and PTSD (Brooks & Greenberg, 2021).

Tadros (2013) explains that it is society's tolerance for acts of criminality that, in part, determines the level of criminalisation in the legislature, implying an uncomfortable relationship between public opinion and legal culpability. Public opinion, too, is not free from influence, and Pellegrini (2018) and Mitre and Cavedon (2023) suggest that facts are not enough without media platforms that amplify the public affect. While the relationship between the public and the media can be positive, the media exerts a substantial amount of influence over the public's perception of any given event (Mitre & Cavedon, 2023; Valenzuela & McCombs, 2019). The grey line between trial by court and

trial by public opinion, and how one may unduly influence the other, is illustrated by the fact that the media have been used by litigators to purposefully sway public opinion during a trial (Mitre & Cavedon, 2023; Terilli et al., 2007).

Sexual crimes ignite public disgust, anger and condemnation more than any other crime (Giner-Sorolla & Russell, 2013; Pickett et al., 2013) and it is beginning to become clear that it is not directly within the legal system that fears false allegations may originate, but rather in the propensity of the public to prematurely convict, in their minds, anyone accused of sexual boundary violations.

Vulnerability of the therapist

Counsellors are in a unique position of holding a space in which a client feels comfortable exploring difficult and very personal information (Carr & Sandmeyer, 2018). Seeing clients on a one-to-one basis helps to facilitate this sense of safety where he or she is assured of confidentiality, can work in depth and move at their own pace (Vlasto, 2010). A core component of this relationship is trust (Noyce & Simpson, 2018; Rogers, 1957), which grows gradually in the course of therapy and fosters a more intimate bond sparked, in part, by the asymmetrical nature of the relationship (Altimir et al., 2017); That is, the client takes on the role of one who is in need of help and the therapist is perceived by the client as one with the expertise to provide it (Altimir et al., 2017; Bond, 2017). It is this imbalance of power and potential misuse of trust that can, and has, led to both sexual intimacy and abuse between counsellor and client (Capawana & Walla, 2016; Hook & Devereux, 2018; Rodgers, 2011). The therapeutic relationship, therefore, embodies somewhat of a paradox. In the privacy and safety it provides the client, it holds both the main impetus for positive change (Noyce & Simpson, 2018; Rogers, 1957) and the potential for abuse (Capawana & Walla, 2016; Rodgers, 2011; Smith et al., 2019) in both directions (Hedges, 2002).

Carl Rogers' early observations and hypotheses on the therapeutic relationship have been adopted, not only as a modality in its own right but by several antithetical therapeutic approaches as the foundation upon which their successful interventions now rely (Farber et al., 2018; Norcross & Lambert, 2018). One component of this relationship is congruence (Rogers, 1957) and it is asserted that this is a key element of the "real relationship"; described as a "personal relationship between therapist and patient marked by the extent to which each is genuine with the other" (Gelso et al., 2018, p. 435). Gelso et al. (2018) argue that, along with self-disclosures, the therapist reveals who they are through their humour, clothing, facial expressions and body posture. This, alongside being genuine and unencumbered by perceptions of the client that are based on unresolved personal issues, strengthens the real relationship. As this deepens, the client feels able to be genuine and may share their inner experiences that reveal who they are. It is a potentially deep and intimate relationship (Noyce & Simpson, 2018; Rodgers, 2011) that requires a mature therapist to manage well (Modell, 1991).

Gelso et al. (2018) go on to describe a distinct difference between bonding over the working relationship, whereby a therapist might express liking the client as a client, and the real relationship, where the therapist likes and cares for the client as a person. As the line between real and therapeutic is so thin, Modell (1991) warns that there are some clients and therapists who will be unable to manage this paradox. Anger, guilt or sexual desire, for example, illicit arousals outside the therapeutic space that are indistinguishable from those within it, and can lead to misperceptions (Jackson, 2017) on either side of the room. Working, or not being aware of working, with sexual or erotic transference between client and therapist or vice versa may lead to sexual boundary violations, risk of complaints of unethical practice and even abuse charges (Andrea et al., 2021; Fisher, 2004; Rodgers, 2011).

Studies have shown that there is a long history of sexual boundary violations committed by therapists (Alpert & Steinberg, 2017; Blechner, 2014; Capawana & Walla, 2016; Arlene Steinberg et al., 2021). The prevalence of sexual attraction towards clients ranges from 60% to 90% with a quarter of therapists admitting to having had sexual fantasies about a client (Vesentini et al., 2021) with

the vast majority (80%) of transgressors being male (Alpert & Steinberg, 2017; Capawana & Walla, 2016). From these studies, it is clear that clients are vulnerable to sexual boundary violations given the asymmetry of the relationship and the intimacy involved in sharing one's inner world with another person (Altimir et al., 2017; Andrea et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2011). However, there is also evidence that men are unfairly discriminated against (Baskwill & Vanstone, 2017) and are more vulnerable to accusations of misconduct (Rogers, 2013).

In a study of complaints to the British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists (BACP), it was found that men were the subject of complaints two and half times more than women and that they were four times more likely to have the complaint upheld following an investigation (Rogers, 2013). It is asserted by Rogers (2013) that 30% of complaints against men are of a sexual nature. It is noted that this particular study provides a structured breakdown of the nature of the complaints against men, for which sexual violations are at the top of the list, despite it not being obvious whether this represents the majority percentage of the complaint types. Furthermore, when discussing complaints against female therapists, no such breakdown is offered, but attention is purposefully drawn to the fact that there were no complaints of sexual transgression. It is worth noting, however, that the breaking of boundaries is mentioned as the dominant complaint for female therapists, though these are described as "non-specific" (p. 47). The seemingly intentional focus, either in the raw data or the reporting of statistics on sexual boundary violations among men, potentially fuels a widely perpetuated cynicism and fear that all men are predators or potential rapists (Delap, 2022; Lisak, 2004; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2020). This is not helped by the under-researched and over-representation of complaints against men (Symons et al., 2011), a bias that is noted earlier in Rogers's (2013) study. These observations are supported by Symons (2012) who asserts that male therapists are disproportionately represented in complaints through the BACP and specifically in the research pertaining to sexual boundary violations. Specific complaints are not generally broken down by gender, detailed statistics are patchy across the board (Rogers, 2013; Symons et al., 2011) and reporting appears not to be comprehensive enough to highlight, for example, cases of false accusations, their outcomes or the reasons for the over-representation of men (Symons et al., 2011).

In part as a consequence of socialisation, men are not taken seriously as caring and emotionally supportive caregivers and so any physical contact, and one could also argue emotional support, can be misconstrued as bearing ulterior motives (Bennett, 2019). Most studies about male caregivers mention suspicion and risk behaviour as a matter of course (Bennett, 2019). While acknowledging the systems and historical abuses which precipitated this actual and perceived risk, Farquhar (2001) reports that, for example, male teachers work with an expectation of their interactions being misperceived, male caregivers are required to work alongside a minimum of two female workers as they are not trusted by parents or staff to be alone with children (Johnson, 2001), and are less likely to be hired for these roles in which the perceived risk of sexual abuse is high (Sczesny et al., 2022). Furthermore, male teachers admit to avoiding contact with youth where possible because of the potential that their care will be misinterpreted (Bennett, 2019). A small survey of 685 teachers in 2015 found that 22% of them had been the subject of false allegations of physical or sexual abuse (Burnett et al., 2017). It is unsurprising then that an atmosphere of fear, among men who work with children or women, has been cultivated.

Interestingly, this explicit level of suspicion of men and their motives does not appear to be represented by studies examining gender preferences when choosing therapists. This may go some way in encouraging male counsellors that they are trusted. Unfortunately, recent studies on client's gender preferences are scarce, and past studies of this kind have been inconsistent (Black & Gringart, 2019; Seidler et al., 2021) making it difficult to know if there are definitive preferences around the gender of one's therapist. However, Black and Gringart (2019), for example, report that women prefer male therapists over female therapists, and this appears to be echoed in Swift et al. (2018), as well as studies prior to #MeToo (see Anderson, 2005). This would suggest that women who actively seek male therapists feel safe to do so. Conversely, there are far more studies on counsellor

gender preference that show a preference among female clients for female therapists (see Cooper, 2006; Ilagan & Heatherington, 2022; Landes et al., 2013 and Schweitzer et al., 2024, for example). However, no studies were found that cite the fear of sexual harassment, or concern over physical safety with a male therapist, as a reason for gender preference when choosing a therapist. The current research into gender preference tends to focus on personality traits and therapeutic approaches or does not detail reasons for preference at all (see Cooper, 2006; Quinn & Chan, 2009; Russell et al., 2022; Seidler et al., 2021). Nevertheless, following the murder of Sarah Everard (Holmström, 2021) several of my female clients expressed a heightened sense of anxiety around attending their sessions with me, to the extent that our interactions needed to change. These included changes in session times to avoid the dark, chair positions, if and how I should open doors in and out of rooms and not walking behind them up or down the stairs. This would corroborate the findings mentioned briefly earlier that showed that an increase in media attention was found to decrease the perception of safety among women. This suggests that women are not necessarily less safe, but that the information shock through increased press coverage has brought into question their level of comfort in certain situations (Aitbihiouali & Graham, 2021). Regardless of the reasons, a heightened sense of fear among female clients can also arguably heighten a male counsellor's fear that actions as simple as holding a door open for someone can be seen as threatening.

Men and women in positions of care who are falsely accused are particularly affected by accusations. Whether proven or not, the allegations often prevent them from ever working in these positions again, with many expressing sadness at not being able to continue their important work and frustration at never being able to fully clear their names (Burnett et al., 2017). The stress and stigma surrounding allegations of this nature (Bennett, 2019) have reportedly resulted in withdrawal from relationships, an inability to trust others, panic, anxiety, severe depression and suicidal ideation. Even if they are legally permitted to return to work, many choose not to because of the fear of further allegations (Burnett et al., 2017).

In consideration of ethics

When considering whether male therapists should make conscious decisions not to work with women in private sessions, it may be helpful to approach the dilemma from a deontological perspective. Deontology maintains that determining the moral intent of an action is of more importance than the consequences of that action. Since one cannot know the outcome when taking on a client, the most ethical course of action, one's moral intent, would arguably be to treat potential clients impartially. The decision of male therapists to continue to see female clients on this basis would err on the side of being in the best interest of society as a whole, fulfilling obligations to the ethical framework to which one adheres (see BACP, 2018) and working within the anti-discriminatory laws that exist in this country (O'Conneide & Liu, 2015). As with most decisions, though, ethical decision-making is susceptible to emotional activation (Heinzelmann, 2018). Rightly or wrongly, some men are fearful of false allegations of sexual misconduct and this may lead to a response that is driven more by emotion than rational and balanced thought processes.

If men do not feel comfortable seeing women on a one-to-one basis then women may lose out on valuable relationships (Atwater et al., 2019; Grant-kels, 2018) that are reparative by nature (Antoniou & Blom, 2006) and that may only be possible in a mixed-gender alliance. Denying access to counselling services is not only discriminatory under the law (O'Conneide & Liu, 2015) but also antithetical to the ethical framework of the BACP where the best interest of the client should be foremost in consideration (BACP, 2018). That said, the autonomy that therapists promote in their work with clients, for their clients, should also apply to counsellors. Therapists should, therefore, be able to enter into a counselling relationship with a client only when they feel able to, and while safeguarding their own care (Bond, 2015). Jenkins (2007) asserts that, in his

view, it should be ethics and not law that drive therapeutic practice. In principle, this is an ideal but, in practice, it may be the fear of the law or that of premature public conviction that drives decisions that would otherwise be dictated by ethics.

Implications for clinical practice

As has been established, the therapeutic relationship is arguably the fundamental engine of change (Norcross & Lambert, 2018; Rogers, 1957) and trust is a large part of this engine (Noyce & Simpson, 2018). Bond (2017) suggests that the concept of trust is the most globally universal and requisite component of a therapeutic relationship that transcends cultural differences. He argues that without a sufficient level of reciprocal trust between client and counsellor, the work stalls or fails. Similar findings were reported by Noyce and Simpson (2018). The BACP ethical framework focuses on trust from the perspective of the client (see BACP, 2018) but this author contends that the therapist's trust in their clients is of equal importance to the relationship in light of what has been illuminated in this review. This contention is supported by Bond's assertion that there can be no intimacy without mutual vulnerability (Bond, 2017).

The very practices that therapists employ to safeguard clients: e.g. privacy, soundproofing, distance from others etc, are also the very elements used to facilitate sexual boundary violations (Smith et al., 2019). The risk to clients is very real, and this paper does not intend to minimise this risk or historical evidence of violations within psychotherapy, or the importance of helping women to feel safe with male counsellors. However, there is a fear of litigiousness and risk in this context that prevents therapists from being truly congruent and present with their clients (Coale, 1998/2020). Perhaps, though, therapists need to be willing to accept risk in order to facilitate the growth of this relationship, recognising that there is both safety and danger for both parties (Bond, 2017; Carr & Sandmeyer, 2018) and an inherent risk in the work that we do (Bond, 2017). This is aligned with the deontological approach of ethics already discussed, whereby a counsellor will do what they believe to be right, both morally, and in line with the duty to uphold the ethical framework to which they adhere, regardless of the consequences (Heinzelmann, 2018; McCartney & Parent, 2015).

Implications for policy

Mental health organisations and counselling agencies must, by law, have policies and procedures in place which safeguard the client and the employee (Care Act, 2014; Employment Rights Act, 1996). While vital to the safety of both client and practitioner within organisations, the inflexibility of such policies makes them vulnerable to discrimination. As no studies could be found that question policies surrounding male therapists working with female clients in such organisations, the author must rely on personal experience to illustrate the policy implications of what has been discussed in this review. While working with a nationwide mental health charity, I was not permitted to be alone in a room with a female client. While one might assume that this was a stated preference of each client, it was a blanket policy founded on the presupposition that there is an automatic preference for women to have a non-male therapist and an inherent risk for both client and practitioner in being in a room alone with each other. No such rule was enforced for the female members of staff. It is therefore suggested by this author that this constitutes discrimination against a therapist on the basis of sex (Equality Act, 2010) and a breach of ethical standards in denying the client choice where choice exists. Discrimination of men in caring professions, from hiring practices to client's personal choices is a cause for concern because it does have financial and emotional consequences (Baskwill & Vanstone, 2017). One can understand that such policies protect the client from potential sexual boundary violations and the practitioner from false allegations, but this does warrant further investigation when one considers the ethical argument made previously.

Conclusion

The experience of researching this subject has been akin to academic whiplash whereby the polarised views, evidence and research have left the author feeling similar to those who prosecute and defend cases of sexual violations; it is as difficult to prove or disprove (Burnett et al., 2017) as it is to know what, or who, to believe. The emotive nature of the crime and its changeable societal integration in terms of what is and is not deemed acceptable at any given point in history (Tadros, 2013) gives rise to a subject which ultimately battles against the relentless tide of patriarchy (Corteen & Steele, 2018) and generations of oppression and inequality (Amussen, 2018).

The fear of false sexual allegations being levied against men is not unfounded (Bennett & Wragg, 2018; Burnett et al., 2017; Nankivell & Papadimitriou, 2023; Symons et al., 2011) and the atmosphere, particularly since the #MeToo movement, has undoubtedly changed the way that men and women interact socially and professionally (Atwater et al., 2019; Fansher et al., 2023). However, no evidence was found to suggest that male counsellors in the UK feel the need to avoid seeing female clients in their practices. Nevertheless, the broader experiences of fear among men in society mirror the disquietude and variability of the research found. Evidence would suggest that the percentage of false allegations is small (Fansher et al., 2023; Weiser, 2017), nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence that a significant number of men in society are reticent to work with female colleagues alone (Corteen & Steele, 2018; Grant-kels, 2018; Lisnek et al., 2022).

The erosion of the POI within the law, specifically in sexual misconduct cases prior to trial (Davies, 2016; Myers, 2017), while still concerning, is mitigated to some degree by the robust way in which the accused is protected within the court system itself (Henriques, 2016; Tomlin, 2012). Of greater disquiet is how accusations of sexual boundary violations play out in the media and the court of public opinion where there appears to be no such concern, nor any discussion of the lack of protections for the accused (see BBC, 2021). For male counsellors, the thought of being falsely accused or imprisoned for something that is so reviled in society (Williamson et al., 2020) is a potent deterrent to putting oneself in any situation of risk. The author suggests that the perception of safety, regardless of actual safety, among men is as important to recognise and act upon, as it is for women.

The question that arises is this; are we perpetuating a myth about false allegations by attempting to validate our fears? Overall, the author would conclude that making ethical decisions on which clients to see based on the fear of false accusations is not in the best interest of the client or society and that doing so does perpetuate largely unfounded fears (Fansher et al., 2023; Lisak et al., 2010). In fact, a recent study in the US provides stark statistics that illustrate the vast gap between the assumption within law enforcement of false allegations (53%) and the actual rate of just 5%. Nevertheless, the word “myth” suggests that false allegations are the fanciful imaginings of men when, in fact, they are described by some as “far from rare” (also see Burnett et al., 2017, p. 17; also see Nankivell & Papadimitriou, 2023) and have devastating consequences on the lives of those accused and their families (Brooks & Greenberg, 2021; Hail-Jares et al., 2020). Furthermore, Orchowski et al. (2021) suggests that those who suffer from psychological and emotional difficulties are more likely to make false allegations; the very people that one could argue may be seeking help from mental health professionals.

Further detailed research into the specific nature of complaints about counsellors, the outcomes and the reason for the over-representation of complaints against men in the UK’s leading membership body (Symons et al., 2011), would go some way in alleviating the fear among those male counsellors who feel that the risk to their family, friendships and career is too high a price to pay for making an ethically sound decision.

The reflexive nature of this paper necessitates that the author’s perspective as a man and as a therapist is explicit. While I have never denied anyone access to therapeutic services,

nor do I intend to, I cannot pretend that I have no fear of false allegations and that it isn't difficult when women, based solely on my gender, express fear around me; reasonable as that may be.

My hope is that this review will add to the voices of the “new class of victims” (Burnett et al., 2017, p. 8), who themselves acknowledge the wrongs perpetrated against women over generations, but who also feel like a pariah in society because of the crimes of other men. As the pendulum swings righteously towards the protection of marginalised and victimised women in society, one hopes that a balance will eventually be achieved both in the criminal justice system and in the court of public opinion. This final quote from an article about the decline of male mentorship in the health sector speaks to the heart of the issue:

Somehow, we need to make these good men feel safe with us just as much as they need to make us feel safe with them. (Grant-kels, 2018 para. 5)

Note

1. Though common law exists in countries such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, data collection and the definitions of sexual assault differ (Carson, 2007). Therefore, where the law is discussed, it is in reference to the law and criminal justice processes in the United Kingdom.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Gregory James is an integrative psychotherapist and certified Somatic Experiencing® practitioner with a thriving private practice in the UK. Known for his expertise in trauma resolution, Gregory holds a Master's degree in counselling and psychotherapy practice and leads the Centre of Somatic Resilience Training as well as the African team for the Somatic Experiencing® Committee for Humanitarian Response; a global initiative to connect and support local trauma practitioners in responding to crises.

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James, G. (2023) “The psychological impact of sending children away to Boarding Schools in Britain: Is there Cause for Concern”. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*: DOI: [10.1111/bjp.12854](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjp.12854).

Diversity and inclusion statement

As a mental health professional, I am committed to the protection and empowerment of all people, and I am aware that the binary nature of gender that is discussed in this paper may be of concern to some. However, it has been necessary to do this as it reflects, and is, therefore, a reliable critique of, the existing literature. Any attempt to be inclusive of other gender identities would not be an accurate representation of the literature that was reviewed, the examples given from academic studies, my professional experience, or the news.

Ethics and integrity

I confirm that the work submitted is original and that I am the sole author.

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