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“I didn’t feel i was a victim”: a phenomenological analysis of the experiences of male-on-male survivors of rape and sexual abuse

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“I Didn’t Feel I Was A Victim”: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Experiences of Male-on-male Survivors of Rape and Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

Research on men’s experiences of sexual victimization is limited and largely outdated. The present study seeks to remedy this issue by qualitatively examining the accounts of nine male-on-male survivors of rape and sexual abuse in the UK. It examines survivors’ experiences of psychological distress post-incident, the influence and manifestation of male rape myths, challenges in self-recognition and disclosure, and barriers to accessing therapeutic support and reporting to the Criminal Justice System (CJS). Participants took part in one-to-one, semi-structured video interviews, and an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized to identify four superordinate themes of participants’ experiences: i) gendered narratives, ii) coping with the abuse, iii) masculinity, and iv) reporting to the police. These themes emphasized the stigma and hostility repeatedly encountered by survivors after their victimization. Participants provided an account of short and long-term psychological issues following the abuse, emphasizing the role of self-perceptions of masculinity in the development of unhealthy coping mechanisms. Findings also highlighted the prevalence of prejudice and rape mythology that characterized negative encounters within the public, voluntary agencies, and the CJS. Results are discussed in relation to current service provision in the UK, recommendations for future research, and avenues for improvements across multiple vital entry points.

KEYWORDS

Male rape; male rape myths; trauma; masculinity; service provision; reporting

Research on male rape has gained increased academic attention, with studies from the last 20 years providing insight into the phenomenology, psychology, and physiology of male rape (Bullock & Beckson, 2011), male rape myths (DeJong et al., 2020; Hammond et al., 2017; Hine, Murphy, & Churchyard, 2021; Walfield, 2021), and police responses to male rape allegations (Hine, Murphy, Yesberg et al., 2021; Jamel et al., 2008; Rumney, 2008). Recent academic efforts in the US have also provided much needed insight into the prevalence of adult male sexual violence and the profile of male survivors through the analysis of secondary data from national databases and victim-surveys (e.g., Dierenfeldt & Balemba, 2021; Light & Monk-Turner, 2009; S. G. Smith et al., 2021). As such, whilst hugely illuminating in many ways, current knowledge on male rape and sexual abuse is largely based on attitudinal studies, literature reviews, and archival research. There exists,

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therefore, a lack of research using primary data, most likely due to challenges in recruiting male survivors, known to be reticent to be involved in sensitive research (Javaid, 2015; Sorsoli et al., 2008; Stanko & Hobdell, 1993). Such challenges seem to be heightened in the UK, where only a limited number of studies have qualitatively examined the experiences of male survivors in the last 15 years (Davies et al., 2010; Jamel et al., 2008). Therefore, the present study aims to advance knowledge in this area through a phenomenological analysis of the accounts of adult men who experienced rape and sexual abuse by other men after the age of 13 in the UK, legal age of consent for children under the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

Until 1994, male rape was legislated as “non-consensual buggery,” a term describing anal sex “committed with mankind or beast” (Lowe, 2018). Sex between men was considered unnatural and associated with bestiality, thus distorting the boundaries of consensual and non-consensual acts. It was only with the introduction of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994) that men started being included in rape legislation, laying the foundations of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (the current legislative framework in place across England and Wales). The delay in recognizing and validating men’s experiences of sexual victimization still resonates today, where policy statements are currently describing men and boys’ sexual victimization as “crimes that fall within the violence against women and girls [sic] space” (Home Office, 2022). As such, despite important legislative changes in the last 30 years, political dialogue is arguably still currently minimizing and even trivializing men’s sexual victimization, despite an abundance of evidence detailing the deleterious impact that sexual violence has on men.

Substantial psychological issues following rape and sexual abuse, including depression, helplessness, persistent anger, guilt, shame, low self-esteem, unhealthy self-blame, sexual impairments and confusion, and PTSD symptoms, are regularly revealed in studies exploring male sexual victimization (Bullock & Beckson, 2011; Mgozeli & Duma, 2020; Peterson et al., 2011; Voller et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2005). Whilst there are similarities with female survivors (Weiss, 2010), indicating that the sexual nature of the offense itself shapes rape victims’ symptomatology, it is important to also recognize male survivors’ gendered experiences (Cohen, 2014; Davies & Rogers, 2006; Javaid, 2016). Indeed, some have argued that male survivors of interpersonal violence encounter gender-specific barriers (Hine, 2019), as men are typically expected to adhere to traditional masculine norms around stoicism, resilience, invulnerability, and independence (Mahalik et al., 2003; J. A. Smith et al., 2007). Javaid (2015) also argued that male survivors’ self-perceptions are affected by a sense of failure for not “acting masculine” during their victimization (e.g., being physically tough and resisting the perpetrator).

As such, male survivors often struggle to recognize vulnerabilities, disclose to others, and access therapeutic support (Ellis et al., 2020; Sorsoli et al., 2008). Whilst these challenges are also experienced by female survivors (Campbell et al., 2004), help-seeking is typically difficult for men as norms and standards attached to their self-perceptions of masculinity reject displays of weakness and communicating needs (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Wong et al., 2017). It can therefore be argued that challenges associated with help-seeking are thus amplified for male survivors, as the experience of sexual victimization compromises men’s standing in society and results in their marginalization. This aligns with writings on so-called “hegemonic masculinity,” defined by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) as norms and practices that embody “the currently most honored way of being a man” (p. 832), and associated with constructs of power, authority, sexual dominance, and antifemininity.

Specifically, it is argued that men's experiences of sexual violence fundamentally conflict with hegemonic constructs. Moreover, it has been argued that in response to victimization, male survivors aim to recapture their status as men, by engaging in stereotypically masculine behaviors, such as excessive drinking, acting aggressively and violently, and engaging in risk-taking sexual behaviors (Lees, 1997; Weiss, 2010). However, studies on hegemonic masculinity often focus on sexual dominance and antifemininity and links between hegemonic masculinity to sexual aggression (see, R. M. Smith et al., 2015). As such, little is known about how male survivors of sexual abuse position themselves in relation to constructs commonly associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as power and authority, beyond the theoretical. Additionally, besides affecting survivors' self-perceptions, constructs of hegemonic masculinity can be seen in the hostility and prejudice around male sexual victimization within the general public, voluntary agencies, and the Criminal Justice System (CJS: Javaid, 2018; Weare, 2018). For example, whilst dated, studies by Donnelly and Kenyon (1996) and Kassing and Prieto (2003) highlighted how even professionals were not immune to gendered stereotypes which questions the authenticity and likelihood of men being sexually assaulted. Such beliefs are indicative of the existence and predominance of widely held myths about male rape.

Drawing from feminist perspectives on gendered sexual violence (e.g., Burt, 1980), Turchik and Edwards (2012) argued that so-called "male rape myths" were widely endorsed by the public because of their close relationship with masculinity and sexuality norms. Indeed, male rape myths are often charged with homophobic characterizations, sexism, and hypermasculinity (Bullock & Beckson, 2011; Chapleau et al., 2008), questioning male survivors for not living up to the standards of male heterosexuality (i.e., hegemonic masculinity) and characterizing male rape as a rare phenomenon concerning a minority of marginalized men. Examples include: "real men cannot be raped"; "male rape only concerns gay men"; "men who are raped asked for it"; "male rape is not traumatic" (DeJong et al., 2020; Hine, Murphy, & Churchyard, 2021; Turchik & Edwards, 2012; Walfield, 2021). Male rape myths question and minimize the prevalence of male rape in society and diminish the experiences of male survivors, with negative consequences in terms of recognition and awareness of this phenomenon. However, at present, there is virtually no evidence assessing male survivors' own experiences of and encounters with male rape myths, limiting our understanding of which myths survivors encounter, how myths affect self-perceptions and recognition, and willingness to disclose.

Examining how male rape myths affect survivors' experiences with disclosure is particularly relevant in the context of reporting to the police, as several studies indicate officers draw on rape myths in the investigation of female sexual offenses (Hine & Murphy, 2017, 2019; Parratt & Pina, 2017; Venema, 2016). Indeed, the issue of secondary victimization upon reporting to law enforcement agencies is routinely reported by (female) complainants of sexual offenses (Campbell & Raja, 1999; Jackson et al., 2017; Patterson, 2011). Arguably the recurrence of negative police responses upon reporting is indicative of the damaging impact of police investigation on rape complainants as well as the challenges encountered by police officers in delivering support and conducting sensitively their investigative duties. However, whilst the overall response to female survivors seems to be improving (Fisher & Pina, 2013; Lowe & Rogers, 2017), it is currently unclear as to whether male survivors have experienced similar improvement. Previous evidence suggests that men are met with a range of negative responses, including skepticism, disbelief, and ridicule (Jamel et al.,

2008; Rumney, 2008), with officers allocating more blame to male survivors than female survivors in hypothetical rape scenarios (Davies et al., 2009). However, as with other areas of the male rape literature, the evidence available on men's experiences of reporting is largely dated.

Some evidence can be found in recent case reviews of cases involving abused men, such as work by Hine et al. (2021) who examined 122 male rape cases reported to the London Metropolitan Police between 2005 and 2012. The study attempted to produce a descriptive profile of male rape cases and examine the relationship between case characteristics and case outcomes. Findings revealed that 1 in 5 victims withdrew¹ their complaints. The study also highlighted how factors related to victims' credibility affected case progression, consistent with findings from female rape cases on the influence of "extra-legal" factors on investigative decisions (Hohl & Stanko, 2015). However, it should be noted that, whilst being one of the few studies to specifically examine male allegations with the UK CJS, the study's timeframe (2005–2012) comes before reforms to case classifications, high profile case operations (e.g., Operation Yewtree²), and commissioned reviews (Angiolini, 2015).³ Given the substantially higher rates of victim withdrawal recently reported for female rape allegations (51%: Murphy et al., 2021), it is reasonable to question whether the number of male survivors withdrawing their complaints is substantially higher than previously estimated. Indeed, recent reports suggest that in London almost 55% of male complainants withdraw their case after reporting to the police (Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, 2021). As such, it is crucial to explore men's experiences with reporting and to understand the barriers to engaging men with the investigation after the initial report to the police.

The present study adds to the understanding of the experiences of male-on-male rape and sexual abuse in the UK. By directly accessing survivors' own personal accounts of rape and sexual abuse, this study gives a unique and detailed data set of the ways that male survivors relate their experiences of sexual victimization. Following a phenomenological framework, the study explores: i) male survivors' lived experiences of rape and sexual abuse, ii) the impact of myths and stereotypes in their victim experiences, iii) survivors' experiences of recognizing and disclosing their victimization, and the challenges they had to overcome to do so, and iv) the barriers encountered in accessing therapeutic support and/or the police.

Methods

Participants

Purposive sampling is recommended in IPA studies (see procedure below for more information) to identify and recruit a sample with extensive knowledge and experience of the research topic (Bernard, 2006). Purposive sampling in IPA is designed to narrow the range of variation and focus on common patterns of experiences, whilst recognizing and acknowledging the uniqueness of each account. Therefore, it is often recommended to conduct IPA studies with small samples ($N < 12$) to yield the level of depth and detail required to give voice to participants' lived experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In this study, the target population consisted of male-on-male survivors⁴ who experienced rape and sexual abuse after the age of 13.⁵ Recruitment occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, with national restrictions and social distancing rules in place in the UK. As

such, recruitment and data collection were conducted remotely across two phases. Firstly, UK-based support services were contacted to advertise the study with their male clients. Services would direct male survivors who expressed interest in participating to the first author of the study to discuss the project and arrange the interview. However, the challenges arising from Covid-19 restrictions affected services' ability to continue their involvement with the research project. Some services offered to share a social media advertisement on Twitter, with a weblink to a survey designed to filter clients who did not meet the recruitment criteria set for this study. Participants who met the criteria were contacted on their preferred e-mail address to arrange a video interview; participants who did not meet the criteria were directed to a debriefing page, with information on the aims of the study, the reasons they could not participate, contacts to the research team, and links to national and local support services and helplines. A total of 10 male survivors were recruited to take part in one-to-one, semi-structured online interviews. One participant was excluded from the final analysis as during the interview safety concerns emerged around their wellbeing. The interview was suspended, with the participant withdrawing from the study during the debriefing stage. The final sample consisted of nine male survivors of rape and sexual abuse. [Table 1](#) outlines participants' aliases, demographic, and case-related information.

Materials

Participants took part in one-to-one semi-structured interviews. An interview schedule ([Table 2](#)) was designed and used as a guideline, to allow for the natural flow of conversation between interviewer and participant. The interviews thus took the form of largely open discussions on participants' experiences of male rape and sexual abuse. The areas covered in the interview included: a) their experience of rape and sexual abuse, b) the societal attitudes and myths on male rape encountered by participants, c) the challenges around disclosing their victimization, and d) the barriers and facilitators to access effective therapeutic care and reporting to the police.

Procedure

Upon recruitment,⁶ participants received digital copies of an informed consent form detailing the general purposes of the study, to be signed and returned before the arranged video interview. This form emphasized their rights for confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal. Interviews were conducted and recorded on the Microsoft Teams platform. The interviews lasted on average 1 hour and 30 minutes (ranging from 55 minutes to 2 hours and 30 minutes). During the interview, close attention was paid to participants' well-being. When and if appropriate, the interviewer would ask if they were happy to continue with the interview and/or if they needed a break. Upon completion, the interviewer carefully debriefed participants, clearly explaining the objectives and anticipated outcomes of the research. The interviewer also reminded participants about support services available and ensured that they had access to the relevant contacts. Once the interview was terminated, a copy of the debrief form was sent to participants, reiterating aims, objectives, and the authors' availability to answer questions, address concerns, and direct participants to relevant support services.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants in the study.

Alias	Age	Ethnicity	Self-identified sexual orientation	Age at the time of the incident(s)	Relationship to the perpetrator(s)	Reported to the police (yes/no)	Time between incident and reporting	Accessed support services (yes/no)	Time between incident and accessing support
Nick	37	White (British) ^a	Gay	18 and 28	Stranger;	Yes	3 years	Yes	3 years
James	57	Mixed- Caucasian	Straight	13	Acquaintance	Yes	43 years	Yes	42 years
Michael	58	Afro Caribbean	Straight	13 to 17	Acquaintance	Yes	40 years	Yes	25–30 years
William	45	White (British)	Gay	22	Acquaintance	No	-	Yes	22 years
Pete	38	White British	Gay	16 and 20	Acquaintance;	Yes	<1 day	Yes	2–3 years
Chris	39	White British	Gay	20 and 36	Stranger	No	-	Yes	18 Months
Leyton	49	White (British)	Prefer not to say	15	Acquaintance	Yes	27 years	No ^b	20 years
Sorel	54	White	Bisexual	16	Acquaintance	No	-	Yes	32 years
John	23	White (British)	Bisexual	21	Acquaintance	Yes	2 days	Yes	1 month

^aParticipants self-reported their ethnic background, with some self-defining as White (British) and White British.

^bLeyton self-reported that he did not access support yet indicated that he tried to briefly attend group meetings 20 years after the incident. As such, he did not believe that it constituted enough to be considered formal support.

Table 2. Interview schedule with representative questions.

Section	Representative questions
Initial Rapport Building	So (alias), how old are you? What are your current circumstances (e.g., job, family if appropriate – survivors to advise)
Free recall about experiences (optional*)	Thank you for telling me a bit about yourself. Now I would like to ask whether you can tell me anything you'd like to about your experience. If you'd prefer not to take this approach, don't worry, I have questions we can start with instead
Beliefs, myths, and stereotypes	Moving on, if you can cast your mind back, I'd like to hear any thoughts or stereotypes you might have had about the idea of a victim of a male-on-male sexual attack prior to your incident. For example, what you believed, thought, or had heard about male-on-male rape or sexual violence before.
Challenges around disclosing	So, after the incident, what went through your mind in relation to who you tell and how? What internal challenges did you have to negotiate (e.g., how did you decide to disclose and what, if any, feelings did you have about it)
Experiences of, and challenges/barriers to access therapeutic care, and reporting to the police	Did you identify any external challenges to disclose the incident to any particular groups (e.g., the police)?
Conclusion	So, given your experience, in what ways, if any, have your views changed about how men would or indeed should respond? What advice would you give to a man who experiences this type of crime?

*Some participants provided an account of their experiences during the initial rapport building phase

IPA

IPA is an established method of analysis within qualitative research, concerned with the examination and exploration of participants' personal lived experiences, and focused on how individuals "make sense" and interpret the events in their lives in the context of a particular phenomenon (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). As such, IPA is suitable to access hidden voices from seldom-heard groups by "metaphorically shining a light" (Oxley, 2016) in novel and under-researched areas. Typically, IPA studies favor smaller samples to ensure that sufficient attention is given to individual experiences by providing in-depth experiential accounts of the object of study (Conroy & de Visser, 2015). A key characteristic of IPA is its adherence to established philosophical principles and the need for researchers to clearly demonstrate how these have been followed in the analysis (J. A. Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al. (2009) describe IPA as a phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic qualitative method. IPA is phenomenological as individual interpretations are seen as meaningful and valid representations of the reality studied. Methodologically, IPA involves a hermeneutic process of deconstructing how participants interpret and rationalize their own experiences, whilst considering how the researchers' personal constructs inform the analytical decisions. Finally, IPA is idiographic, as the analysis focuses on appreciating the details and uniqueness of the singular experience, before constructing broader trends in the overall sample, known as "group experiential themes" (J. A. Smith et al., 2022).

The researchers endeavored to adhere at all times to IPA's philosophical principles. The research questions in this study and the interview schedule (see, Table 2) were designed to engage and elicit male survivors to provide a personal account of their experiences. The resulting interviews were transcribed verbatim, with minimal changes made, to reflect as much as possible participants' natural conversation, with its pauses and hesitations (Lala et al., 2019). Following transcription, the analysis followed a four stage process which

involved i) interpretative reading and annotations, ii) generating codes and identifying preliminary themes, iii) seeking relationships and clustering into master themes, and iv) comparison of master themes across the sample to identify overarching superordinate themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

All members of the research team (i.e., all coauthors) were involved at key phases of the analysis. After the first annotations, coding, and nesting of preliminary themes by the first author, the research team engaged in in-depth discussions to examine and refine the personal experiential themes identified for each account. This was a reiterative and collaborative process, in line with the hermeneutic foundations of IPA to ensure that assumptions were accounted for at every interpretative stage. After a process of summarization and nesting of related themes, master themes were identified for each account by the first author and independently assessed by the other members of the research team. The decision to examine each case individually was in line with the idiographic foundations of IPA, focusing on one specific case at the time. This process was then repeated for each of the interviews which allowed the generation of a master table of themes that represented the data overall. This allowed to compare and contrast master themes across the different transcripts and identify superordinate themes that permeated participants' experiences. All authors were involved in critically assessing the validity of the themes against the original transcripts of each participant, to ensure that the extracts selected captured the range of male rape experiences within the sample of this study. Every methodological and analytical decision was taken in line with established validity and quality guidelines for qualitative and IPA research, which are further discussed below.

Validity and quality assurances in this study

In this study, validity was defined as the “extent to which the design and methodological approach used in a study are fit for purpose” (J. A. Smith et al., 2022, p. 147). Accordingly, to ensure that the methods employed were appropriate and coherent to the research questions, three guidelines were used: Yardley's (2000) four principles for good qualitative research, J. A. Smith's (2011) assessment tool for quality in IPA studies, and Nizza et al.'s (2021) four quality indicators for IPA research, which are briefly outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Guidelines for validity and quality in the study.

Guideline	Criteria
Yardley (2000)	Sensitivity to Context Commitment and Rigor Transparency and Coherence Impact and Importance
J. A. Smith (2011)	Adherence to IPA Philosophical Principles Transparency and Coherence in the Analysis Sufficient Sampling from the Corpus Keeping Focused and Offering Depth Presenting Strong Data and Interpretation Engaging and Enlightening the Reader
Nizza et al. (2021)	Constructing a Compelling and Unfolding Narrative Developing a Vigorous Experiential and/or Existential Account Close Analytic Reading of Participants' Wording Attending to Convergence and Divergence

By closely and carefully ensuring that the analysis reflected IPA's philosophical principles and that the design of the research as a whole was transparent, coherent, and rigorous, the authors engaged in a collaborative and iterative process to present vigorous experiential accounts of how participants made sense of their experiences of rape and sexual abuse.

Results

Four superordinate themes were identified from male survivors' accounts, describing their experiences around i) gendered narratives, ii) coping with the abuse, iii) masculinity, and iv) reporting to the police.

Theme 1: gendered narratives

All participants observed damaging narratives that described men as exclusively perpetrators and women as victims at various moments in their lives, from disclosing to close support networks to accessing formal support. These narratives came from different sources, including family, friends, support services, media outlets, and the general public. These gendered portrayals of sexual violence both significantly explained and shaped participants' understandings of the disbelief, hostility, and prejudice they encountered in every aspect of their lives. Analysis of participants' accounts revealed three predominant and distinct narratives: the invisibility of male rape, real men cannot be raped, and only gay men can be raped.

The invisibility of male rape

Participants relayed a general hesitancy around recognizing or openly discussing male rape. After their victimization, they felt that male rape was hidden and invisible, with some survivors emphasizing how their post-abuse experiences made them realize how little *they* knew about male sexual victimization. Specifically, participants revealed how meeting other survivors "who don't fit the stereotype" led them to understand and appreciate how male sexual victimization was a largely misunderstood and ignored reality. For instance, William suggested that invisibility stemmed from men's repulsion around discussing the topic:

Men don't like to hear about other guys getting fucked . . . it's a graphical, physical, visceral experience. And men and women are just not comfortable hearing about it, acknowledging it. And that goes back to misogyny [. . .] Men are the stronger sex and should therefore not be assaulted and raped.

William's understanding of misogyny differed from the traditional notion of hostility, hatred, and prejudice toward women within patriarchal systems and ideologies (Richardson-Self, 2018). Instead, he used the idea to explain a broader discomfort around "hearing about" male rape, capturing how other men find repulsive the idea of men having sex with other men, making male rape invisible. This invisibility was also observed by Nick in interactions with close support networks, unable to provide meaningful help after the abuse:

My family [and friends] struggled . . . I don't think they had a reference point, because rape of men was just not something that was discussed. If a female friend said to me "This happened to me", I had reference points to go to in the media. [. . .] No one could conjure up any . . . all the

empathy wasn't because they'd experience something similar or heard about something similar . . . there was literally no awareness of men being raped. Certainly, that was reflected in my family, I just don't think they understood.

Nick felt that family and friends could not meet his needs because male rape had no public recognition as an issue. Interestingly, Nick speculated on how male and female survivors would be received by close networks, suggesting that, since female rape is well known in society, family and friends are more readily equipped to provide more effective support. He felt this social awareness of female rape had unintended negative consequences on him as a man as he tried to disclose his experience, resulting in a feeling that his emotional needs could not be met.

The invisibility of male rape was also felt to be an issue in receiving care, with James reporting an upsetting experience with a female rape service, which for many participants often represented the only local and accessible resource:

They say that these crimes are primarily propagated almost exclusively by men. [That] made me feel shit [*sic*] actually . . . the victim is forgotten from that point onwards . . . I didn't choose to be male; I didn't choose to be abused. I said that to them, which resulted in them saying "We don't want to see you again". I was basically fired as a client because I was a male!

The limited availability of professional support led participants to access female-oriented organizations that often subscribed to narratives portraying men as sexually aggressive and abusive toward women. A sense of frustration emerged from James' account as he described feeling attacked by services. He felt that his victimization became invisible ("forgotten") the moment that gender was introduced. James' experiences resonated across the sample, with participants reporting feeling silenced from the responses of families, friends, and professionals. The invisibility observed by participants described the consequences of essentialist gendered narratives (e.g., men are only rapists) in men's experiences of hostility, unawareness, and self-inhibition in all aspects of their victim experiences (Cohen, 2014; Fisher & Pina, 2013; Javaid, 2016). These negative encounters seemed to be underpinned by specific and distinct myths, used by external observers to further delegitimise survivors' experiences.

Real men cannot be raped

All participants reported expectations and norms around how men should behave in dangerous circumstances. These "real men" standards had an impact on how they rationalized and understood their role and responsibilities in the abuse. Pete said:

I'm a weak man, and I wanna be a tough man. So, I'm gonna be a tough man, I'll go out looking for fights, I'll go to the gym and beef up . . . everything to tell myself and the world that I'm tough, and if you see me as tough, I am not gonna get raped again.

Pete described how men are expected to do all they can to protect themselves, by being physically and mentally strong. By saying that "if you see me as tough, I am not gonna get raped again," Pete gave an insight of how he understood his victimization and blamed himself for being "a weak man." Indeed, participants described how norms around

toughness and aggressiveness shaped the ways in which they made sense of their victimization. Crucially, participants' adherence to "real men" myths increased their reluctance to disclose for fear of how others would react. In describing his workplace, John said:

I get it at work, [they are] extremely misogynistic, racist, God, you name it. But God, would I not tell them this because I've heard their opinions of it, some of the men I've worked with, talking about big cases in the news. You get the same comment "Well, they should have just punched them."

For John there were various types of men (misogynists, racists) who perpetuate prejudice toward male survivors as having failed to take responsibility for their own safety and well-being. Such failures included not reacting aggressively and forcefully against the perpetrator, with the implication that victimization could be avoided by "just" punching the abuser. Significantly, John's account of the "real men" myth was one where survivors fail to meet *other* men's standards of resilience and invulnerability. Other participants also highlighted the unforgiving scrutiny they experienced when their actions were judged, and seen as failing, against how "real" men are expected to react. Importantly, these expectations reflected the additional stigma encountered by gay men.

Only gay men can be raped

All participants were confronted by the myth that all male rape survivors must be gay, a narrative that they believed ignored and overlooked their own circumstances and/or sexual orientation (see [Table 1](#)). They reported experiences with this myth in a variety of settings, including the media. For example, when asked about stereotypes, William immediately referred to fictional portrayals of male rape involving "some sort of effeminate gay men getting jumped [...] raped over a car bonnet by a group of apparently straight guys." William's focus on the sexuality of both the fictional victim ("effeminate gay men") and the perpetrators ("apparently straight guys") was indicative of how he understood stereotypes as traditionally directed toward victims yet overlooking or dismissing the abusers' character and behaviors. Indeed, even when myths focused on perpetrators, they were often damaging for victims:

I've shared my experience of rape and people laughed. People joke. They ask if my rapist was good looking. Some will say "Oh, you don't really hear about it happening to men".

Pete's experiences captured how myths created barriers to disclose, as he experienced ridicule and incredulity when talking about his experiences. It could be argued that by asking if the perpetrators were good looking, sexuality myths are used to reinforce a perception of gay men as promiscuous and consenting participants in the abuse. Indeed, across the sample the duplicity of sexuality myths emerged in how they simultaneously justify perpetrators and condemn victims. For example, Nick reported his experiences in court, where barristers actively minimized the actions of the abuser:

"Oh, you know he's [the perpetrator] been in the closet all his life. He's sixty now and it's been difficult for him. He just got a bit carried away". On the other hand: "Well, you're a gay man, so it's expected that you would say yes to anyone!"

This extract highlighted how sexuality myths diminish male rape as sex between men that “got a bit carried away,” where the sexuality of those involved eclipses the seriousness of the incident. In Nick’s experience, stereotypes were used to absolve the perpetrator as sexually motivated and characterize gay survivors as hedonists who would “say yes to anyone.”

Theme 2: coping with the abuse

The immediate post-incident emotional reactions described by participants were complex, debilitating, and charged with sexual language, where the sense of violation and contamination revealed the traumatic impact of acquaintance sexual violence (see Table 1). Indeed, participants’ accounts indicated how they felt that their psychological and physical being were invaded and attacked, often by someone close taking advantage of them. Participants described a progression of negative emotions and recognized a process of self-isolation that led to a series of coping strategies, designed to mitigate their psychological distress. These included unhealthy self-blame and compensatory behaviors.

Unhealthy self-blame

All participants reported a sense of taking responsibility for what had happened, by questioning and scrutinizing their own behaviors and character. For example, Nick said:

I was naïve, desperate to be noticed [. . .] I probably drunk too much. It was such a clear-cut scenario, it was obviously rape, I probably was drugged. But still afterwards, at times, I wondered whether it was partly me that contributed to it?

Nick described behaviors (excessive drinking) and character flaws (being naïve, desperate) that he believed precipitated the incident. He recognized the potential irrationality of these self-blaming tendencies, as he unequivocally admitted that he was raped. However, he still continued to blame and criticize himself during the interview, reflecting the extent to which he had internalized these self-blame processes. Nick’s tendency toward unforgiving self-scrutiny was common across all participants in the study, who particularly struggled to dismiss the belief that their actions were seen by the perpetrator(s) as indications of consent. For example, Sorel said:

. . . Thirty-two years locked away in the back of my head, in a box. I didn’t feel I was a victim, I thought I got myself into. I felt I consented, acquiesced, gone along with it. I haven’t stopped him. I participated by not saying anything, by masturbating him, helping him put my underwear [back] on. I felt guilty, ashamed, and, at the time, unsure what it meant about my sexuality.

Sorel illustrated how feelings of responsibility limit men from recognizing themselves as victims, resulting, in his case, in over thirty years of denial of having been raped. By mistaking his actions as consensual, Sorel had not come to terms with how he was coerced, resulting in conflicting emotions. This highlights the challenges for self-recognition, especially when non-penetrative acts have occurred and when men have memories of physiological arousal. Self-blaming helped Sorel to mitigate his confusion and, ultimately, suppress and internalize his trauma. This created an extreme juxtaposition, where all participants seemed to simultaneously know that responsibility lay only with the perpetrator, but also continue to hold themselves accountable for what happened.

Participants' need for self-blame was often about identifying ways they could protect themselves from future abuse. Acknowledging the perpetrators' responsibility would hinder this process as it would imply that the abuse was unavoidable:

If someone said to me "You were unlucky, in the wrong place at the wrong time, says nothing about you, it says more about this guy", I wouldn't believe it, wouldn't have helped. I was all over the place in my head. (Pete)

Male survivors struggled to reconcile self-blaming thoughts with the knowledge that they could not prevent the abuse. These conflicting thoughts resulted in a series of compensatory behaviors designed to mitigate their distress.

Compensatory behaviors

Evidence from veterans with histories of sexual trauma highlight survivors' tendencies to engage in compensatory behaviors following the abuse (Elder et al., 2017; Voller et al., 2015). In this study, participants reported using coping strategies to manage the emotions arising from the abuse. Michael reported:

I became violent, a monster [voice breaks] to protect myself. The tough guy, robbing people, drug dealers . . . [voice breaks] I was just scared. I'm drug dealing, I've always used some kind of substance, using alcohol, people say this progress to crack cocaine and heroin. Stuff was happening, I didn't know how to deal with the way I felt inside. I didn't want to be that person.

Fear and anger characterized Michael's victimization, and he recognized how antisocial behaviors helped him recapture a sense of self and control. Conversely, when talking about the progression of substance use, Michael seemed unsure about how it all happened ("people say"). Importantly, Michael illustrated the challenges of making sense of the "stuff that was happening," with drugs proving the only escape from "that person." This extract captured the psychological demands arising from sexual trauma, with participants in this study often struggling to rationalize and comprehend their internal psychological state. Despite being "clean" for 17 years, Michael's account still resonated with the pain and suffering of years of drug abuse and antisocial behaviors that left him with a sense that he had to be a "monster" in order to survive.

Similarly, Chris highlighted how the sexual nature of his victimization resulted in equally sexual coping behaviors:

I just didn't give a shit. Take what you want: you want to have sex with me, have sex with me. I don't care who you are, what you want, what you want me to do, do it. I lost agency over myself, my body: if you want it, have it. I have no control of myself, over my body, over how anyone uses [my body], so fuck it. Do what you want. I was reckless, very reckless. I was very lucky to get out of it.

Chris was raped and drugged by a police officer at a party. He described a loss of agency that was intrinsic to his physical and sexual being, supposedly free to make decisions as to who he wished to have sex with: losing that freedom pushed him to engage in "reckless" sexual behaviors. Chris's account reflects how male survivors justify exaggerated behaviors as a way to cope with trauma and loss. Indeed, despite presenting his story almost dismissively,

Chris did not hide how vulnerable he felt after the abuse: an emotion shared by all participants in this sample. Other participants, for example, dealt with their trauma by seeking fights:

I went looking for fights in the city centre, after a few drink – most of the big guys looked at me and laughed – so I started having lots of sex with lots of different people. (Pete)

Participants' coping strategies were underpinned by a series of recurring needs, which highlighted the role of masculinity in their psychological needs and vulnerabilities.

Theme 3: masculinity

Societal constructions of masculinity substantially defined the experiences of abuse across all nine participants. Participants' testimony relating to male expectations and behaviors suggested that male survivors perceived and understood masculinity as something that governed how *all* men should or should not behave, and that becoming a victim was a significant violation of these "rules." For Nick, masculinity and rape were both inter-related expressions of power, where men lose their power to consent: "Rape is about power and it's emasculating for a man to be raped, to be helpless, to have no power." He further stressed how masculinity contributes to men's reluctance to recognize their victimization, originating from myths (such as the "Real men" myth discussed above) where men are expected to "stand up for themselves." Participants all spoke of similar masculine expectations and discussed at length how it affected their lives, especially post-incident. However, as they attached unique meaning to their experiences of abuse, they had a unique understanding of *their* masculinity. For example, James felt that masculinity meant being "ordinary" in the eyes of others:

I don't want to be a circus animal in front of a crowd. I wanted to just be like the person next to me. A lot of my life has been hiding just to blend in, a childhood pattern of internalising to look like respectable people [...] trying to forget, ignore, play it down, minimise it. You haven't [lied], just denied it: "Oh, it only happened once or twice".

The metaphor of the circus animal captures how men are governed by fears of being seen by the "crowd" as an anomaly. The need to be "like the person next to me" highlights how men like James minimize, internalize, and deny the severity of their abuse, for the sake of being seen as ordinary and respectable. Participants strongly adhered to masculine norms, particularly when rejecting labels that diminished their status as men:

When we talk about sexual abuse surv-survivors – I don't like that word – being a gay man already trying to be more masculine as opposed to feminine . . . being looked at as weak, as a victim, I can't stand that, it would really piss me off. I don't want people's help, to look at me with pity, to feel sorry for me, to feel they need to look after me . . . I don't want that; I don't need that.

In this extract, Chris's need to maintain a sense of masculinity in his life defined a series of psychological needs. Chris's sexuality also seemed to play an important role in his reluctance in being "viewed that way." As a gay man trying to distance himself from femininity, embracing the label of "rape survivor" conflicted with his masculinity and how other men would view him. Chris's dread of others' pity, compassion, and care highlighted the importance that survivors place in their self-images as functioning masculine men.

Overall, all participants noted how other men defined expectations, norms, and standards of masculinity. For example, Sorel explained that fearing “the state of the mockery” from male peers contributed to 32 years of silence. Similarly, recognition and respect of other men was non-negotiable for Pete, who after being raped, sought out fights with other men even if it meant hurting himself in the process:

I wanted to prove that I was tough, show the world and myself that I’m not weak. I want people to see me as strong. I will square up to you even if you might knock me out, you will know that I’ve still tried to square up to you and that shows you, and the world, that you’re tough and *I am tough*.

Despite knowing his actions carried serious risks to his wellbeing, Pete felt that being recognized by stereotypically strong men warranted that risk. He could not accept feeling weak and vulnerable because it meant he could risk future victimization. Safety as a function of masculinity resulted in behaviors that helped Pete conceal his vulnerabilities. The need to show his toughness “to the world” suggests how masculine norms define dominance and success for men. It also indicates how masculinity is involved in maintaining barriers for male survivors, who engage in toxic and hyperaggressive behaviors to mitigate non-conforming emotions (Jakupcak et al., 2005).

Theme 4: reporting to the police

Reporting was seen by six participants in the sample as a part of a more personal therapeutic process of recognition, control, and closure. For James, it was an important step to give meaning to his victimization:

It was quite hard because it happened over 40 years ago, and the person was still alive. I thought I should really do something about it. If my children were abused without a doubt [the police] would be involved. I was looking after me in a way that no one else did for me. The law had been broken; it isn’t about vengeance. If we believe in the rule of law, why suddenly make an exception for yourself? My own therapy is wrapped up in this process.

As he stressed the time between incident and reporting, James recognized the challenges of investigating his historic case, yet felt it was his responsibility as a law-abiding citizen to come forward. Civic duty and institutional validation motivated James to involve the police, an attitude that was especially prevalent in the historic male survivors in this sample who often had internalized their abuse for several years. Throughout the interview, James emphasized how he was not motivated by retribution. Reporting was a process of externalization that sought affirming responses from police officers. However, more commonly, participants reported negative and unsatisfactory responses by officers, with often long-term psychological consequences. Indeed, James himself, despite approaching the CJS with positive expectations, as illustrated in the previous extract, went on to say that he felt traumatized after being interviewed by the police:

They were bludgeoning: “So did he anally penetrate you?”. The concept of rape is upsetting because I wasn’t anally abused, that’s a level of upsetting detail because there is stuff where the law doesn’t quite work with. I feel I was penetrated, yet I know legally it doesn’t count as rape. Laws are blunt instrument [...] but it doesn’t mean that they [officers] need to be blunt instruments.

In describing the police as “bludgeoning,” James highlighted their impact on male survivors’ emotional wellbeing. He had rarely discussed his victimization with others before and was not ready to examine the “graphic” details of his abuse. Moreover, James himself identified as a rape victim, in contradiction with current legal definitions.⁷ Consequently, he felt that the officer was potentially diminishing his experiences as secondary to penetrative offenses. James felt that the officer’s inquiries overlooked both the trauma and silence surrounding his victimization. This extract captured the importance of first responders in providing care and guidance to survivors upon reporting.

Throughout participants’ accounts, issues with reporting often indicated a conflict between officers’ investigative duties and victims’ trauma informed needs. Survivors’ negative attitudes toward the CJS were often exacerbated by encounters with unexperienced officers who were seen as ill-equipped to investigate their cases:

A girl came to my house, asked me what happened; when I did, she was horrified, she had no experience. The lack of care, just no consideration, no empathy, nothing. I don’t know if she had any training, if she did, [it] just ain’t good enough. It made the situation even worse for me. The anger, disgust, and the rest of it comes, they didn’t even tell me she was coming. She just gonna come and knock on my door, and I will come to you about my childhood sex abuse? Come on man – prepare someone for that shit.

During the study, Michael discussed his trust issues with authorities, borne out of prolonged sexual and physical abuse by teachers at his school. Considering he had a history of antisocial behaviors, his attitude toward the police was not a positive one. By not asking prior permission to arrange the interview, Michael felt that his reservations on reporting were being overlooked; a feeling that worsened when he realized that the interviewing officer seemed unprepared to deal with the sensitivity of the topic. He interpreted the officer’s inexperience as a reflection on the overall police system. From this encounter, Michael was left with anger, “disgust,” and feeling that the seriousness of his allegations was once again overlooked and disregarded by a figure of authority. Michael’s experience was not unique, with participants believing that officers’ lack of preparedness and familiarity were indicative of male rape being disregarded by the CJS.

Only a minority of participants reported immediately after their victimization. From a policing perspective, recent cases present significantly fewer investigative challenges in terms of gathering evidence, witness testimonies, and suspect identification (Maslen & Paine, 2019; Shead, 2018). However, many participants’ accounts told a story of re-traumatization, with officers acting unhelpfully and dismissively:

I told the police straight away . . . crying, covered in dirt: “Some guy just raped me, I don’t know what to do”. The officers just said “Oh, just go home and sober up”. They then turned up at my house - after a friend called and had a go at them – and asked me what happened. The one thing I remember them saying was: “So after it was over, you just got up and walked off with him willingly? That’s not gonna look very good in court, is it?”

This police encounter led Pete to withdraw his case from further investigations. Across two instances (in the police station and in Pete’s home), Pete felt that his victimization was being invalidated by officers who first suggested he was intoxicated and then questioned the credibility of his account and how it would be seen in court. Pete’s account of reporting emphasized how officers influence survivors’ decisions around progressing their cases and

fears of the repercussion on their wellbeing. Indeed, case withdrawal was not uncommon in this sample, with participants unable to engage with the CJS if it meant burdening an investigative process that felt as an attack on their credibility:

They don't give the impression they're on your side. They give the impression they're going to argue, question you as if you're the one doing the wrong. You feel like you're guilty until proven innocent, rather than innocent until proven guilty. You doubt your own decisions, made me feel like [reporting] was wrong and I potentially ruined someone else's life by reporting them.

In this study, men felt that withdrawing their case meant prioritizing their wellbeing. Participants found the reporting process taxing, as they felt blamed and judged by officers. In the extract above, officers' skepticism created feelings of guilt toward the abuser. Investigative procedures were often interpreted by participants as indicators that their cases were not serious enough to be investigated, or that they did not deserve justice. Participants who did report felt their encounter with the CJS left them feeling re-traumatized, making it unlikely they would advise other survivors to report.

Discussion

This study enhances understandings of male rape and sexual abuse by providing insight into the personal experiences of male survivors. Four superordinate themes describe participants' experiences of i) gendered narratives, ii) coping with the abuse, iii) masculinity, and iv) reporting to the police, highlighting the uniqueness of the barriers encountered by male survivors as they try to make sense with a form of violence that is often undetected in society (Javaid, 2016). Participants' experiences varied in terms of age at the time of the incident, type of abuse (prolonged or one-off incident), offender-relationship, delay in disclosure, and reporting. However, despite divergences in the sample, the general convergence exposed suggests that the phenomenon of male rape commands specific attention as a distinct form of sexual violence, and that support should be constructed in accordance with this recognition (Hine, Murphy, & Churchyard, 2021; Hine, Murphy, Yesberg et al., 2021).

Gendered narratives (Theme 1) described participants' encounters of disbelief and hostility, which both represented and influenced essentialist beliefs on male violence – that violent men abuse powerless women (Cohen, 2014; Fisher & Pina, 2013; Graham, 2006; Javaid, 2016). Survivors' accounts reflect how such gendered narratives minimized experiences that do not meet traditional sexual violence paradigms, created barriers for disclosure, and facilitated the silence surrounding male rape, described in this study as the *invisibility of male rape*. Importantly, narratives were often reinforced by close support networks, and were reflected in their struggle to provide effective support (Sorsoli et al., 2008), as well as the unavailability of specialized, male-informed therapeutic care (Lowe, 2018). Gendered narratives were also the foundations of myths related to *real men* and *gay rape*, two well-established male rape myths in the literature (Turchik & Edwards, 2012). The encounters with male rape myths described in this study emphasized how male victim blaming center on judgments on victims' masculinity and sexuality (Hine, Murphy, & Churchyard, 2021). Indeed, whilst presented as discrete and separate, participants' accounts often revealed the inter-relatedness of these myths, used in conjunction to delegitimise their victimization, exonerate perpetrators, and accuse male survivors of making false allegations, or exaggerating the severity of their experiences.

Theme 2 described survivors' attempts to resolve emotional issues through coping strategies that participants recognized to be "unhealthy." All participants reported engaging in self-blame, a mechanism designed to rationalize the events in one's life by self-questioning and self-scrutiny (Davis et al., 1996; Janoff-Bulman, 1979). Despite being able to identify the downfalls of self-blaming and recognizing their abusers' culpability, most participants still needed to have agency over their victimization, highlighting the extent to which men internalize guilt, shame, and self-blame (Jakupcak et al., 2006, 2005). Additionally, to resolve and mitigate emotional distress, participants reported a variety of compensatory behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, aggressiveness, risky sexual behaviors). Whilst these reactions are common in victims of sexual violence (Javaid, 2015; Turchik & Hassija, 2014; Turchik et al., 2012), this study illustrates how compensatory coping strategies were informed by gendered norms.

Masculinity (Theme 3) dominated participants' accounts, with several characteristics highlighted including respectability, invulnerability, resilience, and sexual independence. The prevalence of these norms highlights how men internalize a hegemonic understanding of masculinity ideologies that value power and authority (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Crucially, participants referred to these masculine standards in their encounters with gendered narratives (Theme 1), as well as the coping strategies employed to deal with the psychological consequences of their victimization (Theme 2). Indeed, participants often described their experiences within heteronormative frameworks, where sex involves conquests and surrenders (Chapleau & Oswald, 2010). As such, participants understood male rape as a loss of their sexual power and as a damage to their masculinity. These negative emotions seemed to be compounded by the fact that accepting their victimization meant embracing traits (i.e., weakness, submissiveness) that were outside of the prescribed masculinity ideology (Javaid, 2015; Rock, 2002; Weiss, 2010). Unsurprisingly, men reported concealing their vulnerabilities, so as not to be seen as inferior to stereotypically masculine men, seen as functioning, dominant – thus hegemonic – members of society (Fields et al., 2015). Indeed, participants' relationship with masculinity emphasized the duality of this construct, as an internal belief system that adheres to an external, socio-cultural masculinity ideology that is policed by other men who set and uphold its values.

The decision to involve the police (Theme 4) was not taken lightly by the participants, who, despite differences in delay, shared similar reasons for reporting. They described a sense of civic duty to bring abusers to justice. Reporting was also a way to acknowledge their victimization, where seeking institutional validation carried some therapeutic value. However, participants were often disappointed with officers' responses, seen as dismissive, unhelpful, inconsiderate, inappropriate, and hurtful. The accounts of this study reflect existing issues within the UK CJS around exaggerated skepticism (Jamel et al., 2008), over-estimation of false allegations (Angiolini, 2015), and rape myths (Venema, 2016). It is important to acknowledge the investigative challenges associated with sexual offenses, yet the recurrence of negative experiences in this study suggest that closer attention to complainants' emotional needs is desperately needed. Survivors described feeling re-traumatized after reporting, with officers' investigative decisions/actions seen as attacks to their credibility as rape victims. These findings suggest the validity of reporting as a form of secondary victimization (Campbell & Raja, 1999) for male rape cases, with participants struggling with the investigative "burden" and withdrawing their case. Given the prevalence in the UK of case retractions (Hine, Murphy, Yesberg et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2021) victim withdrawal emerged in this study as a safeguarding decision to avoid further psychological damage from officers' stigmatizing approaches.

Implications and recommendations

The complex emotional issues and downward psychological trajectories described by participants (Theme 2) suggest it could be useful to understand male rape experiences as a form of PTSD (Walker et al., 2005), and stress the importance of recognizing trauma in the development of symptoms and coping strategies. Moreover, given the role of masculinity in male survivors' experiences, treatment should provide men with the tools to be in control of their recovery plans. Indeed, acknowledging survivors' gender-specific needs can improve help-seeking and engagement with support (Ellis et al., 2020; Sorsoli et al., 2008). However, participants' experiences with non-specialized services suggest a current lack of awareness of male-specific needs within some organizations. Indeed, the lived experiences of re-traumatization and dismissals provided in this study speak to the fact that more specialized organizations in the UK are desperately needed. Whilst increased attention and funding to male support services are routinely called for (Lowe & Balfour, 2015; Lowe & Rogers, 2017), this study emphasized how other entry points required closer attention. For example, participants often accessed rape services that were unequipped to provide support tailored to their unique gendered needs. Gender/sexuality inclusive approaches within third sector organizations⁸ are crucial to the recognition of male rape. Indeed, by refusing or providing inadequate support, services risk causing further psychological harm. Therefore, by improving communication with male-focused services, non-specialized services can facilitate signposting, referrals, and significantly reduce the delay between victimization and access to care; by including male-informed training, services can make a difference between life and death (Walker et al., 2005).

Crucially, such focus on male rape services should not come at the detriment of the resourcing and financing of female services, as both women and girls are known to experience re-traumatization and secondary victimization upon accessing support (Campbell & Raja, 1999). Indeed, as highlighted by the recent report by the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales's (2021), some of the challenges encountered by male survivors around re-traumatization, availability of support, and unpreparedness within the third and criminal justice sectors are widespread problems that desperately need to be addressed. However, this does not mean taking a gender-neutral approach to service provision, where neutrality would ignore the nuances of experiences, as clearly indicated in this study by participants' gender experiences of trauma and rehabilitation needs. Instead, confirming findings from research in the domestic violence sector, it highlights the importance of providing gender-inclusive services that are designed and delivered in ways that are sensitive to the unique and specific needs and behaviors of survivors of interpersonal violence (Hine et al., 2020). As such, this study calls for a proportional, appropriate, and informed support within the sexual violence support sector, that matches both the generic and specific demands of all groups of survivors of sexual violence that are increasingly coming forward in the UK.

To corroborate the findings of this study, further research is required to investigate police officers' own experiences of investigating male rape offenses. Nevertheless, it is clear that male complainants need better access to care when reporting. Firstly, the presence of rape victim advocates can significantly improve officers' responses to rape victims (Campbell, 2006). Additionally, specific focus is needed on first responders (Angiolini, 2015), with training aimed at managing complainants' complex

psychological needs. The female rape literature supports the benefits of trauma-informed approaches to the investigation of sexual offenses (Franklin et al., 2020; Gillespie-Smith et al., 2020; Lathan et al., 2019), with reductions of re-victimization, improvement of quality of witness testimonies, and willingness to engage and cooperate with the investigation (Rich, 2019). Besides increasing officers' specialisms, trauma-informed training enhances effective interviewing skills (Rich, 2019), with the aim of prioritizing victims' comfort and safety, and in turn improving their working memory of the assault in a non-judgmental and empathic approach. Considering how survivors criticized an apparent lack of preparedness, familiarity and empathy, officers also need to be supported and trained to identify safety concerns, vulnerabilities, and male-specific psychological needs. A gender and sexuality-sensitive, trauma-informed approach would improve male survivors' welfare in the CJS, and the investigation of offenses that, historically, have repeatedly failed to reach threshold for prosecution (Hine, Murphy, Yesberg et al., 2021; Hohl & Stanko, 2015; Murphy et al., 2021).

Limitations of this study

The present study presents a heterogenous sample in relation to range of abusive experience and outcome. However, whilst this diversity was welcomed and sought after, this sample was in other ways far too homogenous. For example, given their representation among the population of male victims, future research is needed with straight male survivors to examine their unique needs and vulnerabilities (Javaid, 2018), particularly as the emerging role of masculinity discussed in this study could play different functions in terms of internal and external barriers for disclosure and self-recognition. Furthermore, whilst diverse in terms of sexuality, all men in this study were cisgender. As such, whilst the experiences presented in this study will resonate with other marginalized groups, the findings may not be transferable to other masculinity identities that are often overlooked, including trans, transmasculine, and non-binary individuals.

Similarly, only two participants did not identify as White. The underrepresentation of ethnic minorities is not only a limitation of this study but also of the wider sexual violence literature. Ethnic minorities experience increased cultural pressures to avoid bringing shame and dishonor on their families (Gilbert et al., 2004; Gilligan & Akhtar, 2006), thus the barriers identified in this study may be amplified for these marginalized groups. Finally, as the majority of participants in this study reported to the police, we can only speculate on to why the majority of men do not report. Whilst three participants did not report (see, Table 1), it was not possible to further explore their decision around not involving the police. Again, this limitation is indicative of the type of male survivors who are more likely to engage in academic research. In fact, the men in this study had all accessed and completed their therapeutic support programmes and were arguably more prepared to engage in a demanding research interview. Indeed, on average participants were discussing events that occurred around 24 years ago. The lack of participants who did not report reflects broader research challenges to recruit "recent" male survivors, who appear to be a particularly difficult cohort to engage with. Future research is vital to address these crucial gaps, by working closely with the third sector to develop the necessary safeguarding measures to recruit and safely interview these underrepresented, yet equally important, groups of men.

Conclusion

This study provides a detailed and powerful insight into the lived experiences of men affected by rape and sexual abuse. The themes identified highlight the existence of damaging gendered narratives and the development of unhealthy and compensatory coping strategies to mitigate the psychological consequences of the abuse. The common denominator of participants' experiences was the adherence to traditional masculinity ideologies and norms. Masculinity emerged as a dual construct: an internal belief system and a culturally reinforced ideology underscoring the psychological conflict often reported by male survivors. Finally, survivors raised concerns around the prevalence of false beliefs and negative attitudes within non-specialized services and the CJS. In particular, the findings emphasized the inadequacy and unpreparedness of police officers to manage the emotional needs of complainants and to effectively investigate male allegations of sexual offenses. The accounts described in this study clearly indicate the need for increased awareness on male needs and for trauma-informed interventions across the different entry points male survivors routinely attempt to access. Importantly, this research provides a framework for future research on different aspects of male rape, as well as indicating ways to improve support across the third sector and the CJS.

Notes

1. "Victim withdrawal" refers to complainants retracting their cases from the investigation/prosecution at any time after making the initial report to the police.
2. Operation Yewtree was an investigation into sexual abuse allegations, predominantly the abuse of children, by the British media personality Jimmy Savile, and others. The investigation, led by the Metropolitan Police Service, started in October 2012, resulted in 11 criminal cases, leading to 7 convictions.
3. Dame Elish Angiolini carried out an independent review of how allegations of rape were investigated and prosecuted in London. Angiolini (2015) found a number of issues in how police officers responded to rape victims in early investigative stages, their lack of preparedness to handle the psychological needs of complainants, and the use of rape myths.
4. Here after the term "male survivor", unless specified, will refer to men who experienced sexual victimization at the hand of other men.
5. This age criterion was selected in line with the (Sexual Offences Act 2003), which states that children below the age of 13 cannot legally give consent to sexual activity. This legal framework was chosen to maximize participation, while excluding survivors who were legally children at the time of the incident, because of differences in how the law is applied in those criminal cases.
6. Full ethical approval was granted by the institution of affiliation of the second and fourth author. Participants were not compensated for taking part in this study.
7. The (Sexual Offences Act 2003) defines rape as the i) intentional vaginal, anal, and oral penetration with a penis, ii) the penetration took place in the absence of consent or a reasonable belief thereof.
8. "Third sector organisations" is a term used to describe the range of organizations that are neither public sector nor private sector. It includes voluntary and community organizations (both registered charities and other organizations such as associations, self-help groups and community groups), social enterprises, mutuals and co-operatives.

Availability of data and material and coding apparatus

Data and apparatus for this study are not available due to confidentiality and sensitivity issues.

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