

# Counselling for connection: making queer relationships during Britain's sexual revolution

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Accepted 25 May 2022  
Published Online First  
2 August 2022

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the creation and mobilisation of counselling services by British LGBTQ+ activist organisations during the 1960s and 1970s, focusing especially on Britain's first 'homophile' organisation, the Albany Trust, and Friend, the counselling and peer support wing of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (1975). Beginning in the early 1960s, activists supporting homosexual law reform launched counselling services aimed at sexual minorities as a long-term solution to the harmful and enduring legacy of social exclusion and internalised homophobia and transphobia in Britain (and beyond). In an effort to make visible and help remedy the many social and emotional problems that homosexual, bisexual and trans populations faced, activists supporting sexual law reform drew on expansive postwar British understandings of emotional health in forging new queer subjectivities in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. This article reveals how popular British post-World War II conceptions of emotional health—which had explicitly promoted the monogamous heterosexual relationship as the basis for healthy emotional life and pathologised homosexuality—were appropriated in the 1960s as a basis for conceiving of positive depathologised queer sexualities. In the 1970s, however, gay liberation activist organisations pursued counselling as a basis for cultivating a broader range of intimate relationships in connection to psychological healing, including queer friendships and queer social and political community. This article thus demonstrates how concerns about socially induced emotional damage in LGBTQ+ people shaped not only political demands both prior to and following homosexual decriminalisation in the late 1960s, but also personal expectations of what it meant to be a 'proud' self-realised queer person during Britain's sexual 'revolution'.

In order to learn about anything, whether it's how to be feminine or masculine, or about relationships, we all need models to learn from (Campaign for Homosexual Equality 1975, 22). On 16 September 1967, 7 weeks after the passage of the momentous Sexual Offences Act—which decriminalised homosexual behaviour between consenting male adults (over-21) in private—*The Guardian* newspaper ran an article that both celebrated and scrutinised this historic piece of legislative reform. It highlighted the lived experience of 'John and Eric, who have been together for the past twenty years', who confirmed that 'it hasn't made a ha'porth of difference to them' (The Guardian 1967). Given the many restrictions that the law kept in place, the continued increase in police arrests,<sup>1</sup> and the enduring stigma attached

to homosexuality, the couple maintained that the 'legislation they want to see now would make the man-man situation entirely comparable to the man-girl one' (The Guardian 1967). The changes they hoped for would make expressions of sexual intimacy and love—so highly revered in the context of heterosexual marriage—viewed as the same by people regardless of gender and sexual orientation.

Many activists and organisations involved in campaigns for gay liberation similarly saw the decriminalisation of homosexual behaviour as insufficient on its own in introducing sexual equality. In response, they confronted social stigma and its damaging emotional impact through counselling initiatives aimed at Britain's increasingly visible population of sexual minorities.<sup>2</sup> The Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS) created the Albany Trust in 1958, which pursued counselling beginning in the early 1960s. In the early 1970s every organisation attached to the 'homophile' and gay liberation movements similarly developed a counselling arm.<sup>3</sup> The Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) launched Friend (Fellowship for the Relief of the Isolated and Emotionally in Need and Distress) in 1971 and the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) created the Counter-Psychiatry Group in reaction to the popular use of aversion therapies to 'cure' homosexuality and, soon after, Icebreakers, a network of support groups. Gay Switchboard, a 24-hour telephone referral service offering information, help and advice to those in need, was launched in early 1974.

As this essay will show, law reform constituted a mere fraction of activists' time and effort. Queer people's access to the choices and experiences that heterosexuals took for granted involved far more than eliminating legal obstacles to same-sex intimacy. The psychological weight of cultural associations of homosexuality with criminality and mental abnormality needed to be tackled. Following the establishment of queer counselling services in the early 1960s through the Albany Trust and the Minorities Research Group, many advocates of homosexual equality approached relationship choice as connected less to legal permission than psychological capacity.

The explosion of queer counselling services was not a practitioner-led phenomenon. The narrative presented in this essay is not a top-down story demonstrating the triumph of psychological experts in an era of LGBTQ+ liberation. Instead, the creation and use of queer counselling involved reciprocity between predominantly queer counselors and volunteer 'befrienders' (non-expert peer-support-givers, who were often themselves former



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**To cite:** Chettiar T. *Med Humanit* 2023;**49**:182–192.

advice seekers and clients) and service users through written correspondence, telephone conversations and in-person meetings.<sup>4</sup> This was not a case of experts imposing a goal of intimate relationships onto avowedly lonely sexual minorities. Instead, counsellors and those who sought their help *together* engaged in imagining what queer community and relationships could do.

This is not to say that all voices counted equally. Despite the mutual involvement of clients and service providers in identifying problems and formulating plans for a better future, there were clear outliers who approached these services with needs that lay decidedly beyond the capacity (or willingness) of these services to help. In the view of service providers, 'good' advice seekers tended to be individuals like gay men looking to meet potential partners outside of the club scene and lesbians seeking advice on how to maintain their partner's sexual interest. They presented desires that could be channelled towards building lasting relationships. 'Bad' advice seekers on the other hand, presented desires that were antithetical to this—for example, having exclusively unattached sex, or a fetish for being whipped. The 'good' advice seeker sought to be part of a community and longed for durable intimacy. The 'bad' advice seeker sought out relationships that were transient, one-sided and *not* mutually fulfilling. Advice seekers in general wanted help extending their sexual sociability into a world of strangers, however 'bad' advice seekers did not hope to have this exploration lead to either lasting romantic partnerships or ongoing participation within a queer community.<sup>5</sup>

The use of the term 'queer' at various points in this essay is deliberate. Although 'queer' was a derogatory term in the decades that this essay discusses and there is an argument for strictly adhering to actors' categories (which were, for the actors in this essay, 'homosexual', 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual' and 'transsexual'), I have often opted for the more widely encompassing term 'queer'. The services that I examine targeted the serious psychological and emotional harm that it was presumed *all* gender and sexually non-conforming people experienced given the corrosive effects of stigma. Although the Albany Trust was established in 1958 to help homosexual men, their remit quickly expanded in response to the diversity of client demand. By the mid-1960s, not only were a significant proportion of their clients not homosexual men, since they either identified as bisexual or were women, but a rising number were described as 'transvestite' or 'transsexual'. Further, some clients who confessed sexual desires that were considered deviant at the time refused any specific sexual minority identity. What all clients shared was the perceived psychological damage and ongoing emotional pain that resulted from social and sexual stigma. The contemporary term 'queer' better encapsulates the range of people seen as commonly suffering from internalised shame than terms that bring attention to separation such as LGBT.

The use of queer counselling and befriending services rose significantly in the years immediately following the decriminalisation of homosexual behaviour in 1967 as many LGBTQ+ people ceased to face legal barriers to help-seeking. Demand truly exploded, however, with the rise of gay liberation movements and LGBTQ+ people's access to increasingly positive political associations with 'coming out'. In 1970, the Albany Trust helped more than 2000 men and women positively accept their sexuality through in-person counselling (Albany Trust 1979). By 1978, Gay Switchboard reported that their organisation had dealt with 123 140 calls that year alone;<sup>6</sup> and Friend's telephone counselling services were helping more than 30 000 men and women per year (Lewisham 1978). Yet, historical literature on homosexual law reform and gay liberation activism

scarcely mentions counselling as an important activity, much less assigning it a place of significance alongside more familiar forms of political work in the era of LGBTQ+ liberation, such as marches to protest homosexual discrimination and campaigns to lower the age of homosexual consent (Avicoli Mecca 2009; Grey 1992; Weeks 1977; Weeks 2007). This tendency to split off the development of counselling, befriending and support groups geared towards assisting lesbians and gay men in working through 'homosexual problems' like social isolation, loneliness and shame speaks to a narrow characterisation of politics. I argue that, like the campaigning organisations that they were affiliated with, queer counselling and befriending sought to provide men and women who had suffered a lifetime of social exclusion access to sexual partnerships. Helping LGBTQ+ men and women achieve not only social acceptance, but also self-acceptance, was a necessary precursor to this.<sup>7</sup> This spoke to political movements that worked towards not only enlarging the scope of freedom for sexual minorities but also fashioning people capable of participating fully in the emotional depths of sexual liberation. Although the political objectives of the counselling services that I discuss changed over time—from efforts aimed at social integration achieved via psychological and emotional health to forms of activism that sought to foster non-heteronormative 'queer' emotional experiences and communities—all commonly aimed to make psychological healing fundamental to LGBTQ+ political work.

This essay reveals crucial connections between counselling and the politics of sexual freedom, despite important changes in the focus of LGBTQ+ political movements over time. It challenges the notion that queer counselling and politics were separate areas of activity and argues that queer counselling initiatives were a central—although now overlooked—feature of LGBTQ+ liberation. Specifically, they provided crucial space for cultivating the emotions and relationship styles that were at the heart of a projected 'healthy' liberated queer subjectivity. In counselling encounters sexual minorities tested out their feelings about their sexual desires and experiences and received validation and advice as to how they should proceed in meeting someone they might love.

Additionally, I argue that counselling and befriending—its intentionally less-skilled and expert-driven peer-support counterpart—helped create the political scripts and goals that shaped gay liberation. Just as consciousness-raising groups provided a language and set of demands for feminists to rally around, counselling and befriending services focused on identifying the harm caused by sexual stigma and social alienation. By 1966, on the eve of decriminalisation, it was widely known that public knowledge of one's homosexuality could cost one one's job, one's family and one's ability to find housing, however the effects of loneliness and despair were less commonly grappled with. It is in this register—the experience of suffering—that LGBTQ+ liberation politics would take shape in the wake of criminal law reform. It was the less precisely visible everyday aspects of discrimination—those that could not be resolved through changes in the law—that queer counselling services helped to illuminate and politicise.

## 1960S SEXUAL LAW REFORM AND THE PERSISTENCE OF STIGMA

Although there had been a five-fold increase in arrests for homosexual behaviour between 1939 and 1954, a movement to legalise homosexual sex was largely non-existent in the decade following World War II (Weeks 1977).<sup>8</sup> The 1885 Labouchere

Amendment, which had expanded the range of homosexual crimes to include all forms of intimacy in public and private, was occasionally raised in the press and parliament as wrong-headed and frequently exploited for more harmful criminal purposes, notably blackmail. In response the Home Secretary, Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, appointed a departmental committee in August 1954 to investigate whether the criminalisation of homosexual behaviour and public solicitation of prostitution interfered with citizens' right to personal freedom. The Committee, headed by John Wolfenden, Vice-Chancellor of Reading University, equally explored both issues, however it was questions surrounding the just treatment of homosexuality that ended up at the forefront of public discussion (Mort 1999; Waters 2012).

When the Wolfenden Committee's report was published in 1957, it sold 5000 copies within hours and ignited public conversation over the decriminalisation of homosexual acts. However, it was not until the mid-1960s that Britain's members of parliament would show significant support for removing criminal penalties attached to homosexuality. When parliament overwhelmingly voted in favour of passing a Sexual Offences Bill that would decriminalise homosexual acts in July 1967, it was to support citizens' right to privacy rather than a call for sexual liberation. In his final speech to the House of Lords, Lord Arran, the Bill's sponsor, noted that a change in the law should not be seen as indicating social acceptance:

Homosexuals must continue to remember that while there may be nothing bad in being a homosexual, there is certainly nothing good. Lest the opponents of the Bill think that a new freedom, a new privileged class, has been created, let me remind them that no amount of legislation will prevent homosexuals from being the subject of dislike and derision or at best of pity (Grey 1992, 125–6).

Indeed, the most prominent reasons for favouring homosexual law reform in the mid-1960s stemmed from concerns about blackmail and police 'witch hunts' (Irvine 1964; Ryan 1965; Wollheim 1963).

The Act itself also had severe limitations. Historian Jeffrey Weeks notes that it was 'hardly a trumpet-call to freedom' (Weeks 1977, 176). Not only did it exclude Scotland and Northern Ireland and not apply to the army and navy, but it introduced harsher penalties for sex with underage men ('minors' were identified as under-21) and public solicitation. This resulted in even more policing and a rise in prosecutions for homosexual offences. In addition, the Sexual Offences Act did not alter the public view of homosexuals as promiscuous, often predatory, and a threat to the family.

The Act's defence of privacy was also woefully ineffective in overturning social and sexual stigma. The meaning of 'in private' was highly restrictive. It indicated not only spaces that were shielded from public view—such as the private residence of a property owner—but one where a third party was unlikely to be present. 'Public' sex referred not only to sex that took place in a public lavatory, but any sex act that could *potentially* be seen by another person. The legal protections that the Act afforded to sex 'in private' excluded a wide range of intimate encounters: not only sex outdoors, but also sex in shared rented accommodations as well as sex in a separate room of a private residence where a social gathering was taking place.

More importantly, emphasising the 'private' status of sex did not shield it from post-WWII heteronormative values, especially at a moment when heterosexual intimacy had become increasingly connected to aspirations for the public good. Birth control, marriage, child rearing and divorce were all publicly regulated at

this time: the government was deeply invested in heterosexual relations. Since homosexual sex was non-reproductive, it could be written off as non-threatening and relatively unimportant. It was for this reason that Lord Brabazon presented homosexuality as inconsequential in his passionate defence of decriminalisation in the House of Lords in 1957: 'These people are self-eliminating. They do not breed. They do very little harm if left to themselves' (HL Debate 1957).<sup>9</sup> Policy-making advocates of decriminalisation presented homosexual sex as having no real or lasting impact (negative or positive) on broader society.

Following the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in 1967, 'homophile' activists shifted their focus more centrally onto sexual stigma and its damaging effects on sexual minorities. Several years before decriminalisation had even occurred, homosexual law reformers had launched a counselling service to help gay men 'adjust' to their sexual orientation and form meaningful relationships. It quickly came to service the needs of a much wider range of LGBTQ+ people, and not only those whose sexuality was explicitly criminalised. Although sexual law reformers would continue to defend citizens' right to sexual privacy after 1967, they saw greater urgency in ensuring that LGBTQ+ people's private sexual and relationship choices were as publicly valued as those made by married monogamous child-producing heterosexuals.

## EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF SEXUAL REFORM: COUNSELLING SEXUAL MINORITIES

Concern for the psychological impact of queer social repression and exclusion developed within the context of the homosexual law reform movement. Despite the clear need for an organised lobby with a respectable public face to urge on the government's consideration of the Wolfenden proposals, legal reform was only ever one—and, to many involved, narrow—objective of the sexual reform movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Immediately following the creation of the HLRS in May 1958, the group launched a registered charity that was devoted to the longer-term goals of reform: overturning the stigma attached to homosexuality and promoting the psychological health of criminalised homosexual men.<sup>10</sup> It was named the Albany Trust after the Piccadilly residence of JB Priestley and Jacquetta Hawkes (The Albany), the location of the HLRS' early meetings.

Homosexual men's mental health struggles were highlighted as a priority because, as early HLRS member Antony Grey explained, 'the present British laws against male homosexual behaviour' were 'responsible for a great deal of neurosis and some severe mental illness' (Grey 1997, 75). Grey noted that psychological 'difficulties' resulted 'primarily from fear and a degree of repression which makes sex a problem that is impossible for the homosexual individual to solve with peace of mind' (Grey 1997, 75). For this reason, members of the HLRS and Albany Trust believed that a movement aimed at homosexual equality needed to address not only the legal aspects of homosexual repression, but the psychological outcomes of that repression as well.

Members of the Trust did not originally set out to create a counselling service. This happened in response to many service users' expressed need for a venue where they could openly communicate their emotional pain, uncertainties and desires for a different kind of life. The Trust had initially been a referral service for physicians, lawyers and psychiatrists sympathetic to the needs of people with same-sex sexual desire. Yet their office quickly became,



the constant destination of a stream of requests for help. Many of these were for professional help or for advice on treatment. Some were from poor, wretched people who felt they had come to the bitter end, and were contemplating suicide. Others simply wanted someone to talk to, who would listen unrepvingly to their tale of woe (Albany Trust 1963-64b).

By 1963, in response to steady demand for psychiatric help, the Trust had begun to offer non-directive counselling in-house on an ad hoc basis to help homosexuals 'adjust' to their sexual orientation.<sup>11</sup>

The Trust's approach to counselling deliberately departed from the aversion therapies that had become popular in the decades following WWII (Dickinson 2015). Rather than viewing conversion to heterosexuality as a solution for symptoms of depression and suicidal despair, the Trust offered clients 'constructive adjustment in the face of social and legal problems rather than "cure"' (Grey 1992, 65). This approach to the 'treatment of homosexuality' was explicitly aimed at 'better adjustment to [clients'] innate homosexuality' (Grey 1992, 65). Demand for counselling was between 100 and 150 clients per year until 1967, when—following the addition of a full-time social worker to the staff alongside the partial decriminalisation of homosexual behaviour—client numbers shot up to over 500 (Grey 1971). Most of these new clients were described as requiring 'help in accepting their own sexuality, help fitting in to a predominantly heterosexually orientated society, help in meeting other homosexuals under normal circumstances, help to fight loneliness' (Grey 1966-1977). The Albany Trust put conventional expert-oriented counselling to unconventional use in directing it towards fostering homosexual clients' self-acceptance and capacity for both social integration and more 'normal' homosexual romantic relationships.

The historical relationship between psychiatry and same-sex desire is fraught and complex, extending far beyond the growing use of aversion therapies in the post-WWII decades. The term 'homosexual' first emerged in the latter decades of the nineteenth century as a psychiatric diagnosis, and its associations with mental disorder—despite the challenge this presented to contemporary associations between homosexuality and sin—opened new possibilities for medical surveillance, classification and forcible 'cure'. Despite this, historians of sexuality have also shown the liberatory potential of sexual diagnoses, revealing how they were, as early as the late nineteenth century, embraced and revised by predominantly middle-class, white, male homosexuals seeking greater public visibility and social acceptance (Minton 2002; Oosterhuis 2000). The Albany Trust's support for psychological treatments that deviated from a disease framework for understanding homosexuality was not new. The Wolfenden Report, which had argued against straightforwardly accepting the mainstream medical view of homosexuality as a mental disorder, still included extensive discussion of 'therapeutic measures'. Doubtful of the efficacy of 'converting' homosexuals to heterosexuality, the report instead addressed the benefits of treatment focused on encouraging greater sexual discretion and geared towards 'better adaptation to life in general' (Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution 1957, 109).

Taking their lead from the Wolfenden Committee, despite their complete refusal of homosexuality's innate connections to pathology, the Trust's leadership saw 'treatment' as playing an essential role in bringing about sexual equality. Focusing less on encouraging discretion (as the Wolfenden Committee had suggested), and instead on helping homosexuals 'come to terms with' their sexuality, Albany Trust leadership approached

counselling as a promising support towards creating emotionally well-adjusted sexual subjects. The therapeutic encounter was meant to help clients develop language to express the invalidating pain caused by social injustice, and, in the process, create a more positive view of homosexuality with a view to successful integration in a more sexually evolved society. Trust leadership did not envision a positive future in queer subcultural communities. Grey saw this as working against large-scale change in British cultural attitudes to sexual diversity.

Alongside the Trust's commitment to social integration, its vision of sexual 'adjustment' was not only uncritical towards heteronormative sexual values—such as monogamy, lifelong marriage and shared emotional intimacy—but actively celebrated them. Promiscuity was associated with psychological ill-health, in addition to what Grey described as 'disagreeable' (gender-crossing) personal features, such as 'affectation of manner and dress' (Albany Trust 1963-64a). Grey argued that none of these ostensibly 'deviant' behaviours were inherent to homosexuality itself, but were derived from homosexuals' 'non-acceptance, and often positive rejection, by society', which caused them to 'rebel' (Albany Trust 1963-64a). Grey did not challenge common male homosexual stereotypes, but instead explained them as socially induced and, therefore, capable of being changed. Albany Trust leadership did not invent this implied schism between 'respectable' and more 'deviant' expressions of homosexuality. As Matt Houlbrook and Chris Waters have shown, British literary, autobiographical and sociological publications in the 1950s supported a model of middle-class monogamous gay male respectability that was strategically positioned as distinct from 'degenerate' effeminate, working-class and promiscuous queer groups who, it was argued, were more justifiably aligned with mental 'pathology' (Houlbrook 2005; Houlbrook and Waters 2006).

For Grey and others at the Albany Trust, sexual 'adjustment' relied on collaboration with trained experts. The style of counselling that they advocated and eventually practised, particularly following the inclusion of an experienced social worker on staff from 1967 onwards, was non-directive and client-centred. Given that treatment of homosexuality had long been cornered by psychiatric professionals, it made sense that counselling aimed at sexual minorities in the 1960s was more explicitly expert-oriented than the sexual and marriage counselling services offered by volunteer lay counsellors through the National Marriage Guidance Council (NMGC). According to David Mace's 1948 handbook on marriage counselling, the ability to counsel young married couples on sexual matters relied more on personal experience with successful marriage than specialised training and skills (Mace 1948). At the Trust, however, any appeal to shared experience was far more complicated. Fear of criminal associations and a desire to maintain sexual respectability meant that the Trust's public face was almost exclusively heterosexual and married. Aside from Grey, counsellors working with sexual minorities both with and alongside the Trust tended not to share their clients' experiences as a sexual minority.

Despite the Albany Trust's and the NMGC's differing commitments to expertise in counselling, the Trust's counselling goals quickly came to resemble those of marriage counsellors in important ways. Counsellors wanted to help their clients become capable of sustaining a monogamous intimate relationship (Chettiar 2016).<sup>12</sup> Antony Grey—who was himself happily partnered from 1958 until his death in 2010—saw relationship stability as not only 'desirable in itself' because it led to happiness, but as also playing a key role in overturning damaging homosexual stereotypes of 'promiscuity, importuning and public indecency' (Grey 1997, 78). In counselling sessions, clients were informed

of the social causes behind their inability to establish a lasting relationship. They were also alerted to the important contribution that they could make by living a respectable life in overturning negative public perceptions of homosexuality.<sup>13</sup>

The Trust's goal of making monogamous relationships possible was shared by many of the people that it served. Many who contacted the Trust emphasised their despair as connected to the absence of a stable long-term partnership. For example, a young man in Menorca, Spain, wrote to the Trust in June 1966, requesting help in meeting someone with whom he might become romantically involved:<sup>14</sup>

As for myself I am feeling *extremely* frustrated and becoming more so... I feel empty, lonely, and long for a deep emotional attachment to someone like myself (my age) with whom to share my life and home. I want to feel needed and to need in return (Albany Trust 1966).

Similar expressions of sad longing were present in letters from gay men and lesbians in relationships who were concerned about their relationship's fragility given the enormous pressures that came with being a sexual outsider. In 1968, Grey became an ongoing counsellor to Jonathan, who worried that his partner Michael, who wanted to date other men, was going to leave him.<sup>15</sup> Other clients spoke of suffering connected to bisexuality, infidelity and indecision surrounding partner preference. A young woman, who had been married to a man with 'homosexual tendencies' for 11 years underwent several counselling sessions with Grey hoping to 'preserve homelife both for the sake of her husband and her children' (Grey 1966–1977). Her husband—who was also seen by Grey—similarly confessed he 'still had loving feelings' despite his 'deep emotional involvement homosexually' (Grey 1966–1977). Although Grey noted that cases of bisexuality and non-monogamy were more difficult to help resolve, it was clients, not Trust counsellors, who often led the process of identifying the romantic relationship that worked best for everyone (husband, wife, children and potential new partner).

In 1967, the Trust experienced a post-reform jump in the demand for counselling. On his return from a 1968 trip to the USA to meet with gay rights organisations, Grey found the Albany Trust's office,

just as fraught as it had been when the parliamentary campaign was reaching its climax. It became even more so; now homosexual people felt there was a freer climate in which to seek help for their social and emotional difficulties, their first chosen port of call was the Albany Trust (Grey 1992, 147).

The demand for help, he noted, 'was nationwide and in the first twelve months after law reform the annual number of people approaching the Trust more than doubled and continued to climb' (Grey 1992, 147). The number of clients receiving counselling at the Trust rose to over 2000 in 1970, a twenty-fold increase in comparison to the early 1960s (Albany Trust 1976). Not only were more people requesting emotional assistance in the wake of reform, but the Trust's clients' sexual problems had become more diverse. In addition to gay men, bisexuals and lesbians, 'transvestites' and 'transsexuals' were increasingly recipients of the Trust's work after 1965. The precise reasons behind this development were not speculated on in the Trust's archived records—there was, however, satisfaction expressed that their work had turned out to have wider than anticipated application and appeal. In the Trust's broadening range of clients, we see the beginnings of an incipient LGBTQ+ identity. What tied the Trust's diverse client body together as a group was the belief that

they shared a common emotional experience stemming from stigma attached to sexual *and* gender nonconformity.

Located as it was on the front line of help-related referrals and counselling for sexual minorities, at the Albany Trust confusion, isolation, shame and despair quickly became the basis for understanding the urgent need for legal reform. The goal of making 'deep, mature' relationships possible was not only important for individual happiness. It also had an important political purpose in the pursuit of equality, working against public perceptions of promiscuity and prostitution, and preparing LGBTQ+ people for participation in the world of monogamous sexuality in the post-reform era. Much more was at stake than the immediate despair of large numbers of sexual minorities. In counselling, Grey saw the possibility of full social inclusion: LGBTQ+ people and heterosexuals alike would share equally in the promises of stable intimacy.

This commitment to queer respectability and mental health in the form of monogamous relationality would change in the early 1970s with the post-Stonewall emergence of a gay liberation movement in Britain. As the next section will show, queer counselling (and now additionally allied peer-support 'befriending' services) became less committed to a goal of romantic monogamy and more interested in fostering queer relationality writ large.

## QUEER COUNSELING AND THE PURSUIT OF INTIMACY IN 1970S BRITAIN

The Albany Trust's psychological health initiatives had focused on ending queer people's social alienation and feelings of despair. According to surveys investigating the 'social needs' and relationship experiences of gay men and lesbians conducted over months spanning 1969–1970—more than 2 years after the 1967 Sexual Offences Act had been passed—the vast majority of the 2700 respondents continued to suffer from social isolation (Albany Trust 1969–79c). The legality of homosexual relations in private between adults had not amounted to full social equality or anything close to 'liberation'. Not only did police arrests continue to rise, a dramatic indication of a lack of inclusion at the local level, but social attitudes remained largely unchanged.

Despite significant increases in the number of people approaching the Albany Trust in the years following the 1967 Act, sharing their ongoing and 'unmanageable feelings of guilt' and experiences of 'fear, ostracism, and bigotry', the Trust leadership decided in 1970 that they would no longer take on more counselling cases themselves (Albany Trust 1968a). Counselling individuals in order to cultivate queer respectability was seen as less immediately effective in tackling sexual stigma than large-scale research into the needs of Britain's sexual minority population. Research, ideally organised through a well-funded British Sex Research Institute, was seen as more promising in directing policy change and supporting improvements in social services for LGBTQ+ people.<sup>16</sup> The Trust thus directed would-be clients towards those services that had been providing counselling for decades, partnering with suicide prevention, marriage counselling and sexual health organisations like the Samaritans, the NMGC and the Family Planning Association (Albany Trust 1968–70b). This outsourcing of counselling referrals remained in place until October 1974, when a yearly grant of £10 000 began to be received from the Voluntary Services Unit, enabling the Trust to hire additional staff and become more directly involved in providing front-line help.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the Trust's decreased involvement in counselling in the early 1970s, the number of LGBTQ+ people receiving counselling rose considerably. This coincided with the high point of

gay liberation in Britain. Following the Stonewall riots in New York City in the summer of 1969 and launching of the GLF in the USA in July 1969 and in the UK in October 1970, the CHE created Friend in May 1971 as a queer counselling and befriending service.<sup>18</sup> Given the record number of gay and lesbian adults and young people empowered to ‘come out’—encouraged by positive political associations with openness and self-acceptance—and lack of services to help sexual minorities cope with their internalised homophobia, Friend saw itself as ‘well placed to help with these problems’ (Friend 1976-1979c). They placed high value on befrienders being open about their sexuality since they could demonstrate ‘from personal experience it’s possible to lead a full, happy and productive life’:

We can help people not only with our counselling skills, but also by example. By being openly gay, we’re proof that gays don’t have to conform to the unhappy, neurotic stereotypes invented for us by others (Friend 1976-1979c).

Providing real living examples of positive queer experience was central to the counselling and befriending experience at Friend. Friend thus rejected the need for training in specialised expert-driven counselling techniques, which were promoted by the Albany Trust even more resolutely in the 1970s. Adopting a thoroughly egalitarian approach to providing ‘help’, volunteer befriender training at Friend focused on close listening, sharing personal experience and offering friendship when appropriate. Friend began its work in May 1971 with only a couple of dozen befrienders, all of whom were openly homosexual. This was a deliberate choice that set Friend apart from earlier support provided by Albany Trust counsellors, whose claims to expertise relied on training in social work rather than the lived experience of a sexual minority. It soon became evident that the demand for befriending services provided for LGBTQ+ people by LGBTQ+ people was much greater than anticipated. By November 1972, the London office had brought in an experienced counsellor to assess client needs and London Friend was open five nights a week for callers to telephone in (Friend 1971-1979a). By early 1973, Friend had become an independent national organisation—relaunched as separate from the CHE—with seven local groups and approximately 50 consultants and befrienders. By 1973, Friend’s client base had expanded significantly beyond the expected ‘vast mass of’ lesbians and gay men who were not ‘conversant with the gay scene’ to include married bisexuals, older people, ‘transvestites’ and ‘transsexuals’ (Friend 1976-1979c).

Friend was not the only service aiming to meet the needs of the self-confessedly lonely queer person. The counselling scene both expanded and transformed during the first half of the 1970s as each LGBTQ+ organisation developed a counselling arm. Queer counselling services launched during these years were linked to the broader goal of LGBTQ+ liberation. The clearest example of this was Icebreakers, whose mission was to provide help by using only proudly queer-identified activists: healing was understood to take place within the context of shared experience. When Icebreakers was first launched by the GLF in 1973, homosexuality had yet to be removed as a psychiatric condition from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.<sup>19</sup> Icebreakers’ roots lay in the GLF’s Counter-Psychiatry group, and its objective was not only to provide emotional support to those who suffered from queer discrimination, but to also counter the long history of gay and lesbian oppression that psychiatrists had both directly and indirectly supported and enacted. Merging their Marxist-inspired call for

large-scale structural change with an antipsychiatric imperative to purge capitalist structures of psychiatrically legitimated power imbalances, Icebreakers’ agenda was political to its core. Taking their lead from the feminist cry ‘the personal is political’, they similarly organised support groups as consciousness-raising cells.

Although not nearly as outspoken against the psychiatric and allied professions as Icebreakers, Friend (whose origins lay in the more politically moderate CHE) was also deliberately operated by openly gay, lesbian and trans befrienders who answered telephone calls, responded to letters and met with advice seekers in person. As at Icebreakers, the reasons for this were both psychological and political: befrienders were meant to serve as positive examples of queer self-acceptance, offering evidence of eventual psychological relief, at the same time as befrienders encouraged clients to become active participants in queer organisations and subcultural communities. Even after Friend was relaunched as an independent organisation in 1972, it continued to receive most of its requests for help through CHE referrals and, in turn, frequently encouraged clients to join CHE social groups as a means for resolving their emotional problems.

The massive growth in counselling, befriending and self-help support services at the height of gay liberation was thus not separate from gay liberation politics but reflected the view that the resolution of sexual minorities’ emotional problems was profoundly connected to the advancement of emancipatory sexual politics in the 1970s. This story has, however, been largely relegated to the margins of histories of 1970s queer political radicalism. Jeffrey Weeks refers to the existence of early support groups as ‘conservative and tiny’, yet ‘an important first step’ (Weeks 1977, 180). Weeks is far from idiosyncratic in bracketing off confessional pro-queer speech within political spaces like pride marches, demonstrations against anti-gay factions like the Christian Festival of Light, and government lobbying, from confession in the intimate space of the counselling or befriending encounter. In the case of the former, the purpose of pro-queer speech was to challenge and transform public opinion. Counselling services were, instead, ostensibly meant to help individuals accept and adjust to the life that they—privately—wanted to live.

An alternative view to this—and one that acknowledges the political objectives of queer counselling and befriending services—disrupts assumptions of hard and fast distinctions between public and private. Intimate relationality was, for these queer befrienders, counsellors and many clients, itself a political act and foundation for political community. Queer studies scholars such as Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, Lee Edelman and Deborah Nelson have shown that constructions of private life have been deeply informed by needs that might more typically be understood as quintessentially public: state actors, participation in market activities and cultural values have played key roles in producing its boundaries (Berlant and Warner 2000; Edelman 2004; Nelson 2002). They have also shown that the conventions of intimacy—its associations with emotional depth, sharing and the transcendence of individual boundaries in the twentieth-century West—are themselves the outcome of collective processes of imagination and are embedded in power relationships. What has been less explored, however, is how the very experience of intimate relationality has itself functioned as a mode of publicness. Against the Habermasian reading of the public sphere as governed by rationality, Berlant points out that intimate attachments ‘make people public, producing transpersonal identities and subjectivities’ (Berlant 2000, 2).

Intimacy is thus not merely public because public entities like the state and market invest it with meaning and value. It became public within the context of queer counselling and befriending



services because it provided a means for creating what were seen as liberating, humane and wholly egalitarian social alternatives. As Berlant puts it, 'intimacy builds worlds'—worlds that exclude some populations to cement others (where intimacy is seen as only possible in a heteronormative space like the nuclear family) and worlds that foreground inclusion (where intimacy becomes the means for producing subcultural communities as well as more inclusive national and transnational communities, a bridge that connects all worlds). The version of intimate relationality that was being cultivated at queer counselling and befriending sites did not hinge on an ideal of married child-producing monogamy. The production of children was not the intended outcome of queer intimacy; yet durable relationships—romantic, friendship, community—were.

Counselling and befriending services were important sites of cultural initiation into an alternative, emotionally oriented queer public. Counsellors and befrienders' written responses to advice seekers typically began by attempting to create a sense of shared emotional experience. Phrases like 'many people in your situation feel this way' and 'I used to feel as you do you now' preceded befrienders' advice, addressing letter writers' feelings of isolation (Friend 1971-1979a). Correspondence very often continued back and forth for several weeks, months, even years, before the advice seeker became either willing or able (such as when the person was writing from prison), to meet face-to-face and even participate in one of Friend's weekly social gatherings.

A sense of common hardship set the initial tone of communications and provided the befriender with the opportunity to model the longer-term emotional purpose of the advice seeker's current suffering: after overcoming their own alienation, they now felt optimistic and open to the many opportunities that queer social life had made possible. Befrienders—often themselves having once been on the other end of Friend correspondence—demonstrated a self-accepting, friendly and open disposition as a positive outcome of establishing contact with a queer self-help organisation like Friend. Some would immediately share their own experiences of coming out and the months that followed—many now had queer flatmates, a network of close friends, and had formed one or more fulfilling romantic relationships.

Requests for advice were most often framed within a larger narrative of loneliness and shame. Although letter writers were typically very open about their emotional hardships—resulting not only from their stigmatised sexual desires, but often also from age, socioeconomic factors, and differing racial and cultural backgrounds that led them to experience exclusion within the queer social scene—the act of putting these into words was fraught with uncertainty. Correspondents described their struggle to find the words that best described their current situation, the events that were most relevant to mention, and the emotions that felt most suitable to convey. The act of writing was not infrequently mentioned in letters as a safe first step towards forming connections with other queer people and less challenging for many than either calling to speak to another queer person over the phone or meeting in person. Letters were typically read by befrienders as communicating deep sadness, which was often intended, but this was commented on even when the advice seeker was contacting Friend about practical issues, such as questions about housing or employment opportunities. Even in these cases, befrienders would invite deeper confession; their responses would open with sentences that reflected difficult emotions back to the letter writer, such as, 'You sound very lonely and I know that it can be difficult to reach out for help' (Friend 1971-1979a).

Advice seekers who wrote to Friend saw the possibility of friendship as very seductive. Replies to their first round of correspondence most often expressed relief at having finally encountered the mutual understanding that might only be found in communication with someone with similarly painful experiences. The goal of communication with queer counselling and befriending services was, in many ways, mutually negotiated and agreed upon. Letters written to Friend shared many similarities, and yet whatever the problem and ideal outcome imagined, there was seldom a clear road map to its resolution. These included requests for advice on how to go about meeting people with whom one might form a romantic connection outside of the club scene, questions about how to find housing when one was openly queer, as well as inquiries relating to intimacy challenges, including how one might go about negotiating a significant age difference, divergences in class backgrounds and varying levels of sexual experience. Many exchanges showed both advice seeker and befriender working together to arrive at a solution.

Although Friend's correspondence showed a strong commitment to helping self-confessedly lonely correspondents establish intimate connections with others, unlike at the Albany Trust the focus was not always on forming monogamous partnerships. For example, when a young couple, David and Gordon, approached Friend asking for advice about moving in together (from finding a landlord willing to rent to a same-sex couple to managing changing relationship dynamics), Friend counsellor Peter advised the men to exercise caution in their decision as the intensity of cohabitation often destroyed rather than stabilised intimacy. He instructed them not to 'ape heterosexuality' and invest all their emotional needs in their relationship:

lots of people assume that all their needs (to give and take) can be fulfilled by one person and this is very rarely true and more particularly with same sex partners. Most of us need a network of relationships (I don't necessarily mean sexual of course) to be fulfilled. Living together of course can be a joyful experience, so long as it isn't an effort to 'ape' heterosexuality, but many people find it too heavy and often say that it has shortened their relationship, because it was too demanding (Friend 1976-1979b).

Advice like this was not exclusively given to men. Lesbian befrienders similarly affirmed the importance of 'a network of relationships' for personal fulfilment. When, for example, an anonymous woman approached Friend expressing shame at carrying on sexual relationships with multiple female friends, her befriender advised her to abandon the notion that non-monogamous sex was somehow wrong. If anything, 'making love certainly enrich[ed] a friendship':

there is nothing to be ashamed of... if you can go further than the majority of women and include physical love-making in your relationships with other women, then the better for you (and the sizeable minority of women sharing this gift with you)... the more intimate and exciting are the possibilities of such relationship (Friend 1980-1982).

It was a commitment to intimate relationality—a capacity to form close relationships and friendships—rather than an appeal to a specific kind of relationship (monogamous, child-producing) that was actively promoted and cultivated at Friend.

Although Friend correspondence typically functioned as a consciously upbeat introduction to a welcoming queer community, with invitations to meet in person or attend social groups usually extended, there were notable exceptions. For example, Mark, who wrote to Friend complaining of his inability to form emotional connections with his sexual partners, was counselled

to abandon his preoccupation with physical appearance. In response to confessing to being drawn exclusively to men of a specific physical type—handsome, hairy and well-endowed—his befriender pointed out that he seemed to be, ‘getting tired of pursuing such men and want something more—perhaps someone you can like and love as a person and not just as a body’ (Friend 1980–1982). He then advised Mark to focus on building emotional connections with his sexual partners and, to this end, ‘try for a while to not consider only handsome, hairy men and try to find a situation where you can meet different sorts of people, not only those who instantly appeal to you sexually’ (Friend 1980–1982).

Not only were advice seekers dissuaded from pursuing fleeting physical encounters, but correspondents with certain fetishes were offered little help in satisfying their desires. For example, in the autumn of 1979, Friend counsellor Philip advised a middle-aged advice seeker against indulging in his fantasy of being ‘thrashed’ by an older man. His correspondent, George, described as around 50, divorced for 10 years, and ‘possibly homosexual’, had stated that he had a ‘deep-seated longing’ to show himself ‘freely to an old man wearing my long pants’ and ‘to receive a thrashing from him’ (Friend 1971–1979a). He believed that this would ‘cure’ him of ‘this ridiculous desire which has been with me for some time’ (Friend 1971–1979a). George sent several letters to Friend asking for help finding a man who might discreetly help him live out his fantasy. He explained that his uncle had assumed this role on several occasions, however, he had recently become unwilling and threatened to expose George to his mother if he did not stop asking.

In response to George’s initial letter requesting help with introductions, befriender Richard had advised that he put a personal advertisement in *Gay Times* describing the person that he hoped to meet: over 70, gray-haired or bald, and ‘highly trustworthy’. When no one responded to his ad, George wrote back to again ask for help. At this point, Philip let George know that there was nothing that Friend could do for him:

I cannot see that I can help you very much, if you really want to realise your ambition to be thrashed by an old man while you are wearing long pants. You seem to feel that this will ‘cure’ you. But I cannot see why this should be the case... There are lots of people around who have strong wishes to engage in unusual activities associated with sexual feelings. While it is the case that the feelings can diminish over time, and the activity even be socialized, as with the organisations for transvestites and rubber lovers, this probably happens because such people have ample opportunities to satisfy their needs. You, however, crave one and only one experience (Friend 1971–1979a).

Philip was bothered not by the fact that George’s request was ‘unusual’ in and of itself, but that its rarity likely precluded him from forming connections with similarly oriented individuals. Unlike people with latex fetishes, who were increasingly visible in the queer social world, George’s fetish was seen as isolating him from others. The Friend counsellor thus responded negatively to George’s insinuation that he himself might be willing to accommodate his needs:

I am not old enough to perform the rite. And even if I were I would be unlikely to acquiesce—at least if you expected to be freed from your wish thereafter. What I would have done, had we met, would have been to discuss with you quite what your desire was, how you felt about it, and whether you wanted to be free of it. And my ‘cure’ would not have entailed encouraging you to enact it (Friend 1971–1979a).

In communications between George and Philip, unlike most Friend correspondence, there was a clear lack of support for the advice seeker realising their desires. Even in exchanges with self-identified paedophiles—however controversial their sexual interest—befrienders showed compassion in response to descriptions of deep loneliness and repeated failed attempts at establishing lasting love relationships (Friend 1971–1979a). In response to longing for romantic relationships—a distinctive marker of a ‘good’ queer—befrienders communicated understanding and empathy.

The emotional tone of correspondence was an important feature of initiation into a specifically queer culture. Scholarship by David Halperin on gay male cultural initiation brings attention to the acculturation process at work in producing gay male subjectivity. Halperin describes homosexual subjectivity as involving far more than desire for homosexual sex. It emerges out of a range of social and emotional practices cordoning off mainstream gay male culture, practices that produce, ‘not only identification but disidentification’ (Halperin 2012, 5–6). On this account, being gay or ‘queer’ ‘refers not just to something you are, but also to something you do’ (Halperin 2012, 13). Like many other social practices and demonstrations of cultural knowledge, one can do this well or badly: performing a high level of fluency, missing the mark or failing to even try. Gay cultural initiation teaches self-identified gay men how to properly perform gayness. While the subject of Halperin’s book focuses on the music, theatre and cinema that has been appropriated and re-interpreted as quintessentially ‘gay’—and perhaps seemingly far from the work of counselling—his aim, namely to bring our attention to gay male *cultural* initiation, is highly relevant. The counselling and allied peer-support initiatives that this essay examines played an important role in fashioning a queer subjectivity that was embedded in lasting intimate relationships. Becoming a well-adjusted sexual minority far exceeded issues of desire and sexual practice. It involved social practices meant to end emotional alienation. Making peace with one’s sexuality and becoming a ‘good’ queer meant becoming part of a queer community and embedded in a network of meaningful queer relationships.

At Friend, ‘good’ queer correspondents communicated loneliness but not self-indulgently or self-pityingly. They communicated awareness that their isolation was connected to an absence of meaningful connections. For example, the tone of Michael’s letters, a young man in prison for sexual offences, was discussed among Friend volunteers as problematically ‘self-indulgent and demanding’. In response, intimate one-on-one (as opposed to official business) correspondence was discontinued. As one befriender, who had been ‘careful to strike a balance between a friendly, yet reserved tone’, put it:

He obviously feels very lonely, but I have become increasingly concerned about the tone of his replies; I’ve found them increasingly self-indulgent and demanding. I have explained that ‘Friend’ is made up of part-time volunteers, but it seems that he *expects* to be visited periodically and sent up-to-date copies of *Gay News* etc. whilst in Broadmoor and a full-time rehabilitation service upon his forthcoming release. He seems to think that we can take all the effort and difficulty out of his life... In the circumstances I feel that it would not be wise to continue correspondence with [Michael] on a one-to-one basis (Friend 1971–1979a).

Other correspondents expressed concern that befrienders might see them as self-pitying and self-centred (Friend 1980–1982). Toby, an agoraphobic man who identified as homosexual, complained of the lack of sincere relationships to be found in



'facilities for gays in London' (a category in which he included Icebreakers, the CHE and Gay Switchboard). He wondered why he had been unable to experience anything more than casual sexual encounters, and if there was something especially off-putting about him: 'I hope that this letter doesn't make me sound to be full of self-pity... I've been let down and been in contact with those who seem to care only for their own personal pleasure' (Friend 1980-1982). Others worried about the damage that homosexual discrimination had done to their capacity for authentic human connection: 'I really don't know how much damage emotional repression does to a person but judging by the periodic explosions I have it surely can't be too beneficial!' (Friend 1980-1982). This expression of self-doubt elicited a sympathetic response from a befriender: 'let me first of all express my total sympathy with your troubled state of mind... one's sexuality is tied up with so many other facets of individuality that a repression of one's sexuality must also affect much of what makes up our relationship with the world' (Friend 1980-1982). The solution to correspondents' complaints was to join queer social organisations:

I am sorry to read that you have been finding yourself increasingly isolated and unhappy of late. Your letter makes it clear that you see the difficulties and strains of your life and emotional needs very clearly... But our social groups do offer you still the only alternative to the dispiriting round of soulless discos of which you speak, and a very real forum for friendly, long term links with other gays, of all ages (Friend 1980-1982).

This was suggested so often that some correspondents explicitly asked not to be given the advice that they should join a club or other LGBTQ+ organisation:

I have tried all the usual 'remedies' such as joining clubs, societies, evening classes and the like in an endeavor to force some interest into my life, but with no avail... I have no idea what else I can do; perhaps you could suggest some course of action or perhaps put me in touch with someone with similar problems whom I might contact, but please, no 'gay' societies or organisations (Friend 1971-1979a).

Counsellors and befrienders' communication modelled the candid intimacy that they hoped to foster. Private details of personal pain were met with sympathy and expressions of hope that suffering would be temporary. Their proposed solutions—participation in gay social organisations and events, meet-ups through Friend, face-to-face meetings with counsellors, a more optimistic attitude—were centred on initiating their correspondents into a particular version of the queer social world: one dominated not by discos and casual sexual encounters but by club meetings, friendship and sincere emotional encounters. Not only were these services meant to help heal emotional pain, but they were also presenting—and helping cultivate—a relational life for queer men and women.

## CONCLUSION: COUNSELLING FOR INTIMACY

During the same late-1970s moment that conversations about the disabling effects of LGBTQ+ people's isolation were happening at Friend, Antony Grey and Edward Shackleton, former diplomat and participant in the rise of Britain's evangelical right, were engaged in a heated debate. The key issue circulated around whether Shackleton and his colleagues at the Gables, a recently launched experiment in Christian sexual counselling, should represent their ministry to confused and struggling gay and lesbian people as 'counselling'. Questions surrounding both the ethics and effectiveness of guidance in counselling were at

the forefront of their impassioned exchange. Grey was adamant that counselling should be non-directive and serve to help clients make their own autonomous decisions. He appealed to standards set out by the Standing Conference for the Advancement of Counselling to defend his view. Shackleton disagreed and, appealing to the dictionary definition of the term, argued that 'giving counsel' was akin to giving advice. He believed that counselling needed to provide clients with direction on how to overcome same-sex sexual desire. Only this, he argued, would bring an end to their emotional suffering.

Far more was at stake in Grey and Shackleton's disagreement than deciding on the correct meaning of the term counselling. Grey consistently brought discussion—which unfolded over more than a dozen letters in 1978—back to the question of freedom in its many dimensions, moral, legal and political. He repeatedly emphasised that counsellors needed to allow their clients a 'full measure of freedom', and was adamant that there should be no interference with an individual's right to choose how they lived their lives. This was congruent with the Cold War origins of marriage counselling—David Mace had similarly emphasised client freedom as the cornerstone of marriage guidance work. Grey went so far as to liken Shackleton's assumption about the sinful nature of homosexuality that pervaded his work to the moral presumptions that animated authoritarian regimes. An ardent liberal, Grey defended the individual's right to choose as the core expression of a person's individuality. It was this commitment to radical non-judgement and respect for sexual freedom that had caused the Albany Trust to lose public funding following Thatcher's election in 1979, resulting from a scandal over the Trust's provision of counselling to known paedophiles.

Grey's claim that the non-directive counselling offered at the Albany Trust was value-free was perhaps not entirely accurate. As Grey himself discovered in the decades following the Albany Trust's founding, there was more to queer counselling than simply making clients capable of making choices about their sexual lives. Much more was required to undo the negative effects of sexual stigma than simply helping the client achieve greater self-awareness. Counselling aimed at sexual minorities in the 1960s and 1970s paid close attention to only some of the specificities surrounding the emotional pain described—that which related to the client's sexual experiences, interests and desires. Race, class, gender, ability and age were far less often addressed, and when they were, they were seen as factors accentuating the original problem, that is British society's intolerance towards queer sexualities.

Was there anything specifically 'queer' about the counselling and befriending that was directed at LGBTQ+ people in the 1960s and 1970s? Did their focus on healing the psychological effects of discrimination against sexual minorities cause them to operate differently than other counselling services? Definitions of counselling ranged in the mid-1970s, but, according to the Standing Conference for the Advancement of Counselling in 1975, tended to coalesce around the following three themes: counselling was understood to be a 'person-to-person form of communication marked by... subtle emotional understanding', it was 'centred on one or more problems of the client' and it was 'free from authoritarian judgements and coercive pressure by the counsellor' (Vaughan 1976, 14). As a mode of intimate communication between strangers aimed at resolving personal problems, counselling was meant to unmask painful parts of the client's life and invest these with new meaning. Bill Logan from Gay Switchboard has emphasised the peculiarly transformative intent of queer counselling as it was directed towards shifting the client's life story from a heteronormative narrative framing

to a queer one. To achieve this, the counsellor engages in 'queer listening', which Logan describes as marked by 'a special kind of curiosity':

We are especially interested in those elements of the story that do not fit within a compulsory heterosexuality. We listen to the heartache, we empathise with the sense of confusion our callers may be experiencing, we reflect back the grief they feel, but we also maintain a curiosity which seeks to make possible an expanded exploration of the gay element of the story (Logan 2002, 140).

Although Logan was trained in a conventional Rogerian non-directive client-centred approach, counsellor Christopher Behan points out that there was something distinctly new and different about the counselling style developed at Gay Switchboard: 'the description of the work on Switchboard as "Rogerian" does not sufficiently describe what I think is happening there. I think Bill's description of the work on the Switchboard as "queer listening" is more rich and experience-near'. Behan sums up the counselling that happens at Gay Switchboard as drawing on conventions in counselling, but as itself producing something new—a 'copying that originates' (Behan 2002, 163).

What precisely was being originated? Unlike many counselling agencies—whether the Samaritans or the NMGC—the services provided at the Albany Trust in the 1960s and organisations like Gay Switchboard and Friend in the 1970s actively sought to make counselling, and those who participated in it, agents for social change.<sup>20</sup> Through the meaning-giving agency of counselling services, the emotional suffering caused by internalised sexual stigma could become one possible foundation for a uniquely queer relational subjectivity. The proposed solutions to emotional pain centred on promoting new forms of relationality—LGBTQ+ community, unmarried coupling, romantic friendships. These rivalled monogamous marriage as the central, and (according to marriage counsellors) most important, relationship of adult life. Queer relationality would emerge out of internalised stigma and shame as the positive resolution to isolation and despair.

This essay has considered the important role that counselling and peer-support services attached to sexual law reform and gay liberation organisations played in cultivating models of queer relationality that were at once emotionally 'healthy' and politically useful. By the late 1960s at the Albany Trust, this was more closely focused on the cultivation of sexual minorities who were able to create and sustain committed monogamous relationships; by the mid-1970s at Friend, queer emotional well-being was more broadly connected to a vision of harmonious relationality that went far beyond monogamous intimacy. The possibility of engaging in intimate relationships (including close friendships with people with similar emotional experiences) was long in the making. Clients first needed to overcome the major struggles that many lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and trans people experienced—loneliness, social isolation and the potentially debilitating impact of stigma.

The queer subjectivities described in this essay were very much in process. The narratives developed reciprocally in written counselling and befriending exchanges revolved around the need for human connection, whether in the form of sex, romance, friendship, family or community. Epistolary encounters were directed towards making socially isolated queer men and women relational subjects. This was very different from simply helping people meet potential partners. This was a project of self-making. Counsellors and befrienders modelled a relational style that would help clients themselves make ostensibly better choices about their sexual conduct and their lives.

The immense value attributed to intimate relationships in the homosexual law reform and gay liberation movements was not a

foregone conclusion. This essay has explored how conventions and expectations surrounding private life were actively remade as fundamentally emotional and relational at a moment when privacy seemed to be slipping away. There was a reassertion among supporters of the Wolfenden proposals of the value of private individual choices at a moment when much that was quintessentially private (notably, heterosexual love, sex and family) had come to hold public value. In queer counselling initiatives we also see the rise of visible efforts to make same-sex intimacy equally seen as embodying the public value attached to heterosexual love.

In the 1970s, with the rise of an active gay liberation movement, queer counselling services worked to create a queer political community that was geared towards transforming Britain's exclusionary heteronormative social world into one humanely rooted in intimate friendships and romantic relationships. At these services, relational incapacity was reconceived as a pathological outcome of social stigma. A restored ability for intimacy was seen as central to both positive queer identity and liberating social change.

**Contributors** TC is the sole author of this paper.

**Funding** The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

**Competing interests** None declared.

**Patient and public involvement** Patients and/or the public were not involved in the design, or conduct, or reporting, or dissemination plans of this research.

**Patient consent for publication** Not applicable.

**Ethics approval** Not applicable.

**Provenance and peer review** Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

**Data availability statement** No data are available.

## NOTES

1. Arrests were largely of men charged with having sex with men under 21 years (considered minors) and men charged with having sex in public.
2. Although the organisations that this article examines were based in London, they succeeded via telephone and mail in reaching queer people throughout Britain who were seeking help. In-person advice seekers were also not always originally from London but had migrated there from various parts of Britain (as well as many other parts of the world).
3. The term 'homophile' refers to organisations that advocated on behalf of the civil rights and welfare of gay people, especially gay men, whose sexual relations were explicitly criminalised in England and Wales until 1967. Decriminalisation of homosexual acts occurred in Scotland in 1980 and in Northern Ireland in 1982. Lesbian sex was never made explicitly illegal in the UK, although it was equally—although in its own unique ways—highly stigmatised.
4. Unlike counselling, which involved some form of training (and counsellors came from diverse professional backgrounds in the 1960s and 1970s), befriending was intended to help sexual minorities to heal from social exclusion and internalised shame through sharing common experiences and forming friendship. No professional training was required to volunteer as a 'befriender'.
5. This article is based on the consultation of close to 1000 letters archived at the Hall-Carpenter Archives at the London School of Economics. This includes correspondence between pioneers of the counselling services examined (such as Antony Grey) and their supporters and correspondence between counsellors and those seeking counselling and advice.
6. A total of 301 939 calls had been received since 4 March 1974.
7. The queer populations that these services aimed to help consisted of gay and bisexual men and women as well as, from the mid-1960s onward, people identifying as 'transvestites' and 'transsexuals'. Sexuality (and gender presentation in the case of trans clients) was prioritised over other identity markers, including race, class, age and ability. In 1979, one befriender went so far as to tell a self-identified black lesbian that her racial background was not nearly as important to her emotional suffering as her sexual minority status. Friend (1976-1979b), 'Counselling Correspondence' HCA/Friend/3/3 (London: Hall-Carpenter Archives).
8. Weeks (1977), 158: 'In 1938 there were 134 cases of sodomy and bestiality known to the police in England and Wales, in 1952, 670, and in 1954, 1043. For indecent assault, the increase was from 822 cases in 1938 to 3305 in 1953, while for "gross indecency" (the Labouchere offence) the rise was from 316 in 1938 to 2322 in 1955'.

There was thus a seven-fold increase for 'gross indecency' in contrast to the four-fold increase in the number of sexual crimes that were not specifically homosexual in nature.

9. Lord Brabazon was not alone in stressing the lack of risk that queer people presented to the quality of Britain's population. For more discussion of this see Chettiar 2022, *The Intimate State: How Emotional Life Became Political in Welfare-State Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2022).
10. Although it was the support of Parliament that ultimately led to a change in the law surrounding homosexual behaviour, government lobbyists were central to making this happen. Supporters of homosexual law reform had published letters in Britain's major newspapers championing the Wolfenden Committee's proposals and quickly generated a movement for reform. University of Wales lecturer Tony Dyson published the most seminal of these in *The Times* on 7 March 1958, having managed to secure the signatures of 33 influential public figures, including Isaiah Berlin, Julian Huxley, Jacquetta Hawkes, Bertrand Russell and JB Priestley. The letter led to the formation of the HLRs on 12 May 1958. See *The Times* (1958), 'Homosexual Acts: Call to Reform Law', 11.
11. Although lesbians and bisexual women also contacted the Albany Trust in search of information and advice in the early years of the Trust's existence—and increasingly in the mid-1960s for counselling as well—the vast majority of service users were gay men until the years following homosexual decriminalisation in 1967. From 1963 onwards, women could contact the Minorities Research Group, which focused on women's unique experiences of homosexuality and bisexuality.
12. Caroline Rusterholz notes that Brook Advisory Centres similarly promoted monogamous intimacy to clients seeking birth control. Rusterholz 2021, "'If We Can Show That We Are Helping Adolescents to Understand Themselves, Their Feelings, and Their Needs, Then We Are Doing [a] Valuable Job': Counselling Young People on Sexual Health in the Brook Advisory Centre (1965–1985)," *Medical Humanities* doi:10.1136/medhum-2021-012347.
13. Grey emphasised the longer-term political goals of counselling in a 1964 funding proposal for a psychosexual outpatient clinic: 'By converting the individual into a complete and intact personality, we shall be going the right way about it to educate the public'. Albany Trust 1963-64b.
14. The Trust corresponded with many people around the world, including India, Japan, Nigeria, South Africa, the USA and various parts of Europe. Self-identified 'transsexual', gay, lesbian, and bisexual men and women wrote to the Trust to learn about the legal and social situation for queer people in the UK. They also wrote asking for advice on how they might go about meeting potential sexual and romantic partners in their own countries.
15. Clients and counsellors have all been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.
16. Like the Trust's proposed psychosexual outpatient clinic (1964), its proposed British Sex Research Institute (1968–1969) never received the funding that it would have needed to be launched.
17. This voluntary services unit (VSU) grant was set at £10 000 for 1974 and 1975 and then increased to £12 000 per year until it was revoked by Margaret Thatcher in 1978–1979 following a controversy—initiated by Mary Whitehouse—over the Albany Trust's alleged support of paedophiles.
18. The CHE, unlike the GLF, has been described as an 'organisation' rather than a 'movement' (see Weeks 1977). Politically situated mid-way between the Albany Trust and the GLF, which was radically democratic and anti-establishment, the CHE, from its origins in 1964, wanted to see more social facilities and meeting places for queer men (primarily) and women. In the 1970s, the CHE was the largest and longest running activist organisation campaigning for social change for queer men and women.
19. Homosexuality would not be removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* until 1973.
20. For a broader discussion of how counsellors might use counselling for social change, see Vaughan (1976), 17–18.

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