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Queering the agony aunt: reusing and adapting a public engagement activity for different audiences

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Introduction

'There is no such thing as the general public.' Almost a cliché among public engagement professionals, this statement encourages researchers to consider *who* they are aiming to engage with and to tailor their public engagement activities accordingly.[1] Indeed, for the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 'People' – the *who* – are one of the three pillars of public engagement: 'Purpose, People, Process', or the 'Why', 'Who', and 'How' to consider when planning activities.[2] Public engagement was an important part of the Wellcome Trust-funded project 'Body, Self, and Family: Women's Psychological, Emotional and Bodily Health in Britain, c. 1960–1990', on which I worked from January 2018 until March 2022. As well as exploring the histories of women's everyday experiences of health, the project aimed to use historical resources to improve the emotional health and wellbeing of adolescents.[3] From the start, I and my colleagues (Tracey Loughran, Kate Mahoney, and Hannah Froom) were considering how to engage young people with the themes of the research so that they might better understand the structural problems within society whilst also seeing how individuals and communities have agency to affect change. We wanted to create a resource, a toolkit, which would engage young people with the histories of women's 'everyday health', encourage them to take control of their wellbeing in the present, and help them to build better futures.

While this was the overarching aim with a clear 'purpose' and 'people' in mind, in the early stages of the project there was not a

clear 'process'. We had a general sense that we would need to create activities and gather feedback on them, but no clear roadmap. Throughout the course of the project, we sought out public engagement opportunities for which to design and gather feedback on activities, but we also often accepted invitations that came our way in an ad hoc fashion. The toolkit was always the end goal, but on the way to it our engagement activities picked up other purposes. They provided fun opportunities to tell people about the project and to recruit oral history participants – women born between 1940 and 1970 – to contribute to the research and an archive of interviews to be held in the British Library; another integral aim of the project.[4] Some of these public engagement opportunities required a whole new activity, but sometimes it was easier and much more time-efficient to tweak a pre-existing activity for a new audience.

In this chapter I discuss how I created and adapted a public engagement activity called 'Could you be an agony aunt?' for different audiences; from the original audience of school pupils aged fourteen to fifteen, to attendees at two LGBTQ+ history fairs, to a sixteen+ audience attending a Valentine's Day Late at the Royal College of Nursing, before finally returning to an adolescent audience when shaping the activity for our toolkit 'Bodies, hearts, and minds: using the past to empower the future'.[5] This chapter details how I adapted the activity to suit these different audiences and how they responded to it differently. It explores the complexities of using magazine sources to do this work and discusses how the activity changed as my research evolved; as I explored titles aimed at diverse readers and my knowledge of women's magazines broadened and deepened, prompting new research questions and points of discussion. I reflect on my attempts to include diverse experiences in the activity and how people responded to this representation in the context of different events, exploring the difficulties of framing public engagement activities for marginalised groups that neither ignore nor replicate the terms of that marginalisation.

Taking a reflexive approach, the chapter also discusses my own grappling with the question of what queer public engagement looks like to me as a queer academic and how the conversations I had with people at these events influenced my perspective. In documenting our ad hoc approach to public engagement, the chapter demonstrates the value in remaining receptive to unexpected opportunities and

conversations. However, it also highlights the importance of attending to the 'who' not just in terms of identity but also within the wider context of the event and those individuals' likely experiences. A discussion of public engagement 'on the ground' rather than an idealised account, this chapter demonstrates some of the messiness that shifts in research and encounters with different publics can bring to public engagement projects.

Could you be an agony aunt?

The public engagement activity 'Could you be an agony aunt?' used letters and responses from problem pages in 1970s magazines for teenagers and adult women. Women's magazines have been sites of advice and support for women for centuries, but in postwar Britain problem pages and advice columns in women's magazines had 'enormous potential reach and influence' through the sheer size of their readership.[6] In the early 1960s, over fifty million British women read a women's weekly and thirty-four million read a monthly. By 1987, the number of readers of women's weeklies had declined to nearly twenty-four million, whilst readers of monthlies had risen to nearly forty million – still a substantial reach.[7] The letter-response format of agony aunt advice columns fostered a 'supportive community' within the magazines' pages.[8] Agony aunts, as emotional advisors, played an especially important role in creating this 'fiction of friendship and trusted relationship', and held 'considerable power to shape popular understandings' of gender, sex, and relationships.[9] Crucially, however, agony aunts fulfilled a dual role: they offered both 'serious emotional advice and voyeuristic entertainment'.[10] As an activity, 'Could you be an agony aunt?' embraced the dual role of problem pages. In showing participants glimpses of the letter writers' lives it aimed to provoke empathetic responses to these voices from the past while allowing for the baser pleasures of prurience and *Schadenfreude*.

The premise of the activity was simple. It reproduced questions and answers from problem pages but presented them separately from each other. Questions were scattered on one half of a table and responses on the other half (see Figure 8.1). Participants were asked to match questions with responses. Some responses could

plausibly match more than one problem, so participants had to be aware of tone and content. To a certain extent they had to imagine themselves as 1970s agony aunts – as the magazine-quiz-style title immediately challenged them to do: 'Could you be an agony aunt?' Magazine quizzes encourage readers to imagine new selves and can direct the nature those selves take.[11] In this activity, the newly imagined self was an agony aunt, but the quiz-style title also transported adult participants to the playful spaces of their teenage years, with the challenge of the task reinforcing the sense of play for participants of all ages. It drew on the recognised role of play and creative engagement in supporting learning.[12] Throughout the activity, participants were encouraged to empathise with the letter writers and the agony aunt, paying attention to both in identifying the real-life advice.

During and after the activity, I asked follow-up questions, including 'What do you think of this advice?', 'What advice would you give to this person if they were your friend?', 'Do these problems resonate with you?', and 'How do you think teenagers or women's lives have changed since the 1970s?' These questions aimed to draw out the historical context behind the problems posed and the advice given, prompting participants to examine how people's lives, their choices, and their emotional landscapes and wellbeing have changed from the 1970s to the present day. The questions also offered opportunities to reflect on how people might deal with similar problems in the present. I ran the activity at several events, tailoring it to diverse audiences, but the first iteration of the activity was developed for school students aged fourteen to fifteen years as part of the University of Essex's Digital Arts Festival in April 2019.

The Digital Arts Festival creates an opportunity for young people at secondary schools in Essex to visit campus and attend workshops by academics and local arts practitioners on different topics and technologies. The theme of the 2019 festival was '#ChallengeYour-Reality', and I wanted to address young people's experiences with digital environments as well as to include a digital element. Young people on school visits to the festival were obliged to be there by their teachers – a captive audience – but even so I wanted the activities to speak to their interests. I designed a workshop called 'Am I normal? Body image from agony aunts to Instagram', which included four short interactive activities: the 'Could you be an agony

aunt?' pairing exercise in worksheet form, a group discussion about the internet and body image, a task involving designing a body-positive Instagram post, and an online quiz version of the 'Could you be an agony aunt?' activity conducted in competing teams. Due to issues of safeguarding and accessibility I did not want the young people involved to use their own Instagram accounts and devices to design an Instagram post, so I turned that task into a drawing activity. I created the online quiz to include a 'digital' element rather than asking the young people involved to reflect solely on their digital lives. Constrained by budget and time, I made the quiz using the free online quizzing website Sporcle.[13]

While the workshop was certainly less flashy than some of the other activities on offer at the Digital Arts Festival, I was concerned with ensuring that the activities spoke to themes in young people's lives. I selected problem/answer pairs representing areas including body image, confidence, and relationships. My research was on women's magazines and at that stage in the project I was still methodically working through mainstream monthly magazines including *She*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Nova* and had not yet begun looking at magazines aimed at lesbian and bisexual women (*Arena Three*, *Sappho*) or those aimed at Black and South Asian women (*Chic*, *Black Beauty and Hair*, and *Mukti*). Most of the problem pages I had access to were created with white, cisgender, heterosexual, adult women in mind. My colleague Hannah Froom shared problem pages she had examined during her PhD research into *Jackie* magazine – a magazine aimed at teenagers – including questions sent to the Beauty Editor asking advice about cosmetics and hair.[14] From the problems Hannah shared with me, I selected letters which would hold participants' attention. As Suzie Hayman, former agony aunt for *Woman's Own*, explains: 'As an agony aunt, I think I owe my readers professionalism and empathy and knowledge and understanding […] But I also owe them entertainment, because they're not gonna read if it's just a professional screed.'[15] I tried to choose shorter pairings and ones that were possible to match without being too obvious. I also made sure that questions about body image did not include specific advice about weight loss and dieting, as that could be potentially harmful. The advice on offer needed to be sensitive and sensible, even accounting for changing attitudes over time. Finally, it was important that some of the humour in

the activity could be found by attempting to match wildly incorrect responses.

I could select only a handful of pairings for the worksheet and those I did not use I made into the online quiz. This included pairings from gay or bisexual young people. I included these on the online version rather than the worksheet because at that point I did not feel equipped to have conversations about queer topics with young people whom I was meeting for the first time that day. The year before, some of the young people who had attended the Digital Arts Festival had been a bit disruptive and the workshop length of forty-five minutes was not long enough to build the level of rapport necessary for me to feel comfortable navigating potentially homophobic responses. At the time there were frequent news stories about protests against LGBTQ+ inclusive education in schools in Birmingham.[16] As a queer person and one who had lived in Birmingham, those news stories affected me. I felt like I did not have the capacity to have those conversations. Including questions about queer experiences where the advice given was kind and encouraging felt like a compromise. It was there in the activity for those it would resonate with, but the quiz activity was fast-paced enough that we would not linger on it. Together the interactive activities provoked some interesting discussions around body image, but the girls in the groups were much more engaged than the boys, some of whom were visibly bored. The competitive element of the Sporcle quiz reinvigorated the group and the session ended on a high note despite the earlier dip in enthusiasm. On reflection, I had tried to fit too much into a forty-five minute session to overcompensate for a lack of exciting technology that I knew other workshops were using, but in essence the 'Could you be an agony aunt?' activity was born.

Adapting the activity for LGBTQ+ and sixteen+ audiences

In November 2019, I was awarded funding through the Being Human Small Award scheme to put on a weekend of events for the Being Human Festival themed around health and beauty. Being Human is the UK's national festival of the humanities, encouraging humanities researchers to produce enjoyable events for public audiences to attend at their leisure. Two of the three events we ran were

drop-in events and we wanted to include a variety of activities for visitors to engage with. I turned 'Could you be an agony aunt?' into the tabletop matching game that I described above, using all the problem pairs I had and some new ones. The first event of the weekend, 'Beauty school drop in', was about exploring what beauty means/meant to people in the past and in the present and examining how that has changed over time culturally and for individuals. Traditional beauty spaces can be alienating, especially for queer and gender non-conforming people. To address this and make the event as inclusive as possible, whilst at the same time adding to the beauty salon feel, we booked transgender activist Charlie Craggs to do manicures. Craggs's 'fabulous activism' includes her project 'Nail Transphobia', where she invites members of the public to ask her questions about trans lives whilst she paints their nails.[17] 'Nail Transphobia' aims to break down stereotypes and create allies, and for Craggs sharing in the self-care element of having your nails done is an important part of her work: 'The act of looking after yourself is an act of love, and learning to love myself saved my life.'[18] We aimed to make 'Beauty school drop in' a space where beauty could be explored in an open and inclusive way and I wanted to build this message into all the interactive activities we were running, including 'Could you be an agony aunt?'.

At this point in my research schedule, I had started to scope out more queer magazines, including magazines for lesbian and bisexual women like *Arena Three* in the 1960s and *Sappho* in the 1970s. Whilst letters pages were integral to building community in these publications, they offered a more discursive space for readers to respond to articles and each other rather than emulating the problem pages of mainstream women's magazines.[19] The *Beaumont Magazine* – a magazine from the 1990s for transfeminine 'transsexuals' and 'cross-dressers' – had what I was looking for: a problem-page column for crowd-sourced beauty tips called the 'Poser Page'.[20] With the problems and the advice both coming from readers, the 'Poser Page' functioned as a community-building space whilst also more closely emulating the problem-page dynamic that I needed for 'Could you be an agony aunt?': 'You ask the questions […] we give you an answer and invite you, the READER, to give us your wisdom. Send your solutions to us!'[21] Questions such as this one from 1993 – 'I

always take care with my eye make-up. Then I ruin it by mis-managing my mascara brushes. Any pointers?' – fit well with the beauty questions already in the activity, as did the answer which encouraged the use of 'false eyelashes, readily available from Boots, department stores etc […] select the finer styles, not the thick ones'.[22] During the activity at 'Beauty school drop in' I explained to participants that the pairings on the table were from a variety of magazines: teenage magazines, mainstream women's magazines, and the *Beaumont Magazine* which transgender women read in the 1990s. Unfortunately, Charlie Craggs had to pull out of the event at the last moment, but through the activity I was able to have conversations with people about LGBTQ+ history and experiences with beauty and self-expression.

At the time I was pleased with how seamlessly the *Beaumont Magazine*'s beauty questions fit into 'Could you be an agony aunt?' However, I soon realised that they fit so well as to be invisible among the mainstream women's magazine questions. The activity was queer, but only if you knew it. Like subtext or coded language, a queer reading was available to those who recognised it, but it was not obvious. In December 2019 this was brought home to me when I took the activity to the annual LGBTQ+ History and Archives Conference at the London Metropolitan Archives. Our main aim in attending this event was to recruit older lesbian and bisexual women for our oral history research. We attended with a large stack of flyers and laid out the agony aunt game to draw people into discussion. Surrounded by co-produced projects that centred LGBTQ+ voices, I realised that this activity was not transparently queer and it did not garner the same interest from passers-by as it had from visitors to 'Beauty school drop in' – who, although it was a 'drop-in' event, tended to stay for a couple of hours. A number of people approached our stand to ask about the game, but when I explained that it was about agony aunts their response was often muted. Met with their lack of enthusiasm, I'd switch to talking about the oral history project and try to get them to take a flyer to pass on to any women aged between fifty and eighty. I found that younger people were more inclined to have a go at the game, but the experience left me feeling drained. I felt like the activity was not 'queer enough' for the event, and that perhaps, by extension, neither was I. In

January 2020 I took the same activity to the Goldsmiths Queer History Fair without having time to remake it, and received a similar response.

The new year brought one last in-person public engagement opportunity before the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown. In February 2020, the Body, Self and Family team were invited to have a stand at Valentine's Day Late event at the Royal College of Nursing organised by the University of Roehampton's 'Surgery and Emotion' project. The Late was aimed at adults interested in the history of medicine, including medical professionals. Museum and library 'lates' are usually evening events promoted to younger adult audiences as an opportunity to view exhibitions outside normal opening hours in a friendly, social space. They often incorporate interactive activities and food and drink, including alcohol. After confirming with the organisers that this was a sixteen+ event, I decided to adapt 'Could you be an agony aunt?' further.

By this point I had completed my research on *She* magazine. A monthly magazine, *She* was created in 1955 for the women its founder saw around him; women who were 'funny, vulgar, and tough'.[23] *She* spoke to women whose interests did not centre on being a housewife, although the women who read it most likely were housewives, or expected to be once they married. Amassing a regular circulation of more than 300,000 in the 1960s, '*She* blazed a lone trail of outspokenness […] showing a healthy disregard for customary "unmentionables"'. *Cosmopolitan*'s launch onto the UK market in 1972 with a male nude centrefold threatened *She*'s place.[24] To compete with *Cosmopolitan*'s frank attitude to sex, *She* reintroduced a doctor's column in 1973. Written by Dr David Delvin, it focused exclusively on answering readers' questions about sex and reproductive health, whilst seasoned agony aunt Denise Robins continued to tackle readers' emotional problems in a separate column. Delvin's column was informative. He answered quite basic questions about the risk of pregnancy when having sex standing up, often countering erroneous information given to women by their male lovers.[25] He also answered more complex questions about types of contraceptive pill and their side effects.[26] But Delvin's column was humorous too. Striking a brasher, sillier note than Robins's more serious advice column, it followed publishing trends which saw some newspapers and magazines present problem pages 'more overtly

as entertainment' by the 1970s.[27] In response to one letter writer who asked whether Delvin approved of her husband's preference for pouring 'half a glass of 1968 Burgundy' on her 'most intimate area' before oral sex, Delvin wrote, 'No, I don't … The correct year would be … (dare I say it) a '69'.[28] I thought problem/answer pairs from Delvin's column would make a nice addition to 'Could you be an agony aunt?' for a Valentine's Day-themed event aimed an adult audience in the 'Late' space.

This version of 'Could you be an agony aunt?' was a success. Having run versions of the game multiple times by this point, I was very familiar with it and with talking to visitors about our project. I knew each pairing off by heart and could answer at ease any questions about the historical context. People approached the activity with a real sense of fun, curiosity, and engagement. A group of young women were slightly scandalised by some of the questions, while some older women there with friends reminisced about teenage magazines. An older man read through some of the problems with a wry smile and then suddenly stopped. He picked up a problem from a teenage boy writing into *Woman* magazine with confusing feelings about a male friend:

> I'm 16, still at school and a pretty normal guy – or at least I was. I still date girls, but for the past six months I've been strongly attracted to another guy. He's very good looking and is looked up to by most people. But it's more than admiration in my case. We've only got a few weeks left at school and I'm desperate at the thought of never seeing him again.[29]

I helped him find the response and he was surprised and touched by how sympathetic it was (see Figure 8.1). The agony aunt, Anna Raeburn, reassured the boy that there were 'many kinds of affection' but that he was understandably 'frightened of a kind of human behaviour which, sadly, has been made into a bogey'.[30] The man told me that when he was growing up in the 1970s and realising that he was gay he would have found a response like this in his mother's magazine comforting.

Jennifer Crane, in her work on the 'Cultural History of the National Health Service (NHS)' project, writes about 'the challenge of how – and whether – to position ourselves, our own memories and beliefs' within interactions with the public. Crane found that being open

about her own life and experience with the NHS improved conversations she had with the public: 'Bringing my own NHS glasses, for example, which I wore as a child, encouraged members of the public to tell me their own childhood stories.'[31] The challenge of how to position ourselves and where to draw boundaries around our personal life in these kinds of interactions is something we each have to consider on a case-by-case basis, although there is a clear difference between telling a member of public about your glasses and talking about your sexuality.

Eli Burke explains that, 'To be visible as a queer person is to be vulnerable', but 'to be vulnerable is to develop strength and resilience. It is to reclaim your narrative in a world that wishes you erased. It is an act of resistance.' Working with intergenerational LGBTQIA+ communities as a queer/trans museum educator, Burke found that 'vulnerability is a powerful teaching tool, especially when working with a population that must grapple with it for survival'.[32] By sharing his experiences and allowing himself to be vulnerable over a ten-week-long, weekly arts programme, Burke made powerful connections and gained a deeper emotional understanding of his participants' experiences:

> Their lives and struggles made my freedom to live openly possible. I knew this intellectually, but the connections I made through our reciprocal moments of vulnerability during this program made me feel this in my body. It became an organic, breathing new truth that I could not put on a shelf.[33]

Burke reframes vulnerability 'as a form of power.'[34] Talking with this older man at the Valentine's Day Late event I felt a glimmer of this power. As he shared his experiences of the 1970s with me, I felt comfortable opening up in turn about my experiences as a queer but closeted teenager in the 2000s. We talked about the differences as well as the similarities, and of what we saw of young people today and their experiences. It was a meaningful interaction for me, and I think for him as well. He was by no means the only queer person that I had a long conversation with that evening. A bisexual woman around my age participated in the activity, and after she responded similarly to the queer voices in the agony aunt game we talked about the impact Section 28 had had on our younger selves.[35]

Understanding different responses to 'Could you be an agony aunt?'

In trying to understand why people responded so differently to 'Could you be an agony aunt?' at the Valentine's Day Late, as compared with the LGBTQ+ history fairs, I turned to museum studies literature on visitor experience. Exploring the role identity plays in visitor experience, Falk writes that 'the long-term meanings created by visitors from their time in the museum are largely shaped by short-term personal, identity-related needs and interests rather than by the goals and intentions of the museum's staff'. These 'identity-related visit motivations' are 'the series of specific reasons that visitors use to justify as well as organise their visit, and ultimately use in order to make sense of their museum experience'. These can be as varied as looking for queer connection or just having an hour to kill before catching a train. Both can exist at once and can be 'fluid and changing' to the extent that 'the same individual can engage with the same exhibitions and content in fundamentally different ways depending upon their current identity-related visit motivations'.[36]

Visiting a museum or exhibition can be a frustrating experience for queer people seeking queer representation, recognition, and connection. Margaret Middleton explains how attempting to find LGBTQ+ representation in museum settings can feel like work:

> As queer people, we are used to approaching museum visits as if we are archaeologists seeking long lost traces of our ancestors. My all-too-often accurate assumption that queerness will be missing from the interpretation means that the feeling underlying my experience in museums is one of scrutiny and scepticism. The few queer-positive museum experiences I have had are markedly more relaxing because they are not so much work.[37]

The absence of queer stories in museums can not only be tiring but also alienating. Middleton writes of the 'relief it would be to visit any museum and be met with exhibition text, tours, and other methods of engagement that demonstrate the interpretation team has noticed queer connections, deemed them worthy of mention, and imagined a potential queer visitor'.[38] While this hypothetical situation sparks relief, Burke explores the harm inherent to most learning environments

in which 'heteronormativity is pervasive […] We are often caught in the loop of considering our identities and aware that we are not part of the accepted majority before learning can even begin.'[39] People attend LGBTQ+ history fairs expecting queer content. An LGBTQ+ history fair should be a relaxing space for a queer person where they should feel assured that LGBTQ+ identities have been considered and will be represented. Coming across an activity that hides queer experiences among heterosexual and cis-normative ones and considers queerness through the heteronormative lens of the 1970s agony aunt could be jarring in this environment, leading a participant to feel that the activity is too much work to engage with.

The same visitor approaching the same activity in a different event with a different context may well experience the activity more positively. Sean Curran, writing about the process of situating LGBTQ+ voices in National Trust historic houses, frames the feeling of searching for and finding traces of queer experiences in a more positive light. Curran deploys cruising as a metaphor to explore the feeling of encountering fleeting moments of queer recognition in historical spaces. Drawing on Mark Turner's work, Curran explains that cruising 'is not just about looking for nameless and faceless sex, but rather about forging brief and fleeting connections through "backward glances", which constitute "an act of mutual recognition amid the otherwise alienating effects of the anonymous crowd"'.[40] Viewing cruising as a still-popular and 'inherently queer way of experiencing place, and of community building', Curran nevertheless acknowledges that 'queer people are rightly no longer content with this stealth-like appropriation of spaces', with many preferring to use apps like Grindr or Hinge to insert themselves into mainstream hook-up or dating culture.[41] For many, faced with an LGBTQ+ event that is full of queer stories and queer voices, there would be no great desire to sift through a mostly straight collection of agony aunt problems to find glimmers of queer recognition.

At an event where that is not the case, however, like the Valentine's Day Late, these brief moments of queer recognition and connection can still hold their power. As Burke notes, queer people 'often come to know themselves as LGBTQIA+ in isolation. It often happens in private moments of awareness around other bodies or in familial settings where what is modelled does not "feel" right for us.'[42] Seeing glimmers of queerness and recognition in a source as domestic,

heteronormative, and everyday as mainstream women's magazines is powerful. Often queer people, especially queer young people, have had to look for queer community outside the home. For a queer person to recognise and imagine the experience of a queer person in the past finding comfort from an object inside the home (in this case a queer teenage boy and his mother's magazine), and with that recognition find themselves transported back to their own past self, is a significant moment. I know from my own experience that finding glimmers of queerness amongst pages of heteronormative content is exciting, and to share that experience with another queer person is joyful. It feels good to be in the know. For the right person in the right context, then, experiencing flashes of queer recognition in unexpected places can be exhilarating rather than exhausting.

If I had the opportunity to run the 'Could you be an agony aunt?' activity at an LGBTQ+ event again, or even for a general audience, I would change it to foreground the queer experiences by dramatically reducing the number of problem/answer pairs from mainstream women's magazines and by writing the name of the publication on the pairings to make it clearer if the examples came from LGBTQ+ publications like the *Beaumont Bulletin*. I have since researched magazines aimed at Black women in Britain such as *Chic* magazine, which from 1984 closely emulated mainstream magazines, covering lifestyle, relationships, careers, and beauty from the perspective of Black British women, and its successor *Candice*, which from the late 1980s claimed a readership of 25,000.[43] I would incorporate problem/answer pairs from these publications too, prioritising discussions of LGBTQ+ themes. Although labelling the problem/answer pairs with their publication sources would make the matching component easier, successful matching would still require paying attention to the text and would allow for queer recognition without participants having to work so hard for it. Furthermore, it would counter the invisibility of Black and trans women in the activity, who, when writing in to publications aimed at themselves, did not tend to describe themselves as 'Black' or 'trans' unless it was relevant, such as with one 'dark skinned black girl' who wrote to *Chic* for make-up advice. The diversity of these women's experiences might otherwise be lost between the problems of the readers of mainstream magazines aimed at white, cis, heterosexual women where the readers writing in were assumed white unless otherwise stated.[44]

Conclusion: the 'Bodies, hearts, and minds' toolkit

'Could you be an agony aunt?' was originally designed as an activity for adolescents at the Digital Arts Festival with the eventual aim of including it in a toolkit engaging young people with histories of women's 'everyday health' and encouraging them to take control of their own wellbeing. As a project, one of the aspects we found most challenging in building the toolkit was representation. From 1960 to 1990, the period examined by the 'Body, Self, and Family' project, mass-market cultural products like women's magazines either exoticised or rendered invisible women of colour and LGBTQ+ women. The activities in our toolkit needed to portray how racism and heterosexism structured the 'everyday health' experiences of these women, through unthinking exclusion as well as documentable oppression. But we struggled with how to represent and historically contextualise invisibility in short activities and avoid reducing these women's multifaceted lives to oppression and victimhood. As we have explained elsewhere, we were

> particularly keen not to represent BAME [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic] and LGBTQ+ women's experiences in primarily negative terms to adolescents. As they struggle with racism and heterosexism in their own lives, they need opportunities to empathise with the successes, pleasures and mundanities of the lives of past women with whom they share aspects of identity – the opportunities that white, heterosexual girls and women can take for granted.[45]

We were keenly aware of these issues as we designed activities, and were grateful for the feedback we received from the activists, educators, and community groups who helped us to shape the 'Bodies, hearts, and minds: using the past to empower the future' toolkit.[46]

In the much-simplified version of 'Could you be an agony aunt?' included in the toolkit, we included the question from the teenage boy who was 'strongly attracted' to another male friend as one of just three problem/answer pairings (Figure 8.1). In other activities throughout the toolkit, we used extracts from oral history interviews and autobiographies to include diverse experiences, and we incorporated images from the fashion pages of Black women's magazines alongside images from mainstream women's magazines in collage materials.[47] Trialling the toolkit with Healthwatch Essex Young

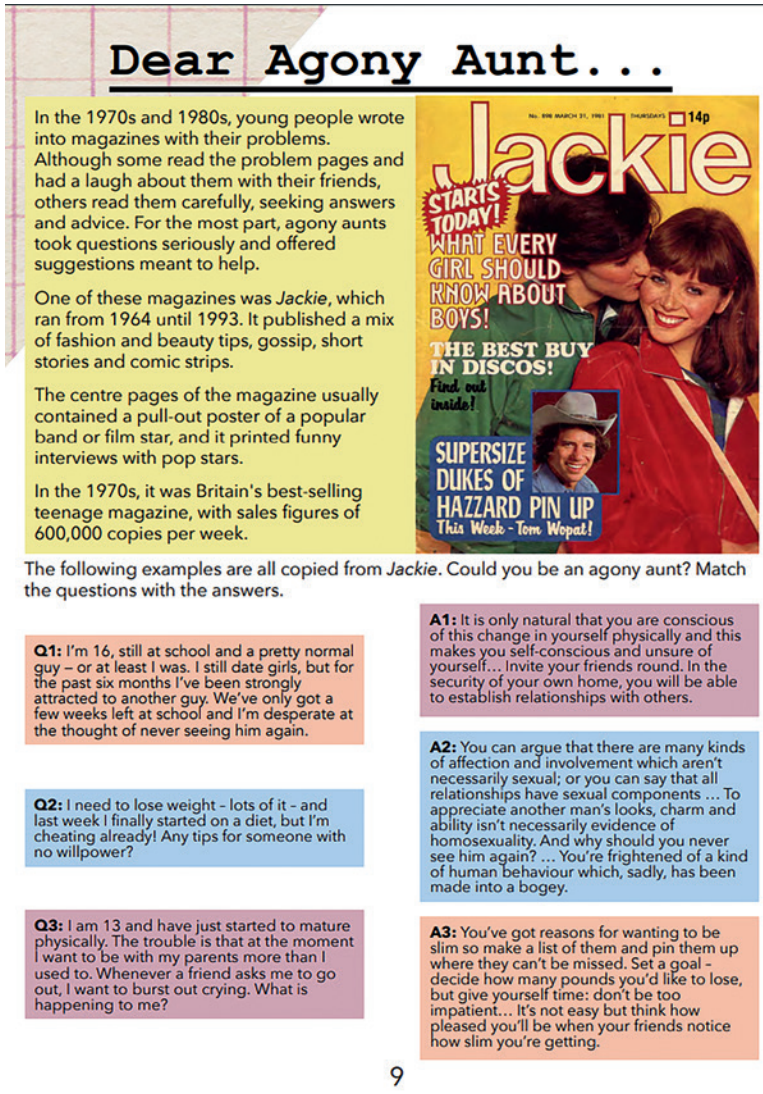

Figure 8.1 'Dear agony aunt' activity from the 'Bodies, hearts, and minds: using the past to empower the future' toolkit. Courtesy of Tracey Loughran, Kate Mahoney, and Daisy Payling. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

Mental Health Ambassadors – a group of local adolescents interested in mental health – we received feedback that we needed to incorporate more male experiences. We commissioned additional activities from historians of masculinity Mark Anderson, Richard Hall, and Katherine Jones, but also took the opportunity to be more gender inclusive. We reached out to photographer Julia Comita and make-up artist Brenna Drury, the artists behind 'Prim 'n Poppin" – a project which recreates vintage make-up advertisements to make them more inclusive – to ask if we could incorporate their project into an activity.[48] With the models' permission, they graciously allowed us to use the adverts they created starring non-binary models Cory and Kaguya as a discussion starter about what – and who – is often missing in media depictions of beauty and fashion.[49]

The conversations I had with LGBTQ+ participants playing 'Could you be an agony aunt?' encouraged me to put some of my own experiences into the 'Bodies, hearts, and minds' toolkit. In an activity called 'Sex education then and now: putting yourself in the picture', we included quotes about people's experiences of sex education in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, leaving a space for young people to include their experiences of sex and relationships education in the 2020s. Most of the quotes come from oral history interviews and Mass Observation responses, but, as material from those sources stopped in the 1990s, we had to look elsewhere for examples for the 2000s and 2010s. For the 2000s, we included my memories of growing up under Section 28, attributed to a character called Chris:

> We had a term of specific PSHE [Personal, Social, Health, and Economic education] teaching which looked at sex and relationships but also taught us about drugs and other things. These lessons were in the music block and taught by one of our music teachers. I vividly remember the teacher saying that homosexual relationships were valid but that she wasn't allowed to tell us that.[50]

Eli Burke writes that, as queer people, 'our intuition, vulnerabilities, personal narratives, and experiences are the most powerful places from which we can gain understanding, make more sense of things in the world, and connect with others'.[51] Playing 'Could you be an agony aunt?' with other LGBTQ+ people and sharing something of my experiences helped me better understand my queer self and trust

that I knew when and how much of it to share. The 'Bodies, hearts, and minds' toolkit reflects a diversity of experiences including my own. As LGBTQ+ inclusive sex and relationships education continues to weather attacks in 2023, I hope our toolkit can act as an inclusive resource for young people to connect with others' experiences, better understand and trust themselves, and take control of their 'everyday health'.[52]

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Notes

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35 Section 28, known as Clause 2a in Scotland, was legislation introduced in 1988. It prohibited 'the promotion of homosexuality by local authorities'. In practice, this meant that local authorities could not provide books, plays, leaflets, or films that depicted LGBTQ+ relationships positively. Teachers who taught about same-sex relationships could face disciplinary action. The law was stopped in Scotland in 2000 and in the rest of the United Kingdom in 2003.
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37 Margaret Middleton, 'Queer possibility', *Journal of Museum Education*, 45:4 (2020), 426.
38 Middleton, 'Queer possibility', 427.
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40 Sean Curran, 'Queer Activism Begins at Home: Situating LGBTQ Voices in National Trust Historic Houses' (PhD thesis, University College London, 2019), p. 27, quotations from Mark W. Turner, *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* (London: Reaktion, 2003), p. 9.
41 Curran, 'Queer Activism Begins at Home', p. 27.
42 Burke, 'Intuition and vulnerability', 409.

43 Yinka Sunmonu, 'Chic', in Alison Donnell (ed.), *Companion to Black British Culture*, (Routledge: London, New York, 2002), p. 73; Kadija Sesay, 'Publishing, newspapers and magazines', in Donnell (ed.), *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture*, p. 251.
44 *Chic*, July 1985. A further alternative could be to keep the pairings unlabelled but include an information sheet showing covers of each magazine featured with a sentence explaining its audience and reach. Whilst this would retain the mystery element of the activity, it would create an additional step in an activity that already requires quite a lot of reading.
45 Loughran, Mahoney, and Payling, 'Women's voices, emotion and empathy', 400.
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49 'Bodies, hearts, and minds', toolkit, p. 23.
50 'Bodies, hearts, and minds', toolkit, p. 34.
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