Psychometrics as moral labour: Subject formation at the intersection of neoliberal and spiritual discourse

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Abstract This ethnography-based research article explores the negotiation of well-being and subjectivity for youth workers in a Faith-Based Organisation (Canterbury Youth Services [CYS]) in Christchurch, New Zealand. We highlight the emergent significance of the Clifton *StrengthsFinder* psychometric assessment as a biopolitical mechanism, operating to actualise vocational identities and optimise ‘life and health’ of CYS leaders, in response to burnout and other salient threats to ‘collective human vitality’. We demonstrate how *StrengthsFinder* contributes to the governing and responsibilisation of youth workers through a call to heightened self-reflexivity, interacting with existing faith practices. We suggest the concept of ‘moral labour’ as the most appropriate term to describe the active participation of individuals in their own subjectification through a combination of managerial and spiritual techniques. We highlight the paradoxical value of this neoliberal/managerial tool of introspection and personality auditing to the growth of spiritual identities.

Keywords Neoliberalism · Christianity · Psychometrics · Subjectivity · Morality · Non-profit work

The truth obligations of faith and the self are linked together. This link permits a purification of the soul impossible without self-knowledge.

– Michel Foucault 1988, p. 40.

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Introduction

This article explores how the psychometric tool known as *StrengthsFinder* shapes the vocational and spiritual lives of Christian youth workers associated with Canterbury Youth Services (CYS) in the South Island of New Zealand. Our ethnographic exploration of the practices of selfhood and well-being among these workers demonstrates the paradoxical value of neoliberal/managerial tools of introspection and personality auditing to the growth of spiritual identity. The specific paradox our analysis reveals relates to the tensions that arise when individual workers are pressed through religious discourses to understand the work they do not merely as a job, or even a vocation or calling (Christopherson 1994), but as an identity, and to offer all of themselves (time, money, body, mind, emotions, and so on) in service. At the same moment and in a more secular health professional sense, as expert self-managers youth workers are required to draw practical and psychological boundaries around their giving—to monitor and self-regulate their involvement with their charges in order to avoid ‘burnout’, the stigmatised local idiom of distress through over-giving, or overwork (Wardell 2016). The astute application of *StrengthsFinder* (described in more detail below) we will argue is key to the negotiation of these tensions.

In a wider context political and organisational pressures to responsabilise and modify the self in care work have already been noted. Barwick (2006) for example, has framed neoliberal policy implementation as a threat to the core of human services’ values and practices. The dangers that Barwick evokes relate to the force of neoliberalism not simply as an economic pattern, but as a pervasive ideological system. This pattern of affective/moral restructuring—the challenging of ‘old’ norms, behaviours, values and practices (often including religious ones), and the substitution of new ones when engaging with managerialist restructuring of patterns of labour, has been noted by Wiegatz (2010) and Martin in Ericksen (2015). The ‘day-to-day’ of secular youth care may include one-on-one counselling, group instruction, event logistics, advocacy with government institutions, and broader forms of health education and social work. In addition to this however, in its faith-based forms, youth work includes prayer, corporate worship practices, and scriptural teachings. Faith-based youth work shares the ‘redemptive’ focus of secular professional caring practices (to improve social order, foster well-being and welfare), but often formulates a different sense of the means through which this is to occur (Davies 2013, p. 149). It is the impact of neoliberal reforms on the embodiment of these ‘different means’ of caring that our study explores.

Existing studies of the experience of neoliberal reform in faith-based contexts offer contradictory readings of the effects of this on moral/spiritual life and practice. Some authors have argued that there is a fundamental disjunction between Christian worldviews emphasising the relationality of care, and the individualist managerial logics of neoliberalism. As an example, Davies (2013) notes the resistance in the UK to using terms such as ‘manager’ in favour of retaining role titles such as ‘leader’, demonstrating the conflict in both language and values between the Church as a religious community and the highly managed profession that youth work has

become. Davies' work also expresses concern regarding the potential for worker burnout, concluding that Christian youth work suffers from too little management, while the secular workplace suffers from too much. However other writers suggest a more complicated entanglement between neoliberal managerialism and faith-based logics. Elisha (2008) observes the emotional distress (framed as 'compassion fatigue') of evangelical activists providing faith-based social services in Tennessee. He analyses this strained subjectivity as emerging from competing needs to demonstrate compassion and to encourage accountability, during a period when Christian discourse was impacted by "emergent hegemonic dogmas, from the free-market principles of neoliberalism to the authoritarian leanings of neoconservatism" (Elisha 2008, p. 158).

Given New Zealand's history as a voluntary and very early adopter of the commercialisation of the government welfare system and the adoption of the 'new public management' ideologies associated with neoliberal reforms, our study is relevant. Organised, faith-based labour forms a significant part of the overall landscape of youth work in New Zealand (Wardell 2016; Martin 2006) and CYS, the site of our research, plays a significant part in this. Through a small paid staff and a dispersed network of hundreds of other supporters and volunteers, CYS run annual events for over 5000 young people from around the South Island of New Zealand (Fig. 1). As an umbrella organisation, they also provide training events (Fig. 2) and supervisory support for hundreds of youth pastors and leaders from various other, smaller church and community organisations. CYS's momentum as an organisation relates in part to their successful interdenominational aggregation of

Fig. 1 Crowd of 3500+ young people gathered in the 'big top' at Easter Camp, which is organised by an amalgamation of community and church youth leaders, CYS paid staff, and CYS unpaid volunteers, and targeted to youth groups from across the region. *Credit CYS, used with permission*

Fig. 2 A branded image of the young aspiring leaders, established leaders, and CYS staff who attended the Xtend conference in 2014. *Credit CYS, used with permission*

the region's strong Pentecostal groups alongside more conservative Protestant denominations, in what remains broadly evangelical (according to Bebbington's 2004 quadrilateral definition). They also interface successfully with other secular, voluntary, and state services. In many ways, the significance of the faith-based sector responds to the vacuum created through a neoliberal restriction of secular state services in New Zealand (Barwick 2006). This trend has been observed elsewhere, for example Ireland (Kintz 2007), the US (Elisha 2008) and sub-Saharan Africa (Cooper 2015; Wiegatz 2010).

We turn now, briefly, to describing the ethnographic research underpinning this paper, which was conducted by the first author during 2012–2014. Data collection included participant observation at the CYS offices, events, meetings, and activities throughout the region, field note compilations (Emerson et al. 1995), reflexive journaling, and visual analysis (Rose 2016) of primary print and digital organisational resources. The research also included nineteen formal in-depth interviews (with 10 men, and 9 women), and two focus groups (with a total of approximately 40 participants engaged in a range of working contexts from volunteer to full time). Some workers have been identified by (real) first name only, and others by pseudonym, as requested. The majority were involved in church-based youth ministry, only a few working exclusively in community-based programmes, and many doing both. Mostly urban or suburban, largely middle-class, the leaders included in interviews primarily identified as *Pākehā* ('White' New Zealanders, of European Decent), although there are a strong minority of *Māori* (Indigenous), Pacific Island, and other ethnic groups represented among CYS staff, and clients. The study received ethical approval (12/228) from the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee.

The prominence of *StrengthsFinder* as an organisational and spiritual resource quickly emerged from the ethnographic analysis. The suburban CYS offices in fact are also the home of "*StrengthsFinder* South Pacific", as a glossy sign outside declares—primarily because many of the staff within have dual roles in CYS youth

Fig. 3 Xtend (2012) Workbook and personalised StrengthsFinder tag—listing not only the attendees name, but also their top five (StrengthsFinder discerned) Strengths—to be worn during all social and spiritual activities for the duration of the camp. *Credit David King, used with permission*

Fig. 4 An image taken from the Xtend 2012 workbook: a page for note-taking and reflection on ‘Devotional Pathways’. This is a more overtly spiritual tool which offers opportunities to intermesh other spiritual practices with one’s demonstrated Strengthsfinders qualities; both employed under the same rubric of discovering a self (Fieldwork Archives 2012)

worker supervision, training, and events, but also as *StrengthsFinder* coaches servicing both faith-based and secular, corporate organisations around the country. The *Clifton StrengthsFinder Test* as it more formally known, is a Gallup tool. It

takes around 30 min to complete the internet-based test of 177 ‘either/or’ self-evaluative questions. The test assesses personal attributes or ‘strengths’ that an individual possesses from a list of a possible 34. Feedback is delivered both online, and through face-to-face sessions with (local) trained *StrengthsFinder* coaches. At the first level of engagement (and payment) only the Top 5 Strengths are revealed (example Fig. 3), and discussion centres on how these articulate in an affirming way within the individual’s personal and professional life. The *StrengthsFinder* book has been a #1 Wall Street Journal bestseller (Buckingham and Clifton 2001, Rath 2008) with one of many later offshoots—entitled *Living your Strengths: Discover your God-given talents and inspire your community* (Winseman et al. 2004)—targeting Christian organisations specifically. The tool’s founder, former Gallup chairman Donald Clifton, was also himself a Christian, as CYS staff like to point out.

StrengthsFinder is an exemplary case study of the role of both business and non-profit bodies in the mechanisms of biopolitics—tailored for corporate uptake, but at an emic level continually re-embedded in faith communities as part of the training and (we argue) the thinking and practice of not only the CYS staff, but the network of hundreds of professional and volunteer youth pastors and leaders whom they promote it to throughout the region. As such we analysed the significance of Strength Finder through an iterative process (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007); drawing together common narrative elements of formal interviews, the recurring metaphors in CYS handouts, and observations of youth work training and sessions and devotional practices, in order to highlight the lived and performed quality of sense-making around ‘strengths’.

For representational completeness, we note that in training and practice these leaders also draw on a wider range of different psychometric forms. For example, the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) which pre-dates *StrengthsFinder* considerably as a popular leadership and teamwork training tool in New Zealand churches. There is also a recent trend towards reframing biblical and spiritual principles into pseudo-psychometric formulas (Horvath 2013): for example, the plethora of quizzes and ‘inventories’ that exist to help people discover their spiritual giftings (a teaching drawing from 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, on “different kinds of gifts [...] different kinds of service [...] different kinds of working” (NIV)). The same CYS training events, sermons, workshops, and printed teaching material that referred to *Strengths* also referred variously to Spiritual Gifts, as well as Devotional Pathways (also called “Spiritual Pathways” or “Worship Pathways”, as formulated by Hybels 1991) (Fig. 4), and “Love Languages” (as formulated by Chapman 2009). Scholars such as Horvath (2013) have argued these styles of teaching take advantage of the “scientific aura” this gives them, despite questionable statistical validity and a lack of agreed upon parameters. By way of comparison *StrengthsFinder* is presented as having a higher empirically measurable reliability and validity (Horvath 2013; Asplund et al. 2009). We note that our own focus on *StrengthsFinder* is not because of its presumed greater scientific validity, but because of its prominence in CYS’s discourse and organisational structure.

Our analysis was critical (Madison 2005), attempting to distil an understanding of the multiple threads of discursive power shaping everyday lifeworlds which were

characterised by complex entanglements of both spiritual fulfilment, and distress. Our engagement with the CYS community as both an insider (first author) and an outsider (second author) places the work simultaneously as an intimate ethnography (Banerji and Distant 2009) which attempts to subvert a dominant secular interpretative gaze upon faith-based work; and also as the work of a vulnerable observer (Behar 1996), in which witnessing, and blurred subject/object lines are recognised rather than denied for their capacity to create positioned ethnographic truths. Ellingson (2009) offers the metaphor of crystallisation to encompass these multiple analytical positions and genres of representation as a way of “building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers’ vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them” (Ellingson 2009, p. 4).

Much of the fieldwork for this project recorded and explored the resistance, contradictions and management between the cultural identity of the ‘good’ Christian youth leader who overflows with God’s care and the neoliberal “view of the person as a disembedded, goal-rational individual” (Eriksen et al. 2015, p. 915) who carefully stores and monitors their finite human reserves of care. Our argument is that the psychologically framed self-knowledge cultivated by *StrengthsFinder* operates as a biopolitical mechanism to enable a careful objectification and instrumentalization of the self towards both care practices, in a manner that in fact integrates the two (see Fig. 5). The result is a new form of subjectivity appropriate to successfully negotiating both internal and external problems related to identity, calling, work and well-being in “the new political economy of vitality” (Rabinow and Rose 2006, p. 215). We argue that the most appropriate term to describe the work of youth workers as active subjects in these local faith-based worlds is ‘moral labour’. In the next section, we set out the ethnographic evidence to support this interpretation.

Fig. 5 An image posted on Facebook just prior to an Easter Camp, by CYS employee (and church-based youth leader) Laura, pictured right. *Credit Laura, used with permission*

The contradictions of Christian care labour in CYS

‘Amped’ is an intermediate (age 10–13) kids camp, run annually by CYS staff. In 2013, the fieldnotes record core staff member Laura posting on Facebook directly after the event to say “Amped was amping! My body however is no longer amping. #shattered”. Her CYS colleague Sam also posted to say he was “slowly recovering from a fun and full on weekend”. Earlier in the year as the much larger Easter Camp event neared, these two had posted a picture of themselves (Fig. 5) with items identified as their “pre-EC survival kit”. The accompanying comment proclaimed light-heartedly: “Nurofen, chocolate and Vitamin C+ Echinacea. Sickness, you won’t defeat us any longer!”

In CYS, the physical self is the most socially acceptable place in which to locate and communicate the cost of care, as reflected here. Yet this is a cost borne in the emotional/psychological sphere as well. Burnout is an extremely common local category of distress, and as such is emblematic of the individual cost of this demanding form of care labour. As an occupational phenomenon addressed frequently, and frankly, in the organisation’s leadership training material and events, it also functions as a signifier of collective threat to the youth work sector and those they serve.

In what Foucault has called “the era of biopower”, anatomo-politics and biopolitics operate at population level to solve internal problems or threats to productivity (Nordberg 2016; Foucault 1976). Even when used as an idiom of distress less stigmatised than clinical categories such as ‘depression’ (Wardell 2016) those with, or at risk of, burnout (i.e. all youth workers) become, as Rabinow and Rose suggest (2006, p. 215), both targets and active subjects of the biopolitics of mental health. This is evident in the way many of these stories of burnout were carefully performed by CYS leaders; doubling as cautionary tales, and as a mark of pride and legitimacy in a discursive field saturated with a neoliberal valuation of the individual as productive worker (Wardell 2016). It is also evident in the way that the painkillers, vitamins, and chocolate in Laura and Sam’s photo serve as an ironic nod to the cost of youth work on individual well-being, even while simultaneously performing the careful management of the self required of youth workers in this field. This logic extended also to the management and actualisation of the spiritual and psychological/emotional self, similarly constituted as practices which maximise professional efficacy, and which are *moral* labour for the caring, committed, and spiritually called young leader.

Davies (2013, p. 150) notes that the objective view of moral values within the church “offers an ongoing framework within which “the good” is debated, measured, pursued and realised” claiming that as a result “members of the faith community are engaged primarily in a moral project”. Experienced local youth worker Jim echoed this unconsciously during an interview when noting:

I think you’re failing as a youth worker if you are not looking for ways to improve yourself. If you are sitting down quite comfortably and going “OK, I’m doing well, and this is how it should be”, then something’s wrong.

His comment was typical of many of the workers because faith-based organisations must be examined as *over*-determining the ‘good’ subject, since they are also a site of employment, and the workplace has been determined to be another principle site of identity formation under capitalist ideologies (Miller and Rose 1995). Christian youth workers thus are governed not only by a long tradition of ideas surrounding the ‘good’ Christian, but also by neoliberal ideologies of the ‘good’ citizen and ‘good’ worker. The contradictions and tensions of these competing discourses we will argue lies in the transaction of “moral labour” as part of one’s employment. Both lines of discourse while endorsing the provision of compassionate care services, offer contradictory cautions regarding the “cost” (Figley 2002, p. 1434) of such caregiving. While Christian discourses include admonitions to selfless obedience (Macmillan 2011, p. 6), to hold nothing back in offering one’s life on an altar of service to God’s intuited calling, managerialist discourses in New Zealand health care focus on managing the cost of care by promoting interpersonal distance in caregiving. This involves a strategic economy of the self-intervening (in the case of expert carers) only through practises of the most perfectly delivered evidenced based practice and by contracting the affective elements of care to mean sustained excellence in customer service (Fitzgerald 2004).

An example of this occurred when Mike Dodge (CYS Director) promisingly referred in an interview to a manner of working “the way that God wired you”, which “still costs you a little bit but is not as draining, not depleting you of everything”. He elaborated: “When you are working within your gifting, in your sweet spot, you are doing what energises you”. This reflects the Euro-American capitalist historical trajectory from the early 1900’s when the “selection and allocation of workers to different tasks in terms of a matching of their capacities to the demands of the activity” characterised the growth of human beings as a productive force (Miller and Rose 1995). Popular ‘psy’ knowledges and techniques became key managerial tools while the mental hygiene movement also connected industrial problems with worker identity through the notion of “maladjustment” (ibid 1995, p. 433). In CYS there was a general expectation that in the right role, and with good practice (of self-awareness, and self-care), a leader *could* largely avoid the cost of care; “Serving outside your gift area tends to drain you” affirmed Tessa Dodge (CYS’s *StrengthsFinder* coordinator) in a leadership development session. She added “If you are always working in your strength, you will never burn out, because it will only give you energy”. As such, an experience of mental illness—or burnout—within CYS was likely to be read in line with the managerialist concept of organisational of [ill]fit, or poor personal and professional practice. To voice distress then represented a risk to an individual’s position, their perceived efficacy, authority and legitimacy, (and in paid positions) their income, and their personal and professional identity.

Therefore there is a lot ‘at stake’ (Kleinman 2006) in the onus for individuals to take responsibility in ‘managing’ themselves and their well-being. In this way these inescapably embedded and ‘moral’ decisions about how to make sense of, recover from, press through, adjust to, heal or manage the costs of a deeply challenging vocation were also processed in ways through which we can recognise neoliberal

ideology. In the sense of a discursive shaping and constraining of social actions even whilst interacting with and incorporating politically and culturally distinct identity paradigms (McCormack 2011, p. 283). It is the awareness of the internal threats of emotional labour, burnout, and compassion fatigue in the community that provide important local context for the promotion of *StrengthsFinder* as a resource to help leaders find their ‘sweet spot’ in the job; the balance between personal well-being and wholehearted, long-term service. Considered contextually as part of training around vocational identity and efficacy, and Christian discipleship more broadly, it is important to acknowledge that it can thus be read simultaneously as an extension of “the reach of neo-liberalism into public and private consciousness” (Neville 2014, p. 399) and as a productive “central and routine part of contemporary [spiritual]¹ life” (Beer 2015, p. 1). Although so diversely situated, we argue it is the successful integration of *both* readings that best explains these youth workers’ relationship to tools such as *StrengthsFinder* as ‘moral labour’. We discuss some of these discursive contradictions around *self-care*—namely the worker’s responsibility to identify and seek out those conditions under which they are ‘hardwired’ to perform to their optimum as worker versus the role of *self-care* in authentic spiritual practice, in the following two sections.

Psychological tools for reflexive selves

There are no ethnographic observations of youthworkers first encounter with Strengths Finder for it is a solitary, digitally mediated practice of introspection. However the reflexive recollections of the attendees and our own autoethnographic engagements with the tool suggest a characteristic style of subjectification which the following narrative crystallisation (Ellingson 2009) evokes.

...When the aspiring youth leaders register for the five day ‘Xtend’ training conference, the confirmation email immediately directs them to the link for a quiz; compulsory to complete before they attend. They click it, curiously. The survey offers binary statements presented alongside a clickable Likert scale. ‘I am a sensitive person; I am a logical person’ they read. ‘My view of humanity guides my life; My ambition guides my life’. They tick boxes, pause to puzzle occasionally, click ‘Next’, ‘Next’, ‘Next’ until 180 questions later there is a final soundless moment of computation before a list of five words appear on the screen. The list is simultaneously forwarded to the staff of Canterbury Youth Services (CYS), as the organisers of the colourfully branded 2012 ‘Xtend’ camp. The young people make little sense of it all yet, and eventually close the window with a sense of mild confusion...

In the next vignette we draw on the more observable ethnographic moments of the *StrengthsFinder* encounter several weeks later

... Vans and buses pull into the gravel parking lot of ‘Living Springs’, the multipurpose Christian conference centre nestled on the picturesque hills above Governor’s Bay, about half an hour out of Christchurch City. Young people throw

¹ (Our insertion).

open doors and step out to stretch stiff limbs as they admire the view. Hastening to follow the flow of other excited teenagers towards the main building complex, they haul bags and camp-style bedding across the lot and through the double-glass doors of the main building. Inside the foyer casually attired CYS staff greet them warmly and tick them off against a sheet of names, bestowing upon each one as they do so, a small, laminated brown paper card on a lanyard (see Fig. 3) which the attendee must wear for the rest of camp (Fig. 3). Printed on the card is a list of 5 words that they have seen once before; their Top 5 'Strengths' according to the *Clifton StrengthsFinder* assessment (Rath 2008; Winseman et al. 2004). People can be observed examining theirs closely and curiously, comparing amongst their friends and the other leaders from their group. Then, as a fresh crowd of arrivals pushes eagerly in behind them, the newly welcomed attendees are ushered onwards through another set of doors to go and find their bunkrooms. Picking up their bags, they slip on their lanyards in a moment of effortless interpellation (Althusser 1971) not only into the identity of the CYS 'youth leader' but also into the specific understanding of 'identity' as a fixed and individual set of qualities which they are morally obliged to uncover as a core part of the week's work (Fieldnotes July 2012).

During the camp, 'Strengths Bingo' was used as an icebreaker, and for many activities the crowd of 150 people was broken into groups based on their Strength. Furthermore each attendee was given a one-on-one session with a trained *StrengthsFinder* 'coach' (often a local senior youth worker). At the level of life (Rabinow and Rose 2006; Foucault 1978) the language and logic of *StrengthsFinder* became rapidly incorporated into the explanatory narratives and self-reflections people made about their own youth work practices in both formal sharing sessions and informal conversations. For example, sitting in a trendy inner-city café youth pastor Hannah, who was also trained as a *StrengthsFinder* coach,² relied almost entirely on the language of Strengths (as underlined here) to answer questions and discuss her experience.

(Interviewer): What do you do to invigorate yourself when the job is getting you down?

(Hannah): I'm a real thinker, I love just like dreaming, I've got Futuristic and Ideation and Strategic, so they are all real thinking ones.

Later in the interview, Hannah discussed her emotional response to a heart-rending situation related to her work.

(Hannah): I just felt, like *terrible*, because I've got Restorative, and that always makes me want to fix problems, and [I also have] Individualisation, so I see the problem for that individual, and feel it for myself.

(Interviewer): How does empathy play into the work for other leaders in your team?

(Hannah): If they've got, like, if they just have all those real caring strengths, like Developer and Empathy[...] it can be really hard.

² Someone who runs one-on-one sessions with people to help them understand their own Strengths profile. CYS trains senior youth leaders/pastors as coaches to enable them to assist with coaching other younger leaders, and young people, in this at events like Xtend.

Hannah was very aware the saturation of this tool into her ways of working and thinking—laughing self-effacingly at herself for being unable to answer without returning to the terminology. “It’s just so crazy like how all my Strengths really helped in the job that I’m in”, she declared in somewhat awed tones, towards the end of our interview. Despite the deliberate semiotic ‘flattening’ of authority roles within CYS (Wardell 2016), trained Strength coaches in particular exist to transform both others’ and their own ‘hearts’ into objects of analysis.

Across the city, being interviewed in a noisy mall food-court, Emma—a young (volunteer) church-based worker and (paid) 24/7 youth worker with colourfully dyed short-cropped hair—provided a strong example of both this belief and its lived complexity. She was adamant that there was no particular skillset or personality that would make a ‘good’ youth leader. She mused on her own, rural youth group: “We have so many people with different skills, *so* many different skills. *So* many different personalities. And because of that we can reach so many different kids”. Like many other leaders responding to this question, she reframed the topic with an emphasis on individuality, and thus intra-community heterogeneity, rather than conformity. This is not to say that individuals in CYS do not experience normative pressure towards particular ways of being and behaving. Rather it shows a particular conceptualisation of selfhood through which subjectivities of the ‘good’ Christian, and the ‘good’ leader are understood and communicated as *individual* experiences. Leaders were admonished to ‘live close to your own heart’, as the SYLT speaker put it and this was a recurring theme observed throughout this and many other camps and will be elaborated in the following section. Yet even after her assertions of the value of diversity among the leadership, Emma candidly admitted that she had often struggled with feeling different to other youth leaders as a negative experience, earlier in her youth work career. She had to learn, she explained, to ‘act like herself’ through a process of self-talk: “There’s no right way to do something” she explained; “It’s good to go: ‘God made me, God gave me these strengths, wouldn’t God want me to use them?’” The virtue she expresses here is again not a particular set of qualities, but rather the more general virtues of self-awareness and self-knowledge... the virtue of the reflexive process itself, through which identity is cultivated, rather than the particularised result.

Similarly, in a separate interview, long-haired, practically attired rural youth worker Steph expressed some awkwardness in wrestling with her rating as “not particularly empathetic” according to the *StrengthsFinder* evaluation. “There’s other ways of caring as well” she was eager to assert. Steph also expressed her self-awareness and strategic navigation of these facts in her practices by teaming up with another leader who did ‘have’ empathy, as in the example she gave of her care of a particular troubled teenage girl. She recalled a time when the other leader “Just went and hugged her, and the two of them just sat down and cried together, and I was like ‘What? There’s no way I can do that’”. However like many other participants who also identify as ‘low’ empathy, she was also quick to highlight the dangers and drawbacks of that particular strength for a youth worker, who would need “boundaries around that feeling” lest you yourself “become hurt, or tired”, and needing “balance” lest you “become heart-broken all the time!” The ultimate emphasis was again on awareness of one’s own emotional capabilities, limitations

and strengths. Such awareness was a key part of this process of being a caring, effective, responsible youth leader in Canterbury in and of itself.

StrengthsFinder is clearly characteristic of biopower in that it “distributes the living according to value and utility” (Nordberg 2016, p. 244). Its centrality in the vocational experiences of Hannah, Emma, and Steph alike illustrates the way it operates through technologies of the self; cultivating both self-examination and self-management (Schilling and Casper 2015; Foucault 1988; Rose 1996). The proliferation of this psychometric tool into a faith-based setting is not serendipitous. For example, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries non-state bodies, including philanthropic organisations, and commercial entities, have been key players in biopolitical processes; in the mapping out new knowledges of life, health, truth and value (Rabinow and Rose 2006, p. 203). Governmentalised states are thus shaped by and through “ever-growing apparatuses of knowledge collection and problematization” (Rabinow and Rose 2006, p. 203) of which psychometric testing is a potent example. However while many authors examining the use of testing technologies in other settings have focussed on the force of these mechanisms in shaping individuals towards some kind of normative mean (Schilling and Casper 2015), *StrengthsFinder*’s logic emphasises efficiency through the utilisation of diversity. Thus while Shilling argues that the ‘project’ of psychometrics embodies many of the ideals of modernity (2015), the case of *StrengthsFinder*, we argue, embodies something more of a post-modern emphasis on individuality and authenticity. Considering this, there are some essential connections to be made around the interface between the view of individual, fixed identity that *StrengthsFinder* offers, and the *type* of reflexive work it both promotes and enables which can be personally confronting and (as per Rose 1996)—responsibilising.

The ideological performative and positioning power of the *StrengthsFinder* testing is significant. It creates and promotes “truth discourses” about the “vital” characteristics of living human beings (Rabinow and Rose 2006, p. 197); in this case, not only their bodies, but their minds, emotions, and identities. It employs a reified quantitative metric on identity—prior even to the face to face sessions of the Xtend camp—and the identity of the leader is very efficiently constructed in the process. Foucault’s late career work on “technologies of the self” highlighted connections between classical notions of self-care/self-cultivation, and self-knowledge, suggesting that indeed it is only through pursuing and constructing knowledge of the self that subjects devise ways of living in an overdetermined world (1988). “You have to take your heart, rip it out of your chest, and take a real good look at it, and ask: ‘Who am I?’” one CYS event speaker was recorded entreating their audience. Certainly there was a strong understanding among CYS leaders (communicated in group work and shared informally between each other) that it was only through discovering their ‘real’ selves that they could devise ways of being a youth worker that were unique to them even whilst fitting with the locally specific subjectivity of the ‘good’ youth worker. Kirmayer (2006, pp. 237–238) has argued that an appeal to the “true self” is one way that western values of individualism become transformed into tacit facts about the mind, through systems such as psychodynamic psychotherapy (2006, pp. 237–238). In this way psychometric tools like *StrengthsFinder* construct not only personal identities, but socially shared ‘tacit

facts' about what identity—the mind, the (western) self—is, i.e. individual, fixed, hidden (Elias 1987) and as shall now be shown—biological (through biblical references to the formation of identity in utero).

An example of the promotion of this fixed identity as also biologised occurred on the second morning of the 2012 Xtend camp. After a short briefing about the day's activities, the young people were released and spread out across the camp for morning devotion. Many settled themselves around the hilltop in the fresh early-morning air, zipping their coats up tighter and opening their notebooks to the page they had been advised to reflect upon. Printed there was one of the more familiar verses among the local Protestant faith community—Psalm 139. The first and last verses of this Psalm illustrates God undertaking the same kind of close interior examination of humankind, that youth leaders are also entreated to undertake on themselves. However it was also taught (verses 13–16 particularly) in a way that reinforced a contemporary biologised view of identity as largely fixed before birth, by emphasising the presence of God during the creation of the physical form of the person, in their mother's womb. "Be who God created you to be" was the common phrase grounding notions of calling in this spiritual knowledge. This in turn reflects the biomedical discourses of the wider secular New Zealand society within which CYS operates, where genetics is popularly understood as establishing the fixed and unique combinations of traits for individuals before birth. Ian Hacking uses the pertinent term "folk-genetics" to describe these contemporary interpretations of genetic science as supportive of the idea of the essential self (2004, p. 286). Similarly folk neurology (Vrecko 2006, p. 300) has seen the term "hard-wired" spread as a common colloquialism, along with an idea that some elements of an individual's mind are unchangeable.

As Schilling and Casper observe "In modernity, psychometric tools emerged as a means and method for standardizing, linking, and hardening formerly "soft" knowledge claims in psychiatry and psychology" (2015). In CYS an "array of authorities" could be observed, in this case often spiritual authorities, considered competent to "speak the truth" (Rabinow and Rose 2006). Such workers were fluent in the new vocabularies, new narratives, and new languages drawn from popularised science and into lay populations (Mantilla 2015). Ultimately this view of one's personal characteristics as written not only on the interior of the soul, but written onto the deep interior structures of the physical body, cultivates a view of identity as both hidden and fixed, while also lending a scientific quality to the process of reflexive self 'discovery'. We turn next to those ethnographic examples in which *StrengthFinder* was used poignantly and poetically (rather than the preceding pragmatic examples) as an aid to devotional practice.

Traditional techniques for spiritual selves

The CYS leaders performed 'self-awareness' as a key aspect of their idealised professional identity through articulate discussion of the subject of themselves. Fluency in *StrengthsFinder*, alongside the other psychological (or pseudo-psychometric) tools mentioned earlier, acted as a form of cultural capital. But the reflective

practices that accompanied them also formed a significant component of one's devotional life. These were built into daily routines alongside a number of other locally articulated forms of spiritual reflexivity. For example, on arrival, all camp attendees received a printed A4 booklet containing bible verses, notes and diagrams, and a number of blank lined pages left for every sermon, workshop, or devotional time in order to write down one's thoughts and experiences. Attendees were reminded continually to bring the booklet with them to different workshops and activities in order to take notes. Alongside the solo 'devotional time', was the group-based 'spiritual ministry' time. A spiritual ministry session often occurred following an evening speaker and more often towards the end of the camp. It followed a more charismatic, spontaneous format than the structured educational and team-building sessions of the day, combining various elements of music (sometimes with a larger worship band brought in especially for that night), prayer and sharing/prophesying. There was a focus on individual reflection, interaction with God (through the Holy Spirit, summoned to manifest among the group), and the experience of emotional/intellectual 'breakthroughs' (including conviction, encouragement, or revelation) which represented longed for spiritual and personal development.

The 'sharing sessions' were usually a daily occurrence and involved individuals being invited to present a personal reflection or insight to the group, with few explicit parameters set. Large numbers of the audience would form quickly into a line leading up to the front. Picking up the microphone, those who shared were standing literally and metaphorically on stage and began by sharing their names, forming a striking parallel with the performance of an AA style support group meeting. During such sessions at events like Xtend, self-knowledge was performed as marker of 'good' youth leader who has "really got something out of" a camp or conference. People who shared were commended for being brave, and crying in particular was seen as a marker of authentic emotion and openness. In the same way that patients in psychotherapy learn to make "their inner experience (or self) and social roles, identity and interaction (personhood) a central topic of conversation" (Kirmayer 2006, p. 237), the younger leaders learnt to identify and perform their innermost and sometimes most painful processes to the group. Though it is the *junior* (high school aged, aspiring) leaders at Xtend who partook of this to the more extreme degree, even with the somewhat altered expectations and emotional display rules among senior leaders at SYLT, similar practices were still followed, and similar values expressed.

The long history of such techniques in Christian spiritual experience is clear. For example among the techniques of the self which Foucault identified, were personal letters, religious confession, self-focussed dialogue with others, listening to the self-declarations of others and subsequent contemplation (1988, p. 29). Weber also noted among Protestants after the reformation, a tendency to use tools such as diaries of confession to "monitor his own pulse" (1905/2001, p. 76). The CYS activities described, all involve activities that contemporarily parallel Foucault's list, with a particular emphasis on the longstanding Christian tradition of confession. Confessional narratives, Hughes writes, are part of a process "in which the self is rendered visible and made amenable to change, and ultimately transformation" (2010, p. 48). Bradford similarly explains that they promote "ethical work on the self that seeks to

shape subjects in specific ways”, and that through them, leaders are able to problematise themselves and to recognise their obligation to become a particular kind of person (2007, p. 295). They are therefore an excellent example of an effective technology of the self in that they engender individuals to *want* to engage in moral labour in order to take on very desirable, culturally determined (if individualised) subjectivities. *StrengthsFinder* exists as one new (and prominently promoted) tool, among an already extensive toolkit from which the CYS leaders draw in order to make themselves an object of not only the psychological gaze but a moral, spiritual one. The creative negotiation of multiple truth understandings of personhood, identity and well-being is an example both of the flexibility of post-modern discursivities and the strategic labour of the leaders for whom so much is at stake. The tools are employed often interchangeably, or in tandem, so long as they maintain usefulness under the repeated local rhetoric of “becoming self-aware about how *you* connect with God”. The biological/psychological/spiritual self, once made an object of awareness and attention, can then be worked upon, purified, optimised; the reshaping of social and personal subjectivities begins from here (Mantilla 2015).

Although ‘seasons’ of growth are acknowledged, there is an expectation that one will always be undertaking some form of moral labour. The language of this kind of work on the self abounds. As Chris’s earlier statement suggests through the visceral images of ‘ripping out’ one’s heart, this is not always easy or pleasant. Self-work is, indeed, work. The process of examining, critiquing and shaping oneself can be painful, but undertaking it is an essential part of the moral labour of the ‘good’ leader in Canterbury. We turn now to a deeper discussion of what we mean by this concept.

Moral labour and the making of the responsible, neoliberal faith worker

The moralisation of the ‘examined life’ has historically strong roots in the classicist tradition (Foucault 1988), and has also been a longstanding fixture of Christianity in the form of the ‘truth obligation’: the reflexive obligation that “each person has the duty to know who he is, that is, to try to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognise temptations, to locate desire” (1988, p. 40). More recently Pentecostalism has also been characterised as particularly promoting an inward-looking relation to self, involving high levels of introspection and self-scrutiny (Eves 2010, p. 511). This distinctly western emphasis on the *interior* life of the (Protestant) Christian believer, according to Thomas (2000, p. 53), led to high valuing of self-examination as the necessary precursor to the purification and sanctification of the soul, and growth in the virtues as the basis of the ‘moral’ Christian life. As we have discussed, CYS youth workers also enter into a discursive field about the ‘good’ Christian youth leader, which is accompanied by enjoinders to undertake detailed, reflexive work on the self in order to become that kind of person (Bradford 2007, p. 295)—achieved, as we have illustrated, both through and between the use of traditional spiritual disciplines and scientifically reified psychometric tools. In a faith-based setting, we argue that these activities,

undertaken willingly in pursuit of this idealised identity, are best understood as ‘moral labour’.

A similar term has been used in Rebecca Allahyari’s study of the formation of Christian (volunteer) workers in the USA (2000). Allahyari uses the term “moral selving” to describe the flexible, dynamic process of “creating oneself as a more virtuous, more spiritual person” (2000, p. 4). Her discussion of the different rhetoric that faith-based organisations use to change the “core self” of recruits, brackets moral selving as one form of deep emotional work. The variant term “moral work” was used by Ryan et al. (2010), who examined narrative and subject formation in breastfeeding mothers through a Foucauldian lens, noting the way women balance public ideologies and practical constraints by drawing on both expert and experiential knowledge to construct their sense of self. With the substitution of the term ‘labour’ for ‘work’ in our own approach, we recognise the distinctiveness of self work done in the system of capital, in the same way Arlie Hochschild distinguishes (private) “emotion work” from (commodified) “emotional labour” (1983), while still describing its deeply performative effect on self. For despite its previously mentioned “grass roots” level of organisation in New Zealand, faith-based youth work is still understood to be labour. Furthermore, it is a style of labour demanding emotional reflexivity, as Hughes (2010) has similarly noted of the corporate tool known as Emotional Intelligence. It is also aligned morally with Weber’s discussion of certain types of professions being better understood as “vocations” rather than mere “gaming” over better hours and wages (Gerth and Mills 1946).

Our observations of the use of psychometric testing within CYS, highlight the link between reflexive processes and the governmentality of the individual by neoliberal-managerialist discourses. This argument is best made using historical lens, as supplied by Miller and Rose (1995), which enables an essential critical recognition that the emphasis on efficiency that these tools bring strongly resembles the logic behind the implementation of psychometric testing in the rapidly industrialising workforces of capitalism in the 1900s. At that time, the use of psychological techniques to select and allocate workers fulfilled dual promises of productive output (through efficient utilisation of human beings as a productive force) and the answer to movements pushing for the “humanisation” of the workforce, since they appeared as therapeutic tools for the actualisation of the worker (Miller and Rose 1995, p. 434). As previously noted, a new expectation was arising, that individuals might find fulfilment in work rather than seek emancipation from it or approach it with a utilitarian stance, identifying it newly instead as a realm to “produce, discover, and experience ourselves” (Miller and Rose 1995, p. 457). This in fact is also part of the process Weber charted, post-reformation, with the rising moral significance of work eventually outgrowing that of the church amidst the rise of capitalism and against an undercurrent of Protestant existential anxieties (Weber 1905/2001). This might be considered as doubly meaningful, therefore, applied to faith-based organisations such as CYS where the notion of ‘calling’ retains significance as a sense of transcendent purposiveness, as well as a motivator towards productivity and economic success.

Criticisms of such tools for vocational and spiritual actualisation do arise however from within faith-based communities, for example Horvath (2013) whose work we have already mentioned, raises concerns about the increasing popularity of Spiritual Gift inventories that are entirely methodological. He encourages more rigorous employment of scientific psychometric parameters to “improve” these tests on the basis that they have the potential to “enhance the effectiveness of church ministries”. In this way his article leaves the ideologically rooted nature of the use of psychometrics in faith-based communities entirely unproblematised, while demonstrating Foucault’s notion that technologies of the self are “perpetuated by expertise claims” which in this era hinge on scientific discourse (Hughes 2010, p. 48). *StrengthsFinder* draws on this evidence-based, scientific approach strongly—citing “50 years of research” prominently on its promotional material as a marker, making successful claims to special knowledge (and thus power) within boundaries that are frequently policed in the way Horvath’s article exemplifies.

Beer (2015) argues for the deep embeddedness of measure and data collections within everyday neoliberalism, drawing on Hacking’s philosophical position of “dynamic nominalism” which emphasises the creation of certain “kinds” of people through the creation of categories and vice versa—a line of analysis that is very relevant to *StrengthsFinder* and the qualitative metric it implies. Hacking for example specifies the way experts and institutions are implicated in the process through ten “engines”, within which counting and qualifying are the first two; clearly employed in the qualitative metric of *StrengthsFinder* (2004). Engines five, six and seven, are to medicalise, biologise, and geneticise, which are evident here also in the emphasis in the CYS community can be heard on the way the traits identified as ‘natural’ or ‘hard-wired’ into individuals. A key example can be shown around the idea of being ‘caring’ (both as action and affect), which is of central importance to this community and a deeply complex process/quality (Thelen 2015). One particularly fascinating change the *StrengthsFinder* tool makes on emic conceptualisations of this and of associated terms, is that ‘empathy’ is formulated as one of 34 Strengths which people at the lower levels of training are then informed of the presence (or absence) of in their Top 5. While ‘people with empathy’ or ‘people without empathy’ are clearly *not* new social categories of personhood, it is possible to use Hacking’s work to understand the way CYS as an institution and CYS staff trained as Strengths coaching ‘experts’ are opening and closing certain possibilities for empathetic labour through the creation of ‘empathy’ as a discrete rather than general capacity. After all, there are distinct behaviours and emotional experiences (both emically ‘good’ and ‘bad’) which are associated with empathetic labour. The addressing of an individual by particular names and categories (and their eager acceptance of these) is part of the process of interpellation. In CYS, in relation to empathy, it reflects the interpellation of youth leaders not into a single, uniform ‘youth leader’ subjectivity, but into the idea of individual identity and the fixed self, who may or may not have empathy, but must either way enact their care labour according to the category to which they have been hailed, ‘authentically’ according to his or her type; the scientifically reified process of ‘discovering’ one’s type therefore becoming an equally important precursory aspect of their moral labour.

In a faith-based organisation amidst a neoliberalised, managerialised social service sector, these self-reflexive practices are both moralised as spiritual disciplines, and through neoliberal discourses they become part of the responsabilisation of the worker (Rose 1996). People are only held responsible for what they are aware of (Kirmayer 2006, p. 240) and such practices contribute to bringing increasingly more parts of the interior lives of these leaders into this purview, using managerialist tools and techniques including tools such as *StrengthsFinder*, Myers Briggs, or worship pathways and spiritual gifts specifically in CYS. For the responsabilised CYS leader, these and other technologies of the self are framed as a necessary part of becoming a better Christian, a better leader, a better person, and (implicitly) a more responsible citizen and worker. Embedded within locally specific but politically invested notions of the 'good' person, engagement with these tools both as part of professional development activities and within 'private' life and thought, can therefore be described as moral labour, even whilst clearly expressing a facet of neoliberal governmentality as well.

Hughes argues similarly of EI that while it "ostensibly offers the conditions for a liberation of emotional expression", in that it replaces more rigid feeling and display rules, despite this positive public face it represents no more than a neologistic repackaging of other more overt forms of governmentality (2010, p. 34). In the same manner, psychometric tools are used in the faith-based communities, being technologies of the self (Foucault 1988) rather than of overt domination, and yet representing an even more effective 'colonisation' (Hughes 2010) of individual subjectivities by institutional discourses because of this. A key aspect of this in CYS is the way that teaching around psychometric tools such as *StrengthsFinder* is directly linked to discussions of mental health and well-being, burnout (a locally salient, idiom of distress, deeply important at this historical moment), and self-care. Psychometric tools in CYS are 'sold' as beneficial to the individual youth leader. Contrasted to being 'stuck' working in an area that requires the greater energy expenditure of working 'in' one's weaknesses (a situation to which burnout is emically attributed), they are pitched not only around improving efficiency, but as a form of self-actualisation that protects and enhances well-being in an emotionally and spiritually demanding field of work.

Working out how God has wired you, how to work in your gift area, or what gives you energy, are key parts of the vocational training of CYS leaders. CYS counsellor and Strengths Coach Karen said in her interview that youth workers "need to discover what works for them [...] there's no right or wrong way". Such statements encourage the tailoring of each youth worker's practice to their individual selves. Thus the individualisation of well-being principles, and the responsabilisation of the ('good') worker for knowing and managing themselves accordingly, can also draw on psychometric tools as part of "the calculated administration of life" (Miller and Rose 1995, p. 457). *StrengthsFinder* operationalises these discourses of self-actualisation, whilst maximising the efficiency of self-care activities, and therefore also maximise the amount of time left for the youth worker to be productively engaged in their task.

The rights of the neoliberal citizen go hand in hand with her obligations; to life, health and cure (Rabinow and Rose 2006). In the spiritually-oriented context of

StrengthsFinder training for CYS leaders, this further increases the extent of their responsabilisation, towards not only their physical health but their emotional and spiritual well-being. Metaphors of the self-as-vessel, and the promotion of ‘zero-sum’ equation metaphors for well-being—of care labour *versus* self-care—heighten the sense of threat and the need for careful self-management to avoid becoming ‘drained’ (Wardell 2016). In general other authors have also observed that psychometric tools are adept at offering answers and solutions that continually put the onus on the individual to “to deal with growing demands in neoliberal society” (Heinman and Heinman 2010, p. 292). This diverts attention away from structural concerns, power inequalities, or systemic problems (see also Neville 2014; Kintz 2007; Cooper 2015) and focuses it continually back on the individual as the vehicle for their own advancement and actualisation, their own care (i.e. the strenuous efforts to avoid or at the very least explain with hindsight, moral lapses into burnout), its cure and (in this study) spiritual growth. This aspect of the use of psychometrics in Canterbury Youth Services cannot and should not be ignored. The promotion of *StrengthsFinder* as both a corporate and non-profit tool by Canterbury Youth Services staff is an example of the encroaching, albeit sometimes stilted or uneven spread of neoliberal ideologies, technologies, and ‘therapeutics’ across global and throughout local worlds (Rabinow and Rose 2006), and in this case, a local faith-world. Clearly the faith-based sector is not nearly as immune to the encroachment of managerialist discourse as authors such as Davies (2013) have implied. It is our contention that the effects of this increasing imbrication of neoliberal logic into the faith-based social service sector via psychometrics is only recently being addressed with the theoretical implications for subject formation still quite varied.

Conclusions

As Foucault stated in the opening quote, the actions taken upon the self—the ‘soul’—are always contingent upon self-knowledge. In this case study, it is the reified quantitative psychometric forms of self-knowledge that have become the flexible, refined, and powerful tools of neoliberal governmentality within this faith-based community. CYS workers routinely use these tools to engage in very deep work on their emotional, spiritual, and moral subjectivity. This forms part of their process of responding to their calling, and in fact in our New Zealand study has been woven in with older spiritual disciplines of self-reflection, prayer, meditation, devotional time, worship and confession, almost flawlessly. Nonetheless these ultimately succeed in serving organisational purposes and maximising employee commitment and efficiency in service provision to youth in the region—thus they are a form of moral labour which allows the moral lapse of burnout to be tolerated, provided the experience is well examined through the lens of the *StrengthFinder* tool. They effectively craft the leaders—or more accurately, engage them in crafting *themselves*—into stable, sustainable, situated-ly ideal forms of the ‘good’ youth leader. Although this is not necessarily bad, it is most certainly dangerous (Foucault

in Hughes 2010) for under-resourced grassroots workers struggling with high service demands and faith-based commitments to this service.

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