Living in the Tension

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Living in the Tension
Care, Selfhood, and Wellbeing among Faith-Based Youth Workers
Susan Wardell

Living in the Tension

Care, Selfhood, and Wellbeing among Faith-Based Youth Workers

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List of Acronyms

24/7 Youth Work — An FBO working in Canterbury High Schools, partnered with CYS
COU — Church of Uganda
CF — Compassion Fatigue
CYS — Canterbury Youth Services
GUSCO — Gulu Support the Children Organisation
FBO — Faith-Based Organisation
IDP — Internally Displaced People
KIA — Kampala International University
LRA — Lord's Resistance Army
ME — Myalgic encephalomyelitis
MOTEM — Moment of Truth Evangelistic Ministries
NGO — Non-Governmental Organisation
NZ — New Zealand
SAE — Stephen Adundo Egesa (in photo credits)
SAP — Structural Adjustment Policy
SW — Susan Wardell (in photo credits)
SYLT — Southern Youth Leaders Training (an annual CYS event)
UIICT — Uganda Institute of Information and Communication Technologies
UN — United Nations
UCU — Uganda Christian University
X-tend — An annual CYS conference for high-school aged aspiring youth leaders
YMCA — Young Men's Christian Association

List of Non-English Terms*

Aotearoa — New Zealand
Balokole — Ugandan 'born-again' Christian (emerging from the East African Revival).
Bodaboda — Public transport motorcycle
Buganda — the area in the Central Region of Uganda
Bugandan — the ethnic group associated with the Buganda region in Central Uganda
Covera — Plastic bag or container
Gomesi — Colourful, floor-length dress traditional for women in the Buganda/Busoga regions. In Kampala commonly worn by older women to church, or at formal occasions.
Hinengaro — Mental (health)
Jaja — Grandmother
Kalo — Soft 'bread' dish made from brown millet flower
Kugenda mu maaso — To go straight forward
Lugandan — Language group belonging to Buganda region, Central Uganda (incl. Kampala)
Māori — Indigneous New Zealanders
Matatu — Public transport, taxi van
Matoke — Fried plantain dish
Muchomo — Barbequed goat meat
Mzungu — White person
Pākehā — New Zealand European
Te Whare Tapa Whā — The four cornerstones of (Māori) health
Tinana — Physical (health)
Wairua — Spiritual (health)
Whānau — Family

* May the reader note that throughout this book I have chosen not to italicise terms in Te Reo Māori, since this is the indigenous language of New Zealand, and one of the nation's three official languages, and would be inappropriate to identify with markers of 'foreign' language.

Series Editors' Preface

Consuming Work, Absorbing Stress: Dialectics of Faith and Service

*Andrew Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart**

Susan Wardell has given us here a most unusual work, in which she examines the phenomenon and experience of stress in the special circumstances of faith-based service with Christian youth groups in two contrasting settings, Uganda in Africa and Christchurch in New Zealand. Her study both reports carefully on the context of activities in these two very different areas and gives us further insight derived from the fact that she herself was a professional participant in the youth ministry work she was studying. This is the meaning of her term for her study as an 'intimate ethnography', one that brings us close to the people and close to the author herself as she incorporates her embodied experience into the text.

Through all this, Dr. Wardell maintains a rigorous analytical and comparative approach, drawing on and commenting on general studies of personhood, self-making, service work as compassion and empathy, and the emotional and physical stresses that emerge out of this kind of context. She discusses thoroughly the issue of her positionality in relation to her study. Everyone has the constraints and possibilities of their positionality, and the question of subjectivity that flows from this observation can be answered by referring to the phenomenological viewpoint that all knowledge is a product of subjectivity. Entering into people's life worlds, the anthropologist's task is to observe, interpret, and explain events and processes, using, rather than denying, one's own subjectivity. Dr. Wardell elaborates her account from within the intimate contexts of the life worlds she was in rather than, she says, focusing on broader social structure. It is also clear from her account that life worlds themselves are conditioned by the broader structures that surround them. (See in general Stewart and Strathern eds. 2009 on cross-cultural studies of Christianity.)

This point is made clear in Dr. Wardell's careful discussions of the effects of neoliberal ideological practices on Christian care work. A constant drumbeat of insistence on individual effort and responsibility, with a corresponding reduction of instrumental support — this is the same trend that is found increasingly in corporate business and in academia. Apart from the rationale of cost-cutting that runs through all corporate affairs, the neoliberal trend feeds on the rolling and remorseless digitization of all activities and the drive to eliminate paper, seen as an ultimate, self-justifying ideal.

In Dr. Wardell's discussion the neoliberal drive cuts into the lives of care workers by introducing a managerial tone into activities and policies. Such a distanced ethos is

at odds with the interpersonal demand for altruistic giving that suffuses the ethic of youth work in particular.

Pastoral care is at the heart of Christian ideology in general and is strongly emphasized in youth work. A central motif is that youth work is demanding and constant, because the needs of youths are multiple and insistent. The care worker's response to this demand can result in the phenomenon of 'burn-out', a feeling of stress and exhaustion. In a context like that of Uganda, where a preponderance of the population can be classified as 'youth', this situation is intensified. (The phenomenon also applies more widely, especially in contexts of disaster relief work.)

Care work cannot simply be equated with the work of social services run by government, because it is bound up with religion. It is religious teachings and their intensification in prayer meetings and large-scale rallies that is central to the whole complex. This in turn can be very demanding because of the high emotional intensity involved. Youth work becomes a focus when there are problems of a wide social kind, and a recurrent theme in 'born again' narratives is that a person was led astray into sin (alcohol, abuse, drugs, crime) and was saved by experiencing a religious conversion, which then must be reinforced by constant counseling and support in order to avoid a relapse into sin. 'Sin' here functions as a driver for religious effort, and burn-out can result from the exhaustion of keeping up the emotional pressure to defeat sin in a cosmos sharply divided into arenas classified as good and evil.

The intensity of pastoral work that flows from this scenario is mirrored in many other contexts with which we are familiar in our own fieldwork. Charismatic churches in particular depend on a strong emotional impetus, combined with an emphasis on renewal of religious experience and senses of healing that are intended to accompany this renewal. This is a template that is followed intentionally in ritual practices and is in effect a theatrical script that is enacted with high intensity on a regular basis. The idea of renewal may be brought forward most clearly at transitional times from one period of time to the next such as Christmas and the New Year in the Gregorian calendar.

We experienced this in the turn of the year from 2017 to 2018 in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, when Assemblies of God congregations among Mokei tribespeople were engaged in lengthy reaffirmations of faith and commitment, designed to ward off demonic forces and ensure the victory of 'the good' in their lives. In Rarotonga in the Cook Islands, where we were leading a Study Abroad group of university students from the USA on our Pitt in the Pacific Program, we were fortunate to observe a service of the Cook Islands Christian Church (a conservative Anglican-derived denomination) at which youth group representatives from numerous local groups successively came forward to declare their faith and commitment. Everyone was expected to play their part in these groups by making a personal statement, quoting a bible text, or singing a song. We saw there a tableau of indigenous activity that dispensed with care workers and endowed the youths with their own empowerment. There is little doubt that a lot of care work and preparations had gone into the creation of this tableau.

Rarotongo has its share of usual social problems resulting from alcohol and drug abuse and occasional violence, so the enactment took place against this familiar kind of backdrop. What was interesting was to see this handled collectively in a very group-oriented, Polynesian way, making the church into a venue like the indigenous pre-Christian *marae* meeting places, church congregation names standing in the place of

lineage and chiefship affiliations. The *marae* meeting place was also a sacred place, as the church is. In the early years of Christian mission influence in Rarotonga in the nineteenth century, it is clear that the missionaries and their evangelists altered the localities in which their adherent lived by clustering people around new church buildings, so that the local social structures of today reflect these early changes. These changes became sedimented into Church practices which have assumed a traditional form, and the presentations by youth groups at the service we attended formed a union between Church and kinship criteria. (See, for some early history, Rere 1982.)

Sensitively aligned with current trends of theorizing about personhood, self-making, and concepts of faith-based service, well-being, and stress leading to 'burn-out'. Dr. Wardell's book charts new descriptive and analytical domains in the broad facets of both medical anthropology and ritual studies, underlining the importance of a comparative and holistic approach to the complex field of embodied and emplaced human lives.

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Stewart, Pamela J. and Andrew Strathern, eds. 2009. Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmologies and Histories. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

* Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern) and Andrew J. Strathern are a wife-and-husband research team who are based in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh and co-direct the Cromie Burn Research Unit. They are frequently invited international lecturers and have worked with numbers of museums to assist them with their collections. Stewart and Strathern have published over 50 books and over 250 articles, book chapters, and essays on their research in the Pacific (mainly Papua New Guinea and the South-West Pacific region, e.g., Samoa and Fiji); Asia (mainly Taiwan, and also including Mainland China and Japan); and Europe (primarily Scotland, Ireland and the European Union countries in general); and also New Zealand and Australia. Their most recent co-authored books include *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); *Kinship in Action: Self and Group* (Prentice Hall, 2011); *Peace-Making and the Imagination: Papua New Guinea Perspectives* (University of Queensland Press with Penguin Australia, 2011); *Ritual: Key Concepts in Religion* (Bloomsbury Academic Publications, 2014); *Working in the Field: Anthropological Experiences Across the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) *Breaking the Frames: Anthropological Conundrums* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and *Diaspora, Disasters, and the Cosmos: Rituals and Images* (Carolina Academic Press, 2018). Their recent co-edited books include *Research Companion to Anthropology* (Ashgate Publishing, 2015); *Exchange and Sacrifice* (Carolina Academic Press, 2008) and *Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmologies and Histories* (Carolina Academic Press, 2009) and the Updated and Revised Chinese version: Taipei, Taiwan: Linking Publishing, 2010. Stewart and Strathern's current research includes the topics of Cosmological Landscapes; Ritual Studies; Political Peace-making; Comparative Anthropological Studies of Disasters and Climatic Change; Language, Culture and Cognitive Science; and Scottish and Irish Studies. For many years they served as Associate Editor and General Editor (respectively) for the *Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania* book series and they are Co-Series Editors for the *Anthropology and Cultural History in Asia and the Indo-Pacific* book series. They also currently Co-Edit four other book series: *Ritual Studies*; *Medical Anthropology*; *European Anthropology* and *Disaster Anthropology,* and they are the long-standing Co-Editors of the *Journal of Ritual Studies* [Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/ritualstudies]. Their webpages, listing publications and other scholarly activities, are: http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/sandspublicat.htm and http://www.stewartstrathern.pitt.edu/

Preface

Beyond Burnout

An interest in the phenomenon of 'burnout' formed the genesis of this study. Or perhaps more accurately, an *experience* of burnout did: my own. At the time I was an undergraduate, studying fulltime, working part-time, and passionately involved in a variety of volunteer activities. The period of exhaustion and emotional distress that disrupted this required a great deal of sense-making. It also required a name. Within the faith-based youth work community I was part of the term 'burnout' seemed to package up a unique complex of embodied experiences, emotions, assumptions, and causal attributions. It was a powerful cultural signifier: people knew what I meant just as soon as I uttered the word. It was in many ways an 'easy' illness to lay claim to … and a very difficult one in other ways. As time passed and I forged forward with an adjusted sense of self, I became interested in examining the interplay between cultural sensibilities and emotional distress for this particular form of suffering (Desjarlais 1992a).

'Burnout' is an international buzzword. It has become of site of intense academic interest, as well as a hot topic in many professional spheres. A number have studies have highlighted, in particular, the link between occupational burnout and the 'helping professions' (Moreno-Jiménez & Villodres 2010, Jansen 2010, Kahn 1993, Miller 1995, Abbott 2009). A lesser explored facet of this, literature also shows high levels of burnout for Christian ministry leaders internationally (Lewis, Turton & Francis 2007, Doolittle 2008, Golden et al 2004, Ellison, Gay & Glass 1989, Ellison 1991) and across all religious denominations (Schaefer and Jacobson 2009). These findings juxtapose the stereotype of the "perennially cheerful" believer (Greene-McCreight 2006: 15). Behind the statistics this can become "a cruel caricature for those Christians who are indeed depressed or otherwise mentally ill" (15). A perhaps surprisingly small body of pastoral literature on burnout has also emerged from within the topic. In the USA John Sanford's (1982) book *Ministry Burnout* is probably one of the earliest and most common volumes, with others following on with a similar focus on external, often organisational features (such as high work expectations and role conflict) as the cause of burnout (Baab 2003, Pector 2005, Schaefer & Jacobson 2009). None of these were specific to youth workers. In fact, just a handful of academic studies (e.g. Krueger 2000, Colley 2001, Karabanow 1999) have examined the intersection of care work and emotional or mental wellbeing among youth workers at all, and these secular organisations rather than religious ones.

The organisation I was most familiar with was Canterbury Youth Services. As the central node of faith-based youth work in the South Island of New Zealand, they boast proudly about the longevity of their youth workers, and actively foster an open atmosphere around mental health. Yet burnout remains an all too familiar term. The initial thought to 'write what I know' was somewhat unsatisfactory, however, when it became clear from my preliminary surveys that across an enormous body of scholarship on

burnout, a distinctly Euro-centric bias was already evident (Schaufeli & Leiter 2009). Only a handful of studies had addressed the question of the relevance of the diagnostic category of burnout internationally or cross-culturally (Pines 2003, Turnipseed & Turnipseed 1997, Kageler 2010), and despite a few methodological problems (such as sampling bias) most of these quantitative studies had concluded that burnout is not exclusively a Western phenomenon (Friberg 2009). However as Schaufeli and Leiter (2009) note, the global presence of 'burnout' does not mean an identical set of meanings around what burnout is, between different places. Inspired by the tradition of rich cross-disciplinary investigations in the areas of psychological and psychiatric anthropology (e.g. Kleinman 1977, 1978, 1982, 1987, Kirmayer 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008) I went on to tailor my initial research focus to ethnographically investigate the expression and embodiment of 'burnout' experiences across two culturally distinctive but vocationally similar sites.

I had fallen in love with Uganda several years before, when I visited as a volunteer in a Christian youth-focussed organisation. This seemed a strategic choice for a second site, since I already had some organisational connections and personal relationships there, and was cognisant to some extent with the day to day cultural realities of the place. I choose an organisation previously unknown to me and at the other end of the country to where I had been before, but that shared some striking similarities to my New Zealand organisation. I had no doubt that Uganda encompassed enough dramatic historical and socio-political differences that would make it a rich non-western counterpoint to the Canterbury site.

I began to talk to people about burnout. What very quickly became apparent was that a simple catalogue of the causes and symptoms of burnout was insufficient to explore the cost of care for faith-based youth workers, as moral, political, and cultural subjects. While the topic of burnout had been an effective lure into the field, this single category of distress turned out to be only part of a complex web of creative, storied and embodied sense-making practices that youth workers engage in, in the face of enormous pressures and (at times) deep distress. Thus while it began personally, and narrowly, it opened up — broadened, deepened, complicated — into some even more interesting , involving questions about how we build and protect cherished images of ourselves, the role of institutions in shaping moral sensibilities, and how people exercise agency and resilience in the face of powerful (and multifarious) discursive regimes. As these wider themes spilled out from the narrow confines of significance I had initially attempted to place around them, I embraced the forgiving iterative fluidity of the ethnographic process and refocussed my research topic from 'burnout' to 'wellbeing'. This book is built on the back of this more nuanced attention to the experiential and imaginal landscape of the caring self, and its darker shadow. I return to the topic of burnout towards the end of the volume, though with a somewhat changed perspective.

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