

Think Paper: Well Now Theory and HAES Theory

Summary: *This paper was first written for colleagues working with HAES theory and assumes familiarity with a HAES approach.*

Several people have used HAES theory to write programmes. Examples are HUGS, from Canada, and A New You in the USA. I previously considered Well Now as a HAES programme. In this Think Paper I give some background on how and why I came to position Well Now theory as distinct from HAES theory. I explain why it is important to me to share this scholarship. I first published a version of this paper in spring 2016. I wrote this revised version in December 2016.

For over thirty years (Berg, 2009) HAES activists have been engaged in “ending the war on obesity”. The movement has made real strides in changing ideas about weight and health by highlighting flawed science, offering an alternative to dieting, and challenging weight stigma. As a dietitian, finding the HAES movement was a huge relief for me: I was not, after all, alone in my decision to stop recommending weight loss and use a health-gain approach that explicitly promoted size acceptance. I felt vindicated, supported, inspired.

I was invited to join the HAES movement after an article I wrote (Aphramor, 2005) was picked up by HAES-friendly listservs. Several community leaders commended my work and warmly welcomed me. In the article I critiqued a weight-centred approach of dietetics and argued the need for a conceptual map that integrated the body politic in any theory around lifestyle change. I argued that “the physiological is the political¹” and referred to concepts such as allostasis, metabolic inheritance, somatophobia, power, silences, gender and nutrition justice, critical pedagogy², trauma and shame alongside critical appraisal of weight science and the need to challenge fat stigma. (My practice was strongly informed by previous involvement in disability advocacy that was catalyzed by, and then fast-forwarded, my belated politicization (Aphramor and Campbell, 2001; Aphramor, 2003 and 2004). These concepts and data informed my practice at the time (Aphramor, 2004a, 2004b) and have remained central concerns.

As Well Now evolved in the intervening decade I added other co-ordinates to the map, notably status syndrome, Kreiger’s work on racialised hypertension and embodiment

¹ Used in this way, political isn’t referring to party politics. Instead it refers to how power operates in society. For example, how power operates to produce racism, homophobia, size stigma, ageism and so on. How power operates so that children from privileged backgrounds tend to be healthier and wealthier than those from average or deprived backgrounds. The phrase ‘the physiological is the political’ captures the fact that power and privilege have a metabolic effect. Thus, racism is linked to hypertension and high social class reduces risk of heart disease.

² A pedagogy is a teaching framework. A critical pedagogy is a teaching framework that pays attention to power dynamics in teaching and designed to encourage critical thinking and social change.

(oppression syndrome), ecofeminism theory and, most recently, the concept of lifeworld. Looking back over the intervening ten years, the paradigm I advocated in the article wasn't subsequently taken up by the HAES community³. It's not that I'm the only person advancing a health-gain (or 'non-diet'⁴) approach who has integrated any of these issues: the work of Be Nourished around trauma and shame readily springs to mind as a case in point. Instead I'm suggesting that the knowledge codified in flagship HAES literature that I have read since becoming aware of, and contributing to, the movement remains primarily concerned with a (1) critical appraisal of weight science within the parameters of its usefulness as a lifestyle change model, (2) offering a non-diet alternative, and (3) challenging fat stigma. (Except, that is, where I have merged Well Now theory with HAES theory¹.) An educational HAES webinar made available around the time of first writing this Think Paper reaffirms ASDAH's current allegiance to this agenda (Clifford and Du Breuil, 2016).

The vision I outlined in my 2005 article embraces these three themes of HAES practice. However, the themes emerge from and are situated within a framework that is paradigmatically distinct from the framework used for HAES theory. The paradigm I envisioned then, and now, is one that aspires to "*integrate, rather than eclectically add-on, issues such as gender-equity . . . " where "inter-relatedness must take centre-stage. . . [and] we must insist on an embodied ethics and linguistics and then allow multiple and partial perspectives to engage in a fully contextualized dialogue."* (Aphramor, 2005)

In other words, I wanted my work to be shaped by a commitment to equity (fairness), to emerge from 'inequalities imagination' (Hart et al., 2003) from the outset. Hence the importance given to the physiology of oppression and the need for dignity as core beacons, not appendices to the real work of behaviour change. I wanted it to be grounded in a relational way of looking at things. A relational approach resists the move to explain things in an abstract, isolated way (as in reductionist science, and a neo-liberal ideology). Instead it seeks out histories, context, stories, connections. Hence the Well Now tenets that insist our stories matter, and are explicit about valuing different ways of knowing. This information is then reiteratively tied in with the body politic (i.e. we consider how what we just learnt links to our place in the bigger scheme of things, and to what we already knew).

I wanted it to value embodied and non-rational knowledge as much as it valued reason. I wanted ethics to extend beyond biomedical parameters to embrace inclusivity, power and growth. Hence the use of poetry, of teaching activities designed

³ It's reflected on the HAESUK website, which I contributed to before differentiating between Well Now and HAES.

⁴ In Well Now I use 'health-gain', HAES theory tends to 'non-diet' or 'wellness'

to help develop body awareness and prompt self-discovery: the commitment to a critical pedagogy. It was important to take note of the power of language and use it in an intentionally political way. Thus, Well Now is not concerned with health behaviour change, as in classic HAES texts, but with self-care (and social justice). I wanted something more than, and different to, 'mindful eating', so I teach connected eating and body first nutrition which align with a relational, embodied, intentionally political stance. In Well Now, body respect is imprinted as an organizing motif and marks a political understanding that eschews the all-too-casual use of the concept of 'body image problems'. Unlike HAES activists, I am working for weight-equity not weight-neutrality. The continued desire for both neutrality and social justice highlights a poor understanding of the work we need to do to promote equity.

I wanted there to be room for different voices to be heard, for it to be enriched by different disciplinary and experiential perspectives, and for it to develop by a constant negotiation/dialogue of theory and practice. Imagine a building designed for inclusive access, where the architects make a point of researching its context in the locality and speaking with people who will be using it. It is designed to enhance community cohesion and optimize people's enjoyment of space and company. This is a very different building to one constructed to meet minimum safety standards, with no thought around access. The two building will still be different even if the latter is altered to accommodate equality and aesthetics as an after-thought. In the same way, I was taught to teach nutrition in a didactic way with an end goal of behaviour change. It is not possible to graft anything on to this approach so that it becomes the approach I describe above. They are fundamentally two very different structures. Co-opting vocabulary from the plans written by the inclusive architects and using them to describe the bog-standard house might be expedient for any number of reasons. But it will not alter the structure of the house in any substantive way, and as a knee-jerk, superficial response to deeper issues, it may block potential learning. I wanted to build a model like the first house.

HAES theory, as in the HAES Curriculum and HAES Manifesto, arises from a paradigm chiefly informed by critical appraisal of the limits and short-comings of scientific reasoning as it pertains to weight and weight stigma. I have learned lots from reading this work, and also from networking and support as a member of the HAES community. At the same time, I have also been out of step with HAES theory. This is because I felt popular HAES theory lacked criticality. By this I mean that it did not make links to a broader literature on social justice and it disappeared psychosocial determinant of health. As I wanted an overarching framework outlining a coherent conceptual map for making these links, I began to try and spell out these differences, for a time referring to my Well Now work as advancing 'health in every respect'.

Then I changed tack, and for quite some time, from a relatively isolated position HAES-wise in the UK, I developed and taught the Well Now way as if it was a HAES approach. As HAES awareness grew nationally, and I became more engaged in

learning, teaching and collaborating in the international HAES community, the critical dietetics movement, critical weight science, and fat activism, I experienced an increasing sense of dissonance at the differences between my vision and mainstream HAES theory. A central breach was in how both practices approached situatedness and social justice. In other words, how they made sense of the “personal is the political is the physiological” in the everyday context of people’s lives. I continued to try to ‘rescue’ the HAES ideology (by which I presumptuously meant to make the theory align with my beliefs). For example, in conversation with thought-leaders in critical dietetics, and by critiquing its healthist tendencies and theorizing it anew within a relational cultural (RCT) framework (Brady et al., 2013). A germinal motif in this chapter, and one that I subsequently came to rely on heavily in my efforts to align Well Now as HAES, was the claim that if something did not integrate social justice data from the outset it could not be called HAES but was more accurately described as a non-diet wellness approach.

I ran with this. In one explanation I wrote:

The Association for Size Diversity and Health, ASDAH, are copyright holders for the HAES trademark. ASDAH define HAES as ‘grounded in social justice’. So, to my reasoning, it follows that the HAES term doesn’t describe any wellness approach, just those grounded in social justice. In other words, HAES can be thought of as a wellness approach grounded in social justice.

I persisted in explaining away a lack of awareness of social justice as aberrant, as not-HAES. Here I am in full flow in a download on my website, written February 2014:

You’ll no doubt come across instances where there is confusion between a wellness approach and a HAES approach: just calling an approach HAES doesn’t make it so! One such example is in the 2011 paper I wrote with Linda Bacon. We said the RCTs [randomized controlled trials] showed the effectiveness of a HAES approach but it would be more accurate to say they showed the effectiveness of a wellness approach. This doesn’t negate their effectiveness: the research still strongly finds in support of size acceptance, intuitive eating and active embodiment only not in programmes known to be grounded in social justice. In fact, the seed of confusion is sown early on where we give an inaccurate definition of HAES, one that misses out the bigger picture. (The definition given is: The primary intent of HAES is to support improved health behaviors for people of all sizes without using weight as a mediator; weight loss may or may not be a side effect.)

If I was to rewrite this now I’d say something like:

“the primary intent [of HAES practice] is to build a society where every body (and explicitly including people of all sizes) is respected and to

promote wellbeing for all by advancing social justice and fostering compassionate self-care". [end quote]

In fact, all the celebrated HAES texts that I know of fall outside my criteria of what counts as HAES. This was a difficult truth to finally accept. It left me with several options: one, re-categorizing a classic cross-section of hallmark books, videos and teaching resources (Berg, 2009; Bacon, 2010, 2011; Miller & Adams, 2014; HAES educational webinars) including the ASDAH HAES curriculum and the HAES Manifesto, as not-HAES. (And, aligned with this, acting as if the theory in *Body Respect*⁵, presented as HAES, wipes out the history of HAES practice to date.) Two, rejecting my definition of what makes something HAES [and seeing ASDAH's as work-in-progress] and three, keeping quiet about my doubts and sense of incongruence.

In some ways it has taken me a decade to go full circle. I opened my 2005 paper with a quote that spoke of my awakening to the fact that everything I thought I knew about dieting was wrong: *"But it is just when opinions universally prevail and we have added lip service to their authority that we become sometimes most keenly conscious that we do not believe a word that we are saying."* I arrived at this turning point again once I stopped rationalizing away my disquiet and seriously reflected on what this embodied knowledge signified. There seemed a lot at stake when I realized I could no longer promote dieting. It was a much harder knowledge to reconcile with when I began to realize that my ideas were not a version of HAES but in fact meant my thinking diverged from HAES discourse. By the time I managed to credit my unease with meaning I had ignored the implications of a whole litany of teachable-moments, some of which I have listed here in no particular order.

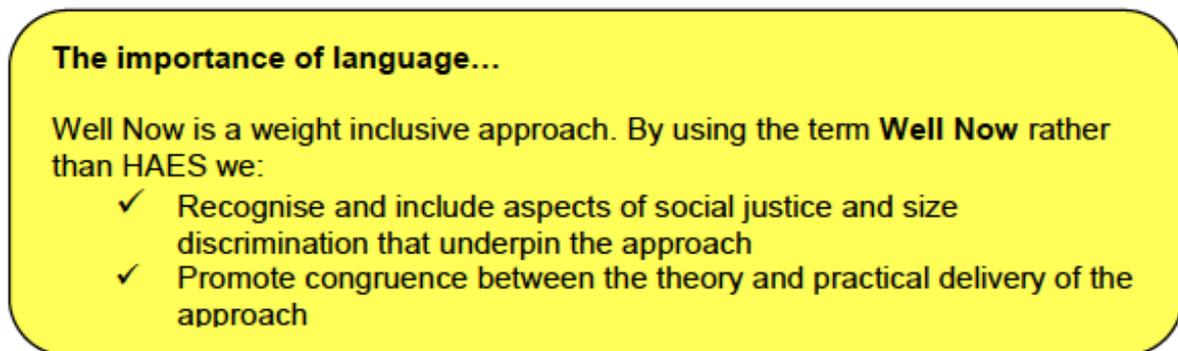
It seemed I was continually defending my version of HAES (grounded in social justice) as the right one: how come I found myself justifying it so often if this was already what was out there? I hinged my theoretical stance on ASDAH's definition, but the living example I came back to was always Well Now. So too, I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with referring people to HAES literature unless I had a chance to qualify it beforehand: it was Well Now I wholeheartedly endorsed, not HAES work. What could I do with the knowledge that the ASDAH curriculum (to which I contributed ideas) fails to reflect a critical pedagogy, thus making it incompatible with the commitment to social justice spelt out in the definition? The curriculum, and other texts that embody what HAES stands for, can't be tweaked to embrace social justice by grafting on information or swapping terms: they require a radical rewrite, the proverbial paradigm shift.

Reflecting on conversations with, and commentary by, committed HAES champions who disagreed with my views and were concerned about how a shift in focus might

⁵ I co-authored the book *Body Respect* before I made the Well Now/HAES distinction, and often without referencing where I drew on my pre-existing work.

be to the detriment of gains made. Reflecting on my experiences of attending HAES teaching sessions over the last ten years: the absence of a critical pedagogy and any theory on the embodied impact of injustice or trauma. While social justice and relationality are at the formative epicenter of Well Now I had never seen this data, or comparable counterparts, rigorously integrated in HAES theory. Moreover, in community conversation, and in HAES-friendly resources, some of the concepts central to Well Now are intentionally excluded or dismissed. Reflecting on power and priorities in collaborative projects across critical weight studies, fat activism, HAES and critical dietetics. Taking heed of when I felt I was wrestling theory across paradigms in collaborative work and reflecting on what and who counted in the process of knowledge creation. Stark differences in politics reflected through attitudes to ‘means and ends’.

More recent conversations with colleagues about a Well Now/HAES distinction: each conversation felt risky – I was potentially jeopardizing a relationship I valued with someone whose views I respected and who I really wanted to respect mine. Hearing ‘I could have told you that years ago’ and other similar responses when I described Well Now as not-HAES was reassuring and heartening. Finally (to this list, which is not exhaustive), two external events. One, receiving an unprompted request from the London HAES group asking if they could call themselves Well Now, and two, reading this:



The importance of language...

Well Now is a weight inclusive approach. By using the term **Well Now** rather than HAES we:

- ✓ Recognise and include aspects of social justice and size discrimination that underpin the approach
- ✓ Promote congruence between the theory and practical delivery of the approach

Figure 1: Screen shot from *Well Now News* (NHS Highland, Issue 2, Dec 2015).

Eventually the penny dropped: my approach and the HAES approach, while both seeking health equity through a health-gain (non-diet) philosophy, are not one and the same thing. No amount of me rewriting history will make them so. I got it wrong.

How are they different? The key way in which Well Now is distinct from HAES theory is that the Well Now philosophy is intrinsically theorized around social justice concerns. It follows that it uses a critical pedagogy to engage people in emancipatory learning (Emancipatory learning gives us the capacity to recognize how power and injustice impact ourselves and others and to reflect on how injustice is sustained or challenged). On the ground, this means that while Well Now mantras such as ‘our stories matter’ and ‘respect is a social determinant of health’ are compatible with many versions of



HAES practice, they aren't articulated or integrated as central concerns, unlike in Well Now, where they are a foundational refrain. It is important to me that I have a coherent theoretical map for Well Now, and that this reflects reliance on an embodied, relational and intentionally political paradigm –and language.

One of the underpinning ideas of emancipatory learning is that language is constructed to carry power meanings – the intentional use of the word fat across various communities is a great example. This is why I use the term 'body respect' in Well Now, because I think it helps keep self and society in view. The term isn't found in the HAES Curriculum, HAES Manifesto or key HAES texts. For me, its absence signifies distinctions in paradigm choice, where the choice to talk about body respect reflects a different politics than the choice to talk about, say, body image problems or body dissatisfaction. Similarly, a weight-neutral approach does not become a weight-equitable approach (should this be desired) simply by swapping terms. The wish for neutrality arises from a very different political heritage than the wish for equity. (Any unintentional language use highlights how implicit ideologies shape our work). A goal of health behavior change is very different than a grounding in self-care. I'm not saying people should use the terms I choose to, or that these examples are exclusive to Well Now, but explain my choices to illustrate a distinction between HAES theory and Well Now theory.

Back to paradigms. While there are many shared areas of action between Well Now and HAES work, notably around eating distress, body shame, and politicising fat stigma, there are significant differences in meta-narrative, practice and politics that emerge as a result of distinct paradigm choices. The Well Now way is strongly informed by a community development philosophy (though I draw on considerable clinical experience too) and developed through praxis (the process where theory and practice reiteratively engage). Critical appraisal of weight science is just one part, albeit a vital one, of a more diverse evidence puzzle favouring criticality.

The HAES definition spotlighting social justice that I re-wrote above is my wish-list. It is the vision that shapes and reshapes the Well Now way. It is my vision. It is not what HAES practice reads like.

Until 2013 ASDAH presented HAES practice as comprising a weight-neutral approach advocating intuitive eating, joyful movement and size acceptance. Newer Principles stating a commitment to social justice were adopted in 2013. However, the current Principles explicitly embed foundational presuppositions (core, formative beliefs) that are neoliberal and aligned with healthism such that they cannot therefore promote social justice as intended. So, the two approaches rely on incompatible assumptions on knowledge about health (called epistemic assumptions). Being able to figure this out specifically was significant in helping me trace a key source of dissonance, that the foundational presuppositions of Well Now and HAES are irreconcilably each at odds with the other.

Yet the real learning for me in this process is not located in drawing a distinction between Well Now and HAES ideologies. Welcome as this clarity is, it is in my painful awareness of the efforts I made to protect (my belonging to?) an orthodoxy that the deep learning lies. It is uncomfortable for me to acknowledge the work I put into protecting (my view of) the rightness of HAES ideology and the considerable work I invested in upholding existing mores around knowledge creation in the movement. In what I said, and what I held back from saying, I re-inscribed performatively decreed power dynamics that perpetuated the very hierarchies the HAES movement seeks to disrupt. Why, for instance, have I silenced and submerged my voice, writing out a decade of my Well Now work in the UK by presenting it in HAES forums as if the ideas were newly theorized? What conventions are upheld by this suppression? Who is protected from what?

It is this learning that I am still reflecting on. We inevitably bring our history to our work, and I have a well worn path of being complicit in disappearing my story to protect a dominant narrative. In recognising this personal pattern, and addressing my collusion, I redeemed much more than cogent theory-making. Through the work I am privileged to do I have learnt first-hand the transformative potential of self-compassion and still marvel at its capacity to lift me out of decades of chronic depression. Now it seems I was ready to let go of another old habit and act as if the waymarker ‘our stories matter’ applied to me too. I have said it often enough, and truly meant it each time. In the scheme of things, my being bothered by jogging along with orthodoxy, especially one supporting such a worthwhile message, might register more as navel-gazing than soul-searching. The thing is, having sensed the disconnect and carried on regardless, I was being dishonest with myself. I was participating in a culture of benevolent authoritarianism (real or imagined) and abdicating my own power in shaping norms and narratives. I disappeared my own voice and did not claim its particularity. Naming my misgivings became important as a measure of personal respect and initially also as a mark of respect for the communities I contribute to. In the same way I was able to teach self-compassion before ‘getting it’ personally at a visceral level of comprehension, I am glad to know what it feels like to claim captaincy of the craft I am steering. It feels redemptive.

It seems plausible to suggest that many people drawn to HAES-related movements share experiences of personal/professional trauma/shame and/or of ‘double ontological shock’⁷: how might this collective history get played out in the stories we tell within the movement? For my part, I can see how devaluing my voice, and taking on shame management for others, influenced my engagement in the tacit customs of creating a canon (Choo, 1998).

⁷ Bartky talks of the ‘double ontological shock of feminist awareness. Namely, first, all is not as it seems. Second, it’s a whole heap worse than you thought. Bartky, S. (1990) *Femininity and Domination: studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. New York and London: Routledge.

My deep learning to date has been painful and freeing. There are two potential story lines contained within the early script where I fail to listen to my emotional unease and go into cognitive over-drive to keep my belief system intact. In one, I'm still there, trying harder and harder and believing less and less in what I say. I disappear my truths and shame triumphs: I cannot risk being seen or upsetting friends and allies. Ever greater feats of disconnect will be necessary. I am exhausted, sleepless, my IBS starts up.

In the other, I am true to my mistakes and my dignity. I am true to my epistemic responsibility. In an earlier version of this Think Paper I next wrote “. . . and I believe you want me to be true to it too, even when you disagree with me, and even if we might then part ways.” I was shocked into full awareness of my continuing naïveté by HAES leaders' efforts to silence me after I shared the Think Paper. So, no, I don't think those holding power want debate and dissensus at all. The 'aha' that resulted from acknowledging my incredulous gullibility left me in no doubt about how wrong – and complicit - I was. The experience has been beyond liberating. It was also instrumental in my finding a new knowledge community, one that recognizes the dangers of orthodoxy/creed and holds that conflict with the status quo is essential for building peace. That's more like it.

In this unexpected way, my involvement with the HAES community has been pivotal in a personal and professional awakening that I am hugely grateful for. It's like I dropped the veils of self-deception that obscured my view. The world feels safer for it. I am emboldened by clarity. I am clear about the value of dissent, not accommodation. I am clear about my allegiance, which is to Love's work.

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