

Solidarity and Risk in Welch's Feminist Ethics

Michael G. Gunzenhauser
Oklahoma State University

There are no victories here, only the condition for later victories.¹

In this passage, philosopher and theologian Sharon Welch is referring to the conditions of racism in Lorain, Ohio, depicted by Toni Morrison.² In the phrase that follows the above passage, Welch explains that a condition for later victories is "seeing the lives that are violated as worthy of more than cruel neglect and callow exploitation" (*FE*, 67-68). For Welch, who seeks a form of communicative ethics that takes seriously the challenges of communication across difference, Morrison articulates a form of resistance that opens up possibilities for genuine transformation. Rather than focusing on commonality and searching for consensus, Welch bases her communicative ethics on difference and seeks solidarity. Like Jürgen Habermas, she turns to communicative action as a meaningful space for discussion of ethics. But unlike Habermas, Welch links consensus (and communicative competence) with a pervasive Western tendency for domination and control. In place of the pervasive ethic of control, Welch advocates an ethic of risk.

In this essay, I revisit Welch's feminist ethic of risk, mainly as articulated in her 1990 book, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, and its 2000 updated edition.³ As an ethical theory that addresses emancipatory practices, it provides promise for educators and educational researchers who are interested in developing philosophies of education, pedagogies, and research practices that enable them to struggle for transformation. Highly significant to this project is articulating exactly what Welch means by "struggle for transformation," specifically addressing the possibilities and limitations of such action. Also significant is the need for a conception of human dignity that avoids reinscribing the ethic of control that Welch criticizes. I consider these theoretical issues associated with her ethic of risk and explore potential implications of a feminist ethic of risk for educational researchers who wish for transformative practice.

RISK IN RESPONSE TO CONTROL

Robert Nash argues that theories of communitarian ethics share a common problem. These theories of the moral life assume a community that defines itself by its membership criteria, which assumes exclusion. As Nash argues, there are significant differences among communitarian ethicists, but they all have difficulty accommodating those who do not share a common (and circumscribed) moral ground.⁴ Similarly, for Welch, the search for consensus among those in a community is a "dream for domination" (*FE*, 133). Welch instead turns to solidarity and identifies additional material conditions for solidarity (and struggle) to occur.

As a feminist theorist, philosopher, and religious studies scholar, Welch draws upon a range of theorists to resolve what she sees as widespread despair among middle-class Euro-Americans. She draws from Jürgen Habermas but is critical of his exclusiveness, and she draws significantly from Michel Foucault and Seyla Benhabib. As she acknowledges in the updated edition, Welch wrote the first edition of *A*

Feminist Ethic of Risk during the Cold War era and depicts cultural despair in the context of life lived with the possibility and absurdity of human annihilation through nuclear war. In the later edition, Welch depicts the ethic of control as having survived the end of the Cold War. Surviving is the underlying notion of complete, total victory and absolute security. In both texts, Welch demonstrates the roots in cultural preference for control and superiority over such constructs as interdependence and risk. To counter cultural despair, she draws heavily on her readings of African-American women writers of fiction, such as Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, and Mildred Taylor, who write of struggle and solidarity in the face of despair.⁵

In what follows, I explain the main aspects of Welch's ethic—risk, difference, material interaction, and mutual critique. Welch articulates these aspects of her ethic through focus on communicative action. Welch positions her project in this way:

I describe an alternative to both poststructuralist thought and liberal political theory, a form of ethical practice in which the recognition and understanding of difference is central to ethical and political critique. The foundation for ethical judgments is neither a shared reason nor a common human essence but the practice of communicative ethics (*ES*, 86).

RISK

Welch advocates risk in response to the Western propensity for control. In the earlier edition of her work, she proffers a radical critique of United States foreign policy regarding nuclear arms proliferation and the ethic of control that fuels rhetoric and serves to ground public policy. While much of her beginning argument centers on nuclear disarmament, Welch draws strength and evocative power from the resistance of peace activists, among others, whose efforts are often discredited or ignored because their accomplishments are not total—nuclear powers have not disarmed, for instance, and the threat of nuclear annihilation remains. She locates the source of despair of such movements as an inability to be satisfied with modest transformations.

Despair arises because in the ethic of control, “the aim of moral action [is] the attainment of final, complete victory” (*FE*, 33). Welch likens it to Foucault's observations about control, depicting it as an ethic characterized by the complex management of human life rooted in a desire for absolute control. A cultural system characterized by control and normalization is suspicious of difference and treats pluralism as a problem to be controlled (*FE*, 37).

Welch contrasts middle-class despair to the social movements such as the African-American civil rights movement, which have survived despite (and by celebrating) non-totalizing victories. Drawing on the history of African-American resistance, Welch acknowledges the necessity of risk taking in order to bring about change. The ethic of risk is an acknowledgement that progressive change is illusory. The desire for progressive change is a vestige of the ethic of control. Rather than leading to progressive change, the ethic of control has led to the justification of atrocities such as slavery, the Holocaust, and the distinct possibility of human annihilation through nuclear weapons (*FE*, 37).

Following Habermas, Welch turns to communicative experience to articulate her ethic of risk. Her break with Habermas comes rather quickly, however.⁶

Particularly she is critical, following Anthony Giddens, of Habermas's dismissal of certain oral cultures from the realm of communicative competence. Education and literacy, she and Giddens assert, alter the substance of an oral culture and distort cultural meanings. It should be unnecessary to require prerequisites such as literacy for communicative action, she argues, and the requirement is indicative of the pervasiveness of the ethic of control.

Welch argues that genuine communication is not possible if one maintains an ethic of control.⁷ Communication with others cannot be undertaken without risk. For Welch, the willingness to take on personal risk is particularly crucial in conversations in which the oppressed express the depth of pain and rage they experience. Often, the privileged do not know what to do in a situation such as this. Welch points out that genuine communication is difficult, because privileged persons have the luxury of leaving a situation that becomes too emotional. In contrast, those expressing pain do not have the same luxury. Even more troubling, the expression of pain is unrecognized and ignored. The ever-present opportunity for escape is a barrier to communication.

Welch cites as an example Marshall's novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, in which Marshall depicts white people from the United States attempting to foster economic development in a Caribbean island nation.⁸ Marshall shows the destructive inhumanity of privileged white people turning away from the pain and anger expressed by the Afro-Caribbean residents who have experienced generations of oppression through slavery and poverty. The destructiveness of well-meaning but controlling communication is evident in the characters of Saul and Harriet, who travel from the United States and are driven apart by Harriet's unwillingness to acknowledge the pain and enduring sorrow of the residents of the island—descendants of slaves—and her failure to cope with her family's history of slave trading (*FE*, 52). Despite her well-meaning charity, Harriet ignores the evidence before her of the roots of oppression and is "bound to repeat it" (*FE*, 56). The pain is too much for Harriet to bear, and she "escapes" in various ways. For Welch, this example of turning a deaf ear (or leaving the situation) serves to perpetuate inhumanity.

Lacking in Harriet's well-meaning involvement is her unwillingness to risk her own security, which leads to distorted communication and the replication of domination. Welch makes this connection to communication:

Conversation is stopped at the point when deep pain or rage is expressed. Efforts at reform inevitably fall short, for the extent of the wound is not seen....As long as some people think they can leave, the trust necessary for genuine conversation is impossible....Transformation occurs as the reformer feels the pain of the people who are oppressed (*FE*, 134-35).

Significant here is that leaving a situation means the loss of an opportunity for genuine conversation, and specifically problematic is that "the extent of the wound is not seen." Privilege associated with race and class (in Harriet's case) can be a buffer to knowing the pain of others. Calling upon privilege is an exercise of control.

DIFFERENCE

Welch is similarly critical of universals as a foundation for ethics. Welch rejects the notion of universally shared moral criteria. She sees it as a holdover from

Aristotelian ethics, wherein the ideal of the polis relied upon exclusionary assumptions, such as injustice toward women and slaves. Along with the denigration of women's and slaves' morality, such injustice made the ideal polis possible but fundamentally flawed (*FE*).

Similarly, she criticizes Alasdair MacIntyre, who argues for a common foundation of virtue, showing that notions of virtue are unstable across time, because they reflect the culture in which they operate.⁹ While (as MacIntyre advocates) sociological and anthropological investigations of ethics may prove useful as descriptive empirical inquiry, Welch correctly notes that cultural despair derives not from the lack of a common moral view but from the inability and unwillingness to tolerate difference.¹⁰ Welch argues specifically against the exclusiveness of MacIntyre's assumptions:

In contrast to MacIntyre, I would argue that the moral calamity of our day lies not in the lack of shared moral criteria but in the inability of most communities to engender or accept a thorough critique of their "own purposes" and their "terms" of implementing those purposes....I would argue that what led to Aristotle's defense of slavery is what is most dangerous in our own society: the assumption that one's own community and social class possess the prerequisites for moral judgment and that other groups are devoid of those same prerequisites (*FE*, 125).

Further, it would not be surprising if the descriptive inquiry that MacIntyre advocates would demonstrate that MacIntyre has underestimated the extent to which different eras in history (which gave rise to the distinct notions of virtue of figures such as Homer, Aristotle, the authors of the New Testament, Benjamin Franklin, and Jane Austen) had divergent rather than common notions of virtue.¹¹ These thinkers' notions of virtue may have been similarly exclusionary to what MacIntyre proposes for contemporary culture.

For Welch, the communal ethics of theorists such as MacIntyre is unjustified unless modified. Welch rejects the communal ethics of philosophers who argue that moral reasoning arises from communities with shared principles. A communal ethics requires an untenable notion of shared reason and human nature. Welch argues instead for maintaining what is lost in a view of shared reason. She focuses attention on the opportunities that may arise from attending to differences.

Welch makes her view of difference distinct from what she calls the "postmodern valorization of difference" (*ES*, 84). For example, Welch sees in Luce Irigaray's work a shifting identity of the self, but in her own ethic, Welch argues that there is not a loss of the self, "a self lost in the play of difference" (*ES*, 84-85). In contrast, she argues, conversations across groups of women are characterized by fierce affirmations of self. Welch challenges Irigaray's notion of slippage in women's identity as a cultural construct limited to the experience of privileged Western women. While elsewhere Welch uses Irigaray's work to support her view of joy, Welch argues that Irigaray's notion of the self is not appropriately inclusive of the experience of the majority of the world's women and unnecessarily limits the potential for understanding women's experience:

In sharp contrast to Irigaray's work, the political debates central for many feminists focus on the understanding and mediation (through conflict and/or coalition) of differences between groups of women, each group asserting a fluid, complex, multilayered yet particular identity (*ES*, 86).

Rather than turning to a notion of the self that has a foundation in shared Enlightenment reason, Welch, with Flax, is more concerned with conditions and methods for liberating practice, rather than a common reason.

Welch's alternative notion of difference becomes evident in her analysis and expansion of Habermas, whose ideal notion of communication establishes conditions of communicative competence that are difficult to obtain. Welch expands the Habermas view beyond its limitations by working with the difficulties inherent in reaching the ideal. She agrees that genuine conversation is problematic, but she argues that it is not necessary for those involved in conversation with each other to know certain characteristics of logic. Likewise, while Habermas would have the "norm of the force of the better argument" be part of the criteria for assessing a successful conversation, Welch instead advocates that conversations be characterized by rich narratives (*FE*, 132). To do otherwise, she argues, is to place the Western definition of reason ahead of all others. She says:

While the West may offer one way of producing social change, oral cultures can offer models of the social self that Habermas himself values, and while not providing as Habermas does a critique of the autonomous isolated self, they do exhibit practices that constitute a collective, larger self (*ES*, 93).

MATERIAL INTERACTION

As mentioned earlier, Welch goes beyond the level of conversation to address material conditions for genuine conversation, and this move crystallizes her break with Habermas. For Welch, interaction that goes beyond conversation is necessary. Crucial here is Welch's notion of material interaction—"either political conflict or coalition or joint involvement in life-sustaining work"—the kind of contact that leads to conversation and critique (*ES*, 87).

Significant for Welch is that the standpoint for communicative ethics should be interaction between "concrete others" (a concept she borrows from Benhabib). The lack of material interaction is particularly significant politically. In comparison, the participants in Habermas's communicative action appear to be strangers. By life-sustaining work she is referring to mutuality in physical labor, and it may be the most basic work that sustains life. For her, work is a site for creating and affirming humanity. She says:

We share our humanity in work and then can move to the conversations that explore the nature of this humanity and the political imperatives it entails. By work I mean material interaction at the most basic level. For those whose differences are large, working together is often possible at only the most basic level: preparing food together, cleaning, building houses, making clothing (*ES*, 98).

Welch suggests two additional material conditions for transformative dialogue. As in the women's movement, the first is a critical mass of women who have had certain experiences (such as going into theological education), so not just one woman has to speak for all women. The second is addressing the question of what leads to the voices of the oppressed carrying equal weight in a conversation. This is partially a product of mutual critique.

MUTUAL CRITIQUE

Welch has a distinct alternative to Habermas's notion of consensus in her more contentious notion of solidarity. The process of coming to understand is not a

process of building consensus. Instead, the process is valued for the opportunities of people to critique each other. In such conversations, the manifestations of humanity and justice are up for discussion—their definitions, what actions need to take place for the sake of transformation, and further, under what conditions such actions should take place.

For Welch, communication is marked by mutual critique, in which members of one culture perceive the moral critique that those from other cultures bring to bear on them. The goal then is not agreement but the opportunity to perceive the other in a different context.¹² Welch provides the following examples:

Genuine communication has not occurred until we become aware of the flaws in our culture that appear quite clearly from the vantage point of Indian and African societies, taking seriously, for example, an Indian critique of the Western treatment of children and a traditional African critique of our extreme individuality and valorization of symmetry and order. From the perspective of communicative ethics, we cannot be moral alone (*ES*, 88).

Here Foucault is particularly helpful to Welch. In Foucault, Welch finds a more compelling reason for engaging in dialogue than the search for truth:

Foucault argues that we can see a system of logic as a particular system and not as truth itself only when we are partially constituted by different systems of producing truth. We can transcend the blinders of our own social location, not through becoming objective, but by recognizing the differences by which we ourselves are constituted and, I would add to Foucault, by actively seeking to be partially constituted by work with different groups (*FE*, 151).

The mutual critique is then inseparable from the material conditions for dialogue mentioned earlier. She also acknowledges here the responsibility and accountability of those participating in communicative action.¹³

UNDERLYING COMMITMENTS

I turn next to Welch's underlying commitments to dignity and transformation. Crucial for Welch is that these notions be defined in ways that avoid reinscribing the ethic of control that she has so carefully critiqued. As such, Welch's reframing of dignity and transformation are characterized by risk and solidarity.

HUMANITY AND DIGNITY

As mentioned above, Welch has an underlying commitment to human dignity that informs her ethic of risk. Welch takes the dignity of cultures seriously as an opportunity for interaction and learning across difference. Her notion of human dignity is akin to what in a different context may be termed cultural relativism.¹⁴ The importance of difference and mutual critique make clear the centrality of dignity. Welch makes this statement: "It is essential that we examine the ways in which excluded groups are not seen as fully human, the exclusion itself is not seen, and the pain of exclusion not recognized" (*ES*, 96). I take her choice of the term "essential" to be significant here. She is clear elsewhere in her opposition to universal notions of reason that "essential" is to be taken differently than it is commonly.

For Welch essential to her project here is a feminist notion of human dignity that works in opposition to human alienation (*FE*, 160). Hers is not a meta-narrative commitment to a Western notion of the self. The self is not autonomous and not the

ultimate location for rational belief. Interaction is centered. As an agnostic theologian, she bases what she calls her theology of resistance and hope on the notion not of a kingdom of God, but a “beloved community” (*FE*, 160). For Welch, the beloved community is grounded materially in the love between persons rather than in the image of a conquered kingdom. Engagements with others—working toward understanding oppression and toward understanding one’s own complicity in that oppression—are to be foremost acts of love. At base, then, is a spiritual commitment to resistance.

REDEFINING TRANSFORMATION

There is at base also a recurring appeal to transformation. Welch is clear throughout her work that utopian visions rely upon a damaging ethic of control. Her ethic of risk cannot promise the outcomes typically prized by communicative ethics; nor does it provide a traditional notion of progress. As Nash notes, there is currently no reason to have faith that the scientific method can resolve social problems; however, the need for an ethics remains inescapable (how are we to act with and toward one another?) as is the need for working with difference.¹⁵

For Welch, transformation is a much more modest construct. The hopes for transformation are not victories but hope for better conditions for later possible victories. Welch provides here her answer for middle class despair: “Middle-class people can sustain work for justice when empowered by love for those who are oppressed. Such love is far more energizing than guilt, duty, or self-sacrifice” (*FE*, 162).

This formulation of transformation is grounded in a radical appreciation of difference and acknowledgement of the difficulty of struggle in solidarity. As it does for the families in Mildred Taylor’s work, this notion of transformation is based on survival, the risky creation of conditions for future transformations, and respect for courage and tenacity. Welch is clear that there is only hope for later victories. As Welch notes, Morrison ends her novel *The Bluest Eye* with these words:

This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it’s much, much, much too late.¹⁶

IMPLICATIONS

While it is much too late for victory in the sense of the ethic of control, the ethic of solidarity and difference has implications for researchers and educators, with specific guidance for those who would adopt a critical or activist stance toward their work. As a meta-ethical theory, Welch’s ethics has multiple points of impact in education, including pedagogy, research, and policy. Here I limit my comments to educational researchers. Most pointedly, Welch’s ethic of risk may inform critical educational research, such as critical ethnography, which endeavors to emancipate the oppressed. In this genre of educational research, theorists have struggled to articulate an appropriate ethic that informs the emancipatory aims of the research, often resorting to rather conventional, axiological ethical views that are inconsistent with their emancipatory aims.¹⁷

The ethic of risk offers an alternative. Fundamentally, it provides researchers working for emancipatory action a more precise objective. For Welch, there can be no emancipation in any heroic sense, because of its inevitable linkage to the critiqued ethic of control. In Welch's more modest formulation of transformation, the researcher could only promise to form solidarity and struggle with the oppressed. While less grand, the reformulated aims provide greater direction for the researcher's disposition toward the researched and the researcher's process of knowledge construction.

Since the ethic of risk arises from attention to communicative action, researchers should attend to the relations between themselves and the subjects of their research. Solidarity implies action, and for Welch, the relationship should be characterized by material interaction and mutual critique. This has implications both for the method of critical research—the researcher should be actively engaged—and for the analysis and presentation of data—the researcher should not merely critique the research situation but also provide the researched the opportunity to critique the researcher.

Further, the ethic of risk has impact on the status of knowledge claims. Emerging from solidarity with the oppressed through communicative action come richer experiences of shared meaning, particularly if the researcher is willing to take risks to experience the pain of the oppressed. The ethic of risk suggests that there is no easy way to confront despair. It is hard work to work alongside and to not escape. To take critique on oneself is to risk one's security and to question one's complicity in oppression. It is resolving to do only what one can, which is to struggle in solidarity.¹⁸

1. Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1990/2000), 67. This book will be cited as *FE* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Penguin, 1970).

3. Welch published a different version of her Chapter 7 of *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* in an educational theory volume; Sharon D. Welch, "An Ethic of Solidarity and Difference," in *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries*, ed. Henry A. Giroux (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 83-99, 270-73). This article will be cited as *ES* in the text for all subsequent references. She also advanced an argument similar to *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* in a book for a more general audience; Sharon D. Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

4. Robert J. Nash, *Answering the "Virtuecrats": A Moral Conversation on Character Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 100-1.

5. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*; Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981); Paule Marshall, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (New York: Random House, 1984); and Mildred Taylor, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984).

6. Welch mostly cites Habermas from a single text; Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), with some reference to another; and Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

7. While "genuine communication" is Welch's terminology, it is not meant to suggest an ideal that can be reached. This is explained in more detail below.

8. Marshall, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*.

9. Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).
10. William Frankena, *Ethics*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 4.
11. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 169.
12. This is similar to the de-centering Collins advocates in her explication of an Afrocentric feminist epistemology; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
13. This calls to mind Collins's articulation of a Afro-centric feminist epistemology, which includes not only a criterion that knowledge be the result of dialogue, but that also that knowledge claims respect an ethic of accountability; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 217-19.
14. Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 76.
15. Nash, *Answering the "Virtuecrats,"* 174.
16. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 160.
17. Michael Gunzenhauser, *Knowledge Claims and Ethical Commitments: Toward a Moral Epistemology for Critical Ethnography in Education*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, 1999).
18. I am appreciative of careful readings and helpful comments on this paper by Virginia Worley, Mark Malaby, and two anonymous reviewers.