

Feminist Methods for Interdisciplinary Fields

Responses to Pitfalls for Feminist Methods

1. Pitfall: Attempting to resolve crisis in feminism deriving from postmodern theory:
Response: Approach feminism as a “field of critical practices that cannot be totalized and that, therefore, interrogate the formative and exclusionary power of dis-course in the construction of sexual difference” (Butler/Scott, “Intro,” xiii)
2. Pitfall: Taking the meanings of terms or analytic categories for granted:
Response: Resignify or appropriate terms or categories (e.g., subject, citizen, reality, experience, agency, women, bodies, ethics, politics) “for specific feminist ends” in ways that “generate analyses, critiques, and political interventions opening up the political imaginary...beyond some of the impasses by which feminism has been constrained” in order to “expose the silent violence of these concepts as they have operated...to establish exclusion [of certain groups] as the very precondition and possibility for ‘community.’” (Butler/Scott, “Intro.,” xiii-xiv)
3. Pitfall: Designate a position, a point of view or standpoint, from which one operates which might be compared to other “positions” within the theoretical field:
Response: Critically interrogate “the exclusionary operations by which ‘positions’ are established” (Butler/Scott, “Intro.,” xiv)
4. Pitfall: Use notions of feminist theory and/or poststructuralism that derive from “logic” and “reason”:
Response: Critically examine Eurocentric “logic” as a way of erasing the subaltern and decentering colonial hegemony to expose the “constitutive logic of colonial oppression” (Butler/Scott, “Intro.,” xv)
5. Pitfall: Use universal theories of patriarchy or phallogocentrism in critiquing society:
Response: Rethink universalist theoretical claims to refuse homogenized constructions of “third world women” or “masculinity” to “avoid the consequences of white-feminist epistemological/cultural imperialism” (Butler/Scott, “Intro.,” xv)
6. Pitfall: Question poststructural theory and center analysis on the “real body” or “real social relations” to give attention to violence, rape, and other forms of oppression:
Response: Problematize “the political construction and deployment of ‘the real’” in ways that refuse “moral relativism and political complicity” through feminist “retheorizations of violence and coercion” (Butler/Scott, “Intro.,” xvi)
7. Pitfall: Maintain moral and political accountability through notions of the universalist subject or stable self:
Response: Deploy a “poststructuralist resignification of ‘agency’...[and] ‘experience’” that recognizes the inevitability and political usefulness of misrecognition to “rethink the purposes of feminist politics” (Butler/Scott, “Intro.,” xvi)

Responses to Pitfalls for Feminist Methods(cont)

8. Pitfall: Use description of social inequality to demonstrate usefulness of feminist analysis:
Response: Practice an agency that recognizes the normative and exclusionary character of the foundations of description in order to reframe the category of “woman” as designating an undesignatable field of difference that cannot be totalized and remains a site of permanent openness and resignification, thereby releasing the term into a future of multiple significations where unanticipated meanings might come to bear (Butler, “Contingent” 16)
9. Pitfall: Emphasize the fact of differences as experienced personally by author or ethnographically by objects of academic study:
Response: Recognize how the subject is constituted through binaries of difference in ways that seek to explain and contest (Scott, “Experience” 25-6, 33)
10. Pitfall: Turn to history to see the politics of categories and social relations:
Response: Think history so history becomes a way out of ideology that refuses to take difference as self-evident and instead allows for the “truly different” and the “production of a different object of knowledge,” the “irreducible difference” that “undoes the order of intelligibility” (Crosby, “Difference” 134-5, 140-141)
11. Pitfall: Establish knowledge as a politically innocent truth that appeals to reason:
Response: Move from knowledge to trace truth as effects of power relations which simultaneously enable possibilities of truth as a local, heterogeneous, and incommensurable desire for power in the world that takes responsibility for the contingent character of the self within contingent contexts (Flax, “Loss” 452-3, 458)
12. Pitfall: Examine power and domination as they function across a group of institutions and mechanisms ensuring subservience to the state:
Response: Understand power as a self-organized multiplicity of force relations operating within a particular sphere through ceaseless struggles and confrontations forming a chain/system or contradictions/disjunctions and always open to transformation because local, unstable, strategic, and coming from everywhere. (Foucault, “Method,” 92-3)
13. Pitfall: Critique the patriarchal system of domination that pervades society in order to identify its weak points and organize to fight for an equal society:
Response: Recognize how a specific “extortion of truth” appears historically and in specific places (around the body, in particular spatial arrangements) in “an incessant back and forth movement of forms of subjugation and schemas of knowledge” as not only “an instrument and an effect of power” but also as “a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance, and a starting point for an opposing strategy,” which “undermines and exposes [power], renders [power] fragile and makes it possible to thwart [power].” (Foucault, “Method,” 92, 98, 101)
14. Pitfall: Identify those who hold power in society:
Response: Explore how power comes from below determining the wide-ranging social cleavages as their effects with a plurality of resistances ever present and inescapably intrinsic to power thereby making revolution possible (Foucault, “Method,” 94-6)

15. Pitfall: Analyse women in third world as already constituted and coherent, homogenous group that gives proof of universal, cross-cultural truths:
Response: Find contradictions inherent in women's locations with discourse specific structures to develop "careful, historical specific generalizations responsive to complex realities" of historical agency and "resistant modes of existence" that rejects ethnocentric universality (Mohanty, "Western Eyes")
16. Pitfall: Assume that agency is a matter of freedom for rational, moral unified, coherent individuals:
Response: Move within and between discourses to use the terms of one discourse to counteract and go beyond the terms of another discourse that constitutes the person so can change discourses through which person is being constituted and begin to break up dualisms in language and take new terms as one's own (Davies 51-2)
17. Pitfall: Develop an analysis based on terms derived from the public sphere:
Response: Disidentify with the terms of the public sphere through a politicized performance of those terms that exaggerates, parodies, tactically misrecognizes, and critiques those terms to create a counterpublic sphere of positions rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture, of identity-in-difference constituted through failed interpellation (Muñoz 7, 11, 31)
18. Pitfall: Approach other groups as an object of cross-cultural study:
Response: Approach the language of the other as an active cultural media that actively produces knowledge of culturally diversified ethical systems within the history of multicultural empires, resisting the mere appropriation of the emergent by the dominant (Spivak, Death, 9-13)
19. Pitfall: Understand the gendered oppression of imperialism and (neo)colonization from the perspective of a critic of domination:
Response: Find our own undecidable meaning in the irreducible figure that stands in for the eyes of the other as figured in the text in ways that rearranges our desires as constituted within the vicious circle of our own stakes in institutional power (Spivak, Death, 23)
20. Pitfall: Write about women using facts uncovered through our research:
Response: Pray to be haunted by the ghosts of Shakespeare's sister (and Nagarjuna's and Geronimo's) to work for her as a principle of the formation of an unintended collectivity through open-plan field work (Spivak, Death, 34-5, 39, 42-3, 50-52)
21. Pitfall: Do comparative cultural work that shows how difference makes oppression possible:
Response: Imagine the self not as a global agent but as a planetary subject constituted by an alterity that remains underived from us but both contains us and flings us away, making our home uncanny through a narrative of the impossible deriving from the pre-emergent and undecidable (Spivak, Death, 73-4, 80)
22. Pitfall: Resolve interpretive problems in terms and writing styles/genres that make sense:
Response: Confront the place where you know you cannot understand to do the work of refusing appropriation and accepting the dare to get to work (Anzaldúa)
23. Pitfall: Write using the weapons of social struggle increasing knowledge of patriarchy and oppression:

Response: Write as a “priestess at the crossroads” of difference, “weaponless, with open arms, with only our magic” as a person on the knees of the gods to create new myths that help us to see new realities (Anzaldúa 102-3)

24. Pitfall: Write about difference in way that demonstrates the deadly violence perpetrated on excluded groups:

Response: Live in the Borderlands where “you are the battleground, dead, fighting back” (Anzaldúa 216-7)

25. Pitfall: Investigate resistance to sexist, heteronormative, and other social norms:

Response: Work to queer, make strange, frustrate, counteract, delegitimise, camp up heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that inform and are informed by them (Sullivan, vi)

26. Pitfall: Carry out research as an already constituted subject to furnish the subject with a nameable identity:

Response: Highlight the inherent instability of the terms (homosexual, heterosexual; white, black) to enable an analysis of the culturally and historically specific ways in which the terms and the relation between them have developed and the effects they have produced in order to imagine alternative ways of thinking and living (Sullivan, 50-51)

27. Pitfall: Focus analysis on sources in the self of the actor/agent for feminist gender-based or sexuality-based roles and/or resistance:

Response: Recognize that the subject is both an agent and an effect, so that the regulatory and disciplinary practices which produce ostensibly coherent gender/sexuality are no longer displaced from view but come into visibility, where can show how repeated acts of forcible reiteration reveal through occasional discontinuity the groundlessness of the “ground” of the gendered/sexually oriented “self” (Sullivan, 84-5)

28. Pitfall: Carry out feminist practices to uncover oppression in solidarity with resistance:

Response: Listen to the voices of those who dispute the terms of representation and say “This is not us,” or those “Other” women who say they are not the women being spoken to, voices that often come from black women, in order to recognize the inventiveness of women creating new social categories (McRobbie, 7)

29. Pitfall: Identify and study successful social movements in order to learn how social change is possible:

Response: Explore incompleteness, fragmentation, and the pluralities of emergent identities that point the way to new forms of struggle that create conditions which are “more difficult to manage and control” and more easily realize techniques of evasion and demonstrate more democratic conceptions of social change and a logic of contingency where no social group is granted a privileged place (McRobbie, 50)

Sources:

(Note: For Butler/Scott, Butler, Flax, and Crosby, see Butler/Scott, ed., Feminists Theorize the Political.)

Anzaldúa, Gloria, Borderlands/La Frontera, Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.

Butler, Judith and Joan W. Scott, Feminists Theorize the Political, Routledge, 1992.

McRobbie, Angela, Postmodernism and Popular Culture, Routledge, 1994.

Muñoz, José Esteban, Disidentifications, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, The Death of a Discipline, Columbia University Press, 2003.

Sullivan, Nikki, A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory, New York Univ. Pr., 2003.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism, Ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, p.51-80.

Scott, Joan Wallach, "The Evidence of Experience," in H. Abelove, et al., The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, Routledge, 1993, 397-415.

Davies, Bronwyn, "The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Poststructuralist Analysis," Social Analysis, v. 30 (1991): 42-53.

Diamond, Irene and Lee Quinby. "Introduction." Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance. Ed. Diamond and Quinby. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988. ix-xx.

Foucault, Michel, "Method," The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, v. 1, Vintage, 1990 (1976), p. 92-102.