Randomised control trials

Are they really the gold standard?

How do the experts decide on public policy? Traditionally, by generating new theories about what will work, or by asking big questions with even bigger answers. However, this theoretical approach has been critised for being ungrounded in reality, leading to failed development efforts. A more down-to-earth approach to policy development is the use of randomised control trials (RCTs) which is being held up as the gold standard for determining the effectiveness of an intervention. For example, the 2019 Nobel Prize in economics was awarded to three scholars for pioneering the use of RCTs to study ‘what works’ in the fight against global poverty. Research using RCTs is increasingly favoured over other evaluative methods. Regarding themselves as the ‘plumbers’ of policy development, the ‘randomistas’ say that they are interested in solving real-life problems with science, rather than theory.

**RANDOMISED CONTROL TRIALS**

To understand whether an intervention is working, non-RCT experimental methods would compare the outcomes of people who have chosen to participate in the intervention (treatment group) against people who have not chosen to participate (control group). The problem with grouping people in this way, however, is that there may be selection biases – differences between the groups which could influence the results of the study – such as personality types of people who are keen to participate in interventions versus those who are not, or unintended differences in access to the intervention due to location.

RCTs seek to overcome this problem by identifying a group of people who are eligible for the intervention and randomly assigning them to either a treatment or control group before the intervention. In so doing, RCTs aim to reduce the effect of selection biases and ensure that any evidence of impact can be ‘clearly’ attributed to the intervention. As a result, RCTs are considered by their practitioners to be more rigorous than other methods, leading them to dismiss the usefulness of other approaches and, by dissemination of job advertisements to villages within commuting distance of Delhi had increased women’s employment in those villages. This is used to support her contention that there has been a rise in female employment in India. But there has not. On the contrary, much of the literature in India is focused on the fact that women’s labour force participation in India, especially rural India, has been in steady decline for a number of years.

Similarly, evidence from an RCT in one state in India is used to suggest that there is no evidence for gender discrimination in India, at least in relation to immunisation. Once again, this claim is contradicted by the national data which shows that girls were immunised significantly less than boys in almost every other state in India. By examining a small-scale situation, and relying only on their findings, randomista economists tend to provide a very skewed picture of the true state of affairs.

**RCTs deliver poorly on what seems to be their main claim to methodological superiority.**

Another drawback is the tendency to focus entirely on individual behaviour without taking account of the history and context in which this behaviour plays out. For instance, Professor Duflo suggests that the gains from gender-affirmative policy – policies designed to improve gender equality – are exaggerated. They may have benefits for some women, but they are not efficient from the perspective of economic growth. An example put forward is a study from Sri Lanka which showed that transfers in cash and kind to micro-entrepreneurs increased profits for men but not for women. This suggests that these transfers would have been more efficiently used if they had been directed only to men. This narrative by randomista economists would discourage policymakers from implementing gender-affirmative policies in their society.

Professor Kabeer, however, rebuts this argument from a feminist economics perspective. She argues that feminist movements and gender-affirmative policies have contributed hugely to gender equality in politics, such as women’s right to vote and electing women into public office. This has helped policy decisions to better reflect women’s interests. There is also substantial evidence to suggest there is a positive impact of gender-affirmative policies on critical aspects of family wellbeing, an important dimension of development.

She suggests the reason why transfer policies in Sri Lanka only profited males was because patriarchal constraints on women (including their unpaid domestic responsibilities and restrictions on their mobility) made it more difficult for them to use transfers profitably; one policy alone will not be sufficient to level the playing field between men and women. The larger patriarchal structures that prevail in different contexts are not considered by randomista economists in judging questions of efficiency, but feminist economists argue they are essential to the argument that gender inequalities, rather than individual women, are the source of inefficiency.
Behind the Research
Dr Naila Kabeer

Research Objectives
Understanding the limitations of randomised control trials for informing gender equality policy worldwide.

References
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Personal Response
RCTs and qualitative methods seem limited in the sample size they can practically achieve, which could limit the applicability of their findings in country-wide studies. What would be the best research method to overcome this?

It is true that neither RCTs nor qualitative methods work with large samples. There are two alternatives. One would be to do several RCTs within a country to take account of different contexts and use qualitative studies to tease out causal processes for what works and what doesn’t. But RCTs are very expensive. So, the other would be to go for well-designed old-fashioned surveys, but using econometric techniques for creating valid control groups, and relying on qualitative methods once again to understand causality.

Detail
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