BRANDED BAND-AIDS ON BROKEN LEGS

A RELATIONAL CRITIQUE OF THE RANDOMISED CONTROLLED TRIAL'S APPROACH TO POVERTY

by
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Mini-dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Commerce in Economic Development

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Abstract

The rise of experimental evaluations, specifically the use of the randomised controlled trial (RCT) in the field of development economics, has been widely critiqued. These critiques range from technicalities, such as the internal and external validity of the methodology, to the approach to economic development it takes. This dissertation contributes to the latter, and offers a critique of the underlying theoretical framework embraced by the RCT. The dissertation deploys a New Relational approach to poverty, which foregrounds an analysis of the social relations within which the poor are immersed. The New Relational framework examines how class, caste, and gender, as well as the intersection of these social identities, shape the creation and reproduction of poverty. In this sense, the New Relational approach draws from the insights of Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial theory to present an anti-essentialist approach to poverty. By critically examining two RCT-implemented poverty programmes in Bangladesh, this study shows that the RCT approach to poverty relies on a modified neoclassical theoretical framework that neglects studying the determinants of poverty related to power, discrimination and exploitation. This dissertation argues that by ignoring these variables the RCT approach provides an insufficient understanding of poverty, as the latter plays a crucial part in shaping the preferences of, and opportunities available to the poor.

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Introduction

In 2019, the Sveriges Riksbank Prize of Economics was awarded to Abhijit Banerjee, Ester Duflo and Michael Kremer for their experimental approach to alleviating global poverty. This approach to poverty, championed by the randomised controlled trial (RCT), was praised for dividing the issue of global poverty into smaller, more manageable questions, and answering these questions through carefully designed experiments and rigorous evaluations (Svensson, 2019). The RCT, which originates from the medical field, works through researchers randomly allocating an intervention (treatment) to certain groups or individuals of a predefined sample [known as treated group(s)], while withholding the treatment from the other group (or individuals) in the sample [known as the control group(s)]. The law of large numbers suggests that the randomisation process will ensure that the two groups will have similar mean values for a predefined variable of choice, thereby providing the perfect counterfactual. By evaluating the mean difference of a predefined variable of choice before and after the intervention of both groups, the researchers can establish the exact causal effect of the intervention (White, 2013).

The use of RCTs in poverty programme evaluations is based on an understanding of poverty as a technical failure, which can be corrected through small incremental changes. Thus, instead of questioning structural conditions causing poverty, the approach suggests targeting specific micro dimensions of poverty, implementing a market-correcting intervention and then, through rigorous empiricism, determining which interventions work for addressing poverty and which do not. Examples of RCTevaluated interventions include financial instruments, such as the provision of microcredit (Banerjee et al., 2015) and conditional cash transfers, educational programmes, such as access to textbooks (Glewwe et al.,2009), and health-related interventions, such as deworming programmes (Miguel & Kremer, 2004). Advocates of RCTs argue that the experimental approach enables researchers to find internally valid estimates of the treatment effect and alternative (small) solutions to development challenges, which would not have been known *a-priori* (Banerjee & Duflo, 2009:153). The credible identification of the causal effects of RCT has facilitated the methodology to become the dominant impact evaluation methodology in international development programmes (White, 2013; Servet, 2018), at a time where the field of development

economics had increasingly valorised impact evaluations of development programmes as such (Donovan, 2018).

However, the enthusiasm for RCTs is not shared by all development theorists. Apart from the technical problems of RCTs, such as the scalability and generalisability of the results (Heckman, 2010; Cartwright, 2011; Deaton, & Cartwright, 2018), one of the biggest concerns is the specific approach to poverty noted above, which marks a retreat from addressing the broader, entrenched and relational problems that lie at the heart of long-term poverty reduction (Chang, 2013; Chernomas & Hudson, 2019; Surrendran & Kumar, 2020; Kvangraven, 2020; Chelwa, 2020). By focusing on small questions and changes, RCTs have been criticised for transforming the nature of development research, moving away from questions regarding power and politics, (Toye, 2018:284) and macro processes, to treating symptoms of development failures and ignoring their underlying causes.

The fact that RCTs are silent on broader macro and political economic processes has been raised by a variety of scholars attached to varied schools of thought in development studies. For instance, feminist scholars have pointed out that RCTs ignore how women's choices and preferences are shaped by structures and norms that are built on unequal-gendered power relations (Kabeer, 2019). Marxian scholars have pointed out that RCTs ignore and undermine unequal power relations between various classes, international structures and institutions, and the capitalist mode of production that leads to those with less power (relative to those who have economic power), being impoverished (Stevano, 2020). What this paper seeks to do is to build on these critiques using a theoretical framework that consolidates what Sharma et al. (2021:221) refer to as new relational approaches to poverty, into a singular and consistent approach to poverty, which I term the New Relational approach.

The New Relational approach to poverty follows from the relational approaches to poverty championed by Green (2006), Harris (2007), Hickey and du Toit (2007), Woolcock (2009) and Mosse (2010), as a critique of poverty studies that fail to examine the social relations that the poor are embedded in. A relational approach to poverty argues that poverty cannot be addressed accurately without understanding the poor's relations to other non-poor social groups and larger macroeconomic and political processes. This approach, therefore, suggests that poverty and privilege are mutually

constituted processes, as the result of unequal power relations (Mosse, 2010). These unequal power relations are deemed to be perpetuated not solely through formal structures but also through the reproduction of discourses that create and subjugate the "other" (Hickey, 2009).

Early relational approaches specifically examined poverty as the result of unequal power relations present in class relations. What Sharma et al. (2021:221) refer to as new relational approaches[1], extended this scholarship by not only examining vertical inequalities (that are examined through class relations) but also the unequal power relations taking place over gender, culture and ethnicity lines associated with capitalist development (horizontal inequalities). The new relational approaches also examine the interaction between various oppressions that can lead to conjugated oppression (Sharma et al., 2021:221). As such, the new relational approaches to poverty do not treat social categories of class, caste and gender as separate categories but rather as intersecting social relations that co-constitute practices of governance, domination, and resistance (Lerche & Shah, 2018).

The relational social ontology embodied in the New Relational approach that examines both material and discursive realities and both horizontal and vertical inequalities and their intersections, draws from Marxist, feminist and postcolonial theory to provide an anti-essentialist understanding of the processes creating and perpetuating poverty. By using this New Relational approach as a theoretical framework to critique the RCT approach to poverty, the aim of this dissertation is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to show how the RCT provides an insufficient understanding of why poverty exists and how to overcome it. This will be done by examining the approach to poverty of two published RCT studies and then using the New Relational approach to poverty to illuminate the importance and relevance of various relational processes that interact and underpin the material situation of the poor. Secondly, it seeks to show the value of using an antiessentialist theoretical framework to study poverty.

[1] Although Sharma refers to these as new relational approaches, other scholars who use this type of relational approach, refers to it as the relational approach (such as Du Toit, 2009; Hickey, 2009; Elwood et al., 2016). To avoid confusion, and to distinguish between the relational approaches that solely examine vertical inequalities, and the relational approaches that also include horizontal inequalities (and the intersection of these), I term the notion of examining social relations, across various categories (as well as the intersection of these social relations), as the New Relational approach to poverty.

The dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 1 introduces the RCT and presents a survey of existing critiques. Chapter 2 sets out the New Relational approach as theoretical framework after a summary of social theories in the field of development economics that also embody such a social relational ontology. Chapter 3 starts by setting out the methodology, followed by the examination of two RCT-implemented anti-poverty interventions in Bangladesh informed by a New Relational approach. The chosen RCTs are Bandiera, Burgess, Das, Gulesci, Rasul and Sulaiman's study titled, *Labor market and poverty in village economies* (Bandiera et al., 2017), which is an evaluation of the Targeting the ultra-poor (TUP) programme. This study is based on their hypothesis that the transfer of livestock assets and skills to women can enable poor women to move to a higher class of wealth, and sustainably escape poverty. The second study is Lane's (2020) study titled, *Credit lines as insurance: evidence from Bangladesh*, which introduces an emergency loan in highly-vulnerable-to-flooding areas in Bangladesh to mitigate income risks posed by environmental disasters. By using the New Relational approach as a theoretical framework, and drawing from secondary data, this chapter will seek to answer what the RCT understanding of poverty is, and to illuminate its limitations. It also attempts to demonstrate the superiority of the New Relational approach and what it may offer poverty research. The fourth and final chapter highlights the importance of placing social relations at the heart of poverty analysis and proposes a move away from the RCT-compatible development research industry model in poverty studies that perpetuates an 'elite subject and subordinate object' (Selwyn, 2016) approach to development.

Chapter 1: Introducing the RCT and a survey of its critiques

Introduction

The introduction of RCTs to the field of development economics has been widely praised for bringing empirical credibility to the field (Barret & Carter, 2010). In poverty studies, the use of RCTs has been commended for its ability to radically rethink how to best address global poverty, as it divides the big question of global poverty into manageable chunks that can be addressed easier while promising to significantly improve the lives of the poor (Svensson, 2019). Conversely, the celebration of RCTs as a radical way of rethinking poverty that boasts superior methodological standards has been questioned and critiqued abundantly. These criticisms range from the

empirical credibility of RCTs (Heckman, 1991) to ethical concerns (Hoffmann, 2018), to questioning the overall approach to poverty that RCTs take and their hegemonic status in the field of development today (Donovan, 2018; Kabeer, 2019; Kvangraven, 2020). This chapter will introduce RCTs before reviewing these existing critiques. For this paper, the focus will predominantly be on critiquing the RCT's understanding of the processes creating and perpetuating poverty (as seen in Kabeer, 2019; Chernomas & Hudson, 2019; Chelwa, 2020; Kvangraven, 2020; Tyagi & Weber, 2020; Wintrup, 2021).

Introducing the RCT

Definition

An RCT is a form of impact evaluation that assesses the causal effects of interventions on outcomes of interest (White & Raitzer, 2017:2). This is done by building a counterfactual through drawing two samples at random, from a population that could benefit from a project, and allocating the intervention only to one arm of the sample. Those receiving the intervention (treatment) is the treated group, and those who do not, is the control group. Given the law of large numbers, it assumes that through randomisation, the researcher can ensure that all factors likely to influence an outcome variable, (apart from the intervention itself), are distributed equally between those receiving the treatment and those that do not. This has been called the "idealisation assumption" (Cartwright, 2007). If this assumption holds, the researcher can ensure that after the implementation of the intervention, the difference between the groups (measured by the difference in means of the group), can be attributed to the intervention (Gertler et al., 2016). By ensuring that the difference between the groups can be attributed to the interventions, the researchers can be confident of the internal validity of the local average treatment effect for the population of interest (Banerjee & Duflo, 2009:152).

RCTs in development economics

Initially RCTs were used in the field of medicine to test the efficacy of medication by giving one patient the real treatment and the other a placebo. Although implemented in the field of development economics during the 60s, the success of RCTs in the field came within what is referred to as the second wave of RCTs in development economics, which started in the early 21st century (de Souza Leão & Eyal, 2019). The

second wave was marked by asking “small questions” aimed at addressing symptoms of poverty with the aim of marginally reducing the suffering of the poor. Instead of thinking what are the big underlying processes that may cause poverty, RCTs looked at immediate changes that could be implemented (predominantly based on the poor’s behaviour). For instance, instead of addressing broader national educational policy to improve school attendance, an RCT would recommend introducing deworming drugs to address a more specific and localised issue (Miguel & Kremer, 2004).

This wave of experiments took place alongside a changing landscape in development economics, which saw the mainstream of the discipline move away from studying structural transformation and industrialisation, to studying the ways of tackling symptoms of poverty (Fine, 2008; Chang, 2013; Donovan, 2018; Chelwa, 2020). The changing landscape was accommodated by the increasingly important role that donor agencies and NGOs played in development, compared to development associated with state or market-led structural change. The important role that donor agencies and NGOs played in development interventions, simultaneously introduced a demand for the inquiry into the efficacy of development interventions and aid programmes, which led to the increased importance of evaluating the impact of interventions. By questioning the validity of traditional evaluation methodologies, such as observational studies and calling for “hard evidence”, RCTs created a gap in the field of development, which they then filled through a combination of a scientific media appeal and a large institutional network (Donovan, 2018; Bédécarrats et al., 2019a). The demand for evidence that they created ensured that their entrance into the development field was welcomed by policy makers of aid organisations, who believed that RCTs can provide scientific evidence of the efficacy of programmes or interventions, and thereby accurately assess the impact of their aid policies and development programmes (Lensink, 2014:12). The support of the scientific credibility of RCTs was not limited to funding and donor agencies, but also applied in the academic realm, with the awarding of the 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics attesting to the success and reach of the methodology.

The dominance of RCTs in the academic and development field simultaneously changed the landscape of development, and specifically poverty research, through encouraging an epistemology that allegedly questions all existing theories unless

experimentally proven (Donovan, 2018). By doing this, RCTs dismissed decades worth of research into development processes and practices (Akram-Lodhi, 2014), while solidifying a development research agenda that departs from an analysis of macroeconomic, sociological, and political economic trends and dynamics towards a research agenda predominantly concerned with poverty reduction (Toye, 2018:284), specifically a reduction of the symptoms associated with poverty. This impact of the hegemonic use of RCTs on the field of development has led a variety of scholars to critique RCTs for failing to challenge power inequalities and marginalising alternative economic epistemologies and methodologies. As such, RCTs have been critiqued for cementing a hierarchical, positivist and eurocentric field – critiques that will be examined in more detail below (Crush, 1995:5; Barret & Carter, 2010; Kabeer, 2020a Kvangraven, 2020; Wintrup, 2021).

Theoretical framework

Proponents of RCTs advocate for addressing poverty as a technical problem that should not be reliant on theoretical ideas. As a key proponent of RCTs, Ester Duflo says, that the validity of the experiment is not grounded in the validity of the theory, making the RCT a useful methodology to invalidate the assumed “universal laws” derived from mainstream economics (Duflo, 2009:67). Despite claiming not to be guided by theory, proponents of RCT actually use theory in the form of propositions that define the expected results of an experiment, in a piecemeal and selective way (Labrousse, 2016). Labrousse (2016) uses an experiment of Banerjee and Duflo from their book *Poor Economics* as an example of this. In the publication, Banerjee and Duflo start an experiment by stating that if the theory of the poverty trap is true, the poor should maximise their intake of calories to enhance their work productivity and thus one would expect their food budget to go up proportionally faster than total spending (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011:24-25). This (often implicit and piecemeal) theory that they draw on is based within the theoretical framework of neoclassical microeconomic theory (Kvanrgaven, 2020:312).

The key assumptions of neoclassical microeconomic theory are, firstly, that it follows a mechanistic and determinist epistemology, which is rooted in methodological individualism. This suggests that economic actions and relations are separated from nature and social relationship*s.* Secondly, it relies on the idea of homo economicus to

explain human decision-making. Homo economicus is defined as a self-sufficient rational individual, who has perfectly defined preferences that are not influenced by society. In this sense the theory rests on an assumption that humans (individual agents) make decisions at the hand of optimising rationality, interacting with their selfinterest in mind, in a market where prices are the only means of communication. Thirdly, neoclassical microeconomics relies on the imposition of economic growth as the ultimate objectives and universal principles of social development (AgenjoCalderón & Gálvez-Muñoz, 2019:143).

RCTs diverge from traditional neoclassical theory by theorising that people do not always act in the rational, utility-optimising way postulated by homo economicus. Instead, they believe that people's diversion from such a behaviour, is held to explain their conditions of poverty. It is, therefore, this behaviour or decision-making of the poor, that needs to be corrected. As such, although RCT proponents argue that they are not following the conventional understanding of economic behaviour (that is that people act in a rational utility-optimising way), they still insist that there is a universal logic that allows uncovering what constitutes rational behaviour and the obstacles to achieving conformity with it (Akram-Lodhi, 2014; Reinert et al., 2016:17; Kvangraven, 2020:313). The scope of their poverty research is, therefore, limited to micro-market transformations improving the behaviour and decision-making of the poor, by means of what critics call "paternalistic" development policies (Berndt, 2015).

Critiques of RCTs

The introduction and rise of RCTs in development economics have been critiqued abundantly, both from within the mainstream of the field as well as from heterodox scholars. This section will briefly summarise the main critiques grouping them into three categories, namely those critiquing the methodological superiority, those raising ethical concerns about experimenting in the field of development, and finally, and most importantly for this thesis, those critiquing RCTs' understanding of, and approach to, poverty.

Methodological superiority

RCTs have been praised for solving the problem of credibility of research results or impact evaluations of development economics by providing rigorous and scientific evaluations of what works. RCT proponents argue that RCTs are the only impact evaluation method that can provide “hard evidence” (Banerjee, 2007:12). The supposed epistemic superiority of RCTs in the field should, however, be challenged. Firstly, by looking at how superior this evidence really is, (that is examining the internal validity) and, secondly, by querying its overall utility (namely examining the external validity associated with the methodology).

Internal validity

The biggest claim of RCTs is that it provides unbiased rigorous evaluation of what works, due to random unbiased sampling. Randomisation is argued to solve the problem of selection bias in that it ensures that the treated and control groups differ only through their exposure to the treatment (Duflo et al., 2008a:3902). Accordingly, RCTs are argued to provide an unbiased estimate of the impact of the programme, and, therefore, internally valid estimates (Duflo, et al., 2008a:3902). Conversely, this viewpoint has been critiqued based on how unbiased and precise the RCT estimates are.

Mainstream economists have critiqued RCTs for trading precision off for unbiased results, and thereby jeopardising the internal validity of the estimates (Heckman, 1991; Ravallion, 2005; Deaton, 2009; Barrett & Carter, 2010; Harrison, 2011; Deaton & Cartwright, 2018; Ravallion, 2018). This is because RCT estimates mean or average impact effects of interventions. However, relying on the average treatment effect as an estimate is problematic when the effects were heterogenous among the sampled population. This problem is compounded by the fact that RCTs provide no information on the variance, and that there is no robust method to quantify the margins of error. RCTs can improve precision through stratification but that would contradict RCTs, as the methodology claims its superiority because of the absence of priors (Bédécarrats et al., 2019a).

Heterodox economists have also given attention to the measurement errors associated with RCTs, as RCTs often use the household as the unity of observation for their data. Akram-Lodhi (2020) notes that the household is not unified, and it is worth examining

what the household structure is when using the household as the unit for observation. This means that the household structure (which is determined by intrahousehold differentiation according to gender, generation or cultural norms that shape the decision-making ability and distribution of resources) should be unpacked when data is collected, instead of researchers assuming that the benefits of an intervention are equally shared in the household. This reliance on individual data responses of the household provided by RCTs could therefore imply that the results are misleading.

Practically, the claim of RCTs to internal validity is also jeopardised due to difficulties that arise when implementing an RCT. Obtaining perfect randomisation and unbiased results are firstly compromised due to the likelihood of spill-over effects from the treatment group to the control group, as well as non-attrition from the treatment group (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Secondly, the implementers of the RCT can also jeopardise the randomisation by using non-random methods of assigning the treatment (Deaton, 2009:39). Bédécarrats et al. (2019b), for instance, show how an RCT-evaluated microcredit programme in Morocco (by Crépon et al., 2015) breached its own standards for implementation (and thereby biasing results) by altering the sampling approach, and also tweaking the programme to encourage the take-up by the treated groups. These implementation problems and imperfect randomisation deter the internal validity, which furthermore has been seen as problematic due to researchers not publishing or reporting on the implementation difficulties they have (unlike the mandatory requirements of needing to do so in the field of medicine) (Barret & Carter, 2010).

External validity and generalisability of results

If the strongest point of RCTs is its internal validity, its weakest point, according to mainstream economists, has been its external validity or how generalisable the results obtained from the experiment are (Basu, 2014; Deaton & Cartwright, 2018). External validity refers to whether a study's findings can be transferred from the population that was studied to a different population. As RCTs provide an evaluation of a specific intervention implemented with a specific set of partners at a specific place and time, it is unlikely that these results will hold, given another context. Scaling up an intervention itself is likely to change the treatment effects as the RCT is often implemented by NGOs (or the researchers themselves), while the scaled version of the intervention is

typically implemented by resource-constrained governments (Ravallion, 2012; Banerjee et al., 2017). This problem of how scalable or generalisable results are, is aggravated by the majority of RCT papers in the field of development economics not discussing issues of external validity (Peters et al., 2016; Peters et al., 2018). Since RCTs are devoid of contextual factors, which are accounted for through the process of randomisation, massive disruptions can take place if results are implemented into policy (Peters et al., 2018). Wintrup (2021), for instance, found that the upscaling of an RCT (implemented and evaluated by Ashraf et al., 2015) aimed at recruiting health workers in Zambia, led to false hope being generated by those selected by the recruitment process, as the RCT did not consider the structures in which it takes place.

To combat this and make results more generalisable, it has been argued that RCTs can perform replication studies (Karlan & Appel., 2011). However, this poses a problem in terms of who would be willing to do a replication of a study. On the one hand it would make little sense for donors who have few resources to waste, and less so for the professional development of academics, as journals are unlikely to publish replication studies (Rodrik, 2008). Another suggestion is that results should come with a warning or a note, which clearly specifies under which conditions the interventions worked and what the external validity of the results is (Peters et al., 2016). Pearce and Raman (2014) discussed this problem in the UK public policy context. They suggest that RCT results should be compounded with an interpretation of the results, which discloses under what conditions the results were obtained, and under what conditions similar results can be expected to be obtained.

Furthermore, as RCTs provide the mean treatment effects, they only provide a static portrayal of the impact of the interventions, without providing information on the how and why, and through what causal mechanisms, the intervention worked. Thus, the evidence RCTs provide is restricted to detailed and specific questions, which limits the relevance and use of the methodology in development studies (Rodrik, 2008). This poses the question of what is the actual purpose of RCTs: is it merely for an academic debate or does it provide a useful tool to better evaluate NGO-based development programmes (Petryna, 2009)? This issue leads to the second group of critiques on RCTs namely those concerning how ethical experimentation is in the field of economic development.

Ethical concerns

Beyond the mainstream economic critiques regarding the technicalities of the RCT, there has been the more philosophical question of how ethical is conducting social experiments on the poor. This concern can be divided into two subsections or categories, namely concerns regarding the practicalities of experimentation on human subjects, and the more epistemological critique regarding the making of a subject and the discarding of local and potentially alternative ways of knowing expressed by these subjects, which may escape the research design of RCTs. Each of these categories is examined in more detail below.

Withholding treatments due to limited resources

In the field of economic development that engages with life-threatening topics, such as poverty, experimenting proves ethically concerning as it relies on giving some people an intervention (that could be life-changing) while withholding it from others, and vice versa, exposing some to a treatment that could be detrimental to them, while withholding it from others (Nama & Swartz, 2002). However, the implementation of experiments in such a context is underpinned by the argument that until it is known if an intervention works, it should not be assumed that those exposed to the intervention are better off (Kaufman, 2016), and that implementing institutions are bound to budgetary constraints. The justification of implementing an intervention without assuming that the treated is better off, is based on the ethical principle of 'equipoise', which requires uncertainty on the part of the researcher regarding the merit of both access and non-access to the treatment. These rules of equipoise suggest that as soon as the treatment is found to be beneficial to a group and can be scaled up or expanded to the control group, it should be done (Freedman, 1987:141).

By merely implementing an intervention, the RCT is already pushing these boundaries, as it requires significant additional cost. In this sense, the scarce resources that could have been used to treat an additional group of people are used to fund the evaluation. Furthermore, studies have revealed how, apart from the costliness of the RCT, the RCT has breached ethical guidelines by violating principles of equipoise. An empirical analysis by Tyagi and Webber (2021) of the RCT implementation of the Generasi project in Indonesia found that the RCT researchers knew after the pilot phase that the programme was beneficial but continued for another six years not giving the treatment to the control group. The researchers, therefore, broke these principles because of

self-interest, namely, to expand on their research outputs and contributions to scientific research.

The making of the subject and determining what qualifies as knowledge

Epistemologically the RCT also poses an ethical question, namely what the research subject's knowledge of the experiment is. Previous studies have inquired into the consent of participants in RCT studies and their awareness of being in a study (Peters et al., 2018). Controversially it has been found that there is a discrepancy between the consent of research subjects in the Global North and research subjects in the Global South. Hoffmann (2020) found that in the Global South only 34% of studies inform subjects about their participation in the RCT, which compares poorly to the 65% consent rate in the Global North.

Furthermore, it has been argued that RCTs seek to change the behaviour of the poor through a soft paternalism (Berndt, 2015). This is because they reproduce an unequal relationship between the researcher and the research subject, which scholars have suggested perpetuates a discourse that Global North researchers have better expertise in estimating what is best for the poor in the Global South (Tilley, 2011; Berndt & Boeckler, 2016; Weber & Prouse, 2018; Hoffman, 2020). As such, the economist's knowledge and evidence overrule the experience of local stakeholders, placing the poor in a passive role in the intervention (Abdelghafour, 2017). In this sense, the RCT researcher's approach to development forms part of what Selwyn (2016) calls "elite subject-subordinate object" development theory, where the poor is conceptualised as merely human inputs. Such elite-led conceptions of development, Selwyn argues, legitimises the economic exploitation of the poor.

Approach to poverty

It has already been explained that RCTs rely on a modified microeconomic neoclassical theoretical framework. While the approach denies that individuals are necessarily rational, it proposes that interventions will nudge towards rational, marketconforming behaviour that will benefit the poor. In this sense, RCTs can be seen as aimed at correcting "market-failures" and thus share common ground with welfarist neoclassical theory. As proponents of RCTs disregard the structure in which people's decisions are made, their approach leads to a twofold interlocking problem. Firstly, the researcher is unable to see how historical, social, and political structures

shape the choices and preferences of people (Fourcade, 2006:160; Reddy, 2012:64; Mitchell & Sparke, 2015; Labrousse, 2016; Pritchett, 2019; Kabeer, 2020a). Secondly, by assuming that the market is stable and efficient, the researcher circumvents larger questions about structural problems that cause poverty, meaning that these larger problems remain unchallenged, limiting the scope of change and thereby leaving the economic status quo untouched (Surendram & Kumar, 2020:2). The rest of this section will examine previous research that explains why this provides an insufficient understanding of poverty, and how such an understanding of poverty limits the impact of long-term poverty interventions, and, in some cases, even exacerbates the poor's vulnerabilities.

Understanding choices

As RCTs ignore the structures in which people operate, they are not able to recognise the centrality of how these structural conditions influence and shape individual choice (Goodwin et al., 2018; Akram-Lodhi, 2020). Although RCT proponents reject strict ideas of economic rationality, they fail to see how large political, and social structures are responsible (and act as barriers) for the behaviour and preferences of the poor. For instance, in a study by Banerjee and Duflo on hunger in Morocco, it was concluded that the poor are starving because they choose to spend their money on other priorities (Banerjee & Duflo, 2009:69). As such, they ignored the historical shifts in food production and trade, which are at the root of people's economic and sociocultural relations to food, and which can only be understood when examining the international relations associated with food production (Stevano, 2020). Banerjee and Duflo's argument of how people spend money depending on how they value the present versus the future, therefore, provides an insufficient understanding of poverty compared to an approach that examines how the food choices people make are shaped by the structural features of agrifood systems and the power relations of the associated economic, social, and cultural conditions (Stevano, 2020).

This lack of understanding of the choices and preferences of the poor is echoed by Barrett and Carter (2010) who criticised an RCT (by Duflo et al. 2008b) that concluded that a group of western Kenyan farmers would gain from higher investment in fertiliser, but they failed to take advantage of higher returns because they were present-biased. The RCT argued that small time-limited discounts on fertiliser purchases could correct this bias. Barret and Carter, however, noted that previous studies that did not use

experimental methods, established that many maize farmers in this same area faced low returns on fertilizer even if the average returns significantly exceeded the cost of purchase (Marenya & Barrett, 2009). The discrepancy between the results Barrett and Carter argued follows from Duflo and her cohorts overlooking the fact that the crop yield's response to fertiliser (and thus its profitability) depends on *ex-ante* soil conditions. This suggests that the key reason for a lower yield was not because of farmers being present-biased but rather because their choice of land was limited due to other structural conditions, namely what determines farmers' access to a certain quality of land, which is dictated by class (Barrett & Carter, 2010:539) and gender (Quisumbing & Pandolfeli, 2010).

By ignoring how behaviour is shaped by larger structures, and (as mentioned in the critiques of the internal validity of RCTs) by not unpacking the household structure, RCTs are (as noted above) likely to reach false conclusions about how an intervention worked, as well as posing a threat of implementing interventions that might have adverse effects on the sample population. Naila Kabeer's (2019) study of two pairs of impact assessments implemented in West Bengal and Sindh prove very useful to show the accumulated technical and theoretical problems of the RCT, and what the consequence of their implementation is. She studied two pairs of impact evaluation studies (consisting of an RCT and a qualitative assessment) of BRAC's (the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) TUP programme. From the qualitative studies she illuminates what the RCT is unable to pick up, namely how there are certain "conversion factors" that can hinder or differentiate people's ability to translate resources into the capabilities needed to achieve their goals, and how not having these conversion factors can mean that the intervention is detrimental to the group it aims to benefit. From her qualitative analysis of the study, she found that differences in the patriarchal constraints characterising the two contexts made it far more difficult for women in Sindh than those in West Bengal to independently convert project resources into livelihood capabilities. Advisasi women, being expected to start earning money from a young age, displayed the greatest agency in the project. In contrast, the Muslim women in the study were subjected to greater social constraints, which limited their capacity to translate the support of the project into valued capabilities (Kabeer, 2019: 207).

Thinking small; ignoring the big

By ignoring the structures and focusing on individual behaviour, RCTs undermine the systemic causes of market failure and how those shape behaviour (as noted above), as well as how these structures are responsible for reproducing poverty. As such, the failure of the market is placed on the market subject (Berndt, 2015). Chernomas and Hudson (2019) point out that Duflo's focus on individual solutions, such as convincing poor families to purify their water supply, to reduce infant mortality (as argued in Banerjee and Duflo, 2011:42), ignores the historical success (and necessity) of largescale infrastructure projects in improving health outcomes. Furthermore, Duflo's claim that the impediments to poverty alleviation have "less to do with some grand conspiracy of the elites to maintain their hold on the economy and more to do with some avoidable flaw in the design of policies" (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011:270) dismisses the influence of powerful international players, such as multinational corporations and foreign governments, on the outcomes of the poor (Chernomas & Hudson, 2019). Radical and heterodox critics have made the claim that by ignoring these harder and political questions regarding complex mechanisms creating poverty, RCTs normalise the current economic status quo and do not challenge the existing economic structures (Chang, 2013; de Souza Leão & Eyal. 2019; Stein et al., 2021). Some maintain that this is, in fact, the secret behind the success of RCTs (Bedecarrats et al. 2019a), while simultaneously allowing them to solidify a development landscape that is top-down oriented, dominated by the development apparatus and leaving limited autonomy to the poor (Chang, 2013; Webber & Prouse, 2018).

Conclusion

Although RCTs are acclaimed for being the most rigorous form of impact evaluation, the methodology has been shown to have technical flaws (creating doubt over claims on its superior internal validity), to have a limited use due to its low external validity, to pose ethical questions and, due to the theoretical framework it rests on, to provide an insufficient understanding of both the structures creating and reproducing poverty, as well as the choices and preferences of the poor. The rest of this dissertation will expand on the limitations of the understanding of poverty offered by RCTs. To do so, it will enlist the New Relational approach to poverty as a theoretical counterpoint to the neoclassical theoretical foundations of RCTs.

Chapter 2: Towards a relational approach to poverty

Introduction

Chapter 1 presented a survey of critiques of RCTs. The final group of critiques that was presented specifically examined the overall and largely implicit theoretical framework and approach to poverty that guides RCT interventions. These critiques made the charge that RCTs reliance on neoclassical theory means that it adopts an insufficient understanding of poverty. More specifically, the issue is that RCTs are dismissive of the various social and political processes that underpin the reproduction of poverty and shape the choices and preferences of the poor. In this sense, the RCT approach to development problems is in line with the contemporary wave of development economics that has distanced itself from examining structural change and market failures, such as seen in the classical development theories including modernisation, developmentalism, structuralism, dependency and other critical approaches inspired by Marxist political economy (Fine, 2008). Rather, RCTs are a symptom of what Fine (2008) refers to as the 'newer development economics' or 'postWashington consensus' development economics. This approach to development rhetorically distances itself from 'high theory' (Krugman, 1994) – such as the state versus market debate – yet remains unreflectively embedded in neoclassical theoretical presuppositions. Moreover, while the 'new development economics' does not share the theoretical roots and the ambition of modernisation theory, it nonetheless subscribes to some of its core propositions. These include the view that underdevelopment is rooted in problems internal to poorer nations, outside intervention is necessary to stimulate development and that these interventions should be geared towards systematic behavioural change (Rostow, 1959; Fine, 2008).

Some of the literature that was referenced in Chapter 1 specifically illuminated various social relations that influence and restrict the choices and preference of the poor, showing the necessity of examining social relations to understand poverty (Goodwin et al., 2018; Kabeer, 2019). This literature adopts a relational social ontology that views poverty not as a product of market failure or irrational choice, but rather as the consequence of historical economic and political relations that lead to inequalities in power (Mosse, 2010). As such, poverty is viewed as relational, with the unequal power relations ensuring that the poor and the privileged are not distinct categorical social groups, but rather that poverty and privilege are mutually constituted (Wood, 2003).

A relational social ontology is present in various political economy theories that examine both the discursive and material conditions associated with social relations. In the field of development economics these theories are associated with some of the early development theories that examined structural change and the development of capitalism and have been carried forward by heterodox development thinkers today. Below, three key social theories in the field of development will be examined namely Marxist, feminist and postcolonial theory. A synthesis of these theories forms the bedrock of the New Relational approach to poverty embraced by this thesis. I argue that the New Relational approach is an emergent theoretical framework in the field of poverty studies that combines the best aspects of these Marxist, feminist and postcolonial insights and presents an anti-essentialist and non-reductive understanding of poverty.

Marxist theory

Marxism is a theoretical and political framework that is used in various disciplines and is based on the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxian analysis highlights issues of class, power and economic inequality. Within the field of development Marxist thought has taken a variety of forms, with no single, unequivocal or unified Marxism present (Perraton, 2007; Munck, 2021). These various schools of thought include classical Marxism, third-world Marxism, orthodox Marxism and neo-Marxism. For the scope of this paper only the key ideas of classical and neo-Marxism, and their contributions to development economics will be discussed.

The early Marxist, or the classical Marxist, examined the motions of capitalism and its ability to dissolve pre-existing traditional modes of production. The key thinkers were Marx, Engels, Lenin and Luxemburg. This early Marxism was not concerned with economic development, as we know it today, but concerned about the development of economic systems. As such, it aligns with the research agenda of early/classical development economics. For the classical Marxist, specific attention was given to class and how that is determined by the social relations that arise from the mode of production. The various classes refer to categories of social actors who are defined by their relation to property. Marxists deem inequality to be innate to the capitalist mode of production, as inequality is inevitably produced during the normal operation of capitalist economies. This is because in contemporary capitalism the capitalist owns

the means of production, and the worker owns the labour power. By virtue of these property rights in capital and labour, the capitalist can exploit the worker through the employment relation (Haralambos & Heald, 1980:161; Wright, 1995).

The Marxist point of view challenges the assumption that capitalist development generates progress for all (as seen for example in Rostow, 1959). The concept of exploitation highlights the *dual-sided* nature of modernisation and development; on the one hand, the process generates opportunities for productivity improvements and wealth creation, yet, on the other hand, it produces systemic inequalities and crises. Poverty in the Marxist sense is therefore not an accident or the result of the behaviour or decision-making of the poor. Rather, poverty is seen as emerging from the functioning of a certain kind of social system (Wright, 1995), reliant on the exploitation of labour and subject to recurrent crises.

Since the 1950s, Marxist scholars have focused on how the development of capitalism differs across countries, specifically in the then "Third-World" countries as compared to European countries. This facilitated the thinking of neo-Marxism. Neo-Marxists emphasized that nations exploited other nations and that this harmed the prospects for capitalist development in the Third World (Forster-Carter, 1973; Taylor, 1974). In this sense, unlike classical Marxism where exploitation takes place internally as part of capitalist development, neo-Marxist contend that this exploitation is external. The ideas of neo-Marxism relate to dependency theory (Amin, 1976 Dos Santos, 1970, Cardoso & Falleto, 1979) and world systems theory (Wallerstein, 2004), which are theories examining core-periphery relations. More specifically they examine the dependence relation between core and peripheral countries. This dependence relation is widely agreed to be defined as a "situation in which the economies of certain countries (peripheral) are conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected (core)" (Dos Santos, 1970:231). Due to a power hierarchy that exist between the core, semi-periphery, and peripheral countries, peripheral countries are structurally constrained as the powerful core societies dominate and exploit them (Chase-Dunn & Grimes, 1995).[2]

[2] A thorough examination of dependency (and world systems theory) in development economics is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, it is worth mentioning that there has been a renewed interest in dependency theory in the field of development economics. The contemporary literature aims to illuminate how dependency theory as

A recent application of Marxist theory can be seen in Selwyn and Leyden's relational class analysis of global value chains. Selwyn and Leyden (2022) adopt a relational class analysis to critique The World Development Report 2020's assertion that increased participation in global value chains will lead to increased productivity and income. Their relational class analysis shows that global value chains concentrate wealth, exacerbate inequalities, and limit social upgrading, thereby actually undermining the pursuit to escape poverty.

Although there is no single Marxism in the field of economic development, Marxian analysis illuminates the importance of examining social relations and the power embedded in them, be it with in the capitalist development itself, or the global nature of capitalist development and the inequalities that arise from it. In a Marxist framework, poverty can be overcome in two ways. Firstly, the revolutionary argument is that the only way to significantly reduce poverty is to eliminate capitalism altogether. As such, there is no real prospect for significantly reducing poverty through capitalism. The alternative option argues that capitalism can be tamed, through legislation that ensures redistribution of income (Wright, 1995:90). Yet, all Marxists would agree that in the long-term a transition out of capitalism is necessary.

Feminist theory

Feminist scholars transformed the field of economic development by incorporating women's voices and experiences in the process of development (Floro, 2019:258). Scholars drew attention to how development is not a linear process of steady and evenly distributed improvements, but rather emphasised how the development process has different implications for women and men (Beneira & Sen, 1981). In this sense feminist development economics, similar to Marxian-inspired theory, has not

traditionally formed part of mainstream economic development theories, even if the rhetoric of 'gender empowerment' and feminism has become more prominent in recent years.

a research programme, can be useful in examining the polarising tendencies of global capitalism (See for instance Kvangraven, 2021).

Although there are different varieties of feminist scholarship, feminist work in the field of economic development converges around several starting points. Firstly, it necessitates a deep understanding of patriarchal power and the varied forms of gender inequalities that occur in economic and social processes (Boserup, 1970). This feature furthermore includes the acknowledgement of the intersectionality of class, race and ethnicity, thereby incorporating the varied experiences of women (and men) throughout the processes of development (Peet, 1975:564; Kabeer, 2015; AgenjoCalderón & Gálvez-Muñoz, 2019:142-143). Secondly, the theory foregrounds an analysis of the processes that support life and social provision involving both paid and unpaid labour (Deere & De Leal, 1982; Folbre, 2009; Federchi, 2012). As such, attention is given to the important role of care work, household maintenance, and social reproduction (Nelson, 1993; Power, 2004; Folbre, 2006) and how this reduces women's ability to engage with other "productive" labour. Feminists suggest that poverty can be explained by the wider socioeconomic structures that limit women's choices of work (Beneria, 1979; Kabeer,1989), or that force women to do certain types of work that are insecure and low-paying, while still needing to do care work (Floro, 1995). Thirdly, feminism demands that development cannot be made analogous with economic growth and should be measured by placing human well-being at the core (Nussbaum, 2003). And finally, feminist scholars also draw attention to the fact that economic gains and losses are not shared or experienced equally in the household, thereby necessitating the de-construction of the household structure (Boserup, 1970; Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 2015).

Postcolonial theory

Postcolonial theory emanated from literary studies drawing on Foucault's ideas on the power of discourse. Discourse refers to the ways in which language is used to communicate meaning and construct reality. Postcolonial theory specifically draws attention to the discursive power wielded by 'Orientalism', which Said explains as a method by which the West socially constructed, produced and controlled the Orient through the power of representation (Said, 1979). For Said the construction of this representation is based on an ontological distinction between the 'Orient' and the 'occident', which made it possible to define Europe (or the West) as progressive, rational and liberal, in contrast to the Orient as backward, irrational and despotic (Said,

1979:2). Postcolonial theory therefore draws attention to how discourse is used to subordinate a group (Crush, 1995).

Although postcolonial scholars are mostly concerned with the representation of the 'other' and have been criticised for not being relevant to material conditions, (but rather being a theoretical engagement that does not integrate material practices and the relevance of capitalism) (Amin, 2011; Chibber, 2013), postcolonial theory's focus on the power of discourse proves valuable as a relational approach to poverty. Postcolonial scholars suggest that the dominant discourses produced by societies shape the interest and perspectives of those in power, and, through that, the discourse serves to justify and maintain the existing power dynamics that contribute to poverty (Chakrabarty, 2000). As such, poverty is relational, as people are poor because those in power reinforce a stigma, which purposefully keeps people poor, or subordinates them.

Postcolonial theory that has been applied to poverty studies, for instance, looks at how certain narratives or stereotypes about poor people (such as the idea that they are lazy or undeserving) may be reinforced through media, education, and other forms of discourse, and these narratives can then shape the way that poor people are treated and the policies that are implemented to address poverty (Green, 2006). Work has also focused on how the representation of a certain ethnic or racial group as backward, enables justification for their ill-treatment and excuses for denying them income support or equality of opportunity (Harvey,2003).

The New Relational approach to poverty

The theories mentioned above all enlist an analysis of social relations to understand the reproduction of poverty and therefore could be referred to as relational approaches to poverty. However, the relational approach to poverty, as will be used from here on, refers to a more specific set of literature in the field, which has critiqued mainstream analysis for a narrow focus on measurements and indicators, and for its failure to consider how wider social and political relations can clarify the origins of poverty (Green & Hulme, 2005; Harriss, 2007; Hickey & Du Toit, 2007; Woolcock, 2009; Mosse, 2010). These authors argued that poverty, as traditionally understood in the field of economic development, fails to examine poverty as a consequence of social

relations, or of the categories people identify and act upon in the social world (Green & Hulme, 2005; Green, 2006). As such, mainstream poverty research has separated social processes of the accumulation and distribution of wealth, thereby depoliticising poverty research (Ferguson, 1990). The relational poverty scholars, in turn, argue for placing social relations at the core of poverty analysis and propose a relational approach that engages with the multidimensional economic, political, cultural, and social relations that cause poverty (Elwood et al., 2016:747).

The relational approach to poverty as a specific analytical framework and body of literature draws from Charles Tilly's idea of 'durable inequality'. Tilly suggests that power and privilege are mutually constituted processes, and that inequality follows from these unequal power relations that persist over time, space, and place (Tilly, 1998). By drawing from this, poverty can be understood as the consequence of these inequalities that push or keep those with less power in a state of poverty (Elwood et al., 2016). To understand why people are poor it is thus necessary to examine the social relations within which they are embedded.

The early work of these theorists specifically examined the unfolding of capitalism and the associated inequalities that arose from it (Harriss, 1982; Harriss-White, 2005). This approach was in a sense predominantly drawing from Marxist theory, as discussed above, through examining the vertical inequalities to explain the position of the poor. This thesis by contrast draws on what Sharma et al. specifically refer to as the new relational approaches (2021:221) and consolidates these in a singular consistent theoretical framework which I call the New Relational approach. The New Relational approach is anti-essentialist and acknowledges the potential of taking an approach that is cognisant of the intersectionality of oppression. As such, the focus is not solely on vertical inequalities, but also horizontal inequalities, implying that the power relations causing poverty are not only limited to, for instance, class or gender, or that gender and culture act as secondary axes of oppression, but rather that gender, class, and culture are critical relations of power in itself (Elwood et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2021:221). Furthermore, the New Relational approach views class, caste, and gender not as separate categories, but rather as intersecting social relations (Lerche & Shah, 2018).

This approach therefore combines the best aspects of Marxist and feminist thought in development, but without reducing oppression to only class or gender. The New Relational approach suggests that the analysis of the development of capitalism and class must be explored in relation to social oppression based on race, ethnicity and gender (and sexuality), and that such relations are co-constituted (Lerche & Shah, 2018). Although some Marxist and feminist theories are not reductionist, and thus adopt stances similar to the New Relational approach, the New Relational approach provides an analytical framework to examine *poverty* specifically. This will be useful when examining the RCT approach to poverty in Chapter 3.

As the New Relational approach examines the intersection of various oppressive relations, it aligns with the scholarship of intersectional theory. Intersectional theory is a framework for understanding how different aspects of a person's identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect and combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). The New Relational approach also recognises this intersection of discrimination or inequality (across various marginalised social categories), which leads to what it refers to as conjugated oppression (Bourgois, 1995:72; Lerche & Shah, 2018).

The various oppression and unequal relations that can be formed in the New Relational approach can take place through material oppression but also through the power yielded by discourse to other certain groups. As such, poverty can be produced through discourses that exteriorise poor people and spaces from a preferred normative group. Poor people become signified as deficient, criminal, backward or lazy (Green, 2006) and thereby are stigmatised and discriminated against (Hickey & Du Toit, 2007).

Drawing on this New Relational approach, Hickey (2009), for instance, explains persistent poverty in Northern Uganda by examining the marginalisation of certain people by national economic structures, which are accompanied by the stigmatisation of these people. The process derives from colonial imaginaries, and is then reinforced by anti-poverty programmes, focusing on agency capacity building, neglecting the need to shift cultural narratives and development priorities. These discursive legacies are echoed by Du Toit (2009) who examined how land dispossession intersects with processes of social categorisation like racialisation, which sustains and amplifies the

marginalisation of impoverished people and places. Similarly, Mosse (2010) combines materialist and discursive aspects with class and social analysis to show how social exclusion takes place by means of racialisation and class discrimination. By looking at these categorisations, and subsequent exteriorisations, special attention is drawn to social and patterned processes of shutting out, to stigmatisation, to alienation, to the monopolisation or sequestration of scarce resources, through and for the benefits of more advantaged groups (Mosse, 2010).

The New Relational approach literature, therefore, shows how poverty is created through an entangled interplay of many social forces, such as discourses, class and social conflicts, and gender relations (Woolcock, 2009). As such, this is a dynamic approach to studying poverty, which recognises various forms of oppression that lead to inequality and poverty. The approach can help uncover these causal sequences of poverty creation in a way that a non-dynamic, one-dimensional analysis cannot (Davis, 2011:25). Furthermore, by being anti-essentialist and not pinning poverty onto a single cause like (reductionist) Marxism or some versions of postcolonial studies, the approach enables us to think about the various social relations that lead to poverty in a given context. In combining the insights of Marxist, feminist and postcolonial theory, the New Relational approach to poverty also aligns with contemporary literature aiming to reconcile these apparently irreconcilable theories (such as Bannerji, 1995 and Bakan & Dua, 2014).

Conclusion

This chapter has presented key theories that place social relations at the core of understanding poverty. It has shown that the New Relational approach combines the best insights of Marxist, feminist and postcolonial theory, thereby presenting an appropriate analytical framework to study the processes creating and perpetuating poverty. The New Relational approach requires analysis to focus on the various material and discursive social processes that create and perpetuate poverty relations. The rest of this dissertation will proceed by deploying the New Relational approach to illuminate the limitations of RCTs as a solution to poverty.

Chapter 3: A New Relational critique of RCTs

Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to expand on the existing critiques of RCTs by adopting the New Relational approach to poverty (as explained in Chapter 2) as a theoretical framework. By examining RCTs with this framework, this chapter, firstly, seeks to answer what is the difference between the New Relational approach to poverty and the RCT approach to poverty, and, secondly, to answer how the New Relational approach illuminates the limitations of RCTs. This will be done by specifically examining two RCTs that were implemented in Bangladesh in partnership with BRAC.

Methodology

Two RCT studies will be examined through the New Relational approach to poverty. As explained in Chapter 2, the New Relational approach to poverty understands poverty by examining the social relations within which the poor are immersed. It specifically examines the persistence and reproduction of class, caste, ethnicity, and gender identities and locations through material and discursive practices. The RCT studies chosen for analysis are Bandiera, Burgess, Das, Gulesci, Rasul and Suleiman's 2017 published study titled *Labour Markets and Poverty in Village Economies* (Bandiera et al., 2017), and Gregory Lane's 2020 published study titled *Credit lines as insurance* (Lane, 2020). The studies were chosen through a search conducted to scope poverty reduction interventions in Bangladesh, which were published and implemented by means of an RCT. This was done by searching all major electronic databases, using the key words "RCT", "Poverty" and "Bangladesh". The studies were then further scoped to ensure that the programme or intervention was implemented by means of an RCT. For the scope of this study, the analysis was limited to two widely cited studies that were both implemented by the same development organisation, called BRAC.

BRAC is a large NGO in Bangladesh that has implemented various poverty reduction schemes predominantly aimed at rural households. The organisation offers various poverty reduction programmes, depending on the severity of poverty in households. For the poorest, these programmes are predominantly transfer (such as asset

transfers or conditional cash transfer) programmes, while for the less poor, programmes are generally related to financial inclusion, through the availability of microfinance. Their most renowned transfer programme is the TUP (Targeting the ultra-poor) graduation programme, which is the programme evaluated by Bandiera et al. (2017). The graduation programme consists of a sequence of interventions designed around addressing the multidimensional causes of extreme poverty (BRAC, 2017). Interventions are designed around four pillars namely social protection, livelihood promotion, financial inclusion, and social empowerment. These pillars are supported by interventions, such as consumption support, healthcare asset transfer technical skills, saving programmes and training and life skills training.

For the TUP, BRAC explicitly states that the poor are graduated when they reach their outcomes of sustainable livelihoods, which consist of increased assets, food security, savings and financial inclusion, better health, increased social capital and productive skills (BRAC, 2017). The TUP revolves around the premise that the ultra-poor are different from the poor, and that anti-poverty interventions often fail to reach the ultrapoor or be beneficial to them, given their state of ultra-poverty. The TUP was pioneered by BRAC in 2002, to improve the 'resilience' of the ultra-poor (BRAC, 2017). The TUP has been referred to as one of the 'best buys' in development (DFID, 2019). The TUP has also been viewed as an effective strategy to fight ultra-poverty in a sustainable manner, and in a way that targets livelihoods, as it can increase per capita income, the productive asset bases and the overall food security of its participants in the long run (Raza et al., 2012).

BRAC and their programmes have widely been praised for encouraging and contributing to sustainable development for the rural poor in Bangladesh and being an exemplary organisation for sustainable development (Stevens & Morris, 2001; Seelos & Mair, 2006; Rahman et al., 2012), however, the implementation of some of their programmes have not been without scrutiny. The TUP has been critiqued for the programme evaluating effects too early, and disregarding the long-term effects (Halder, 2003:227). Furthermore, their approach to targeting the poor is by segmenting poor groups into several layers, such as Ultra-poor I, Ultra-poor II, Moderate poor, Vulnerable non-poor, (Seelos & Mair, 2006:4). This type of class understanding is one that Wright (1996) explains as gradational. As such, classes are differentiated strictly

on the basis of inequalities in the material conditions of life, which ignores the relationality of class analysis that suggests that the given class location can be defined as the result of the social relations that link it to other class locations (Wright, 1996:694). BRAC, as an institution, has also been criticised for de-politicising development in Bangladesh, and solely focusing on poverty alleviation (as such treating the symptoms of development failures instead of addressing the root of the problem) (White, 1996).By using the frame of the New Relational approach to poverty, the paper will now conduct a critical analysis of the two RCT studies, starting with Bandiera et al.'s (2017) study, followed by Lane's study (2020).

Case study 1: Examining the barriers to occupational choice

INTRODUCTION

In its simplest form, the type of occupation a person has is directly related to their income. Given this, to understand why people are poor, it is necessary to understand what jobs they do. Since occupational choice is not solely based on infinite occupational options, it is worth noting that the choice is limited by barriers. What these barriers are, is, however, debatable, and how the researcher determines these barriers is dependent on how far they are willing to investigate the context of the subject. I maintain that the approach adopted by RCTs, based as they are on a microeconomic neoclassical theoretical framework, cannot illuminate the relevant barriers to occupational choice and income levels. The analysis below is intended to demonstrate the superiority of the New Relational approach.

To realise this aim, the first case study examines the paper of Bandiera, Burgess, Das, Gulesci, Rasul and Suleiman (from here on Bandiera et al., 2017), that was published in 2017 in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, titled *Labour Markets and Poverty in Village Economies*. The study examined the success of the TUP, by means of an RCT, to determine if the big push provided by the BRAC intervention can lift the poor and lead them on a sustainable trajectory out of poverty. The hypothesis of Bandiera et al. (2017:4) is that the poor are poor because they are engaging in low-return work activities, as there are barriers hindering them from entering high-return work activities, and that the programme provides the beneficiary with the means to overcome these barriers. To examine how this relates to the New Relational approach, it is necessary

to understand what is meant with barriers, and how the interventions are able to overcome the processes of poverty formation in rural Bangladesh.

To do this, the case study will first examine what Bandiera et al.'s study did, and thereby explain the theory on which Bandiera and her cohorts build their understanding of class and the choice women have in deciding their occupation in rural Bangladesh. This will then be followed, firstly, by a relational analysis of class in rural Bangladesh, specifically looking at the intersection of patriarchy and class, and ethnic minority status and class, and, secondly, by an examination of the social relations shaping occupational choices and preferences of women in rural Bangladesh.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Bandiera et al. (2017) conducted an RCT on BRAC's TUP, which provides a once-off transfer of assets and skills to the poorest women (as discussed above), with the aim of instigating occupational change, thereby leading the poor to a sustainable trajectory out of poverty. The programme included transferring livestock assets and skills to the poorest women in Bangladesh's 13 poorest districts. These include grants of productive assets (a once-off productive asset like livestock, agricultural input or a kind of seed capital, that can be used for small-scale trading), weekly stipends, savings (participants are encouraged to save; during the programme period they maintain a formal savings account with BRAC's help), intensive hands-on training, health care, and social integration (through setting up village poverty reduction committees to provide support) (BRAC, 2017).

The RCT covered 21 000 households in 1 309 villages in Bangladesh over a sevenyear period. The programme included a participatory wealth ranking, followed by the application of TUP eligibility criteria by BRAC officers. The process classified households of all the villages into four income groups namely ultra-poor, near-poor, middle-class, and upper-class. The study was implemented nationwide, with the majority of the treated groups being located in the northern regions of the country, which are exposed to Monga (a seasonal famine). Neither the specific districts, nor any map indicating locations of the treated groups, are given though.

The researchers' argument rests on an observation that the poorest women mostly engage in low-return and seasonal causal labour, while wealthier women solely

engage in livestock rearing. As the income of seasonal casual labour is not as regular as that of livestock rearing, it would make sense for the women to rather engage in livestock rearing, and Bandiera and cohorts argue that they must be wanting to do so, but there are barriers preventing them from doing these jobs. However, the researchers argue that these barriers can be overcome by the TUP package, which equips the poor with assets and skills to engage in livestock rearing, thereby enabling the poor to do the jobs of their richer counterparts, and increasing their earnings, leading to asset accumulation and, as a result, reducing poverty.

Key to the paper is ensuring that these improvements to the lives of the poor are sustained, (thereby putting the poor on a sustainable trajectory out of poverty, and not just something that would push them back into poverty as soon as the intervention ends). Furthermore, the study employs a broader conceptualisation in measuring poverty (thereby measuring poverty not solely in monetary terms). Rather the study looks across ten dimensions, to establish the effect on the lives of the ultra-poor women, thereby adopting a livelihood approach. These dimensions are consumption, food security, assets, financial inclusion, labour supply, income, physical health, mental health, political awareness and women empowerment (Bandiera et al., 2017:818).

The study concludes with the researchers confident that poor people are able to take on the work activities (of the non-poor), but face barriers in doing so, and a once-off intervention is able to remove the barriers leading to sustainable poverty reduction (Bandiera et al., 2017:811). By including the comparison to similar studies outside of Bangladesh, the study furthermore lends support to the scaling up of such a programme in different contexts, with different implementing partners, to achieve “sizable and sustainable improvements in outcomes for the poorest” (Bandiera et al., 2017:818). This suggests that enabling people to jump from classes requires a wellpackaged combination of skills and assets, which can be applied, and work, universally.

A NEOCLASSICAL APPROACH TO CLASS AND OCCUPATIONAL CHOICE

It is first worth examining how RCT researchers understand class. Understanding class as something that can be moved simply through a big push is limited to a gradational approach. As such, they view different groups of the poor as isolated groups, rather

than being bound to or embedded in social relations (Wright, 1996). This is as they rely on a neoclassical theoretical framework that rests on methodological individualism, where individuals and households are viewed as separate entities and not embedded in social relations linking various class and social categories to each other. In this sense the approach downplays or ignores practices of exclusion or forms of exploitation that are foregrounded in relational approaches to class.

The reliance on a neoclassical theoretical framework, furthermore, reduces their understanding of the barriers to occupational choice, and chances of presenting an accurate reflection of occupational preferences. The argument of the researchers rests on the assumption that the poor face barriers to enter high-return work activities, and this is what keeps them in poverty. These barriers, they argue, are removed for programme beneficiaries (2017:814). This, therefore, suggests that the barriers preventing them are what they get through the programme, namely credit and skills. With this reasoning, the focus is moved away from the market to the market subject and their specific attributes, suggesting that if they have the necessary skills (demanded by the labour market), they would be able to supply it, and that given the higher utility (income to be made) they would choose to do such as job. This reasoning though obscures how social relations, firstly, reduce and limit (thus acting as a barrier to) the occupational choice people have, and, secondly, shape their occupational preferences. By doing this they ignore inequalities in power, which leads to exploitation and exclusion of marginal social groups. The undermining of the differences in social structures underpinning the groups becomes apparent in the result of the study: when estimating the quantile treatment effects, the researchers find there is a large degree of heterogeneity, the effect on the 95th centile of consumption is ten times larger than the effect on the 5th centile, with differences for savings and productive assets being even larger (2017:815). The RCT does not allow us to understand why this is, nor seeks to engage with other methodologies to understand this.

To prove why their understanding of class is insufficient, as well as why their understanding of occupational choice and preferences is inadequate, the next section will start by looking firstly at how class is relational, specifically scrutinising how social relations shape the class location of women, and additionally how ethnicity shapes this location. Thereafter, the way in which social processes shape both the choices these women have and their preferences over occupations will be investigated, providing an

explanation of occupational choices relying on how these are shaped by broader social relations.

A RELATIONAL CLASS ANALYSIS OF BANGLADESH

Bandiera and her cohorts classify the poor in various classes based on the land they own. In rural Bangladesh access to land is indeed the biggest indicator of class, but this section will examine what the reasons are for having or not having land relationally. As such, it would draw attention to how social relations determine the land some own, while others are deprived of it. Two specific social phenomena (and their social relations), which are likely to shape the poor's access to land and thus their class, will be examined. This will be done firstly by examining how ethnicity is related to class, and then more exhaustively how gender is related to class.

Ethnicity and class

Although Bandiera and her cohorts do not give exact information on where the interventions take place, it is made clear that most villages in the programme are located in the north-eastern and western regions of the country (2017:818). This area is prone to Monga (a seasonal famine that takes place after the planting of crops) and is the area where most of Bangladesh's minority groups live. The northern region, also called the plainlands, are home to what are known as the plainland peoples. People live on the periphery in these areas due to their minority status (Mazumder & Wencong, 2012). Historically, they have also not received the same attention and resources from government as the Bengali people (Khaleque, 1998). However, in the Bandiera and cohorts' study, there was no mention of, or reference to different social or cultural groups.

Mazudmer and Wencong (2012) found that during the Monga season, vulnerabilities are exacerbated as there are no industrial establishments enabling ethnic minority groups to find alternative sources of employment opportunities and income-earning and, above all, no government help or support for skills development training programmes to find other jobs, which is indicative of a political failure. This suggests that, unnoticed by Bandiera and cohorts, the structures underpinning the opportunities available to the women might be privileging the majority groups at the cost of minority groups. This suggests that there are relational inequalities innate to the current system,

acting as barriers to some women, which lead both to the underdevelopment of skills and an absence of economic safety nets for minority groups.

These inequality problems are further pronounced with regard to the land people own. Bandiera and her cohorts note that land is the most distinctive difference between the rich and the poor; it is therefore strange that there is no mention as to why certain groups have access to land and others not. In a static sense, it is attributed to being a symptom of poverty, rather than a cause. They do not ask how land is distributed. Keeping to the northern regions of Bangladesh and engaging with the qualitative studies, such as ethnographic research on ethnic minority groups, it becomes clear that land has always been a contentious issue in Bangladesh, especially for ethnic minority groups (Islam, 2016; Dutta et al., 2022). Studies have been conducted on the Harijans (which are those of the lower caste in the caste system), and how their ability to buy land has been obstructed by Bengali neighbours refusing to live next to them (Dutta et al., 2022). These groups live in a separate geographical location due to their traditional occupation in the British colonial period (Dutta et al., 2022). Similar findings of the Harijans' deprivations of everyday life in Dhaka and Rajshani have also been found (Islam, 2016). Furthermore, due to a discourse 'othering' and subjugating them, they have been found to be subject to exclusion from social safety nets, educational attainment, and public spaces Dutta et al., 2022). Hossain finds similar patterns of exclusion in the north-eastern regions of Bangladesh, where minority groups suffer from continuous labelling as outsiders and thereby explained to be undeserving of social safety nets (Hossain, 2011). However, Bandiera and her cohorts make no reference to differences in ethnicity. When utilising a New Relational approach to understand poverty, it becomes apparent how ethnicity might be limiting the occupational choices women have – both through the national structures privileging majority groups, as well as the stigmatising of minority groups, which perpetuates social exclusion.

Gender and class

It is well known that Bangladesh is a nation with deeply ingrained patriarchal social norms (Greenely, 1983; Kabeer, 1989; White, 1992, 2017; Chowdhury, 2009; Shohel et al., 2021). In Bangladesh, patriarchy describes a distribution of power and resources within families where men maintain power and control of resources, and women are

powerless and dependent on men (Cain et al., 1979). Patriarchy in Bangladesh is upheld by a combination of political, religious and kinship rules that dictate women's position as inferior and subordinate to men (Chowdhury, 2009; Shohel et al., 2021). For instance, women's access to political institutions are limited, as engaging in politics is expected to be reserved for men (Prodip, 2022). Kinship rules are hierarchical, which place women at the lower end of the hierarchy, as well as linking their age to the hierarchy so that women's importance in the house follows a lifecycle of hierarchy, dictated by their age (Cain et al., 1979). Religion also links to patriarchy – Islam is the dominant religion, which also acts as normative base, and prescribes women to conform to rules such as purdah[3].

These deeply embedded norms of patriarchy mean that women are reliant on their husbands and their family for their income and their class. For instance, kinship rules might mean that widowed women can be landless due to their inability to claim from their husband's property as a result of kinship rules favouring the man's blood-related family. At the same time religious norms might prescribe that women forfeited their access to land or inheritance from their own family as soon as they get married. Even in the case of non-marriage, girls are seen as subordinate to boys and thus less likely to inherit or inherit less from their families (White, 2017). This all means that the same structures keeping women reliant on their husband, also provide limited protection to them. As such, it is clear that patriarchy is a determining factor of the class location of women in Bangladesh.

These patriarchal norms influence not only a women's economic position in the wider economy, her *inter*-household economic position, but also determines her *intra*-

household economic position as women are subject to a subordinate position, with less bargaining power within the household (Goetz & Gupta, 1996). Given this, women tend to have access to fewer resources in the household (access to resources are furthermore also dictated by age) making it imperative to deconstruct the household structure. Bandiera et al.'s study does not acknowledge this and evaluates consumption, household assets, financial assets and productive assets all at the

[3] Purdah is a system of secluding women and enforcing high standards of female modesty. Enacting purdah norms would mean that women stay at home or out of the social eye (Kabeer, 2002).

household level (even though they evaluated income generated by women on the individual level) (Bandiera et al., 2017: 861). The limitations of using increased household consumption as an indicator of improved women's consumption is intensified by the finding of Bandiera et al. of an increased value of assets of the household, but these assets are mainly related to livestock shed and transport, such as vans and rickshaws[4].

From this analysis it becomes clear that class is the result of social relations, and, given the patriarchal nature of Bangladesh it is necessary to examine the household structure, as access to resources are likely to differ within the household. Because RCTs view class solely in a gradational way, RCT researchers are unable to see how social relations determine the class location, and the actual material well-being or state of poverty experienced by women. We should also consider how social relations shape the occupational choices and preferences available to women, which is what is done below.

A RELATIONAL ANALYSIS OF OCCUPATIONAL CHOICE AND PREFERENCES OF POOR WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

Bandiera et al. (2017) assume that women prefer engaging in livestock rearing to casual wage labour, as it provides them with a more consistent sustainable income. Casual wage labour jobs are only available on some days of the year, therefore, doing these jobs will on average lead to them working two months fewer per year (Bandiera et al.,2017:812). Their argument rests on the assumption that women would, given the opportunity, act in a utility-maximising way, which, in this case, implies moving to a higher-income job. As such, it relies on the idea that with a little nudge, women will act similarly to the rational economic agent and will reap the benefits of the nondiscriminatory efficient market. Conversely, this assumption ignores the social relations that shape the occupational choices and preferences that women have. This section will specifically look at women's occupational choices being shaped by the patriarchal system that subordinate them to men and prescribe norms dividing jobs across gender.

[4] The suspicion regarding this is due to these assets being generally reserved for males in Bangladesh (see for instance Shohel et al., 2021).

Because of patriarchy, women assume a subordinate position in society and need to conform to certain norms and adopt certain gender-specific roles that shape their choices available and preferences for occupations (Lata et al., 2020). Purdah for instance, plays an interesting role in the occupational choices and preferences of women in Bangladesh (Lata et al., 2020). As referred to earlier, purdah refers to the (veiled) seclusion of women, meaning that they stay at home or out of the social eye (Kabeer, 2002). There is a vast range of literature examining how purdah relates to the labour market (Kabeer, 1988; Paul, 1992; Zaman, 1995; Lata et al., 2020). However, the literature is divided with some authors arguing that purdah norms are so deeply ingrained that regardless of poverty, people will stay secluded and will therefore not engage in causal wage labour even though this is the work more easily available for the ultra-poor (Boserup, 1990; Amin, 1997). On the other hand, there is an argument that as people get poorer, they trade off purdah norms (and take the shame that comes with it) to work outside of the house. This argument rests on the idea that with more extreme poverty, women are showing that purdah norms are malleable and flexible (Feldman, 1983; Kabeer, 1991). To understand the actual impact of purdah on a given group would thus necessitate engaging with qualitative assessments at the specific area of study. However, Bandiera et al.'s study makes no reference to purdah norms. In the study equipping women with an asset would indeed allow them to maintain purdah norms (as they are able to work from home). Indeed, if they did conduct qualitative assessments alongside the RCT they would have better been able to understand how the occupational change takes place. The disregard for this is concerning, given that the researchers advocate for scaling up the intervention in different contexts. By not recognising the role of such deep social norms, they fail to see how the intervention might not be compatible in different cultural conditions, which might lead to unexplained variations in outcomes in a different context.

Apart from purdah norms, other aspects of the patriarchal system and the associated social relations can be influencing the occupational choices and preferences of women. Bangladesh is a country that has strongly defined gender roles dictating the responsibilities of women and men (White, 1992). A common belief is that men act as *maliks* (heads of the household) and should play a major productive role as Allah (God) created men stronger than women. These religious bases and social norms contribute to a rigid division of labour by gender in Bangladesh (Zaman, 1995). A thorough

division of tasks at a very young age engenders powerful norms regarding appropriate work roles and household responsibilities (Shohel et al., 2021). From a young age children partake in household work; male children overall show little participation in housekeeping or food preparation, while female children participate little in marketing activities. Different household activities are also gender-specialised, for instance, with regard to animal husbandry boys will tend to cattle (that involves extensive grazing and searching for fodder), while girls tend to chickens (that are closer located to home (Cain et al.,1979: 238).

In general, it is assumed that women are responsible for housekeeping and thus spend more time doing what is generally referred to as care work. As such, Bangladeshi women are said to have three work categories – their domestic work, reproductive roles and the work in the labour market (Moser, 1989). Care work refers to work that does not bring in income but is necessary for the functioning of the household. Time spent doing care work or non-productive work, such as this, is not mentioned at all in Bandiera et al.'s study, but this is extremely important as women's time engaging in the labour market is often constrained by the unseen household responsibilities they bear (Ferdous & Malick, 2019). Cain et al. (1979) found through their analysis of labour in Bangladesh that women's engagement with wage work is limited, even when they are poor (as richer women rather do livestock rearing), as their demand for household work is not changed. It is thus necessary to look not just at jobs (that are viewed as productive) but a total analysis of the work that the women do, which would require qualitative engagement with the research subject (Zaman, 1995).

Apart from limiting the time available for women to engage in alternative jobs, these social norms also shape their occupational preferences for the jobs they will be engaging with. For instance, certain sectors like fishing, tailoring in an open market, pulling vans and rickshaws are commonly reserved for men. Women are less likely to be able to make an income from such jobs, and have been subjected to stigmatisation (Lata et al., 2020) and violence (Shuler et al., 1996) when they do. The RCT offers no insight into this. Nor does the RCT examine how women engaging with livestock is perceived in a society with such strong gender norms. This leads to the next aspect of the study that needs to be examined, namely what the consequences of implementing an intervention are, when disregarding social norms.

AFTER IMPLEMENTATION – CONSEQUENCES OF INTERVENTIONS

Beyond the presumptions on which the hypothesis for occupational choices is based, it is worth examining what the consequences of these interventions would be, due to the existing structures and social phenomena to which they would be implemented. Being so embedded in neoclassical theory and choosing not to engage with other ways of knowing, the possibility of the adverse effects of the programme are ignored. Such critiques have already been raised about the inability of RCTs to see the negative externalities associated with them (Tyagi & Weber, 2018; Bédécarrats et al., 2019b; Kabeer, 2019).

In a deeply patriarchal society, such as Bangladesh, one of the concerns is what the actual effect on women's autonomy and empowerment would be – implementing a programme targeting women, in a place with conservative gender ideologies have been found to prevent women from using the loans made available to them (Goetz & Gupta, 1996: Karim & Law, 2013; Ferdous & Mallick, 2019, Shohel et al., 2021). As Ferdous and Mallick (2019) have pointed out, although these interventions are aimed at women, in practice, men usually make the decisions on where loans will be spent. Their study highlights how women's agency is effective at the collective level, but at the individual level the rigid social norms limit women's decision-making and choices. Bandiera et al.'s study did examine household decision-making by means of a list of questions, but what these questions were, were not made available in the paper. Also, as they evaluate income, welfare, and asset retention at the household level, as explored above, it is difficult to decipher what the actual impact on the individual woman was.

Men's retention of the control of assets from programmes targeting women, was specifically examined on the same BRAC TUP that Bandeira et al. studied, in a study by Roy et al. (2015). Roy et al. (2015) evaluated BRAC's TUP programme using methods drawing from the RCT quantitative results, as well as qualitative work based on focus group discussions and key informant interviews, which explored the sociocultural context and beneficiaries' own perceptions of impacts of the asset transfer programme. They found that although women retain the ownership of the transferred livestock, men owned the new investments, and that women's relative resource control, mobility and control over income are reduced, showing that the patriarchal structures underpinning the world these women live in, shape women's

control over their given assets. Bandiera et al. actually refers to this study of Roy et al. (2015), in a footnote when conducting their cost benefit analysis of the TUP programme (Bandiera et al., 2017:860). However, Bandiera et al. draws from the study in a piecemeal way by praising the TUP for bringing benefits to men too, without mentioning its important conclusion, namely that a programme that supposedly sought to help women, reduced women's control over resources and mobility due to the strong patriarchal structures in Bangladesh.

Another way in which patriarchal norms affect the acceptance of such poverty programmes has been through the violence associated with women's participation in these programmes. Qualitative evaluations of the first BRAC TUP of 1992 found that violence against women increased with the programme, and that married women between the ages of 15 and 55 participating in the TUP were more likely than nonBRAC members to be subject to gender-based violence (Chowdhury & Bhuiya, 2004). Their findings suggest that violence increases before it decreases – where women participating in the BRAC programme eventually though become more empowered than those who do not. The finding of initial violence corresponds with other studies noting how changes in the power dynamics in the Bangladeshi household context, because of development programmes, often result in gender-based violence. Schuler and cohorts (1996) conducted an ethnographic study on the effects of poverty programmes in Bangladesh. Their study illuminates how both Grameen Bank and BRAC avoid engaging with the violence inflicted on women due to their access to resources. This, they argue, is because the NGOs worry that by being politically vocal, it might jeopardise the programme's acceptance into the community. The availability of women-specific credit has especially been linked to increasing violence and men taking their money, showing that when programmes are designed, they should assist in combatting violence.

Roy et al.'s (2015) study of the BRAC TUP programme, however, found that participating in these activities led women to receive less stigma and increased social capital. The study also found that there was a preference for work inside the home, given the hostile environment outside the home, but that this intervention led to a decline in women's voice. This result was echoed by Kabeer's (2017) review of the existing literature examining women's empowerment through poverty programmes in Bangladesh. Her findings note that working from home conformed to purdah norms

and contributed to women's social status within the community, as well as being associated with lower levels of conflict within the family, higher status, and higher earnings but that it also meant a decline in the voice of women (Kabeer, 2017). As the RCT looked at static efficiencies, and relied solely on methodological individualism, these dynamics and effects of the programme were not considered.

CONCLUSION

Bandiera and her cohorts explain poverty as the result of barriers to occupational choice. However, their idea of barriers is removed from the social relations that have caused them, and therefore their argument rests on an understanding of the labour market and class structures, as static and isolated functions of society, which contrasts starkly with the New Relational approach to poverty. This leads to a solution for overcoming poverty based on technicalities, which does not consider the wider relations these women are embedded in, which I have shown shape their available choices and preferences in decision-making.

Given the location of the study, it was argued that women's class is determined relationally through their ethnicity, as well as through their gender, due to deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. In terms of occupational choice, it is seen that the choice available is shaped by social relations, as well as social norms dictating preferences. Indeed, Bandiera et al.'s interventions can be beneficial for women, as it can ensure they conform to purdah norms, by engaging with livestock farming and thus working from home. But as the RCT ignores the relevance of these cultural norms, it cannot acknowledge how that might have shaped the outcome of the intervention. The RCT also failed to account for how social relations dictate that women are responsible for care work/non-income-earning work. These variables that the New Relational approach includes provides a better insight into how women's time is spent as it does not account only for productive work.

To fully understand the situation of poverty that the women are in, it is necessary to engage with a theoretical framework that examines the various networks of relations that the women are embedded in. In not addressing these structures, the big problem of patriarchy and female poverty cannot be addressed meaningfully. As the patriarchy and violent behaviours are deeply rooted in culture and are systemic problems, the resourceful implementation of such programmes requires large national interventions

to address the systemic failures (Schuler et al., 1996; Karim & Law, 2013). Such programmes would similarly be required to address the unequal treatment of minority groups. Kabeer (2017), for instance, calls for scaling up the efforts of social mobilisation organisations to create active citizenship at grassroots level, which would be capable of holding government to account. Given this, to meaningfully address poverty and instigate occupational choice, political action that addresses these unequal relations is necessary, and far more exigent than programmes merely instigating behavioural change.

Case study 2: Mitigating flood vulnerability by increasing risk appetites

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh's geographical position makes it extremely vulnerable to the impact of climate change. Between 2000 and 2019, Bangladesh suffered economic losses of 3.72 billion dollars due to extreme weather events (USAID, 2018). This does not include other weather events directly impacting livelihoods like salinity and flooding. Many people are annually affected by flooding and there has been massive environmental, economic, and social damage caused by it (Kabir & Hossen, 2019). This has been particularly bad in rural areas where livelihoods are dependent on the environment (as inhabitants predominantly survive through subsistence farming and live in areas vulnerable to flooding). To combat these vulnerabilities, the second case study examines a paper by Gregory Lane (2020), which investigates the introduction of an emergency loan to guarantee households with an additional credit line after floods. Lane's hypothesis is that providing an emergency loan as a guarantee can encourage an increased risk appetite among farmers when deciding how many crops to plant, thereby encouraging greater production, which in the case of no flooding, means greater income, and in the case of flooding, means there is a safety net to smooth consumption levels. This section will show how Lane's implicit theory fails to recognise the relational structures preventing efficient (or rational) optimisation of land, as well as how the increasing commodification (and neoliberalisation) of agriculture in rural Bangladesh, which facilitates the increasing presence of microcredit, forms part of a process where farmers are subjected to forms of exclusion and exploitation.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Lane's (2020) paper, titled *Credit lines as insurance*, introduces what is called the emergency loan, in partnership with BRAC, which combines aspects of microcredit and insurance, to households affected by a flood (Lane, 2020:2). They introduced the emergency loan to over 200 BRAC branches located in flood-prone areas, and contacted over 300 000 clients in the treatment branches, a month before planting, informing them that have been pre-approved for this emergency loan, which can be used in the case of a flood occurring in their area. Participants are informed in advance to give households time to consider investing in more profitable opportunities (as they would have the availability of the loan, in the case of misfortune). There is no type of insurance market and financial tool present or active in rural economies, therefore, Lane proposes to guarantee households with an additional credit line when they are hit by a shock, which relies on the theory supporting credit's ability to act as a buffer against income fluctuations (Deaton, 1991).

The introduction of the emergency loan is done for various reasons, namely, to reduce the vulnerability of poverty caused by shocks for rural farmers in Bangladesh, to reduce defaulting on credit; and to benefit the microfinance lender by not having borrowers that default. Lane argues that emergency loans can reduce the vulnerability of the poor by encouraging them to reduce their risk aversity to planting more (due to their fear of crops being lost in flood), which is assumed, limits the poor's long-run earning potential (Karlan et al., 2014). Lane's argument is that by introducing the emergency loan in the case of no flooding, the poor will expand their yield, and in the case of flooding, the poor will be able to access the emergency loan, which will regularise their consumption. Furthermore, the emergency loan is argued to prove beneficial for the lenders, who are normally reluctant to lend to the vulnerable poor, as they are likely to default. With the emergency loan though, the risk of defaulting is reduced as the loan merely acts as a safety net, and due to increasing the risk appetite of the poor, they will be able to pay back existing credit more easily. However, the focus of this analysis is solely on poverty, and is therefore limited to analysing if the intervention will be beneficial to reducing vulnerability posed by flooding (and not beneficial to the microcredit provider).

The study found that the treated households increased the amount of land dedicated to agricultural cultivation by 15%, and the amount of land rented by 30%,

demonstrating an increased risk appetite, although neither owned nor sharecropped land showed any significant changes (Lane, 2020:18). This is explained by the fact that renting land is "straightforward" (Lane, 2020:18), compared to buying more land due to the administration involved. The number of households planting crops increased by 4%, representing a 10% increase in the probability that a household cultivates crops in the *aman* season. No significant changes were observed in terms of the intensity of input usage (amount of fertilizer and pesticides applied per acre of land). They found that per capita consumption increased by 8% on average in treated households, crop production increased by 17%, business stock rose by 23%, but they found no effect on the income of households. Despite the rather weak result for consumption and income, Lane still argued that guaranteed lines can boost investment by insuring farmers against floods. Furthermore, the results also showed that the treated groups that were exposed to a flood, lost 90% of the production gains they experienced when a flood did not occur (Lane, 2020:20), which is much bigger than the losses observed by the control group. Lane contributed this result to households expanding cultivation on land that is particularly susceptible to floods. He nevertheless found that the treated households experienced a 10% increase in consumption, compared to control households that also experienced a flood.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF LANE'S STUDY

The premise on which Lane's introduction of an emergency loan is built, rests on the idea that the poor make suboptimal economic decisions due to them being risk-averse, which leads them to plant less, and which limits their earning capacity in the case of there being no floods. This idea illuminates how Lane's study (like the previous RCT study) is based on microeconomic neoclassical theory as previously discussed and outlined in Chapter 1.

The theoretical framework Lane proposed consists of microfinance clients making decisions across three periods (Lane, 2020:7). In the first period (pre-planting season), farmers need to decide how many inputs to invest, and how much to borrow. The inputs refer to land to cultivate, inputs to use, such as fertiliser, and business investments; borrowing refers to the microcredit they would be borrowing from BRAC. It is in the first period that farmers are informed about their eligibility for the emergency loan (if they are in the treated group). The second period, which refers to the harvest season, is the period when clients may be exposed to flooding. In the case of flooding, each

eligible borrower is informed that the emergency loan is available for them to access (which they need to decide whether to take or not, and if they would repay any existing loans that they took out in the first period). The final period is post-harvest, when borrowers that took the emergency loan should choose to repay it. In his model a household starts with exogenous cash on hand and having a risk-free asset. The household also has access to a concave production function where the input provides output in the second period. But this input is only influenced by the state of the world, given the likelihood of flooding.

Lane's model yields four predictions that result from extending a credit line in the bad state, namely that consumption increases after a shock, that first-period investment increases, that first-period borrowing increases, and that the probability of taking the emergency loan increases with those who experience severe damage from flooding, or those with good post-harvest income opportunities (Lane, 2020:13). This simple model used by Lane follows from a neoclassical theoretical framework and suggests that people act as homo economicus, in a utility-optimising way, and are not tied to social relations (and their behaviour is solely shaped by risk and not by endogenous preferences). As such, addressing their vulnerability would require changing behaviours that are not economically optimal or utility-maximising, through changing their risk preferences. Furthermore, the expansion of crops planted is possible, as expanding crops are reliant on exogenous variables solely determined by funds at hand through the well-functioning market mechanisms. As such, the idea that land is an endogenous variable and bound to or determined by social relations is disqualified. Lane's analysis is, furthermore, done on the household level, and not on the individual level. And he does not deconstruct the household structure, which, as argued above, is critical for meaningful analysis.

The thesis will now proceed to show how the New Relational approach to poverty can show how vulnerability (and specifically crop production and access to land) is dependent on social relations determining inter- and intra-economic positions. This will be done by first looking at how behaviour and preferences regarding crop production are much more complicated than Lane suggests, and thereafter examining how microcredit itself induces the vulnerability of the farmers.

UNDERSTANDING RISK PREFERENCES REGARDING CROP PRODUCTION

Lane's neoclassical understanding of market efficiencies suggest that the farmers' behaviour and crop yield preferences are currently not rational, as they are irrationally risk-averse. He suggests that by providing a loan as a safety net, their behaviour will be corrected to rational economic thinking. This reasoning does not see how the behaviour or choice to expand crops planted is shaped by social relations, which acts as barriers to expansion. Specifically, it does not acknowledge how access to land is determined by social relations. Lane's thin understanding of behaviour becomes apparent as he finds that there were greater losses for those who expanded the area cultivated. In terms of crop production, treated households lost 90% of the crop production. Lane noted that "these losses are much larger than those observed in the control group, suggesting that treatment households expand cultivation on land that is particularly susceptible to floods" (Lane, 2020:20). This opens the question of what the New Relational approach can tell us about the farmers' choice to expand. To do this, it is first necessary to examine the role social relations play in shaping farmers' access to land.

A relational examination of (access to) land in Bangladesh

Land has historically been a contentious issue in Bangladesh (Seabrook, 2013:40). Beyond the constant threat of natural disasters, such as flooding and cyclones, land ownership and use have been characterised by inequality and patronage (Devine, 2002). The country's history of inequitable land relations follows from a colonial legacy of extended sub-infeudation, which continues to shape agrarian class relations, land tenure and politics in Bangladesh today (Van Schendel, 1982; Boyce, 1987; Van Schendel, 2009; Iqbal, 2010). These issues are echoed in a postcolonial Bangladesh. From the early 1990s the government of Bangladesh implemented structural adjustment programmes that increased farmer indebtedness and landlessness, as they struggled to secure the capital for necessary agricultural inputs (Nally, 2011). Furthermore, land grabs by rural elite, as well as environmentally induced placement and the landless, have led to the poor losing their land (Routledge, 2015:447). All these contribute to high rates of landlessness, which result in a precarious class of sharecroppers and day labourers.

Misra (2021), for instance, showed from a relational class analysis how Bangladesh sharecroppers struggle to get access to land due to the existing unequal relations

between landholders and those renting land. From interviews and focus groups conducted in the Patuakhali district from January 2012 (an area similar to those that Lane studied, which is very vulnerable to flooding due to its proximity to rivers), he showed that despite the Land Reforms Ordinance 1984 (which limits landowners to a third of the crops of sharecropping), land owners exploit the sharecroppers by coercing them into giving more crops (Misra, 2021:338) and forcing them to pay capital upfront. Furthermore, he found that if farmers do not have this capital, they are forced to lease in less fertile or irrigation-deprived land.

Apart from the unequal relations between landowner and land renter (that is the vertical inequality), it is also worth examining the unequal power relations that take place over culture and ethnicity lines (the horizontal inequalities). Lane's study took place in the north-eastern and south-eastern regions of the country, with areas concentrated around four regions/rivers, Jamuna (Brahmaputara); the Attai river and the Padma river basin; the Meghna river basin; and the Feni river basin. This region has a large ethnic minority population, specifically the hill people of the Chittagong region (located near the Feni River Basin) and the plainland people, who reside in the northern regions. Land ownership for ethnic minority groups is made more difficult due to majority groups actively discriminating against them. Research has found that land dispossession and eviction are common in both these regions (Barman & Neo, 2014). In the plainlands historical actions of land-grabbing and dispossession against ethnic minorities have been common. Barkat et al. (2009) estimated that in the plainlands, 202 164 acres of land were disposed from plainlands ethnic minority groups, such as the Dalu, Garo, Hajon, Khasi, Mahot, Oraon, Patro and Santal. This comes to an estimate of almost 1 billion US dollars. Through othering and institutionalised racism that seek to oppress minority groups for the benefit of majority groups, land access in this area is expected to be highly influenced by social relations. However, Lane's framework prevented him from seeing this crucial factor and anticipating what the impact of that would be on expanding land cultivated.

Furthermore, since Lane's analysis was done on the household level and not on the individual level, and because there were no data on the demographics of the farmers, it also ignored the aspect of gender, which also shapes access to land (as discussed in the previous case study). It is expected that given the social relations caused by both vertical and horizontal inequalities, land access would be restricted by barriers

related to social relations. The intersection of these social identities, i.e. women from an ethnic background in an area where land rights are linked to patronage, would exacerbate the adversity and disability to expand land use to productive land. Lane's model, however, removed itself from this context.

The poor as objects of development

Beyond access to land, it is also worth examining how other social relations can influence the choice farmers have to expand their crops. Lane's idea rests on increased utility and the economisation of humans, that is, more crops would mean they can make more money through selling additional crops on the market. As Lane himself noted, the people living in these regions have already developed their ability to adapt to rainfall, through certain practices that might downplay the success of the intervention as an adaptation technique (Lane, 2020:15). The paper makes no reference to what these are, suggesting that the design of the intervention is detached from what the existing techniques might be. This discards the existing coping mechanisms for severe flooding, and in line with elite development theory (Selwyn, 2016), enforces a development intervention that places the poor as the object of research in a passive role, while relying on the researcher's knowledge, in this case their neoliberal belief in the market, to fix damages associated with flooding.

This is contentious from a relational point of view, as there is research done on how the aggressive promotion of increased cultivation from MFIs has been found to adversely affect environmental sustainability and exacerbate the existing exposures to vulnerabilities. This is due to MFIs actively promoting seeds that are beneficial to their own industry, while discarding local knowledge of indigenous crops (Banerjee & Jackson, 2017). Furthermore, this takes place in a Bangladesh that has seen an increased commodification of agriculture, which has introduced intermediaries such as the supermarkets. Subsistence farmers have then been subjected to having produce sold at low prices and needing to buy produce at much higher prices, which led to farmers needing to sell all their crops at low prices and buy them at higher prices from the intermediaries (Misra, 2021). By disregarding context, the study does not recognise these relations that act as oppressive and exploitative for the farmers. As such, Lane fails to recognise the importance and value of their existing coping

mechanisms. Below, we consider, how a relational approach may explain the proliferation of microcredit in rural Bangladesh.

MICROCREDIT AND VULNERABILITY IN BANGLADESH

Microcredit is widespread in Bangladesh, and its proliferation, through donor-driven NGOs, has been recognised to have had a depoliticising effect on Bangladesh's civil society (White, 1996). At the same time its dominance in rural Bangladesh has facilitated the privatisation of a wide variety of social services, which has resulted in the decline of social safety nets, as well as political mechanisms for seeking to address what might otherwise have supported vulnerable borrowers (Karim, 2001; Feldman, 2003; Banks et al., 2015). Given this context supporting the proliferation of microcredit, to examine microcredit as a tool to reduce vulnerability it is imperative to look beyond methodological individualism, and rather to examine how various social relations (both vertical and horizontal) shape the effect that microcredit has on poor rural farmers.

The New Relational approach to poverty to explain vulnerability in Bangladesh due to microcredit

Lane's hypothesis is based on the idea that microcredit is a guarantee to reduce income but ignores the literature on the extended vulnerability posed by microcredit, especially in the Global South (Bateman et al., 2018). Banerjee and Jackson (2017), for instance, found how the exposure to microcredit in the Matlab region of Bangladesh increased economic, social, and environmental vulnerability. Their ethnographic study conducted in three villages in the Matlab region provides an empirically grounded narrative about the lived realities of the poor and describes the experience of poor communities with microfinance. Through this ethnographic study, unlike the RCT, they can provide a bottom-up perspective to see the consequences of the microcredit. Their study found that economic vulnerabilities are incurred, as it was found that in the sampled villages, few managed to escape poverty and actually increased indebtedness, as well as a loss of assets. The programme indicates that microfinance is a tool for entrepreneurial income-generating activities, but, in reality, it is used for income soothing, as there are structural and relational barriers prohibiting engaging in entrepreneurial activities, such as patriarchal gender norms.

The concern about using microcredit to reduce vulnerability is echoed by Jordan (2020) who examined the application of microcredit as a tool for reducing the vulnerability in the region of Bagerhat and Chattogram – Chattogram being the southeastern treated group of Lane's study. The study found that microloans typically get used for non-productive assets, such as buying children's clothes, or paying off other loans, therefore, providing limited potential to adapt to environmental vulnerabilities. MFIs and microcredit thus fail to offset the ongoing impacts of climate shocks in the Bagerhat and Chattogram districts of Bangladesh. She concludes that microcredit is unlikely to meaningfully reduce vulnerability under current climate conditions, let alone those of future vulnerabilities. Indeed, microcredit might lead to the maladaptation through over-indebtedness and locked-in effects (through trapping the poor in suboptimal trajectories).

A relational class analysis illuminates why this takes place. Misra's study in the areas of Panchagargh, Patuakhali and Pabna proves useful as it is focused on the effects of microcredit on small-scale farmers in Bangladesh. He conducted qualitative research on the microcredit industry in Bangladesh based on the idea of accumulation by dispossession/encroachment (Harvey, 2005; Patnaik, 2008). His study illuminates that the smallholder indebtedness, and the expansion of MFIs in Bangladesh are directly linked to broader neoliberal processes, which include the commodification of agriculture, input subsidy reduction and the systematic diminishing of the subsidised agriculture credit system. These all lead to the marginalisation of small holder farmers and lock them in a cycle of debt through three interrelated processes. Firstly, the MFIs expropriate value produced by small holder farmers through rent-seeking activities and divert it into the circuit of capital accumulation. Secondly, MFIs make farmers sell their means of subsistence to ensure repayments that align with a rigid organisational structure. Thirdly, the MFIs play an important role in commodifying peasant labour by indirectly forcing poor peasant borrowers to take up outside employment or engage in income diversification activities (Misra, 2021). Misra's study furthermore draws attention to other processes of oppression that take place through discourse, as those that are indebted become stigmatised (Misra, 2021:345), and, as a means to escape the stigma, resort to extreme actions, such as selling organs to repay loans (BBC, 2013).

Long-term viability and follow-up of microcredit

Lane's examination of microcredit and its ability to reduce vulnerability is further compromised due to the short follow-up it took. The data collection of Lane's study took place over three rounds: a baseline survey in April 2016, before borrowers in treatment branches were informed about their eligibility status, a follow-up survey in December 2016 after the rainy season, and a second follow-up in December 2017 after the second rainy season. It is interesting that this paper only followed up right after the experiment had taken place, with no further follow-up on how the additional loan taking-up by those vulnerable to the flood's consumption was affected. This is no shock, seeing that an RCT is aimed at providing specific results of a certain intervention and ensuring that there is no difference between the control and treatment groups would mean that long interventions and follow-ups cannot be done. In a relational approach, however, this is crucial. There are many additional stresses that can take place, conflicting with the intervention implemented by the RCT. By not using an approach like the New Relational approach, it fails to consider the risks of microcredit as a means of reducing vulnerability, especially in the long term.

CONCLUSION

Lane's study, in proposing an emergency loan as a solution to the vulnerabilities faced by rural flood vulnerable areas of Bangladesh, is a way to show that vulnerabilities can be overcome through an intervention that is insensitive to the context and the capabilities of those in dispute. The study disregards existing techniques of adaptation, in what seems to be only a way for BRAC to have another product. The solution comes from the theoretical framework underpinning the RCT, which is that of neoclassical theory. As such, no attention is given to how preferences are shaped by social relations. This becomes problematic when looking at expanding crops to cultivate and a reliance on microcredit, as it firstly fails to see how land access is blocked depending on relations (to the benefit of groups in power, across both vertical and horizontal levels), and how microcredit has intruded into rural Bangladesh, cementing a neoliberal change, and distorting social relations (Paprocki, 2016) to the benefit of powerful microcredit providers.

The RCT has an implicit understanding that there is market efficiency and that the research subject would, when encouraged with financial instruments, change their behaviour to act in a more 'economically rational' way. This makes the RCT a typical

example of elitist development theory that undermines the autonomy of the poor and places them in a passive role to the development intervention (Selwyn, 2016). When examining the vast interplay of class and culture, it becomes apparent that relying on assumptions of rationality and a belief in the benefits of the market, provides an insufficient understanding of poverty. Moving away from this approach to better understand the processes causing vulnerability and poverty, draws attention to the exigency of examining the social relations when studying poverty. Although this study provides no empirical evidence of the research subjects in Lane's study, it does draw attention to the existence of literature examining unequal social relations in these contexts. This existent literature clearly provides evidence of how the social relations people are embedded in, lead to oppression and exploitation – something that is not seen when using the RCT.

Conclusion

This chapter has used the New Relational approach to poverty as a theoretical framework to critique the RCT approach to poverty. Where the New Relational approach places social relations across class, gender and ethnicity as crucial to understanding how poverty is created, and how these social identities shape behaviour and decision-making, the RCT approach relied on an adapted neoclassical theoretical framework that views poverty as something that can be corrected by behavioural change, thereby encouraging more rational decision-making of the research subjects.

By failing to look at the role of social relations in both creating poverty and shaping the preferences of the poor, the RCT ignored the existing literature on this topic and the lived experiences of the poor. The results it obtained could also not be explained (for example through which mechanisms it worked) but still both studies suggested that their results indicated that these programmes can be scaled up and expanded to different contexts. The secondary research that the case studies drew from showed how the outcomes of Lane (2020) and Bandiera et al.'s (2017) studies could be explained, and also focused on what the wider impact of such an intervention is (that the RCT cannot provide). By critically examining these two studies, it becomes firstly questionable what the utility of these interventions are. Secondly, it draws attention to the potential danger caused by these studies that provides evidence that they are unable to explain the mechanism of, while furthermore assuming the said evidence as a universal truth.

Chapter 4: Discussion and conclusion

Introduction

There has been an abundance of criticism on the proliferation of RCTs in the field of development economics. Chapter 1 of this dissertation provided a brief overview of these critiques. The previous chapter (Chapter 3) contributed to this literature by using the New Relational approach to poverty (as explained in Chapter 2) as a theoretical framework to critique two cases where RCTs were used to inform development interventions. This analysis has shown that the RCT ignores key variables in its approach to poverty, which, given the importance of these variables in shaping preferences and capacities of the poor, means that the traditional RCT design provides an insufficient understanding of poverty.

This chapter will briefly discuss how the RCT and the New Relational approach fit into the field of development economics. By drawing from the insights of the case studies the chapter insists that the RCT merely treats symptoms of development problems, such as poverty, whereas the New Relational approach allows us to understand their roots. This will be followed with proposals for a future research agenda on poverty. Finally, the limitations of this study will be discussed, before the research argument is concluded.

Contextualising the RCT and the New Relational approach in the field of development economics

As discussed in Chapter 1, the RCT is part of a trend in development economics that has moved away from studying 'structural transformation' and macro-social development processes. Instead, the RCT forms part of what Fine calls the "newer" or post-Washington consensus development economics (Fine, 2008:890). The newer development economics still largely relies on methodological individualism to address development challenges and analyses these challenges in terms of market and institutional imperfections. Furthermore, the newer development economics places an increasing emphasis on policy and external funding and contract research, thereby facilitating the research industry model, as opposed to research that critically examines

the nature of development. With its focus on methodological individualism and its elitist-centred approach to development, the RCT is the poster child for this wave of economic development that differs strikingly from the 'old development economics' which, as Fine notes, included an examination of structural change and understood development as a social and political-economic process. The promotion and hegemony of the 'new development economics' in Bangladesh has been critiqued as, although it has had some individual programme successes, these programmes fail to bring about more fundamental changes to the existing unequal social relations, which real developmental progress ultimately relies on (Pearce, 2000:53; Feldman, 2003).

The New Relational approach, in turn, examines inequalities due to structural development, and how that is prevalent in the various relational networks the poor are embedded in. In this sense, the New Relational approach aligns with what Fine calls the 'old development economics' (2008:889), but forms part of its heterodox or radical wing. Drawing on Marxian, feminist and postcolonial theories, it questions the virtues of capitalist modernity and examines the inequalities and power relations associated with the unfolding of the development process. This thesis has argued that the New Relational approach can illuminate important variables that may create and reproduce poverty and thus should be promoted in the area of development research.

RCTs – as good as band-aids for broken legs

As the case-study analyses clarify, the New Relational approach exposes exactly how and why RCTs provide an insufficient approach to address poverty. It was shown that RCTs ignore crucial variables (such as unequal social relations organised by class, gender and ethnicity). This prevented them from seeing the following; that the locations of the interventions are abundant with minority groups that have been excluded and stigmatised in favour of majority groups accessing more resources/power; how agriculture in Bangladesh has increasingly been commodified to the detriment of small holder farmers as they are tied to unequal relations with intermediaries; how land is contentious and organised around social relations favouring majority groups and higher classes; and how patriarchy interacts with class to make women dependent on their husbands, but not protected by these social relations. Furthermore, by ignoring these variables the researchers could not see how the behaviour or preferences of the poor are also shaped by the social relations within which they are embedded. The RCT

could therefore not see how the occupational choices of women are influenced by rigid gender norms, or how expanding crops are related to the ability to access land, which is tied to class and social relations. In not recognising these processes, the RCT merely patches up symptoms of poverty but fails to address what the causes of these problems are, acting like a band-aid on a broken leg, which proves to be more decorative than healing.

The exclusionary design of the RCT has come despite the abundance of literature dedicated to illuminate how the social relations people are embedded in, shape their material conditions. For instance, in the study of Bandiera et al. (2017), gender and ethnic inequalities are completely ignored, despite the existing literature showing how the unequal treatment of these marginal social identities shape their occupational preferences and choices (Cain et al., 1979; White, 1992; Zaman, 1995; Kabeer, 2017; Ferdous & Malick, 2019; Lata et al., 2020; Shohel et al., 2021). Lane (2020) also completely ignored the way access to land is shaped by social statuses, and how a variety of social relations furthermore explains the dominance of smallholder microcredit, and the exploitation of farmers because of it. This was ignored despite the prevailing literature pointing to the centrality of these factors (Karim, 2001; Feldman, 2003; Bank et al., 2015; Banerjee & Jackson, 2017; Jordan, 2020; Misra, 2021).

The implications of excluding these variables are twofold. Firstly, it means that the interventions implemented could be useless or have limited non-durable impact at best. Secondly, the results of the interventions do not come with a disclosure of the specific social conditions under which it worked. In this sense, a result that worked in a current situation can be proclaimed to be a universal law. This problem is exemplified by Bandiera et al.'s study, that failed to recognise how variables of social relations are likely to shape women's choice and ability to engage with livestock rearing. As such, they could not account for the way the social context is influencing the outcome of the study (which I showed, due to strong patriarchal norms in Bangladesh, is very likely). Nonetheless, they confidently propose upscaling and generalising the results of the project to different contexts.

Elevating politics and relations into poverty studies

By using the New Relational approach, we can see the intersections of various social relations that are oppressive and exploitative, thereby presenting an anti-essentialist,

meticulous understanding of poverty. Similar to previous critiques of RCTs, the New Relational critique has shown that the understanding of poverty is limited and, therefore, ignores the historical social processes that underpin poverty. What the New Relational approach has further illuminated, is that these processes are complex, and that various oppressions co-exist. As such, the theoretical framework allows us to engage by firstly placing relations at the heart of understanding poverty, thereby ensuring that poverty is understood as the result of dynamic unequal power relations and, secondly, by thinking about the various processes in a non-reductive manner, examining both material and discursive practices. Instead of the top-down technocratic, and elite-centred development approach of poverty that RCTs rely on, the New Relational approach recognises that poverty is often deeply rooted in the local context and that local knowledge and expertise can be crucial for understanding and addressing poverty.

To address poverty by using the New Relational approach, it is important to bring politics into the conversation. New Relational scholars specifically suggest "unthinkable" forms of politics, which foregrounds alternative imaginaries of development emerging from lived experiences of deprivation (Borges, 2018; Da Costa & Nagar, 2018). In this sense the New Relational approach proposes a similar approach as Selwyn's 'labour-centred development' theory, which conceptualises and promotes the experience and agency of labouring classes in the development process (Selwyn, 2016).

Early relational scholars suggested moving away from the research industry model that studies the poor, to studying *systems* that lead to their exclusion and oppression. In this sense, poverty research should be dedicated to examining the various networks of patterns of interdependence that weave the world together and then seeking to measure the cost of ongoing arrangements that produce widespread exploitation and expropriation. This could illuminate the ways the poor themselves can upset these patterns of exploitation and expropriation, thereby encouraging labour-centred or poverty-centred social reform. This leaves little space for the RCT technocratic approach, as it cannot provide any information on the struggles of the poor or the networks they are trapped in. However, there is the possibility that the RCT interventions can upset these norms (for instance, in more women encouraged to work

outside, thereby upsetting norms of purdah), but this would require additional research being done alongside the intervention – compare the study of Roy et al. (2015) that combined the quantitative results of the RCT with qualitative assessments. Yet even if it is done in such a way, it does not get rid of the fact that the RCT model remains reliant on a more elitist conception of development than the conceptualisation proposed by the New Relational approach.

Limitations of the study

The purpose of this paper was to provide a theoretical critique of the RCT, and not to provide empirical evidence of poverty using the New Relational approach. The latter would require drawing from primary research, which the author did not have the resources to undertake. As such, the use of secondary research to prove the existence of salient social trends and factors in the Bangladeshi context was sufficient. However, if the study used primary data that was collected simultaneously with the RCT interventions and at the same place as the case studies, the results would have had stronger credibility. True to the New Relational approach is that poverty can only be understood by examining the specific context. The places where the studies of Lane and Bandiera et al. were implemented might have additional relational power imbalances that could not have been picked up, due to a lack of existing qualitative studies implemented in these specific areas. This is especially apparent in terms of conjugated oppression, which by only drawing from different sources in a piecemeal way, this study cannot examine, since the existing research of specifically examining conjugated oppression of, for instance, poor ethnic women, was limited.

A suggestion for future research could be an examination of a poverty intervention evaluated by an RCT, by using various methodologies and employing a New Relational approach to poverty as a theoretical framework. The framework will guide which variables need to be examined. This could be done by a variety of methodologies, such as ethnographic studies or even a more in-depth analysis of the poor's lives through life history interviews [as, for instance, done by Kothari and Hulme (2004)] and combining that with political economy analysis.

Another limitation of the study is how deeply it engaged with various heterodox or 'radical' theories in development studies, such as feminist, Marxian, and postcolonial

theories of development. This study engaged these contributions in a general sense, (for instance only referring to classical and neo-Marxism, and the general tenets of feminist theory without engaging with nuances within and between these various schools of thought). To provide a more nuanced understanding, it is worth building on the idea of deeply engaging with these theories and attempting to reconcile their contradictions in a complementary manner. For the purposes of this study, the New Relational approach provided adequate grounds to reconcile these epistemologies to better understand the various processes creating and perpetuating poverty.

Conclusion

This dissertation echoes previous heterodox development scholars critiquing RCTs and consolidates these critiques with the work of poverty scholars arguing for the necessity of connecting the creation and reproduction of poverty to the specific social relations within which the poor are embedded. The research has three main contributions. Firstly, the study illuminates the fact that the RCT approach to poverty is insufficient due to its narrow scope and limited theoretical framework. Secondly, it shows the relevance of studying social relations, recognising that poverty is not a behavioural trait, but a process that is mutually constituted with privilege. This requires addressing broader macro-social and political-economic processes to improve the lives of the poor and figuring out which forces are robbing them from their (potential and actual) livelihoods. These may include forces of social exclusion or adverse incorporation rooted in unequal power dynamics. And thirdly, by using the New Relational approach as a theoretical framework, the research valorises an approach that is anti-essentialist and reconciles conflicting development theories. In this sense, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the processes creating poverty, which it hopes will become more prominent in the broader field of development economics.

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