Understanding Human Passivity toward Global Crises and Engineering Empathy

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Abstract

This article reports on an investigation into the basic psychological and social mechanisms underlying ordinary individuals' passivity towards global humanitarian crises. Qualitative data were gathered through structured interviews with a sample of adults and students in Russia, supplemented by comparative biography and public writing analysis of famous philanthropists. Responses were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns with respect to perceived self-efficacy, definitions of "help," trust in institutions, and emotional distance. Results are presented to indicate that most participants perceive their potential impact as minimal, conceptualize "help" narrowly (mostly large monetary donations), and exhibit considerable distrust in charitable channels of distribution. Passive attitudes in this respect were strongly associated with emotional detachment: suffering was cognitively recognized but not affectively internalized. The philanthropists' engagement, in contrast, was associated with direct exposure to suffering. From these findings, an engineering concept - the so-called "Empathy Booth" - is proposed: a multisensory installation that reduces emotional distance and enhances perceived agency. This paper contributes to human-centered design approaches for empathy-inducing technologies.

Introduction

Whenever major global crises occur, they dominate media platforms and become part of everyday life. When the Russian-Ukrainian war began in 2022, I was still in the seventh grade. I remember feeling shocked as I saw people online openly wishing others death simply because they were from "the other side."

A few years later, when the Israel-Gaza conflict escalated, I was older and more observant. I noticed that while people expressed strong opinions, very few actively helped those suffering. Not many people donated, even as humanitarian crises worsened and famine was confirmed. The same indifference can be seen in other regions such as Congo, where the suffering of innocent people often goes unnoticed.

I also observe widespread neglect of environmental issues: oceans filled with plastic, animals dying because of human carelessness, and people discarding garbage without thought. I see children who need expensive medical treatments while many who could help simply choose not to.

These experiences pushed me to ask two questions: **Why do so many people remain passive in the face of global problems? And how can this change?** These questions became the foundation for my research.

Methodology

a. Research Goal

The purpose of this research is to understand why ordinary people remain passive despite constant exposure to global problems through the media. By identifying the factors that prevent individuals from acting, this study aims to propose solutions that eliminate these barriers and encourage collective responsibility.

b. Data Collection

Data were collected through a series of interviews with ordinary individuals. The questions were designed to gradually open participants up and explore their emotional and moral responses to global crises. Topics included initial reactions, emotional responses, and personal reasoning about issues such as war, poverty, illness, and climate change.

Additionally, I analyzed the biographies, books, and interviews of well-known philanthropists and thinkers who dedicate their lives to helping others. Comparing these individuals with ordinary participants helped reveal key motivational and psychological differences.

c. Participant Background

The participants comprised both students and adults from Russia because it is a country shaped by political complexity, social tension, and constraints on open expression. This background offered valuable insight into how people justify inaction and define moral responsibility.

d. Data Analysis

Responses were translated, categorized, and analyzed to identify recurring patterns. Special attention was given to emotional responses, perceived ability to help, trust, and moral reasoning. These patterns were then compared with the perspectives of philanthropists to highlight contrasts between awareness and real action.

e. Ethical Note

All participants gave informed consent. The interviews were anonymous to ensure privacy and honest responses.

Interview Analysis

People differ greatly in how they react to suffering. Some dedicate their lives to helping others; others remain detached. The interviews revealed recurring themes that explain why.

1) Perceived Powerlessness and Narrow Definitions of "Help"

Most participants saw themselves as powerless. When asked how they could "help," they thought only of large donations or activism. Few mentioned small, indirect actions such as volunteering, educating others, or reducing waste.

This narrow view of helping leads to passivity. Institutions such as schools, workplaces, and local communities should emphasize that even small, indirect contributions matter. Activism and big donations may be intimidating, but accessible, visible small actions can still make real impact.

2) Mistrust and Selective Generosity

Many participants said they would only donate to people they personally knew. They feared fraud and doubted whether their money reached the intended recipients. While some may use this as an excuse, for many it reflects a genuine lack of trust.

Transparent systems that show exactly where funds go, through real-time updates or verified reports, could remove this barrier and make generosity more likely.

3) Emotional Detachment, Self-Centeredness, and Judgment

Several participants displayed emotional detachment or judgment toward others' suffering. Some viewed hardship strictly as "people's own fault." One participant was unaware that children's surgeries can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, demonstrating how ignorance can prevent empathy.

This shows a need for education that combines factual information with emotional engagement, helping people both *understand* and *feel* the importance of compassion.

4) Defensiveness and Withdrawal

Some participants withdrew from interviews when confronted with moral contradictions. For example, those who claimed "animals deserve more help than humans" ended the discussion when challenged with examples of helpless people. This behavior indicates avoidance and cognitive dissonance: when people prefer to retreat rather than reconsider their moral stance.

5) Subtle Exceptions

A few participants showed genuine empathy but felt paralyzed, believing their small efforts would not matter. Others said they would help if they saw organized leadership or mass participation. Many admitted that they act more readily when suffering feels *personal*: when it affects someone nearby or relatable.

Summary of Patterns

- People underestimate the power of small, indirect actions.
- Mistrust in systems prevents generosity.
- Ignorance and emotional distance limit empathy.
- Defensiveness blocks moral growth.
- Empathy increases when problems feel personal or transparent.

These findings reveal both psychological and social barriers that can be addressed through education, trust-building, and emotional engagement.

Understanding the Gap between Awareness and Action

Comparing philanthropists with ordinary participants clarified the source of this passivity. The main difference is **exposure to real suffering.**

Philanthropists such as **Muhammad Yunus, Wangari Maathai, and Peter Singer** acted after direct encounters with injustice. Yunus met families trapped in poverty during a famine; Maathai saw entire forests vanish; Singer developed moral urgency by vividly imagining distant suffering. Even Greta Thunberg's activism began when she emotionally connected scientific facts to her own life. In every case, **understanding was born from experience, not just information.**

In contrast, most participants live in stability. Their knowledge of crises is abstract. It is filtered through social media, news, and opinions. Because they have never witnessed suffering firsthand, they perceive it as distant or exaggerated. This *empathy gap* makes them believe that only huge actions or large donations count, while their personal effort seems meaningless.

Thus, passivity stems less from cruelty than from **distance.** When people are insulated from pain, they neither feel urgency nor responsibility. To overcome this, technology and design should focus on making suffering *visible and relatable* without overwhelming people.

Engineering Solution: The Empathy Booth

Problem Identified

Most people are emotionally detached from global problems because they have never truly felt them. They read about wars, poverty, or illness but remain disconnected. Many of my interviewees admitted that they "cannot really feel it," or that their actions are "too small to matter."

Proposed Solution

To minimize this emotional gap, I propose developing an **Empathy Booth** — a physical, technology-driven installation that lets people momentarily experience the lives of others through multisensory simulation and real human stories. Its purpose is to translate information into emotion and inspire real-world action.

Concept Description

The Empathy Booth is a small enclosed space placed in schools, public centers, or exhibitions. When a visitor steps inside, the system activates a sequence of sensory elements to recreate realistic scenarios of crisis and survival.

- **Audio Simulation:** Surround-sound speakers reproduce environments such as war sirens, rain during floods, or hospital beeps.
- **Visual Projection:** 360° LED screens or holographic images display destroyed cities, polluted oceans, or overcrowded shelters.
- **Environmental Feedback:** Temperature and airflow adjust to match conditions: cold air for a refugee camp, heat for drought.
- **Scent and Vibration Modules:** Diffusers and floor panels add physical realism.
- **AI Storytelling:** A voice assistant narrates true stories from verified sources, linking human faces to abstract numbers.

After the experience, the booth invites the user to take **non-monetary actions**: sign up for volunteering, send messages of support, scan QR codes for education, or commit to small habit changes.

Technological Components

The booth can be built using the following technology:

- **Microcontrollers** (Arduino or Raspberry Pi) to synchronize lights, sound, and temperature.

- **Motion and proximity sensors** to trigger scenes automatically.

- **AI software** for adaptive narration and personalization.

- **Touchscreens and QR systems** for follow-up interaction.

Expected Impact

The Empathy Booth is not designed to frighten but to connect. It can transform emotional indifference into awareness. Visitors realize that helping others is not charity. Instead, it is shared humanity.

This concept illustrates how engineering can extend beyond comfort and efficiency to build *moral technology*: tools that teach compassion through experience. In the long term, such installations could become common in schools and community centers, fostering empathy as a normal part of human development.

Conclusion

This research shows that most people do not stay passive out of selfishness, but out of disconnection. They perceive global issues as distant tragedies that belong to others. Unlike philanthropists who acted after witnessing suffering firsthand, ordinary individuals lack that emotional connection.

However, empathy can be learned. When technology and psychology unite, engineers can design systems that make people **feel**, **understand**, and **act**. The Empathy Booth is one example of how immersive technology can bridge the gap between awareness and compassion.

If technology can help us feel what others feel, then technology can help us become better humans.

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