Does Empathy Have a Design Flaw?

Audio excerpt as an introduction:

Paul: *I think empathy has its place. I think empathy is a great source of pleasure, but I think empathy is a poor moral guide.*

Podcast:

Ann: Hey there podcast listeners. Today we've got a special treat. Steve is joining us and Steve, what are we doing?

Steve: You may remember a few weeks ago we aired an interview with a psychologist, Paul Bloom, who wrote a book called Against Empathy. Turns out that interview generated a lot of response from our listeners.

Audio excerpt from the earlier episode:

Steve: *Paul, this is a really counterintuitive argument you are making. It's hard to believe that anyone other than a psychopath would consider empathy to be a bad thing. Are you really advising people not to feel empathy?*

Paul: *Empathy suffers from various design flaws. For one thing it's very biased. We naturally feel empathy for people who are from our group, people who look like us, people who are cute, and it's very hard to feel empathy for people who are from another group, who are our enemies, who are strangers. Because of that decisions guided by empathy tend to be highly biased, often racist. A second problem is empathy is like a spotlight. It zooms you in on one person. It often leads to just wrong moral choices. One way I put it is it's because of empathy we often care more about a little girl stuck in a well than we do about a crisis that could affect thousands or millions of people.*

Podcast:

Ann: That was part of a full hour we did a while ago asking if we really need other people in our lives at all. "Hell is other people," as Jean Paul Sartre said.

Steve: Not our most warm and friendly topic I suppose.

Ann: So, then something happened. You said we got a lot of mail, listener comments, after we aired that interview.

Steve: It turns out we missed something.

Ann: Hell isn't other people?

Steve: You could debate that, but many of our listeners pointed out that empathy actually has a bunch of different definitions depending on what line of work you're in and a lot of people insisted that Paul Bloom was getting it wrong. He was not describing empathy, but instead maybe sympathy or emotional intelligence, at least if you go by the psychology literature.

Ann: Steve, we're married and you know how little tolerance I have for debates about definitions.

Steve: Well, just wait. You know reading all of this, a few comments caught the eye of our digital producer, Mark Reichers, like this one. "Emotional connection and moral reasoning are really just the tip of the empathy iceberg." The take away: no empathy, no high tech, no advanced society. It's really that simple.

Ann: Wait. What?

Steve: The connection between empathy and engineering seems counterintuitive, right?

Ann: Yes, totally.

Steve: Well, we decided to get that listener in the studio. His name is Chuck Pezeshski…

Ann: So, anybody else?

Steve: Yeah, we also heard from Indi Young who is a designer who advises all sorts of companies on how they can integrate empathy into their design process. She says that this is something that companies really need to understand. So, we asked her how that works.

Indi: Empathy has a lot of different definitions, and the kind of empathy I work with is cognitive empathy. That's consciously cultivating an understanding of other people's perspectives. The real key reason why I bring it in is that when people are trying to design software, or trying to design any sort of product or service, they're often doing it together, just with their own experiences. What I'm trying to do is bring a whole lot of other people's experiences into that room when they're doing those designs.

There's a really famous example. There was an app for tracking health signs, like your heart rate and all sorts of different things. Missing from it was tracking a woman's period. No one mentioned it.

Steve: Because probably the designers were all men.

Indi: Exactly. That's a really simple example that everybody can wrap their head around. Oftentimes though I'm dealing with much more complex kinds of things like how do we support workplace safety? Or how do we support someone who's in charge of data storage? When I'm working with startups this is extremely important because a startup has a short runway. They only have so much time and resources and money to actually accomplish something and get it out into the market. So, they can't solve everybody's problem. Oftentimes they fail because they do try solving everybody's problem. What I try to do is help them get to a more successful point by focusing down. Okay, let's just work with this particular kind of approach, this kind of person, the way they think. Or maybe these two kinds of people, the way they think.

Steve: To come back to what you do, which is to create better designs using these principals of empathy, trying to get them ahead of someone else, you're saying this is a different dimension of working with these businesses?

Indi: It is. This is a new dimension. I mentioned the words user research and solution space. I think we've gotten very good at checking out our ideas and making sure that they work. We'll check out ideas. We'll check out prototypes. We'll check out the actual services and products that we create for people and we've gotten pretty good at that. Ideas are sexy, and when you make an idea and people like it you get a lot of credit. So, we all sort of gravitate towards solving problems as opposed to spending that much time understanding the problem. So, this is new, trying to understand the problem. There's been quite a bit of discussion about it lately.

            Om Malik did a piece in the New York Times about Facebook, when we were just experiencing all those faux news pieces that were getting bubbled around to everybody. I think the title of his piece was we really need to pause. We need to pause first to understand all the implications of what's going on with our designs. By pausing up front we can understand those implications before we cause the disasters.

Steve: What I find so interesting about what you're saying is – you're talking about unintended consequences. You might have a great idea, but you don't exactly know what's going to come of it. You're also saying the problem is sort of a deficit of empathy. That's sort of the piece that seems new to you.

Indi: Actually, what I would say is that it's a deficit of breadth. I think that people have empathy. I think they can have both emotional empathy and cognitive empathy when

they're designing these things, but they don't have the breadth. They don't realize there are other perspectives out there. And since we live now in the digital world, we can take advantage of that long tail. We don't have to only support the kind of thinking that we understand. We can support other kinds of thinking, and it really behooves us to go out and understand what that other kind of thinking is. What all of those other perspectives are and map out, say over the next 5-10 years, who are we going to support next? How can we find out more about these other kinds of thinking? So it's recognizing that we've so far created digital products and services for a very small percentage of the world.

Of course I'm focusing on technology, but what I do isn't constrained to technology. I've actually worked with a fast food company, designing menus and stuff like that. It's not constrained only to digital. We can still have frustrating experiences. What's happening in a frustrating experience is that we're feeling, as a person, as a human, as an individual, that someone else didn't think of us. Like they didn't recognize our situation, or this particular situation that maybe me and a group of others are in. We get frustrated, not only that it doesn't do what we intended, but that there was some designer out there that we feel like we should blame. This is all emotional. That has nothing to do really with empathy. We might be having an emotional reaction, thinking that that designer didn't have empathy with us. But like I said earlier, it's really not about a deficit of empathy. It's a deficit of breadth. What we need to focus on is the idea that there are lots of different things to solve for. We've been so far solving for the low hanging fruit, the easy stuff.

Steve: One thing I'm wondering about is as you get better at this, you understand how people think, how people are using these products. I guess I'm wondering if there's also the danger of manipulation here? Can you design user experiences essentially to trick people into doing things that they might otherwise not have any interest in doing?

Indi: One of the things that I do with cognitive empathy is … something that Daniel Goldman actually says, "Hey, that can lead to manipulation." And most often I think that people default to thinking, "Hey if I know how you think then I can change how you think and I make you do something you weren't intending to do." In most cases that's bad. That's called a dark pattern. What I do is I emphasize, instead of manipulation, support. What I really want people to do is be able to support other perspectives. I want people to think beyond the perspectives in the room that they're familiar with. I want whole companies to recognize that there are markets out there in

the other 95% of the population of the world and we need to start looking at those. Now's the time. We have the opportunity to get in now and start solving some of the more complex problems.

Steve: Coming back to this whole idea of empathy. Did you hear our interview with Paul Bloom?

Indi: Yes

Steve: What was your impression of that? Do you feel like he was missing something?

Indi: It's interesting. I don't disagree with his emphasis on compassion. His compassion is my support. I think what he's focusing on more is social stuff and I'm focusing in a completely different direction. I think what he's focused on is something that is a very narrow definition of empathy.

Steve: Or I think what he's talking about is the dangers of applying these notions of empathy to developing your moral stance in the world.

Indi: Empathy is really, the way he's talking about it, an emotion. He's talking about emotional contagion, like bathing in their feelings. He says that's very exhausting and that's true. That bathing in someone else's feelings is very exhausting. It's what you do with the emotion afterwards that counts. If we're strictly speaking about emotional empathy, which is really not my expertise, I think it's what you *do* with that emotion. He could have said … the title of his book could have been Against Anger, or Against Contempt. It's the emotional maturity that you have to recognize what that emotion is and then make decisions based on it. We don't have a lot of maturity in our emotional self-recognition and recognition in others. We just don't teach our kids that. And the focus really should be on the lack of emotional education, the lack of teaching people to recognize and listen to other people in school. We've got the three R's – reading, writing and arithmetic. We don't have listening. We don't have speaking. We don't have handling our own emotions. And those are very important.

Steve: You make this very clear dividing line between emotional empathy and cognitive empathy.

Indi: Yes. I think one of the things that Paul says is that emotional empathy zooms you into one person and you can ignore the 1,000 other people because you're focused on that one person. Cognitive empathy also zooms you in on one person, but what I'm doing is I'm really intent on trying to bring those thousands of people into the room with the

designers. So, I am going out. I'm hunting around for all the different kinds of thinking styles that are out there, bringing those together in a specific format called mental model diagram, and helping those designers in the room recognize more perspectives. So, I'm sort of doing the opposite. I'm bringing the thousands into the room.

Ann: Wow, fascinating that we could learn so much when it seems like maybe we were a little bit wrong.

Steve: And thanks to Indi and Chuck for taking the time to talk with us and I have to say it pays to have smart listeners.

Ann: That's it for this podcast extra, made possible by you, our wonderful listeners. We will be back with a full hour soon.