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Thursday, 3 November 2011

## Simon Baron-Cohen: Inter-generational patterns of abuse



Imagine you're in a shopping mall car park when you witness a woman scream at her child "I hate you! You're an evil bastard! I'm leaving! You can look after yourself! I'm done looking after you! Good riddance. You don't deserve a mother! I'll kill myself and then perhaps you'll realize you should have treated me better!" and then getting into the car, slamming the car door behind her, and driving off at high speed.

How should we, as witnesses to this scene, react to such words and actions that can cause deep emotional scars in the young child they are directed at? No doubt like you, I would find it deeply distressing and experience an urge to protect the child and condemn the mother for her hurtful behaviour.

But as a psychologist a further thought kicks in: Perhaps this mother herself also deserves our compassion. What has happened in her life to render her so overwhelmed that, in a moment of anger, she can no longer control herself and instead vents her most aggressive thoughts and feelings, and loses any empathy for her own child?

The study of Borderline Personality Disorder reveals strong links with an early history of insecure attachment to a caregiver, itself a consequence of early neglect or abuse. John Bowlby's powerful concept of attachment reveals the long-term 'sleepier effects' of missing out on parental affection. Thirty years later, these can wreak havoc on one's own capacity to parent.

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[Simon Baron-Cohen](#) is Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at the University of Cambridge and Director of the Autism Research Centre there. His new book is '[Zero Degrees of Empathy](#)' (Penguin UK) and is published in the US under the title 'The Science of Evil' (Basic Books).

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