

We need to talk about Kevin's lack of empathy

The psychopathic son in Lionel Shriver's novel and Lynne Ramsay's film isn't evil - but has zero empathy

Simon Baron-Cohen

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In Lynne Ramsay's brilliant film of the book *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver, we meet a child who will inevitably be described as is "pure evil". Almost from birth, Kevin shows his mother no love, just pure hate; he doesn't just push her away, but plays with her mind, finding ever new ways to hurt her. The film asks us to face up to two big questions: where does "pure evil" come from, and how should we as parents or as a society respond to it?

For me, the term "evil" is not helpful. Instead I suggest we need to talk about the erosion of empathy. Unlike evil, empathy is scientifically tractable. You can measure it, locate it in the brain, and dissect it into its component parts. Empathy comes by degrees, and most of us are in the average range on a scale from zero through to six. At zero degrees of empathy we find the psychopath, such as Kevin. From everything we are shown in this gripping film, psychopaths are born callous.

And yet, the film (like the science) does not want us to settle too comfortably into the idea that the cause of psychopathic low empathy is purely genetic. It hints, disturbingly, at the role of psychological conflict in Kevin's mother, about whether she is trying to love him without truly loving him. The science confirms that environmental and emotional factors do also play a role in the development of antisocial personality disorder, but teasing apart cause and effect in such hard-to-parent children is a tall order.

In people who end up as psychopaths, brain regions connected with empathy are under-active. The science also tells us that empathy is a complex skill, with several components. Two major ones are "cognitive" empathy (the capacity to recognise what someone else thinks or feels) and "affective" empathy (the capacity to feel an appropriate emotion in response to someone else's thoughts and feelings).

Psychopaths such as Kevin have zero degrees of affective empathy (they just don't care about someone else's feelings) but have excellent cognitive empathy (able to worm their way into someone else's mind by using their ability to figure out what someone else might think, want or feel; able to manipulate others through deception).

So how should our civilised society respond to psychopaths such as Kevin? Do we show compassion for the killer because his actions are the result of his neurology, his low empathy? To do otherwise is to be as uncaring as the murderer himself. Having empathy for those who lack it is the ultimate challenge.

*Simon Baron-Cohen is professor at Cambridge University and author of *Zero Degrees of Empathy* (Penguin)*

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