MEDIA COMMENTARY

We Need to Talk about Challenges Facing Research into the Origins of Psychopathy
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In Lionel Shriver’s We Need to Talk about Kevin (WNNTAK), a high school shooting is the backdrop for a controversial yet utterly compelling portrayal of a woman who struggles to bond with her son. The recent film of the same name was greeted with critical acclaim, not least for Tilda Swinton’s mesmerising performance as Eva Khattchadourian, Kevin’s resentful, anguished mother who narrates the story. Kevin is portrayed throughout as ‘evil’; he rejects Eva’s attempts at effective parenting (“it wasn’t milk he didn’t want, it was mother,” p. 102), displays unusual and flattened emotional responses (“I observed Kevin watching decapitations, disembowelments, dismemberments, flaying, impalements, deoculations, and crucifixions, and I never saw him flinch,” p. 172), and directs premeditated acts of aggression towards peers and family members (“I watched Kevin despoil other people’s pleasures for most of his life,” p. 293).

In the story’s climax, Kevin uses a bow and arrow to shoot and kill seven of his classmates, a teacher, and a cafeteria worker, eerily evoking memories of real-life atrocities committed by the young, including the 1999 Columbine school shootings, and the abduction of 2-year-old James Bulger in 1993 by Jon Venables and Robert Thompson. But do we believe these children to be ‘evil’? What were the signs, if any, in their early childhood that suggested they would become murderers?

In trying to answer these and other questions relating to the origins of psychopathy, research efforts are faced with various theoretical and methodological challenges, which have important implications for clinical practice and intervention science. Aside from being a stunning piece of contemporary fiction, WNNTAK is a useful tool through which to analyse these ongoing challenges.

First, WNNTAK is a skillful provocation of our understanding of ‘evil.’ In adults, the term ‘psychopathy’ has been in use for over 100 years, although historically, descriptions akin to modern conceptualisations are found across cultures (see Murphy 1976) and in writings as old as the
Bible: “…his ways are always grievous… his mouth is mischief and vanity” (Psalm 10:4-7, King James VI version). In the last 50 years, the term psychopathy has been consistently used by clinicians and researchers to describe a constellation of extreme interpersonal, affective, and lifestyle traits (e.g., Hare 2003; Hare & Gudonis 2005; Karpman 1961; McCord & McCord 1964). More specifically, psychopathy refers to individuals who demonstrate shallow emotions, callousness, impulsivity, risk-taking behavior, deceitfulness, arrogance, a manipulative interpersonal style, and the ability to cause harm to others without empathy, guilt, or remorse (e.g., Cleckley 1941, 1976; Hare 1993). It appears to be this combination of characteristics that best represents our understanding of ‘evil.’ Indeed, psychopathic offenders are guilty of more violent and nonviolent crimes, a greater variety of offenses (Kosson et al. 2003), more severe and violent aggression, higher rates of reoffending, and poorer treatment outcomes (e.g., Gretton et al. 2001). As such, the measurement of psychopathy in adult criminal samples is a central facet within a modern justice context that benefits from the identification of ‘bad,’ dangerous people (Skeem & Cooke 2010).

By extension, the measurement of psychopathy in youth samples is also recognised as valuable to understanding its early manifestations, identifying root causes of the syndrome, and perhaps uncovering the very origins of ‘evil.’ In reference to Kevin, Eva argues that, “you can only punish people who have hopes to frustrate or attachments to sever; who worry about what you think of them. You can only really punish people who are already a little bit good” (p. 167). Nevertheless, while Kevin appears to manifest all the hallmarks of a psychopath, applying psychopathy to children is fraught with difficulties, not least because of research concerns about potential stigma attached to its use (Edens et al. 2001; Tremblay 2000). Furthermore, measurement tools to assess psychopathy were developed in incarcerated, criminal, and invariably male-only samples, making it difficult to generalise the construct of psychopathy to community and youth samples, where antisocial and criminal behaviour is less common (see Skeem & Cooke 2010 and the reply from Hare & Neumann 2010). On the other hand, preventative efforts to reduce the possibility that psychopathic behaviours become entrenched, chronic, and associated with severe antisociality are likely to be more effective in early childhood, when behaviour may be more malleable and amenable to treatment (Salekin & Lynam 2010).

\textit{WNTTAK} is therefore a reminder of the need to identify and provide support to children at risk of psychopathy as early as possible, when “we can observe the development of the disorder before it has had an opportunity to destroy its host” (Lynam 1997, p. 434). At the same time, the centrality of the themes of ‘evil’ and psychopathy to the book reminds us that while we need early identification, we also need sensitivity in our language of classification. For example, framing the problem as individual differences in empathy, guilt, and other normative behaviours related to adult definitions of psychopathy, instead of using labels such as ‘evil’ or ‘psychopathic,’ may reduce any potential negative stigma. Finally, some of the earliest case studies described a key dimension of psychopathy as involving some features that are normally seen as indicative of positive psychological adjustment, such as an absence of nervousness, good intelligence, and social adeptness (Cleckley 1976). Indeed, in relation to youth samples, although perhaps not in Kevin’s case, there is a need to recognise that adaptations to psychopathic tendencies can be both maladaptive and adaptive, and not all children displaying early psychopathic traits will commit acts of
'evil.' Nevertheless, maintaining continuity between Cleckley’s elegant portrayal of the dimensional (and sometimes positively adaptive) nature of psychopathic traits with the need to identify the most severely antisocial and aggressive individuals across different samples is an ongoing challenge within both research and clinical contexts.

Second, WNTTAK cleverly depicts the methodological challenge that a child is necessarily viewed by researchers and clinicians through the eyes of his/her mother or primary caregiver. Commonly via questionnaire, a parent rates the occurrence of behaviours, such as deceitfulness and callousness. But what can we infer when a mother describes her two- or three-year old child as being sneaky, callous, or a liar? In WNTTAK, Eva reports on seven-week old Kevin that, “he was never ‘the baby’. He was a singular, unusually cunning individual who had arrived to stay with us and just happened to be very small” (p. 103), and she expresses her resentment at being “stuck all day with hell in a handbasket” (p. 107). These quotations and Kevin’s age at the time remind us that relying on parent-report alone risks research being confounded by distorted parental perceptions. Indeed, Lionel Shriver, in an interview in 2005, admitted Eva’s unreliability as a narrator: “she’s not a liar, except in the sense that we’re all liars. We all choose to remember some events more than others, because they play to our version of the world, and of ourselves.”

WNTTAK therefore highlights the need for alternative measurement approaches to parent reports of child behaviour. For example, studies could employ experimental paradigms that investigate related behaviours, such as a child’s response to hypothetical moral dilemmas illustrated by story vignettes (Kochanska 2002) or empathic concern in response to parental distress (e.g., Hastings et al. 2000). Alternatively, studies could include alternate caregiver, teacher, or child reports to corroborate parent reports and potentially address the problem of either over-reporting or under-reporting of child behaviour. To address the potential under-reporting of behaviours related to psychopathy, such as lying, sneakiness, manipulativeness, and cunning, and improve the validity of measures of psychopathy in youth, studies have often combined parent and teacher ratings at the item level, by taking the higher of the two (e.g., Frick et al. 2003). In an alternative approach, Pasalich and colleagues (2011) assessed the callous and unemotional traits of children by combining items across the ratings provided by mothers, fathers, teachers, and children. The final score assigned to children represented the proportion of all reporters who classified them as being high (in the top third of all scores) on callous and unemotional traits. More recently, a child report version of the inventory of callous-unemotional traits has been developed (Frick 2004), although has yet to be validated outside adolescent samples.

In relation to the over-reporting of child behaviour problems, studies have typically focused on the ‘depression-distortion’ hypothesis (Richters & Pellegrini 1986): the idea that symptoms of depression precipitate a negative bias in the severity with which a parent judges their child’s behaviour. The use of multi-agent latent variables constructed using the reports of multiple informants and tested within a structural equation modelling framework provides support for a modest effect of maternal depression on inflation in the reporting of child behaviour problems (see Garstein et al. 2009; Muller, Achtergarde & Furniss 2011). No studies to date, however, have applied this analytic approach to parental distorted perceptions and the reporting of early psychopathic traits. In addition, further empirical work is needed to model more
precisely the link between parent beliefs (distorted or otherwise), parenting behaviour, and child outcomes. Eva recalls Kevin’s father saying “I do what I can to make up for your – and I’m very sorry if this hurts your feelings, but I don’t know what else to call it – your coldness” (p. 247). Specifically, if some parents are biased in reporting on their child’s emerging traits, an interesting empirical question arises: do these negative parental beliefs about their child serve to undermine effective, warm, or consistent parenting, thereby influencing their child’s behaviour? One way to investigate this question is to test cross-lagged panel models of the reciprocal and concurrent associations between observed parental harshness, parental negative feelings, and emerging child psychopathic-like behaviours over time (e.g., Waller et al., manuscript in preparation).

Third, WNTTAK is superbly effective in conveying the complex intricacies of the parent-child relationship, and how shared genetics, parenting behaviour, and child behaviour interact almost immeasurably (although Shriver is too subtle to use the book simply as a vehicle for a debate about nature versus nurture). As a reader, you are trapped in every tense exchange between Eva and Kevin from infancy through to adolescence, and are a helpless witness to Eva’s inability to be an effective parent as the interactions become increasingly covert and coercive. In line with the notion that the emergence of psychopathology happens early in life (see Angold & Egger 2007), Kevin seems to be cruel and callous from a very young age, with his nanny reporting, “he pulls my hair...he pulls it very hard indeed. He’s old enough now and I think he knows it hurts” (p. 122), supporting the idea of some genetic predisposition to psychopathy. Indeed, research evidence supports the idea that there are differences in the emotion-processing regions of the brains of highly psychopathic youth (Blair et al. 2001; Dadds et al. 2006; Loney et al. 2003; Marsh et al. 2008), which could be inherited. Blair (2003) has theorised that these brain differences correspond to failure in a ‘violence inhibition mechanism.’ Specifically, psychopathy is proposed to develop because of a genetically conferred dysfunction of the amygdala, which produces deficits in the recognition of fear and sadness, leaving a child unable to associate the causing of harm to and the subsequent distress felt by others. Violent and aggressive behaviours then continue unmodulated.

Nevertheless, research has also consistently highlighted the importance of particular aspects of the parenting environment to the development of antisocial behaviour in youth, including rejecting parenting practices (Shaw et al. 2003), coercive patterns of parent-child interactions (Patterson 1982), poor parental supervision (Loeber et al. 1998) and positive parent-child engagement (Gardner et al. 2003). Furthermore, emerging evidence also suggests that harsh parenting practices can have a direct effect on child psychopathic-like behaviours (Fontaine et al. 2011; Pardini, Lochman, & Powell 2007; Waller et al. 2012). WNTTAK reminds us, however, of a simple and unavoidable fact facing developmental research: parents are the providers both of their child’s genetic makeup and their early environment. Specifically, investigations of how parenting (including parental negative beliefs about their child) predicts child behaviour are confounded by passive gene-environment correlations – the correlations between a child’s behaviour and the environment provided by the parent because of a shared genetically transmitted liability. This confound is reflected in Eva’s own words: “Kevin had proven defective and I was the manufacturer” (p. 164) and “the furtiveness of his gaze and the secrecy of his silence seemed to confront me with a miniature
version of my own dissembling” (p. 135). As a film, *WNTTAK* is less subtle and, using disturbing imagery, shows Eva’s face morphing into Kevin’s face. *WNTTAK* is also a reminder of the confounding effects of evocative gene-environment correlations – that a temperamentally difficult and potentially hard-to-socialise child may *evoke* a certain style of parenting from a parent who shares similar affective characteristics: “As that infant squirmed on my breast, from which he shrank in such distaste, I spurned him in return” (p. 467).

To address these confounds, future studies could investigate whether parenting predicts the development of child psychopathic traits, over and above negative parental beliefs, parental antisocial behaviour, or parental psychopathic personality traits (i.e., as proxies for the genetic overlap between parent and child). In addition, future investigations will undoubtedly benefit from genetically informative research, including twin studies and molecular genetic studies that seek to identify candidate genes associated with psychopathy (see Viding et al. 2009; Viding & Larsson 2010). Finally, randomised controlled trials (RCTs) demonstrate that interventions targeting parenting practices can be effective in reducing child problem behaviour (Dishion et al. 2008; Piquero et al. 2009). Emerging evidence from RCTs suggests that interventions that teach more effective parenting practices also result in reductions in child psychopathic traits (McDonald et al. 2011; Somech & Elizur 2012), although more research of this nature is needed. Indeed, RCTs are an exciting methodology for future studies to assess the contribution of parenting to changes in child psychopathic traits, and have been conceptualised as ‘reverse gene-environment interactions’ [ (see Viding & Larsson 2010).

Ultimately, *WNTTAK* leaves us only with questions and a haunting feeling of despair at the senselessness of human cruelty. Writing for *The Independent* following a real high school massacre in 2006, Shriver argued that “the urge to interpret - to draw ‘lessons’, to use these freakishly gratuitous acts of malice as windows on American culture, to burrow deeply inside the psychological twists and turns of the killers’ minds - might best be resisted.” As such, while we may gain little from retrospectively analyzing “why?” for real-life ‘Kevins,’ perhaps Lionel Shriver would approve of the important ‘lesson’ that research on the origins of psychopathy would benefit from prospectively investigating the factors that protect genetically predisposed children with low levels of empathy, guilt, and caring from becoming psychopathic or criminal. Furthermore, we need better theories of therapeutic change (Salekin 2010) to ensure that research findings identifying risk or protective factors are translated into clinically- and socially-viable methods of targeting and changing the processes associated with psychopathy development. Finally, Eva/Shriver leaves us with an unexpected, albeit begrudging, glimmer of hope: “I can finally announce that I am too exhausted and too confused and too lonely to keep fighting, and if only out of desperation or even laziness I love my son” (p. 468), gently persuading us to reject the notion of ‘evil’ in children and serving as a reminder that, even in the most dire of circumstances, optimism should remain a cornerstone of human welfare research.

**References**


