

We need to talk about 'We need to talk about Kevin'

This film is not an easy one. I asked myself two questions over and over again: Why did this happen? I want a reasonable explanation, a feeling of control through understanding. I do not want this to happen to me, my family, friends, in fact, to anyone. And: Whose fault is this? I figured, once I know what was going on, I could feel sorry for the victim. I could put myself in that person's shoes and see the world from their perspective, feel their pain, blame the perpetrator. Then I reminded myself that I am a master student of clinical psychology, and that I should neutrally try to understand what was going on. So, here is my rational version of what happened.

Eva, Kevin's mom, got unexpectedly pregnant. Her feelings towards having a child seem to be ambiguous at that point. When Kevin was born, she appears to be apathic, postnatally depressed. Kevin incessantly cries as a baby, nurturing the aggression in Eva against the baby that took her freedom. Having to deal with a crying baby all day, is hard enough to deal with, even if the baby was planned and there was no postnatal depression around. Instead of acting it out she suppresses her aggression rendering it impossible to show any affection towards Kevin. Although she tries otherwise, the only emotion, Eva convincingly shows towards Kevin is aggression and Kevin does not stop crying.

At that point, Franklin, Kevin's dad, has a much easier job. He seems to have had less ambiguous feelings towards having a child in the first place and, as a working dad, does not have to deal with the crying baby all day long. He convincingly shows Kevin warmth and affection stopping him from crying. This gives rise to Eva's feeling of being intentionally tortured by Kevin.

As Kevin grows up, Eva seems less apathic and depressed and she tries to establish a better relationship with her son. However, it becomes evident, that all Kevin does is antagonize her and turning down her attempts to reach out to him. Eva keeps feeling intentionally tortured and becomes increasingly alert to his next provocation. Kevin won't miss out on letting her fear become reality and Eva's attempts to connect positively become rarer and rarer. If provoked, she furiously leaves the room or falls silent, not discussing his actions any further. Still, the dominant affection towards Kevin is helpless, suppressed aggression.

Why does Kevin turn his mum's attempts down? Remember, when he used to cry all day, he experienced nothing or aggression and hostility from her. This situation might have been the root of the insecure attachment and unhealthy relationship developing between mother and son. When she starts making attempts to improve their relationship, it seems to be too late. He does not believe her anymore, especially because she easily gives up and does not really try to get through to him. He might consider her attempts as shallow, although they are all she can provide given her own struggles.

Being scared that his mum does not love him, he provokes her non-stop. This might serve different aims: firstly, he is so hurt by her rejection that he wants to hurt her, too. Secondly, he reassures his importance to her. The meaner his actions, the stronger must be her love, if she does tolerate it and keeps sticking around. Thirdly, he can be sure to have his mother's attention.

Does Kevin really want his mum's love? Or is he just an evil kid? There are two episodes, where it becomes evident that all Kevin wants is to be truly loved by his mum: The first is, when they discuss his new sister to be. He accusingly, but also promptly states that Eva is 'used to' but does not love him, and that he will feel that way towards his sister. She does not correct him. The other scene is

when Kevin is sick and weak, so he lets Eva take care of him, enjoying her care, her reading Robin Hood and cuddling.

Kevin's struggle becomes even worse when his little sister is born, and he must compete for his parents' love. She is an easy baby and gets along well with her mum, making her a target for Kevin's increasingly serious provocations towards Eva. She tries to ignore them and suppresses her aggression.

In the meantime, Franklin, whose love is safe for Kevin, gets along with him well. Franklin and Eva disagree when it comes to Kevin's behavior and Kevin overhears Franklin asking Eva for a divorce. After that and a couple of days before his 16th birthday, Kevin murders Franklin, his little sister, attacks his school, and kills several people with a 'Robin-Hood'-like bow. He walks out making sure his mum watches, seeming to enjoy her horror.

However, Eva keeps visiting him in jail for two years. Before he is about to be sent somewhere else, she asks him, why he did it. At that point, he does not know it anymore. Assuming that he did the massacre to test if his mum's love was bigger than the horror he caused, her continuing visits must have finally convinced him of Eva's love, rendering his action pointless.

So far, so clear. I have a reasonable idea of why and how this happened. I feel less helpless, more in control. This was not inevitable. I attempted to write a neutral rational of underlying mechanisms, but whose fault was it? I feel sorry for the unloved child, so I started blaming Eva. Analyzing how she got there (even without knowing the childhood package of her own), made me understand her behavior better. My world was so much easier before I decided to study psychology, when I picked one side and did not bother too much to understand the other ones. Much less tension to stand.

What role does empathy play for the movie's effects?

It is empathy that helps us co-experience the situation of another (Breithaupt, 2018). The movie shows Eva's perspective, leaving the audience with the same helplessness and horror she experiences being tortured by Kevin. It seems to be designed, to channel sympathy to Eva, the victim, with the occasional crack in her role as victim, keeping the tension up. Additionally, I think, it was much easier to feel empathic with Eva than with Kevin, simply because the viewer has no clue what he is feeling and what his motives are, whereas this lack of understanding as well as Kevin's provocations automatically evoke Eva's frustration and helplessness in the viewer. Recent research raises the question, if empathy is restricted to one's own experience (e.g. Breithaupt, 2018). I think, this is part of the reason why it is harder to feel what Kevin feels: Most of us (hopefully) never experienced a situation like Kevin. Someone who has experienced a similar situation might have better understood his motives, feelings and actions and therefore might have been more prone to feel empathic for Kevin instead of Eva. As a psychology student, I am used to switching perspectives suppressing the natural urge to reduce complexity, to take sides and ignore the other side of the medal: I believe that this helped me not to discredit Kevin as evil right away. Asking myself the question "How did Kevin get there?" helped me develop a rational idea of how he must have felt and to start actually feeling some of his feelings, being empathic with him. Therefore, I do not believe that having experienced a similar situation is necessary for being empathic with someone, but it definitely helps and requires less work.

I noticed another effect: My feeling of one of the protagonist's feelings made my opposition to the other one greater, raising the question if empathy is good or bad?

It is empathy that allows us to feel, what others feel. It can make us co-experience the situation of another (Breithaupt, 2018), is a key characteristic of the human race and undoubtedly can be a strong motivator of prosocial behavior (Batson, 2010). It is likely to increase intimacy between two people (Bloom, 2017).

At the same time, there might be some flaws to empathy, that are worth looking at (e.g. Breithaupt, 2018; Bloom, 2017):

One negative effect of empathy is pretty obvious in my search for the perpetrator: Next to reducing complexity, I want someone to blame, channel my own horror and transform it into aggression versus the perpetrator. I want to feel the victims pain, co-experience their emotion to fuel up my aggression. It is very obvious that this might be prosocial for the victim but probably antisocial against the perpetrator. If I had not consciously stopped myself from taking Eva's side, I would not have bothered to evaluate Kevin's side and I would have missed out on half of the situation.

Additionally, empathy might not always be as altruistic as usually claimed. Why do people think, anyone would like to watch such a horror movie? Feeling what people in fiction are feeling, enriches one's own experience; it is emotional stimulation. Psych thrillers, horror movies, police series, fiction, movies, books, opera, theatre, it pretty much feels like this happens to us. This effect might be similar to empathy felt in the real world, which serves one's own emotional stimulation. Also, in the real world as well as in fiction empathy can be exaggerated into blurring lines between the self and others and stopping the effort of experiencing original emotions in the real world (Breithaupt, 2018), ultimately ending up in addictions e.g. to computer games and codependence in relationships (which is also adequately called 'vampirism'). Moreover, empathy, feeling the feelings of others might make you feel exhausted. Feeling the feelings of the people in the movie is not a pleasant experience, neither is feeling all the feeling a depressed patient is feeling as that patient's therapist.

So, is empathy good or bad? It can be both, it simply depends on the context. There might be some other mechanisms, such as rational compassion, cognitive empathy, that elicit just as much social support, intimacy, and so forth, but they do not come along with such a strong behavioral motivation as feeling someone's feelings. One can learn to handle empathy in a very prosocial way, but there definitely is some need for control to protect others and oneself. As Breithaupt (2012) suggests, there might be three relevant mechanisms: empathy itself, blocking and unblocking empathy. Some training might be needed to successfully control empathy and becoming aware of possible negative effects. But handled that way, empathy can unfold its beautiful prosocial potential.

Some literature to dig deeper into the topic of empathy:

Batson, C. (2011). *Altruism in humans*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Bloom, P. (2017). Empathy and Its Discontents. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 21(1), 24-31.

Breithaupt, F. (2012). A Three-Person Model of Empathy. *Emotion Review*, 4(1), 84-91.

Breithaupt, F. (2018). The bad things we do because of empathy. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 43(2), 166-174. doi:10.1080/03080188.2018.1450928