

# **Social adversity portrayed by Tupac and Eminem**

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Tupac Shakur and Eminem are often touted as two of the greatest rappers of all time. Whilst Tupac is African American and Eminem is Caucasian, their lyrics have similar narrative story telling styles that are filled with anguished suffering, anger and other emotional tones conveyed in their hip-hop songs.

Two songs that describe important issues of adversity reflecting strong emotional turmoil in their lyrics includes the songs, '*Death around the corner*' from Tupac Shakur's album, '*Me Against The World*', and '*Cleaning out my closet*' by Eminem from his album, '*The Eminem Show*'. In this article, we dissect the lyrics for psychopathological themes and we use the biopsychosocial model to explore the underpinnings of the emotional turmoil experienced by these two characters.

In the song, '*Death around corner*', Tupac's character is preoccupied with paranoia about a perceived threat to his own life as well as to his family's life. He feels the need to protect himself and his family from perceived targeted violence. Straight away, the song opens with a skit. It is a dialogue between Tupac's character, his partner, and their son. Tupac's character is standing by the window with a firearm (i.e., an 'AK', abbreviated for AK-47). His son is confused about his father's strange behaviour and his wife is exasperated with her partner

and feels he is consumed by his paranoia. She refers to Tupac's character as 'being crazy' and notes that he is neglecting his social functioning ('you don't work...you don't do a...thing'). It is apparent that she does not share his concerns about their family's safety and appears very irritated that he is preoccupied by his worries. From a clinical risk perspective, it is concerning that the character – who is likely paranoid without justification - is carrying a potentially loaded gun at home whilst a vulnerable child and partner present and witnessing this behaviour.

It is possible that the character's paranoid beliefs are delusional as outlined above and below. The first verse makes reference to his need to stay 'high' that we suspect refers to his use of either a stimulant or cannabis, which are both risk factors for developing psychosis and paranoia. The character describes his harsh urban environment as being where the '...skinny' (i.e., weak/subordinate) people 'die' (i.e., are either killed, are likely to be exploited or taken advantage of, or whom become irrelevant). The environment appears to be a place where vulnerable individuals can develop social defeat, which is a risk factor for psychosis. Selten and Cantor-Graae <sup>1</sup> defined the experience of social defeat as being an experience of 'subordinate/outsider status' for which long term experience could precipitate psychosis. The authors <sup>1</sup> stated that in urban areas there is greater social competition, which increases the prospect of social defeat. Preclinical experiments have tested the social defeat model. In brief, when a male rodent is presented with an intruder rodent, it is the latter animal that demonstrates submissiveness. This behaviour has been associated with

hyperactivity of the dopaminergic system in the mesocorticolimbic pathway in the intruder rodent's brain. <sup>2</sup>

Tupac's character alludes to his daddy being 'madder than a...', which may indicate that the character has an increased risk of developing psychosis due to genetic factors and a family history in a first degree relative. <sup>3</sup> He subsequently takes his firearm to bed 'in my sheets' due to feeling paranoid.

In summary, we present the case that the character has a family history of psychosis, he abuses stimulants or cannabis, lives in a harsh environment altering his dopaminergic function. Kapur has proposed <sup>4</sup> that this leads to an incorrect designation of salience to external objects and internal representations.

In the first verse, Tupac mentions his character's use of 'endo' (i.e. cannabis) and how it relieves his stress and paranoia. However, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse he mentions smoking '...too much weed' (i.e. cannabis) 'got me paranoid, stressed'. These themes appear to be contradictory. However, Di Forti and colleagues <sup>5</sup> highlighted increased risk of developing first episode psychosis following use of 'skunk', which has a high percentage of delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (i.e., THC) and a low percentage of cannabidiol. However this paper showed that there was no increased risk relative to the use of cannabis resin, which has less percentage of THC and a greater relative proportion of cannabidiol. Research suggests that whilst THC is psychotic-inducing <sup>6</sup>, cannabidiol is anxiolytic and has anti-psychotic properties. <sup>7</sup> We therefore speculate that it depends on the type of

cannabis that Tupac's character has smoked which could explain both the increases in his paranoia and his relief from it. The third verse illustrates early adverse experience which could lead to a predisposition to psychosis 'raised in the city, shitty' at an early age <sup>8</sup>, 'drinking liquor out my momma's titty' (reference to mothers excessive alcohol use during early childhood whilst breast feeding), and possibly being exposed to second-hand cannabis smoke from an early age. All these risk factors highlight a chaotic household, potential environmental insults on his developing brain, which could affect brain-derived neurotrophic factor levels of him as a child subsequently reducing hippocampus volume with subsequent hyperactive hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, increased cortisol with increased risk in dopamine dysregulation leading to the develop of psychosis in later life <sup>9</sup> through epigenetic DNA methylation.

An alternative view of Tupac's characters presentation is that he is experiencing some symptoms suggestive of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following experiencing and witnessing life threatening situations from living in a violent hood '..I guess I seen too many murders...'. Hence the frequent looking out of the window and paranoia could be seen as hypervigilance and hyperarousal which are prominent symptoms of PTSD. His mention of seeing death around the corner could be referencing intensive flashbacks, 'reliving' of murders he has witnessed. His use of 'weed' might reflect the use of Cannabis for 'self-medication'. <sup>10,11</sup>

The hip-hop song by Eminem follows a similar trend of highlighting early adverse experiences. This hip-hop song deals with Eminem's angst against his

mother. In the first verse, Eminem highlights how he can't keep his emotion in check and describes them as 'the oceans exploding' attributing it to his parents relationship. The chorus indicates that Eminem wishes to exorcise his emotional demons by voicing his angst in his lyrics. He uses the metaphor 'but tonight I'm cleaning out my closet' to acknowledge that he would rather reveal his 'skeletons' (i.e., his deep family secrets) than allow them to eat away at him. It appears he is trying to reach out to listeners as though they are psychotherapists. His character discloses his secrets in order to feel free from torment. Freud <sup>12</sup> described depression as anger turned inwards, often towards traumatic childhood experiences, hence Eminem's psychotherapy with the listeners can be seen as an opportunity to let go of the buried anger in an attempt to protect himself from depression. The rest of the second verse involves Eminem making accusations against his detached absent father and Eminem promises to be different by being present for his daughter. It also reveals Eminem avoiding killing his daughter's mother and partner (for the sake of his daughter), therefore he's able to control his angry impulses. The 3<sup>rd</sup> verse explores his mother's prescription pills addiction, which echoes Eminem's self-declared battle to addiction to prescription pills. This also highlights his increased risk of substance misuse partly due to his familial genetic predisposition. Eminem's character accuses his mother of Munchausen's syndrome by proxy describing himself as a 'victim of Munchausen's syndrome'. This pattern of behaviour is observed when a caregiver falsely induces, fabricates, or embellishes illness in another person, which is often a child in their care. <sup>13</sup> It is believed that the intention of the caregiver is to gain attention and to receive commendation as the rescuer of the child for saving the child in their

care from the illness. They do this to fulfill their need for attention by placing the sick role on to their child. <sup>13</sup> Eminem ends the song by accusing his mother of being jealous of his success and reveals his intention of not allowing his mum access to his daughter to protect her from becoming a victim of the abuse he experienced. In a song later released in 2013 by Eminem entitled 'Heights', Eminem regrets his harsh views toward his mother as previously written in 'Cleaning out my closet' and instead acknowledges his mother's difficulty raising him as a single parent.

Through the suffering and painful feelings revealed by Tupac and Eminem's characters' we were able to examine mental health themes related to psychosis and social adversity. By utilizing the interests of individuals who listen to hip-hop music - especially young people - we aim to enhance their understanding about mental health by delivering medical information in a context-enhanced manner. Perhaps this urban influenced approach will help empower and encourage individuals to examine what adversity is around the corner for them personally, and to explore what risk factors may still be locked away in their own closets.

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