

Eminem's Character, Stan: A Bio-Psycho-Social Autopsy

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Eminem is a multi-platinum selling Hip Hop artist. For over a decade he has proven his mastery of multi-syllabic rhyming and vivid storytelling. In this article, we dissect lyrics from one of Eminem's most critically acclaimed songs, 'Stan', for mental health themes. We use the bio-psycho-social model to explore contributing factors leading to the decline of Stan's mental health. For the results, we speculate that Stan might be suffering with emotionally unstable personality disorder of the borderline type as evidenced by self-harm, overdose, fear of abandonment, chronic emptiness, self-image and sexual identity issues, and impulsivity. Stan speaks of having an adverse early childhood, which we propose relates to changes in Stan's brain that affect his ability to cope with stress. In conclusion we highlight the feasibility of using Hip Hop lyrics to open up dialogues around mental health and for bridging youth culture with the medical community.

Editor's note: The Journal of Hip Hop Studies is pleased to publish Hip Hop Psych's "Eminem's Character, Stan." For more information, visit www.hiphoppsych.co.uk/index.html. Hip Hop studies brings together scholars from around the world and from different fields of study, as a result, this essay maintains the integrity of scholars from this emerging field of Hip Hop Psychiatry.

Eminem is considered one of the greatest Hip Hop artists of all time. He received the title "best-selling artist of the decade"¹ in 2000 was voted "Best Rapper Alive" by Vibe Magazine's reader's poll,² and titled 'Hottest MC in The Game' in an MTV survey.³ Eminem is renowned for his multi-syllabic rhyming and vivid storytelling. Being born into a poor socioeconomic environment, this theme is often portrayed in his lyrics, giving a different perspective from African American and Hispanic perspectives that, until then, had dominated Hip Hop culture.

One of Eminem's most publicized tracks is "Stan"⁴ from the album *Marshall Mathers LP* that reached number one in the music charts internationally.⁵ In this article, we dissect lyrics from one of Eminem's most critically acclaimed songs, "Stan," explore Stan's mental state, his actions and early adverse life experiences to unravel this complex character's psychopathology. Our methodological approach utilizes the bio-psycho-social model to explore contributing factors leading to the decline of Stan's mental health. We speculate that Stan might be suffering with emotionally unstable personality disorder of the borderline type as evidenced by self-harm, overdose, fear of

¹ James Montgomery, "Eminem Is The Best-Selling Artist Of The Decade," *MTV News*, Accessed January 5, 2017, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1627833/eminem-is-the-best-selling-artist-of-the-decade/>

² Shaheem Reid, "Eminem Is The Best Rapper Alive, According To Vibe Poll," *MTV News*, Accessed February 6, 2017, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1596451/eminem-is-the-best-rapper-alive-according-to-vibe-poll/>

³ Paul Cantor "Eminem Is the Hottest MC in the Game!," 2017. *MTV News*, Accessed January 5, 2017, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1650705/eminem-is-the-hottest-mc-in-the-game/>

⁴ EminemVevo "Eminem - Stan (Long Version) Ft. Dido," *YouTube*, Accessed December 14, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOMhN-hfMtY>

⁵ "Stan (Song)," *En.Wikipedia.Org*, February 6, 2017, Accessed December 14, 2016, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stan_%28song%29.

abandonment, chronic emptiness, self-image and sexual identity issues, and impulsivity. Stan speaks of having an adverse early childhood, which we propose relates to changes in Stan's brain that affect his ability to cope with stress.

In this track, the character, Stan, is upset and writing a letter to Eminem, aka Slim Shady, about his previous fan letters that were not replied to. As the chorus opens, we hear a female voice singing (music artist, Dido) representing Stan's pregnant partner. Her lyrics reference her despair about Stan's increasing obsessions with his idol, Eminem.

In verse 1, Stan comes across as a devoted and knowledgeable Slim Shady fan and identifies with Slim Shady by finding commonalities between his friend's suicide and the suicide of Eminem's uncle.⁶ In verse 2, we attain deeper insights into Stan's mental state. Stan initially writes that he isn't mad at Slim Shady for not responding, but based on his prosodic intonation and inflection of his voice the listener can sense Stan's burst of anger and his feelings of betrayal. Stan comments on witnessing his parents' domestic abuse and never knowing his father; again, he attempts to identify with Slim Shady. We speculate that Stan experienced an insecure attachment to his parents as primary care givers (i.e., is a person or persons predominantly responsible for an individual's emotional needs as a child). Bowlby⁷ and Ainsworth⁸ describe attachment as a social connection that a child fosters (i.e., forms) with a primary caregiver for emotional support and regulation of affect (i.e., help to control changes in moods so they don't become overwhelming or extreme). It has been proposed that this attachment relationship occurs at a 'critical period' between the age of 6 months and 2 years old, enabling the child to hold an internal working model (i.e., based on relationships with your caregivers, e.g., parents, you learn how to love, hate and predict how others relate to you in different situations) as a blueprint for future relationships. Early adverse experiences that effect attachment could contribute to the development of psychopathology that is reflected by insecure future relationships.

Early adverse experiences can alter oxytocin levels (i.e., the 'love' and 'trust' hormone) in the child and primary care giver.⁹ Oxytocin's ability to enable an individual to infer other's mental states (i.e., understand and empathize with people's emotions) is important for human interactions as it enables an individual to read social cues.¹⁰ Since oxytocin is a hormone that promotes social interactions, disruptions to this neuropeptide could partly explain why Stan is alienating himself from his partner and feels betrayed by Slim Shady. Early adverse life experiences can also lead to epigenetic

⁶ David LaChapelle "Eminem Blows Up," *Rolling Stone*, Accessed January 9, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/eminem-blows-up-20091105?page=2>

⁷ John Bowlby, *Attachment: Attachment and Loss Volume 1* (New York: Basic Books, 1969). John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss Volume 2: Separation, Anger and Anxiety*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1973).

⁸ Mary Dinsmore Ainsworth, "The Development of Infant-Mother Attachment, in *Review of Child Development Research*, ed. B. Cardwell & H. Ricciuti (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

⁹ Barbara Stanley and Larry J. Siever, "The Interpersonal Dimension of Borderline Personality Disorder: Toward a Neuropeptide Model," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 167, no. 1 (2010): 24-39.

¹⁰ Gregor Domes, Markus Heinrichs, Andre Michel, Christoph Berger, and Sabine C. Herpertz, "Oxytocin Improves 'Mind-Reading' In Humans," *Biological Psychiatry* 61, no. 6 (2007): 731-733.

alterations (i.e., loose chemical tags which attach to certain parts of DNA switching harmful or protective genes on or off; for example, switching the glucocorticoid receptor gene on, which leads to increased activity in the stress pathways in the brain and body). For example, childhood maltreatment can lead to altered epigenetics (called DNA methylation) of the glucocorticoid receptor gene (i.e., which produces the 'stress' hormone), resulting in an exaggerated hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (aka the HPA axis; i.e., the brain's stress pathway) response to stressors.¹¹ Such factors may interfere with Stan's ability to moderate stress. Evidence suggests that oxytocin helps to decrease excessive HPA axis activity (consequently decreasing stress response); if oxytocin levels are relatively low then this can lead to an overactive HPA axis with possible pathological outcomes.¹² Early childhood experiences can alter brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF; i.e., 'brain fertilizer') gene expression via epigenetic mechanisms¹³ leading to a reduction in the size of the hippocampus, making this brain region less effective at controlling HPA axis activity.¹⁴

Stan speaks about his "Slim Shady" tattoo on his chest; this can be regarded by some as being unusual and possibly considered taboo from a machismo-promoting Hip Hop cultural perspective. We speculate that Stan may be experiencing problems with his sexual identity: 'P.S. We should be together too'. This could hint at Stan's possible homosexuality. Stan also talks about cutting himself to get a "sudden rush", which could be a form of self-medication. Stan might be managing his nasty/unpleasant feelings through increasing endogenous opioid peptides (i.e., 'feel good' chemicals which are released during exercise for example), creating a "feel good" sense of euphoria. Research revealed that cluster B Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)¹⁵ patients who self-harm have low levels of opioid peptides in the cerebrospinal fluid. It has been hypothesised that low levels of opioid peptides and compensatory upregulation (i.e., increased number of receptors) of opioid peptide receptors in BPD patients who self-harm produces a heightened response of receptors to opioid peptide release in response to pain. This would provide self-soothing, euphoric calmness and analgesia effects for the pain after cutting. There appears to be an idealization of Slim

¹¹ N Perroud, A Paoloni-Giacobino, P Prada, E Olié, A Salzmann, R Nicastro, and S Guillaume et al. "Increased Methylation Of Glucocorticoid Receptor Gene (NR3C1) In Adults With A History Of Childhood Maltreatment: A Link With The Severity And Type Of Trauma," *Translational Psychiatry* 12, no. 1 (2011): e59.

¹² Markus Heinrichs, Thomas Baumgartner, Clemens Kirschbaum, and Ulrike Ehlert, "Social Support and Oxytocin Interact to Suppress Cortisol and Subjective Responses To Psychosocial Stress," *Biological Psychiatry* 54, (2003)

¹³ Tania L. Roth, Farah D. Lubin, Adam J. Funk, and J. David Sweatt, "Lasting Epigenetic Influence of Early-Life Adversity On The BDNF Gene," *Biological Psychiatry* 65, no. 9 (2009): 760-769.

¹⁴ James P. Herman, Michelle M. Ostrander, Nancy K. Mueller, and Helmer Figueiredo, "Limbic System Mechanisms of Stress Regulation: Hypothalamo-Pituitary-Adrenocortical Axis" *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology and Biological Psychiatry* 29, no. 8 (2005): 1201-1213.

¹⁵ Alan R. Prossin, Tiffany M. Love, Robert A. Koeppe, Jon-Kar Zubieta, and Kenneth R. Silk, "Dysregulation of Regional Endogenous Opioid Function In Borderline Personality Disorder," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 167, no. 8 (2010): 925-933.

Shady as evidenced by Stan's words 'everything you say is real'; Stan is spending increasingly more time devoted to Slim Shady, neglecting his pregnant partner.

Stan's anger and perceived betrayal escalates in verse 3. His tone and actions suggest he now devalues Slim Shady (e.g., ripping Slim Shady's pictures off his walls). We speculate this reflects a phenomenon called 'splitting', highlighted by object relation therapist Melanie Klein,¹⁶ who described this phenomenon of a child experiencing the "good breast mother" (i.e., a mother that is able to satisfy the child's needs all the time) as being different from the "bad breast mother" (i.e., a mother that is unable to satisfy the child's needs therefore letting the child down) depending on if the child's needs are met (i.e., paranoid schizoid position). As the child matures he/she is able to integrate the mother as a cohesive whole, leading to the 'depressive position'. The child sees both types of mothers (i.e., good and bad) as two different mothers initially but with maturity the child realizes that they are one/the same and the child feels disappointed (i.e., 'depressive position'). It is postulated that failure of an individual to integrate a cohesive view of themselves or others, could lead to polarized views of others with subsequent disappointment with that person.

Stan is now driving impulsively and recklessly over the speed limit whilst intoxicated. There is evidence Stan has taken an overdose of "downers" (e.g., benzodiazepines, opiates etc.) and feeling "drowsy."¹⁷ Notably, when Eminem was interviewed he discusses his addiction to "downers" (e.g., zopiclone, hydrocodone, diazepam and his methadone overdose). There is evidence of aggressive behaviour as it becomes apparent that Stan's pregnant partner is tied-up in the trunk of the car. Stan blames this situation on Slim Shady's rejection. Throughout verse 3, Stan riles against perceived betrayal, abandonment and rejection from Slim Shady and seeks to punish him for this. It appears that his intention is to end his life by driving over the bridge, killing himself, his partner and their unborn child. The scene ends with Stan's realization that his recorded message to Slim Shady might not reach him, illustrating poor planning and impulsivity.

Through these verses, we speculate that Stan is probably suffering with emotionally unstable personality disorder of the borderline type as evidenced by self-harm, overdose, fear of abandonment, chronic emptiness, self-image and sexual identity issues and impulsivity;¹⁸ these recurrent themes are likely to be long standing issues. We speculate that Stan's early childhood neglect and psychological trauma have led to chemical changes in his brain making him less able to cope with stress and difficulty in developing trusting relationships. Such factors may have led Stan to self-medicate by cutting himself to deal with his unpleasant, distressing feelings, which, taken together,

¹⁶ Melanie Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963*, (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1975).

¹⁷ Shaheem Reid, "Eminem Admits He 'Almost Died' From Drug Overdose," *MTV News*, Accessed December 6, 2016, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1610557/eminem-admits-he-almost-died-from-drug-overdose/>

¹⁸ World Health Organization: *The ICD-10 classification of mental and behavioral disorders: clinical descriptions and diagnostic guidelines*, Geneva, 1992.

could infer a potential diagnosis of emotionally unstable personality disorder of the borderline type.

We highlight the feasibility of using Hip Hop lyrics to open up dialogues in mental health. In this article, we have speculated on the possibilities of mental health problems and diagnoses in a fictitious character; however, diagnosing a mental health disorder is a complex process and clinicians who diagnose mental health disorders take information from patients and obtain collateral history from close relationships around them. We also need to stress that we are not attributing violent acts to a significant number of people with mental health problems, and are aware of the vulnerability and stigma faced by people experiencing mental health problems. The social venture, HIP HOP PSYCH, generates material available for use by practitioners in order to open up youth-focused dialogues with patients.

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