

NADINE SALMAN & ZAINAB AL-ATTAR

NEURODIVERGENCE & EXTREMISM: CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTICE

A summary of findings from three studies examining the contextual relevance of neurodivergence within extremist populations and subsequent considerations for practice.

Existing research does not indicate that neurodivergence (e.g., autism and ADHD) causes extremism engagement in the general population. However, while estimates vary, a proportion of individuals within extremist populations are neurodivergent. These individuals may follow a different pathway to engagement and have different needs than their neurotypical counterparts.

Here, we summarise the key findings from our research (see read more) and considerations for practice

1 RESTRICTED INTERESTS

Neurodivergent extremists may develop specific intense interests that draw them into and keep them engaged in extremism. While these intense interests may serve psychological functions for the individual (e.g., alleviating stress), they may become associated with harmful subjects, including terrorism. According to our research, harmful interests may arise from precursors such as military history, especially the Second World War; mass murder and violence; weapons (firearms, knives, and bombs); computers and technology; extremist narratives or ideologies; conspiracy theories; and politics. Technical and weapon-related interests may confer criminal capability (e.g., bomb-making), while multiple interests may converge to shape risk.

2 VIVID FANTASY AND IDEATION

At-risk neurodivergent individuals may experience vivid extremism-related fantasies and ideation. In our research, this included detailed visual fantasies depicting violent ideation or preoccupations with death – usually inspired by existing violent imagery viewed online. Violent ideation may be associated with intense interests, and often appeared to redress feelings of anger, distress, and injustice. These fantasies can extend to idealised versions of themselves, contributing to a grandiose narrative surrounding them and their actions. In some cases, particularly where individuals become desensitised to violent imagery, they may transition from fantasy to action.

3 OBSESSIONALITY, REPETITION, AND COLLECTING

Interests may become obsessive and include the collection of associated items, images, or videos. In our research, this included collections of weapons, Nazi memorabilia, and virtual content such as memes, propaganda, and violent videos. These collections may provide opportunities for detection, or in extreme cases, grounds for conviction. As well as obsessively pursuing their interests, at-risk individuals may demonstrate a fixation, preoccupation and repetitive thinking and communication linked to specific grievances or feelings of injustice.

4 SOCIAL INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES

Social and relationship difficulties experienced by neurodivergent individuals may lead to isolation, feelings of resentment, and personal grievance. This may, in combination with other factors, fuel revenge fantasies and identification with extreme ideologies that offer an explanation or social status. Social difficulties may push individuals to retreat into online communities, where they can communicate about their interests and may feel more competent and connected, but may be exposed to more extreme content and actors.

“**Neurodivergent cognitive styles can be seen both as strengths and potential difficulties.**”

A lack of social awareness may also lead individuals to ‘leak’ their extreme views, resulting in referrals to authorities.

5 NEED FOR ORDER, RULES, ROUTINES, AND PREDICTABILITY

Autistic individuals may have a need for predictability, order, structure, rules, and routines. Changes to routines or perceived loss of order can be associated with stress and frustration that may contribute to grievances. ‘Rule-based’ ideologies that claim to restore order may be attractive to at-risk individuals.

6 COGNITIVE STYLES (STRENGTHS AND DIFFICULTIES)

Neurodivergent cognitive styles can be seen both as strengths and potential difficulties. There may be a tendency to overfocus on minute details (of an interest, or a fixation on a grievance) while overlooking the bigger picture and context. This could lead to a lack of consideration of the consequences of their actions. Information that is presented in the form of facts, categories, fine details, and patterns, may resonate and have a pull. Difficulties in organisation, planning, and prioritisation may exacerbate professional and academic challenges faced by individuals that may contribute to grievances. Impulsivity may be linked to impulsive risk-taking behaviour and violence.

7 SENSORY NEEDS AND SENSATION-SEEKING

Over-sensitivity to sensory input may contribute to difficulties in school or work and subsequent isolation, and may drive some individuals to self-soothe through risky interests and online spaces. It may also lead to a perception of the world as threatening.

Meanwhile, under-sensitivity may be expressed through sensory-seeking behaviours, including interests in violent video games, fire, explosions, weaponry, and shooting. Elaborate stimuli may have a strong pull. Individuals may experience desensitisation from repeated exposure, leading them to seek more extreme content and engage in riskier behaviour.

8 COMPLEX NEEDS AND COMORBIDITIES

Additional factors often interact with or exacerbate difficulties associated with neurodivergent symptoms, creating complex and interacting needs. In our research, this included other diagnoses (e.g., other neurodivergence, schizophrenia, depression, and anxiety), trauma (e.g., experiences of abuse), and other life stressors (e.g., familial, relationship, and employment difficulties). These can be exacerbated by a lack of support services and transition periods, such as the transition to adulthood. Such difficulties can drive individuals to self-soothe through their risky interests and behaviours.

CONCLUSIONS: ENHANCING RESILIENCE AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Overall, our findings suggest that some neurodivergent features can contextualise extremism vulnerability and risk, but rather than directly causing this risk, they can become a context for push and pull factors linked to extremism and combine with or exacerbate other vulnerabilities. Within populations of concern, risk assessment approaches and interventions may benefit from considering how specific neurodivergent traits and symptoms can contextualise risk, vulnerability, and resilience, and their interaction with other factors.

Practitioners may benefit from:

- Adopting tailored neurodivergent-friendly approaches
- Harnessing protective factors, including leveraging strengths conferred by neurodivergent features
- Considering wider environmental and systemic factors such as school, mental healthcare, and social support
- More in-depth and practical training to guide them through understanding neurodivergent needs and the complex implications they may have for assessment and interventions.

Nadine Salman is a Senior Research Associate at Lancaster University. Twitter/X: @Nadine_Salman. Professor Zainab Al-Attar is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire, Honorary Research Fellow at UCL, and Adjunct Professor at Victoria University, Australia.