

## Autism & Radicalization by Elora

There is definitely a greater risk for people with Autism and overlapping mental health issues to be radicalised, especially online. While there is no actual evidence suggesting that people with Autism are more likely to commit acts of violence (rather they are the victims of it), there is research that suggests individuals with ASD are more susceptible to radicalisation. There are specific risk factors and vulnerabilities that individuals with ASD have that could increase the risk of offending.

“There has been an ongoing debate around any increased susceptibility to radicalisation in those with ASD but the current literature examining the link between ASD and radicalisation or the risk of committing terrorist offences is *sparse and inconclusive*. It has been suggested that among those individuals, who have a diagnosis of ASD and have committed a terrorist offence or are at elevated risk, both aspects may be contextually linked due to their tendency to hyper-focus on their fascinations at the expense of other attachments and life interests (Al-Attar, 2016). This tendency, alongside the absence of meaningful social connection and impairments in ability to critically analyse the philosophy and beliefs of radical groups, may collectively result in an individual with ASD being indoctrinated by terrorist ideology (Faccini & Allely, 2017).” ([Source](#))

There are certain risk factors that take into play when considering the link between Autism and susceptibility to radicalization. One of those risk factors is **special interests** such as fantasy, obsessiveness (extreme compulsiveness), the need for routine/predictability, and social/communication difficulties. Social alienation plays an incredible role in radicalisation, even for neurotypicals. Searching for a purpose or “need to matter” via social connection is a risk factor.

“People with an ASD may be more vulnerable to being drawn into increasingly more involved commitment. They also have a tendency to hyper-focus in on their fascinations and interests at the expense of other attachments and life interests. These are potentially the conditions which extremists are increasingly exploiting in people they target for recruitment.” ([Source](#))

“... [Incel forums] ... tend to attract a disproportionate number of autistic men. In an October 2019 user poll on the website incels.co, for instance, roughly one in four of the 550 respondents said they have autism. Certain traits of autistic people — a heightened response to perceived slights, a strong sense of social justice and difficulty understanding what others are thinking and feeling — may make them amenable to extreme views, says Clare Allely, associate professor of forensic psychology at the University of Salford in Manchester in the United Kingdom.” ([Source](#))

While there is not a lot of research about autistic women as it stands, autistic men and women do feel a sense of “otherness” from other individuals. This sense of otherness can lead to social isolation and control of attention behaviours that can lead to extreme views.

“The “Path to Violence” model is considered to comprise six behavioural stages according to Calhoun and Weston (2003). These six behavioural steps or stages include: holding a grievance (as a result of, for example, a perceived sense of injustice, a threat or

loss, a need for fame, or revenge), ideation (considering violence to be the only option, discussing one's thoughts with others, or modelling oneself after other assailants), research/planning (gathering information regarding one's target, or stalking the target), preparations (such as collating one's costume, weapon(s), equipment, transportation, or engaging in "final act" behaviours), breach (assessing levels of security, devising "sneaky or covert approach"), and attack. ([Source](#))

Holding and grievance and ideation tend to go hand in hand with individuals with ASD, for instance, if one feels a greater sense of unfairness and otherness that causes them to socially isolate, they may feel a grievance towards society/the world, and thus ruminate on vengeful thinking; ideation. If an individual with ASD has "disturbing or violent" preoccupations/special interests such as but not limited to: guns and weaponry, WWII, serial killers/mass shooters/etc, politics, body horror/gore, eugenics/ethnicities, biological sex/gender, then they may be at greater risk of developing radical ideas when also combined with ruminating on grievances and ideation.

"Specifically, Al-Attar mentions restricted interests, rich and vivid fantasies, difficulties in socialising and communicating, a need for routine, differences in information processing and sensory sensitivity as potential features of ASD which might affect to the risk of radicalisation (Al-Attar, 2019)." ([Source](#))

There were many aspects of ASD discussed with professional and young people which were deemed to impact an individuals' susceptibility to radicalisation. These included, but are not limited to, those outlined in Box 1.

<b>Box 1: Internal factors affecting susceptibility to radicalisation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A need for structure and routine</li><li>• Issues with self-esteem or self-confidence</li><li>• Elevated levels of anxiety stress and fear</li><li>• Emotional dysregulation and the inability to recognise their own emotional states</li><li>• Sensory processing issues and cognitive impairments which affect memory or;</li><li>• Impaired cognitive developmental more generally, including delayed adult maturity</li><li>• Rigid thinking and tendency to hyper-focus on topics of interest</li><li>• Difficulties with abstract thinking, problem solving and information processing</li><li>• Difficulties with anticipating the consequences of behaviour</li><li>• Uncertainty when differentiating right from wrong</li><li>• Poor social interaction and ability to form meaningful relationships</li><li>• Difficulties when interpreting the actions and intentions of others</li></ul>

([Source](#))

Individuals who are socially isolated, needing supports and a need or want to fit in, can often be exploited or groomed into radical ideologies.

"They're much more socially naïve. It makes them far more vulnerable so often they really struggle with friendship groups [...] so, problems with inhibiting behaviour, ability to anticipate consequences of behaviour, problems generating more socially appropriate behaviour and challenging contexts." ([Source](#))

“Professionals and young people also described how individuals who are excluded from social circles have behaved in extreme ways as a mean to actively control the nature of the attention and ridicule they receive. One young person told us how this is one way of gaining a sense of control in situations where a person would ordinarily have no control. It was also suggested by professionals and young people that constant exposure and feelings of helplessness can contribute to the wish for revenge, making individuals more vulnerable to adopt extreme ideologies.” ([Source](#))

Geeraerts is similarly interested in interpersonal dynamics in online extremist “echo rooms,” contending that online friction over personal credibility can lead to a strengthening of extremist attitudes.” ([Source](#))

Within a study that I conducted, featuring many ASD diagnosed individuals, I asked them if they had any special interest that involved those listed earlier. All of them answered with one of more interest, and all of them answered with knowing someone else diagnosed with ASD that has any of those interests as well. Majority answered with all or some of the vulnerabilities/risk factors presented listed.

To quote from “do you believe you are more susceptible to radicalization?”

“[...] but some people on the spectrum are more prone to it than others. Being more self aware makes it easier to recognize things like that.”

Majority answered that they did feel more susceptible to radicalization at one point in their life than those without ASD, but that it is contextual to other overlapping mental health issues, or contingencies with other factors.