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The Mental Disorder and Counter Terrorism

How Different Features of Autism Spectrum Disorder can Contextualise Vulnerability and Resilience to Terrorism Related Behaviours

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Competing Interests

- Consultant for the Irish Prison Service.
- Expert Witness in criminal cases involving defendants with autism spectrum disorder.
- Consultant for Parents For Peace.
- Regularly deliver training to legal professionals, law enforcement and clinicians on autism and offending/CJS.
- Regularly invited to present at conferences/events.

Southport attacker Axel Rudakubana

- On the 29th of July 2024, a 17 year old male entered a Taylor Swift themed dance class in the British city of Southport armed with a knife. He then proceeded to stab the young girls in attendance, managing to kill 3 and injuring many others before being stopped.
- The attacker, Axel Rudakubana, was recently sentenced to 52 years in prison and during his arrest he stated that he was proud of his actions and glad the girls are dead.






ASD and Terrorism: How Different Features of ASD can Contextualise Vulnerability and Resilience

- There is no evidence supporting the existence of an association between ASD and terrorism in the general population (Faccini & Allely, 2017; Al-Attar, 2020). However, it is crucial that there is “an understanding of the individual’s autistic functioning and how it may contextualise factors that push them towards terrorism and aspects of terrorism that may pull them in, in order to manage and reduce risk” when terrorist acts are planned or executed by an individual with ASD (Al-Attar, 2020, pp. 926).
- There has been some research exploring how ASD can ‘contextualise vulnerability and risk’ (Faccini & Allely, 1917; Al-Attar, 2016a, 2016b, 2018b, 2018c, 2019; Al-Attar, 2020, pp. 926).
- Dr Zainab Al-Attar (2020) detailed seven facets of ASD that “may have different functional links with push and pull factors to terrorism” (pp. 928).

Dr Zainab Al-Attar (2020) outlined and examined seven facets of ASD that may have different functional links with push and pull factors to terrorism.

- **Facet 1:** Circumscribed interests
- **Facet 2:** Rich vivid fantasy & impaired social imagination
- **Facet 3:** Need for order, rules, rituals, routine and predictability
- **Facet 4:** Obsessionality, repetition and collecting
- **Facet 5:** Social interaction and communication difficulties
- **Facet 6:** Cognitive styles
- **Facet 7:** Sensory processing

Autism spectrum disorder, extremism and risk assessment

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Abstract

Background: To date, there is no evidence supporting the existence of an association between Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and extremism in the general population. However, there is increasing recognition that several features of ASD may provide the context of vulnerability to engage in extremist behaviour.

Aims: This paper sets out the case for a dedicated clinical approach to better integrate clinical risk appraisal processes with an assessment of ASD individuals' vulnerabilities within

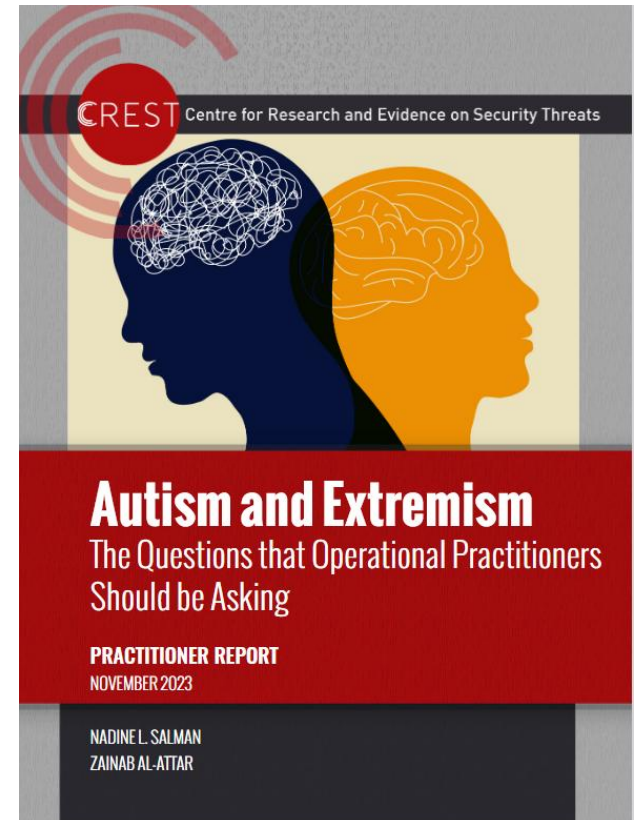
Facet 1: Circumscribed interests

- One of the core features of ASD is an intense, narrow, all absorbing interest that may become pre-occupying and frequently researched in extensive detail by the individual.
- Circumscribed interests may offer a sense of purpose, social identity and topic of conversation, and the autistic individual often finds that they function at their optimal levels of cognitive, motivational, and social functioning and present with a high level of expertise when engaging and conversing in the topic of their interest.
- When researching their all-consuming and obsessional interest, they may become completely **immersed and absorbed in their details and the immediate rewards** becoming less focused on the links in the **cause-and-effect** of their behaviour (Al-Attar, 2019).



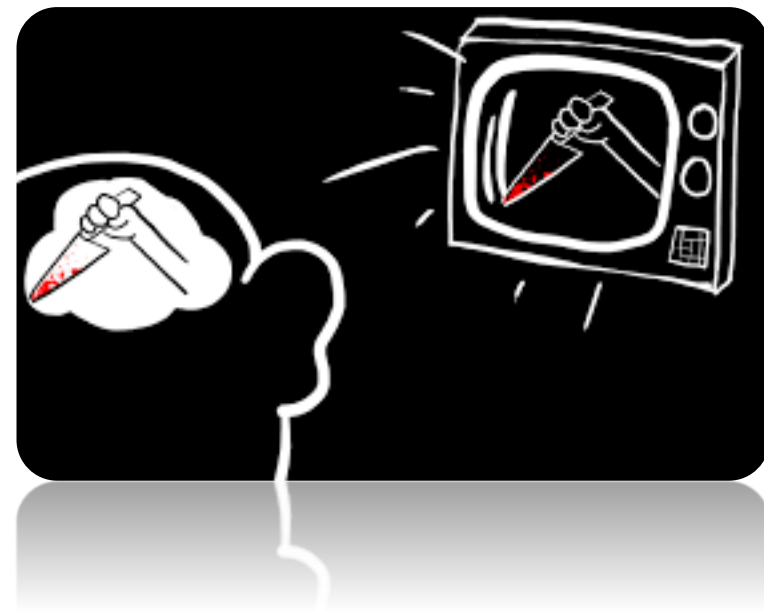
Questions to Consider:

- What role do the individual's interests play in their pathway to extremism engagement?
- Where and with whom does the individual engage with risk-related interests (online and offline)?
- What needs does engaging in these interests address? Does it provide positive feelings such as excitement, mastery, connectedness with others, or a deep sense of identity and purpose? Does it reduce negative feelings such as anxiety, depression, agitation, and stress?
- Do other factors (e.g., stressors) exacerbate the need to use risky interests to self-soothe? Do interests link to pre-occupations with life difficulties and stressors?



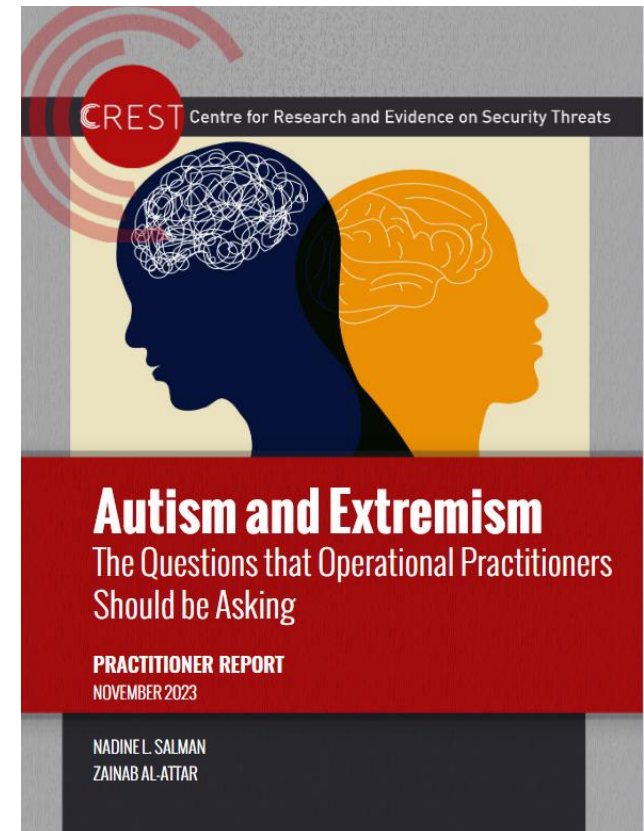
Facet 2: Rich vivid fantasy and impaired social imagination

- Restricted interests and pre-occupations may be exhibited through vivid fantasy which is usually visual (Al-Attar, 2020).
- The contents of their fantasy life are usually based, very directly, on what they have come across both offline and online as opposed to being based on social imagination or abstract ideas (Al-Attar, 2019).
- Fine details of the fantasy may be more captivating than any wider emotional meaning or social context of the fantasy and when these are shared online or offline by the individual and affirmed by others, fantasy can become socially/externally reinforced also.
- In the fantasies there may be certain themes which provide 'certain functions' (e.g., revenge or violent fantasies which alleviate feelings of anger) or 'general functions' (e.g., being intellectually stimulating or exciting) (Al-Attar, 2020).



Questions to Consider:

- What risk-related fantasies does the individual experience?
- Where does the inspiration for risk-related fantasies originate? Are these fantasies adapted from extreme content?
- What are the triggers for risk-related fantasies and what feelings do fantasies generate?
- What might be stopping the individual from acting out risk-related fantasies?
- What might be compelling the individual to act out risk-related fantasies?




Facet 3: Need for order, rules, rituals, routine and predictability

- The social world can be chaotic and unpredictable for individuals with ASD.
- They may read and carry out extensive amounts of research to try and make sense of an otherwise chaotic world. May come across, often unintentionally, “explanations” and “solutions” which are extremist. Most extremist ideologies and terrorist groups claim to offer explanations for moral chaos, social injustice as well as solutions for this which are both concrete and literal (Al-Attar, 2018b, 2020).
- Extremist groups often brand themselves as organised, systematic and orderly. Some individuals with ASD find the world easier to understand the world when it is explained to them in categories, facts and systems (bypassing the complex social and emotional aspects of people’s lives) (Al-Attar, 2019).

THE BASIC IDEOLOGY (WITH MEMES)

INCEL = INVOLUNTARY CELIBATE.
A MAN (USUALLY YOUNG) WHOSE IDENTITY IS DEFINED BY HIS LACK OF SEXUAL EXPERIENCE WITH WOMEN. HE BLAMES WOMEN AND SOCIETY FOR THIS.

‘THE VIRGIN WALK’
A meme used by incels to represent incels



INCELS HATE SOME MEN TOO.
‘CHADS’ ARE CONVENTIONALLY ATTRACTIVE MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH WOMEN.



‘CHAD’ - Alpha male, muscly, top of the social hierarchy

INCELS BELIEVE LOOKS AND GENETICS DETERMINE YOUR SUCCESS WITH WOMEN. THEY CALL IT ‘LOOKISM’

AND THAT THE ‘TOP’ 80% OF WOMEN ARE SELECTIVELY DATING ONLY THE TOP 20% OF MEN. THIS IS CALLED ‘HYPERGAMY’

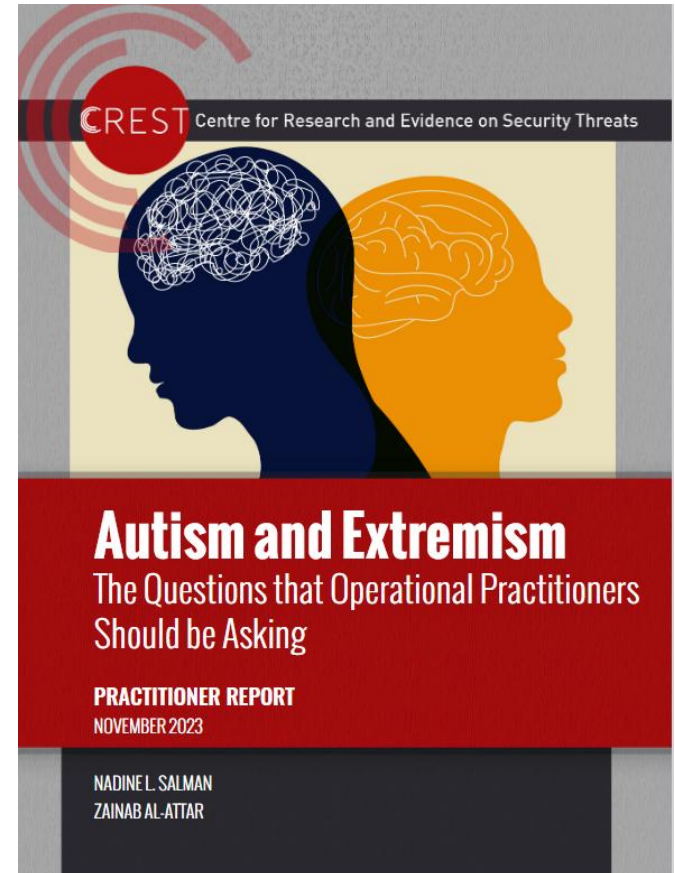
‘STACY’
The female version of Chad. She's hot but shallow and a gold digger.



The CHAD and STACY memes are both blonde + blue eyed. Incels and the alt right cross over alot.

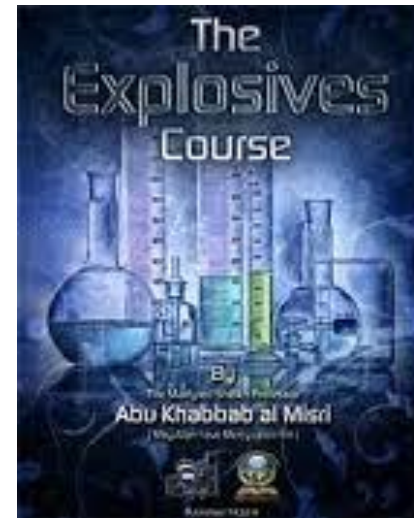
Questions to Consider:

- Does the risk-related interest, fantasy, ideology, or group meet a need to restore order, punish rule-breaking, or provide a sense of predictability?
- Does a disruption to routines, order, or rule-breaking feed into a threat or grievance narrative for the individual.



Facet 4: Obsessionality, repetition and collecting

- It is common for autistic individuals to pursue their interest or pre-occupation in a repetitive manner (and pedantically) and it becomes all-encompassing as they engage in their pre-occupation at the expense of other things such as social relationships (Klin et al., 2007).
- With regards to terroristic (or extremist) behaviour, the individual may engage in the accumulation of substantial amounts of information or data associated with terrorism, watch propaganda videos repeatedly or engage in making items relating to terrorism.
- Pre-occupational interests may be inaccurately misinterpreted as being strong indication of an **intense commitment** to terrorism.

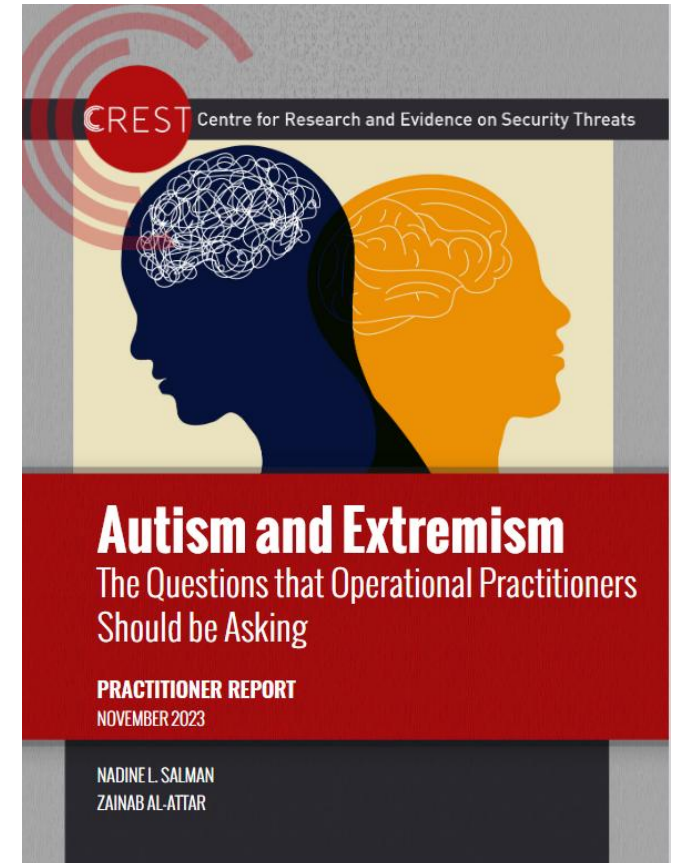


Common Types of IEDs



Questions to Consider:

- What purpose does any collecting behaviour serve for the individual (e.g., what feelings does it generate)? Does the collecting behaviour feel compulsive?
- Do collecting behaviours increase risk of harm or offending? Consider whether the items/content collected are directly linked to offending (e.g., preparation of terrorist acts, offensive weapons).
- Does the individual appear to be fixated on a grievance, injustice, or specific individuals or groups?

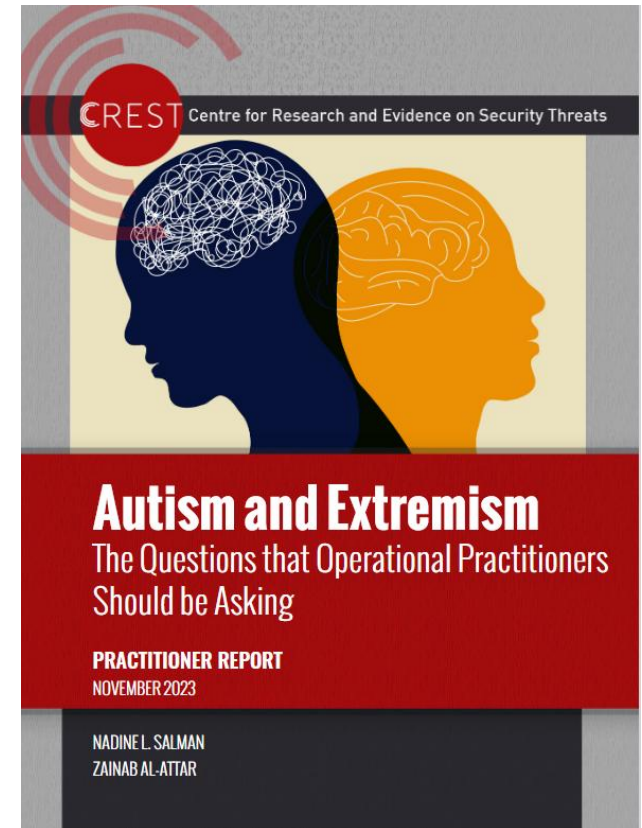


Facet 5: Social interaction and communication difficulties

- Autistic individuals can find navigating the social world challenging, stressful, anxiety-provoking and exhausting which can lead many to withdraw from the complex social world becoming socially isolated and anxious as a result. The online environment is a predictable and safe environment.
- Like-minded individuals can also communicate and share their interests and opinions on the online environment. For some with ASD, this may be the first time they have ever experienced a sense of connection or belonging to another person or group (Al-Attar, 2020).
- If the autistic individual accesses extremist websites, they may read what is on these extremist websites and take them literally & at face value (Al-Attar, 2019, pp. 12).
- They may talk about their ideology in very graphic, matter of fact terms, with a flat expression and tone of voice and volunteer a substantial amount of detail. Such a presentation may be mistaken by the interviewer as evidence of boasting about terrorist capabilities and impact or trying to cause fear or to shock (Al-Attar, 2018b).

Questions to Consider:

- Have social interaction and communication difficulties contributed to experiences of stress, threat, grievance, and injustice that may relate (directly or indirectly) to extremism pathways?
- Does extremism engagement (online or offline) fulfil social needs?
- Does the individual appear to have additional vulnerabilities (e.g., to exploitation) related to a lack of social awareness?
- Do communication strengths linked to extremist interests afford social acceptance, status, or identity?



Facet 6: Cognitive styles

There are four features of neurocognitive functioning which Al-Attar has drawn attention to which may contribute to the push and pull factors (Al-Attar, 2020).

(1) Theory-of-Mind

(2) Central Coherence

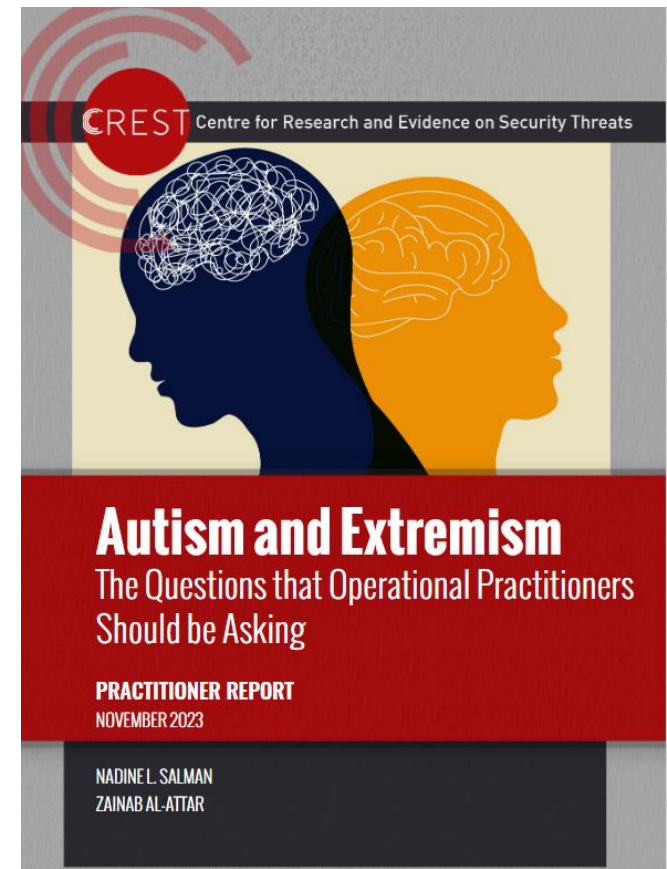
(3) Systemising

(4) Attention-switching

“Push” factors may include distress, insecurity, and anxiety which are caused by perceived threats and injustice. “Pull” factors include “the appeal of extremist causes and groups in addressing such negative feelings and restoring order, safety, and justice” (Al-Attar, 2018b, pp. 326).

Questions to Consider:

- Have difficulties in education, work, and managing day-to-day demands contributed to distress and pushed towards a grievance narrative?
- Does the individual demonstrate an attention to detail in risky interests that could confer terrorist capability (e.g., bomb-making) or susceptibility to an ideology?
- Does the individual have an appreciation of the wider context and social and legal consequences of their extremist interests and actions?
- Does the individual struggle to understand how their actions may be perceived by, or may affect, others?



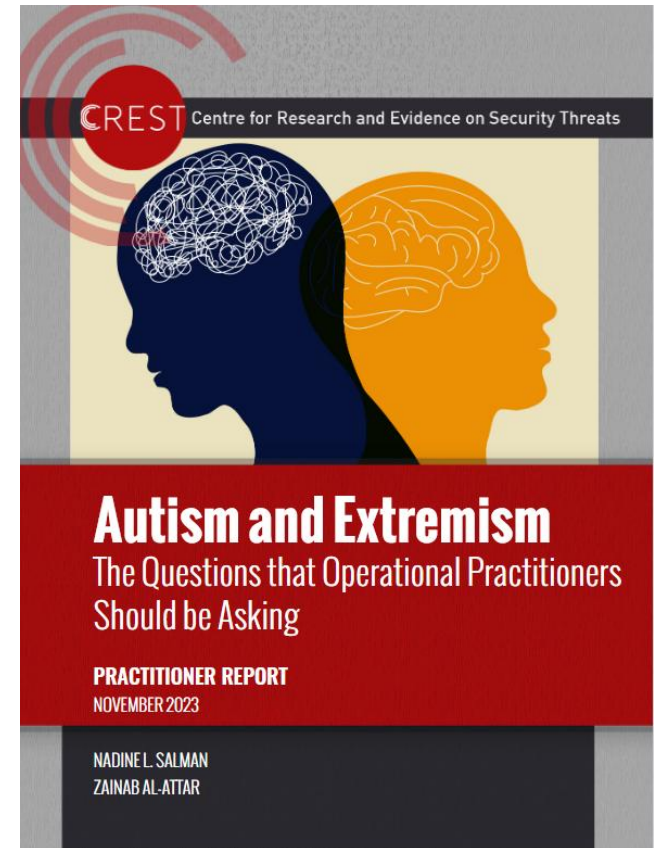
Facet 7: Sensory processing

- May be a significant sensory appeal (strong sensory pull) to terrorist materials to some autistic individuals (e.g., their colours, lights, smells, noises of chemicals and explosives). Terrorist imagery, magazines, diagrams, flags, murals, uniforms, weapons and paraphernalia, etc., can have a significant sensory appeal (visually - detail/colour) to the autistic individual (Al-Attar, 2020). Hypersensitivity may have played a contributory role in an indirect way to the offence pathway (Al-Attar, 2018b).



Questions to Consider:

- Have sensory sensitivities (directly or indirectly) contributed towards stressors that push towards grievance narratives, or self-soothing through extremism engagement?
- Does extreme content and behaviour provide a sensory reward for the individual?

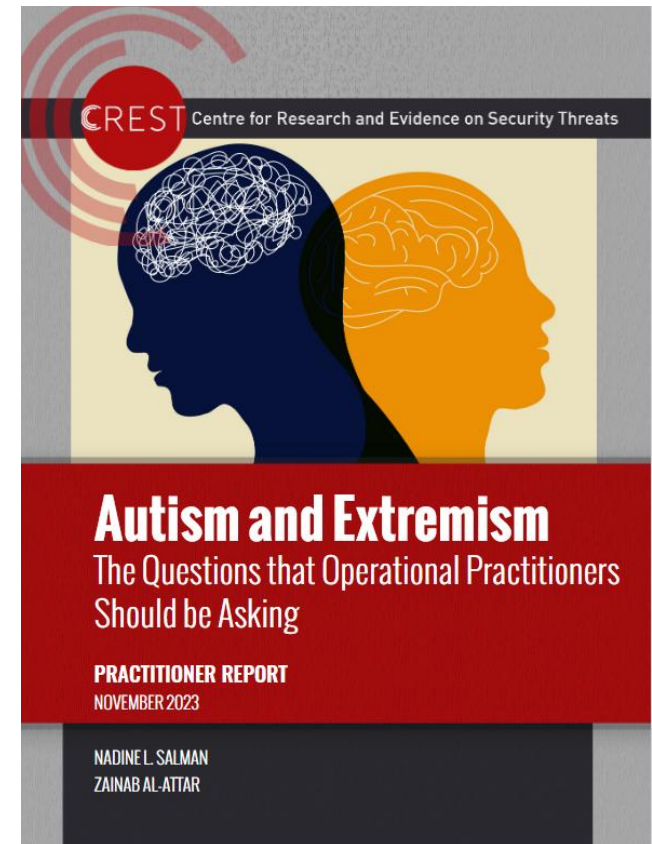


ADHD and Other Neurodevelopmental Disorders/Conditions

- Individuals with autism and ADHD or other forms of neurodivergence may experience additional difficulties that may exacerbate some of the above challenges.
- Difficulties in organisation, planning, and prioritisation may exacerbate professional and academic challenges that may contribute to grievances.
- Impulsivity associated with ADHD may be linked to impulsive risk-taking behaviour and stimulation seeking through extremism.
- The presence of ADHD may also intensify sensory seeking behaviours, and increase the sensory pull of extreme content, including taboo topics linked to different forms of extremism and harmful behaviour.

Questions to Consider:

- Does impulsive, reckless, or risk-taking behaviour play a role in behaviours of concern (e.g., accessing extreme content, sharing extreme views, violence)?
- What rewards (e.g., sensory, novelty, interest) does extremism engagement provide for the individual?
- Does the individual switch between or seek several different risky interests, ideologies, or groups?



- **Most risk assessment tools do not focus on the ‘function’ of risk behaviours** (i.e. why the individual engages in them and what needs they meet for that individual).
- Therefore, even if they capture behaviours exhibited by offenders with ASD, they do not distinguish why this behaviour is carried out. Thus, the depth of formulations and their utility to inform rehabilitation will be limited.
- The FARAS guidelines address how to delineate the autistic functions of behaviour and hence may add depth and specificity to standard risk assessments as well as help inform rehabilitation pathways for offenders on the autistic spectrum.

FARAS

Framework for the
Assessment of
Risk & Protection in
Offenders on the
Autistic
Spectrum

A Guide for Risk Assessors Working with
Offenders on the Autistic Spectrum



Deviant Behavior

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Clinical profile, risk, and critical factors and the application of the “path toward intended violence” model in the case of mass shooter Dylann Roof

C. S. Allely & L. Faccini

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To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2018.1437653>

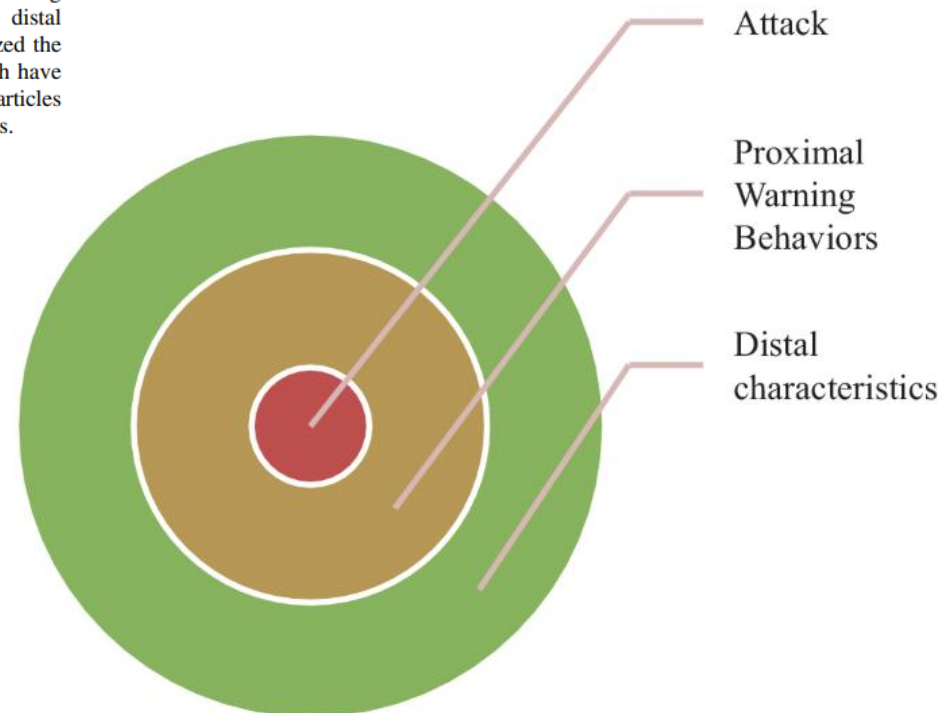
The Feasibility and Utility of the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18): A Review and Recommendations

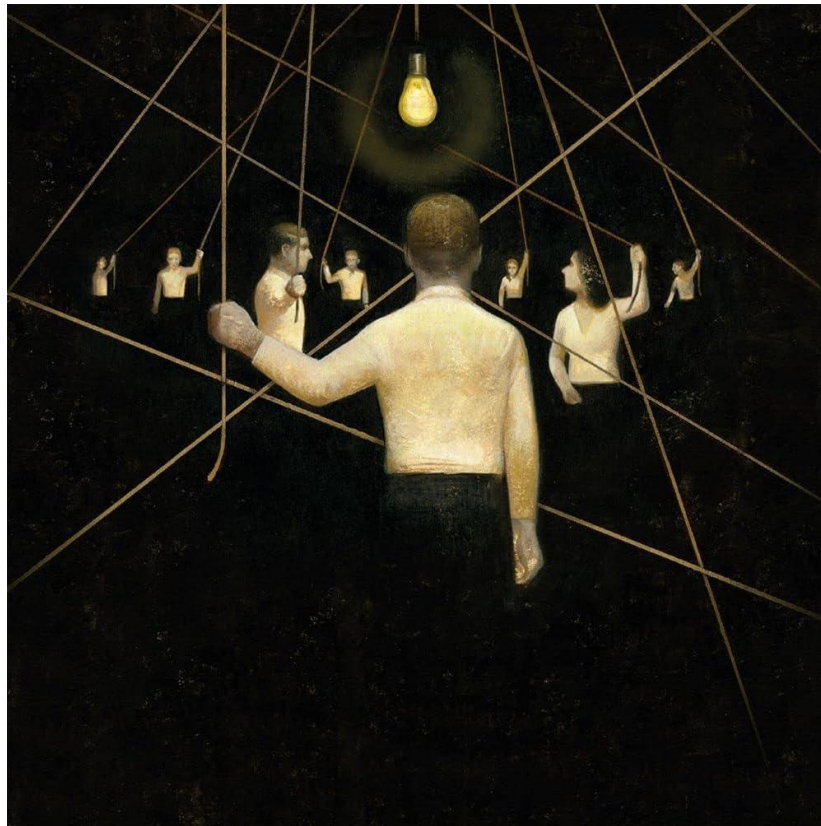
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The ability to accurately predict the risk of an individual committing an act of targeted violence is likely to be impossible given the low base rate of these acts (Goodwill & Meloy, 2019). Nevertheless, prevention is possible if there is a focus on fact-based behaviors, and threat management is in place. The Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18; Meloy, Habermeyer & Guldemann, 2015; Meloy, Roshdi, et al., 2015; Meloy & Gill, 2016; Meloy, 2017) is a collection of 18 behavior-based warning signs for terror incidents. There are eight proximal characteristics and 10 distal characteristics. The aim of this review was to identify studies which have utilized the TRAP-18 either prospectively (operational use) or retroactively or studies which have investigated the validity and reliability of the TRAP-18. A total of 17 relevant articles were identified in the review including six case studies and 11 empirical articles.

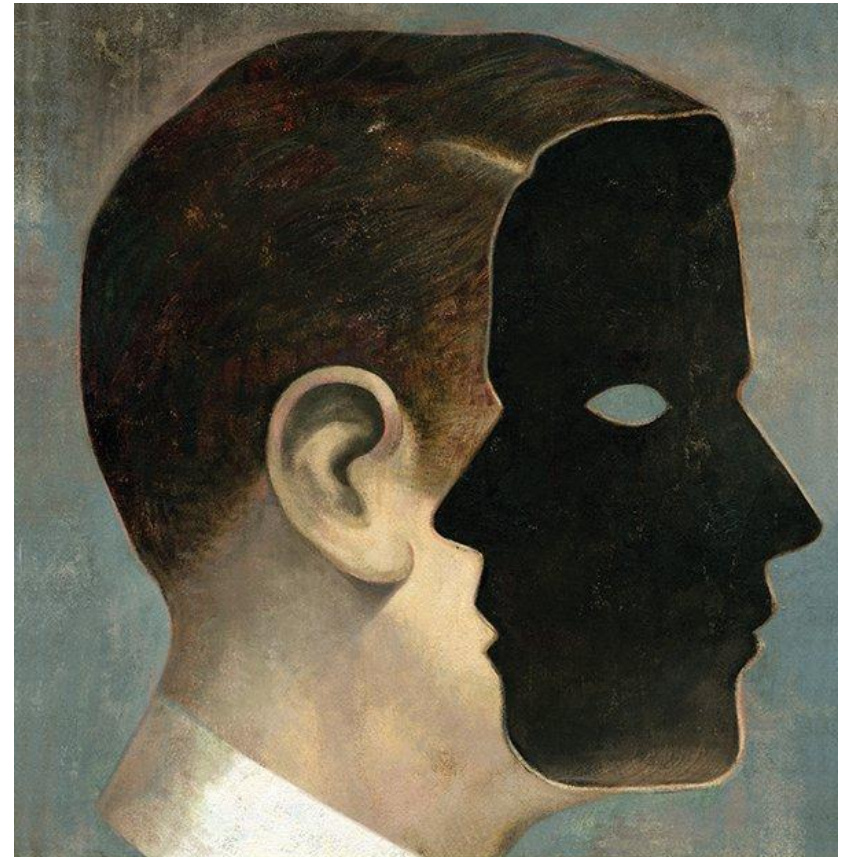




AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

A Guide to Understanding Suspects, Defendants
and Offenders with Autism

Dr Clare S. Allely



THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EXTREME VIOLENCE

A Case Study Approach to Serial Homicide, Mass
Shooting, School Shooting and Lone-actor Terrorism

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