

## Literature Review

### Introduction

The impact of terrorism can lead to national fear, alter public behaviour, and influence economies, in a powerful reaction which can pass through generations (Van Der Does et al. 2021). In illustration of how history influences perception, despite what would be the impression of many, there were no fatalities within the United Kingdom (UK) because of terrorism within 2022 (Counter Terrorism Policing, 2023). A consideration therefore forms towards how history, stereotypes and fear compare with reality, and how well the risks are truly understood. Despite the 2022 statistic, deeper analysis of recent terrorist movement within the UK identifies the growth of far-right extremists, where activity has been particularly prominent within post-industrial communities (Knight, 2019). This chapter of the dissertation will evaluate the existing literature surrounding far-right extremism and focus upon the prominence of neurodiversity within radicalisation. The current level of research towards far-right extremism is disproportionately low however, where between the timeframe of 2001 and 2018, only 6 out of 1846 terrorism articles within the top three terrorism journals used primary data to support their research (Ahmed and Lynch, 2021). Consequently, research of those vulnerable to radicalisation by far-right extremist groups holds opportunity and forms the landscape this research project will explore. This chapter will be separated into four specific areas of research, followed by a summary of the key learning and areas of opportunity. The four specific areas of research will include an introduction into far-right extremism, the recruitment strategies of far-right extremist groups, the growth of neurodiversity awareness, and how neurodiversity characteristics relate to far-right extremism factors. The chapter

will critically evaluate the work of prominent researchers in these fields and aim to achieve objective one of the dissertation, which for reference is: To analyse the existing literature surrounding the radicalisation of those with neurodiverse characteristics into far-right extremism, to include any additional contributing factors.

### Introduction into far-right extremism

Despite the disproportionately low volume of research completed within far-right extremism, studies specifically focussed on this form of extremism mostly began in 2013 (Schuurman, 2020). This has allowed for the complexity and range of far-right extremism to be understood to some extent, however despite this the UK's definition of terrorism has remained unchanged since 2000 (Glover, 2023). A prominent researcher to explore the far-right on a global scale is Cas Mudde, who acknowledged the academic debate to define the area, and concluded the far-right to be an umbrella term for the idolisation of nationalism and order (Mudde, 2014). This ranges between those who complete acts of physical violence to those who support or distribute the ideology, and whilst the area has been difficult to define, it has been described to be easily recognisable (Muddle, 2017). Further studies have shown that common areas far-right extremist groups target include minority groups, immigration, and national strategies that promote diversity and inclusion (Ahmed and Lynch, 2021). These factors are frequently impacted by current news and societal movement, however research also finds famous moments in history, such as the 9/11 terrorist attack in the United States (US), create regular focus for far-right groups (Wright, 2009). These references also date deeper into history, with common idolisation drawn towards the Nazi movement against the Jewish population for example (Ahmed and Lynch, 2021). Furthermore, from a UK perspective, extreme

far-right roots trace back to a similar timeframe, with the proscription of the British Union of Fascists in 1939, a right-wing political party (Jupp, 2022). With UK terrorism legislation relatively static across recent decades, despite the knowledge growth of far-right extremist risks, this research project intends to explore whether awareness gaps exist within different policing units, and any implications that may result.

In addition to historical motivations, far-right activity across more recent years shows an evolvement in extremist networks, and their global reach. Two prominent worldwide attacks in 2019 for example include shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand and El Paso, Texas, where 51 and 22 people were killed respectively, in attacks committed by individuals described to have been lone parties, self-radicalised by far-right ideology (Ahmed and Lynch, 2021). This is in contrast with stereotypes of extremist activity requiring large, organised networks, and highlights the risk of self-radicalised individuals. From a UK perspective, the threat level of far-right extremism is described to have drastically increased since 2014 (Jupp, 2022). A contributing factor towards this is the emergence of highly active and visible UK groups, illustrated through the first UK proscription of an extreme far-right organisation in December 2016, where support or association with the group National Action was formally banned (Home Office, 2019). Further statistics show that although far-right terrorism currently occupies only 20 percent of UK counter terrorism investigations, 37.5 percent of prevented attacks between March 2017 and December 2021 were of late stage far-right terrorist plans (Counter Terrorism Policing, 2021). These findings have led some researchers to question the contribution the COVID-19 pandemic provided towards the current risk, where a combination of fear, loss, restriction, and an enhanced online presence may have

laid foundations for the growth of far-right ideology now and into the future (Khan-Ruf, 2021). With this learning considered, the next phase of the literature review moves into the recruitment strategies of far-right extremist organisations, to evaluate the level of existing research and build upon current understanding.

### Recruitment strategies of far-right extremist groups

To better understand the recruitment strategies of far-right extremist groups, the common presence of frustration, injustice and affinity is an important tone to continually consider (Collins, 2023). In contrast with earlier indication that the online world forms the landscape where modern radicalisation largely takes place, thought is drawn towards the words of Walter Laqueur, a pioneering terrorism theorist, who famously claimed in 1999 that no volume of worldwide emails held the power or potential to make any future political impact (Laqueur, 1999). The speed that views such as this changed however is clear, where as early as 2002 theories such as David Rapoport's wave theory, which separated terrorism into phases dating back to the 1880s, assessed the utilisation of technology and communication to be a continual priority for terrorist organisations (Rapoport, 2002). Also in reflection of earlier discussion, although far-right extremist acts are prone to singular attackers, intentions do not develop without influence, where physical isolation may be relieved with online inspiration and relationships (Pajunen, 2015). This view is supported by a study within 2013 which found the internet held a prominent role in the communication and education of extremist content within all fifteen sampled instances of UK radicalisation (Behr *et al.* 2013). Limitations at that time include a relatively small sample size however the unanimous factor adds legitimacy to the study. From this point to the current day, technology and social media usage has

accelerated, whilst online hate speech simultaneously grew throughout the pandemic, and conditions are set for further far-right growth (Velásquez *et al.* 2021).

The spread of far-right ideology online mainly spreads between the use of websites to display content, and social media platforms to network and engage (Odag, Leiser and Boehnke, 2019). Jessie Daniels (2008, 2009a, 2009b), a Professor of Sociology, led early studies into the online spread of hate speech and far-right concepts within the late 2000s, which found that extremist groups created and used websites discretely to promote their ideology, where content was displayed subtly, without direct reference to far-right extremist networks, and avoided censorship. Within her studies, Daniels presented an example where a Google search of Martin Luther King provided a website within the first page of results which was linked to a white supremacist group, and displayed extreme messages of hate, religion, and race (Daniels, 2009b). In addition to those actively seeking this content, examples such as this demonstrate the risk of people locating far-right extremist content unintentionally. Separate to websites alone, social media holds the added opportunity for far-right groups to promote messages and communicate quickly. Whilst the perception of social media immediately draws images of large platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, lesser publicly known platforms such as 8chan and Gab developed a large extremism presence (Scrivens and Conway, 2019). This does not exclude the large social media networks however, where studies of X (formally known as Twitter) found far-right groups used extremist hashtags alongside trending topics for mass exposure, and posted a large volume of less extreme, however suggestive content, to utilise volume to portray a lawful perception (Nouri, Lorenzo-Dus and Watkin, 2021). Strategies such as these illustrate how accessible far-right

extremist media has become, and draws theorist attention towards the vulnerability of children, and those with neurodiverse conditions to view this content (Glover, 2023).

From a different perspective however, a study in 2017 across 223 convicted terrorists within the UK concluded that whilst the online world was an enabler, it was not a requirement within the radicalisation process, and that additional research towards those radicalised was required, to include their motivation and ability (Gill *et al.* 2017). More recent literature has added strength to this argument, where an online resilience study promoted factors such as cultural acceptance, trust in community and leadership, and a natural resistance to violence to be barriers to extremism (Gerrand, 2022). This provokes thought towards why some people withdraw from extremist media if it becomes visible, and why others may be drawn deeper into the content. The next section within this literature review will therefore explore the available research towards neurodiversity, to investigate whether characteristics relate to current findings.

### The growth of neurodiversity awareness

Neurodiversity is a growing area of medical research, where the term is used to describe a difference in how the human brain processes information, and includes several conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia and a number more (Bell, 2023). Accordingly, medical studies estimate that 15-20% of the UK population live with a neurodiverse condition (Doyle, 2020). Some of the physical characteristics these conditions tend to present will be explored later within this literature review, however at present some of the emotional factors that studies highlight will be discussed now.

Firstly, a significant book edited by psychologist Steven Kapp in 2020, with chapter authors praised to be on the forefront of the neurodiverse movement, consistently detailed the diagnosis phase to be an enlightening journey, where people with neurodivergent conditions quickly felt a sense of belonging, and an explanation to potential difficulties within their lives (Kapp, 2020). In contrast however, some describe the NHS neurodiversity services to be under high stress, with long diagnosis waiting lists, which can add additional mental health strain, and a sense of helplessness for those in need of support (Mandy, 2022). From a different perspective, even once a diagnosis has been made, scholars raise a common sense of them-and-us amongst those with neurodiverse characteristics, which can create a divided feeling of society, and lead to a perception of unfairness (Runswick-Cole, 2014).

Within the large range of neurodiverse conditions, most of the current research has been completed towards ADHD and autism, where the conditions may coexist, and characteristics can overlap (Craig *et al.* 2015). From an offending perspective, a review within 2010 found that approximately 14% of child offenders were diagnosed with ADHD, a higher percentage than all diagnosed children in total (Colins *et al.* 2010). This shows an increased likelihood for children with ADHD to have interaction with police compared with children without ADHD, where concerns are enhanced by more recent studies which found children with ADHD had a younger first arrest age on average, and had an increased likelihood to re-offend (Rutten *et al.* 2022). There has however been limited statistical research completed towards the presence of neurodiversity within terrorist offenders. Despite this, of the research which does exist studies show people with neurodiverse conditions to be more prone to

individual based attacks as opposed to group actors (Corner, Gill and Mason, 2016). Alongside this however, recognition is raised towards the increased rate of people with neurodiverse characteristics experiencing mental ill health, to include for example suicidal thoughts, depression and anxiety, where far more detailed analysis is required of neurodivergent terrorist offenders to better understand the factors (Curnow *et al.* 2023). The next and final area of the literature review therefore intends to draw the prior learning within this chapter together, to evaluate any potential links between far-right extremism and neurodiverse characteristics.

#### Neurodiversity characteristics in relation to far-right extremist factors

A leading researcher toward the analysis of autism characteristics within terrorism is Dr Zainab Al-Attar, a Forensic Psychologist who's work will be largely referenced within this section of the literature review. Al-Attar, who has spent numerous years within the field, to include direct interaction with convicted terrorists, is consistently of the opinion that no evidence exists to prove people with autism are vulnerable to terrorist radicalisation (Al-Attar, 2020). Instead, her view is supported by separate research which details that characteristics of neurodiverse conditions may provide factors which direct those affected towards extremist content, however, does not mean that all neurodiverse people are vulnerable to radicalisation (Altier *et al.* 2017). The first area presented here is the difficulty some people with neurodiverse conditions may have with social interactions, where if experiences such as the difficulty forming relationships and bullying for example exist, this may lead to feelings of frustration, injustice, a desire for retaliation, and promote online dependency (Al-Attar, 2020). Secondly, separate research towards the characteristics of autism show that those affected frequently rely on thought processes driven by

rule and facts (Baron-Cohen, 2002). This can form reference to the traits of dictatorships, powerful leaders, and orders, which far-right groups are known to promote. This characteristic also poses thought towards historical moments such as the Nazi movement as previously discussed. In further exploration of history, Al-Attar finds within her research that autistic traits lead to a desire to understand topics in great depth, a factor which often leads to prolonged research, where war, history, conspiracy theories and generally shocking content frequently provide stimulus (Al-Attar, 2020). Finally, separate research also found those with autism are often attracted to visual stimulation, with stronger learning through the use of imagery, which may enhance reliance on this sense (Samson *et al.* 2012). This further supports potential attraction towards military and extremist topics through the frequency of bold, striking content, to include graphic images, weapons, flags, and uniforms often used by far-right groups.

In addition to content consumption, the risk of radicalisation for people with neurodiverse characteristics is viewed to peak if online research leads into direct communication with extremists. Should this occur, validation and encouragement towards extremist ideology can provide reassurance, and form a personal connection which may bond the person towards the extremist group (Al-Attar, 2020). Furthermore, as connection and commitment become stronger, additional studies highlight the risk of fantasy, which becomes more prevalent during periods of tension (Palermo and Bogaerts, 2017). Al-Attar supports this factor, where her studies suggest that discontent with reality can lead to a fixation on fantasy thoughts, where times of depression link with fantasies of death, and feelings of unfairness lead into the imagination of revengeful acts (Al-Attar, 2020). This to some extent brings

reflection to earlier findings of those with neurodiverse characteristics being more susceptible to mental ill health.

## Conclusion

This literature review has now completed objective one within the research project: To analyse the existing literature surrounding the radicalisation of those with neurodiverse characteristics into far-right extremism, to include any additional contributing factors. To conclude, the review has transitioned through the four distinct areas of research, to finish in a position where direct comparisons between far-right extremist factors and neurodiverse characteristics have been reviewed, predominantly through the research of Al-Attar (2020). As a result, the research has found that characteristic similarities can be drawn, however theorists do not support that actual evidence exists of those with neurodiverse characteristics being more vulnerable to far-right radicalisation. Most of the research reviewed is relatively new however, and a consistent factor throughout the chapter is that research of both far-right extremism and neurodiversity is within a growth phase. Similarly, the research available at present does not include direct views from those who investigate the criminality of the area. The exploration of police perceptions toward these factors, to include different policing units, is therefore where this research project fits within the broader selection of existing literature and research. The next chapter of the dissertation will therefore move into a methodology phase, to plan a research strategy which will best support this research gap to be filled.

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