

Autism Hub

West Cheshire



Hiding in plain sight

Masking and camouflage

Masking or camouflage is a strategy where autistic individuals adjust their behaviour to try and fit with the non autistic way of being.

They instinctively adjust their way of being to **survive** the “*predominantly neurotypical social environment*” (Cook et al., 2020, p. 6).



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Instinct:

- Livingston et al (2019) propose that autistic individuals have an internal drive that motivates them to try and meet non autistic norms and expectations.
- **Is this something you can relate to?**



Camouflaging

Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2019):

‘low’ camouflagers had less stress and anxiety symptoms compared to ‘high’ camouflagers and those that switched between not camouflaging, to camouflaging sometimes.

Camouflaging= a cost to stress and anxiety. Masking in some situations but not in others is as costly as all the time!

There can be a questioning of self. **Is this something you experience?**



The hidden cost:

“Whilst those who switch are less impacted by constantly hiding their identity, they are nonetheless burdened with expending energy evaluating the perceived risk of exposing their autistic identity in each context. This constant self-regulation may therefore bring them to the same level of stress as those consistently camouflaging”

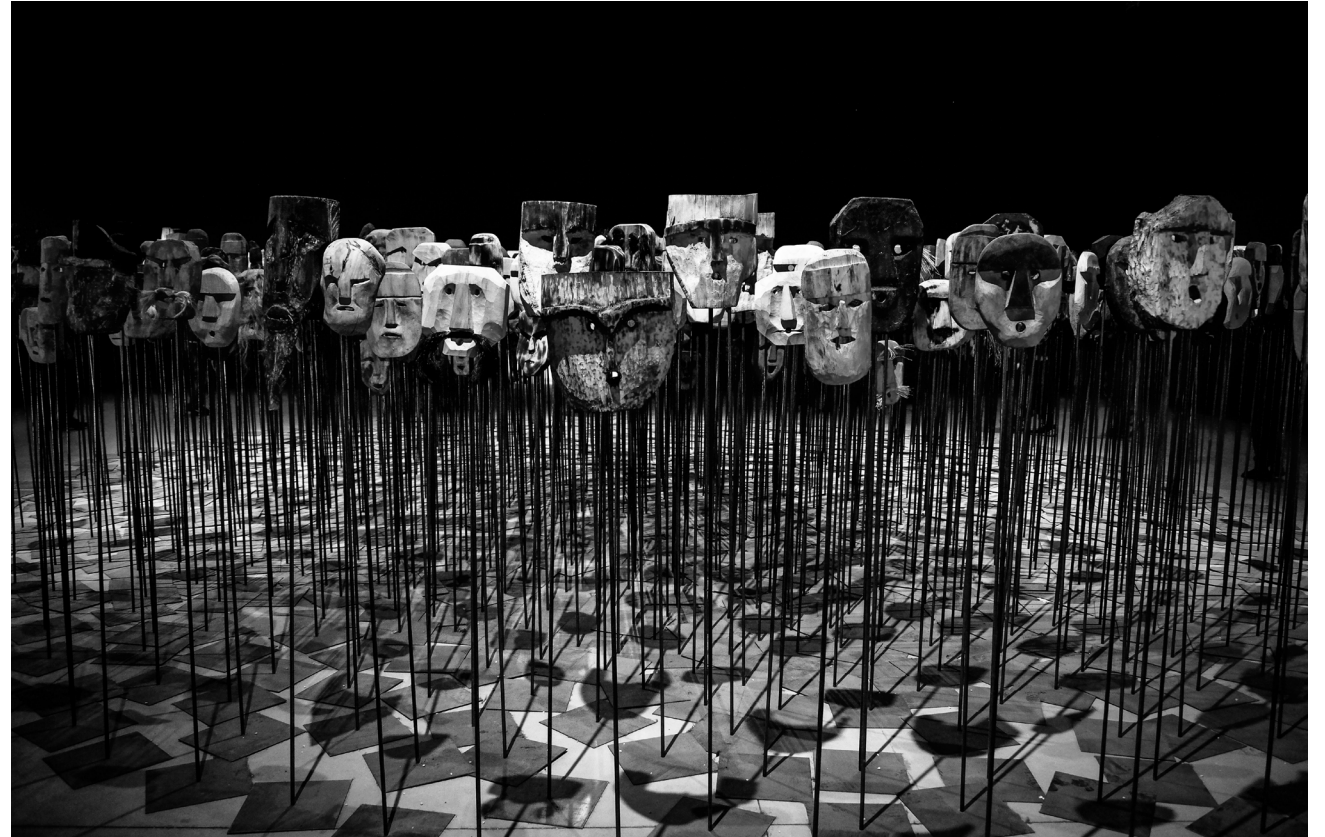
(Cage and Troxel-Whitman, 2019, p. 1907).



“Having to be something else.” (Hull et al., 2017, p. 2529)

There is a price to be paid in terms of the depletion of “emotional energy”

(Tierney et al., 2016, p. 82)



Burnout:

Raymaker et al. (2020), in their research on burnout reported masking as the most stressful life experience for autistic individuals.

They found this to be a key factor leading to Burnout.





Pearson and Rose (2020)



Stressor
Masking



Sheer effort required leads
to the snapping point of
burnout



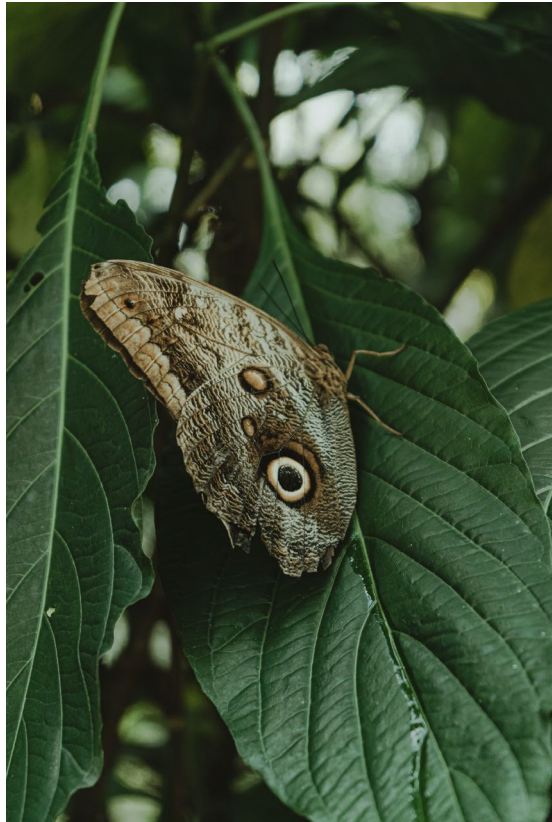
Accounts from autistic individuals:



Boren (2018): His reward for masking was the expectation that he could maintain it for ever more.

Endow (2015): “the bar was set higher” in terms of expectation at an unsustainable level.

Can you relate to this? Discuss



A personal account of camouflaging

- Tabb (2018) (also known as Purple Ella) is a late diagnosed woman, whose depression and anxiety had a massive disruption on her life. After receiving years of support from mental health services, she describes the impact of camouflaging. She states that it is too simplistic to ask autistic people to stop masking. Despite saying that:

“The more I unmask the better my mental health.”



Removing the mask?

Masking may be beyond a person's control due to co-existing factors of alexithymia and interoception

Removing the mask places the burden of responsibility on the autistic individual!

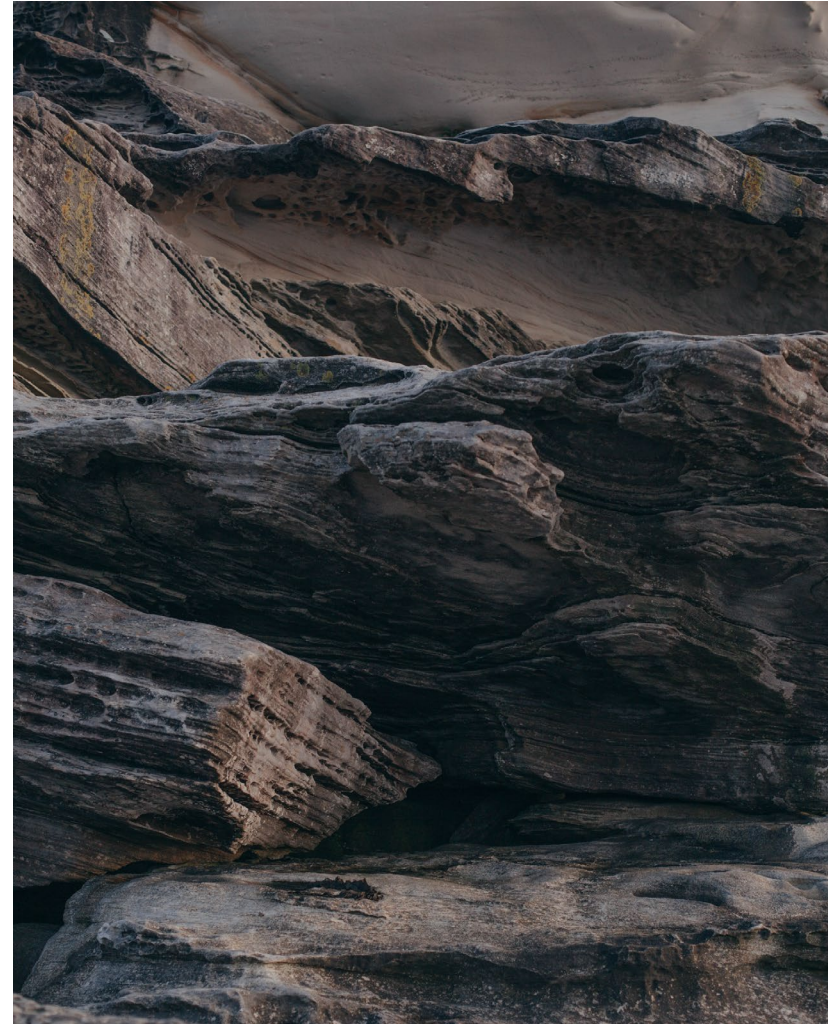
Pearson and rose (2020) stress the importance of understanding masking in the context of social pressure.

They liken the process to "*rock formation*"



Just like the development of rock, the various factors involved in masking are invisible with the process taking place, over a sustained period-of-time. Just like rock formation, masking is formed by pressure!

Society therefore needs to reduce this pressure!



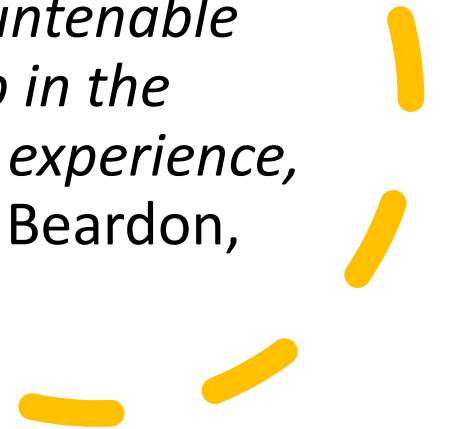
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Awareness of the impact

“Masking might seem like an excellent way of getting along in life. Some of you will be so used to a lifetime of masking that it might even be difficult not to. But masking is tiring-and doing it over long periods of time can lead to untenable levels of exhaustion. Yes, it might help in the short term to get through a particular experience, but it will take something out of you.” Beardon, 2022, p.156





Resource:





The need for adjustments:

Many autistic individuals feel unhappy about not being their real self, feeling that this is inauthentic. However, they don't feel able to stop masking/camouflaging due the expectations of society (Hull et al, 2017). Strategies therefore need to be:

“Balanced with a supportive environment which allows the individual to ‘drop their act’”

Tierney et al., 2016, p. 82

