

A Conceptual Analysis of Autistic Masking: Understanding the Narrative of Stigma and the Illusion of Choice

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"Autistic masking is a complicated topic. We currently think that masking includes things such as making eye contact even if it makes you feel uncomfortable, or not talking about your interests too much for fear of being labeled "weird." There is a lot about masking that we do not know yet, but it is important to understand masking as we think that it might have a negative effect on autistic people."

Abstract:

"Autistic masking is an emerging research area that focuses on understanding the conscious or unconscious suppression of natural autistic responses and adoption of alternatives across a range of domains. It is suggested that masking may relate to negative outcomes for autistic people, including late/missed diagnosis, mental health issues, burnout, and suicidality. This makes it essential to understand what masking is, and why it occurs.

In this conceptual analysis, we suggest that masking is an unsurprising response to the deficit narrative and accompanying stigma that has developed around autism. We outline how classical social theory (i.e., social identity theory) can help us to understand how and why people mask by situating masking in the social context in which it develops. We draw upon the literature on stigma and marginalization to examine how masking might intersect with different aspects of identity (e.g., gender).

We argue that although masking might contribute toward disparities in diagnosis, it is important that we do not impose gender norms and stereotypes by associating masking with a "female autism phenotype."

Finally, we provide recommendations for future research, stressing the need for increased understanding of the different ways that autism may present in different people (e.g., internalizing and externalizing) and intersectionality. We suggest that masking is examined through a sociodevelopmental lens, taking into account factors that contribute toward the initial development of the mask and that drive its maintenance.

We conclude that work on masking needs to think about autistic people in a different way. Autistic people grow up in a social world and experience a lot of negative views about autism and autistic people. We argue that we need to understand how this social world and the trauma that can come from being part of it contributes toward masking.

We also argue against the idea that masking is a "female" thing that occurs as a result of there being a "female-specific" subtype of autism, because this might make it harder for some people to get a diagnosis (e.g., nonbinary people, and men and women who do not fit with any of the current criteria). Instead we argue that people need to recognize that autism does not look like one "type" of person, and try to separate ideas about masking from ideas about a person not fitting a stereotype."

Amy Pearson and Kieran Rose. *Autism in Adulthood*.
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