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Understanding Camouflaging and Identity in Autistic Children and Adolescents

Using Photo-Elicitation

Stephanie J. Howe^{1,2}, Laura Hull³, Felicity Sedgewick³, Benjamin Hannon⁴ & Carly A. McMorris^{1,2}

¹Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

²Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

³Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

⁴Cambridgeshire & Peterborough NHS Trust, Cambridge, UK

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:

Stephanie J. Howe

Mailing address: EDT 508, University of Calgary, University Dr. NW, Calgary, AB T2N 1N4

Email: sjhowe@ucalgary.ca

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Abstract

Purpose: Camouflaging, or the use of strategies by autistic people to minimize the visibility of their autistic traits in social situations, is associated with stress, autistic burnout, depression, and suicidality among autistic adults. However, little is known about how autistic children and adolescents experience camouflaging, limiting our understanding of its onset and development. The present study filled this knowledge gap by examining camouflaging behaviour among autistic children and adolescents using a photo-elicitation approach.

Methods: Eight autistic children and adolescents aged 10 to 14 years ($M = 11.88$, $SD = 1.89$) attended an orientation session and were given two to three weeks to take photographs on the topic of camouflaging. Individual interviews were conducted with each participant about their photos. Inductive thematic analysis and an interpretive engagement framework were used to identify major themes within participant interviews and images.

Results: Qualitative analysis identified 12 themes reflecting motivations to camouflage (as a response to negative social experiences, as a learned habit), contexts of camouflaging (e.g., the audience), strategies and behaviours used to camouflage (suppressing autistic stimming behaviour, hiding the self), and perceived consequences of camouflaging (internal conflict, stress, needing time to recharge).

Conclusion: Results highlight that autistic children and adolescents as young as 10 years old engage in camouflaging behaviour that can be pervasive and automatic, and that can be a stressful, confusing, and energetically draining experience. Better understanding of the development and experience of camouflaging in childhood can inform prevention of mental health concerns in adulthood.

Keywords: autism, children, adolescents, camouflaging, masking, photo-elicitation

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Autistic people often experience co-occurring mental health concerns, with 55-94% meeting criteria for at least one mental health disorder (Hossain et al., 2020). Autistic individuals are also more likely to die by suicide, with the risk of suicide being seven times higher for autistic people than for non-autistic people (Hirvikoski et al., 2016). While research in mental health has been identified as a key priority across stakeholder groups (Cusack & Sterry, 2016; Roche et al., 2020), there remains a lack of understanding of what factors cause and maintain these mental health issues. Recently, camouflaging has been identified as a key risk factor for mental health issues among autistic individuals (Hull et al., 2021; Cassidy et al., 2020).

Camouflaging is described as the use of strategies by autistic people to minimize the visibility of their autistic traits in social situations, resulting in a ‘less autistic’ presentation (Hull et al., 2017; Lai et al., 2011, 2017). This phenomenon is noted as a common experience for autistic individuals in their navigation of the non-autistic world (Bargiela et al., 2016; Hull et al., 2017). Camouflaging can include a variety of conscious and unconscious strategies and behaviours that have been conceptualized and categorized in different ways (e.g., Ai et al., 2022; Cook et al., 2022; Hull et al., 2017; Livingston et al., 2020). One categorization is Hull and colleague’s (2017, 2019) descriptions of *masking* (hiding, suppressing, or otherwise controlling behaviours associated with autism [e.g., stimming, responses to sensory overstimulation]), *compensation* (explicit strategies to fill the gaps in social and communication skills [e.g., practicing appropriate facial expressions, researching the rules of social interactions], and *assimilation* (attempts to blend into social situations in which an individual feels uncomfortable, without letting others see their discomfort), which comprise the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q; Hull et al., 2017, 2019), a self-report measure of camouflaging.

Interviews with autistic adults (e.g., Hull et al., 2017) suggest that the two main motivations for camouflaging are to fit in and to form relationships with others. Many autistic adults report that they perceive an expectation from the general population that they need to change to be accepted by others and

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to obtain employment opportunities (Hull et al., 2017). Autistic adults have also reported struggling to make friends and form romantic partnerships due to their social difficulties (Hull et al., 2017).

Camouflaging may be perceived by autistic individuals as a way to overcome their social and communication differences to establish and maintain relationships.

Despite the potential that camouflaging attempts will result in positive consequences for autistic adults (e.g., relationships, job opportunities, acceptance), there is a growing body of literature demonstrating that camouflaging can have a profound impact on an individual's mental health and well-being (Hull et al., 2019, 2021; Cassidy et al., 2020). Camouflaging as measured by the CAT-Q has been found to predict scores of generalized anxiety, social anxiety, and depression (Hull et al., 2021), and has been linked to increased risk of lifetime suicidality (Cassidy et al., 2020) among autistic adults. There are several mechanisms through which the association between camouflaging behaviour and mental health difficulties may develop. First, camouflaging has been reported to be exhausting for those who engage in it due to the intense concentration, self-control, and management of discomfort required (Hull et al., 2017, Tierney et al., 2016). The effort needed to camouflage has been described by both autistic adults and adolescents as mentally, emotionally, and physically draining and may reduce individuals' capacity to deal with stress as well as exacerbate existing mental health problems (Hull et al., 2017, 2021; Tierney et al., 2016).

Second, camouflaging may result in feelings of inauthenticity or a loss of identity (Hull et al., 2017). For many autistic individuals, camouflaging their natural behaviours may be associated with feelings that they are hiding their true selves, betraying the autistic community, forming relationships based on deception, and/or even losing their sense of self (Hull et al., 2017). Additionally, individuals who camouflage may experience lower self-esteem and fewer close relationships, both of which are associated with poor mental health outcomes (Cooper et al., 2017; Cresswell & Cage, 2019).

Finally, camouflaging may result in missed or late diagnosis, as well as a lack of supports and services (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Kirkovski et al., 2013; Lai et al., 2015). Camouflaging may lead

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to a false perception that an individual is doing well, while they may be experiencing significant difficulties internally (Hull et al., 2017).

The area of camouflaging in autism has recently garnered considerable research attention; however, the most prominent research in this area has focused on autistic adults that were diagnosed relatively late in life (e.g., Hull et al., 2017; 2019; Lai et al., 2011; 2017). Information about the onset, etiology, and prevalence of camouflaging in autistic children and adolescents is currently not known, primarily because of a lack of valid tools available to measure camouflaging in this age group. The CAT-Q, the only self-report measure available to assess camouflaging behaviour, was developed for use with autistic adults, and has yet to be validated for use with children and adolescents (Hull et al., 2019). A caregiver-report version of the CAT-Q has been developed (Hannon et al., 2022); however, observational and proxy reports are limited to measuring behaviours that are visible to others. It is important to collect information from autistic children and adolescents themselves, who have unique insight into their own thoughts and behaviours.

The process of when and how autistic children and adolescents may begin to camouflage has not yet been investigated (Chapman et al., 2022). Reflections from autistic adults suggest that camouflaging may become a habit related to being conditioned to perceive their autistic traits as negative in childhood (Cage & Troxwell-Whitman, 2019). Of note, camouflaging research conducted with younger autistic children is exceedingly rare. Qualitative and mixed-methods research in this area has typically been conducted with adolescents (e.g., Bernardin et al., 2021b; Tierney et al., 2016), with few studies including children as young as 11 years of age (Cook et al., 2018; Sedgewick et al., 2019). To our knowledge there are currently no studies published that include interview data from younger autistic children (i.e., 10 years of age and younger), which significantly limits our understanding of when cognitions and behaviours related to camouflaging may develop and what the beginning stages of camouflaging may look like. Camouflaging research in autistic children and adolescents may be especially important, since social cognition and communication skills are acquired, and individuals first begin to become aware of social pressures and expectations in this developmental period (Garfield et al., 2001).

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Before researchers can attempt to accurately measure camouflaging in children and adolescents, foundational knowledge about the experience of camouflaging in children and adolescents and what it looks like is required. For example, it is unknown whether the phenomenon of camouflaging even exists early in life, and if so, what strategies and behaviours are used (e.g., masking, assimilation, compensation, or other behaviours/strategies that may be unique to children and adolescents), the motivations behind engaging in these behaviours, the degree of insight autistic children and adolescents have into their own camouflaging behaviours, the success of camouflaging attempts, and the perceived consequences of camouflaging for autistic children and adolescents. This information may have implications for the recognition of emerging camouflaging behaviour, and the prevention of the consequences known to be associated with camouflaging in adulthood, including mental health concerns and suicidality (Hull et al., 2019, 2021; Cassidy et al., 2020).

Current Study

This study provided evidence of emerging camouflaging behaviour in autistic children and adolescents and provided in-depth descriptions of camouflaging from those with lived experience. Qualitative research exploring camouflaging in autistic children and adolescents is scarce and has relied on informant reports or semi-structured interviews to collect information about the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of autistic children and adolescents (e.g., Bernardin et al., 2021a; Cook et al., 2018; Tierney et al., 2016). Communication challenges that some autistic children and youth may experience, such as alexithymia (difficulty articulating emotions to others; APA, 2022; Schauder et al., 2015), may make it difficult for autistic children and adolescents to communicate personal information to researchers, making qualitative research methods that rely solely on verbal communication potentially inaccessible (Haas et al., 2016). The current study used photo-elicitation to help participants more clearly articulate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with camouflaging and addressed four research questions:

1. *Do autistic children and adolescents engage in camouflaging?*
2. *What strategies are used and what behaviours are exhibited?*
3. *What are the motivations for camouflaging in autistic children and adolescents?*

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4. *What are the perceived outcomes or consequences of camouflaging in autistic children and adolescents?*

Method

Participants

Eight autistic children and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 14 years ($M = 11.88$, $SD = 1.89$) participated in the current study. Children and adolescent participants were diagnosed between the ages of 4 and 11 years ($M = 7.42$, $SD = 2.37$) and were living in the Canadian provinces of Alberta ($n = 6$, 75%), Saskatchewan ($n = 1$, 12.5%), and Ontario ($n = 1$, 12.5%). The sample was 62.5% male ($n = 5$ identified as male and $n = 3$ identified as female), and 100% ($n = 8$) identified as White, Anglo, or European Canadian. A majority of participants ($n = 7$, 87.5%) experienced at least one co-occurring mental health or neurodevelopmental condition, the most frequent being attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; $n = 4$, 57.1%) and learning disability ($n = 3$, 42.8%).

To participate, children and adolescents had to: (1) be between the ages of 8 and 14 years (2) have a confirmed diagnosis of autism without a diagnosis of co-occurring intellectual disability; (3) be able to communicate verbally in English; (4) have a caregiver willing to participate in the study with them (i.e., complete the demographic questionnaire); and (5) have access to a computer with a microphone and internet connection.

All caregivers that participated in the study were biological mothers to the autistic child/adolescent ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.86$ years, $SD = 6.41$) and identified as White, Anglo, or European Canadian ($n = 8$, 100%). Caregiver and family demographic information is presented in Table 1. Three of the seven caregivers attended all or parts of the interview with their child. These were caregivers to younger children (all 10 years of age) who aided their child's articulation of thoughts and feelings through prompting (e.g., "I think she would find ... interesting", "tell her more about ..."), and kept their child on track if they began to lose focus, become hyperactive, or drift off topic.

Table 1

Caregiver/Family Demographic Characteristics

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	<u>M (SD)</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>n (%)</u>
Marital status*			
Married/common law			5 (71.4)
Divorced/separated			1 (14.3)
Single			1 (14.3)
Level of education*			
Some college/university			4 (57.1)
University undergraduate degree			1 (14.3)
Trade/technical/vocational school or business/community college			1 (14.3)
Master's degree			1 (14.3)
Employment status*			
Working for pay for an individual or company			4 (57.1)
Self-employed			2 (28.6)
At-home parent			1 (14.3)
Perceived financial stability*			
We manage quite/very well			3 (42.9)
We manage			3 (42.9)
We have some trouble/don't manage well			1 (14.3)
Classification of community*			
Urban			5 (71.4)
Suburban			1 (14.3)
Rural			1 (14.3)

* $n = 7$; one caregiver did not complete the questionnaire and so some caregiver demographic information was not available.

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Measures and Procedure

Participant Recruitment and Ethics Approval

Participants were recruited through social media, word of mouth, a community presentation, and posters and advertisements circulated by email and posted in the waiting rooms and common areas of autism-specific organizations and mental health clinics. Additionally, families that had participated in past research and had consented to be contacted about future studies were invited to participate by email. Potential participants completed a brief pre-screening questionnaire over the phone with the researcher to confirm that they met eligibility criteria. Caregivers were also asked whether their child was aware of their autism diagnosis, the degree to which they understood and identified with their autism diagnosis, and what terms they preferred to be used when speaking about autism (person-first, identity-first, or no preference). Families were asked to provide copies of past diagnostic and/or psychoeducational reports to confirm autism diagnosis. If eligibility criteria were met and there were no significant concerns about the child or adolescent's ability to participate in the study, children, and adolescents were asked to provide verbal assent over the phone.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Following pre-screening, caregivers were emailed links to complete digital consent forms and a demographic questionnaire.

Photo-Elicitation

Using photographs in research with autistic people has been found to be effective in helping participants to clearly articulate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences as well as provide autistic participants with a creative form of expression that enables and empowers them to share their unique perspectives (Do et al., 2021). Photo-elicitation (Collier, 1957) is a flexible qualitative methodology where photos are incorporated into interviews to aid participants in fully expressing their perspectives (Phelan & Kinsella, 2011).

Orientation Session. A 30 to 45-minute orientation session was scheduled based on participant availability. Children and adolescents met with the researcher in groups of one to three. All group

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meetings and interviews took place virtually using the University of Calgary's teleconferencing platform (Zoom). The session served as an introduction to the goals of the study and the idea of taking photos to express emotions. Example photos were shown, and a warm-up activity included asking children and adolescents to interpret photos and discuss with the group and/or the researcher. The orientation session also included a discussion of what camouflaging is, in which autistic children and adolescents were invited to share if they had heard of camouflaging before and whether the topic resonated with them. Prompts in the form of questions were posed to the participants to facilitate discussion, encourage reflection, and to help participants generate ideas for their photos (e.g., "how do you feel in social situations? How do you feel when you are alone? How do you feel when you are being yourself? How do you feel when you are hiding yourself? What does being autistic mean to you?). Because autistic children and adolescents were partners in the study, they were invited to share their own ideas for prompts and were encouraged to decide for themselves what they wanted to take photos of. Participants were also provided tips on how to take photos, instructions on how to share their photos with the research team (uploaded to Google Drive), and an opportunity to ask questions about the research study. This meeting included a discussion of confidentiality, and children and adolescents were asked to refrain from taking identifying photos of others and avoid taking photos with sensitive (e.g., private) or inappropriate content (e.g., violent, or potentially offensive words or images). Participants were provided with a plain-language child-friendly handout to remind them of the information covered within the session and the contact information of the researcher so that they may ask questions if needed.

Time to Take Photos. Autistic children and adolescents were given a period of two to three weeks to take photos related to the topic and prompts provided. Participants residing within Alberta were offered a digital camera to keep as part of the study. Children and adolescents outside Alberta or that declined the digital camera used their own photo-taking device (e.g., iPad, mobile phone, camera). Participants were allowed to use photos that they had previously taken as well as other forms of art (e.g., drawings). The research team sent weekly reminders to participants and/or caregivers via email for participants to upload their photos to their own Google Drive folder as they took them.

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Individual Interviews. Once photos were received, the researcher scheduled a 30 to 45-minute individual interview with each child or adolescent participant to discuss their photos. While caregiver attendance was not required, caregivers were invited to join the interview if they believed their presence would be beneficial (e.g., to provide emotional support, to help prompt their child about things they may have trouble remembering or articulating) or the child or adolescent requested their presence. Child and adolescent participants led discussion by talking about their photos and offering insight into what was meaningful for them. Prompts from the researcher were used to encourage additional reflection if needed. Prompts were adapted from the SHOWeD method (Gant et al., 2009; Cheak-Zamora et al., 2018) for the present study to be simpler and more concrete for autistic children and adolescents. For example, the prompt, ‘why does this this condition exist?’ was removed, and several simple prompts were added including, ‘what does this photo capture about your life or story?’, ‘what does this photo mean to you?’ and ‘which of these photos is your favourite and why?’.

Data Analysis

Participant interviews were transcribed verbatim by an independent source from Zoom audio recordings and uploaded to NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2018). The first author identified major themes within the coded qualitative data consistent with the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) for conducting inductive thematic analysis. Transcripts were read several times and coded in NVivo. Themes and subthemes were generated inductively. Beginning with a set of tentative themes, these themes were refined, collapsed, and expanded until they adequately captured the full breadth of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Statements were organized into themes with single statements having the potential to fit multiple themes. The number of participant responses that fit each theme were counted.

Strategies associated with trustworthiness and credibility of data collection within qualitative research (Morrow, 2005) were utilized in this study wherever possible. For instance, allowing sufficient meeting time, engaging with participants at multiple time points, and encouraging participants to connect with the researcher throughout the study period reflected prolonged engagement. Obtaining perspectives from autistic children and adolescents via different modalities (i.e., photos and interview) allowed for

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triangulation (Patton, 1999). Following initial development of themes, a second coder reviewed 30% of participant data and also coded them, producing their own themes. These themes were compared to initial themes to reduce risk of bias. Coders spent time discussing each theme and came to 100% agreement.

Drew and Guillemin (2014)'s interpretive engagement framework was used for the analysis and interpretation of visual images. This framework was chosen for its systematic approach to analyzing visual data, as well as its congruency with thematic analysis for non-visual material. It includes three key stages of meaning-making: (1) through participant engagement, (2) through researcher-driven engagement, and (3) through re-contextualising.

Positionality

As Scharp and Thomas (2019) argue, scholars engaged in social science research should assess how their own positions and experiences may contribute to their interpretations of others' lived experiences. We acknowledge our perspectives as university-educated, White researchers who are neither autistic nor caregivers to autistic children. The first author, who analyzed and interpreted the data, has experience working with autistic children and adolescents and a background studying mental health concerns (anxiety, depression, and suicidality) among autistic children and adolescents.

Results

Participants each uploaded between 2 and 21 photos for the study ($M = 10.38$, $SD = 6.19$), contributing to a total of 83 photos. Through analysis of the content of both participant photos and interviews, 12 overall themes emerged. Themes were organized in relation to guiding research questions (i.e., what are the motivations, strategies/behaviours, and consequences of camouflaging among autistic children and adolescents?). Three themes, not directly associated with camouflaging, but related to autism identity and the perceived importance of being unique (Themes 10 to 12), also emerged. The themes and frequency with which each theme was endorsed are presented in Table 3, followed by a detailed overview of theme content. Participant quotations are accompanied by a researcher-assigned pseudonym which are outlined in Table 4 with each participant's age and gender.

Table 3

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Themes and Frequencies

Theme or subtheme	Number of interviewees that endorsed theme/subtheme <i>n (%)</i>
<u>Motivations</u>	
Theme 1: Camouflaging as a response to negative social experiences	3 (37.5)
Theme 2: Camouflaging as a learned habit	5 (62.5)
<u>Contexts</u>	
Theme 3: The person matters	5 (62.5)
Theme 4: You can be yourself with animals	4 (50.0)
<u>Strategies & Behaviours</u>	
Theme 5: Suppressing autistic behaviours	3 (37.5)
Theme 6: Hiding the self	5 (62.5)
Subthemes:	
<i>Hiding interests</i>	3 (37.5)
<i>Hiding emotions and opinions</i>	2 (25.0)
<i>Hiding physically</i>	2 (25.0)
<u>Consequences</u>	
Theme 7: Internal conflict	3 (37.5)
Subthemes:	
<i>Inability to be authentic self</i>	2 (25.0)
<i>Bipartite identity</i>	2 (25.0)
Theme 8: Stress	2 (25.0)
Theme 9: Needing time to recharge.	6 (75.0)

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Subthemes:

Quiet decompression 4 (50.0)

Calming items and activities 5 (62.5)

Autistic Identity

Theme 10: Unique interests 7 (87.5)

Theme 11: Personal values 3 (37.5)

Theme 12: Recognizing individual strengths and challenges 3 (37.5)

Table 4*Participant Pseudonyms*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender
Jordan	12	M
Katie*	10	F
Lisa*	10	F
Ethan*	10	M
Matthew	11	M
Jason	14	M
Ivy	14	F
Lucas	14	M

*Interviews in which a caregiver was present to provide support as requested by child and caregiver.

*Motivations**Theme 1: Camouflaging as a Response to Negative Social Experiences*

Three participants felt the need to camouflage because they anticipated that being themselves would evoke negative reactions from others. For example, they felt that they would make others feel uncomfortable or bored, that they would be perceived as strange or confusing, or that they would even be mocked or ridiculed for being their authentic selves. When asked why some people may want to hide or

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change parts of themselves, Jason (age 14 years) replied that it can “*help avoid uncomfortable situations*”.

In describing a photograph that Ivy (age 14 years) had taken of a friend’s cat that she was cat-sitting, she said:

“I have an interest in animals but it’s often hard to express it without it being seen as weird or confusing by you know, other people. Some people think it’s weird or confusing that someone would be so interested in taking care of just an animal.”

For Ivy, her prediction that others would react negatively to her interest was believed to be justified because she had experienced similar reactions in the past. Similarly, when asked how he feels in social situations, Lucas (age 14 years), responded: “*to be honest, most people find me annoying... I fixate on one thing, and I don’t really talk about much else*”.

Ivy explained that another photograph she had taken, one of wildflowers in a mountain field (Figure 1), was symbolic of an environment in which someone can be themselves, and “*actually flourish and grow*”. When asked what such an environment would look like for her, she responded that:

“I guess an environment that would help someone grow like me, where someone can freely express their interests without having fear of ridicule, being mocked, being, you know, um, harassed for it... We can tell when you’re mocking us and when you’re not genuinely interested and like, some people think we can’t, but we can.”

Theme 2: Camouflaging as a Learned Habit

Many participants felt that camouflaging was likely something they engaged in unconsciously. Two participants reported that they frequently suppress some of their natural behaviours at school and let them out when they were comfortable at home. This difference across contexts was perceived as being unconscious in that they were not typically aware of their change in behaviour across contexts. Jordan (age 12 years) identified that when he was excited at home he flapped his arms, while he tried not to do this at school. When asked if he did this because he had noticed negative reactions from others when he flapped his arms at school, he said, “*I don’t know, I don’t even know if I even like to do that at school... If I do it, I’m not doing it consciously... I do know when I do it at home*”. Ethan (age 10 years) chose a

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photograph of his toy cars for the study to depict his interest in cars and his bedroom as a place where he enjoys playing with his cars alone, often making car sounds. Ethan's mother commented that he likely makes these sounds unconsciously:

"I guess at home, you don't camouflage as much, hey? Sometimes you start doing sounds and you don't notice but we all hear them too. Sometimes we have to remind you like, 'oh, we're here too, we're hearing the sound' ... I think, at school with other kids they never hear those sounds and at home we hear them so much... And I think sometimes with us you don't even notice you're doing them."

Other participants highlighted the fact that they had been camouflaging for so long and to such an extent that it was something they couldn't stop. Ivy (age 14 years) described camouflaging as *"a mini crisis, but 24/7 to the point you've basically ingrained it to your behaviour, and you just can't stop anymore"*. When asked whether camouflaging was a conscious decision or an unconscious behaviour, she said it was *"more like a mixture of the two. More like, I know it's happening, but I just can't stop it"*. She later reflected that sometimes she was not aware of camouflaging in the moment but was able to recognize it several hours after the interaction, *"I don't know. It's hard to talk about it. It's hard to explain because sometimes half the time you don't even realize you're doing it until like hours later you realize, 'why was I doing this again?'"*.

Contexts

Theme 3: The Person Matters

Several participants felt that the company they were with was an important factor in determining whether they would engage in camouflaging. Lisa (age 10 years) expressed that it was typically easier to be alone than with other people; however, her best friend was an exception. Katie's (age 10 years) mother indicated that Katie felt pressure to camouflage around her same-age or older peers but did not experience this pressure around younger children. Ethan's (age 10 years) mother indicated that she had received comments that Ethan acted differently across the two households in which he resided. Overall, over half ($n = 5$) of participants made comments suggesting that characteristics of the social environment played a

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role in their camouflaging behaviour. Characteristics identified included the type and/or strength of the interpersonal relationship (i.e., close friends and family versus acquaintances, classmates, stepfamily, etc.) and the age of the individual(s) (i.e., younger versus older children). However, one participant emphasized that it did not matter who the person was; they were always camouflaging and never able to be their authentic selves in the presence of others. When Ivy (age 14 years) was asked whether there was anyone that she felt she was truly herself with, she responded that she did not:

Interviewer: *“Do you have people in your life that you feel you are totally yourself with?”*

Ivy: *“Not exactly, no.”*

Interviewer: *“So even with like family, close friends?”*

Ivy: *“Nope. It’s just kind of, I’ve come to accept that and I just kind of live with it.”*

Theme 4: You Can Be Yourself with Animals

Animals were frequent subjects of participant photographs, comprising approximately one quarter (27%) of photos submitted for the study. Most animal photos ($n = 20$) were of family pets, and an additional two depicted wild animals (e.g., birds). When discussing these photos, many participants revealed that it was easier for them to be themselves around animals than people, and that when they were in the presence of animals, they did not feel that camouflaging was necessary. This was because animals were perceived by participants as accepting, affectionate, and capable of unconditional love. Conversely, humans were perceived as judgemental and often difficult to understand. Lucas (age 14 years) shared a photo of his pet dog, and provided the following explanation for why he chose the photo for the study:

“I feel like I can just kind of be myself around [pet name] because... he won’t say, ‘hey [Lucas], that’s stupid’, or ‘why are you telling me about this?’ because he’s a dog and dogs cannot understand English, nor can they talk.”

Katie (age 10 years) also shared a photo of her dog for the study. When asked what the photo meant to her, she answered that *“he understands me”*. When Katie was prompted to explain how she knew her dog understood her, she described how her dog would often cuddle up with her when she was sad to make her feel better. Later in the interview, Katie chose to talk about a photo of a neighborhood cat

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(Figure 1), further expressing her love for animals and nature. Her mother proposed that “*she likes nature so much because she doesn’t have to camouflage. Nature is just nature, and you can be whoever you are no matter where you are.*”

Strategies & Behaviours

Theme 5: Suppressing Autistic Behaviours

Three participants described suppressing certain behaviours when they were away from home. For Jordan (age 12 years), this was flapping his arms when excited, for Lucas (age 14 years), this was jumping up and down when excited, and for Ethan (age 10 years), this was making car noises. Within the context of the interviews, these behaviours can be understood as self-stimulatory behaviour or “stimming”, which is experienced by autistic people. While often unconscious (see Theme 2), these participants engaged in this stimming behaviour at home, but to a lesser extent or not at all at school. When discussing a photo of the outside of Lucas’ house, he reflected that: “*I can just be myself, which, like, when I get excited I kind of jump up and down, which is ridiculous, and... a stupid thing to do, and I would never do it in front of anyone at school.*”

Theme 6: Hiding the Self

Over half of participants ($n = 5$) spoke about feelings that they could not allow others to see their true selves. This was typically due to worry that others would judge them, treat them differently, or like them less if they saw who they really were.

Hiding Interests. Lucas (age 14 years) described avoiding talking, for fear that he would bore or “irritate” others: “*I simply just listen, because nobody wants to hear about it, so why should I talk?*” Ethan (age 10 years) was hesitant to disclose his interests at all, even with his friends. When discussing a photo of him in his garden, it was revealed that gardening was something special to Ethan that he didn’t choose to tell many people about. When asked why he kept this interest to himself, he responded that it was because “*they don’t need to know*”. When subsequently asked whether he felt his friends knew very much about him, he answered that they didn’t, “*because I don’t tell them*”. When Ethan’s mother was asked

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whether she was surprised about any of the photos he shared for the study, she shared her perspective about his reticence to share his interests:

“There’s lots of big pieces that he doesn’t share with other people. Like the gardening is pretty special.... I guess I feel a little bit sad because some of the things you are really good at and make you happy, but then other people don’t even know about those things. Like maybe they like them too, you just haven’t shared it.”

Hiding Emotions and Opinions. When asked what camouflaging looks like for her, Lisa (age 10 years) responded, *“I hold anger inside”*, describing that she contains her emotions in social situations but afterwards, *“it all comes out”*. Later in the interview, Lisa showed the interviewer her sketchbook and a drawing she had titled, *“All the Emotions”* (Figure 1). When asked about what emotions she felt when she was camouflaging, she responded that she felt, *“all of them”*, suggesting that while camouflaging was an internally emotional experience for her, Lisa felt she was not able to outwardly express these emotions.

Ivy (age 14 years) described feeling the need to be agreeable and polite, even when uncomfortable. As an example, she spoke about an expectation that you *“must give your family members a hug; you can’t say no”*. Additionally, she felt that for her camouflaging included telling people what they wanted to hear, while keeping her own feelings and opinions to herself: *“Well, it’s usually just not speaking your mind at all and just saying what they want you to say.”* Ivy remarked that this tendency to be agreeable can become so pervasive that it can be difficult to distinguish your opinions from the opinions of others:

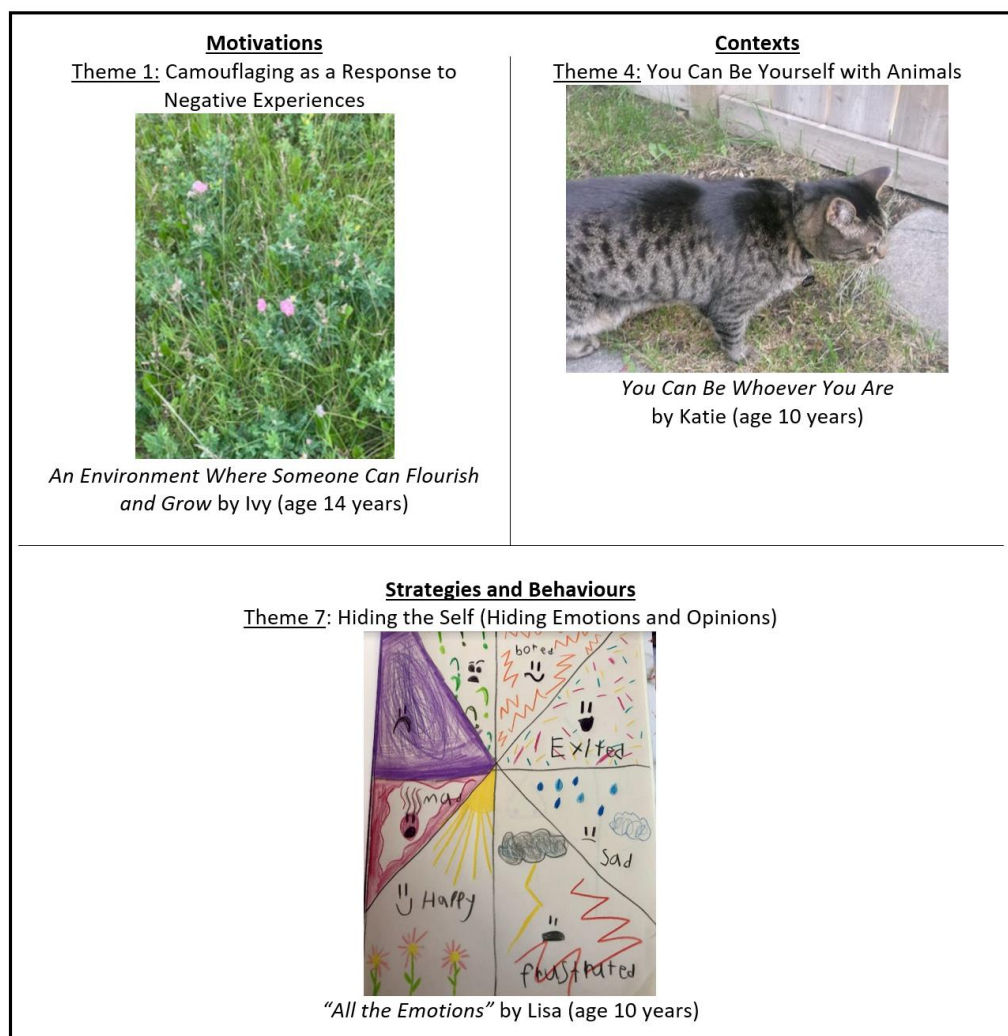
“Do I really agree with this person? Or am I just telling myself I do and just saying that I agree with them? ... Masking is literally just like gaslighting yourself. Thinking what everyone else wants you to think and like act the way other people want you to act.”

Hiding Physically. When asked about camouflaging, Matthew (age 11 years) said that he sometimes tries to disguise himself to hide his identity and not be recognized:

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“Sometimes I hide my identity. It’s kind of hard cause I always get recognized. Well, usually I have to literally get my hair grown for no one to recognize me... I would change my hair, change my looks... cause then people can like me more.”

Ethan (age 10 years) also discussed hiding behind his hairstyle. When his mother observed that he liked to keep his hair long and pulled down to cover his face, Ethan confirmed, *“I like it over my eyes”*, and agreed that it was because he was more comfortable when other people couldn’t see his eyes.

Figure 1*Camouflaging Motivations, Contexts, and Strategies*

Note: Image titles in quotations are participant-generated titles. Image titles without quotations were generated by the research team based on accompanying participant quotes.

Consequences

Theme 7: Internal Conflict

Inability to be Authentic Self. Some participants described that a fear of judgement kept them from being themselves in social situations, leading to a loss of identity and confusion about who they were. Ivy (age 14 years) created a digital artwork for the study (Figure 5) that she titled, “Little Miss Masking”. Through this image, she was able to express the conflicting thoughts she experienced when camouflaging:

“Well, it’s more like what it feels like, what the internal thoughts are and just like the confliction you feel when you’re masking. Because when you mask for a long time, especially you mask almost, you mask on the daily for hours, maybe even days at a time, with no way to recharge, you kind of just don’t really know who you are.”

In addition to confusion about identity, Ivy also endorsed feeling significant guilt, and worried that by not being her authentic self, she was being deceitful to the people around her:

“Like, yes, friendships can come out of it. Yes, like relationships, experiences, job opportunities can come out of it, but at what cost? It’s like when you’re masking 24/7 in front of someone and only masking around them, it’s pretty much like lying to them to their face.”

Bipartite Identity. Interestingly, two participants used images for the study suggesting that there were two sides or parts to their identity. Katie (age 10 years) explained that a photo of two magpies standing next to each other (Figure 6) was an “*optical illusion*” in which the two birds looked like one. When asked how this photo related to her own life, her response indicated that like there were two birds making up one bird image, there were two sides to her: “*there’s two of me... there’s a crazy me and a calm me.*”

Lisa (age 10 years) used an image of black and white stripes (Figure 7) to represent her experience masking, saying that “*the black one is like masking and the white is just being calm*”. She also drew a self-portrait to accompany the photograph (Figure 8), using the same black and white motif to depict her masked and unmasked, both literally and figuratively.

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Theme 8: Stress

Two participants spoke about stress and other negative emotions in relation to camouflaging. When asked to describe what camouflaging felt like, Lisa's (age 10 years) mother prompted her to reflect on a time when she was preparing for a two-week visit from her grandmother:

Mom: *"You were really, really worried, right, because you said, 'I don't know how to not mask and it's really stressful when I do it'. So, can you explain what it's like to have to feel like you have to mask? Can you explain what it feels like when you're masking?"*

Lisa: *"I don't know"*

Mom: *"You don't know how to explain it, ok, well what does it feel like when you're not masking?"*

Lisa: *"Normal and calm."*

Ivy (age 14 years) described camouflaging as a "*mini crisis*" that it made it "*hard to function*" and acknowledged that prolonged camouflaging could ultimately lead to issues such as fatigue, anxiety, and depression.

Theme 9: Needing Time to Recharge

Many participants ($n = 6$) emphasized the importance of time to replenish their energy and regulate their emotions after they had been drained by socializing and/or camouflaging.

Quiet Decompression. Participants reported valuing time alone in their bedroom or another quiet space. Ethan (age 10 years) and his mother discussed the importance of him having access to his bedroom and his preferred activity after a day at school:

Mom: *"It's interesting because when you play with your cars, it's almost the first thing you do when you get home. You do your routine and then you go in your room and close the door. It's almost like you need that time after school for that activity."*

Matthew (age 11 years) chose to share a photo of the sun shining on a cemetery near his home (Figure 9). When asked to describe the meaning behind the photo, Matthew referred to the location as "*my quiet place*". He further explained that he liked being alone because everyone was too loud at school,

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causing him to get headaches. When asked how he felt when he was in his quiet place, he said he was “*in peace*”.

Calming Items or Activities. Several participants identified items they used or activities that they engaged in to relax or calm themselves. Lisa (age 10 years) shared a photo of her fidget toy collection, expressing that using them “*helped to calm me down after a long day of masking and stuff*”. Other participant photos that were described as representing calming items were photos of toy cars, a blanket, and a pinecone. Lisa also took a photo while cocooned inside her silk swing (Figure 2), stating that it was another way she liked to calm down. Other activities that participants endorsed as being calming or relaxing were drawing, reading, and petting animals.

Figure 2

Consequences of Camouflaging

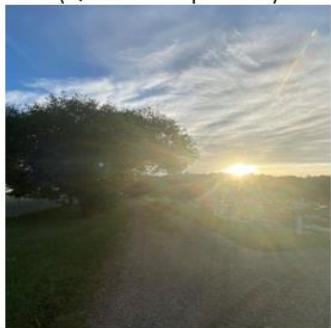
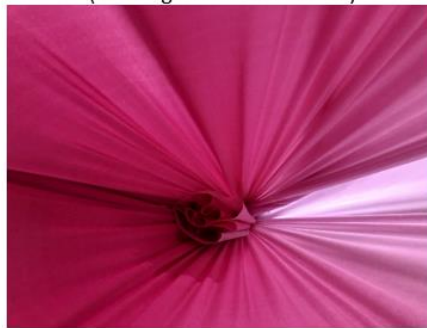
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ConsequencesTheme 8: Internal Conflict
(Inability to be Authentic Self)*"Little Miss Masking"* by Ivy (age 14 years)

Text on image reads: "Identity? Who's that? Am I faking this? Am I the problem? 2 faced. I feel broken.

Say and do what they want, maybe they treat me human. Hate? Love? What's so different. I don't like this but... I don't even understand my own emotions.

Who am I?

Theme 8: Internal Conflict (Bipartite Identity)*There's Two of Me* by Katie (age 10 years)*"The Side Not Seen"* and *"Masking While Masking"* by Lisa (age 10 years)Theme 9: Needing Time to Recharge
(Quiet Decompression)*My Quiet Place* by Matthew (age 11 years)Theme 9: Needing Time to Recharge
(Calming Items or Activities)*"Inside My World"* by Lisa (age 10 years)*Autistic Identity*

All participants in the study chose to take photos and discuss what they felt was special about them, and in particular, their autistic identity. Three core themes emerged related to this area.

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Theme 10: Unique Interests

When asked about the meaning behind a photo of a feather (Figure 3), Katie (age 10 years) expressed that the feather was unique like her. In response to a question about what made her unique, Katie said, *“I have different likings than everyone else”*. Throughout the study, it became clear that participant’s likes, interests, and passions were an important part of their identity. Subjects of participant photos were often items that were symbolic of their preferred interests ($n = 19$ photos, 22.9%), including art, board games, cars, soccer, video games, Lego, dinosaurs, and trains.

Theme 11: Personal Values

Some participants chose photos that they felt represented their personal values or characteristics (e.g., kindness, acceptance, authenticity) that they wished to emulate. Lisa (age 10 years) stated that one of her favourite images she selected for the study was one of her role models, American actress and singer, Zendaya. Lisa emphasized that she looked up to and was inspired by Zendaya because of her kind heart. Katie (age 10 years) spoke about the importance of suspending judgement in her interview. When asked if there was something she thought people could learn from her photos, she conveyed the message: *“don’t judge a book by its cover”*. Similarly, Ivy (age 14 years) highlighted that assumptions should not be made about someone based on their diagnosis:

“I guess juts be patient with people and like, despite any diagnosis that someone has, don’t treat them any lesser than anyone else, right? Like don’t treat me like I’m, like some people treat me like I’m three as soon as they realize I’m autistic.... so, I guess just like, don’t always see someone as their diagnosis and only that.”

When Lisa (age 10 years) was asked how her photos could be used to teach something to others, she answered: *“try to be your true self”*. In response to a query about why it was important to be yourself, she replied: *“it’s just good, it’s just important”*. While authenticity was a principle that Lisa valued, earlier in the interview it was revealed that she often hid her true self through camouflaging, resulting in significant stress. It may be the case that autistic children and adolescents internalize authenticity as a

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cultural ideal, and camouflaging acts as a barrier to achieving this ideal, resulting in internal conflict, dissonance, and distress.

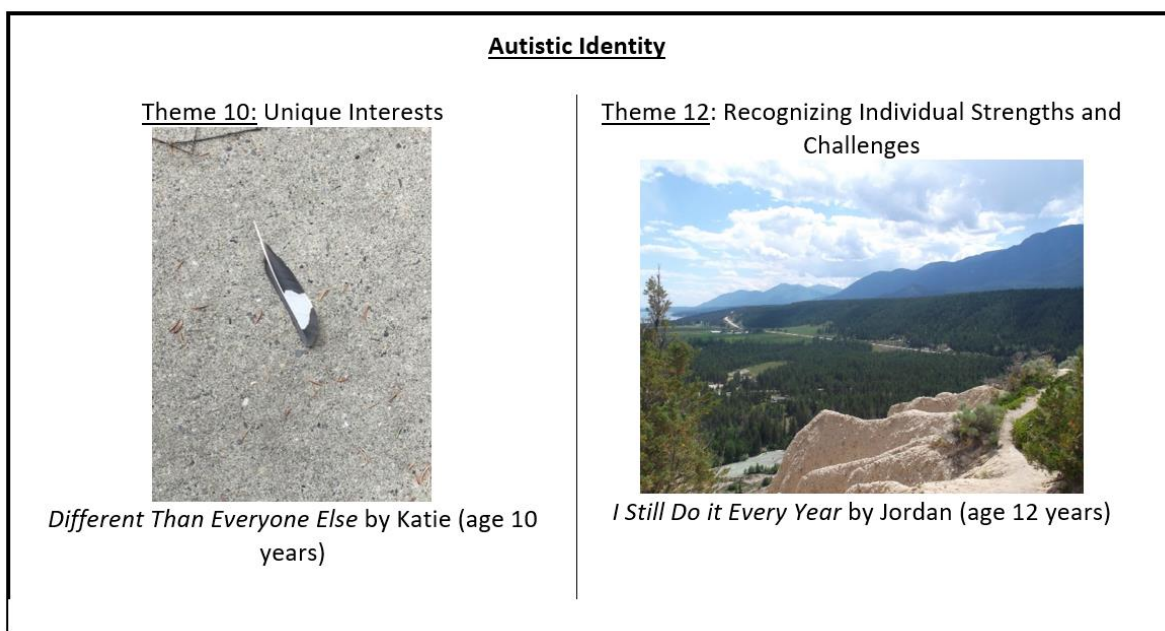
Theme 12: Recognizing Individual Strengths and Challenges

Several participants captured their talents and strengths in their photos. For example, Matthew (age 11 years) shared a photo of a Rubik's cube he solved, expressing that he was "*impressed with myself*". When asked about what the photo meant to him, he said, "*it means I'm good at stuff*". Other strengths depicted in participant photos were math, video games, imagination/creativity, and courage. Jordan (age 12 years) shared a photo of a mountain trail (Figure 3) and explained: "*I'm afraid of heights, and this, I don't know if you can tell but it's very high up... but I still do it every single year.*"

When asked if there was anything he would want others to know about autism, Jordan answered that "*it's a spectrum, not a like one-size-fits-all thing... everyone has their own challenges*". Jordan's message can be interpreted to signify that while autistic children and adolescents each have various strengths and abilities, they also experience unique challenges and individual needs.

Figure 3

Autistic Identity



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Interviewer Observations

Information obtained from interviews went beyond what was directly conveyed by participants, extending to observations about the quality, quantity, and content of participant communication. While some participants were able to speak extensively about their camouflaging experience, many found camouflaging difficult to talk about. A subset of participants reported that they likely engaged in camouflaging; however, were unable to provide additional details or examples. For instance, below is an excerpt from an interview with Jason (age 14 years):

Interviewer: *“Do you feel like you ever camouflage?”*

Jason: *“Yes.”*

Interviewer: *“Can you tell me about that a little bit?”*

Jason: *“I don’t know, I, yeah, I don’t ... Yes, off the top of my head I don’t know, but I, I do know that there are things I do.”*

When asked to explain what camouflaging felt like, Lisa (age 10 years) said *“I don’t know”*. When asked how it felt when she was not camouflaging, she replied, *“normal and calm.”* While her verbal descriptions of her emotions were very brief, she shared a drawing (Figure 1) in which she had depicted and labelled a wide range of emotions using color, facial expressions, and other imagery (e.g., a rain cloud for ‘sad’, confetti for ‘excited’). In the context of the interview, Lisa was able to communicate more effectively about emotions through her art than through her verbal communication. Notably, Lisa did not have difficulty articulating herself in other parts of the interview and was often very talkative, especially when sharing her interests and passions. It is likely the case that camouflaging is a particularly difficult experience for autistic children and adolescents to identify and describe.

While communications about camouflaging ranged widely in their level of detail, nearly all participants recognized that they camouflaged to some extent. Only one participant stated that they did not camouflage. When asked whether she camouflaged, Katie (age 10 years) stated, *“no... I stand out.”* However, after her mother offered examples to the contrary (e.g., spending time in nature so she can be herself, seeking out younger peers so she doesn’t have to act mature, being agreeable or passive with

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certain friends), Katie agreed that she wasn't always able to be herself completely. Communication about camouflaging likely relies on one's ability to remember and reflect on past experiences. For participants that did not have a caregiver present to remind them of these experiences and label them as camouflaging, providing examples of camouflaging in the interview may have been difficult.

Discussion

Reports from autistic adults suggest that camouflaging begins in childhood or adolescence and persists into adulthood (Chapman et al., 2022), contributing to mental health problems, confusion about identity, lower self-esteem, exhaustion, and burnout (Bargiela et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2017; Hull et al., 2017, 2021; Tierney et al., 2016). Despite this, few studies have examined camouflaging in autistic children and adolescents, limiting our understanding of when cognitions and behaviours related to camouflaging may develop, and what emerging camouflaging behaviours may look like. This study provides evidence of emerging camouflaging behaviour in autistic children and adolescents and offer an in-depth description of this phenomenon from those with lived experience.

Findings from this study highlight that camouflaging is a phenomenon that autistic children, as young as 10 years of age, experience. Cook and colleagues (2018) also found that autistic children and adolescents in their study engaged in camouflaging. Specifically, using qualitative interviews with autistic girls aged 11 to 17 years of age ($M_{age} = 14.45$), these researchers found that camouflaging was perceived by autistic girls to be a solution to their problems (e.g., to conceal their differences, be included in friendship groups). While qualitative research obtaining self-report data from young autistic children is rare, quantitative research has found evidence of camouflaging behaviour among elementary school-aged children using discrepancy approaches (e.g., Corbett et al., 2020; Livingston et al., 2019; Wood-Downie et al., 2021) and observational methods (e.g., Dean et al., 2017). Past research has also demonstrated sex and gender-based differences in social skills and language among elementary school-aged autistic children, with researchers suggesting that these differences are due to autistic girls engaging in camouflaging to hide their social difficulties (e.g., Parish-Morris et al., 2017; Ratto et al., 2017; Rynkiewicz et al., 2016). The current study corroborates previous literature demonstrating that autistic

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children and adolescents camouflage. However, while previous literature has found that camouflaging exists among elementary school-aged children, it does not tell us what emerging camouflaging looks like. This is the first study to enable autistic children in this age range to describe (through both words and images) their experience of camouflaging. Many participants in this study indicated that they engaged in camouflaging because they presumed that being themselves in social situations would result in negative reactions from others. These beliefs originated from previous social interactions in which autistic children and adolescents received direct (e.g., they were told by another person that their interests were strange) or indirect (e.g., they inferred from another person's tone of voice or facial expressions that they were uninterested in the conversation) feedback that they were perceived as boring, confusing, and/or strange. The finding that autistic children and adolescents camouflage due to negative past experiences is in line with previous research demonstrating that autistic people experience stigma (Shtayermman, 2009), misunderstandings or underestimation of their abilities (Heasman & Gillespie, 2018), and rapid negative first impressions formed by non-autistic observers (Sasson et al., 2017). For autistic children and adolescents, camouflaging is likely used as a protective strategy to shield them from a society that lacks understanding of and empathy for autistic people (Botha et al., 2020, 2021; Milton, 2012).

One finding from previous qualitative research that was not observed in the current study is that autistic children and adolescents also camouflage to gain positive outcomes. For example, Bernardin et al., (2021a) explored motivations for camouflaging among autistic and non-autistic adolescents (aged 13-18 years) using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Participants reported that they camouflaged to both avoid negative consequences (e.g., avoid negative perceptions and judgments from others, avoid teasing and bullying) and gain positive outcomes (e.g., be perceived positively, make friends). Similarly, interviews conducted with autistic females aged 11-17 years (Cook et al., 2018) revealed that participants camouflaged to make friends and fit in with other non-autistic girls. However, participants in the current study focused solely on camouflaging to avoid negative consequences. One possible explanation for this finding is that the motivation to camouflage to form relationships may become more common later in development, with autistic adolescents being more motivated to gain

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friendships than autistic children. There is evidence that desires for social relationships increase in many autistic people by adolescence, which can be difficult for them to manage due to social difficulties (Cresswell et al., 2019). It may be the case that when motivations for peer acceptance and close friendship increase in adolescence, camouflaging is employed as a strategy to achieve these goals. Investigation of the developmental trajectory of camouflaging motivations and behaviours may be an important avenue for future research.

Participants in this study often described camouflaging as being unconscious and automatic. Some children and adolescents indicated that camouflaging had been ingrained in their behaviour to the point that it was difficult to stop. This finding is consistent with reflections from autistic adults who report camouflaged not by choice, but because camouflaging became a habitual and automatic response in social situations (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). In Cage and Troxell-Whitman's (2019) study, autistic adults reported that camouflaging occurred through a 'lifetime of conditioning' in which autistic people are led to see their differences as a problem in childhood (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019).

Autistic children and adolescents reported that the characteristics of the immediate environment (i.e., who they were interacting with) played a role in whether they camouflaged. The fact that an autistic individual's camouflaging behaviour will vary across contexts is well-established in the autistic adult literature. Some researchers have suggested that camouflaging is an adaptation to the environment, with variations in person-environment fit influencing the presence of camouflaging behaviour (Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015; Lai et al., 2015). Camouflaging can be viewed through an ecological and context-based lens, in which camouflaging does not develop due to deficits within the individual, but through a mismatch between the autistic individual's unique patterns of strengths and difficulties and the demands of the environment (Mandy, 2019). Consequently, it has been proposed that intervention for autistic people should not focus solely on the individual's skills and development, but on enhancing the person-environment fit. For instance, making accommodations within an individual's ecological system (e.g., family, school, community) can help build resiliency and perhaps prevent camouflaging among autistic people (Lai & Szatmari, 2019; Mandy, 2019).

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Some examples of camouflaging generated by autistic children and adolescents were like examples of camouflaging drawn from research with autistic adults and could fit into Hull et al.'s (2019) conceptualization of types camouflaging behaviour (masking, assimilation, and compensation). For example, three participants described suppressing autistic stimming behaviours when they were at school. This is like 'masking', an aspect of camouflaging that focuses on hiding or controlling one's autistic traits in social situations (Hull et al., 2017, 2019). On the other hand, relatively few participants in the current study ($n = 3$, 28.6%) mentioned their autistic traits at all in the interview. In contrast, over half of participants ($n = 4$, 57.1%) endorsed beliefs that they could not be their true selves, choosing instead to hide a range of aspects of their identity, including their interests, their emotions, their opinions, and their physical appearance. This need that participants felt to hide their authentic selves is most conceptually consistent with Hull et al. (2019)'s 'assimilation', which includes the idea that autistic individuals are not comfortable being themselves in social situations and feel the need to put on an act or performance (Hull et al., 2019). One explanation for as to why behaviours consistent with assimilation were more frequently endorsed by participants in the current study is c that autistic children and adolescents may not yet be able to identify their autistic traits and distinguish them from other aspects of their identity. Therefore, rather than camouflaging specific traits or behaviours that are stigmatized, children and adolescents may overgeneralize, hiding as much of themselves from others as possible as a form of protection.

The third type of camouflaging, 'compensation' includes explicit strategies used by an individual to fill gaps in their social communication skills (Hull et al., 2017, 2019). Examples of compensation strategies used by autistic adults include practicing appropriate facial expressions, researching the rules of social interactions, and learning social cues from media. None of the autistic children and adolescents in this study spontaneously provided examples of camouflaging behaviour consistent with compensation. It may be the case that compensation strategies emerge later in the lifespan because of increasingly complex social expectations and/or further development of cognitive skills required to compensate. Alternatively, it is possible that autistic children and adolescents use compensation strategies that were not captured in the current study. The simplistic definition of camouflaging used in the orientation session ("some kids

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may change or hide parts of themselves in social situations to fit in with other kids”) does not include the aspect of compensation as a camouflaging type, and so participants may not have identified strategies they use to compensate in this study.

Autistic children and adolescents in this study reported that prolonged camouflaging resulted in internal conflict. For example, participants relayed beliefs that they could not be their authentic selves in social situations, leading to feelings of confusion and guilt. Experiences of internal conflict originating from camouflaging have been well-documented in both the child and adult literature (e.g., Hull et al., 2017; Bargiela et al., 2016; Bernardin et al., 2021a). For example, Bernardin et al., (2021a) conducted interviews with autistic adolescents (aged 13-18 years) and found that the most frequently cited consequence of camouflaging was feeling inauthentic. This theme included the notion that others do not get to see who you really are, which can lead to questions about whether your friendships are genuine, as well as feelings that relationships are built upon deception (Bernardin et al., 2021a). A compelling theme emerged from participant’s images and their verbal descriptions that suggested that there were two sides or parts to their identity that were often opposing or in conflict with each other (e.g., “masking” versus “normal and calm”). To our knowledge, previous qualitative studies have not described camouflaging in this way, and the idea of a bipartite identity because of camouflaging may be a unique finding that was facilitated by the collection of visual imagery in this study.

Autistic children and adolescents in the current study described camouflaging as stressful, using language such as, “*mini crisis*”, “*hard to function*”, and the opposite of “*normal and calm*”. This finding parallels themes from Bernardin et al.’s (2021a) study in which autistic adolescents reported feeling ‘bad’ (e.g., tired, sad, and drained) after camouflaging, as well as previous literature in autistic adults highlighting negative mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and stress among both autistic adults (Hull et al., 2019, 2021; Cassidy et al., 2020) and adolescents (Bernardin et al., 2021a, 2021b).

Autistic children and adolescents reported that they generally valued time to themselves, and that this time was especially crucial after a period of camouflaging. Participants reported seeking out quiet

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and/or private spaces and engaging in relaxing and/or preferred activities to self-regulate, replenish their energy, and release any stimming behaviours they had suppressed throughout the day. The fact that autistic people find camouflaging to be exhausting and draining, necessitating time alone to recover, has been a consistent finding in other qualitative research conducted among adults (e.g., Hull et al., 2017) and adolescents (e.g., Bernardin et al., 2021a).

Participants were eager to share positive aspects of their identity, including their strengths, interests, and abilities. Autistic children and adolescents in this study also emphasized the importance of being unique, relayed messages of acceptance, and described autism as a spectrum that is not a “*one-size-fits-all thing*”. These perspectives align with the neurodiversity movement, which conceptualizes autism and other neurodevelopmental disabilities as valued aspects of human diversity rather than defects that need to be treated or cured (Leadbitter et al., 2021; Kapp et al., 2013). While autistic children and adolescents discussed autism and other individual differences in positive ways, they also chose to hide aspects of their identities and camouflage their autistic traits, which may be a source of internal conflict and cognitive dissonance. It may be the case that autistic children and adolescents experience social support and neurodiversity-aligned attitudes at home but encounter stigma and rejection in other environments. Notably, when participants in the current study talked about negative social experiences that motivated them to camouflage, they primarily identified experiences that occurred with peers and/or in the school environment. The transition that autistic children make into elementary school or other early social environments may be when children first encounter stigmatization and pressures to camouflage, making it a critical period in which to target prevention efforts.

Limitations, Considerations, and Future Directions

While collecting self-reported information about camouflaging from autistic children and adolescents was a strength of the study, relying on subjective accounts of camouflaging experiences also has inherent drawbacks. For instance, because the idea of camouflaging has recently received widespread attention within the autistic community, it is likely that many participants had already heard about camouflaging and held preconceived notions about what camouflaging looks like prior to enrolling in the

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study. Consequently, it is unknown whether participant's ideas about camouflaging resulted directly from their own experiences, or whether they were influenced by external factors.

Another drawback of using self-report data from autistic children and adolescents is that it required participants to: (1) understand the concept of camouflaging, (2) possess the self-awareness to be able to identify camouflaging within themselves, (3) retrieve prior camouflaging experiences from their memory, and (4) communicate their experiences to the interviewer. These are processes that autistic children and adolescents may find challenging due to executive functioning and communication difficulties (Robinson et al., 2009; Hill, 2004; APA, 2022). Autistic children and adolescents may benefit from additional time and support (e.g., multiple group meetings) to formulate and convey their ideas related to camouflaging. Future research should engage with participants at additional time points to ensure that individuals understand the concept of camouflaging and allow for greater opportunities for participants to share their insights.

Another limitation of this study is that a small and homogeneous sample was used. While autistic children and adolescents did not need to camouflage to participate, recruitment materials for the study advertised the study topic, and it is likely that caregivers who were interested in camouflaging, and/or believed their child engaged in camouflaging behaviour were motivated to participate. In this case, the number of participants who endorsed engaging in camouflaging behaviour may have been exaggerated in this population. Lower income and ethnic minority families were underrepresented in the sample. Further, the current study excluded autistic children and adolescents that do not use verbal communication and/or had a diagnosed intellectual disability. Future research should recruit a larger and more diverse sample to better understand camouflaging among autistic children and adolescents of different demographics and abilities.

Conclusion

Camouflaging may be a key risk factor for the development and maintenance of mental health problems among autistic people, but little is known about the onset, etiology, and presentation of camouflaging among children and adolescents. This exploratory study utilized a unique methodology to

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provide evidence of emerging camouflaging behaviour among autistic children and adolescents and supply rich descriptions of this phenomenon from those with lived experience. Young participants in the current study expressed that camouflaging had already become a habit that was difficult to stop, implying that efforts aimed at preventing the negative outcomes associated with camouflaging (e.g., mental health problems, late or missed diagnosis, a lack of support) should begin early. Findings from the current study support the assertion that an environment in which autistic people ‘can flourish and grow’ is one in which non-autistic people are more understanding and accepting of autistic people. Understanding the experience of camouflaging in the early developmental period may have implications for the prevention of consequences associated with camouflaging, including internal conflict, stress, exhaustion, and mental health concerns.

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