

DOCUMENT SUMMARY This study investigates the construct validity of the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q), a key self-report measure for autistic masking. It uses statistical analysis to determine if the CAT-Q is distinct from measures of social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and autistic social traits. The findings largely support the CAT-Q's validity as a measure of a unique construct but highlight potential overlap and flaws in its 'Assimilation' subscale, providing critical insights for any assessment tool aiming to measure masking.

FILENAME McKinnon2025_Research_Article_CATQ_ConstructValidityVsSocialAnxiety

METADATA Primary Category: RESEARCH Document Type: research_article Relevance: Core Update Frequency: Static Tags: #CATQ, #camouflaging, #masking, #assessment_validation, #self_report, #social_anxiety, #autistic_adults, #construct_validity, #women, #late_diagnosis Related Docs:

FORMATTED CONTENT

Exploring the construct validity of the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q)

Why This Matters to Enliten

This paper is core to our mission because it rigorously evaluates a self-report questionnaire for masking—a central experience for many of our clients. It provides statistical evidence that **camouflaging is a distinct construct and not just social anxiety**, validating the lived experiences of high-masking individuals. The study's methodology, which includes self-identified autistic adults and a majority-female sample, aligns with our commitment to inclusive, community-responsive research and our focus on populations often missed by traditional diagnostics.

Furthermore, the paper models the critical scrutiny we apply to all assessment tools. By identifying specific weaknesses in a widely used questionnaire (the CAT-Q's 'Assimilation' subscale), it reinforces our position that no standardized test is perfect and highlights the need for nuanced, person-centered interpretation—or better yet, the development of more valid tools like the Enliten Interview. The explicit use of identity-first language and the acknowledgment of sociocultural factors in camouflaging also directly support our brand values and revolutionary stance.

Critical Statistics for Our Work

This study provides valuable data on a population highly relevant to Enliten.

Participant Demographics (N=308)

- **Diagnosis:** 86% had a professional autism diagnosis; 14% self-identified as autistic. The study found no differences in reported autistic traits between these groups.
- **Gender:** 61.4% Female , 28.6% Male , 10.1% Non-binary, other genders, or undisclosed.
- **Age:** Mean age was 36.17 years (SD = 11.62, Range 18-76).
- **Ethnicity:** 77.27% Caucasian , 9.42% Mixed race , 7.47% Asian.
- **Mental Health:**
 - 55.52% reported an anxiety disorder diagnosis in the past 5 years.
 - 51.62% reported a depressive disorder diagnosis.
 - Only 30.84% reported no co-occurring mental health diagnoses.
 - 33.12% reported two co-occurring diagnoses, and 12.99% reported three or more.

Assessment Scores and Overlap

- **High Rates of Social Anxiety:** 93% of participants reported social anxiety above general population cut-offs on the SIAS-6 and SPS-6 short scales. This is higher than the 51% found in meta-analyses, potentially due to the study's focus on camouflaging.
- **High Autistic Traits:** 91% of participants scored above the cut-off on the BAPQ aloof subscale and 96% on the pragmatic language subscale.
- **Correlations:**
 - The study confirmed its hypothesis that correlations between the CAT-Q and measures of social anxiety, FNE, and autistic traits would be positive but below the $r=0.8$ threshold for collinearity (i.e., they are not measuring the exact same thing).
 - All inter-correlations were <0.66 .
 - The strongest association was between the **CAT-Q Assimilation** subscale and **autistic social traits** (BAPQ Aloof + Pragmatic Language), with $r=0.66$.
 - The CAT-Q Assimilation subscale was more strongly correlated with social anxiety ($r=0.54$) than FNE ($r=0.29$).
 - Conversely, the CAT-Q Masking subscale's association with FNE was larger ($r=0.38$) than its relationship with social anxiety ($r=0.25$).

Methodology We Can Learn From

The study's primary goal was to test the construct validity of the CAT-Q by seeing if its items could be statistically distinguished from items measuring social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation (FNE), and autistic social traits.

1. **Inclusion of Self-Identified Participants:** The study included 43 adults who self-identified as autistic (14% of the sample). This was done "in line with previous studies and the acceptance of self-identification within the autistic community, and in order to increase representation of those facing barriers to professional diagnosis or not professionally diagnosed due to camouflaging."
2. **Use of Specific Measures:**

- **Camouflaging:** 25-item Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q).
 - **Autistic Social Traits:** The 'aloofness' and 'pragmatic language' subscales of the 36-item Broad Autism Phenotype Questionnaire (BAPQ).
 - **Social Anxiety:** The Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS-6) and the Social Phobia Scale (SPS-6).
 - **Fear of Negative Evaluation:** A brief 8-item version of the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE-II).
3. **Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA):** This is the core of their method. Instead of just correlating total scores, they combined the individual items from the CAT-Q with the items from each of the other three questionnaires, one at a time. They then ran a factor analysis to see how the items would naturally group together.
- **Hypothesis:** If the CAT-Q is a valid measure of a distinct construct, its items should "load" onto separate factors from the social anxiety, FNE, or autistic trait items.
 - **Rationale:** This is a common and robust approach to evaluate if two scales are measuring the same thing or different things.

Findings That Challenge the System

This research provides powerful evidence to support the Enlitens philosophy.

- **Camouflaging is Real and Measurable:** The study provides strong evidence that camouflaging is a distinct set of strategies, not just another name for social anxiety or a direct reflection of autistic social traits. The CAT-Q Compensation and Masking subscales, in particular, were clearly differentiated from other constructs. This validates the experiences of countless autistic people who feel their internal state and the effort they expend to "fit in" are not captured by standard diagnostic criteria.
- **Self-Report is a Valid Data Source:** The entire study is built on the foundation of self-report questionnaires. By successfully using this data to differentiate between complex, overlapping psychological constructs (camouflaging, anxiety, FNE), the research implicitly supports the validity and reliability of lived experience as a primary source of clinical information.
- **Even "Validated" Tools are Flawed:** The study's most nuanced finding is a direct critique of the CAT-Q itself. The 'Assimilation' subscale was found to be poorly defined and showed significant statistical overlap with measures of social avoidance and low social motivation.
 - Items like "I have to force myself to interact with people..." and "...I try to find ways to avoid interacting with others" loaded onto a factor with items measuring autistic aloofness.
 - This demonstrates that even tools developed with community input can contain confounding items and require critical, ongoing evaluation—a core tenet of the Enlitens approach.
- **The "Why" of Behavior Matters:** The research suggests that what looks like social anxiety or social disinterest on the surface might actually be a component of camouflaging. The potential overlap highlights the need to move beyond checklists and ask *why* a person is engaging in a certain behavior—is it anxiety, lack of interest, or a deliberate, exhausting strategy to blend in and avoid negative judgment?

Populations Discussed

- **Autistic Adults:** The study population consisted of 308 autistic adults.
- **Women and Gender-Diverse People:** The sample was 61.4% female and 10.1% non-binary or other genders. The authors note that some research suggests "more autistic women than men" engage in camouflaging. This makes the findings particularly relevant to the experiences of masking in populations historically underdiagnosed.
- **Self-Identified Autistic People:** The study intentionally included a cohort of self-identified autistic adults (14% of the sample) , acknowledging barriers to formal diagnosis and the validity of self-identification within the community.
- **Cultural Diversity:** The authors explicitly state that a limitation is the predominantly White (77.27%) sample and that "there may be important sociocultural influences in camouflaging that need to be considered and investigated further."

Quotes We Might Use

- **On Defining Camouflaging:** "Camouflaging' is a set of strategies used by autistic people to hide or compensate for their autistic characteristics to fit into predominantly non-autistic social environments."
- **On the Duality of Camouflaging (Survival vs. Harm):**
 - "Camouflaging strategies have been described by autistic adolescents and adults as often necessary, adaptive, and helpful for social acceptance, employment, and educational opportunities and as a set of strategies to defend oneself against bullying, discrimination and social isolation..."
 - "Nevertheless, camouflaging has also been described as emotionally painful and exhausting, with more frequent camouflaging use being consistently linked to increased anxiety, depression, suicidality... and autistic burnout..."
- **On Using Correct Language:** "In response to the limitations of this deficit-based understanding of autism... and to align with the language preferences of the autistic community... in this study we use 'autism' instead of 'ASD', 'differences' and/or 'difficulties' instead of symptoms or deficits, and so on."
- **On the Need to Validate Measures:** "Lai and colleagues (2021) agreed that 'addressing the unsettled construct validity [of camouflaging] is a priority' (p. 1037), highlighting a need to identify [camouflaging's] overlapping factor structures with various current measures and associations with established constructs' (p. 1037)."
- **On the Flawed 'Assimilation' Subscale:** "...the CAT-Q Assimilation subscale items in particular appeared to be less distinct, as over half of the CAT-Q Assimilation items loaded onto Factor 2, which was otherwise a factor containing mostly BAPQ items."
- **On Including Self-Identification:** "...acceptance of self-identification within the autistic community, and in order to increase representation of those facing barriers to professional diagnosis or not professionally diagnosed due to camouflaging..."

Clinical Implications

The study concludes that while the overall construct validity of the CAT-Q is supported, its use in clinical practice requires nuance, especially regarding the flawed 'Assimilation' subscale.

- **Use as a Conversation Starter:** The CAT-Q can be a useful clinical tool, not for a score, but to guide exploration. The authors suggest that "inviting autistic adults to complete the CAT-Q and to then discuss and share the extent to which they camouflage, and their person-specific reasons and consequences of camouflaging may provide additional helpful insights..."
- **Improved Formulation:** This process can "improve clinicians' understanding and formulation of their mental health and wellbeing difficulties."
- **Interpret 'Assimilation' with Caution:** Clinicians and researchers using the CAT-Q should be aware that the Assimilation subscale may be capturing aspects of social interaction anxiety and autistic social motivation, not just camouflaging. Its interpretation requires more caution than the Masking and Compensation subscales.
- **Future Refinement Needed:** The paper strongly advocates for the "iterative improvement of the CAT-Q and other camouflaging measures to strengthen how we measure camouflaging." This supports the Enliten mission to build better, more valid assessment tools.