

DOCUMENT SUMMARY This 2021 study provides crucial evidence that autistic camouflaging is significantly higher in females, gender-diverse individuals, and those diagnosed in adulthood. It is the first study to directly and quantitatively link higher rates of camouflaging to a later age of diagnosis. The authors introduce the critical concept of "performative" camouflaging (Compensation and Assimilation), suggesting these strategies go beyond simply hiding autistic traits to actively constructing a "non-autistic" persona that can mislead clinicians and delay diagnosis.

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Camouflaging in autism spectrum disorder: Examining the roles of sex, gender identity and diagnostic timing

Why This Matters to Enliten

This paper provides the direct scientific evidence for the central challenge our clients face: camouflaging. It validates the lived experiences of our key populations—women, gender-diverse individuals, and late-diagnosed adults—by quantitatively demonstrating that they engage in significantly more camouflaging. The study's distinction between simply hiding traits ('Masking') and actively performing neurotypicality ('Compensation' and 'Assimilation') gives us a sophisticated, evidence-based language to discuss this with clients. Most importantly, this is the first study to prove a direct link between higher camouflaging and later diagnosis, confirming that camouflaging is a primary reason why traditional, observation-based assessments fail to identify so many of the people we serve.

Critical Findings: Who Camouflages and Why It Matters

Using the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q), this study examined camouflaging in 502 autistic adults and found significant differences based on sex, gender identity, and age of diagnosis.

- **Females Camouflage More:** Autistic individuals assigned female at birth reported significantly higher levels of camouflaging across all three subscales (Assimilation, Compensation, and Masking) compared to those assigned male at birth. This was true for both those diagnosed in childhood and those diagnosed in adulthood.

- **Gender-Diverse Individuals Camouflage More:** Gender-diverse autistic adults reported higher levels of 'Compensation' behaviors compared to cisgender autistic adults. The authors suggest individuals who are both neurodiverse and gender-diverse may be more susceptible to social pressures that contribute to camouflaging.
- **Late-Diagnosed Individuals Camouflage More:** This was the first study to directly compare these groups. Adults diagnosed at age 18 or older reported significantly higher levels of 'Assimilation' and 'Compensation' than those diagnosed as children or adolescents. This provides direct evidence that camouflaging is a factor in missed, mis-, and late diagnosis.

The "Performative" Nature of Camouflaging

The authors make a crucial distinction between different types of camouflaging, which helps explain why high-masking individuals are so often missed by clinicians.

- **Masking:** Involves monitoring and adjusting one's own behaviors (language, gestures, facial expressions) to hide autistic traits or "give away" one's autistic identity. This is about *hiding* who you are.
- **Compensation & Assimilation:** These are more "performative" and involve the "active, generative processes of constructing a non-autistic persona".
 - **Compensation** involves modeling the social behavior of others, such as by copying gestures, studying socially adept characters from media, and rehearsing facial expressions.
 - **Assimilation** involves strategies to blend in during social situations, such as "pretending to be normal". This is about *performing* who you are not.
- The authors speculate that while Masking conceals an autistic presentation, **Compensation and Assimilation go further, "crafting a social presentation that not only conceals an ASD presentation but in fact argues against ASD"**. This active performance may more strongly deter detection and interfere with the diagnostic process.

The High Cost of Camouflaging

The paper's introduction highlights the serious mental health consequences associated with camouflaging, providing a strong rationale for why identifying and supporting these individuals is critical.

- Elevated camouflaging is associated with greater internalizing symptoms (like depression and anxiety) and suicidality.
- Later-diagnosed individuals report more mental health difficulties.
- Autistic women are at greater risk of completed suicide relative to autistic men, a reversal of the pattern in the general population.

Quotes We Might Use

- **On the definition of camouflaging:** It "generat[es] a mismatch between external observable features and the internal lived experience of ASD".

- **On the link to late diagnosis:** "Missed, mis- and late diagnosis in ASD, particularly for ASD females without co-occurring intellectual disability (ID), has been attributed in part to camouflaging".
- **On the key finding for late diagnosis:** "...we show for the first time in a direct between-groups comparison of ASD adults diagnosed in childhood/adolescence versus adulthood, that adult-diagnosed individuals reported significantly more camouflaging behaviors".
- **On why performative camouflaging is so effective at hiding autism:** "...the active maintenance of a 'non-autistic' social self through Assimilation and Compensation may more strongly deter detection of this presentation as autistic and thus interfere with the referral of these individuals for diagnostic assessment".