DOCUMENT SUMMARY

This 2019 study provides the first large-scale, self-report evidence that autistic females camouflage their traits more than autistic males, a gender difference not observed in the non-autistic population. This finding strongly supports the concept of a "female autism phenotype" and highlights camouflaging as a key reason women are often underdiagnosed by traditional, male-centric assessments. The paper also reinforces the severe mental health costs associated with camouflaging (e.g., exhaustion, suicidality), making its identification a critical component of a neurodiversity-affirming clinical practice like Enlitens.

FILENAME

Hull2019_RESEARCH_research_article_AUTISM_CAMOUFLAGING_GENDER_DIFFERENCES_FEMALE_PHENOTYPE.md

METADATA

Primary Category: RESEARCH **Document Type:** research_article **Relevance:** Core **Update Frequency:** Static **Tags:** #camouflaging, #masking, #female_autism_phenotype, #gender_differences, #autistic_women, #late_diagnosis, #mental_health, #suicidality, #CAT-Q **Related Docs:** N/A

FORMATTED CONTENT

Why This Matters to Enlitens

This paper provides critical, quantitative evidence that validates the lived experiences of many of our clients, particularly late-diagnosed women. It scientifically demonstrates that autistic women camouflage more than autistic men, directly challenging the validity of traditional, male-biased diagnostic criteria and underscoring why our nuanced, interview-based approach is essential. The research confirms that camouflaging is a key feature of the "female autism phenotype" and links it to severe negative mental health outcomes, elevating the importance of our work from simple diagnosis to critical, life-saving mental health support. The tool used in the study, the CAT-Q, is also a model for assessment development, as it was created from the lived experiences of autistic adults.

Key Findings on Gender & Camouflaging

This study used a new self-report measure, the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q), to compare 306 autistic and 472 non-autistic adults.

Autistic Females Camouflage More Than Autistic Males

- A significant interaction was found between gender and diagnostic status.

- Autistic females demonstrated higher total camouflaging scores than autistic males (a moderate effect size).
- This gender difference remained significant even after controlling for the participants' level of autistic traits, suggesting that the higher camouflaging in females is not simply because they have more traits to hide.

No Gender Difference in Non-Autistic People

- In the non-autistic group, there was no gender difference in self-reported camouflaging once autistic traits were controlled for.
- This indicates that the gender difference in camouflaging is unique to the autistic population and likely a result of the interaction between being autistic and societal gender expectations.

Specific Camouflaging Strategies Differ by Gender

The CAT-Q has three subscales: Compensation, Masking, and Assimilation. The gender differences were found in specific strategies:

- **Masking:** Autistic females scored higher than males on strategies used to hide or disguise autistic characteristics (e.g., using learned speech patterns).
- **Assimilation:** Autistic females scored higher than males on strategies used to try to fit in with others (e.g., forcing themselves to socialize).
- **Compensation:** No gender difference was found on the Compensation subscale, which measures strategies to actively learn social rules (e.g., learning social 'scripts'). This suggests that autistic individuals of all genders may use these explicit learning strategies to a similar extent.

The "Female Autism Phenotype"

These findings provide strong support for the existence of a "female autism phenotype," a concept that proposes females may experience and express their autism differently than males.

- Greater camouflaging has been proposed as a key reason why autistic girls and women may be missed by assessments that focus on "typical" (i.e., male-centric) autistic behaviors.
- The unique pressures on individuals who are both autistic and female may create a greater expectation, necessity, and ability to camouflage.
- The study suggests an interaction between being female and being autistic produces greater camouflaging than the additive effects of each identity separately.

The High Cost of Camouflaging

The paper's introduction cites extensive previous research on the severe negative consequences of camouflaging, framing it as a costly adaptation.

- **Exhaustion**
- **Loss of identity**
- **Mental health difficulties**, including anxiety and depression

- **Suicidal thoughts**

The CAT-Q: A Tool Based on Lived Experience

The Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q) is a model for the type of tools Enlitens values.

- It was developed based on autistic adults' lived experiences of camouflaging.
- The items were derived from autistic adults' self-reported behaviors, reflecting experiences that may not be identifiable through external observation.
- Unlike many other measures, it has demonstrated measurement equivalence across gender and diagnostic groups, making it valid for these types of comparisons.