Masking, Camouflaging, Passing: A Critical Phenomenological Analysis of Autistic Self-Presentation

Autistic people are frequently described as masking; consciously or unconsciously adapting their behaviour to fit neurotypical social environments. In psychology, masking is consistently associated with poor mental health, including social anxiety and depression. But what do the metaphors people use — masking, camouflaging, passing — disclose about how people understand themselves and their possibilities?

Drawing on diaries and interviews with fifteen autistic adults in the Netherlands, I examine what these metaphors help explain, for whom and under what circumstances. 'Masking' suggests a hidden authentic self; a layered view of selfhood in which unmasking means peeling back normative layers to find an authentic core. Yet, it captures the theatrical, performative character of social interaction. 'Camouflaging' emphasises blending into one's surroundings. 'Passing' implies actively presenting oneself as neurotypical, which presupposes knowing what one is passing as and what that requires of one's body.

From a critical phenomenological perspective, I argue that masking should be understood as a learned bodily habit — formed (pre-)reflectively in response to intersecting neuronormative, gendered, and racialised norms — rather than as a performance concealing an authentic self. Participants describe unmasking not only as self-discovery but as cultivating relational conditions in which a less alienating relationship to one's body becomes possible.