Camouflaging Behaviours Used by Autistic Adults During Everyday Social Interactions

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Abstract

Background

Autistic people may modify their innate autistic social behaviours in order to adapt to, cope within, and/or influence the predominately neurotypical social landscape. We term such modified or changed behaviour “camouflaging behaviour.” Conceptualisations and definitions of camouflaging behaviours are in their infancy. Existing qualitative research examining camouflaging behaviours relies solely on retrospective accounts of camouflaging experiences.

Methods

Using Interpersonal Process Recall methodology (Kegan, 1969), 17 autistic adults (8 women, 6 men, and 3 agender/gender neutral) participated in a brief social task designed to replicate a common day-to-day social situation. Participants then watched a video of their interaction with a researcher, actively identifying and describing camouflaging behaviours. Interview transcripts were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Results

Detailed descriptions of 37 camouflaging behaviours were generated. These behaviours were grouped into four categories: masking (hide particular behaviours and/or aspects of one’s identity); innocuous engagement (facilitate passive, conservative, and superficial engagement in social interactions); neurotypical communication (involve communicating in line with non-autistic norms and preferences); and active self-presentation (facilitate active, open, and reciprocal participation in social interactions).

Limitations

Given the IPR methodology utilised in the study, the results may not generalise to all social environments or autistic individuals.

Conclusions

This study extends the current understanding of camouflaging by generating novel, specific, and detailed information about camouflaging behaviours. These camouflaging behaviours are discussed with reference to literature concerning interpersonal research and theory within and outside the field of autism.

Keywords: Autism, Camouflaging, Masking, Social Behaviour

Camouflaging Behaviours Used by Autistic Adults During Everyday Social Interactions

During social interactions between autistic and non-autistic people, factors contributing to communication, reciprocity, and rapport problems are both numerous and complex (Double Empathy Problem; Milton, 2012). Autistic and non-autistic people differ in their use of, for example, pragmatic language (e.g., de Villiers et al., 2007; Sng et al., 2020), eye gaze (e.g. Papagiannopoulou, et al., 2014), facial expressivity (Faso et al., 2015), and gesture (e.g., de Marchena & Eigsti, 2010). Just as autistic people have difficulties in inferring non-autistic mental states, understanding non-autistic social communication, and maintaining social reciprocity with non-autistic people (e.g., American Psychiatric Association 2013; Baron-Cohen et al., 1997; Frith & Happé, 1994), non-autistic people likewise experience difficulties in inferring autistic mental states (Edey et al., 2016), identifying autistic facial expressions (Sheppard et al., 2016), and effectively sharing information and building rapport with autistic (compared to non-autistic) peers (Crompton et al., 2020). Moreover, non-autistic people demonstrate an ingroup preference for their interpersonal style; forming more negative judgments about and less positive behavioural intentions towards individuals displaying autistic behaviours than individuals without autistic behaviours (e.g., Campbell et al., 2004; Morison et al., 2019; Sasson et al., 2017; Sasson & Morrison, 2019). Such issues likely contribute to poor functional and interpersonal outcomes for autistic people in domains such as social participation and relationships (Billstedt et al., 2011; Orsmond et al., 2013), employment (Howlin et al., 2004), and mental health (Lever & Geurts, 2016).

An emerging line of research concerned with social coping examines ways in which autistic people camouflage during neuro-diverse social interactions (e.g. Dean et al., 2017; Hull et al., 2017; Lai et al., 2017; Schuck et al., 2019). Conceptualisations, definitions, and

measures of camouflaging are in their infancy. Here, we conceptualise camouflaging as the dynamic process through which autistic individuals modify their innate autistic social behaviour in order to adapt to, cope within, and/or influence the predominately neurotypical social environment. Autistic people commonly encounter negative reactions to their personal characteristics and behaviours during social interactions (e.g., Kinnear et al., 2016; Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2018; Sasson et al., 2017; Sasson et al., 2019). As a result of such reactions, some autistic people modify their innate or instinctive social behaviour (Hull et al., 2017; Lawson, 2020; Livingston 2019b). In modifying their behaviour, autistic people likely engage multiple cognitive functions involving monitoring the social environment, monitoring of personal behaviours and social reasoning (or proxy social reasoning via non-social cognitive routes; Livingston et al., 2019b). However, the extent to which an individual consciously engages in a process of behaviour change or is even aware of behaviour change may vary widely (Lawson, 2020). This modified social behaviour (i.e., camouflaging behaviour) may hide autistic characteristics, minimise the visibility to social difficulties, or signal neurotypical social competence (Hull et al., 2017).

Camouflaging is one means through which autistic people attempt to overcome social challenges within neuro-diverse social interactions to secure employment and education, develop friendships and romantic relationships, and even avoid harassment and victimisation (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2017). Qualitative research about autistic experience suggest that camouflaging positively influences the reactions and behaviours of non-autistic people towards autistic people (e.g., Hull et al., 2017; Livingston et al., 2019b). Yet the act of camouflaging is cognitively effortful and taxing; prone to breakdown under increased social demands and complexity and/or psychological distress; and associated with increased mental health difficulties (Beck et al., 2020; Cage & Troxel-William, 2019; Cassidy et al., 2018; Lai et al., 2017; Livingston et al., 2019a, 2019b). Thus, in seeking to

improve the overall wellbeing of autistic people, it is important to understand the mechanisms through which camouflaging may lead to disparate social, functional, and health outcomes. Currently, very little is known about the extent to which camouflaging affects neuro-diverse social interactions and, in turn, impacts social and functional outcomes for autistic people.

The way in which an individual is perceived and treated by their social partner/s during any given social interaction depends on a complex interplay of factors related to both the individual and their social partner/s as well as the circumstances of the social interaction (Cuddy et al., 2008; Morrison et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2019). Nevertheless, individuals influence, and are influenced by, the behaviour of their social partner/s (De Jaegher, 2013; Forgeot d’Arc & Soulieres, 2019). Research with non-autistic people suggests that distinct subtypes of verbal and non-verbal behaviours function within specific interpersonal situations to invite distinct interpersonal reactions and behaviours from others. For example, experimental studies demonstrate that: individuals who disclose more personal information during getting-to-know-you conversations are rated as more likeable (Sprecher et al., 2013); individuals who ask more follow-up questions during speed dating situations are more likely to elicit agreement for a second date (Huang et al., 2017); and individuals who smile less during job interviews are rated as more suitable candidates for roles associated with a serious demeanours (Ruben et al., 2015). In the case of camouflaging, a detailed description and understanding of both camouflaging behaviour as well as the immediate interpersonal consequences of such behaviours is required to delineate relationships between camouflaging and various social and functional outcomes. The development of such an understanding is impacted by the complex and nuanced nature of camouflaging and the associated challenges this poses in using established methodological paradigms and psychological measures to investigate it.

One line of research, using an existing diagnostic observational measure, has demonstrated that in clinical settings, some autistic individuals are rated as appearing less autistic and more normatively socially skilled than would be expected given their autistic traits and social cognition differences (i.e., Lai et al., 2017; Livingston et al., 2019a; Rynkiewicz et al., 2016). However, this approach, based on an observational assessment designed to measure the presence or absence of behaviours for the expressed purpose of an autism diagnostic assessment, is limited in describing the full range of camouflaging behaviours exhibited by autistic people in more naturalistic social environments. Other observational based research has documented the camouflaging behaviour of autistic children in school playgrounds, using both a structured observational assessment of social engagement and qualitative observer descriptions (Dean et al., 2017). Whilst this approach goes further in describing camouflaging behaviours in a more naturalistic setting, descriptions of behaviours collected from a distance by neurotypical observers may be both imprecise and constrained by neurotypical conceptualisations of social behaviour.

A further line of research, focused on investigating the phenomenology of camouflaging, has identified and described components of the camouflaging process based on autistic adults' responses in qualitative questionnaires (Hull et al., 2017; Livingston et al., 2019b). Based on this research, a self-report measure of camouflaging (Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire; Hull et al., 2019) and a checklist of compensation strategies (Compensation Checklist; Livingston et al., 2020) have been created. This approach, based on the real-life experiences of autistic people, promotes the development of an ecologically valid description of camouflaging that is not unduly biased by the preconceptions of researchers and clinicians. However, given camouflaging behaviours as well as the social interactions in which these behaviours occur are often numerous and complex, it may be difficult for participants to retrospectively free-recall all their camouflaging behaviours.

Further, camouflaging behaviours that are more immediately accessible in participants' memories may be selectively reported over less accessible behaviours, particularly those that are pre-verbal or not-verbalised (Larsen et al., 2008; Omodei et al., 2005). Overall, given these methodological limitations, we suggest further investigation is required to develop a detailed description and understanding of camouflaging behaviour.

The Current Study

The aim of the current study was to identify and describe camouflaging behaviours exhibited by autistic adults during everyday social interactions through the use of Interpersonal Process Recall methodology (IPR: Kegan, 1969). Specifically, participants took part in a short, quasi-everyday social interaction with a stranger and then completed a semi-structured interview whilst viewing the audio-visual recording of their earlier social interaction. During the interview, participants actively identified and described instances of camouflaging.

Whilst new to the field of autism, IPR methodology has been used in psychotherapy, education, and health research to systematically investigate interpersonal interactions and processes (e.g., Bartz, 1999; Burgess et al., 2013; Larsen et al., 2008; Marsh, 1983). IPR is designed to address limitations associated with qualitative research retrospectively exploring individuals' experiences of interpersonal interactions weeks, months, or years after they have occurred (Larsen et al., 2008). In the case of camouflaging, interviewing participants immediately after a camouflaging experience may allow participants to easily and vividly recall camouflaging behaviours. The use of video during the interview may also cue participants to recall camouflaging behaviour that wouldn't otherwise be recalled unassisted (Omodei & McLennan, 1994; Omodei et al., 2005). Finally, the slow pace of the IPR interview may allow participants more time to recall and verbalise nuanced, complex, or infrequent camouflaging behaviours. Through the novel use of IPR methodology, we aim to

identify and describe camouflaging behaviours not previously reported in existing camouflaging research.

Methods

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were 17 autistic adults recruited via social media and through London-based autism support groups. Inclusion criteria were (1) aged over 18 years; (2) formally diagnosed with autism by an appropriate health care professional and/or multidisciplinary team; (3) without an intellectual disability (i.e., having an estimated IQ at/above 70) and (4) engaged in camouflaging (i.e., self-identifying as ‘engaging in camouflaging in their everyday lives’ and having a score of 100 or above on the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire [CAT-Q]; Hull et al., 2019). Five additional autistic adults enrolled in the study however their incomplete data were not analysed; one did not meet eligibility criteria, one withdrew before attending the lab, and three attended the lab but did not complete the full experimental procedure. Demographic characteristics of included participants are in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

	Women	Men	Agender/gender-neutral
N	8	6	3
Age (mean years)	39.88 (11.46)	54.67 (5.72)	36.67 (11.37)
Age range	27-58	47-63	24-46
Age at diagnosis (mean years)	37.25 (10.69)	52.17 (6.10)	32.67 (12.86)
IQ	111.75 (3.92)	112.33 (6.50)	114.67 (2.10)
AQ	43.63 (2.33)	34.17 (5.81)	40.33 (5.69)
CAT-Q	138 (21.13)	121 (11.63)	141.67 (8.51)
Ethnicity			
White British	4 (50%)	6 (100%)	2 (66.6%)
White other	2 (25%)	-	1 (33.3%)
Mixed (other mixed background)	1 (12.5%)	-	-
Hispanic	1 (12.5%)	-	-
Highest Level of Education Achieved			
PhD	-	-	1(33%)
Master's degree	4 (50%)	2 (33%)	1(33%)
Bachelor's degree	4 (50%)	3 (50%)	1 (33%)
A-levels (16-18 years)	-	1 (17%)	-
Current day activity (categories not mutually exclusive)			
Working full-time	3 (38%)	3 (50%)	-
Working part-time	4 (50%)	1 (16.6%)	2 (66.6%)
Voluntary employment	1(12.5%)	-	1 (33.3%)
Caring duties	-	1 (17%)	-
Student	2 (25%)	1 (17%)	1(33.3%)
Unknown	-	1(17%)	-
Current living circumstances			
Lives independently	8 (100%)	6 (100%)	3 (100%)

Note. Percentage may not sum 100% because of rounding. Mixed Other = mixed ethnicity other than Asian and White or Black and White; White Other = White ethnicity other than White British or Irish.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the University College London Research Ethics Committee. Interested individuals were provided with information sheets and given the opportunity to discuss the study with the experimenter (JC). Participants then provided their informed written consent and completed a demographic questionnaire, as well as self-report measures of autistic traits (Autism Quotient; Baron-Cohen et al., 2001) and camouflaging

(Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire; Hull et al., 2019) online. Eligible participants were then invited to attend the laboratory to complete the testing session.

During the approximately 90-minute testing session, participants completed a brief measure of intellectual ability (Test of Premorbid Functioning- UK Version; Wechsler, 2009) and, where possible (in 16 cases), provided written confirmation of their autism diagnosis. Participants additionally completed a ten-minute controlled social task comprising an introductory conversation with a stranger (modelled on the “Getting Acquainted” social task; Inderbitzen-Nolan et al., 2007; Plasencia et al., 2011; Taylor & Alden, 2010). They then completed a semi-structured IPR interview whilst viewing an audio-visual recording of their earlier social task. During the interview, participants were asked to stop the video each time they observed themselves engaging in camouflaging or thinking about engaging in camouflaging. When necessary, the experimenter asked the participant clarifying questions to clearly establish observable instances of camouflaging (i.e. descriptions of behaviours exhibited, altered, or avoided by participants). Following the participant’s lead, the experimenter then asked the participant follow-up questions about their internal (e.g. their thoughts, emotions, and motivations) and past experiences (e.g. how the participant learnt the behaviour) related to their behaviour. As a result, participants spontaneously identified additional examples of camouflaging strategies they used in other everyday social interactions.

Analysis

Qualitative content analysis of interview transcripts was conducted (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Landman, 2007). Content analysis was chosen because it is considered to be a systematic means of describing and quantifying phenomena for the purposes of building a model or conceptual system/map (Krippendorff, 1980). Qualitative content analysis has

been utilized in previous research to identify, describe, and categorise behaviours documented in various data (e.g., Håman et al., 2017; Paxling et al., 2013).

Qualitative content analysis was conducted following the approach described by Graneheim and Landman (2007). Analysis focused on identifying manifest (i.e. surface level) meanings in the data following an inductive approach (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Kondracki et al., 2002). The interview transcripts were read several times by JC. All descriptions of observable camouflaging behaviours (i.e., camouflaging behaviours participants reported engaging in during the social task and/or during other social interactions) were considered meaning units. If a behaviour was described multiple times within a single interview transcript, these descriptions were conjoined into a single meaning unit. JC conducted an initial coding of the interview transcripts by abstracting meaning units and labelling each with a code, reviewing and refining codes then conducting a second coding of the interview transcripts. To ensure credibility, these codes were checked and evaluated by LH who conducted an independent coding of the interview transcripts. Both coders agreed on the final codes and code frequencies. Codes were then compared on the basis of similarities and differences and grouped into subcategories and categories. All authors reviewed and agreed upon the final subcategories and categories.

Note: a thematic analysis was also conducted to detail processes underlying these outward camouflaging behaviours and to capture the experience of camouflaging in autistic individuals during everyday social situations. These results are reported elsewhere (see Cook et al., under review).

Results

Descriptions of behaviours exhibited, altered, or avoided by participants whilst camouflaging were categorised into 37 codes. As detailed in Figure 1, and described next, these codes were further clustered in to four main categories and seven subcategories: (1) masking; (2)

innocuous engagement (including passive encouragement, centering social partner, deferential engagement and reduce social risk); (3) modelling neurotypical communication; and (4) active self-presentation (including reciprocal social behaviours, risky social behaviours, and comfortable and familiar social behaviours). Descriptions of camouflaging categories, along with the number of participants who referenced each code (i.e. camouflaging behaviour) at least once, are provided in Table 2. Example quotes for each code are provided in the Supplementary Materials.

Figure 1

Camouflaging Behaviour Categories and Subcategories

Category 1: Masking

Participants reported concealing information about their personal characteristics or circumstances and/or suppressing their innate/autistic behaviours. Participants most frequently reported avoiding or limiting personal disclosures (64.7%); avoiding or suppressing autistic or

otherwise atypical hand/arm movements (47.2%); and avoiding sharing factual, detailed, or precise information (41.2%). Some participants also described: reducing body movements (17.7); specifically choosing not to disclose their autism diagnosis or speak about autism (11.9%); or changing their appearance (5.9%).

Category 2: Innocuous Engagement

Participants described using passive, conservative, and/or superficial social behaviours. Many spoke of using relatively passive verbal and non-verbal social behaviours including eye contact (64.7%), mirroring (47.2%), smiling (35.3%), minimal verbal encouragers (29.4%), and laughing (17.6%). Most participants also centred their social partner during interactions by guiding discussion to, or maintaining discussion on, topics related to their social partner (53%) or alternatively allowing their social partner to guide the conversation (23.5%). Some participants reported engaging with their social partner in a deferential manner by apologising or providing excuses for their perceived social errors or poor social performance (23.5%); seeking approval, permission, or validation (22.2%); or avoiding confrontation/complaints or being cooperative/respectful/agreeable (11.8%).

Participants described avoiding social behaviours or conversational topics involving social risk. Some avoided or limited their use of honest or direct statements (23.5%). Some tried to avoid the appearance of being knowledgeable or certain about specific topics or information (11.8%). One participant also avoided using humour (5.9%). Some participants reported keeping conversation at a superficial level by discussing traditional “small talk” topics (35.3%) whilst others avoided potentially controversial topics (11.8%) and/or more intimate topics related to others’ personal or private lives (23.5%).

Category 3: Modelling Neurotypical Communication

Participants spoke of using communication behaviours in line with neurotypical norms and preferences. Many participants reported altering their communication to appear

more neurotypical including altering use of their gestures (70.6%), body language (42.2%), facial expressions (29.4%), or tone of voice (23.5%). Many participants ensured their verbal communication was clear by rephrasing or slowing their speech, purposefully wording comments, or providing clarifying comments (42.2%).

Category 4: Active Self-Presentation

Active Self-Presentation encompasses reciprocal, open, and well-practiced social behaviours. Participants described using reciprocal social behaviours involving asking questions (82.4%); commenting and providing elaborating information (64.7%); establishing and discussing points of similarity (64.7%); keeping a balance between talking and listening (52.9%); and sharing factual information (41.2%). Some participants used more risky social behaviours involving using jokes and/or humorous anecdotes (29.4%), disclosing personal information (23.5%), and discussing weaknesses (11.8%). Most participants also chose conversation topics that they were comfortable discussing or knowledgeable about (70.6%), as well as pre-planned or practiced phrases, comments, questions, or anecdotes (52.9%).

[Insert Table 2 here]

Discussion

Some autistic people modify their innate autistic social behaviour in order to adapt to, cope within and/or influence the predominately neurotypical social environment. In modifying their behaviour, autistic people may engage multiple cognitive functions involving monitoring the social environment, monitoring of personal behaviours (Cook et al., under review), and social reasoning (or proxy social reasoning via non-social cognitive routes; Livingston et al., 2019b). However, the extent to which an autistic individual consciously engages in a process of behaviour change or is even aware of behaviour change may vary widely (Lawson, 2020).

In the current study, we term such changed or modified social behaviour “camouflaging behaviour.” With the assistance of video-cued recall, participants identified and described instances of themselves exhibiting camouflaging behaviours during a specific quasi-everyday social situation. Participants then spontaneously described additional examples of camouflaging behaviours they used in other everyday social interactions. Through this novel use of IPR methodology we report detailed and specific descriptions of everyday camouflaging behaviours that are unconstrained by neurotypical conceptualisations of social behaviour. We also address limitations of previous qualitative research retrospectively exploring autistic people’s experiences of camouflaging, days, weeks, months, or even years after such experiences have occurred (Bargiela et al., 2016; Hull et al., 2017; Livingston et al., 2019). Consequently, many of the precise and detailed descriptions of camouflaging behaviours reported in the current study have not previously been documented in camouflaging research.

Camouflaging behaviours identified by participants were grouped into four categories based on the manner in which they operated within interactions: masking (hide particular behaviours and/or aspects of one’s identity); innocuous engagement (facilitate passive, conservative, and superficial engagement in social interactions); neurotypical communication (involve communicating in line with non-autistic norms and preferences); and active self-presentation (facilitate active, open, and reciprocal participation in social interactions). Next, we examine each of these four categories of behaviours with reference to both existing camouflaging research as well as broader literature on interpersonal behaviour.

Masking

Masking involves concealing information about personal characteristics or circumstances and/or suppressing one’s innate/autistic behaviours. Aspects of masking behaviours identified by participants are similar to masking strategies reported in prior

camouflaging research. Specifically, camouflaging behaviours involving altering or reducing hand, arm, and body movements (i.e. stimming, fidgeting, rocking) reported by our participants may be related to masking strategies involving suppressing “atypical behaviours” on the Compensation Checklist (Livingston et al., 2020) and relaxing the face and body on the CAT-Q (Hull et al., 2019). Similarly, the camouflaging behaviour involving altering one’s physical appearance identified by one participant is similar to the masking strategy involving “superficial assimilation” on the Compensation Checklist (Livingston et al., 2020). However, other masking behaviours involving avoiding or limiting talking about oneself or disclosing personal information generally; discussing autism or one’s autism diagnosis; and sharing factual, detailed, or precise information were newly described in the current study.

People with concealable stigmatised identities, that is people who bear a stigmatised characteristic that is not visible unless revealed (e.g. a mental illness diagnosis or minority sexual orientation) may minimise or prevent prejudice and discrimination by concealing personal information related to their stigmatised characteristic (Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984). In the case of autism, stigma may be more associated with autistic interpersonal behaviours than a concealable autism identity or label (Perry et al., preprint). As such, suppressing autistic behaviours such as hand flapping or body rocking during social interactions could be understood within a stigma framework, as an attempt to minimise or prevent prejudice and discrimination.

Hiding personal information about oneself during a social interaction may, equally, have negative interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences. Experimental research demonstrates that hiding (versus revealing) information about a stigmatised characteristic during an interaction is associated with reduced non-stigma-related self-disclosure and, in turn, external observers rate individuals and their interactions less positively (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). Moreover, for the stigmatised individual, actively concealing stigma related

information is associated with decreased cognitive resources (Critcher & Ferguson, 2014; Smart & Wegner, 1999), decreased feelings of belonging and authenticity (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014), and increased emotional strain (Barreto et al., 2006).

Research in the field of social anxiety similarly demonstrates the negative intra and interpersonal consequences associated with hiding aspects of the self during social interactions. Socially anxious individuals attempt to prevent feared negative evaluations or social outcomes by engaging in “safety behaviours” (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Some of these safety behaviours involve hiding aspects of the self through, for example: avoiding talking about oneself, asking questions, or talking altogether; censoring one’s speech; trying not to attract attention; or keeping still (Gray et al., 2019; Hirsch et al., 2004; Plasencia et al., 2011). Experimental research suggests conversational partners and independent observers rate individuals engaging in hiding behaviours as more anxious, less likeable, less enjoyable to interact with, and less desirable as a future social partner compared to controls (Gray et al., 2019; Plasencia et al., 2011). In terms of intra-personal costs, use of safety behaviours including hiding/avoidance behaviours is also associated with increased anxiety and belief in social fears, as well as poorer self-reported perception of social performance (McManus et al., 2008).

Innocuous Engagement

Innocuous engagement behaviours (encompassing passive encouragement, centring social partner, deferential engagement, and reduce social risks) are conservative, passive, and superficial social behaviours. These behaviours facilitate surface level engagement in social interactions and centre autistic people’s social partners by prioritising their enjoyment, comfort, and preferences. At the same time, these behaviours minimise the likelihood of controversy, disagreement, and negative evaluation. Aspects of passive encouragement and centring social partner behaviours described by participants are reflected in masking and

shallow compensation strategies in the Compensation Checklist (Livingston et al., 2020) as well as masking and compensation strategies in the CAT-Q (Hull et al., 2019). However, the specific passive encouragement behaviours involving using laughter and minimal encouragers are newly identified by participants in the current study. Similarly, most camouflaging behaviours involving deferential engagement (i.e., justifying, apologising, and seeking permission) and minimising social risks (i.e., avoiding controversy, direct communication, discussing others' personal lives, humour etc.), reported by participants in the current study, have not previously been reported within camouflaging research.

Innocuous engagement behaviours are conceptually similar to another category of safety behaviours used by socially anxious individuals involving “innocuous sociability” (Leary, 1995; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Innocuous sociability involves a self-protective interpersonal style characterised by safe and innocuous social behaviours (e.g., engaging in more smiling, nodding, and minimal verbal acknowledgements; asking more questions; avoiding interrupting others; and making less factual statements; Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2014; Leary & Kowalski, 1995a; Leary, Knight, & Johnson, 1987; Patterson & Ritts 1997). These behaviours serve to keep an individual engaged in an interaction whilst simultaneously shifting focus away from them and minimising risks to their image. It is suggested that in the case of social anxiety, this interpersonal style may protect an individual from blatant negative evaluation but at the same time is unlikely to result in a particularly positive social impression.

Innocuous engagement involving excessive accommodation of others' enjoyment, comfort, and preferences may, however, be associated with harmful interpersonal consequences. In the non-autistic population, unassertive and submissive interpersonal behaviours are consistently linked to negative outcomes across the lifespan, including increased social isolation (Rubin & Burgess, 2001), workplace bullying (e.g., Zapf &

Einarsen, 2003), and sexual assault (Ullman, 2007). This potential link is of significant concern given that autistic people report high levels of bullying and victimisation (Weiss & Fardella, 2018).

Modelling Neurotypical Communication

Modelling neurotypical communication behaviours identified by participants involved altering verbal and non-verbal communication so as to conform with neurotypical conventions and preferences. Similar examples of autistic people copying or mimicking the verbal and non-verbal communication behaviours of neurotypical others are found throughout camouflaging literature (e.g., Hull et al., 2019; Livingston et al., 2019b; Rynkiewicz et al., 2016).

As is to be expected, reports of neurotypical people altering their communication behaviours to appear more neurotypical do not appear in broader literature on interpersonal behaviour. However, in general using the normative expressions of the culture, subculture, or family one is interacting with likely improves clarity and ease in communication (Halberstadt, 2001). Given the difficulties non-autistic people experience identifying and understanding autistic social communication, autistic people using more neurotypical communication behaviours may be more readily understood during everyday social encounters (Jaswal & Akhtar, 2019; Sheppard et al., 2016). Likewise, as non-autistic people often perceive neurotypical social communication behaviour as communicating social motivation, they may engage more with autistic people exhibiting such behaviour (Jaswal & Akhtar, 2019).

Active Self-Presentation

The active self-presentation behaviours (including reciprocal, risky, and comfortable and familiar social behaviours) described by participants appear to more directly influence interpersonal elements of social interactions compared to other camouflaging behaviours.

Reciprocal behaviours initiate, build, and maintain interpersonal exchanges within interactions. Reciprocity is further facilitated by the use of accessible, comfortable, pre-planned or practiced phrases, questions, anecdotes, or conversational topics as well as humour and exchange of personal information.

The comfortable and familiar social behaviours reported by participants appear to be related to shallow compensation strategies in the Compensation Checklist (Livingston et al., 2020) and compensation strategies in the CAT-Q (Hull et al., 2019). However, behaviours described by participants involving reciprocal, authentic, and open engagement (e.g., maintaining and building conversation; finding and discussing points of commonality; disclosing personal information; using humour etc.) represent sophisticated and potentially beneficial means of influencing neuro-diverse social interactions, not previously described within camouflaging research.

Considerable research suggests perceived similarity with a social partner in terms of, for example, attitudes, personality traits, and hobbies, is strongly associated with increased feelings of liking and/or attraction for that social partner (e.g., Hampton et al., 2019; Montoya et al., 2008). For non-autistic people, self-disclosure appears to facilitate perceived similarity (Collins & Miller, 1994; Laurenceau et al., 1998; Sprecher, 2014). In the case of camouflaging, autistic people's attempts to adapt their interpersonal style by concealing autistic behaviours, engaging in neurotypical social niceties, and exhibiting non-autistic social communication (i.e., masking, innocuous engagement, and neurotypical communication behaviours) may signal a level of similarity to non-autistic social partners. However, active self-presentation behaviours involving disclosing personal information, as well as actively searching for and exploring commonalities, are likely more effective in establishing similarities with non-autistic social partners.

For non-autistic people, responsiveness to others' disclosures during an interaction is also associated with positive perceptions and social relatedness (Butler et al., 2003; Forest & Wood, 2011). As such, active self-presentation camouflaging behaviours focused on maintaining reciprocity during an interaction may also foster positive reactions and behaviours from non-autistic social partners. At the same time, compared to other camouflaging behaviours, active self-presentation behaviours involving disclosing personal information, responding to others, sharing opinions, and using humour involve an element of social risk. Thus, if unsuccessfully deployed, they may increase the likelihood of negative evaluation.

Consequences of Distinct Camouflaging Behaviour Subtypes

Whilst the above discussion suggests distinct subtypes of camouflaging behaviours may differentially facilitate interpersonal and intra-personal outcomes, a number of caveats must be considered. The effect of camouflaging behaviours on interpersonal outcomes, whether beneficial or harmful, is dependent on the manner in which these behaviours are implemented. Social cognition differences in autism likely result in qualitative differences in the camouflaging behaviours of autistic people compared to the social behaviours of non-autistic people. Equally, the manner in which autistic people employ specific camouflaging behaviours during social interactions is likely to vary widely in accordance with differences in gender, age, social experiences, and various cognitive abilities. Although we highlight potential interpersonal advantages of particular camouflaging behaviours, there is not yet enough evidence to suggest that such camouflaging behaviours should be universally encouraged. The intra-personal consequences of camouflaging behaviours and neurotypical social behaviours may be dissimilar, due to differences in the origins and functions of these behaviours as well as the cognitive skills that produce them. Thus, further experimental research is now required to better delineate the in-situ influence of distinct camouflaging

behaviours in relation to both non-autistic people's evaluation and treatment of autistic people as well as autistic people's cognitive resources and psychological distress.

Self-Presentation, Camouflaging, and Neurotypical Social Behaviour

Our findings suggest some autistic people may exhibit camouflaging behaviours which are similar, or perhaps identical to, behaviours shown by non-autistic people with stigmatised identities and social anxiety. Self-presentation explanations of interpersonal behaviour may provide a framework through which to understanding such findings. Self-presentation approaches posit that people are generally motivated to make desirable social impressions and avoid undesirable social impressions because they are rewarded, via the positive reactions and treatment of others, for doing so (Goffman, 1963; Leary, 1995). In promoting a desirable social impression, people (1) exhibit behaviours they believe will lead others to perceive them in a desirable manner; (2) monitor others' reactions to these behaviours; and (3) strategically adjust their behaviour when they believe others are perceiving them in an undesirable manner (Leary, 1995). People experience anxiety when they are motivated to make a desirable social impression, but they doubt their ability to do so (Leary & Kowalski, 1995a; Leary & Kowalski, 1995b; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Further, people who believe others consistently form undesirable impressions of them develop and utilise repertoires of interpersonal behaviours to minimise the impact of perceived threats to achieving desirable social impressions. People with stigmatised identities who believe others form undesirable impressions of them because they possess a particular stigmatised characteristic may develop similar repertoires of self-presentational behaviours to minimise the impact of their stigmatised characteristic on others' perceptions of them (Miller & Kaiser, 2006). Socially anxious people who perceive that others form undesirable impressions of them may similarly utilise specific self-presentational behaviours to protect or enhance their social impression (Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2014). There are both individual differences

and group level similarities in these repertoires of interpersonal behaviours. Through this framework, camouflaging could be conceptualised as a repertoire of self-presentational behaviours used by autistic people to achieve a desirable social image and promote positive reactions from others.

According to the self-presentation framework, autistic and stigmatised people (as well as those with social anxiety disorder) will commonly experience anxiety when they are motivated to make a desirable social impression in a particular interaction, but they doubt they will successfully be able to do so (Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2014). Autistic and other stigmatised people who believe they can successfully reduce threats to achieving a desirable social impression by using a repertoire of self-presentational behaviours will experience less anxiety compared to those who use similar behaviours yet remain uncertain or doubtful.

Self-presentation approaches further suggest that whilst the specific type of desirable social impression an individual is motivated to convey can vary, such motivations are heavily influenced by social context. People generally wish to make common types of desirable impressions (e.g., as friendly, competent, ethical, attractive etc.) and avoid other common types of undesirable impressions (e.g., as unfriendly, incompetent, unethical, unattractive etc.; Leary, 1995). In this regard, autistic and non-autistic people existing within a predominately neurotypical social context are likely motivated to make similar neurotypical desirable impressions and avoid similar neurotypical undesirable impressions because they are similarly rewarded by the reactions and treatment of others for doing so. Thus, a degree of overlap is to be expected in the type of self-presentation behaviours utilised by autistic and non-autistic people in achieving desirable impressions and avoiding undesirable impressions. At the same time, some camouflaging behaviours are unique to autism because they minimise autism specific threats to creating a desirable impression (e.g., hand flapping may represent an autism specific threat to being perceived as competent). Similarly, the cognitive processes

used by autistic and non-autistic people to produce similar self-presentation behaviours may vary, for example, non-autistic people may utilise social reasoning whilst autistic people may utilise proxy social reasoning via non-social cognitive routes (Livingston et al., 2019b).

Further, some camouflaging behaviours are unique to individuals because they minimise more individualistic threats to creating a desirable impression (i.e., they are developed in response to idiosyncratic social experiences, reasoning, or beliefs) or they represent individualistic solutions to minimising common group level threats.

Diversity in Camouflaging Strategies

In line with previous camouflaging research, our findings suggest autistic people utilise a diverse range of behaviours to adapt to and cope within the predominately neurotypical social environment (e.g., Hull et al., 2017; Livingston et al., 2019b). These behaviours vary on many dimensions, particularly in terms of openness, engagement, and sophistication. At one end of the continuum, masking behaviours may represent a rather protective, reserved, and superficial means of coping within social interactions. At the other end of this continuum, active self-presentation behaviours involve an open, active, and sophisticated means of adapting to and engaging in social interactions. The large number of, and diversity in, camouflaging behaviours and strategies reported here and elsewhere within the literature reflects heterogeneity in individuals' social environments, social experiences, and autism characteristics, as well as the idiosyncratic and individualistic manner in which camouflaging skills are developed and utilised.

Camouflaging is most often conceptualised as a means of coping or “succeeding” in social interactions by hiding and/or compensating for autistic characteristics (e.g., Hull et al., 2017, 2019, 2020). However, our findings suggest some autistic people also utilise autistic strengths (i.e., sharing factual information) as well as authentic and open behaviours (i.e., disclosing personal information, discussing points of commonality, and using humour) to

cope within neuro-diverse social interactions. These authentic, open, and strength based coping strategies may promote more beneficial mental health and wellbeing outcomes for autistic people compared to ‘true’ camouflaging strategies. As such it is important for future research to examine a wider range of social behaviours in investigations of social coping in autism.

Strengths and Limitations

Conceptualisations, definitions, and measures of camouflaging are in their infancy. This study extends the current understanding of camouflaging by generating novel, specific, and detailed information about camouflaging behaviours. However, it is important to acknowledge that, given the methodology utilised in the study, the results may not generalise to all social environments or autistic individuals. The current study focused on camouflaging behaviours used by autistic adults in everyday social encounters, autistic adults likely vary their camouflaging behaviours in line with their immediate social context. Equally, IPR interviews explore conscious experience and thus cannot identify camouflaging behaviours operating outside of conscious awareness. Further, IPR is only suitable for use with verbally fluent individuals who have a relatively high level of insight into their camouflaging behaviours. Thus, the camouflaging behaviours reported in the current study may not be representative of the camouflaging behaviours utilised by less verbally fluent individuals or those with an intellectual disability whom may also camouflage but in potentially different ways.

Conclusions

The current study identifies and describes camouflaging behaviours used by a sample of autistic adults in everyday social interactions. Participants’ descriptions of camouflaging behaviours suggest some camouflaging behaviours may be common to both autistic and non-autistic socialising whilst others are unique to autistic socialising. Camouflaging-type

behaviours may be similarly used by autistic and non-autistic people to make desired social impressions and elicit positive reactions and treatment from others. For non-autistic people distinct subtypes of interpersonal behaviours are associated with different interpersonal and intra-personal consequences. Future research is needed to examine if distinct camouflaging behaviours may facilitate disparate social, functional, and mental health outcomes for autistic people.

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Author Contributions

JC, WM, and LC were responsible for the conception and design of the project. JC led on participant recruitment, data collection, transcription, and data analysis. LB made a substantial contribution to data collection. LH, LC, and WM made substantial contributions to analysis and interpretation of data. JC led on drafting the manuscript which LC, WM, LH, and LB revised for critically important intellectual content.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical clearance was granted by the University College London Research Ethics Committee.

All participants gave informed consent prior to participation.

Consent for Publication

Consent was sought from participants who were informed their data may be used in a publication.

Data Availability

Raw qualitative data cannot be shared due to ethical restrictions. Anonymised quantitative data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Table 2

Description, and frequencies of, camouflaging codes

Behaviour	Description	Frequency N (%)
Masking		
Avoid or limit discussion related to oneself	Avoiding or limiting time speaking about oneself or disclosing personal information (e.g. information about one's relationship, financial status, daily activities, special interests, or hobbies).	11(64.7%)
Alter or reduce hand or arm movements	Reducing the frequency or minimising the visibility of non-gesture hand movements, including fidgeting movements and stimming hand movements.	8(47.2%)
Avoid specific facts and detailed information	Avoiding sharing factual, detailed, or precise information.	7(41.2%)
Reduce body movements	Reducing repetitive movements involving the torso, legs, or entire body including rocking and fidgeting.	3(17.7%)
Avoid autism	Avoiding disclosing one's autism diagnosis or discussing the topic of autism.	2(11.8%)
Appearance	Altering physical appearance to appear more conventional or typical.	1(5.9%)
Innocuous Socialising		
Passive Encouragement		
Eye contact	Maintaining eye contact or maintaining the appearance of eye contact (i.e. looking at a social partner's forehead, nose, or mouth).	11(64.7%)
Mirror	Mirroring another person's verbal (e.g. accent) or non-verbal behaviours (hand movements, body language, smile, or facial expressions).	8(47.1%)
Smile	Smiling at others when speaking or listening.	6(35.3%)
Verbal minimal encouragers	Using verbal minimal encouragers (e.g. "oh really," "yes", "yeah", and "okay").	5(29.4%)
Laugh	Laughing after one's own or others' statements.	3(17.6%)
Centring Social Partner		
Focus on social partner	Guiding discussion to or maintaining discussion on topics of conversation that are related to one's social partner or that may be of interest to one's social partner.	9(53%)

Social partner guides conversation	Allowing or relying on one's social partner to guide topics of conversation.	4(23.5%)
Deferential Engagement		
Apologise for/justify social performance	Apologise or provide excuses for perceived social errors or poor social performance.	4(23.5%)
Seek approval/permission	Seeking approval, permission, or validation from one's conversational partner.	4(22.2%)
Be cooperative	Avoiding confrontation or complaints and/or being cooperative, respectful, and agreeable.	2(11.8%)
Reduce Social Risks		
Avoid causing offence or distress	Avoiding words or remarks that could be perceived as rude, offensive, distressing, or patronising.	6(35.2%)
Small talk	Discussing typical 'small talk' topics such as the weather, commuting, or weekend activities.	6(35.3%)
Avoid or limit honest, direct communication	Avoiding or limiting honest or direct statements.	4(23.5%)
Avoid discussion of others' personal and private lives	Avoiding questions or topics of conversation related to more personal or private aspects of others' lives (e.g. relationships, social activities, or general life outside of work).	4(23.5%)
Avoid controversy	Avoiding or limiting discussion on topics of conversation that may generate controversy or debate.	2(11.8%)
Avoid appearing knowledgeable	Avoiding appearing knowledgeable about specific topics or information.	2(11.8%)
Avoid jokes	Avoid making jokes	1(5.9%)
Modelling Neurotypical Communication		
Gestures	Altering communicative gestures so these appear more like neurotypical gestures or increasing use of conventional gestures.	12(70.6%)
Body Language	Altering body language so this appears more like neurotypical body language.	7(42.2%)
Clear verbal communication	Rephrasing or slowing speech, purposefully wording comments, or providing clarifying comments.	7(41.2%)
Facial expressions	Altering facial expressions so these appear more similar to neurotypical facial expressions.	5(29.4%)
Speech Intonation	Changing the tone of one's voice or the emphasis placed on words to sound more conventional or typical.	4(23.5%)

Active Self Presentation		
Reciprocal Social Behaviours		
Ask questions	Asking one's social partner questions.	14(82.4%)
Maintain and build conversation	Commenting, providing elaborating information, or otherwise talking in a way that builds or maintains a conversation.	11(64.7%)
Find and discuss points of commonality	Establishing and discussing points of commonality with one's social partner.	11(64.7%)
Keep balance between listening and talking	Keeping an even balance between talking and listening.	9(52.9%)
Share factual information	Sharing factual information (unrelated to oneself) with others.	7(41.2%)
Risky Social Behaviours		
Jokes and humours anecdotes	Making jokes or sharing humorous anecdotes.	5(29.4%)
Disclose personal information	Disclosing information about ones' education, employment, daily activities, or relationships status.	4(23.5%)
Disclose weaknesses	Discussing one's perceived weaknesses, vulnerabilities, or feelings of inadequacy.	2(11.8%)
Comfortable and Familiar Social Behaviours		
Comfortable topics	Discussing topics of conversations that one is knowledge about or interested in, finds easy or is comfortable discussing, or have been received well by others in the past.	12(70.6%)
Scripts	Use an established repertoire of phrases, comments, questions, or anecdotes that are pre-planned or practiced, or have previously been well received by others.	9(52.9%)

Supplementary Materials

Table 3

Example Quotes

Behaviour	Example Quote
Masking	
Avoid or limit discussion related to oneself	<i>That's something that I do often to avoid talking about myself.</i> (Male, 50-54 yo)
Alter or reduce hand or arm movements	<i>I think that is a form of self-soothing behaviour I have definitely noticed me doing that before- ringing hands. I would say it is a slightly more socially acceptable form of stimming. My natural stimming would be hands out and kind of like the bouncing of the hands but that is less socially acceptable.</i> (Female, 30-34 yo).
Avoid specific facts and detailed information	<i>I read an article talking about the fact that yeah tomorrow is gonna be, they, it's predicted to be really hot and it's predicted to break records so I think immediately I thought about that article but I didn't want to bring it up because I thought, "Okay maybe it's too specific."</i> (Female, 25-29 yo)
Reduce body movements	<i>As soon as I first [start] rocking, "Oh woah calm down," and "I need it to stop, like stop, doing this."</i> (Female, 55-59 yo)
Avoid autism	<i>I would leave the autism out of the conversation all together.</i> (Female, 50-54 yo)
Appearance	<p>Participant: ...<i>I do try and appear a bit more neurotypical visually.</i></p> <p>Interviewer: <i>Oh okay, can you tell me a bit what you mean by that?</i></p> <p>Participant: <i>Well I mean since my diagnosis, actually yeah since, actually I have tried to appear less quirky.</i></p> <p>Interviewer: <i>And what do you</i></p> <p>Participant: <i>I don't know if you agree with that?</i></p> <p>Interviewer: <i>What do you mean visually?</i></p> <p>Participant: <i>I just mean in the way I dress myself.</i> (Male, 45-49 yo)</p>

Innocuous Socialising	
Passive Encouragement	
Eye contact	<i>I think I definitely noticed, not just here but throughout the whole conversation my eye contact. So I find the back and forth eye contact difficult sometimes so I tend to, in order to camouflage I look at the person's mouth. (Female, 30-34 yo)</i>
Mirror	<i>I remember me being very conscious of what [the social partner] was doing with her hands and trying to do something similar with my hands. (Female, 30-34 yo)</i>
Smile	<i>I was smiling at that point. (Male, 50-54 yo)</i>
Verbal minimal encouragers	<i>Saying OK. (Agender/gender neutral, 45-49 yo)</i>
Laugh	<i>And then I always laugh. (Agender/gender neutral, 40-44 yo)</i>
Centring Social Partner	
Focus on social partner	<i>Although I am genuinely interested, at an early stage of a conversation I try to ask about their own interests and about their career and that is the conversational strategy that I always try to employ over anything else. (Male, 50-54 yo)</i>
Social partner guides conversation	<i>There you can hear that, I was very much relying on [the social partner] to ask the questions rather than me initiate. (Female, 55-59 yo)</i>
Deferential Engagement	
Apologise for/justify social performance	<i>Well it's kind of an apology for not being able to answer what seems like a simple question. (Male, 50-54 yo)</i>
Seek approval/permission	<i>If people actually ask what I do as my job, that's the kind of question that I have trouble answering. So yeah, I'm also actually trying to say I think in all of this, as far as I'm concerned, you know I hope that's acceptable to you. (Male, 50-54 yo)</i>

Be cooperative	<i>If I couldn't avoid people, to stay in the background, to be as un-intrusive as possible. If that wasn't a practical solution then to be as cooperative, as friendly, as undemanding and as amenable as possible with other people. (Male, 60-64 yo)</i>
<hr/>	
Reduce Social Risks	
Avoid causing offence or distress	<i>Then I get frustrated and then I will check myself to try and say, so I don't say something inappropriate like, "Are you stupid? You know I have just said this." (Male, 55-59 yo)</i>
Small talk	<i>Just making small talk. (Agender/gender neutral, 45-49 yo)</i>
Avoid or limit honest, direct communication	<i>I would much rather talk about academic subjects with people. Really, I don't care really what they are you know, what their children or their families, or if their grandmother. You know someone wanted to show me a picture of their grandchildren, happened to me yesterday, "Do you want to see a picture of my granddaughter?" Oh, she didn't really ask, "Oh I have got a picture of my granddaughter here," gets her phone. Couldn't care less. But I'm aware don't say, "Couldn't care less about your grandchildren." So, if they say would you like to see a picture of my children? "Love to!" I wouldn't - I'd hate to but you know. (Male, 55-59 yo)</i>
Avoid discussion of others' personal and private lives	<i>I generally do my best to steer very clear of anything that is a bit person and it might have been a personal topic and I am not sure. (Male, 50-54 yo)</i>
Avoid controversy	<i>I know that you avoid politics, I know you avoid religion, unless you trust someone. Probably cos otherwise you go down this debate that's not a good idea. So I tend to find neutral topics to talk about. (Female, 35-39 yo)</i>
Avoid appearing knowledgeable	<i>I know maybe too much too well so just pretend you don't know that much that well. (Female, 55-59 yo)</i>
Avoid jokes	<i>A lot of the time if I think something's funny, other people don't, so I tend not to say. (Female, 35-39 yo)</i>

Gestures	<i>So I was nodding. (Agender/gender neutral, 45-49 yo)</i>
Body Language	<i>Just, just looking at the video like I was trying to focus on sort of being relaxed and sitting sort of normally. (Agender/gender neutral, 20-24 yo)</i>
Clear verbal communication	<i>Slowing my voice down and trying to sound, speak more clearly, speak less fast. (Agender/gender neutral, 20-24 yo)</i>
Facial expressions	<i>I try to make sure that my facial expressions are a little bit more extreme now so if I am trying to express something I'll just exaggerate it a little bit more then feels comfortable to make sure that I am getting my point across and they understand what I am trying to say. (Agender/gender neutral, 40-44 yo)</i>
Speech Intonation	<i>Okay so I would change my tone and I would make it more variant. (Male, 45-49 yo)</i>
Active Self Presentation	
Ask questions	<i>I'm always worried about what people think about me [that's] probably why I ask them lots of questions because I thought that was the way to be nice. (Female, 50-54 yo)</i>
Maintain and build conversation	<i>I think in there, so she asked me, "How was your journey?" so I said "It's okay" and I would normal-I don't- I think normally I would stop at that but I carried on like adding comments such as, "Oh it's close to work". (Female, 25-29 yo)</i>
Find and discuss points of commonality	<i>The reason I'm talking about that is, that is our point of connection. (Female, 25-29 yo)</i>
Keep balance between listening and talking	<i>I can keep it in a kind of controlled you to me to you to me exchange. (Agender/gender neutral, 40-44 yo)</i>
Share factual information	<i>Right, she might not know who L.S. Lowry is, most people I talk to will know the name but she might not so I provided that information quite deliberately. (Male, 55-59 yo)</i>

Jokes and humorous anecdotes	<i>I mean sometimes I might sort of camouflage [in] the meeting in a sort of like one liner in a sense like a joke or something you know. (Female, 50-54 yo)</i>
Disclose personal information	<i>Maybe I shouldn't have perhaps launched in to the fact that I'm actually sort of like a lot of my time is taken up caring for me Mum cos it might have given [the social partner] the impression that I was just here to sort of off load and so on you know but by the same token I just wanted perhaps for her to understand what's most important in my life. (Male, 55-59 yo)</i>
Disclose weaknesses	<i>One of the ways to make people feel at ease is to talk about a weakness that they can relate to. (Agender/gender neutral, 40-44 yo)</i>
Comfortable topics	<i>So this is where, so the mention of [retracted] to try and redirect the conversation on to a topic that I feel safe on and can talk about and therefore avoid the weird pauses. (Female, 30-34 yo)</i>
Scripts	<i>A rehearsed one liner there. (Male, 45-49 yo)</i>

Note: To aid with readability minor speech errors have been correct. Each example quote is accompanied by text in parenthesis indicating the participants' gender and age range.

Figures

Figure 1

Camouflaging Behaviour Categories and Subcategories