Exploring Camouflaging Experiences of Autistic Women Through the Lens of Impression Management

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Background

Both Autistic and non-Autistic individuals engage in Impression Management (IM), a process through which individuals attempt to influence how others perceive them.[1]

Impression Management
- The universal human inclination to make a good impression of oneself in the eyes of others
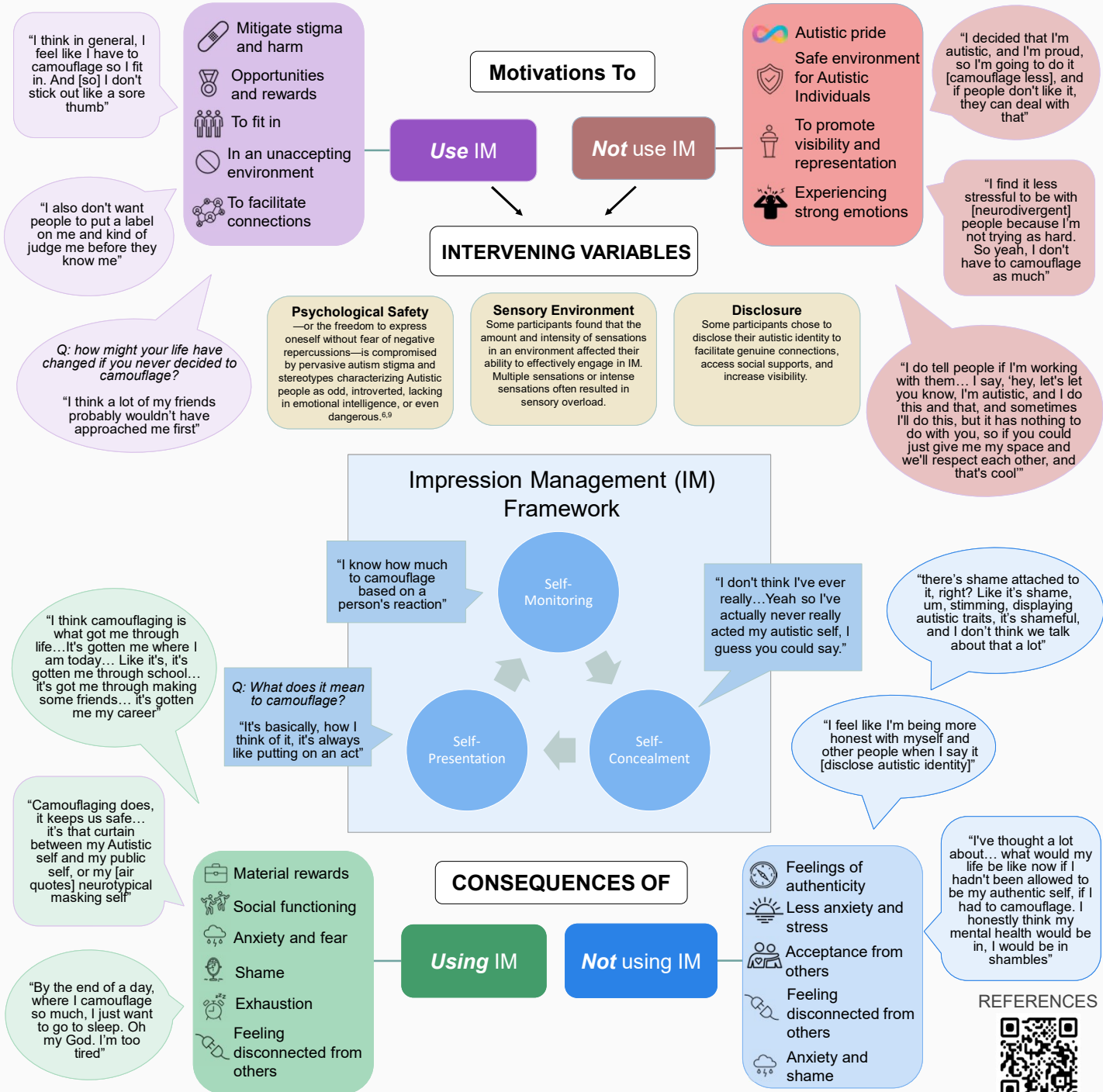- Choosing to project an idealized public self-image within a social interaction[2]

However, IM appears to have unique characteristics for Autistic individuals (known in the literature as Camouflaging and Masking), such as the necessity to suppress Autistic traits, mimic the behaviours, emotions, and expressions of non-autistic peers, and engage in continuous self-monitoring.[3,4]

Ai and colleagues[5] aimed to inspire a fresh perspective by connecting the well-established literature on IM with the emerging research on Autistic camouflaging. To accomplish this, they reevaluated Autistic camouflaging, reconceptualizing it as a transactional, context-dependent form of IM. In doing so, they connected the motivations, neurocognitive foundations, and outcomes of camouflaging with the IM framework.

Using the Framework Method[6], we will evaluate the extent to which the IM Framework captures the experiences of camouflaging amongst our small sample of Canadian Autistic Women.

Methods

9 — Canadian autistic women were interviewed about their experiences of camouflaging

Interviews were transcribed and broken into thought-units, "the minimum meaningful utterance having a beginning and an end"[7]

A codebook was created based Ai et al.'s IM framework using Framework Analysis[1,8]

Two transcripts were coded separately by two RAs. New codes were added to the codebook to better represent participants' experiences

Remaining transcripts were coded using the revised codebook. Any t-units that could not be coded were collected for further analysis.

Codebook additions and un-coded t-units were analyzed, and modifications to the IM framework were made.

"I think in general, I feel like I have to camouflage so I fit in. And [so] I don't stick out like a sore thumb"

"I also don't want people to put a label on me and kind of judge me before they know me"

Q: how might your life have changed if you never decided to camouflage?

"I think a lot of my friends probably wouldn't have approached me first"

Motivations To

Use IM
- Mitigate stigma and harm
- Opportunities and rewards
- To fit in
- In an unaccepting environment
- To facilitate connections

Not use IM
- Autistic pride
- Safe environment for Autistic Individuals
- To promote visibility and representation
- Experiencing strong emotions

"I decided that I'm autistic, and I'm proud, so I'm going to do it [camouflage less], and if people don't like it, they can deal with that"

"I find it less stressful to be with [neurodivergent] people because I'm not trying as hard. So yeah, I don't have to camouflage as much"

INTERVENING VARIABLES

Psychological Safety —or the freedom to express oneself without fear of negative repercussions—is compromised by pervasive autism stigma and stereotypes characterizing Autistic people as odd, introverted, lacking in emotional intelligence, or even dangerous.[6,9]

Sensory Environment Some participants found that the amount and intensity of sensations in an environment affected their ability to effectively engage in IM. Multiple sensations or intense sensations often resulted in sensory overload.

Disclosure Some participants chose to disclose their autistic identity to facilitate genuine connections, access social supports, and increase visibility.

"I do tell people if I'm working with them… I say, 'hey, let's let you know, I'm autistic, and I do this and that, and sometimes I'll do this, but it has nothing to do with you, so if you could just give me my space and we'll respect each other, and that's cool'"

Impression Management (IM) Framework

- Self-Monitoring
- Self-Presentation
- Self-Concealment

"I know how much to camouflage based on a person's reaction"

"I don't think I've ever really…Yeah so I've actually never really acted my autistic self, I guess you could say."

"there's shame attached to it, right? Like it's shame, um, stimming, displaying autistic traits, it's shameful, and I don't think we talk about that a lot"

"I think camouflaging is what got me through life…It's gotten me where I am today… Like it's, it's gotten me through school… it's got me through making some friends… it's gotten me my career"

Q: What does it mean to camouflage?

"It's basically, how I think of it, it's always like putting on an act"

"I feel like I'm being more honest with myself and other people when I say it [disclose autistic identity]"

"Camouflaging does, it keeps us safe… it's that curtain between my Autistic self and my public self, or my [air quotes] neurotypical masking self"

CONSEQUENCES OF

Using IM
- Material rewards
- Social functioning
- Anxiety and fear
- Shame
- Exhaustion
- Feeling disconnected from others

Not using IM
- Feelings of authenticity
- Less anxiety and stress
- Acceptance from others
- Feeling disconnected from others
- Anxiety and shame

"By the end of a day, where I camouflage so much, I just want to go to sleep. Oh my God. I'm too tired"

"I've thought a lot about… what would my life be like now if I hadn't been allowed to be my authentic self, if I had to camouflage. I honestly think my mental health would be in, I would be in shambles"

REFERENCES