

“Fake It Till You Make It”: A Qualitative Study into the Well-being of Autistic Women

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Abstract : Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in women is increasing, prompting research into the presentation of female ASD and exploring why females are failing to meet the diagnostic threshold. One explanation is the use of masking behaviors, where traits of ASD are suppressed and gender-appropriate behaviors are mimicked to reduce the visibility and victimization of ASD girls. Current research explores ASD presentation and the lived experiences of ASD girls and adolescents; however, there is a paucity of literature in relation to the intra- and inter- psychic experiences of ASD women. Through a social constructionist framework, this qualitative study sought to understand how the construction of gender and the medicalisation of ASD influences women's experiences of ASD. This study also explored the use and consequence of masking strategies and the impact this has on well-being. Eight women were interviewed, and three major themes were identified. The themes outline the influence of gender expectations and social norms on the women's experiences, the significance of diagnosis to their identity, and the influence of the medicalization of ASD. Participants shared experiences of feeling different and internalizing blame for this difference. The feeling of difference was a major contributor to the women's positive or negative mental well-being. The process of diagnosis allowed participants to create and confirm their identity. Diagnosis also led to improvements in well-being, however, the findings also explore the complexity of labeling individuals with a disorder and the difficulties that arise from the construct of 'functionality' for those with Autism. The study also explores the temporal nature of ASD and the changing experiences of women as they mature. It is hoped this study promotes discussion and provides clinicians and those connected to ASD women with insights into the support ASD women require to live authentic lives.

Keywords : female autism, gender, masking, social constructionism

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