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Pretending to be myself: on camouflaging and selfhood in the experience of anxiety

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the notion of "camouflaging" and its characterization within research on autism, this paper explores the role that attempts to conceal one's experiences may have in the phenomenology of anxiety. I start by suggesting that actions associated with both the "masking" and "compensating" dimension of camouflaging may be present in different forms of anxiety. I then proceed to argue that these actions may foster the person's ability to sustain their identity when some of its core aspects are seen as being threatened by anxious feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. I do so by drawing on an account of selfhood to which both affective and narrative processes are central, suggesting that, in some cases, actions associated with camouflaging can facilitate the experience of affects and the upholding of narratives that are self-constitutive.

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1. Introduction

Camouflaging, or social camouflaging, has been researched predominantly with regard to experiences associated with autism spectrum disorder (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022, p. 56). In this context, camouflaging can be defined "as the employment of specific behavioural and cognitive strategies by autistic people to adapt to or cope within the predominantly non-autistic social world" (Cook et al., 2021, para. 2).

Different accounts of camouflaging and related phenomena are present in the literature; however, as outlined by Petrolini and colleagues (2023, Section 1.1., para. 1), when discussing camouflaging, particular attention has been given to the *aims* or *purposes* of this phenomenon. Various characterizations indeed converge in suggesting that camouflaging is adopted in order to increase the degree to which those who adopt the relevant strategies "fit in" within a certain environment (Hull et al., 2017).

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In the case of autistic persons, this is an environment that often reflects the practices, needs, and preferences of those who do not have experience of an autism spectrum condition (ASC), and which can be challenging or unwelcoming in different ways.

In this context, "masking" and "compensating" have been identified as key dimensions of camouflaging (Cook et al., 2021; Petrolini et al., 2023). According to the influential characterization provided by Hull and others, masking refers to "aspects of camouflaging that focus on hiding one's ASC characteristics and developing different personas or characters to use during social situations" (Hull et al., 2017, p. 2525). The aspects of camouflaging that are taken to be instances of compensation, on the other hand, "center around developing explicit strategies to meet the social and communication gaps resulting from an individual's ASC [. . .]" (Hull et al., 2017, p. 2526). As it will be outlined in the following, however, the distinction between masking and compensating is still debated and not clear-cut.

While the literature on camouflaging has been focusing largely on the experience of autistic persons, it has been suggested that also neurotypical people and some persons experiencing mental ill-health engage in actions that are analogous or similar to those associated with autistic camouflaging (Miller et al., 2021; Petrolini & Schmidt-Boddy, 2025). For example, there appear to be similarities between some of the behaviors displayed by those who suffer from social anxiety and some of the strategies adopted by autistic persons to mask their autism (Fombonne, 2020, p. 736; Lei et al., 2024; Petrolini et al., 2023, Section 3.1.).

A reason that has been offered for the presence of camouflaging across autistic and non-autistic populations concerns the experiences that may give rise to the willingness to hide certain features, and to try to "fit in". In particular, as illustrated by Miller et al. (2021), the avoidance of stigma is a central aspect of masking,[1] and experiences of marginalization of different kinds can be connected to this phenomenon.

As discussed by Petrolini and colleagues (2023, Section 1.1., para. 5), research on camouflaging has also drawn attention to the effects that masking and compensating can have. Various studies have shown that camouflaging often has negative consequences for autistic persons, being associated with exhaustion and physical and mental ill-health (Bradley et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2017). Camouflaging has been argued to have negative outcomes also among non-autistic people, and one aspect of these dynamics has to do with the way in which camouflaging affects one's sense of self and identity (Miller et al., 2021). However, it is also recognized that some persons with autism find benefits in camouflaging, and it is possible that this is the case also for individuals who are not autistic but resort to camouflaging for various reasons.

In this context, it seems important to develop a fine-grained understanding of the different forms that camouflaging can take, and how they may affect the lived experience of those who engage in them. The present study seeks to contribute to this endeavor, by exploring the role that attempts to camouflage may play in the phenomenology of anxiety.

Not only camouflaging has been associated with anxiety in the autistic population (Hull et al., 2021) but, as mentioned before, it has been observed that some behaviors associated with social anxiety conditions are analogous to those displayed by autistic persons who camouflage.

The extent to which non-autistic individuals who suffer from an anxiety disorder engage in camouflaging – or the impact that this may have, in particular in relation to their self-experience and self-understanding – is not well-investigated in the literature thus far. Drawing also on the exploration of published first-personal testimonies of anxiety sufferers and on a phenomenological approach to the exploration of lived experience, this paper aims to develop a cohesive phenomenological account of these dynamics.[2]

After providing an overview of some of the key insights and debates within existing research on camouflaging (§ 2), I suggest that attempts to conceal one's condition may be associated with different forms of anxiety,[3] and that these attempts may aim to both hide one's experiences and to enhance the ability to manage them (§ 3). I then proceed to argue that the processes associated with these instances of camouflaging may have a specific effect on one's self-experience and self-understanding. In particular, by drawing on an account of anxiety and selfhood to which both affective and narrative processes are central (§ 4), I maintain that some instances of camouflaging may foster the person's ability to sustain their identity when some of its core aspects are seen as being threatened by anxious feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (§ 5). More specifically, I argue that camouflaging may foster the person's capacity to experience affects and uphold self-narratives that are integral to their self-identity.

2. Camouflaging: forms and effects

As outlined above, in the literature it has been suggested that autistic camouflaging has distinct components, differentiating between masking and compensating.

Here, masking can be characterized as a set of behaviors aimed at hiding certain features or experiences. For instance, based on the responses provided by persons with an ASC diagnosis who took part in their research, Hull and colleagues (2017, pp. 2525–26) observe that masking can involve minimizing behaviors that can be associated with autism,[4] or mimicking the behavior of others who appear to be effective in handling social situations.

Compensation, on the other hand, would encompass a range of strategies that increase the person's ability to manage social situations. This includes "non-verbal communication strategies" such as "forcing and maintaining appropriate eye contact" or certain facial expressions in social situations (Hull et al., 2017, p. 2526). Other strategies associated with the compensating dimension of camouflaging may involve following certain "rules or guidelines" (Hull et al., 2017, p. 2526), for example, asking questions or refraining from talking too much or disclosing certain information about oneself.

The characterization of masking and compensation, however, is not uniform across the literature (cf. Cook et al., 2021; Petrolini et al., 2023). For instance, Livingston and Happé (2017) suggest that phenomena associated with masking can be captured by the notion of compensation (p. 734), and differentiate between "shallow" and "deep" compensation. The former is conceived as involving strategies that are considered to be "inflexible", an example of which would be imitating other people's behavior, or indeed suppressing some of one's spontaneous behaviors (Livingston and Happé, 2017; Livingston et al., 2019). Deep compensation, on the other hand, would involve "complex and flexible strategies" (Livingston et al., 2019, p. 770) to navigate social situations, for instance, following certain "algorithms" to identify someone else's mental states. Livingston and colleagues refer to the following report as providing an example of such strategy:

> I think I observe patterns in behaviour and then try to transfer this. So if a person is behaving x/y/z types of ways, they could be feeling or thinking what so and so people had felt. It's almost a case of systematically storing little patterns in each person and the context, so I can refer to it in future. (Livingston et al., 2019, p. 771)

In the present study, I retain the term "masking" to refer to practices whose purpose is to conceal some experiences or traits, while I use the notion of "compensation" to designate strategies that are aimed at increasing one's capacity to manage certain situations. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged, that these aspects of camouflaging are intertwined. As recognized by Petrolini et al. (2023, Section 1.1., para. 2) with regard to autism, masking and compensating are indeed not to be seen as two separate phenomena, and are likely often co-occurring.[5]

Camouflaging can have a significant impact on the wellbeing of the person who employs the relevant strategies, and the literature highlights a range of negative effects associated with it. In particular, camouflaging is linked to exhaustion, stress, and anxiety (Hull et al., 2017, p. 2527), and generally to poorer physical and mental health (Bradley et al., 2021).

Importantly, the effects of camouflaging also relate to the ways in which persons with autism experience and express their own identity. Hull et al.

(2017, p. 2529), for instance, draw attention to how respondents to the study they conducted indicated that camouflaging was in tension with the ability to show and be their "true" self. As noted by the authors, this may happen when autism is seen as an integral part of one's identity, and/or may be related to the sense that camouflaging involves deceiving other people, by projecting an inaccurate view of oneself.

Moreover, the experience of playing different "roles" to camouflage one's autism may lead to a weakening of one's sense of self, as illustrated in the following report (Hull et al., 2017, p. 2529):

> Sometimes, when I have had to do a lot of camouflaging in a high stress environment, I feel as though I have lost track of who I really am, and that my actual self is floating somewhere above me like a balloon.

Similarly, Bradley et al. (2021) report that many respondents to their online survey had faced difficulties concerning identity and self-experience in relation to camouflaging. This included descriptions of having lost one's "real me," "feeling 'fake,'" and related experiences of "shame" (325). More broadly, Miller et al. (2021) have suggested that a sense of disconnection from one's own identity is associated with masking strategies for both autistic persons and other neurotypes.

However, it should be noted that autistic persons who engage in camouflaging also point to some benefits that may be derived from camouflaging. For instance, some see camouflaging as enabling them to entertain social relationships and to "function" better in environments – for example, at work – that are often shaped by neurotypical preferences (Bradley et al., 2021, p. 326). As observed by Bradley and colleagues, for some people, camouflaging seems to contribute to restore or sustain a sense of positive openness toward the future, and may be seen as facilitating achievements that one is proud of. For instance, one of the participants in the study conducted by Livingston et al. (2019, p. 772) reported the following:

> With compensation, I have a job in which people respect my work and ask for my help and opinions . . . I am liked by my colleagues and friends . . . I haven't lived on the edge, lost and lonely, as I could have. I have been super super lucky.

Although camouflaging can be beneficial in some ways, as outlined above, research on camouflaging and autism shows that there are also significant costs associated with these strategies, and some of these have to do specifically with the impact that camouflaging can have on one's self-experience and self-understanding. Some of these effects may be present also when non-autistic people and persons who experience certain forms of mental ill-health camouflage. However, in the remainder of this study, I will show that, at least in the case of anxiety, camouflaging may have a more positive

impact, and indeed may be a way through which one's self-identity is reinforced and supported.

3. Camouflaging and anxiety

Phenomena that have similarities with both masking and compensating appear to be present in various instances of anxiety associated with mental ill-health. Here, I will be mostly focusing on acute and long-term forms of anxiety that can revolve around a wide-ranging set of concerns – as it is the case in the conditions captured by the construct of *generalized anxiety disorder* (GAD) – or can be focused on specific worries, as exemplified by *specific phobias* (such as fear of flying) and *social anxiety disorder* (SAD) (APA, 2022). Some of my investigation in the following is also informed by my own experiences as an anxiety sufferer.

Experiences of anxiety that are associated with disorder diagnoses involve an overestimation of the danger posed by the situations that one is anxious about and tend to be persistent over time (lasting 6 months or more) (APA, 2022, p. 215). In GAD, the excessive worries experienced by the person can focus on a range of different domains. As outlined by the DSM, "[a]dults with generalized anxiety disorder often worry about everyday, routine life circumstances, such as possible job responsibilities, health and finances, the health of family members, misfortune to their children, or minor matters (e.g., doing household chores or being late for appointments)" (APA, 2022, p. 251). In the case of specific phobias, the fear focuses on particular situations or objects – for example, "flying, heights, animals, receiving an injection, seeing blood" – although most people with this condition have multiple phobias (APA, 2022, p. 224). Finally, in SAD, the person's anxiety relates to social situations in which one could be scrutinized by other people, and the person is concerned that they will be negatively judged by others in these contexts (APA, 2022, p. 229 ff.).

One of the reasons why I am considering a variety of experiences of anxiety is that there is high comorbidity between different anxiety disorders (Goldstein-Piekarski et al., 2016), and the same or similar strategies (such as camouflaging) could potentially be employed to manage different ways of being anxious. In addition, the published first-personal testimonies on which some of the present research relies show that feelings of anxiety, and their consequences, can have a far-reaching nature and impact on multiple dimensions of a person's life.

Anxiety sufferers are sometimes concerned about displaying physical symptoms of anxiety or about the anxiety becoming visible through their actions. GAD is often accompanied by somatic symptoms such as restlessness, fatigue, muscle tension, sleeping problems, sweating, nausea, and

headaches (APA, 2022, p. 251) and sufferers can be acutely aware of how these symptoms can be noticeable to others, actively attempting to conceal them.

Some first-person reports indeed highlight how those who experience anxiety may seek to hide, or explain away the physical manifestations of their anxiety. For instance, in her memoir of anxiety, Andrea Petersen reports the following:

> Trying to hide my terror and appear "normal" was exhausting, so I came up with a cover story. I told my roommates and others I was recovering from mono, the quintessential college "kissing" disease. That was meant to explain why I skipped parties, stayed in bed a lot, and escaped to my parents' house on weekends. And to a certain extent, I faked it. (Petersen, 2017, p. 15)

Similarly, in his memoir, Daniel Smith describes how, upon starting college, he engaged in strenuous attempts to hide from other people the fact that he was anxious. As he explains:

> I tried. How I tried! In those first weeks away my circumoral muscles got a serious workout, what with me grinning anytime anyone so much as breathed in my direction. The grin was a reflex [. . .]. My other efforts presumably didn't come off much better. There was, for example, my voice. I did my best to pitch it somewhere short of screamingly hysterical but I could never pull it off.
> [. . .] Then there was the coughing. I coughed a lot. It was a mid-level cough, volume-wise, halfway between a throat-clear and a deep-phlegm extraction, and I peppered my conversation with it liberally. I did this in order to quell the sensation that I was about to projectile weep onto whomever I was talking to. (Smith, 2013, pp. 94–95)

The willingness to hide one's anxiety and its symptoms can be an aspect also of SAD, as one of the reasons why one might be anxious about social situations is the fear that they will display "anxiety symptoms, such as blushing, trembling, sweating, stumbling over one's words, or staring, that will be negatively evaluated by others" (APA, 2022, p. 230). This can give rise to avoidance of the social situations in which others could see and judge the person's anxiety symptoms, which is a strategy that seems to parallel camouflaging as masking.

As it is the case at least in some instances of autistic camouflaging, the desire to conceal experiences and manifestations of anxiety can be motivated by the threat of stigma. Indeed, traits and behaviors that accompany anxiety are negatively evaluated in certain social contexts. For example, in professional environments where confidence, assertiveness, and fast-paced decision-making are highly valued, the cautiousness, hesitance, and indecision that mark anxiety conditions can be seen as undesirable. From this point of view, there could be an important similarity between occurrences of camouflaging related to autism and anxiety.

Alongside the willingness to hide some of one's experiences, behaviors associated with the compensating dimension of camouflaging also seem to be present in anxiety. An example of this is provided by the ways in which anxiety sufferers may seek to counteract the effects that anxious feelings may have on the way in which they act, for example, to ensure that they can pursue plans and projects that are important to them.

Persons with anxiety are frequently aware that their feelings may be unwarranted by the circumstances and convey a distorted appraisal of how threatening or dangerous the object of one's anxiety is. Such an awareness may not weaken the anxiety itself; however, it may prompt the individual to act against the attitudes and behaviors that may stem from their affective experience (Bortolan, 2022, p. 346), motivating them to face the relevant situations despite still being anxious about them. This, I think, can be seen as a form of camouflaging, in so far as one endeavors to behave in ways that are in tension with, and conceal, one's anxiety, but, in so doing, the capacity to effectively manage the circumstances that one is anxious about, and that may be of personal significance to them, can also be strengthened. As such, while there may be a masking dimension to these dynamics, the compensation aspect of camouflaging also seems to be in play here.

An example of this is provided by the way in which some people who suffer from phobias try to counteract the avoidance behaviors (APA, 2022, pp. 225–226) that may ensue from the phobias themselves.

For instance, I suffer from aviophobia, which I experience as a very intense and incontrollable fear of dying in an aeroplane accident. Due to this, I have frequently and for a long time avoided flying, in whatever manner I could, and sometimes with impulsive last minute decisions. In a few instances, I have gone to the airport on the day in which I was supposed to depart, only to later come back home without having been able to board a plane, and, on a couple of occasions, I have asked (and obtained) to disembark a plane that I had already boarded ahead of departure.

I am aware that the level of anxiety I experience about flying is not warranted by the level of risk associated with this activity, as flying is indeed a safe way of travelling. My feelings are not generally weakened by this awareness; however, more and more over time, I have sought to modify my behavior and act like someone who is not afraid of flying, in order to minimize the impact that these feelings have on my life. I go through the motions, so to speak; trying to act as a non-nervous flyer would: I do not try to delay as much as possible the moment in which I board the plane; I do not seek to inspect from afar the engines of the aeroplane for signs of damage or malfunction; when airborne, I try not to monitor the engines' sound patterns to detect potential problems, and I try to keep myself entertained by

reading or listening to music. Some of these are behaviors that I have witnessed in others, and that I keep as a reference point, as a model I refer to to help me navigate a situation to which I would instinctively react with very different actions.

The case of responses to phobias may not at first appear to fall within the remit of what we are talking about when we talk about camouflaging, as one may observe that phobias can be very circumscribed, and the concealing strategies associated with camouflaging rather tend to concern experiences and behaviors that are pervasive or more frequently displayed.

However, it is worth remarking that phobias can play a central role in one's life, and have a significant impact in domains that are central to one's self-conception. Some first-person reports of concealing behaviors in contexts in which specific fears are impacting the person do indeed highlight how significant both the anxiety, and one's camouflaging of it, can be. For example, in his memoir Scott Stossel recounts how he experienced a very intense episode of anxiety during his wedding ceremony and celebrations, but tried to hide the very distressing feelings he was undergoing, powering through the event almost as if nothing was happening. In his words:

> [. . .] when we get outside the church, the acute physical symptoms recede. I am not going to have convulsions. I am not going to pass out. But as I stand in the reception line, and then drink and dance at the reception, I'm pantomiming happiness. I am smiling for the camera, shaking hands—and wanting to die. (Stossel, 2014, p. 5)

Trying to offset the effects of one's anxiety by approaching the feared situation in a premeditated manner, for example, by following certain rules, is also a strategy adopted by some social anxiety sufferers. For example, in her memoir of growing up with social anxiety, Emily Ford describes how she set herself specific goals to navigate social interactions in a university classroom and at a social event at one of her teachers' house. As she explains:

> I set goals for myself, such as initiating a topic of discussion at least once during the three-hour class. At the next meeting, I might set a goal of volunteering at least two answers. (Ford, 2007, p. 96)
>
> [. . .] initially, I simply smiled and quietly offered to stir whatever was on the stove while my classmates chatted. Later, I would make myself ask about everyone's pets or their families. (Ford, 2007, p. 96)

Following certain rules when interacting with others can help to structure such interactions, and this, as highlighted by Hendriksen in her exploration of self-experience and social anxiety, can benefit those who suffer from this condition (Hendriksen, 2019, p. 125 ff.). To support this point, Hendriksen discusses a study carried out by Thompson and Rapee (2002) which

compared the performance of socially anxious and non-socially anxious individuals in different social situations.

In one of the experimental settings, participants (who weren't told this situation was part of the study), were sitting in a room with a confederate for five minutes without being given specific instructions about how or whether to interact. Subsequently – and this constituted the comparison setting – the participants were asked to interact with the confederate, imagining that they were at a party and had to get to know each other as well as possible in the space of five minutes (Thompson & Rapee, 2002, p. 96). The authors found that while the social performance of socially anxious persons was worse than the performance of those who were not socially anxious in both settings, the difference was much more pronounced in the unstructured interaction.

Drawing also on the results of this study, Hendriksen (2019, p. 129 ff.) suggests that structuring one's behavior in this and similar manners is effectively a way of "playing a role" and that this, in some cases, can foster the ability of social anxiety sufferers to be themselves. I will discuss this idea in later sections of this study. For now, however, it is important to note that this kind of role playing can be very effective, in the sense that practices associated with camouflaging can succeed in concealing one's anxiety from other people.

Whether the strategies adopted by anxiety sufferers aim to hide their experiences of anxiety or to enable them to not be affected by their anxiety in contexts that are important to them, it seems that, at least in some cases, these strategies are adopted extensively by anxiety sufferers, and can result in one's anxiety becoming invisible even to those who are close to the person. For example, in his memoir, Stossel makes the following observations:

> More than a few people, some of whom think they know me quite well, have remarked that they are struck that I, who can seem so even-keeled and imperturbable, would choose to write a book about anxiety.
>
> [. . .] To some people, I may seem calm. But if you could peer beneath the surface, you would see that I'm like a duck—paddling, paddling, paddling. (Stossel, 2014, p. 23)

4. Anxiety and selfhood

So far, I have suggested that camouflaging as masking and camouflaging as compensating can be present in the experience of anxiety. I will now explore how these dynamics may be relevant to one's self-experience and self-understanding, looking in particular at the potential positive effects of camouflaging.

This is not to deny that, as discussed before, camouflaging can be harmful or distressing in various ways. Rather, drawing attention to an aspect under

explored in the literature, my aim here is to further investigate some of the ways in which camouflaging may impinge upon self-related experiences, sometimes in manners that can be felt to be advantageous.

To best illustrate this, it is helpful to first consider how prolonged experiences of anxiety can impact on self-identity, a topic to the understanding of which phenomenological approaches to the mind and psychopathology have given a distinct contribution. In particular, in the following I will outline how selfhood is both affectively laden and narratively structured, and anxiety itself can interfere with the capacity to experience affects and entertain narratives that are self-defining.

4.1. Affectivity, narrativity and the anxious self

Within the phenomenological tradition, it has been suggested that anxiety is an affective experience with a particular structure. More specifically, anxiety has been characterized as a mood, namely as an affective orientation that has the power to structure one's relationship with the world. In this context, the exploration of both anxiety and other moods has been significantly shaped by the work of Heidegger (1991) and has been further developed within contemporary research on the lived experience of emotions and mental health.

One of the features of moods, or mood-like states, is that they can shape the way in which we experience the world, or, in other terms, they can mold the ways in which objects, events, or people appear to be meaningful to us (Ratcliffe, 2010b). For example, Heidegger suggests that we can only experience fear towards something if we are in a particular mood, namely a mood in which the possibility of being threatened or endangered is perceived as open to us (Heidegger, 1991, p. 180; Ratcliffe, 2010b, pp. 355-356, 2013b, p. 163). Similarly, in his account of "existential feelings" – which are affective background orientations analogous to Heideggerian moods in various respects – Ratcliffe (2005, 2008) argues that these states can constrain the range of intentional states that we can entertain (they have, in other terms, a "pre-intentional" character) (Ratcliffe, 2010a).

As such, existential feelings and moods can be seen as having the capacity to enable or dis-able, so to speak, certain types or kinds of affective and cognitive states. In other terms, these affective background orientations facilitate the experience of emotions, thoughts, and desires that are consistent with them, while they hinder or preclude the experience of states that are in tension with the appraisal at the core of the affective orientation itself.[6] To further illustrate this, we can consider the example of feelings of hopelessness discussed by Ratcliffe (2013a).

Ratcliffe (2013a, p. 600 ff.) maintains that while felt experiences of hope often have an intentional structure (for example, I can hope that tomorrow

will be a sunny day, or that I will be promoted next year), there is also a more "radical" form of hope, which is not directed at anything in particular, but which grounds our capacity to have hopes with specific contents. Similarly, Ratcliffe distinguishes between different feelings of hopelessness, suggesting that some of these can play a structuring role in our experience, closing down the possibility to entertain certain forms of hope (and other intentional states) (Ratcliffe, 2013a, pp. 605-606). For instance, this would be the case in some experiences of severe depression, where profound feelings of hopeleness may deprive the experiencer of "the capacity to hope for anything" (Ratcliffe, 2013a, p. 605 ff.).

Within phenomenology, anxiety has been depicted as a similarly powerful mood. In this context, the capacity of anxiety to impact on our relationship with the world as a whole can be understood as depending on the radical way in which anxiety can influence our experience of meaningfulness. Heidegger's very influential account of anxiety, for example, suggests that, when this mood is experienced, things no longer matter to us in the way they usually do (Heidegger, 1991, p. 231; Ratcliffe, 2013b, p. 167 ff.). In other terms, the forms of significance that we ordinarily experience dissipate, and the world becomes a very different and unfamiliar place for us. This is a process of cardinal importance for Heidegger, as the fading away of our ordinary cares and concerns is seen as providing a unique opportunity to interrogate oneself about what truly matters to one, and gives people a chance to gain authenticity in the way in which they conceive of themselves and act (Heidegger, 1991, p. 232; Freeman & Elpidorou, 2020, pp. 394-395).

However, the experience of anxiety is not always a positive, transformative phenomenon. Some instances of anxiety can indeed be profoundly debilitating and their distressing nature is unlikely to be conducive to the sense of security that is needed to engage in self-reflection and make well-pondered choices.

Moreover, while the mood of anxiety is often not in itself focused on anything in particular – that is, when we experience this mood we feel anxious, but there is nothing to which the anxiety is directed at specifically – the mood can give rise to a range of intentional feelings (Bortolan, 2022). More precisely, as I suggested in some previous work, anxiety as a mood can lead to the proliferation of experiences of worry and concern directed at certain things, people, events and states of affairs (Bortolan, 2022, p. 353), and this mechanism can be seen as being at the core of forms of anxiety such as those associated with generalized anxiety disorder (APA, 2022). As such, anxiety as a mood tends to have a non-intentional structure, but it has the power to generate a plurality of intentional feelings, thoughts, and desires that are in line with appraisals of threat and danger.

Independently of whether we think of anxiety as a mood that is only or mainly non-intentional, or we think that, even as a mood, anxiety can have a particular focus, phenomenological accounts contribute to highlight the wide-ranging effects that anxiety can have on our mental and practical life. The consideration of experiences of anxiety associated with mental ill-health seems to support the idea that anxiety erodes ordinary experiences of the world and the forms of meaningfulness attached to them, so that the ways in which we can find things significant can become severely limited.

Acute and prolonged experiences of anxiety may make it difficult to undergo affective and cognitive states that are in conflict with a sense of the world, or aspects of it, as a threatening or dangerous place (cf. Bortolan, 2022). Confidence, contentment, and trust, for instance, are attitudes that we are very unlikely to display when feeling deeply anxious, and a vast range of intentional states can be eroded by anxiety.

Importantly, these dynamics have implications for our sense of self and identity too. What we find significant or meaningful, what matters to us, can indeed be seen as the backbone of our identity. As such, by weakening, or suspending, some of our affective and cognitive responses to things, people, events, and states of affairs, anxiety can impinge upon experiences that play an important role in the constitution of who we are.

More precisely, as I argued elsewhere, anxiety can obscure both affects and self-narratives[7] that are self-defining, having a detrimental and potentially wide-ranging effect on one's self-experience and self-conception (Bortolan, 2022). This is the case because affective experience and narrative self-understanding are key to the ability to endorse a particular set of values, cares, and commitments, and it is the formation and upholding of this "evaluative perspective" that enables us to become, and remain, the individual persons that we are (de Monticelli, 2012; Scheler, 1973).

Affective states such as emotions play a central part in the experience of evaluative features of the world (Helm, 2009; Mulligan, 2010; Slaby, 2008), enabling us to determine what is important to us and should guide our actions. In addition, affectivity is also attributed a motivational role (Helm, 2009; Slaby, 2008), as affective states incline us to attend to what matters to us and act in ways that are consistent with our evaluations.

Autobiographical story-telling too is seen as essential to becoming, and being able to remain, a person of a certain kind (e.g., Schechtman, 1996), and, a relationship of mutual influence exists between narrativity and affectivity too (Bortolan, 2021). Affective experience is indeed impacted upon by our self-narratives, and, in turn, the stories we tell about ourselves are rooted in the experience of particular affects.

One aspect of these dynamics concerns the impact that emotions have on the content of the stories we tell about ourselves. As highlighted by Hardcastle (2003), responding emotionally to certain events underscores

their importance, and, because of this, such events are included within our stories. On the other hand, story-telling itself can impact on emotional experience in various ways. For example, the manner in which we depict ourselves in our self-narratives can contribute to our capacity to experience certain kinds of emotions or other feelings (Bortolan, 2021).

Within this framework, it becomes clearer why profound anxiety can impact on self-experience, potentially even creating uncertainty about who one is or has become. When anxiety takes the form of a mood or existential feeling, it can indeed suspend some of the affects that sustain the person's own evaluative perspective, leading one to no longer resonate affectively with aspects of the world that matter to them and that are part of their self-narratives. To further illustrate this, we can briefly return to the aviophobia example I introduced before.

I have always enjoyed the experience of travelling and taken the capacity to appreciate different landscapes, cultures, experiences and activities to be valuable and something that it is important for me to nurture. In addition, having lived in different countries, travelling is also essential for me to be able to maintain a range of interpersonal relationships. However, due to the phobia of flying, I am less able to resonate emotionally with the prospect of travel. For instance, I may struggle to get excited when the opportunity to visit a country I haven't been to before arises, or I am not strongly motivated to explore arrangements that would enable me to catch up in person with relatives or friends that do not live near me. This, on various occasions, has made me wonder whether I am really the kind of person for whom travelling is important, and even made me question my commitment to certain relationships. In other words, my anxiety has interfered with my capacity to feel emotions that are consistent with my values, cares and commitments, and which sustain a certain way of conceiving of myself, an experience which, if protracted over time, can lead to self-doubting and more radical questioning of one's identity.[8]

5. Camouflaging and selfhood

Drawing on the phenomenological understanding of anxiety and self-identity presented so far, in this section I will argue that, for anxiety sufferers, camouflaging may be a way to hold on to aspects of oneself that have been obscured or weakened by their condition. In other terms, camouflaging can be a way to reaffirm identity features that have been challenged by the alterations of feeling and thought brought about by the anxiety.

More precisely, behaviors associated with camouflaging may help to enhance the continuity and diversity of one's affects and narratives at a time in which these are disrupted. In other terms, camouflaging may in some cases contribute to the reinforcement of the affective repertoire that

one perceives as more integral to their own self, sustaining one's self-conception.

The intertwining between camouflaging, affectivity, and identity is hinted at in this passage from Smith's memoir:

> For the anxiety sufferer trying to come off as normal, the limitations of the body are complicated by the fact that the body he has is no longer the one he's always known. His body has *already* changed, and what he inhabits is alien and uncomfortable. He isn't trying to transform himself into something different; he's trying to transform someone different back into himself. (Smith, 2013, pp. 118-119)

I believe that strategies associated with both masking and compensation can play a role in enabling the anxious person to "self-transform" in the way suggested by Smith, strengthening their sense of self when this is challenged by the emotional and narrative transformations that acute and prolonged experiences of anxiety can engender.[9]

Let's consider first the effects of camouflaging as masking. Hiding one's condition from others can prevent one from becoming the direct object of stigmatizing attitudes. In addition, in some cases, concealing one's experiences can have positive effects even in the absence of stigma. This is because it may be easier to feel that one's anxiety is a core aspect of one's identity if other people are aware of it. If others know that we are anxious, they may indeed behave in a range of ways that acknowledge, respond to, or take into account our anxiety. This may create an environment that is more welcoming, accessible, and easier to navigate; however, it may also confer a higher degree of felt "reality" to the anxiety itself, making the sufferer feel that the anxiety is a pervasive feature of who they are, defining both their private and social life. By counteracting these dynamics, masking can facilitate the processes through which an anxious person distances themselves from their condition, fostering the sense that their identity is not exhausted by it, as well as enhancing their sense of agency over anxious thoughts and feelings.

The strategies associated with camouflaging as compensation can also contribute to diminish the negative effects that anxiety can have on one's sense of self.

I outlined before how those who suffer from anxiety may draw on certain rules or "scripts" to navigate situations in which they are anxious (cf. Ford, 2007). More specifically, I have suggested that, in some cases, experiences of anxiety can be camouflaged through the performance of behaviors and actions that one thinks should or would be performed in those circumstances if the anxiety was not present.

These dynamics can be interpreted as attempts to hold on to a specific narrative, that is the story of how someone who is not anxious would approach certain circumstances or events. There is a "character" – for

instance someone who is not afraid of flying, in the case I discussed before – whose examples the anxious person tries to follow or embody. What would they do upon embarking on a flight? How would they keep themselves entertained and relaxed? Similarly, someone who suffers from social anxiety may seek to follow the norms that appear to reflect the patterns of interaction of those who are not socially anxious. What kind of questions would they ask, and how frequently? Where and when would they socialize?

Camouflaging can thus be a way through which aspects of a certain narrative are enacted in one's own life, but the stories in question can be of different kinds. The narrative that the person is trying to mirror could indeed be a general story about how non-anxious persons behave and act in the situations that make one anxious. The narrative might have been formed by observing the behavior of several other persons and by fashioning a more abstract character whose demeanor one tries to model. However, the camouflaging could also remain more closely connected to specific stories: there could be a particular person, real or fictional, that is taken as an example and has inspired the script or rules that the individual who camouflages tries to follow. Going back to the aviophobia case: when I have had travelling companions who were not anxious about flying, I have often tried to imitate what they were doing on board, and in subsequent occasions I have sought to implement the same strategies, thinking about the behaviors and actions of those particular persons I had travelled with before.

So, the characters in the narratives that we try to embody through camouflaging can be general or specific, real or fictional, and we can observe, remember, or imagine the way in which events unfold in these stories. In some cases, we ourselves can be the protagonists of the tales we are trying to emulate. Perhaps, we haven't always been afraid of flying or there were times when we weren't feeling acutely anxious in social circumstances, and the behaviors and actions that we are trying to perform are part of our own repertoire.

One may observe that these forms of camouflaging are not sufficient to overcome one's anxious feelings, and, in fact, they could even exacerbate them, as the tension between one's external demeanor and internal experience may be challenging to manage. This is an important aspect to be taken into account, and it is corroborated by first-personal reports that highlight how anxious feelings can remain present even when one deliberately chooses to behave and act in ways that are in conflict with them (cf. Smith, 2013, p. 167 ff.; Stossel, 2014, p. 5). However, there are also various reasons to suggest that this form of camouflaging can, over time, have a positive impact on the anxiety itself.

One reason why this may be the case is that behaviors and actions can have emotional effects of their own, and these effects can counteract the anxiety itself. If I adopt a bodily posture that is expressive of relaxation and

trust when afraid on a plane, that bodily demeanor may indeed start feeding back into my feelings, diminishing the tension and facilitating the experience of emotions that would normally be precluded by my anxiety. As the fear becomes less intense, for example, I may become curious about or interested in what I am seeing, hearing, or reading. These strategies may in the long term be helpful also because they can sustain the development of different habits, which in turn may lessen the behaviors that typically sustain the anxiety.

This is reflective of the idea that affective states can be changed by modifying the way in which we act, which is one of the tenets of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) (Hofmann and Asmundson, 2017; Hollon and Beck, 2013). However, this and other approaches in clinical psychology also emphasize the influence that particular forms of cognition can have on affectivity, and this further underscores why camouflaging, understood also as a narrative practice, can have the self-sustaining effects discussed in this study.

For example, some frameworks within narrative medicine and narrative therapy emphasize the impact that the stories we tell about ourselves can have on the way we feel, suggesting that the negative affects associated with some experiences of mental ill-health can be modified by changing some of our self-narratives (Angus & Greenberg, 2011). As such, not only, as Hendriksen remarks, once we start acting in certain ways, our feelings will "catch up" with our actions (2019, p. 120 ff.), but self-narrating in certain manners can also be a powerful part of this process (cf. Bortolan, 2021).

Due to the impact that the stories we tell can have on the way we feel, the narratives that are sustained by camouflaging behaviors can feed back into affective experience, modifying the range of emotions and moods that can be felt. By making it possible or easier to offset the influence that the anxiety has, camouflaging can then enable those who adopt these strategies to continue pursuing the values, cares, and commitments that for them are self-defining when the capacity to do so is threatened by anxious feelings. When what one feels, thinks, and does risks being significantly constrained or distorted by anxiety, camouflaging can be a way to sustain thoughts, feelings, and actions that are integral to one's identity.

One could object to these ideas by claiming that, rather than fostering the ability to be oneself, camouflaging diminishes the capacity for self-expression, or can even lead to a weakening or loss of one's identity. As mentioned earlier, the experiences of camouflaging reported by autistic persons highlight how such experiences may threaten one's sense of self (Bradley et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2017), and the same risks could be associated with camouflaging in relation to anxiety (especially when this occurs in response to stigma). As such, one may worry that concealing one's anxiety

may not only prevent an anxious person from expressing a key aspect of who they are, but that it could also pose a challenge to their sense of self.

These concerns can be responded to by noting that not all forms of camouflaging are equivalent, and what we camouflage "as," so to speak, makes a difference with regard to the impact that these practices have on selfhood.

The reports of persons with autism suggest that, in many cases, autistic people camouflage to hide experiences, traits, and behaviors that do not conform to neurotypical expectations. As observed before, this form of camouflaging may entail the suppression of features that are central to one's identity (Bradley et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2021). In these instances, and for reasons such as the willingness or necessity to avoid being recognized as autistic, the person who adopts the camouflaging strategies is suppressing aspects of who she is in order to "fit in" in an environment that doesn't adequately recognize, respect, and support identities like her own.

Camouflaging in anxiety can happen for similar reasons and have similar effects: anxious persons may want to avoid the stigma that can be attached to their condition by hiding it, and this may result in a reduced ability to express core aspects of one's self. As such, camouflaging in relation to anxiety can have identity-threatening effects.

However, not all instances of anxious camouflaging take this form. As highlighted before, some anxiety sufferers may indeed adopt strategies associated with masking or compensating in order to reduce the impact that the anxiety has on their capacity to have the experiences and perform the actions that they think are important to their own identity. So, we can say that, in these cases, a socially anxious person is not trying to act like someone else while hiding their own identity, but rather they are trying to behave in ways that better embody their own self. As such, in these circumstances camouflaging can have an identity-sustaining role.[10]

In the context of anxiety conditions, camouflaging can then amount to trying to endorse a certain identity, but its effects are very different depending on whose identity one is attempting to adopt. As discussed by Hendriksen, it is consequential whether the "roles" we play are picked for us or we choose them, and in the latter case they can act as "scaffolding" that help to "reinforce" and "build" our own self (2019, pp. 129–130).

6. Conclusions

This paper has explored the role of camouflaging experiences in anxiety. I started by outlining the ways in which camouflaging has been characterized within research on autism, distinguishing in particular between camouflaging as masking and camouflaging as compensating. I then argued that

experiences and behaviors associated with both masking and compensating are present in various anxiety disorders, and I considered the impact that these factors may have on anxiety sufferers.

I suggested that, as illustrated by the experience of autistic persons, camouflaging can be motivated by the desire to avoid stigma, and, as a practice that can interfere with the expression of one's own identity, it can threaten one's sense of self. However, I argued that the camouflaging strategies adopted by anxious persons can also have positive effects on their self-experience at times in which their sense of self might be challenged by the anxiety. Drawing on some phenomenological accounts of affectivity and selfhood, I acknowledged that acute or prolonged experiences of anxiety can weaken the person's ability to undergo affects and engage with narratives that are self-constitutive, and I suggested that some forms of camouflaging can counteract these processes. More specifically, I maintained that masking and compensating can in various manners reinforce the capacity to experience affective states and uphold narratives that are at the core of who we are as a person.

While my focus in this study has been on the role of camouflaging in the phenomenology of anxiety, the suggestions I have advanced have potential implications for the understanding of other forms of mental ill-health and the experience of neurodiversity, and this could be explored in future research on the topic. For example, it has been shown that transformations of self-experience and self-understanding are central also to depression (Bortolan, 2017b), and considering how camouflaging may be part of these dynamics could be fruitful. In addition, while the literature on autistic camouflaging has provided the framework for my analysis of how anxious persons camouflage, an exploration of the extent to which the affective and narrative dynamics discussed in this paper could intersect with the way in which autistic persons camouflage is still to be carried out.[11]

Notes

1. The authors use the term "masking," rather than "camouflaging," as an umbrella term for different concealing strategies.
2. My approach reflects the methodological and theoretical framework of philosophical phenomenology (cf. Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012: Ch. 1). The central role played by the exploration of lived experience within this tradition is consonant with the recognition that the investigation of questions concerning health and ill-health cannot be successful (ethically and epistemically) unless the perspective of those who have direct experience of the relevant phenomena takes center stage (cf. Kidd et al., 2025; Ritunnano, 2022).
3. Here I will be concerned with experiences of anxiety that due, for example, to their intensity, duration, and scope, are felt by the experiencer as being significantly distressing or debilitating. At least some of these experiences are captured by the characterization of anxiety disorders provided, for instance, by the Diagnostic and

Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). However, I do not wish to imply that the experiences I am concerned with are always aspects of a diagnosable condition, or that the notion of disorder is appropriate to characterize them.

4. An example of this would be the minimization of "stimming" (short for "self-stimulatory behaviour"), namely repeated movements or actions that can have various aims, including serving as coping mechanisms (Kapp et al., 2019; The National Autistic Society, 2025).
5. As noted also by Petrolini and colleagues (2023), the use of the notion of "compensation" in relation to the experience of autistic persons can be problematic, in so far as it could foster the idea that those who engage in the relevant behaviors do so because they need to make up for the alleged lack of certain capacities. I am grateful to a Reviewer for drawing my attention to this point and for prompting me to clarify my approach. My use of the term in this paper aims to avoid any stigmatising connotation, as I see compensation as simply referring to a range of actions and strategies that are often put in place to manage challenges frequently caused by neuronormative and other restrictive and exclusionary expectations.
6. Ratcliffe acknowledges that existential feelings can be accompanied by certain evaluations (2008, p. 38) but does not claim that they are always appraisals. However, it seems plausible to characterise the experiences of significance conveyed by existential feelings as having an evaluative nature. (cf. Bortolan, 2017a; Slaby & Stephan, 2008).
7. There are different positions in the literature about what makes something a narrative. Here I conceive of it as a story, that can be expressed or simply "thought through" (Goldie, 2012, p. 2) and that captures episodes or periods in one's life that are more less extended and that have oneself as the main character.
8. As I argued before (Bortolan, 2022), the affective transformations associated with anxiety can be connected to experiences of "self-illness ambiguity," namely experiences of uncertainty about whether one's thoughts and feelings are truly one's own or the product of one's condition.
9. As previously discussed, masking and compensation are best understood as components or dimensions of camouflaging (Petrolini et al., 2023). However, as it was the case before, it may be helpful here to slightly abstract from the complexity of the practice of camouflaging to look at the specific ways in which its dimensions may be related to self-experience.
10. The idea that camouflaging may play different roles in relation to self-experience has also recently been defended by Petrolini and Schmidt-Boddy (2025) through a comparative exploration of camouflaging in autism and bordeline personality disorder.
11. Furthermore, as a person can be both autistic and experience anxiety, it would be helpful to consider how experiences of camouflaging focussed on autistic and anxious traits respectively might overlap and interact.

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