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Publication Date

2023-06-16

INVISIBLE WOMEN: THE FEMALE AUTISM MAKE-UP

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

May 05, 2023

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

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ABSTRACT

The majority of advancements in comprehending Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have been accomplished by studying young boys, which has consequently resulted in a scarcity of research on the manifestation of ASD in young girls. Numerous females stay undiscovered well into adulthood along these lines. In my examinations, I've found that ASD is analyzed multiple times more habitually in boys than in girls, featuring a gap in how we might interpret ASD's presence in females. Although the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) undergoes continuous updates and refinements, challenges remain regarding the underdiagnoses of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in young girls compared to their male counterparts. The primary aim of this narrative research endeavor was to pinpoint disparities in the manifestation and experiences of ASD between boys and girls. This study employed a comprehensive, narrative approach, utilizing autobiographical texts penned by women who were diagnosed with ASD during their adult years as a means to unveil disparities between males and females affected by ASD. A review of existing literature brought forth several questions that could illuminate our comprehension of the female autism phenotype – that is, the unique expressions of autistic strengths and challenges specific to females. One particularly relevant question is: What distinguishing features of ASD have been identified in women who received their diagnosis during adulthood, and what might these traits have resembled during their childhood years? This inquiry seeks to pinpoint disparities between the presentation of ASD in males and females while concurrently emphasizing the urgency of gaining a deeper understanding of the female autism phenotype. My research endeavors to illuminate these distinctions and contribute substantively to the rather limited body of knowledge surrounding this essential subject matter.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to my faculty mentor Dr. John Lindo, for his invaluable guidance and support throughout my research project. Dr. Lindo's expertise, encouragement, and willingness to share his knowledge and insights have been instrumental in helping me navigate the complexities of Autism research. His feedback and suggestions have been incredibly helpful in refining my ideas and improving the quality of my work. Without his mentorship, I would not have been able to achieve the level of success that I have in my research. Thank you so much for your dedication and commitment to my academic growth and development.

I would also like to thank UCR for the incredible opportunity to be part of the honors program. Being a member of this program has enriched my academic journey and provided me with unique learning experiences and resources to pursue my academic goals. Thanks should also go to the University's Writing Support which has provided me with valuable feedback and guidance throughout the writing process, helping me to improve my writing skills and produce a high-quality paper.

Lastly, I want to thank my family, especially my mom and little sister, for setting the framework for my resilience and courage to speak up. Their unwavering love and guidance have been instrumental in shaping who I am today. I am forever grateful for their support and belief in me.

Invisible Women: The Female Autism Make-Up

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a multifaceted neurological development issue marked by a range of social, communicative, and behavioral difficulties. As we continue to unveil a greater understanding of ASD, investigations focused on how the disorder manifests in young girls have been significantly lacking. Addressing this imbalance is essential as it frequently contributes to underdiagnoses, often resulting in many women not being formally diagnosed until their adult years. Troublingly, ASD diagnosis rates are up to four times higher for boys compared to girls, which underscores the importance of enhancing our understanding and recognition of ASD in female individuals. Comprehending the impact of ASD on girls and women is vital for facilitating early detection, timely intervention, and appropriate support measures. The term "female autism phenotype" describes the unique expression of autistic strengths and challenges experienced specifically by females. This has led researchers to question what distinguishing features of ASD have been identified in women who received their diagnosis during adulthood and how these traits may have presented during their childhood.

The underdiagnoses in young girls arise from various factors including gender differences in presentation and prevailing biases or stereotypes that may erroneously guide professionals to overlook signs of ASD in girls. As recognition of this issue grows, so too does the importance of understanding the complexities of ASD as experienced by females. It has become vital for researchers, clinicians, and educators to consider the female autism phenotype—a term coined to represent the unique expressions of autistic strengths and challenges specific to females.

Given this context, the purpose of this narrative research endeavor is to elucidate disparities between the manifestation and experiences of ASD among boys and girls. Utilizing autobiographical texts authored by women diagnosed with ASD during their adulthood, this

study employs a comprehensive narrative inquiry approach to explore distinctions between males and females affected by ASD. By delving into these personal accounts and drawing upon existing research findings, my aim is not only to pinpoint disparities between the presentation of ASD in different genders but also to emphasize the urgency for a deeper understanding of the female autism phenotype. This research therefore endeavors to contribute substantively to the relatively limited body of knowledge surrounding this vital subject matter. Through thorough exploration and analysis, I aspire to bring increased clarity and awareness to the experiences of women living with ASD; to shed light on their unique journeys while traversing a world that often overlooks their struggles and perspectives.

Despite ongoing revisions to diagnostic criteria, such as those outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), challenges persist when diagnosing and identifying ASD in females relative to their male counterparts. This underdiagnosis often results in girls with ASD remaining unidentified well into adulthood. As such, addressing this gender bias is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of ASD manifestations across all individuals on the spectrum. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) research in females is notably lacking in comparison to studies focused on male diagnoses. Most ASD inquiries have been carried out on boys, resulting in a deficiency of knowledge about how ASD manifests in young girls. This information gap hinders our comprehension of the female autism phenotype and complicates accurate diagnosis for women exhibiting autistic traits. Thus, this literature review aims to explore the existing research on ASD in females while highlighting the discrepancies between male and female ASD manifestations.

One essential resource for examining female-specific ASD traits is Nerenberg's (2020) book. In "Divergent Mind: Thriving in a World That Wasn't Designed for You," Jenara

Nerenberg highlights the often-overlooked experiences of neurodivergent women. By using a multi-disciplinary approach combining neuroscience, cognitive science, and psychiatry, she offers insight into different expressions of autism in females and ways to recognize them. Additionally, Nerenberg (2020) provides personal accounts from women on the autism spectrum and expert opinions to offer an empathetic perspective of life as a neurodivergent woman. Taking a multi-disciplinary approach and employing neurodiversity as a central framework, Nerenberg (2020) delves into the complexities of the female autistic experience. Within this work, she interviews women with autism and distills insights from experts, providing readers with valuable firsthand accounts that serve to dispel the notion that autism only affects males.

Among these firsthand accounts by Nerenberg (2020), several common themes emerge that illustrate how some symptoms present differently in women compared to men with ASD. Nerenberg (2020) argues that the diagnostic criteria for ASD should be adapted to better reflect the unique presentation of autism in females and that a more nuanced understanding of the female autism phenotype is needed to better recognize and diagnose the condition in women. One startling observation centers around social communication challenges, which manifest more subtly in women with ASD than men (Nerenberg, 2020). For example, Nerenberg (2020) says that girls may struggle with using language or gestures that are contextually appropriate or have difficulties interpreting nonverbal cues. These subtleties can result in girls appearing shy or introverted rather than being identified as autistic. This disparity could contribute to underdiagnosis as social communication challenges are not as explicitly evident in women as in their male counterparts.

Another aspect unique to women with ASD is their intensely focused interests; these can significantly overshadow their other interests to a disproportionate degree. As Nerenberg (2020)

accounts, such intense focus on specific topics or hobbies can lead outsiders to label these women as obsessive or overly "quirky" rather than recognizing these traits as part of the autism spectrum. Nerenberg (2020) states that while it is common for individuals with ASD to have focused interests or preoccupations, these areas may be exhibited differently in females due to gendered societal expectations. Autistic women may pursue hobbies or interests considered more "typical" for their gender, allowing them to go unnoticed within the diagnostic process.

Sensory sensitivity and sensory-seeking behaviors are other crucial elements that warrant further investigation. Individuals with autism frequently report experiencing sensory overloads as Nerenberg (2020) states, often resulting in aversive reactions toward specific sounds, textures, and smells or engaging in sensory-seeking activities. Women might exhibit sensory-seeking behaviors differently than men; for instance, they might gravitate toward certain textures that provide sensory stimulation rather than avoid them (Nerenberg, 2020). Identifying sensory patterns unique to women with ASD will significantly contribute toward understanding how sensory processing affects their daily lives.

Moreover, executive dysfunction; encompassing organization, planning, and decision-making skills, presents a crucial consideration when investigating ASD in women. Nerenberg (2020) says that Women might demonstrate difficulty with multitasking, time management, and prioritizing activities, leading to challenges in navigating daily life. Often referred to as "invisible" traits, these challenges may not be immediately apparent to others or within traditional diagnostic criteria.

Nerenberg's (2020) study brings to light the glaring lack of research on the female autism phenotype and its subsequent misinterpretations. Her insightful book delves into the lives of autistic women, paving the path for individuals who wish to comprehend the nuances of female

autism experiences (Nerenberg, 2020). She underlines the distinctive aspects of female autism phenotypes and advocates for alterations in ASD diagnostic guidelines that capture the true essence of autistic females. This shift would then promote more precise diagnoses and beneficial treatments for women within the spectrum.

Temple Grandin's book, "Thinking in Pictures," provides valuable insight into the unique experiences and difficulties faced by women on the autism spectrum. Grandin, a renowned autism activist, and animal behaviorist shares her journey with ASD and emphasizes the importance of recognizing and embracing neurodiversity among women. Grandin (2006) elaborates that women with ASD often face unique challenges that differ from their male counterparts. Grandin (2006) says sensory sensitivities, difficulty with social interactions, literal thinking patterns, restricted imaginative capabilities, need for structured routines, engagement in repetitive behaviors, strong interests in specific topics, executive functioning difficulties, communication struggles, and visual thinking are all potential symptoms experienced by women with autism.

One key takeaway from Grandin's (2006) work is that women with ASD often exhibit sensory sensitivities. They may be highly sensitive to loud noises, bright lights, or certain textures, making everyday environments potentially overwhelming unlike their male counterparts (Grandin, 2006). In addition to these sensory sensitivities, social interaction can be particularly challenging for women with ASD, as they often struggle to connect with others and may have difficulty interpreting social cues.

Literal thinking is another characteristic identified by Grandin, whom herself has described taking things very literally and struggling with abstract concepts. Alongside this difficulty in imaginative thinking, women with ASD may also exhibit a heightened need for

routine and a strong inclination towards repetitive behaviors as coping mechanisms to manage anxiety or discomfort when faced with disruption (Grandin, 2006). Interestingly, Grandin (2006) identifies that women with ASD can possess strong interests in specific topics or areas of study. Grandin's (2006) fascination with animal behavior is one such example of this passion-driven focus. However, this strength might be overshadowed by difficulties relating to executive functioning skills like organization and time management.

Furthermore, communication challenges are often present in women with ASD. Delayed speech development or struggles expressing oneself verbally may add further layers of complexity to already complicated social interactions. Also, Grandin's (2006) visual thinking process demonstrates another way that autism may manifest differently in females versus males. This unique way of processing information has contributed significantly to her success as an animal behaviorist and designer of livestock handling systems.

These symptoms can manifest differently in females when compared to males due to societal expectations and gender norms. For example, Grandin (2006) states that young girls are often under greater pressure to conform socially than their male peers; they may learn to mask autistic traits to avoid being stigmatized or ostracized. This masking behavior can further complicate accurate ASD diagnosis. Grandin (2006) states that effective support systems tailored towards females on the autism spectrum are essential to address these unique challenges. She adds that increased awareness and education about how ASD present in women will help reduce stereotypes surrounding autism that perpetuate misconceptions about its prevalence amongst females.

To recapitulate, existing research on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has largely neglected its impact on females leading to disparities in diagnosis and treatment. Grandin's

(2006) work sheds light on the unique struggles faced by women with autism and highlights the need for increased understanding within society. By embracing neurodiversity and recognizing the distinct manifestations of ASD in women, communities can help support their growth and success as they navigate through life.

Liane Holliday Willey's work, "Pretending to be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome" (1999), sheds light on the lived experiences of females with autism, providing valuable insights into the unique challenges they face, which is anything like those of male counterparts. Willey (1999) meticulously describes her communication difficulties, such as deciphering sarcasm, interpreting nonverbal cues, and navigating social hierarchies. Willey's (1999) struggles to highlight the need for a more inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to understanding ASD. She also discusses her sensory sensitivities, including heightened sensitivity to sounds, lights, textures, and smells; common experiences for many individuals with autism.

Furthermore, Willey's (1999) memoir delves into her social interaction challenges. Limited interest in socializing and difficulties initiating or maintaining friendships are recurrent themes in her life; a stark contrast to the stereotypical idea that women are naturally skilled at connecting with others emotionally (Willey, 1999). Additionally, she shares her obsessive interests and intense focus on specific subjects, which are characteristic traits of ASD. Willey (1999) recounts her long-standing struggle with executive functioning impairments like organization difficulties, time management issues, and decision-making paralysis. Emotional sensitivity is another prominent aspect addressed within her account of living with autism (Willey, 1999), she is deeply affected by emotions and can become quickly overwhelmed by both her own and others' emotional displays, unlike most of what is diagnosed in males.

The memoir details repetitive self-soothing behaviors that she engages in when facing anxiety or seeking comfort. The importance of routine and predictability is evident through the apprehension Willey feels when encountering changes or unknown situations (Willey, 1999). Furthermore, Willey (1999) exhibits difficulty transitioning between activities or environments smoothly, which is not often realizable since it is not diagnosed in males. Lastly, her heightened sensitivity towards justice underscores another critical dimension of ASD unique to women. She seeks fairness passionately and grapples with the pains of injustice, reflecting how ASD manifests uniquely in females. In conclusion, Willey's *Pretending to be Normal* (1999) significantly contributes to the understanding of ASD in women by detailing her personal experiences and challenges.

In "Autism in Heels," Jennifer Cook O'Toole provides a birds-eye view into experiencing ASD as a young girl and woman. As an esteemed autism specialist and educational advocate, O'Toole openly shares her journey and the unique manifestation of ASD in females. Social confusion often plagues those with ASD, and O'Toole's (2018) experience is no exception. Difficulty comprehending social norms, expectations, and unwritten rules can lead to feelings of isolation, as neurotypical individuals seem to navigate social situations with ease, unlike the diagnosis presented for males (O'Toole, 2018). Moreover, anxiety and depression are commonplace in females with ASD, and O'Toole's (2018) narrative reveals this struggle within her own life. Seeking effective treatment for these symptoms remains challenging for many individuals on the spectrum.

Sensory sensitivities are another striking aspect of ASD that varies among individuals. O'Toole (2018) shares her vulnerability to overwhelming noise, texture, and light stimuli that can trigger immense anxiety, which is often ignored as minor since it is not present in males. On the

other hand, O'Toole's (2018) giftedness in creative fields such as writing and art demonstrates the unique strengths often found in those with ASD.

Literal thinking permeates O'Toole's world; she finds understanding sarcasm and figurative language particularly challenging. As a result, communication difficulties may arise, particularly when attempting to convey meaning or emotions accurately (O'Toole, 2018). This challenge extends into delayed processing speeds that can make decision-making more strenuous or lead to slower response times. This trait contributes to communication difficulties; despite her best efforts, the meaning behind her words is often misconstrued.

Repetitive behaviors serve as self-regulating mechanisms for O'Toole (2018); actions such as pacing or tapping help temper distressing emotions. The change represents another source of anxiety for those with ASD; unexpected alterations to routines prove particularly challenging. Lastly, executive functioning deficits further compound the complexities faced by females with ASD. As evidenced by O'Toole's (2018) experiences, completing tasks and meeting deadlines become arduous due to difficulties with planning and organization. Indeed, understanding the unique experiences of women with ASD is pivotal in closing the existing gaps in research, awareness, and diagnostic processes that leave many women undiagnosed until later in life.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has long been a subject of research, showing that males tend to be diagnosed far more frequently than females (Toeps, 2020). Although knowledge surrounding ASD has grown significantly, a notable gap remains in our understanding of ASD's manifestation in girls and women. Existing literature on this topic is scarce, highlighting the urgent need for more comprehensive research.

Bianca Toeps, a multifaceted Australian talent who is an author, illustrator, actor, and autism advocate, focuses her efforts on illuminating the often-overlooked autistic community (Toeps, 2021). Through her literary work and proactive endeavors, she strives to heighten awareness surrounding the distinct experiences and obstacles that women with ASD encounter. In her book "But You Don't Look Autistic", Toeps (2020) delves into the complex reality of girls and women navigating life with autism.

One crucial aspect that Toeps discusses is the difficulty many women face in obtaining a diagnosis. For years, diagnostic criteria have been heavily influenced by male-centered research, often overlooking the unique ways in which ASD presents itself in females (Toeps, 2020). Per Toeps (2020), the "female camouflage" phenomenon often leads to incorrect or delayed diagnoses for women on the spectrum. This concealment occurs when females adopt social behaviors that mask their autistic traits, resulting in a seemingly typical presentation. Furthermore, some of the diagnostic criteria for ASD were originally based on observations of male subjects only, which may contribute to diagnostic discrepancies between genders (Toeps, 2021). This lack of consideration can prevent countless women from receiving an accurate and timely diagnosis.

Moreover, Toeps addresses the importance of proper support systems for those dealing with autism. In her exploration of women's experiences with ASD, she uncovers numerous accounts of inadequate support services and intense social stigma (Toeps, 2021). With proper intervention and understanding from society at large, females with ASD can flourish both personally and professionally. Also, in both iterations of her book, Toeps identifies key issues such as misdiagnoses or diagnoses later in life, co-occurring mental health disorders that may complicate ASD detection or treatment, and society's stigmatization towards neurodivergent

individuals more broadly (Toeps, 2020; Toeps, 2021). It is suggested that increased awareness and understanding of the female-typical presentation of ASD may contribute positively to diagnostic and support processes for women seeking help.

Furthermore, Toeps emphasizes the diversity within the autism spectrum itself (Toeps, 2021). As an autistic individual herself (Toeps & Live & Learn Autism), she effectively demonstrates how no two autistic experiences are identical. By fostering greater public awareness about the vast range of experiences associated with ASD, we can work towards creating a more inclusive society for everyone, regardless of gender or neurological status.

In "Carly's Voice: Breaking Through Autism," authored by Arthur Fleischmann and Carly Fleischmann, readers gain a precious understanding of the distinct journey of a nonverbal autistic woman (Fleischmann & Fleischmann, 2012). Apart from chronicling Carly's narrative, the book also underscores the commonalities shared between her life and those of other females with autism. Crucial elements of how autism presents itself in women are illustrated through Carly's tale, enriching our comprehension of the exclusive hurdles they encounter.

One critical characteristic that differentiates Carly from many others on the spectrum is her nonverbal status. Despite her inability to speak, she communicates effectively through typing, demonstrating the importance of exploring alternative means of communication for individuals with ASD (Fleischmann & Fleischmann, 2012). Additionally, the authors address difficulties with social interaction and understanding social cues, both characteristic features of ASD. For instance, as elaborated by Fleischmann & Fleischmann (2012), Carly may have trouble initiating or maintaining friendships due to her inability to interpret facial expressions and body language accurately. Thus, Carly's experiences underscore the value of early intervention and ongoing support in fostering communication skills in those with ASD.

Moreover, Carly's sensory sensitivities, difficulty with social interaction, and unconventional language usage exemplify common traits shared by many women with ASD. By detailing her struggles to navigate social situations and interpret body language or facial expressions, the book sheds light on the unique challenges faced by women with ASD in social contexts (Fleischmann & Fleischmann, 2012). In addition, her passion for certain subjects and engagement in repetitive behaviors attest to other well-documented characteristics of individuals on the autism spectrum. Restricted or repetitive behaviors are also demonstrated through hand-flapping or other self-stimulating patterns Carly engages in (Fleischmann, 2012). Transitions can be challenging for individuals with ASD; according to Fleischmann (2012), when faced with changes to her routine or suggestions for new activities, Carly may become upset or frustrated, which is not common for her male counterparts.

Notably, Carly's journey provides essential insights for parents and caregivers of children with ASD. Her perseverance in overcoming various obstacles illuminates the potential for personal growth and development among women on the spectrum when given appropriate support (Fleischmann & Fleischmann, 2012). As such, "Carly's Voice: Breaking Through Autism" emphasizes that understanding the diverse manifestations of ASD in women is paramount to providing targeted and effective interventions.

In recent years, the understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in females has garnered increased attention, as it often manifests differently when compared to males. The literature review on this subject seeks to understand these distinctive features, as outlined by Cook and Garnett (2018). Nonverbal communication is a noteworthy challenge for both males and females with ASD. However, the primary difference arises in that girls tend to exhibit subtler difficulties compared to boys (Cook & Garnett, 2018). Cook & Garnett (2018) state that social

interactions pose significant challenges for females with ASD as well, wherein they may face unique struggles due to their tendency to camouflage, ultimately leading to misdiagnosis or delayed diagnoses.

Additionally, sensory sensitivities are prevalent among women on the spectrum. Similar to their male counterparts, they may experience heightened sensitivity towards stimuli such as light, textures, or sounds (Cook & Garnett, 2018). Cook & Garnett (2018) reiterate that restricted or repetitive behaviors also remain characteristic of ASD across genders but tend to present differently in females who may demonstrate less recognizable patterns or habits.

Moreover, individuals with ASD typically face challenges with transitions and adapting to change. For females in particular, this difficulty may be more profound due to societal expectations regarding adaptability and flexibility (Cook & Garnett, 2018). Per Cook & Garnett (2018), unconventional language patterns and delayed processing of information can also manifest prominently among women with ASD although these signs might be subtle and easily overlooked during assessments.

Females on the spectrum often display intense interests similar to males with ASD. However, these fascinations might be less discernible in girls as they frequently align better with age-appropriate or gender-normative areas of interest (Cook & Garnett, 2018). Difficulty reading body language becomes especially relevant for understanding ASD in females because it significantly impacts their social functioning (Cook & Garnett, 2018)— an area where females with ASD are expected to perform better compared to males. Lastly, extreme honesty, a noteworthy aspect of the female autism experience, reinforces the importance of recognizing and understanding the various manifestations of ASD in women. Indeed, societal pressures often dictate that females mask their true feelings.

Existing research on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in females has drawn attention to the often overlooked difficulties and needs of girls within classroom settings. Honeybourne (2015) investigated the experiences of 67 girls and women with ASD, focusing on their strengths, challenges, and coping strategies in school environments.

These individuals were found to excel in various subject areas, such as mathematics, science, history, English, arts, and languages (Honeybourne, 2015). Additionally, many participants demonstrated specific personal qualities that supported their success in school. These included attention to detail, good behavior, the ability to focus and follow instructions, logical thinking, a helpful nature, neat work presentation, and a vivid imagination.

Despite these positives, the research also revealed numerous challenges associated with female students with ASD. The most significant difficulty reported by participants was the formation and maintenance of friendships and relationships (Honeybourne, 2015). This overarching issue encompassed problems such as loneliness and isolation during breaks and lunchtimes, bullying or teasing from peers, struggles finding like-minded individuals for companionship, difficulties collaborating in group work activities, and the need for personal space which was not always respected by others.

In terms of learning and communication styles, Honeybourne (2015) noted that preferences among female students with ASD can greatly vary. Some participants reported better communication through writing than speech as they found classroom discussions too fast-paced. Others expressed a preference for independent work over group assignments (Honeybourne, 2015). A variety of learning preferences were observed; some individuals learned best through self-teaching while others appreciated assistance or additional sessions.

Lastly, Honeybourne (2015) uncovered several noteworthy factors that relate to how girls with ASD interpret the world around them. Sensory differences emerged as a critical concern; participants reported feeling overwhelmed by background noise or strong smells. Moreover, frustrations arose when school rules were inconsistently applied or did not resonate with the individual's understanding of fairness (Honeybourne, 2015). Many respondents felt that the hardships they faced in school were not solely due to their ASD, but also stemmed from issues such as low self-esteem, depression, and loneliness. Many of these girls and women felt invisible, shy, or overlooked.

In her enlightening works, "Nerdy, Shy, and Socially Inappropriate: A User Guide to an Asperger Life" (2015) and "I Think I Might Be Autistic: A Guide to Autism Spectrum Disorder Diagnosis and Self-Discovery for Adults" (2020), Cynthia Kim bestows crucial perspectives that substantially enrich the comprehension of the subject matter.

Within her 2015 publication, Kim (2015) shares a captivating narrative detailing her odyssey from an unrecognized condition in her earlier years to ultimately obtaining a formalized Asperger Syndrome diagnosis as an adult. Her eloquent depiction of the paradigm shift elicited by her diagnosis, illuminating a previously unfathomable world, underscores the significance of timely recognition and assistance for those living with ASD. Kim (2015) also presents extensive research to help explain the reasons behind some common ASD traits, thereby making the book indispensable for those seeking assistance in managing such characteristics.

Additionally, Kim (2015) emphasizes practical solutions for coping with issues faced by adults with ASD within various aspects of daily life, such as self-care and employment. One unique suggestion she provides is engaging in martial arts as a means of addressing ASD-specific challenges. Through real-life examples and relatable stories, this guide serves as a

helpful resource not only for recently diagnosed adults on the spectrum but also for their family members, partners, carers, and mental health professionals.

In her second book, Kim (2020) delves deeper into the diagnostic process of identifying ASD in adults who may have gone undetected during their childhood. She discusses the critical mental shift from considering oneself weird or introverted to recognizing that one's brain might be wired differently due to ASD. This transformative process often starts with an "aha!" moment, followed by numerous questions regarding the symptoms and implications of ASD in adults.

Kim (2020) guides the reader in understanding the importance of obtaining an official diagnosis, describing the assessment process and strategies for preparing for it. Moreover, Kim (2020) tackles essential aspects of living with ASD as a late-diagnosed adult, such as dealing and coping with the emotional impact of diagnosis, this guide serves both as a resource and a support system for those considering self-disclosure.

Taken together, these works by Cynthia Kim present an underrepresented aspect of the ASD community – adult women diagnosed late in life. These texts emphasize the importance of accurate representation of female autism experiences, providing not only valuable information on diagnosis and self-discovery but also a sense of connection for women with ASD.

With the expansion of research in the domain of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), gaining a deeper understanding of how it affects females is becoming crucial, especially due to potential biases towards males in diagnostic procedures and resources. In an attempt to shed more light on the female perspective of ASD, Milner et al. (2019) carried out an insightful qualitative investigation involving interviews with eighteen autistic females and four mothers of autistic daughters, employing a thematic analysis methodology.

Firstly, fitting in with the norm was a challenge faced by many autistic females in their quest for social acceptance. The participants described modifying their behavior, suppressing their true selves to blend in with neurotypical individuals (Milner et al., 2019). Females struggled to maintain connections with their peers and navigate social situations due to their challenges in social communication and interaction (Milner et al., 2019). This demand for conformity often led to feelings of exhaustion and stress.

Additionally, potential obstacles presented themselves for women and girls diagnosed with autism. They were often misunderstood by others or overlooked for diagnoses due to gender stereotypes and assessment bias (Milner et al., 2019). These may include problems accessing appropriate health care, limited educational opportunities, and a lack of awareness among professionals about gender differences in ASD presentation (Milner et al., 2019). As a result, they received delayed or inadequate support for their condition.

Negative aspects of autism emerged as another theme. The participants reported difficulties with sensory processing, emotional regulation, and understanding social cues (Milner et al., 2019). Additionally, bullying or social isolation was also commonly faced by females with ASD due to their atypical behaviors. Negative aspects further emphasized the mental health challenges experienced by females with ASD, such as anxiety, depression, increased stress levels, and low self-esteem (Milner et al., 2019). Misdiagnosis or delayed diagnosis was found to exacerbate these problems, as females often felt misunderstood or invalidated in their struggles.

The fourth theme pertained to the perspective of others. This highlighted the complexities surrounding societal expectations and judgments placed upon autistic females. Some found that disclosing their diagnosis led to increased scrutiny or discrimination by neurotypical individuals (Milner et al., 2019). This included encounters with family members, friends, educators, and

health professionals who may have uninformed opinions on ASD or hold misconceptions based on traditional gender-specific stereotypes.

Lastly, positive aspects of having autism were also reported. Autistic females were found to possess exceptional attention to detail, heightened empathy, strong analytical skills, heightened memory skills, and the ability to deeply engage in areas of interest. (Milner et al., 2019). Also, some women reported feelings of resilience and personal growth due to their coping mechanisms for living with ASD (Milner et al., 2019). These positive traits could serve as valuable assets in several aspects of life, such as education and career.

Research on ASD has predominantly focused on males, often overlooking the experiences of females with the condition. As Simone (2010) reveals in her book 'Aspergirls: Empowering Females with Asperger Syndrome, females with ASD tend to be underdiagnosed due to differences in symptoms and coping strategies compared to their male counterparts. From early childhood, girls with ASD (colloquially known as Aspergirls) may exhibit different behavioral patterns compared to their male counterparts. According to Simone (2010), symptoms are less frequently recognized in girls, leading to a delay in diagnosis and a lack of support. Part of this stems from the misconception that coping well is an inherent trait of Aspergirls; however, it often masks underlying challenges and feelings of loneliness that are par for the course for females diagnosed with ASD.

Simone (2010), herself an Aspergirl, brings together an array of experiences and perspectives from over 35 women diagnosed as on the spectrum, as well as input from partners and parents. These firsthand accounts highlight how perceptions of gender differences in ASD are largely responsible for society's misunderstandings, which have negatively impacted how Aspergirls are viewed and treated. In her book, Simone (2010) delves into various aspects of

personal and professional life for Aspergirls, discussing topics such as friendships, romance, marriage, employment, and much more. This comprehensive approach allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of how ASD uniquely affects women across various domains.

Furthermore, the narrative style adopted by Simone (2010) humanizes the struggles faced by Aspergirls while simultaneously rejecting negative stereotypes centered around social or behavioral limitations. Instead of focusing on deficits, Simone highlights the need for validation and support to ensure that each woman's strengths are acknowledged and that they can learn to overcome challenges to lead purposeful and fulfilling lives. In addition to personal anecdotes, Simone (2010) provides guidance and advice for Aspergirls, covering both everyday routines and more significant challenges such as depression and meltdowns.

The increasing focus on ASD in females has led scholars to question the frequently reported male-to-female ratio of 4:1 (Young et al., 2018). Sociocultural and familial factors can impact the way female ASD symptoms manifest and are perceived by others, contributing to this discrepancy. Diagnostics instruments are now being reviewed for potential sex/gender biases that could negatively affect girls' access to accurate diagnosis and support.

One critical element identified in female-specific ASD is the "camouflage" phenomenon, where females with autism are more adept at imitating socially acceptable behavior, potentially leading to underdiagnoses (Young et al., 2018). As opposed to boys with ASD who tend to exhibit more obvious stereotypical or unusual play patterns, girls often show less noticeable restricted interests or unusual play behaviors. This distinction highlights the need for more nuanced assessments tailored toward identifying female-specific manifestations of autism.

As a part of ASD's inherent clinical variability, some traits seem to be more specific to female individuals. For example, females with autism often exhibit a camouflaging phenomenon

wherein they mask or hide their symptoms to blend into social situations (Young et al., 2018). This unique aspect of female autism may contribute to underdiagnosis or misdiagnosis in this population. Furthermore, unlike their male counterparts, females with ASD tend to display less unusual play behavior or restricted interests, which could further complicate identification and diagnosis (Young et al., 2018). Thus, improving the recognition and diagnosis of ASD in females is essential in providing necessary support and treatment (Young et al., 2018). Healthcare professionals must be equipped with knowledge about gender-specific differences in ASD presentation so they can accurately diagnose female patients—and consequently reduce instances of misdiagnoses or missed diagnoses. Further research on sex/gender differences will contribute significantly towards better detection rates among undiagnosed females with ASD.

In the pursuit of understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in young girls, a narrative research method was employed to analyze self-written books by adult women diagnosed with ASD. The primary goal was to identify disparities in the manifestation and experiences of ASD between boys and girls. By selecting narrative research, we gathered insights into both the individual and shared experiences of women with ASD through their autobiographical accounts.

An analysis of self-written books by adult women diagnosed with ASD (O'Toole, 2018; Cook & Garnett, 2018; Fleischmann & Fleischmann, 2012; Honeybourne, 2015; Kim, 2015; Nerenberg, 2020; Grandin, 2006; Simone, 2010; Toeps, 2020) reveals valuable insights. Common themes include feelings of being "invisible" or "misunderstood" due to underdiagnoses or late diagnoses. These patterns highlighted unique characteristics of female autism: difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships (Honeybourne, 2015), societal expectations to adhere to specific feminine roles (Cook & Garnett, 2018), higher instances of camouflaging behaviors

leading to increased mental and emotional strain (Milner et al., 2019), and the late diagnosis or misdiagnosis of autism in girls due to subtler signs (Young et al., 2018). These women reinstate the need for gender-specific approaches to diagnosing ASD as they navigate social expectations and adjust to an often-confusing world not designed for them.

The literature highlights differences between the typical male and female experiences of ASD. Women tend to display subtler or internalized traits, such as difficulties with social interactions and communication (Young et al., 2018). They may develop strategies for coping or "masking" their struggles in an attempt to blend in (Willey, 1999). Notably, these narratives demonstrated that females with ASD might exhibit behaviors such as extreme shyness, social awkwardness, or hypersensitivity to their environments, which are not always immediately associated with autism but still significantly impact their lives (Kim, 2015; Young et al., 2018). Additionally, the unique struggles and achievements that the authors discuss provide valuable insight into how these women have navigated mainstream society while remaining authentic to their uniquely autistic identities. By examining these personal narratives and comparing them to academic research on gender-specific manifestations of ASD, we can encourage a more inclusive diagnostic process that accounts for diverse experiences.

In analyzing the narratives of women who received Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnoses in adulthood, several characteristics emerge that may have gone unnoticed or under-recognized during their childhood years. These characteristics are crucial for understanding the female autism phenotype, which is known for the female-specific manifestation of autistic strengths and difficulties. By examining these traits, we can further identify how ASD presents differently in girls compared to boys and address the current disparity in diagnosis rates between genders. Upon analyzing self-written books by women who received

an ASD diagnosis in adulthood as well as researching existing literature, several distinct characteristics emerged that are commonly associated with the female autism phenotype.

One of the most common traits among women diagnosed with ASD in adulthood is their ability to camouflage or mask their autistic behaviors. This often involves mimicking social cues and miming appropriate emotional expressions, even when they may not fully understand the underlying emotions or social context (O'Toole, 2018; Cook & Garnett, 2018; Toeps, 2021). Girls with ASD may also forge relationships and friendships by imitating their peers' interests, hobbies, and behaviors (O'Toole, 2018; Cook & Garnett, 2018; Toeps, 2020; Willey, 1999). This camouflaging ability can make detecting autistic traits more challenging during childhood years, as they may subtly blend into their social environments (Simone, 2010). In childhood, these camouflaging techniques might initially cause young girls with ASD to be seen as shy or introverted rather than experiencing disparities related to autism (Honeybourne, 2015). They may seem overly attached to specific friends or struggle with maintaining relationships but compensate by copying their peers' behavior to disguise their difficulties.

In addition to camouflaging, girls with ASD may experience different social challenges compared to boys. While boys on the spectrum often display more overt disruptive behaviors, girls with ASD may be more inclined towards passivity or displaying socially acceptable emotions like anxiety or sadness (Milner et al., 2019; Fleischmann & Fleischmann, 2012). This can lead to a misinterpretation of their behavior as shyness or introversion rather than as an indicator of ASD.

Sensory sensitivities are common among individuals with ASD but can present differently in women compared to men. For example, some women find it difficult to tolerate certain textures and fabrics, making them extra sensitive to clothing materials (Young et al.,

2018; Toeps, 2021). Young girls with ASD might express discomfort by refusing to wear particular clothes or insisting on wearing the same comfortable outfit repeatedly (Grandin, 2006; Nerenberg, 2020; Fleischmann, 2012). In girls, these sensitivities might be dismissed as personal preferences or general fussiness during childhood (Toeps, 2020; Willey, 1999; Kim, 2020). However, when they persist into adulthood without any apparent triggers or causes other than ASD, it becomes crucial to investigate them as potential characteristics of the female autism phenotype.

Moreover, girls diagnosed with ASD in adulthood often report having intense interests or hobbies that can be more socially acceptable compared to the interests demonstrated by boys on the spectrum (O'Toole, 2018; Cook & Garnett, 2018). Their passions could revolve around animals, art, literature, or even relationships, providing them with a sense of identity and social connection rather than being seen as a manifestation of autism (Fleischmann & Fleischmann, 2012; Honeybourne, 2015). However, the nature of these interests might differ and be more socially acceptable, which can make them less conspicuous than those of boys (Milner et al., 2019). These seemingly typical interests can further obscure indications of ASD when observed in childhood in girls.

Another characteristic often found among women with ASD is difficulty in recognizing emotions and understanding subtle communication cues, including body language or facial expressions (Kim, 2015; Nerenberg, 2020). Girls with ASD are also more likely to experience internalizing symptoms like anxiety or depression compared to externalizing behaviors like aggression or defiance commonly found in boys (Toeps, 2020; Toeps, 2021; Young et al., 2018). In childhood, this may present as emotional sensitivity, difficulty managing strong emotions, or excessive shyness (Willey, 1999). However, these internalizing symptoms might be misattributed

solely as mental health issues rather than underlying signs of ASD (Grandin, 2006; Simone, 2010; Toeps, 2021). This can lead to misinterpretations of social situations and challenge their ability to form close relationships.

Understanding the female autism phenotype is crucial, as it sheds light on the distinct ways Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) manifests in females, ultimately leading to more accurate diagnoses, better support, and an enriched understanding of ASD as a whole. One primary consequence of underdiagnosing or misdiagnosing girls with ASD is that they may miss out on essential interventions and resources specifically tailored to their needs (Young et al., 2018). Girls who do not receive a timely and accurate diagnosis might struggle with social interactions, academic performance, and emotional well-being due to a lack of necessary support (Milner et al., 2019). Furthermore, they may face improper diagnostic labels that could wrongly affect their treatment and self-perception (Young et al., 2018). This can exacerbate their challenges and hinder their ability to thrive in various spheres of life.

Moreover, delayed or incorrect diagnosis has implications for interventions and support. Early diagnosis is vital in providing timely support to help girls with ASD overcome barriers and maximize their potential. For instance, Honeybourne (2015) highlights that understanding hidden difficulties faced by girls on the spectrum helps educators tailor classroom strategies to accommodate their unique needs. Misdiagnosis may lead to these girls receiving inadequate support or interventions designed for other conditions, which contributes to a lack of progress in symptom management and increases their risk of developing mental health issues (Milner et al., 2019). Early diagnosis provides personalized approaches that cater to their distinct needs and can enhance the effectiveness of intervention programs (Honeybourne, 2015). according to Kim (2015), by addressing and appreciating gender-specific differences in ASD, tailored strategies

can help girls develop essential skills and coping mechanisms to navigate their daily lives more successfully.

Furthermore, examining ASD in women adds a broader perspective to our understanding of the condition. Atypical presentations found mainly in females may bring about novel insights into the autistic experience (Nerenberg, 2020). Diverse and inclusive research can uncover the full spectrum of autism experiences (O'Toole, 2018; Cook & Garnett, 2018), debunking common stereotypes that might be biased toward male representations (Fleischmann & Fleischmann, 2012; Nerenberg, 2020). A deeper awareness of the female autism phenotype may also dispel misconceptions that autism primarily affects males (Toeps, 2020). Consequently, this will contribute to an encompassing approach toward ASD research, improving professional competence in recognizing subtle indicators and developing gender-specific interventions (O'Toole, 2018; Cook & Garnett, 2018). Expanding our understanding from both male and female perspectives enables us to appreciate the diversity within the autism community, fostering a more comprehensive approach to diagnosis, treatment, and support.

This research has examined distinct characteristics of the female autism phenotype that are commonly found among women who received a diagnosis in adulthood. These include social interaction difficulties such as camouflaging, sensory sensitivities, special interests, and internalizing behaviors. Understanding and recognizing these traits is important for improving diagnosis rates and providing tailored interventions and support to girls on the spectrum. The importance of understanding the female autism phenotype cannot be overstated. Currently, women are underdiagnosed compared to men, leading to delays in diagnosis and treatment, inadequate interventions, and misattribution of symptoms.

Early diagnosis is crucial for providing personalized approaches that cater to the individual's needs and enhancing the effectiveness of intervention programs. Furthermore, examining ASD in women adds a broader perspective to our understanding of the condition. Gender-specific research can uncover the full spectrum of autism experiences and challenge common stereotypes that are biased toward male representations. Embracing the varied nature of the autism community enables us to develop a more holistic strategy for diagnosis, therapy, and assistance. Given these discoveries, it is crucial to delve deeper into the distinctions between genders within ASD to fully comprehend the manifestation of autism in females and offer more tailored interventions and support. Research could encompass both qualitative analyses, shedding light on the personal stories of girls with ASD and their loved ones, and quantitative data assessing the effectiveness of gender-specific treatment methods. Enhancing our comprehension of how autism manifests in females will ultimately result in improved identification and support for girls within the spectrum.

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