'Before people see the autism, they see my race': An intersectional exploration of the lived experiences of masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girls in UK education using IPA and *DisCrit*

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Acronyms

ABA - Applied Behavioural Analysis

AFAB - Assigned Female at Birth

ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

ASC - Autism Spectrum Condition

BPS - British Psychological Society

CRT - Critical Race Theory

DCD – Developmental Coordination Disorder

DfE – Department for Education

DECP - Division of Educational and Child Psychology

DS - Disability Studies

DSM - Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders

EHCP – Education, Health and Care Plan

EP - Educational Psychologist

HCPC - Health Care Practitioners Council

IPA - Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

LA – Local Authority

RTA - Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SENCo - Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator

SEN - Special Educational Needs

PRU – Pupil Referral Unit

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Abstract

The experiences of Black Autistic girls in UK schools are shaped by complex layers of identity that significantly impact their educational journey. Existing literature highlights a significant gap in research on the Black Autistic experience, particularly regarding masking and camouflaging Autistic traits. By centring the voices of Black Autistic girls with experience of masking and camouflaging in school, this research aims to address that gap, being the first of its kind. This study sets out the historical and current socio-political context of autism, disability, race, and gender, addressing the intersectional and socially constructed nature of identity. Employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), semi-structured interviews were conducted with 4 Black Autistic girls aged 16-18 years. The findings revealed five group experiential themes that underscore the importance of acceptance and belonging, managing social norms, the intersection of autism with race and gender, sensory challenges, and the critical role of support and understanding. Using Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) to understand these experiences at a societal level, this study argues the need for a nuanced understanding of how societal structures, rooted in norms of Whiteness and ability, impact their lives and strategies for social interaction, such as masking and camouflaging behaviours. This novel study's contributions are not only to enrich the academic discourse on intersectionality within autism research but also to inform and transform educational practices, with implications for practice being drawn from the research. It encourages Educational Psychologists and related professionals to actively challenge normative structures and advocate for equity, ultimately fostering environments where all students can thrive authentically. Strengths and limitations, along with potential directions for future research, are discussed.

1.0 Introduction

While the Autistic experience is diverse, for masking and camouflaging Black females, it often comes with layers of complexities; masking their authentic selves while navigating a world where they often feel invisible in more than one way. The concept of Autistic masking and camouflaging, while not novel, has seldom been explored with the intersection of race and gender at the focus, particularly in the UK context. This research aims to illuminate the nuanced lived experiences of Black Autistic girls who mask and camouflage in the UK education system. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Intersectionality and Disability Critical Race (*DisCrit)* theory, this study will shed light on the reasons, repercussions, and realities of this phenomenon.

1.1 Introduction Overview

This chapter will start by laying out the rationale for the language and terminology used throughout this study. Next, it will explore the past and present context and perspectives on what it means to be Autistic, Black, and female, considering the complexities of these socially constructed identities. It will then delve into the UK educational system, presenting the impact of current educational policies and practices on masking and camouflaging in Black Autistic girls. This chapter will then discuss how the role of the Educational Psychologist (EP) can support masking and camouflaging Autistic Black girls in education and facilitate wider change within the system. The chapter will close by stating the justification for this study and its aims.

1.2 Language

Before delving into this topic, it is important to acknowledge the role and use of language. Language has the power to create common understanding, uniting or dividing us, while also having the potential to drive positive change. (Starks & Trinidad, 2010). The language individuals use for their own identity is deeply personal and can vary widely. This study adopts an affirming stance, utilising language that respects the communities in focus, and considering research that includes members from these communities.

1.2.1 Autism

There are differing preferences and opinions for how language is used among the Autistic community. Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN; 2009) asserts that the use of the word Autistic is reclaiming a word that has historically been skewed and diluted. As a sign of respect and recognition of the Autistic community, the A in Autistic is capitalised synonymous with the D in the Deaf community (ASAN, 2009; Amaze, n.d.). Keating et al. (2022) conducted a mixed-methods study with 654 English-speaking Autistic individuals globally, finding that terms such as 'autism,' 'Autistic person,' and 'is Autistic' were consistently preferred by the participants. However, there was no universal preference, highlighting the importance of respecting personal preferences. Kenny et al.’s (2016) study that surveyed 3470 UK Autistic people had similar findings.

There is debate over the use of person-first (person with autism) and identity-first (Autistic person) language. Person-first language is argued to provide a clear separation between the person and their autism (Maio, 2001; Wright, 1983). Yet, it is also argued that this adds to stigma - the notion that autism is bad and must be removed from the individual (Andrews et al., 2019; Botha et al., 2021; Gernsbacher, 2017; Jernigan, 2009). Identity-first language recognises that autism is a core part of an individual's identity, synonymous with race or gender; therefore, a person should never be separated from their autism (Brown, 2011; Halmari, 2011; Sinclair, 2013). It aligns with the beliefs of those who accept autism as a part of their identity and highlights their inclusion in a community (Bagatell, 2010; Davidson & Henderson, 2010; Hurlburt & Chalmers, 2002). It is important to note that not everyone feels this way. There are some advocacy organisations and parents of Autistic children who highlight the profound challenges experienced and advocate for treatments and cures (Bovell, 2006; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Moore, 2010). Whilst acknowledging the difficulties, Autistic adults maintain that they are better placed to advocate for Autistic individuals who may face more challenges due to a shared Autistic experience (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008). Research tends to involve Autistic people who are speaking and accepting of their autism. Consequently, this does not include the views of non-speaking Autistic individuals who may experience more profound daily challenges and societal misperceptions.

Taking an affirmative stance, this study will use the term Autistic and identity-first language. Participants' language preferences will be gathered and respected throughout the subsequent chapters.

1.2.2 Autistic Masking and Camouflaging

Masking and camouflaging are terms used to refer to hiding or concealing Autistic traits and trying to appear neurotypical (Hull et al., 2017; Radulski, 2022). Masking tends to be used in the Autistic community, and camouflaging has been increasingly used as a term by researchers (Pearson & Rose, 2023). The nuances of these terms will be discussed further in this introduction. For the current study, both terms will be used.

1.2.3 Black

In this study, ‘Black’ has been used to describe individuals who describe themselves as Black and/or African or Caribbean descended. This includes those of mixed Black heritage. There may also be references to people ‘of colour’ when referencing studies that have used this term. Historically in the United States, if an individual had any evidence of African ancestry, they were described and categorised as ‘Black’, known as the ‘one drop rule’ (Jonnalagadda, 2022). Racialisation is a process through which bodies come to be seen, known and lived as having a racial identity (Ahmed, 2002; Mallon, 2007; Merriam-Webster, 2019). This study acknowledges the diversity in individuals racialised as Black; there are a myriad of cultures, languages, religions, appearances and so forth.

Following the death of George Floyd, many American news outlets chose to capitalise the B in Black in recognition of the discrimination Black people face in society (Brisman, 2021). It recognises that slavery deliberately severed ethnic and national ties by forcibly relocating individuals overseas (Laws, 2020) and that the term 'Black' is a social construct with its own distinct history (Appiah, 2020; Painter, 2020). The same American news outlets tend to keep the lowercase w in White (Brisman, 2021), as they assert that White people do not have the same shared experience of discrimination due to their skin colour (Bauder, 2020). In contrast to this, white supremacist and white nationalist groups capitalise White to establish White racial dominance (Brisman, 2021). White supremacy is a belief system that aims to assert the superiority of people with white skin and maintain a racial hierarchy (Elliot, 2016). This practice is both symbolic and strategic, allowing them to perpetuate harmful ideologies and maintain control over narratives related to race and identity (Brisman, 2021).

Bauder (2020) asserts that this practice should not be replicated. However, Zorn (2020) argues that the ability to live life oblivious of race and the safety and status it tends to confer is a shared cultural experience. By not capitalising White, ‘Whiteness’ a location of structural advantage of race privilege (Frankenberg, 1993), is treated as a neutral category and the normal standard (Appiah, 2020; Mack & Palfrey, 2020; Zorn, 2020). Painter (2020) asserts that White should be capitalised so that White people see themselves as racialised (D’Angelo, 2018; Harris & White, 2018).

This study takes a social constructionist stance, recognising the racialisation of all peoples. Therefore, this study will capitalise white and black when referring to race, with the exception of the terms ‘white supremacy’ and ‘white privilege’ to reduce any perceived alignment with white supremacy groups.

1.2.4 Girl and Female

Black girls frequently face adultification, a perception that treats them as older than they are, rooted in a history where Black children received the same treatment as adults; this reflects broader social perceptions and socialisation practices that specifically affect Black girls (Black Learning Achievement Mental Health [BLAM UK], 2023; Epstein et al., 2017; Pope, 2017).

Epstein et al. (2017) found that, particularly in the age range of 5-14, Black girls are often seen as less innocent and more adult-like than their White peers, perceived to require less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort. They are also viewed as needing less guidance on topics like sex and independence. Similarly, BLAM UK (2023) reports that in the UK, Black girls face higher rates of arrests, school exclusions, and sexual assaults compared to White girls, often being placed in adult situations that strip them of their childhood innocence and rights, as highlighted in the case of Child Q.

Consequentially, this study uses ‘girls’ and ‘females’ interchangeably, emphasising the participants' status as children, not adults. It acknowledges that not all individuals assigned female at birth identify as female and vice versa. However, for the purpose of exploring socialisation and perceptions of girls, this study focuses on those assigned female at birth and who identify as female.

1.3 Our Understanding of Autism

1.3.1 Historical Context

In 1911, Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler introduced the term ‘autism’ to describe severe self-focus and isolation observed in his patients with schizophrenia (Evans, 2013). In 1943, child psychiatrist Leo Kanner identified a group of children displaying similar symptoms and coined the term ‘early infantile autism’ (Evans, 2013; Wolff, 2004). Around that time, Austrian Paediatrician Hans Asperger identified what he described as a milder form of autism, later known as Asperger’s syndrome (Evans, 2013).

In the 1960s, studies linked autism to genetics (Wolff, 2004). Over time, the definition of autism has evolved. Initially associated with schizophrenia, autism was later understood as a distinct condition and has been used to describe children exhibiting emotional and social challenges. During the 1960s and 1970s, the primary focus was on medication and behavioural modifications as potential treatments for autism. By the 1980s and 1990s, behavioural therapy and structured learning environments gained prominence as primary interventions for autism (Evans, 2013; Wolff, 2004). Currently, medical professionals and researchers consider autism as a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterised by differences in cognitive information processing (Evans, 2003). Researchers tend to view autism as a tangible phenomenon with quantifiable attributes (Fombonne, 2023).

Our understanding of autism is evolving. The number of people receiving an autism diagnosis is rising due to increased awareness, screening, and broader diagnostic tools (Diemer et al., 2022). Concepts of disability evolve with social context; therefore, conditions like autism are categorised based on subjective judgements made by professionals (Annamma et al., 2016; Kliewer et al., 2006). They rely on assessments such as observation-based tools, including the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS; Hull et al., 2017). Historically, autism was viewed through a narrow lens based on early studies on White, cisgender males from middle-class backgrounds (Kanner, 1943; Martin, 2016; Silberman, 2016). This limited perspective has led to underdiagnosis in those who do not fit these restricted and biased norms (Pearson & Rose, 2023). However, this perspective is changing, for example, with the increased awareness of Autistic girls and different presentations of autism (Autistic Girls Network [AGN], 2022).

1.3.2 Autistic Camouflaging and Masking

Camouflaging is when an Autistic individual consciously or unconsciously hides their Autistic presentation by employing strategies to help them navigate their social world (Lai et al., 2020). Ratto et al. (2017) use the term camouflaging not only to describe an Autistic individual actively attempting to hide Autistic traits but also to explain the phenomenon where clinicians may fail to. Pearson & Rose (2023) highlight camouflaging as a barrier to identification. There is ambiguity around camouflaging as a construct, with variable interpretations and measurements (Lai et al., 2020). These include measures of an Autistic individual's efforts to mask and compensate in the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q; Hull et al., 2017), detailed analysis of behaviour and language (Parish-Morris et al., 2017), and differences between internal Autistic characteristics and observable behaviour (Lai et al., 2017; Pearson & Rose, 2021).

Camouflaging involves a complex imitation of behaviours that occur mainly in social situations but are not restricted to them (Tubío-Fungueiriño et al., 2020). Typically developing children use social imitation to learn social skills from their surroundings and others (Bandura & Walter, 1977). Some Autistic children use camouflaging to participate in social interactions, which can be challenging when their social communication differs from the majority. Camouflaging can have multiple functions including acceptance by peers and reducing the stress and feeling of rejection and being misunderstood by others (Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015; Tierney et al., 2016). Hull et al. (2019) argue that there are three components to camouflaging: masking, compensation and assimilation. Masking is defined as the concealment of externally noticeable Autistic traits such as stimming. Compensation is defined as 'making up' for 'deficits' in neurotypical social skills such as forcing eye contact. Assimilation is described as trying to blend in with others, which might involve not sharing unique interests (Hull et al., 2019; Pearson & Rose, 2023; Radulski, 2022). Radulski (2022) summarises that camouflaging is the external process of not appearing Autistic to others, and masking is the internal process of actively trying to conceal one's Autistic traits.

1.3.3 Intersections of Race and Gender with Autism

Societal views of autism are influenced by diagnostic practices, media portrayals, and research, which predominantly reflect the experiences of White, middle-class, cisgender males. Brown et al. (2017) note a significant emphasis on Whiteness within autism discourse, and Aspler et al. (2022) highlight that popular media often depicts Autistic characters as White, male, and intellectually adept.

This limited perspective has had a detrimental impact on the identification and diagnosis of minoritised groups (Brown et al., 2017; Liang, 2022;). The current diagnostic tools do not account for the intersectionality of social constructs. Most research does not represent individuals who do not fit within the diagnostic lens (Liang, 2022; Rosza, 2017). There are clear disparities in autism prevalence amongst racially minoritised groups. The National Autistic Society (NAS) and AGN, two UK autism charities, call for more research into autism and ethnicity (AGN, 2022; Corbett & Perepa, 2007). Roman-Urrestarazu et al. (2021) state further research is needed to understand variations across groups. They examined autism prevalence in 7 million children (aged 2-21) in English schools. Findings revealed the highest prevalence in Black populations and the lowest in Roma/Irish Traveller populations. (Roman-Urrestarazu et al., 2021).

Corbett and Perepa (2007) identify that limited autism awareness, insufficient rights knowledge, and inadequate services are key barriers for ethnically minoritised groups in the UK, which compounds discrimination based on skin colour and disability. They note that racial stereotypes can lead to misinterpretations of Autistic behaviours as misconduct. Pearson and Rose (2021) suggest that social constructs like race may affect perceptions of Autistic individuals and advocate for further research in this area.

Giwa-Onaiwu (2016) states that her experience as a Black, Autistic woman has been shaped by her race and gender. She explains she was misunderstood, did not receive appropriate support, and was mistreated due to her characteristics being attributed to her race and/or gender. When she wrote a book featuring 52 experiences of Black, Autistic women, she explained people were confused as to what race had to do with the Autistic experience. She asserts that this attitude leads to misdiagnosis and missed and late diagnosis. This is echoed by Adewale (2015), who describes ignorance of what ableism means for someone who is racially minoritised and the challenge of deciphering between racism and ableism. AGN (2022) asserts that more research is needed to address the implicit racism and bias in the diagnostic process for Black girls to competently address their needs.

Current estimates indicate a 3:1 male-to-female ratio in autism prevalence (NAS, 2023). Recent studies suggest Autistic females generally ‘camouflage’ their Autistic traits; their presentation of autism tends to be internal rather than the external presentation represented in diagnostic tools and this may be impacting the rate of diagnosis (Lai et al., 2017; AGN, 2022; Livingstone et al., 2018). Research on camouflaging Autistic males is lacking, therefore, little is known of their experiences and camouflaging strategies (Fombonne, 2020). This could also be considered a gender bias in the research. Nevertheless, currently, evidence suggests camouflaging is more common in Autistic females than Autistic males (Wood-Downie et al., 2020).

Research demonstrates gendered and racialised differences in autism diagnosis, with females and Black populations having lower prevalence, tending to be diagnosed later or remaining undiagnosed (Diemer et al., 2022; Liang, 2022). UK research demonstrates a higher prevalence of Autistic Black children in education than other ethnic groups; the reasons for the differences are unclear (Roman-Urrestarazu et al., 2021). Black Autistic females are often overlooked in research; studies on autism that mention race typically do not specify gender, revealing a gap in addressing intersectionality (Liang, 2022: Rosza, 2017).

1.4 Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory postulates that the impact of social constructs such as race, gender or class cannot be considered alone; they overlap and intersect to oppress and/or privilege individuals in different contexts and over time (Crenshaw, 1989). It understands that individuals have a unique experience due to their multiple identities; this experience is grounded in the oppressions and privileges constructed at a societal level. Intersectionality theory acknowledges that power dynamics operate within institutional structures and policies. For example, systemic racism perpetuates historical injustices by disproportionately affecting racialised communities in areas such as housing, education, and employment (Clark et al., 2022). Similarly, ableism within institutions can lead to unequal access to healthcare and the underrepresentation of disabled individuals in decision-making processes (Raypole, 2022). Consideration of intersectionality enables an understanding of how power can disadvantage those who do not hold privileged identities (Crenshaw, 1989).

1.5 Disability Critical Race Theory (*DisCrit*)

DisCrit blends aspects of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies (DS) to propose a novel theoretical framework focusing on the intersections of race and disability (Annamma et al., 2016). Deeply committed to intersectionality, *DisCrit* highlights how the systemic oppression of racism and ableism circulate interdependently in society to uphold notions of what is ‘normal’; ‘racism validates and reinforces ableism, and ableism validates and reinforces racism’ (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 6). For example, there are well-known stories of Black people who experienced injustices due to racism, such as Emmet Till, Harriet Tubman, and Freddie Gray; however, their disabilities remain unacknowledged (Bell, 2011). Consequently, their bodies are misrepresented, and the combined effects of race and disability are ignored, failing to recognise their complex identities. (Bell, 2011).

Additionally, individuals are more likely to be victims of police brutality due to race, disability, class, and other identities (Lewis, 2017). In the US, 50% of people killed by law enforcement are disabled, and more than half of disabled African Americans have been arrested by the time they are 28 (McCauley, 2017; Perry & Carter-Long, 2016; Thompson, 2021). Perry & Carter-Long (2016) highlight that the disability element is not reported in these cases, segregating the real issues. Responding officers are often ill-equipped to identify and interact with individuals with communication difficulties, those going through mental health crises and those with other conditions (O’Hara, 2016). In the UK, the National Appropriate Adult Network stresses that ‘vulnerable’ people need to be better protected throughout the justice system (O’Hara, 2016).

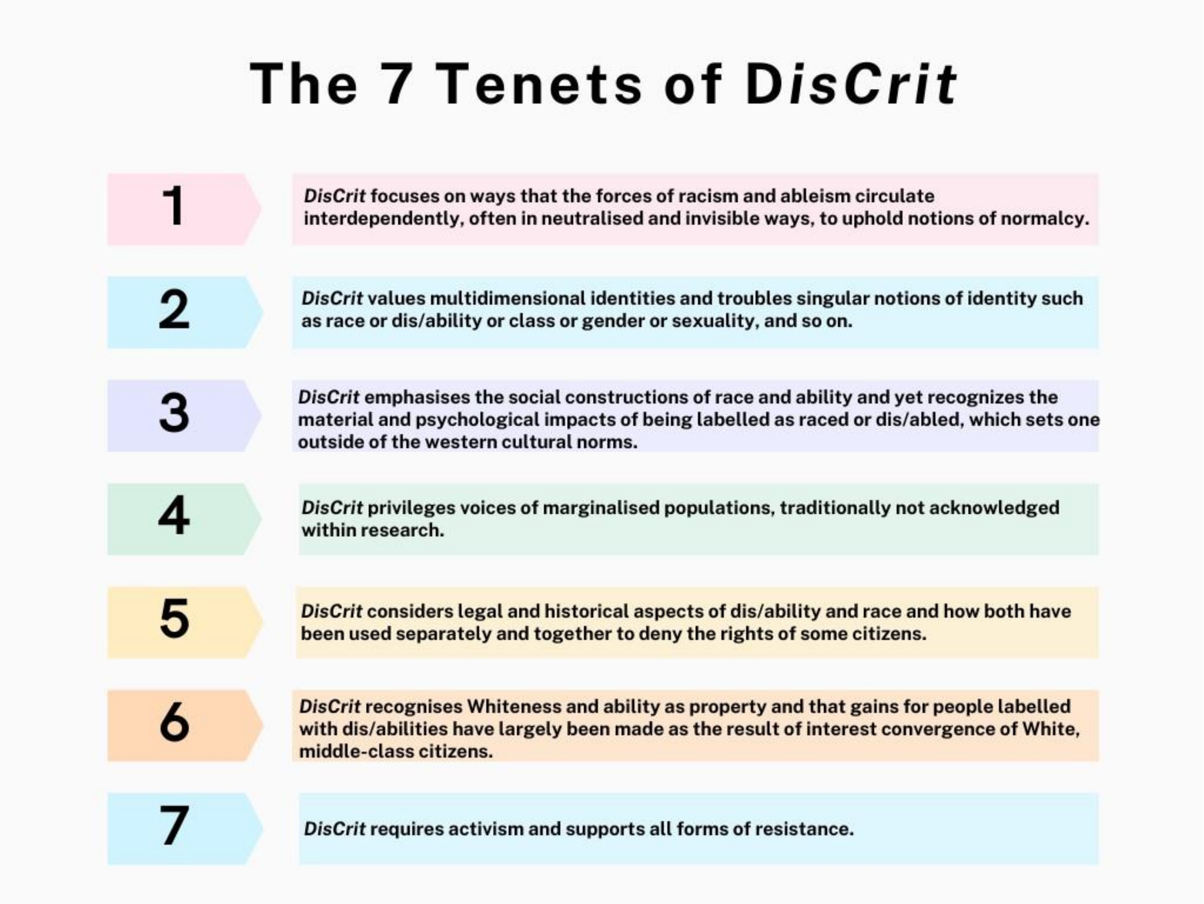
Society has constructed a medical model that frames disabled people as broken or deficient with individuals deemed untreatable often shunned by society (Thompson, 2021). Historically, Black enslaved people were valued for their physical ability and punished with disfigurement and disability (Thompson, 2021). It is imperative for race and disability, as well as other socially constructed identities, to be considered together to fully understand the situatedness of any phenomenon.

DisCrit seeks to deconstruct the structural systems that would prefer to keep these aspects of identity separate (Annamma et al., 2016). The authors acknowledge that their work is rooted in the work of scholars of colour, those with disabilities and intersecting marginalised identities, and their allies (Annamma et al., 2016). This framework is grounded in the perspectives and contributions of those it impacts, making it a suitable model for this study, which aims to do the same.

DisCrit proposes the following tenets:

Figure 1

The Seven Tenets of DisCrit (Connor et al., 2016)



The 7 Tenets of *DisCrit*

1 *DisCrit* focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralised and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.

2 *DisCrit* values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on.

3 *DisCrit* emphasises the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labelled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.

4 *DisCrit* privileges voices of marginalised populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.

5 *DisCrit* considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.

6 *DisCrit* recognises Whiteness and ability as property and that gains for people labelled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of White, middle-class citizens.

7 *DisCrit* requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.

1.6 UK Educational Settings Context

Approximately 1 in 56 children in UK schools have a diagnosis of autism; a figure that is much higher than previously estimated (Roman-Urrestarazu et al., 2021). Roman-Urrestarazu et al. (2021) found that the highest prevalence of autism by ethnic group was Black children (2.1%), and the lowest was Roma/Irish Travellers (0.9%). Across all groups, the prevalence of Autistic boys was higher than autistic girls. The study identified that those recorded as having autism were 60% more likely to be socially disadvantaged (receive a free school meal) (Roman-Urrestarazu et al., 2021).

Autistic masking and camouflaging can lead to late or missed diagnosis, meaning the individual can miss out on essential support in education (Head et al., 2014; Hull et al. 2017, 2019; Lai et al., 2017; Ratto et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016; Tubío-Fungueiriño et al., 2020). Masking and camouflaging can lead to the perception that an individual is functioning well and has no problems when, in reality, they are experiencing difficulties due to the interaction between their autism and the context they are in (Hull et al., 2017). Families of camouflaging Autistic children and young people see them in different contexts and, therefore, are more aware of their different presentations and difficulties. It is crucial for schools to take on board the concerns of families even if the challenges and behaviours are not seen in school (AGN, 2022).

Gillborn (2012) asserts that racism is deeply entrenched within educational and societal structures. Black and disabled children and young people experience many educational and social inequalities (Corbett & Perepa, 2007). Ahram et al. (2011) found that teachers' beliefs, attitudes or biases influenced their perceptions of students' ability and likely contributed to the over-representation of students of colour identified for special educational services. Gillborn et al. (2016) discuss the overrepresentation of Black children in SEN categories in the US and UK (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Artiles et al., 2004; Beratan, 2008; Tomlinson, 1981). In the UK, Black students are twice as likely to be described as presenting with behavioural, emotional, and social difficulties (Lindsay et al., 2006; NAS, 2007) This category is based on the subjective judgement of (predominantly White) professionals and often leads to students being placed in segregated settings, such as Alternative Provisions (AP) including Pupil Referral Units (PRU; Coard, 1971; Tomlinson, 1981).

It is also noted that there can be a stigma with attending specialist school settings in some communities where families may want their child to remain in mainstream education in the hope they might acclimatise to being ‘normal’ (Özmen, 2013).

1.6.1 The Role of the EP

Baron-Cohen emphasises the importance of safeguarding the rights of children to access diagnostic services, education, and tailored support (Newcastle University, 2021). In English schools, the level of support children and young people receive is dependent on their Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) status, which can be determined at a school level, or by an Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP), which is assessed and funded by the Local Authority (LA) under the Children and Families Act (2014). EPs play a crucial role in this process, by writing psychological advice for EHCPs, including recommendations for provision and support and also in supporting schools systemically to adhere to the graduated response outlined in the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education [DfE] 2015). To ensure effective planning of educational support and addressing access barriers to diagnosis and services, accurate identification of autism is essential, particularly for minoritised groups (Roman-Urrestarazu et al., 2021).

EPs are often perceived as instrumental in enabling access to support services, however, their responsibilities extend beyond assessments. EPs provide consultative services, training, contribute to policy development, and work across various intervention levels with individuals, groups, and whole organisations (Birch et al., 2015; Farrell & Woods, 2017; SEED, 2002). In relation to undertaking work at the individual level, their unique expertise blends knowledge of teaching, learning, school systems, and functions, allowing them to deliver therapeutic interventions at the individual level while considering the influence of school culture and processes (Vostanis et al., 2013). EPs also collaborate directly with teaching staff and families, supporting the systems surrounding individual children (Beaver, 2011; Dowling, 2003).

This study has significant relevance to the role of the EP. Intersectionality has been added to the revised Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC) proficiency standards (2023), highlighting its importance and relevance to the role. The aims of this study are to:

- add to the current knowledge within the profession,
- support EPs' development of cultural awareness and competence-an essential skill required in EP practice (DECP, 2002).,
- encourage neuro-affirmative (Chellappa, 2023) approaches to prevention and intervention,
- promote awareness of how an EP's own, and others' biases are influenced by normative culture and the impact this has on children and young people,
- work towards eliminating the reproduction of social inequalities in UK education to improve outcomes for minoritised groups.

EPs must understand the systemic and structural challenges faced to work towards organisational change, especially for those from marginalised groups.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

Over the years, autism research has grown exponentially. Autistic camouflaging and masking in social settings, has gained increasing attention in recent years. While masking and camouflaging are recognised as coping mechanisms among Autistic individuals, studies at the intersection of race, ethnicity, and class are sparse. Existing research often focuses on gender within predominantly White populations. However, Black Autistic girls, who face unique challenges at the intersection of race, gender, and neurodiversity, are notably underrepresented in scholarly discussions.

This systematic literature review critically examines research on the intersection of race, gender, and autism, aiming to synthesise key findings, identify themes, and analyse the complex relationships among these factors. Siddaway et al. (2019) emphasise that effective reviews should synthesise studies to draw broad theoretical conclusions and correlate theory with evidence. This review will adopt a rigorous and systematic method to scrutinise a wide array of scholarly sources, ensuring a thorough and nuanced understanding of the topic. It will also highlight potential gaps in the literature and explore methodological differences in the existing research, shedding light on areas that require further investigation (Siddaway et al., 2019).

The subsequent sections of this review will delve into the literature review questions (LRQs), methodology, search strategy, and inclusion criteria, providing a clear roadmap for the systematic examination of the literature.

2.2 Literature review method

2.2.1 Databases

A thorough literature search was conducted on 18 November 2023 using the EBSCOhost research platform. An initial search restricted databases to those associated with education which revealed few studies. To expand on this, all databases were searched including APA PsycInfo, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycBooks, APA PsycExtra, Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection, PEP Archive, Education Source, ERIC, SocINDEX, MEDLINE, CINAHL, and Library Information Science & Technology Abstracts. Another literature search was conducted on 01 March 2024 which revealed no further studies which met the inclusion criteria.

2.2.2 Search terms

To locate literature that precisely targets the specific demographic of Black Autistic camouflaging and masking girls, search terms focused narrowly on that group rather than using broad terms like gender, race, or ethnic minorities. This approach may have overlooked some relevant literature, so reference lists from studies included were subsequently reviewed to identify additional pertinent papers. Although these studies were not included in the review, they are briefly discussed in a later section about limitations of this review and their findings have been considered in this research. A Boolean search was conducted for each LRQ and terms were entered as follows:

Table 1

Literature Search Terms for LRQs

Literature Review Questions

Search terms

	LRQ.1. What does the literature tell us about masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girls?	**LRQ.2. What does the literature tell us about Black Autistic people?**	**LRQ. 3. What does the literature tell us about masking and camouflaging Autistic girls?**	**LRQ.4.What does the literature tell us about Autistic masking and camouflaging?**
Terms related to **autism**: autism, Autistic, ASC, ASD	✓	✓	✓	✓
Terms related to **masking and camouflaging**: camouflag*, mask*	✓		✓	✓
Terms related to **female** girl*, female*, woman, women	✓		✓	
Terms related to **Black**: Black, BME, BAME	✓	✓		

Note. Each list of search terms was combined using ‘OR’. The columns of search terms were then combined using ‘AND. The asterisk is used as a wildcard symbol that broadens the search by finding words that start with the same letters

2.2.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed and used to ensure that the studies included in the review were relevant to the LRQs and met specific quality standards. Clear and explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria helped to focus the review, reduce bias, and improve the reliability of the findings and decision-making (Siddaway et al., 2019; Tod, 2019). The initial searches, before screening by title and abstract, were restricted to the English language, full text, and peer-reviewed articles from 2011 to 2023. The last 12 years were selected to ensure the research was up to date, given the evolving understanding of autism and Autistic masking and camouflaging. Peer-reviewed articles were selected to ensure the literature was credible, having depth and rigour (Siddaway et al., 2019). Unpublished work was hand-searched using Dart-Europe, Google and Google Scholar, which involved a degree of subjectivity and judgment. This was to reduce the impact of publication bias (Siddaway et al., 2019).

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were used:

Table 2

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for LRQs

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
Topic	**LRQ1:** Sources directly addressing Autistic camouflaging and masking in Black and racially minoritised girls. **LRQ2:** Sources directly addressing the intersection of race and autism. **LRQ3:** Sources directly addressing the intersection of gender and autism to provide relevant insights into the understanding Autistic females. **LRQ4:** Directly addresses the topic of Autistic camouflaging and masking.	**LQR1:** Sources that do not directly address Autistic camouflaging and masking in Black and racially minoritised girls or that focus solely on autism without discussing camouflaging or masking. **LRQ2:** Sources that focus solely on autism without discussing the intersection of race. **LRQ3:** Sources that focus solely on Autistic camouflaging and without addressing the intersection of gender. **LRQ4:** Sources unrelated to the research question or focusing solely on autism without camouflaging or masking to maintain relevance.	**LRQ1:** To maintain focus and relevance of the literature review question. **LRQ2:** To provide relevant insights into the experiences and perceptions of Black and racially minoritised Autistic people. **LRQ3:** To provide relevant insights into the experiences and perceptions of Autistic females. **LRQ4:** To provide relevant insights into autistic camouflaging and masking.
Research design	**All LRQs:** Diverse research methodologies (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods)		**LRQ1:** To comprehensively explore the literature on camouflaging and masking among Black Autistic girls. **LRQ2:** To comprehensively explore the literature's contribution to the understanding of Black and racially minoritised Autistic people.

Participants	**LRQ1 & 2:** Studies involving Black and racially minoritised Autistic girls of all age groups, recognising that experiences may differ across the lifespan. **LRQ3 & 4:** Studies involving Autistic people of all age groups, recognising that experiences may differ across the lifespan.	**LRQ1 & 2:** Studies primarily focused on non-Black or non-diverse populations.	**LRQ1&2:**To prioritise intersectional focus on Black Autistic girls.
		All LRQs: Studies that focus on parental experiences or perspectives.	**All LRQs:** To focus on the perspective and lived experience of the Autistic person themself.
Cultural and intersectional considerations	**LRQ1:** Include studies addressing intersectionality (race, gender, autism). **LRQ2:** Include studies addressing intersectionality (race, autism). **LRQ3:** Include studies addressing intersectionality (gender, autism). **LRQ4:** N/A	**LRQ1:** Studies that do not focus on the intersections of race, gender and Autistic camouflaging and masking. **LRQ2:** Studies that do not focus on the intersections of race and Autistic camouflaging and masking. **LRQ3:** Studies that do not focus on the intersections of gender and Autistic camouflaging and masking. **LRQ4:** N/A	**LRQ1:** To highlight the complex experiences of Black Autistic girls in diverse contexts. **LRQ2**: To highlight the complex experiences of Black Autistic and racially minoritised people in diverse contexts. **LRQ3**: To prioritise intersectional focus on Autistic females. **LRQ4:** N/A
Geography	**All LRQs:** Studies conducted in the UK	**All LRQs:** Studies not conducted in the UK.	**All LRQs:** To understand the phenomenon within the UK context.
Year of publication	**All LRQs:** Studies from 2011-2023	**All LRQs:** Studies before 2011	**All LRQs:** To explore current knowledge and understanding.

2.2.4 Selection Process

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flow diagram was used to document the selection process of the studies included in the review (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA flow diagram provides a visual overview of the different stages in a systematic review, including the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies (Page et al., 2021).

2.2.5 Review of the Quality of the Literature

After the searches and application of inclusion/exclusion criteria, 10 studies were left for critical review (see Appendix A). The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) for qualitative studies checklist was utilised to assess the quality of the five qualitative studies included in the review (see Appendix B). It was also used for the one mixed method design as the themes were generated through qualitative methods. The CASP checklist is a widely used tool that helps researchers evaluate the validity, results, and usefulness of qualitative research studies (Williams et al., 2020). The checklist provided a framework to reflect on the quality of the studies, considering areas of strength and limitations for each, which are discussed in the literature review results.

Additionally, Holland and Rees' (2010) critiquing framework was used to assess the quality of the four quantitative studies included in the review (see Appendix C). This structured framework guided a systematic evaluation of areas including methodology, data analysis, ethics and application of research findings that are discussed in the literature review results (Holland & Rees, 2010). This evaluation offers valuable insights by identifying gaps in the existing literature, providing insight into effective ways to contribute to a relatively unexplored field of study.

2.2.6 Excluded Studies

Most of the literature that was excluded at the abstract stage was due to being US-based and/or not focusing on the specifics of the LRQ (see Appendix D).

2.2.7 Limitations

It is important to note that the chosen search terms might have impacted the search results. There was additional literature that may have been helpful to consider that were not identified through these searches. For example, the work of Wood-Downie et al. (2021) highlights gender differences in Autistic camouflaging with camouflaging being more common in Autistic females than Autistic males. Cook et al.'s (2021a) systematic review indicated that individuals who reported more Autistic traits, self-reported more engagement with camouflaging and higher self-reported Autistic camouflaging was linked to worse mental health outcomes.

2.3. Literature review questions

Using an approach similar to the jigsaw structure, the literature review was divided into distinct, manageable segments through four separate searches, effectively addressing the complexity of the topic in a way that aligns with the study's intersectional framework (University of Hull Library, n.d.). There were four LRQs:

1. **What does the literature tell us about masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girls?**
2. **What does the literature tell us about Black Autistic people?**
3. **What does the literature tell us about masking and camouflaging Autistic girls?**
4. **What does the literature tell us about Autistic masking and camouflaging?**

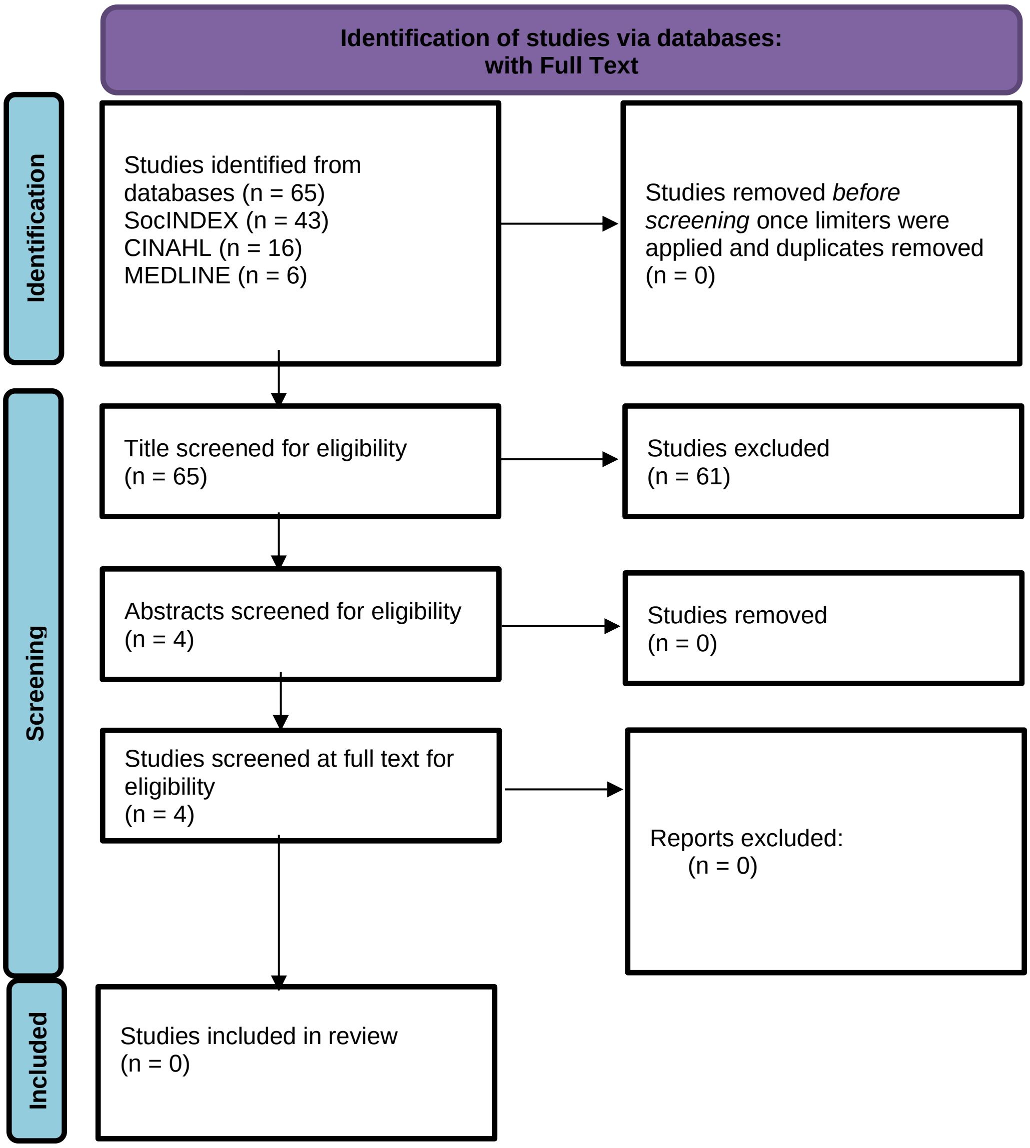
The search results highlight a significant gap in research on the Black Autistic experience, particularly regarding Black girls masking and camouflaging autism, compared to studies focusing on the intersection of gender (specifically females) and Autistic masking and camouflaging. The following sections detail the search for each LRQ.

2.3.1 LRQ1: What does the literature tell us about masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girls?

Titles and abstracts were screened for eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This search revealed a higher number of results than the other searches. However, many of the studies were removed at the title screening stage due to relatedness to the focus topic. This left no journals for critical review.

Figure 2

PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process for LRQ 1

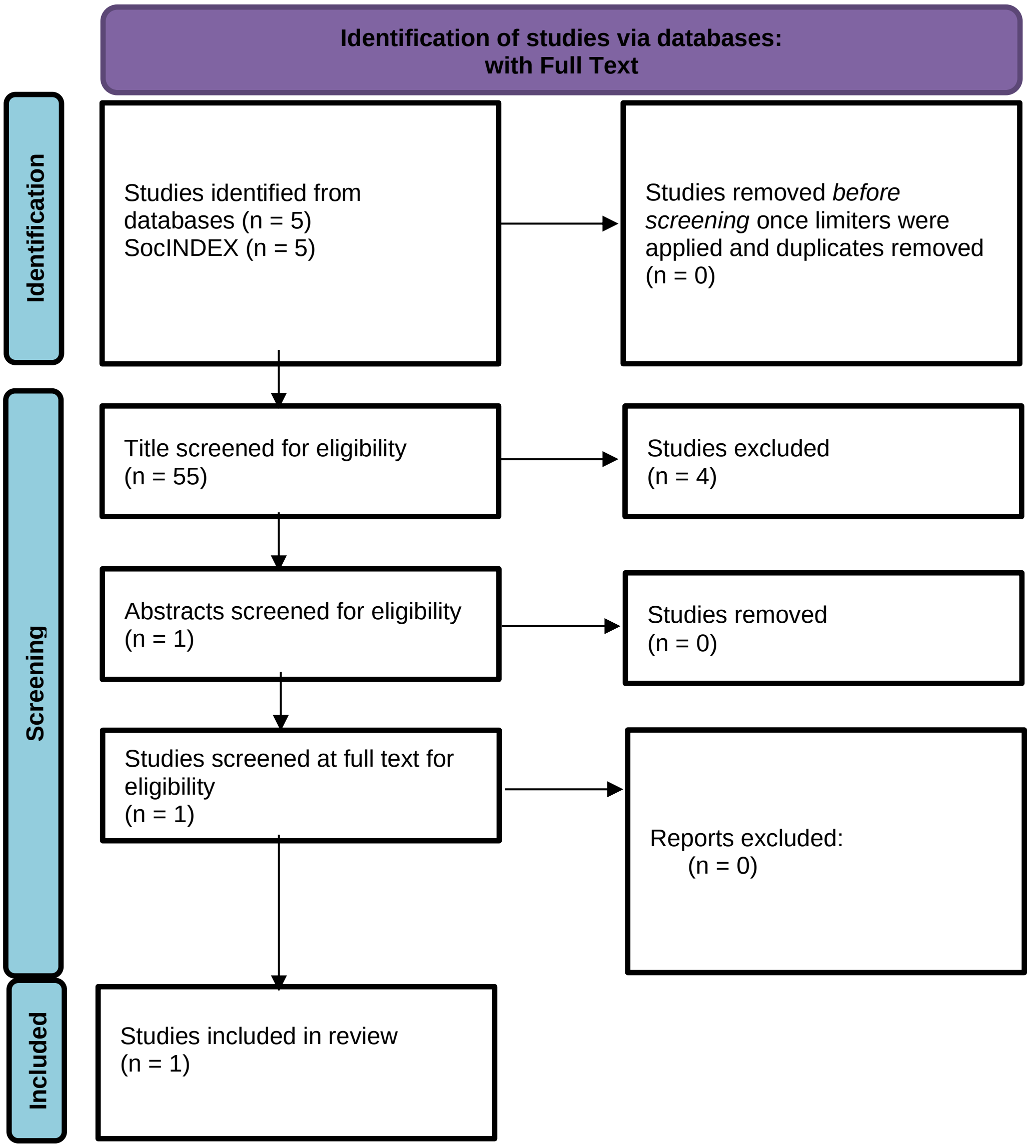


2.3.2 LRQ2: What does the literature tell us about Black Autistic people?

Titles and abstracts were screened for eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, leaving one study for critical review (see Appendix A).

Figure 3

PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process for LRQ 2

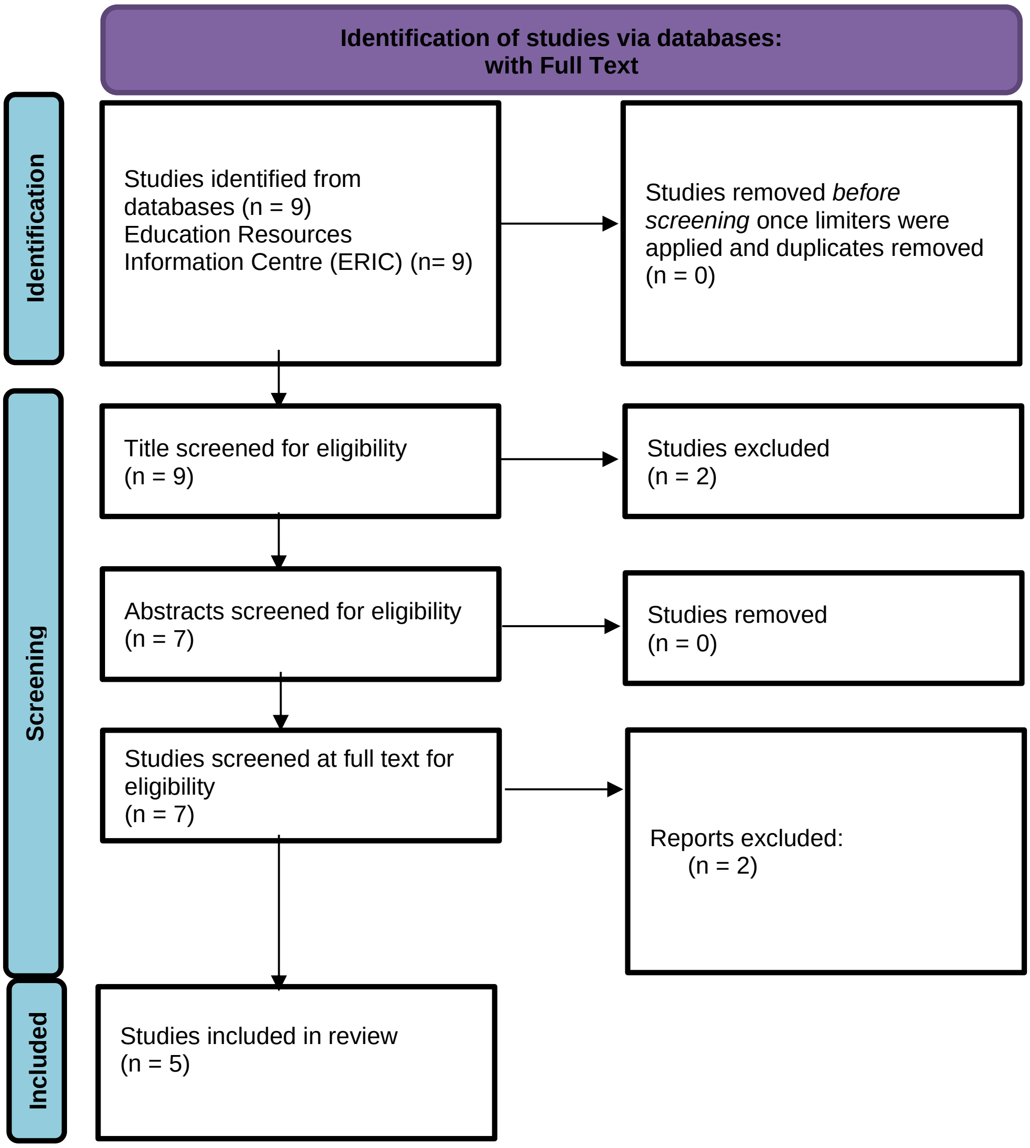


2.3.3 LRQ 3: What does the literature tell us about masking and camouflaging Autistic girls?

Titles and abstracts were screened for eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, leaving five papers for critical review (see Appendix A).

Figure 4

PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process for LRQ 3

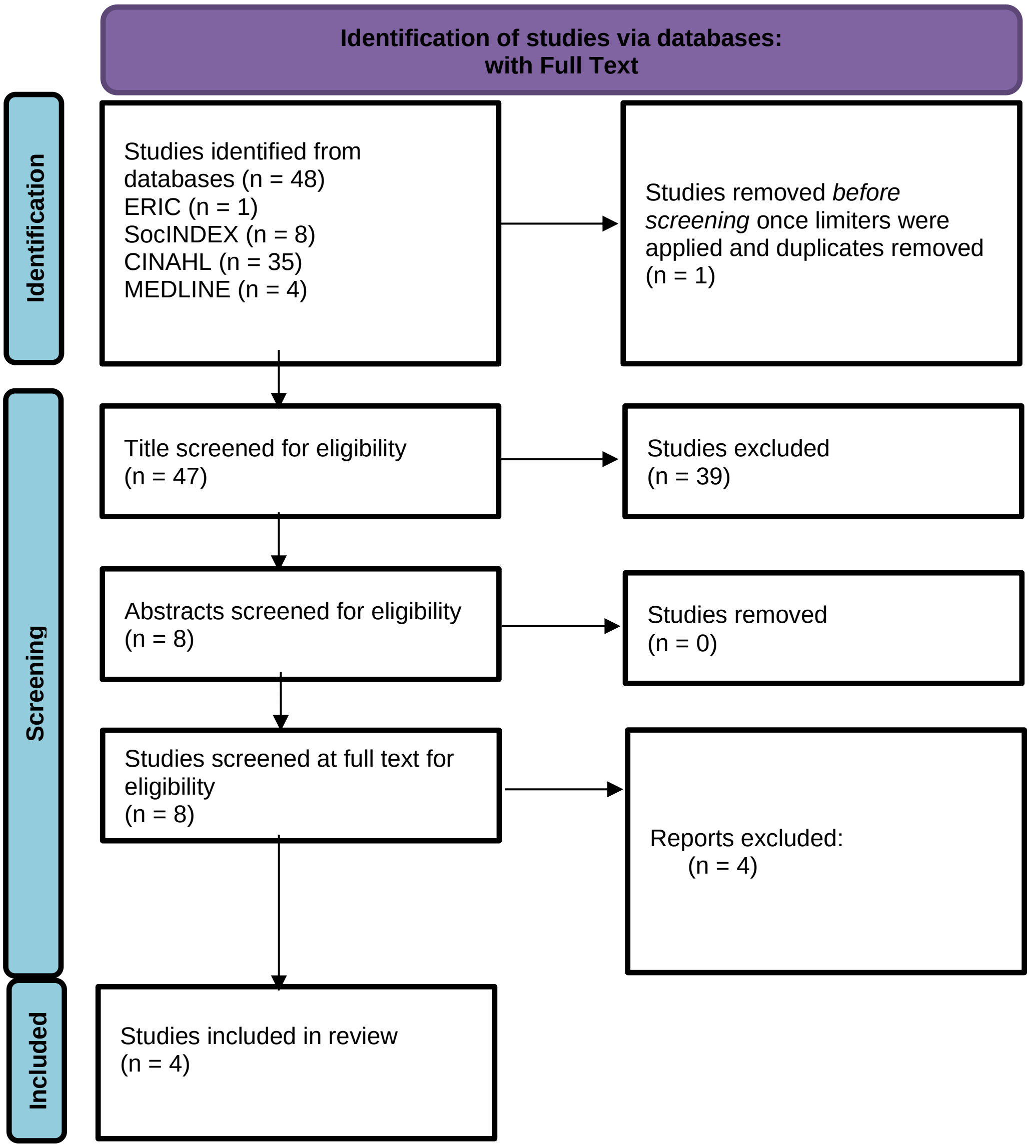


2.3.4 Literature review question 4: What does the literature tell us about Autistic masking and camouflaging?

Titles and abstracts were screened for eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, leaving four papers for critical review (see Appendix A).

Figure 5

PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process for LRQ 4



2.4 Literature Review Results

This section synthesises the 10 papers, organising the analysis around the themes of masking and camouflaging, gender, and race, as they relate to the social constructs being explored.

2.4.1 Masking and Camouflaging

Cook et al. (2021b) used a mixed-methods approach to explore camouflaging behaviours during everyday social interactions among Autistic and non-autistic people. They used the interpersonal process and recall methodology in a controlled social task designed to replicate a common day-to-day social situation. 17 Autistic adults participated in the task, watched a video of their interaction with a researcher, actively identified instances of camouflaging, and discussed their experiences of camouflaging. Thematic analysis generated four themes: (1) a strong desire for, yet uncertainty in, securing social acceptance and connection; (2) camouflaging, developed over time, as a means to achieve social acceptance and connection; (3) experiencing intrapersonal and interpersonal camouflaging consequences during social interactions; (4) authentic socialising as an alternative to camouflaging (Cook et al., 2021b). Findings highlighted that while camouflaging is motivated by and can facilitate social acceptance, it often results in significant psychological and cognitive challenges including exhaustion, anxiety, uncertainty, and interference with cognitive abilities (Cook et al., 2021b). The study also found that authentic socialising is an alternative to camouflaging (Cook et al., 2021b).

Cook et al. (2022) analysed the camouflaging behaviours from their 2021 study, employing content analysis to cluster the participants’ descriptions of their camouflaging behaviours. Thirty-eight camouflaging behaviours were clustered into four main categories and seven sub-categories: (1) masking; (2) innocuous engagement, (subcategories: passive encouragement, centring social partner, deferential engagement and reducing social risk) (3) modelling neurotypical communication and (4) active self-presentation (subcategories: reciprocal social behaviours, risky social behaviours, and comfortable and familiar social behaviours). Some of these behaviours included reducing body movements, making jokes, small talk, avoiding appearing knowledgeable and using scripts.

Both studies have several strengths. The use of interpersonal process recall methodology allowed for real-time analysis of camouflaging behaviours, overcoming previous research limitations that depended on retrospective accounts (Cook et al., 2022; Hull et al., 2017; Livingston et al., 2019). This method captured immediate reactions, offering a more accurate depiction of behaviours as they occurred. Additionally, the studies prioritised interpretations from Autistic participants themselves rather than relying on neurotypical researchers' observations (Dean et al., 2017). They also provided detailed descriptions of the behaviours Autistic adults exhibit while camouflaging, aiding a deeper understanding of their social challenges. The inclusion of agender and non-binary perspectives was noted, although it was minimally discussed.

Both studies are limited by their small, homogenous sample of 17 Autistic adults. (Cook et al., 2022). Participants were predominantly well-educated (16 participants had a bachelor’s degree or higher), employed (15 participants), White (16 participants), and all lived independently. This composition restricts the generalisability of the findings to a broader Autistic population, reflecting perhaps the specific demographics more likely to volunteer for such studies. It is crucial to remember that the findings may not represent different identities and lived experiences within the Autistic community. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability bias. Notably, the studies do not explore the effects of camouflaging on mental health and well-being, which marks a significant gap and suggests a need for further research with larger, more diverse samples to fully understand camouflaging's broader implications in the Autistic community.

Chapman (2020) investigated the link between masking behaviours and mental health among Autistic teenagers. The author identifies masking as a potential factor mediating the relationship between autism and mental health difficulties. Transcripts of semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 Autistic teenagers were analysed using thematic analysis. Chapman’s (2020) results indicated that negative experiences of treatment from others, such as bullying, ostracism, and rejection led to a negative self-image and fed into negative internal experiences such as low mood, high anxiety, and sensory and cognitive overload. Environmental contexts such as unfamiliarity, neurotypical people and broader social inequalities had the same effect. Negative self-image and internal experiences led to masking which led to negative mental health-related consequences, including self-harm, disconnection, exhaustion, anxiety, and suicidality (Chapman, 2020). Conversely, positive experiences of treatment from others, such as being valued, accepted, and supported, led to a positive self-image and fed into positive internal experiences such as low anxiety and feeling comfortable and relaxed. Environmental contexts such as familiarity, neurodivergent people, and engagement of their strengths and interests had the same effect. Positive self-image and internal experiences were reported to lead to authenticity, where participants did not feel the need to mask and were their true selves. Authenticity then led to positive mental health-related consequences, including connection, happiness, positivity and being comfortable to stim (Chapman, 2020).

The findings suggest that masking in autism is a complex, emotionally driven behaviour, often developing subconsciously in response to social and environmental factors (Chapman, 2020). Participants viewed masking not as a choice but as an anxiety-driven necessity, involving the suppression of emotions, reactions, and various aspects of identity due to external perceptions and challenging environments (Chapman, 2020; Bargiela et al., 2016). This aligns with prior research, indicating that masking is motivated by anxiety, the need for social acceptance, and the fear of negative consequences for revealing true feelings (Hull et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016). Negative experiences, such as bullying and social rejection, significantly impact the development of masking and mental health in Autistic teenagers. These external factors, coupled with internalising deficit-based narratives about autism, drive Autistic youth to mask to conform to social norms, leading to increased anxiety and sensory distress (Chapman, 2020). This aligns with Milton’s ‘double empathy problem’ (Milton, 2012) and the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006), highlighting the role of inhospitable environments (Mandy, 2019) in exacerbating the challenges faced by Autistic individuals (Chapman, 2020). The findings support a broader conceptualisation of masking and have implications for diagnostic and therapeutic clinical services.

A key strength of this study is that the author consulted with an Autistic advocate, who is an expert by experience, throughout the research. This is in keeping with ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’, the active involvement of disabled persons in planning strategies and policies that affect their lives (Koontz et al., 2022). Chapman’s study shares limitations with the other studies in terms of small sample size and diversity of participants.

Belek (2023) conducted a social anthropological study using ethnographic fieldwork at Autscape, an Autistic-led annual conference designed and tailored to meet the unique needs of Autistic people. Through observations, in-depth interviews, and informal chats with consenting attendees identified by coloured badges, the study examined how such environments enable Autistic individuals to express their authentic selves, contrary to societal expectations. Belek (2023) explores the concept of 'being oneself' in the context of autism, examining how such supportive spaces impact attendees' understanding of their identity and place in society. Central to this enquiry is how Autistic individuals cultivate an authentic sense of self, particularly in social environments that often pressure them to mask. The author introduces the concept of ‘un-festival’ to describe the event, which is similar to a festival in its goals of defiance and inversion, but different in its style, structure and potential implications. The design of the festival exposes the disabling elements of society and structural systems. The festival encourages attendees to rethink their identities not just in terms of unmasking and revealing their true selves but also in the context of an altered environment with new sensory experiences, values, and social interactions (Belek, 2023).

Belek (2023) reported mixed experiences in the Autistic-designed space at Autscape. One attendee experienced isolation and rejection due to another's use of festival rules allowing withdrawal from uninteresting conversations, raising questions about the impacts of such unmasking. Another attendee expressed scepticism about the feasibility of a universal Autistic space, asserting that people were interested in their own Autistic space rather than a communal one. Belek (2023) reflects on the notions of ‘passing as normal’, stigma and closeting (Goffman, 1963; Sedgwick, 1990; Seibers, 2004). He notes that the compulsion to mask can reflect deeper societal oppressions and challenges. The Autscape Festival aims to remove this power. Belek (2023) draws on Limburg (2016) who described being unable to find her authentic self under the mask and experiencing exhaustion when trying. She states that she had to consciously and effortfully design her Autistic self. Autscape appears to have the assumption that all Autistic people can unmask and be their Autistic selves when this is not the case for all (Belek, 2023).

Anthropological fieldwork studies face several limitations. These challenges range from observer bias, where the researcher's own background might influence their interpretations, to the complexities of cultural relativism, which demands understanding a culture without imposing external values. Ethical issues also arise, notably concerning consent and the potential impacts of the researcher's presence on the community. Belek, a neurotypical researcher, addressed these by reflecting on his positionality and the dynamics of power between researcher and participants, especially considering the sensitive history Autistic adults might have with observation from professionals (Belek, 2023). The limited sample size and the unique nature of each culture studied can also restrict the generalisability of findings. Yet, this study took a different approach to the Cook et al., (2017 & 2019) studies above, providing a broader, nuanced consideration of the Autistic perspective, power, systemic structures, and everyday implications for Autistic people.

These studies generally focus on Autistic masking and camouflaging; however, they did not focus on or explore the intersection of autism and gender.

2.4.2 Gender

Milner et al., (2023) conducted a quantitative study examining camouflaging behaviours among Autistic and non-Autistic males and females, exploring differences, potential predictors, and consequences. They specifically investigated whether camouflaging was more prevalent among Autistic females compared to males and whether it impacted autism diagnosis. The study involved three participant groups: those diagnosed with autism, those undiagnosed but high in Autistic traits (HAT), and a non-Autistic comparison group (CO). Participants data came from two cross-sectional studies: The Social Relationships Study and the Gender Differences in Social Communication study (Milner et al., 2023). They employed validated measures to assess camouflaging behaviours and Autistic traits, along with scales for happiness, loneliness, and quality of life, to understand the motivations and impacts of camouflaging (Milner et al., 2023). Milner et al. (2023) found that Autistic females used more camouflaging strategies than Autistic males, a pattern not found in non-Autistic groups. The study suggests a correlation where females with higher levels of Autistic traits tend to camouflage more, though this was less apparent in Autistic males (Milner et al., 2023). There are several possible explanations for this relationship; however, as this research design only indicates correlations between variables, these explanations must be hypothesised. One hypothesis asserted by Milner et al. (2023) is that cultural and societal expectations of social behaviours may differ depending on gender. Some cultures hold views that may lead an individual to feel the need to fit in with social settings. The higher the

Autistic traits, the more pressure they may feel to camouflage (Milner et al., 2023). Cultural and societal views and expectations evolve over time; therefore, Milner et al., (2023) call for further research into the role culture and society plays in motivations for Autistic camouflaging.

A key strength in Milner et al.'s (2023) research lies in its comparative analysis of Autistic and non-Autistic groups, a method prompted by Wood-Downie et al. (2021), and its consideration of the intersection of autism and gender. However, the study did not include non-binary or transgender individuals, which limits the scope of its gender analysis. Furthermore, the data, drawn from studies conducted between 2013 and 2019, may not fully reflect the current global context in relation to global events and gender identity. Additionally, the number of females in the control group greatly outweighed the number of males, potentially skewing the ability to detect gender differences within this group.

Halsall et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study in a mainstream secondary school to explore camouflaging strategies among Autistic girls in a specialist resource class. Specialist resource classes provide a secure setting where students are supported as they access the majority of the curriculum in mainstream classes (NAS, n.d.). There are 1125 resource bases for SEND across English schools (DfE, 2024), therefore, this type of setting for Autistic students is limited. The study involved interviews with eight girls, their mothers, and their educators to understand the use, motivations, and consequences of camouflaging. Furthermore, the study aimed to bring together multiple perspectives to gain a holistic view of the girls' experiences of camouflaging. The study used reflexive thematic analysis and found four themes: (1) inconsistencies and contradictions in camouflaging, (2) challenges of relationships and ‘finding a tribe’, (3) learning, inclusion and awareness and (4) consequences of camouflaging (Halsall et al. (2021).

Halsall et al. (2021) found the girls used camouflaging strategies in the mainstream and resource-based classes to hide Autistic traits and learning challenges. However, their attempts were both inconsistent and ineffective. One of the consequences of camouflaging was persistent isolation as the girls did not have a sense of belonging in either class (Halsall et al., 2021). Mothers and educators attributed increased camouflaging behaviours to increased social expectations. There was a difference in the perceptions of the girls and the educators in terms of camouflaging behaviours in the resource class. The authors suggest this may be explained by the double empathy theory which asserts a two-way communication breakdown resulting from a lack of shared understanding (Milton, 2012). Halsall et al.’s (2021) findings also suggest that as well as camouflaging to hide the social challenges of autism, the girls were also camouflaging their learning needs across all contexts. The consequence of this was missed learning, teacher unawareness of difficulties and underachievement. They also found that the girls used a range of camouflaging strategies that ranged from simple (appearing busy on the phone) to complex (researching normative social interactions). Both mothers and educators noted that these strategies were ineffective as the girls did not employ them in a flexible or adaptive manner. This is in keeping with Livingstone and Happé (2017) who postulated that superficial strategies could break down when social environments are complex; adolescence is a time when social interactions tend to become more nuanced (Halsall et al., 2021).

They also found that the girls camouflaged their interests as they had not developed at the speed and sophistication of their neurotypical peers (Halsall et al., 2021). The girls revealed different interests in different contexts. Some girls promoted certain aspects of their Autistic identity within the mainstream class. It is thought this may be due to mainstream pupils being aware of their autism diagnosis due to being in a resource-base classroom. They found girls were motivated to camouflage by their desire for friendship. In line with this, the experiences of mothers and educators frequently involved dealing with the girls' struggles with friendships, which were characterised by feelings of rejection and isolation. Halsall et al. (2021) found that the girls were socially excluded twice; they struggled to find their place in their mainstream class and in the resource-based class; there were far more boys who had more significant needs. Some girls overcame this by developing friendships with other SEN peers which resulted in similar social expectations and camouflaging demands. Similar relationships have been found in other studies suggesting SEN friendships can increase feelings of acceptance and reduce demands to camouflage (Cook et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016).

Halsall et al. (2021) stress crucial implications for educational professionals, such as the importance of facilitating Autistic girl’s friendships and sense of belonging in mainstream classes. Opportunities should be sought to structure and support interest-led activities with mainstream peers, including those with SEN. Mothers and educators explained that they gave social skills training and encouraged camouflaging behaviours in the participants. Similar guidance was given to all students by educators regardless of their desire to fit in (Halsall et al., 2012). These external pressures to camouflage are rooted in societal expectations that Autistic people need to adapt their behaviour to aid acceptance (Hull et al., 2017). It is important to embrace neurodiversity instead of trying to encourage Autistic people to conform to neurotypical standards of behaviour (Halsall et al., 2021). This may go towards reducing the perceived demand on Autistic people to camouflage. Halsall et al. (2021) highlight the negative consequences of camouflaging, including exhaustion, heightened anxiety, and mental health conditions that result from the conflict of not successfully camouflaging to fit in with mainstream peers and not fitting in with the stereotypical expectations of autism. This fits with the negative consequences reported by Autistic adults in Cook et al.'s, (2021b) study. Furthermore, girls camouflaging attempts were misinterpreted and their teachers were unaware of their struggles, which led to missed appropriate and targeted support. This further evidences implications for educational professionals to explore camouflaging demands and develop adjustments to learning and social expectations. To support pupils who camouflage, they suggest increasing staff awareness of camouflaging, using a person-centred approach to reducing the demands of different school contexts and developing ways to reduce stigma and increase acceptance of difference (Halsall et al., 2021). Limitations of this study were the small sample size and the context of the study is relevant to a small population of Autistic girls who attend resource-based classes within a mainstream secondary school. Unlike, Milner et al. (2023), this study does not compare with Autistic boys or non-Autistic young people seemingly to gain greater clarity of the specificity of the girl's experiences.

Bassett (2022) conducted a study similar to Halsall et al. (2021) exploring camouflaging in adolescent girls at school. However, Bassett's study was based on those attending mainstream secondary schools, which has a wider reach for the adolescent Autistic girl population. Bassett (2022) took a qualitative approach utilising two online focus groups with Autistic girls and an additional group with their parents. The aims of the study were to explore how Autistic adolescent girls experience their education within mainstream secondary schools and to determine any differences between behaviours and support at home and school. The study also sought to understand the reasons behind camouflaging behaviours and how the participants were developing their identity as Autistic girls in order to recommend support and environments where Autistic girls feel less need to camouflage. Data was analysed using thematic analysis and six themes were found: (1) Searching for self, the conflicts with their self-identity; (2) The dismissal and devaluation of parental concerns; (3) Meeting social norms in different environments; (4) Impact masking has psychologically and physically (5) Taking off the mask - what helps; and the superordinate theme (6) Internalising negative perceptions of others.

These themes revealed the daily struggles of the girls and the challenges their parents faced in securing a diagnosis and necessary support. Bassett (2022) found that these girls often adopted masking behaviours to conform to societal and gendered expectations, influenced by the internalised stigma of not fitting into typical autism profiles. Their masking behaviour was an attempt to blend into mainstream school settings despite not aligning with traditional or non-Autistic social expectations. This was a similar finding to Halsall et al., (2021), albeit the contexts were different. Consequently, this long-term masking adversely affected their relationships, learning, family life, and especially their mental health. Moreover, these challenges were exacerbated by the lack of adequate support for this demographic. Bassett (2022) noted that the majority of participants received a late diagnosis - their masking behaviour began before they were aware of a diagnosis, likely in response to receiving negative messages about their behaviour. The author argues for a reclassification of autism to account for both internalised and externalised presentations, calling for more inclusive and effective diagnostic tools and support systems. The study emphasised the need for more research and better support tailored to those with an internalised presentation of autism, considering intersectionality and underrepresented groups.

As with Halsall et al. (2021), the study faced limitations in its sample size, affecting the generalisability of its findings. It is also important to consider the use of virtual focus groups, as this method of data collection may have influenced participation and the authenticity of responses. Unlike Halsall et al., (2021), this study did not explore parental perspectives, particularly regarding parents with their own autism diagnoses, although it did identify that some parents were also diagnosed. Other factors to note about the participant group are that they were White, half of the parents had a household income of over £50k (above the national average, high tax paying), one parent reported their child received free school meals, and over half of the parents had a bachelor’s degree or higher. This is similar to the demographic of participants in Cook et al.’s (2021b; 2022) studies and demonstrates the narrow demographic through which autism knowledge is being produced. However, the study does suggest intersectional experiences and underrepresented groups be considerations for future research.

Lai et al. (2017) describe the negative cognitive, emotional, and developmental cost of Autistic camouflaging, drawing on existing research (Head et al., 2014; Hull et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016). They explain that the pioneering studies on Autistic camouflaging suggest that Autistic camouflaging involves using learned social behaviours like imitation and conversation skills to conceal autism-related challenges. Previous research has consistently found that females with autism tend to camouflage more than males, a skill likely supported by verbal ability and executive function. Lai et al., (2017) hypothesise that camouflaging requires acute environmental monitoring and cautious response strategies and may also involve other abilities like social imitation and as-yet-unknown cognitive or behavioural skills. This study attempts to test this hypothesis by adopting a positivist approach to operationalise the concept of camouflaging in Autistic adults, using standardised measures. This study took a novel approach in attempting to operationalise camouflaging as the difference between a person's outward behaviour in social interactions and their internal state, which includes inherent personality traits and the ability to understand and navigate social situations (Lai et al., 2017). The study focused on estimating camouflaging levels in Autistic adults, comparing these between males and females, and examining the association of camouflaging with anxiety, depression, verbal ability, and cognitive processing. Additionally, the research explored the neuroanatomical correlates of camouflaging and utilised knowledge and understanding from neuroscience, to identify other cognitive aspects potentially related to camouflaging.

Lai et al. (2017) used data from participants recruited in one of their previous studies (Lai et al., 2013), which included standardised and widely used measures of behavioural characteristics, self-rated traits and ability, and autism diagnostic measures, including the ADOS and Autism-Spectrum Quotient (AQ). Participants were pre-menopausal, of average to above average IQ and right-handed. Lai et al. (2017) found that Autistic women’s camouflaging scores were higher than Autistic men with substantial variability in both groups. In Autistic men, greater camouflaging was associated with more depressive symptoms and better signal-detection sensitivity was found in Autistic women. Neuroanatomical association with Autistic camouflaging was found to be largely gender specific, particularly around the medial temporal and cerebellar structures and in terms of memory and emotion. Lai et al. (2017) suggested this be researched further.

Although this study is novel and provides some interesting insights, the authors suggest taking caution with interpretation (Lai et al., 2017). They indicate that a careful concept formation of camouflaging through qualitative methods such as grounded research, would be the only valid basis for a direct measure of camouflaging to operationalise. To strengthen the validity and application of findings, this study could have benefitted from employing mixed methods to develop a direct measure of camouflaging before attempting to operationalise it. Additionally, the study highlights potential confounding variables when answering self-report questionnaires; these included anxiety, self-reflection ability, and masking (Lai et al., 2017). These factors are all within-person and do not account for external confounding factors such as geography, context, or identity. Additionally, all participants were tested for intellectual and verbal ability which means this only includes a specific Autistic experience. The aims appear to be to better understand the construct and the gender differences in Autistic camouflaging to improve diagnosis and individualised assets and support; however, it is unclear what individualised support could be put in place and the everyday benefits of this study to Autistic people. Furthermore, without causation and valid measures of camouflaging, this study’s contribution to the knowledge of Autistic camouflaging is limited. The study demonstrates that the underlying constructs, measurement, mechanisms, consequences, and heterogeneity of camouflaging in autism warrant further investigation.

Lai et al. (2019) follow on from their 2017 study by using quantitative methods to investigate differences in brain activity related to understanding others' thoughts and self-perception in Autistic female and male adults. The study also considers whether camouflaging influences these brain activity differences in females and males. The study used functional magnetic resonance imaging (FMRI) to observe brain activity in specific areas (right temporo-parietal junction and ventromedial prefrontal cortex), while participants were engaged in tasks related to understanding others' thoughts (mentalising) and thinking about themselves (self-representation). The study found that Autistic males had less brain activity in certain regions during tasks of understanding others and self-perception compared to non-Autistic males (Lai et al., 2019). However, Autistic females showed similar brain activity to non-Autistic females in these tasks. Interestingly, in Autistic females, camouflaging was linked to more brain activity related to self-perception. This suggests that Autistic females might not have the same difficulties in self-representation and understanding others as seen in Autistic men. These findings highlight gender differences in brain function related to social interactions in autism. In their discussion, Lai et al. (2019) respond to some of the limitations raised for their previous study. They acknowledge that the participants are of average or above-average intellectual ability, and explain that previous research has associated camouflaging with cognitive ability. In their conclusion, they acknowledge that further research would need to include all intellectual abilities to explore this association, and also acknowledge that the study does not account for cultural, linguistic, ethnic and socio-economic heterogeneity (Lai et al., 2019). This demonstrates the importance of continued research as thoughts and awareness evolve overtime, continuously contributing to learning and knowledge.

Many of these studies that focus on gender, acknowledge intersectionality within their discussions. They point to further research to explore the intersection of autism with different and underrepresented identities. The following section discusses the only focus on race found within the literature search.

2.4.3 Race

Belek (2023) explained that the majority of Autscape participants, as well as those in other UK field sites, were White, a fact that merits reflection on the intersection of race, class, and the diagnosis of autism. As highlighted by Mattingly (2017), autism diagnosis is more common in Euro-American and affluent communities in the U.S., indicating that race and class play significant roles in autism identification. Belek (2023) asserts that this racial and socioeconomic skew in diagnosis may contribute to the limited presence of ethnically minoritised Autistic communities in England, suggesting that the conception of autism, both as a medical category and as a basis for identity and community, has been racially influenced.

Lewis & Arday (2023) use dialogical knowledge production (Collins, 2012) and collaborative autoethnography to reflect on their experiences of navigating the politics of neurodiversity and neurotypical hegemony in UK higher education as Black neurodivergent sociologists. In using these methods, the authors aim not only to reflect on how they act and feel in society but also to develop layers of consciousness focused on how they come to know and be in the world (Adams et al., 2013; Brown-Vincent, 2019).

The authors state that civil society is maintained by the integration of key social institutions (namely, media, education, and religion) in the formation of people’s identities, which contributes to the conditioning of ideological power that regulates ideas, values, and social norms (Lewis & Arday, 2023). Hegemony, the dominance of one group over another, eliminates the need for coercive control in civil society and instead requires continuous investment in the protection and reproduction of ideologies that preserve power (Lewis & Arday, 2023; Hall, 1986; Gramsci, 1971). They highlight that a vital part of neurotypical hegemony is the manner within which racialised boundaries of neurology or eugenics historically and presently normalise an active struggle to establish negative racialisation and racism. This fits with *DisCrit's* assertion of racism and ableism working together in tandem (Annamma et al, 2016).

Lewis and Arday (2023) draw on Leonardo and Broderick (2011) to assert that the intersection of racism and ableism must involve engagement with Whiteness, disability, and race to demonstrate how racial hierarchies are maintained through unchallenged labelling of White people as either smart (abled) or needing more care (disabled). Neurotypical hegemony is multi-racialised and marginalises White neurodivergent individuals. Marginalisation is heightened for those negatively racialised due to the dehumanising function of racism; this generates a double jeopardy where they must navigate a toxic fusion of racism and neurotypical hegemony (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Lewis & Arday, 2023).

Alongside the politics of neurodiversity and neurotypical hegemony, Lewis and Arday (2023) suggest the production of sociological knowledge has been at the exclusion of Black intellectual thought. The work of W.E.U. Du Bois, a Black sociologist, was routinely overlooked and omitted by White scholars (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021). Black feminist praxis and theory, a methodology that values lived experience, mutual nurturance and small groups working for change, has been marginalised through lack of citation (Allen, 2023; Smith, 2018). As Black neurodivergent scholars, Lewis and Arday (2023) describe an intersectional experience of dealing with critique that positions their intellectual thought and expertise as marginal, and perceives their way of thinking, doing, and communicating scholarship as inferior. The authors assert that the culture of institutionalised UK education sets the context for understanding race and neurodiversity. They explain that the UK education system made them, and many others, acutely aware of the deep-seated inequalities related to race and class, a situation that is further intensified for those who are neurodivergent (Lewis & Arday, 2023; Blanchett, 2006).

Lewis and Arday’s (2023) reflections involve discussions on masking and camouflaging. Their experiences support findings explained in the previous sections, including hiding their authentic selves to appear scholarly; Lewis explains that they do not need support but need ‘space to be different’ (Lewis & Arday, 2023, p.1308). They note little consideration or adjustments made for their differing needs, as the everyday aspects of academic life such as writing, teaching, being reviewed and collaboration, are shaped and influenced by neurotypical hegemony. Lewis and Arday (2023) also point to a general lack of understanding of the internalised and external impact of adapting to neurotypical hegemony.

Black academics often face significant challenges, including impact on mental health and precarious employment, due to having to make personal and professional sacrifices (Lewis & Arday, 2023). These challenges are compounded by the need to constantly navigate racist microaggressions, which can hinder career progression. Lewis and Arday (2023) reflect on Radulski (2022) who stresses the association between race, neurodiversity, and Whiteness as an opportunity to seriously consider the intersectional nature of adapting to neurotypical hegemony. Radulski (2022) discusses the reflections of a Black neurodivergent individual on masking, who struggled with acceptance from both their White peers and the Black community. Arday discusses code-switching, a way in which Black individuals adjust their cultural expressions and speech to align with the norms of the dominant (White) majority (Myers, 2020; Seymour & Seymour, 1979). This process echoes Fanon's (1986) analysis of constructing a Black identity under White dominance. In "Black Skins, White Masks," Fanon explores how self-perception in Black individuals is influenced by the 'White gaze', which often frames Blackness in terms of subjugation and inferiority, fuelled by pervasive stereotypes and narratives. This concept, described as a 'racial epidermal schema', highlights the impact of the White perspective on Black identity. This process of performing is intensified by neurodiversity (Lewis & Arday, 2023). Lewis and Arday (2023) assert that investigating race and neurodiversity together raises issues related to cultural norms, policies and practices that extend beyond individualised accounts; this highlights a challenge for research and work cultures. They also suggest further research to investigate how racism and ableism produce specific processes of marginality.

The study is limited in its transferability to other populations and contexts due to its narrow focus on two Black neurodivergent UK higher education scholars. Furthermore, it is based on the authors' experiences, which can raise concerns about bias and reliability. Auto-ethnographical research has been criticised for being too subjective, self-indulgent and lacking rigour (Ellis et al., 2016; Adams et al., 2021). However, dialogical knowledge production can be a useful research method for generating new knowledge and understanding of complex social phenomena. It can help researchers explore multiple perspectives and voices, which can lead to a more nuanced understanding of the research topic (Denzin, 2017). Collaborative autoethnography can be a powerful research tool for exploring personal experiences and emotions. It can help researchers gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of individuals and groups, which can lead to more empathetic and compassionate research outcomes (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

Lewis and Arday (2023) directly address the critique of their chosen methods by calling for a more inclusive scholarly place for neurodivergent people that goes beyond neurotypical ways of teaching and researching. They assert this should not be deemed a betrayal of knowledge but a defence of intellectual fluidity, openness, and a collective commitment to truth (hooks, 2006; Lewis & Arday, 2023). The complex politics of neurodiversity reveal how race and disability become silenced by Whiteness (Lewis & Arday, 2023). Lewis and Arday (2023) argue that the racialised hierarchy of disability has sidelined Black neurodivergent individuals through narratives that perpetuate false beliefs about intelligence, deviance, and meritocracy. Their research counters this by centring their Black and neurodivergent perspectives in the methodology. Furthermore, the empirical focus on their experiences will enable other neurodivergent staff and students to relate and will add to scholarship that values singular reflections.

2.5 Conclusion

This literature review evidences emerging research in the UK about Autistic masking and camouflaging that use diverse methodologies. There is a specific focus on how this affects Autistic females. However, there is limited focus on other aspects of identity. The research included in this review has generally featured a specific demographic of participants; that are of middle to high socio-economic status, of average intellectual and verbal ability, and White British. This reinforces the stereotype of Autistic people that has dominated media and society. It excludes Autistic people who do not speak, have learning needs and difficulties, and who do not fit other identity aspects of that demographic. This adds to the marginalisation and ‘othering’ of specific groups. It may be that the highlighted demographic is more likely to respond to a request to participate in research. Researchers need to ask themselves why this is the case and design research that is accessible, inclusive, and comfortable for all Autistic people to participate in.

Despite the lack of diversity and inclusivity among most of the participants, many of these studies called for a focus on intersectional experiences. Current research suggests limited consideration of how social constructs intersect to shape the Autistic experience. Most of the literature focused on gender assigned at birth yet neglected differing gender identities. This literature review unearthed one article focused on the intersection of neurodiversity and race in the UK and no articles on the UK Black Autistic female experience. The absence of peer-reviewed publications on this topic underscores the critical need for further research that explores how different social constructs intersect with autism, particularly studies that focus on marginalised identities. This conclusion points to a significant gap in the literature and highlights the ongoing need for research that broadens the scope of inclusivity and intersectionality in the study of autism.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Overview

The purpose of the methodology section is to outline all considerations thoroughly accounted for in the process of conducting this research. The aim is to clearly understand the procedures followed and the rationale and positions that have influenced the methodological approach.

3.2. Research Purpose and Aims

There is limited research exploring the educational experiences of masking and camouflaging Autistic children and young people in the UK. The literature tends to focus on Autistic females; social constructs such as race and ethnicity feature less. The interplay of social constructs in shaping experience is further limited. There is a significant void when it comes to understanding the nuanced experiences of Black Autistic females in UK educational settings. Therefore, this research study aims to address that gap in knowledge. This research is an exploratory and emancipatory study, aiming to listen to and amplify the voices of masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girls in UK educational settings. Currently, their experiences are not represented in research. Employing camouflaging strategies suggests they are used to hiding their true feelings and thoughts. This research will give them the opportunity to express their true feelings anonymously without being judged or having the fear of rejection or non-acceptance. The aim is for the participants to have a safe, reflective space to express their authentic selves.

Additionally, this research aims to better understand the lived experiences of masking and camouflaging among Black Autistic girls, focusing on how multiple identities (intersectionality) impact their daily lives, diagnosis, and support within educational settings. It investigates the role of cultural differences, power dynamics, and the specific demands these girls face in education. It also examines barriers to identification and support. The aim is that educational settings can be informed of reasonable adjustments that need to be made from the perspective of an Autistic young person, in keeping with ‘nothing for us without us’[1] (Charlton, 1998). This study aims to inform future research, policy, and practice, ultimately striving to create a more inclusive and empathetic society for all Autistic individuals.

3.3 Research Questions

This study will use IPA to make sense of their individual experience. It will look further by considering the individual in context by using *DisCrit* (Connor et al., 2016) and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) to make sense of the impact of wider levels, in keeping with developmental psychological theory, and the role of power, oppression, privilege, and structures. In doing so, the hope is not only to contribute to academic discourse but also to prompt a wider societal reflection on the structures that necessitate such camouflaging in the first place.

The study will answer two research questions:

1. **What is the lived experience of camouflaging Black Autistic females?**
2. **How can the findings from research question one be understood using a *DisCrit* and intersectionality lens?**

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[1] This is the notion that policies and decisions should not be made without the direct participation of individuals from the group affected.

3.4 Research Paradigm

This qualitative research study will take an interpretivist approach, emphasising understanding subjective experiences, context, and social constructions rather than considering reality as purely objective and quantifiable, like positivist approaches (Annamma et al., 2015). Interpretivist research methods often involve qualitative techniques such as interviews, observations and case studies rather than relying solely on quantifiable data and generalisation (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). Researchers adopting this approach seek to explore meanings, cultural contexts, and individual perspectives. For this reason, it is the most appropriate method for this study’s research questions.

3.4.1 Epistemology and Ontology

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with the study of knowledge. It seeks to understand how knowledge is acquired, justified, and evaluated (Lehrer & Cohen, 1983; Lehrer, 2000). Ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of being, reality and existence (Crotty, 1998). Ergo, ontology is concerned with what is truth and epistemology with how this truth is found out. Consequently, this research's epistemological and ontological stance will determine its methodology and the knowledge produced.

Ontological perspectives move on a continuum from realism to relativism (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Realism posits one observable, objective, and measurable reality independent of subjectivity (Howell, 2012). In contrast, relativism asserts multiple realities, emphasising that reality is constructed by the subject (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Epistemologically, stances include objectivism, emphasising meaning within an object; constructionism, asserting that meaning is developed by the subject; and constructivism, which posits that meaning exists within the subject who imposes meaning on the object (Moon & Blackman, 2014). This study will take a social constructionist and critical realist stance.

Social constructivism assumes that understanding and meaning are developed through other people (Kukla, 2000). The concept of objective truth is non-existent, as reality doesn’t manifest until it is socially constructed. This aligns with the premise of learning being an active, predominantly social process, rather than an isolated individual one, adhering to the principles of social constructivism and holding a relativist ontological stance (Kukla, 2000). The focus of social constructionism lies in discourse, power dynamics, and cultural specificity (Burr & Dick, 2017). It posits that to comprehend observable phenomena fully, one must understand the unobservable structures influencing them, as they play a pivotal role in shaping reality (Archer, 1998). This study aims to unveil the intersectionality of race, disability, and gender in shaping the lived experiences of camouflaging black autistic girls. Social constructionism acknowledges the role and influence of social and cultural constructs on lived experiences (Burr & Dick, 2017). A social constructionist position, therefore, aligns with this study as it aims to understand an individual’s construction of lived experience as influenced by societal systems and norms.

Critical realism acknowledges the existence of an objective truth that exists independent of perception and interpretation (Archer, 1998; Collier, 1994). It acknowledges that the understanding of reality is imperfect and influenced by social, cultural and individual aspects (Danermark et al., 2019). The world that we know and understand is constructed by our perspectives and experiences and what we can observe (Archer, 1998). Critical realism posits that unobservable structures cause observable events. Therefore, for the social world to be understood, people need to understand the structures that generate these events - make the unobservable observable (Archer, 1998). This fits the aims of this study, which are to understand the constructed perspectives and experiences of the participants and understand the unobservable structures that influence these, namely racism and ableism.

This study will use IPA which is derived from a phenomenological and hermeneutic epistemological framework (Smith et al., 2022*)*. It assumes knowledge is subjective and acknowledges that understanding is co-constructed between the participant and researcher (Connor et al., 2016). This study will further the understanding of the participants' lived experiences by using a *DisCrit* theoretical framework and intersectionality lens, which assumes reality is constructed through factors including power, social norms, history, and legislation (Connor et al., 2016; Crenshaw, 1989).

3.5. IPA Theoretical Underpinnings

IPA, informed by phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, is a qualitative method that examines individual meaning-making in life experiences and their engagement with the world (Smith et al., 2022). Individuals are unconsciously caught up in their everyday experiences, such as school interactions until a significant event like an autism diagnosis highlights it to them (Dilthey, 1976). This event can link various experiences under a common theme, prompting reflection and meaning-making in interviews (Smith et al., 2022). IPA, guided by hermeneutics, interprets participants' accounts as their attempts to understand their experiences (Smith et al., 2022). The researcher analyses these accounts, taking on the dual role of employing the same cognitive and personal skills as the participant to make sense of the participant's experience based on what they have shared (Smith et al., 2022). IPA is idiographic in that it focuses on understanding individual experiences and the personal interpretations of events, exploring each case in detail and comparing them to identify similarities and differences (Smith et al., 2022).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the philosophical examination of human experience, focusing on our values and what constitutes our lived world (Smith et al., 2022). According to Husserl, one of the leading phenomenological philosophers, phenomenology involves an introspective attitude, examining our perceptions of objects to bring thoughts, feelings, conclusions, hopes and meanings into consciousness – a process Husserl describes as intentionality (Ahmed, 2006; Husserl, 1927; Smith et al., 2022)

Heidegger and other phenomenologists argue that individuals are inherently connected to a world filled with objects, relationships, language, and culture, making this relatedness essential to their identity. (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2022). Phenomenology holds that experiences must be understood within the context of how individuals perceive their 'lived' world, rather than the world being separate from the individual experiencing it (Langdridge, 2007). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty (1962) emphasises that our bodies communicate with the world, meaning our perception and knowledge are shaped by embodied experiences.

Phenomenology aligns with social constructionism by emphasising how individuals actively construct meaning in their experiences and understand the world as it appears to them (Langdridge, 2007). It acknowledges the complexity of individual lives, which must be viewed within their biographical and social contexts. Husserl refers to the individual as inseparable from the world, and (Smith et al., 2022). Husserl and Heidegger highlight this integration by describing individuals as inseparable from their environments; Heidegger speaks of the ‘person-in-context’ (Smith et al., 2022).

IPA supports understanding the meaningfulness of individual experiences; to understand their lifeworld (the everyday, taken-for-granted life led), encompassing temporality, spatiality, embodiment, and intersubjectivity (Smith et al., 2022). This approach is especially relevant for studying the intersectional experiences of Black Autistic women, considering the historical contexts of Autistic, female, and Black embodiment.

Autistic individuals' self-perception is often shaped by knowledge from non-autistic sources (Milton, 2017). Foucault (1977) highlighted that power is derived from accepted knowledge, scientific understanding and what is considered truth, yet marginalised groups frequently lack this power to define their own narratives. Held (2020) discusses this as epistemic violence, where mainstream concepts ignore the lived experiences of marginalised people and findings about them are used to reinforce their perceived inferiority and/or lesser humanity. Notably, the developer of Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA), Ivar Lovaas, viewed Autistic people as less than fully human; he described them as not people in the psychological sense (Chance, 1974). Many Autistic adults have reported enduring trauma from ABA experiences (AutisticsAgainstABA, 2017; Bascom, 2012; Broderick, 2011; Dawson, 2004; Kupferstein, 2018).

De Jaegher (2013) suggests that Autistic people interpret the world uniquely, particularly in social interactions where their sense-making differs from the majority.

She advocates for autism research to explore the meanings behind Autistic ways of moving, perceiving, and feeling to enhance understanding of often overlooked aspects of Autistic experiences like intense interests and repetitive behaviours. She emphasises the need to move beyond disembodied individualism to appreciate Autistic capacities in intersubjective processes (De Jaegher, 2013).

Ahmed (2002) suggests that we cannot understand the production of race without understanding its reference to embodiment. Racialisation cannot be understood without reference to European colonialism. European colonialism involved the direct and violent control of bodies through slavery and power over bodies of the indigenous peoples of colonised lands (Ahmed, 2002). Colonisers sought to create knowledge of indigenous peoples, built out of the dissection of their bodies, by using scientific classifications and typologies. The bodies of indigenous people were examined for similarities and differences and used to set out the superiority of the White race (Ahmed, 2002). Similarly, nineteenth-century scientific knowledge determined that women’s bodies were inferior to men's (Ahmed, 2002). There is a long history of forced and coerced sterilisation of women who are disabled, and those from racially minoritised groups, a practice that still exists today (Bleuler, 1924; Patel, 2017; Rowlands & Amy, 2018). This has been promoted across the globe by various ideologies, including eugenics (Rowlands & Amy, 2018). The US Supreme Court’s decision to overturn *Roe vs Wade* in 2022, took away women's protected rights to have an abortion, putting the decision in the hands of the US state (Coen-Sanchez et al., 2022). This further demonstrates that women still do not have control over aspects of their bodies and is further escalated for racialised and poor women (Coen-Sanchez et al., 2022).

There is a difference between White and Black women’s bodies. Black women’s bodies have historically been hypersexualised and seen as grotesque and sexually deviant (Ahmed, 2002; Awad et al., 2018). During slavery, Black women’s bodies were routinely violated for pleasure and profit without recourse or protection (hooks, 1992; Collins, 1990; Mama, 1995). Currently, Black women’s bodies continue to be devalued and rejected by mainstream culture, which considers the Western aesthetic of blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin as the epitome of beauty (Awad et al., 2018). Given these varied viewpoints on embodied experiences, IPA is ideally suited to comprehend the experiences of a body perceived as female, Black, and Autistic.

Hermeneutics

The term 'phenomenology' combines the Greek words 'phenomenon' (meaning to show or appear, focusing on perception) and 'logos' (meaning to make something clear through analysis) (Heidegger, 1962). Thus, phenomenology involves analysing what appears to interpret meaning, linking it closely with hermeneutics for interpretative purposes (Moran, 2000).

Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, combines skills such as intuition to make sense of appearances, aiming for a deep and holistic understanding that might surpass the individual's self-awareness (Schleiermacher, 1998; Smith et al., 2022). From an IPA perspective, the researcher uses their detailed analyses to uncover insights that participants might not be aware of, drawing on oversight of a larger data set and theoretical frameworks (Schleiermacher, 1998; Smith et al., 2022). This process is influenced by the researchers' own experiences and biases (Heidegger, 1962) They must prioritise the new object of study over their own preconceptions.

The challenge is not in completely setting aside one’s natural attitude, as prior experience is integral for interpreting data, but in attentively managing preconceptions to maintain an equilibrium between openness and reflexive self-awareness. (Finlay, 2008a; Finlay & Gough, 2003). Finlay (2008a) equates this balancing act to a 'dance' where preconceptions are both restrained and utilized for deeper insights.

Making meaning is a dynamic process of projection, where interpreters continuously adjust their understandings as parts inform the whole, influenced by a developing set of preconceptions (Gadamer, 1990). This iterative process involves revising preconceptions through comparison and contrast, clarifying meaning as more becomes apparent (Smith et al., 2022). It is vital for researchers to be aware of their biases to ensure that these do not obstruct the genuine expression of participants' truths (Gadamer, 1990).

The hermeneutic circle highlights the dynamic relationship between parts and the whole, emphasising a circular, iterative approach to data analysis in IPA (Smith et al., 2022). This concept suggests that understanding of the parts is enhanced by their context within the whole, much like the meaning of a word is clarified within the context of a sentence (Smith et al., 2022). This perspective contrasts with more linear qualitative methods, offering a nuanced way to engage with and interpret data.

Idiography

Idiography focuses on how specific individuals understand phenomena within their contexts, allowing IPA to provide a detailed examination of unique lived experiences (Eatough & Shaw, 2019; Smith et al., 2022). Consequently, IPA employs a carefully selected homogenous sample to facilitate generalisations from individual cases. In this study, the sample consists of Black Autistic females aged 16-18 years, examining their experiences of camouflaging and masking in UK educational settings.

The idiographic approach, which focuses on individual experiences, contrasts with the nomothetic methods prevalent in psychology. Nomothetic approaches seek general patterns applicable across larger populations and often employ quantitative methods to analyze group averages, rather than individual distinctions (Piccirillo & Rodebaugh, 2019; Smith et al., 2022). Critics like Lamiell and Kastenbaum (cited in Datan et al., 1987) have questioned the validity of generalising individual behavior from such broad data, arguing that it constructs hypothetical profiles not representative of real individuals. Kastenbaum (cited in Datan et al., 1987:156) described this analytic method as constructing people ‘who never were and never could be’.

The literature suggests studying individual cases to explore subjects of intrinsic interest and to prove their existence rather than their frequency (Platt, 1989; Yin, 1989). Such cases can expose flaws in existing theories and lead to theoretical revisions (Platt, 1989). They can disrupt assumptions and preconceptions, providing new insights and knowledge (Campbell, 1988). Galton emphasized that understanding begins with an in-depth look at particulars to avoid risks of misrepresentation (Galton, 1883, cited in Allport 1951). For IPA, idiography is the foundation for broader generalisations (Eatough & Shaw, 2019).

Focusing on the specific individual does not negate the person in context. The individual is embedded in a world of shared pre-existents (Ashworth, 2015); our worlds are distinctive yet shared. Experience does not belong to the individual; the individual offers their unique perspective on their relationship to the phenomena of interest (Smith et al., 2022). Multiple individual cases can be synthesised to develop theoretical explanations through analytic induction, a method that refines hypotheses through iterative examination of cases (Hammersley, 1989; Hammersley, 2011). This is a cautious and considered task, committed to a balance between preserving individual details and identifying generalisable aspects of their experiences (Eatough & Shaw, 2019).

IPA emphasises the necessity of capturing lived experiences as they present themselves, without imposing preconceived theories or assumptions (Smith et al., 2022). It discourages researchers from integrating theory prematurely in the study to avoid biasing the lens (Abrams et al., 2020). However, Larkin et al. (2018) discuss using IPA multiperspectively, suggesting people’s experiences could be used to illuminate a phenomenon's wider meaning to understand its broader construction, dynamics or mechanisms. They assert that this leads to a more complex research design that retains phenomenological and hermeneutical concepts yet builds upon links to systemic psychology (Rostill et al., 2011; Glasscoe & Smith, 2011). This study will use IPA to answer research question one. It will use *DisCrit* and intersectionality to answer research question two. A second research question was created to avoid biasing the IPA lens. The integration of *DisCrit* and intersectionality frameworks will be discussed in the discussion chapters to maintain a clear distinction from participants' perspectives.

3.6 Disability Critical Race theory (*DisCrit)*

DisCrit combines disability studies and critical race theory to examine the experiences of individuals with disabilities, particularly those from racially and ethnically marginalised groups. *DisCrit* aligns with social constructionism, recognising that disability and race as intersecting social constructs that significantly influence individual experiences in nuanced ways (Ferri et al., 2023). In this study, *DisCrit* will be used to enhance understanding of the data that emerges from IPA, focusing on the intersectional educational experiences of masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girls females. It will help identify how race and disability intersect in shaping experiences and highlight the structural and systemic barriers that contribute to the marginalisation of Black Autistic girls in UK education.

3.7 Kaleidoscope Analysis

Analysis will start with the reflective, mean-making, perspective of the participants' lifeworld to answer the first research question (phenomenology). It will then consider the multiple socially constructed aspects of identity and how they have influenced the individual experience (intersectionality) whilst considering the influence of structural racism and ableism (*DisCrit*) to answer the second question. Using multiple lenses to analyse the data is in keeping with Smith et al.'s (2022) description of multi-layered high-quality IPA, moving iteratively between group-level claims, individual-level claims, and claims developed in the interpretative commentaries. Using this approach to data analysis, attempts to deepen interpretation so that it captures the richness of individual experiences, explores patterns at the group level, and provides a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study, aligning with the multi-layered framework proposed by Smith et al. (2022).

Figure 6

Kaleidoscope Analysis

Using multiple lenses for analysis can be likened to a kaleidoscope, a device with two or more reflective surfaces enclosed within a structure, such as a tube (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). When viewed from one end, a kaleidoscope displays symmetrical patterns due to repeated reflections, and rotating the tube creates ever-changing patterns (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). In this study, the analytical approach resembles the kaleidoscope's structure (see Figure 6). It begins with a narrow focus, representing the micro-level of individual experiences, and expands towards a broader view, reflecting societal norms and structures. The analytical lenses, including IPA, intersectionality, and DisCrit, act as the reflective surfaces within the kaleidoscope. As you shift and explore these lenses, they interact, revealing dynamic patterns akin to how aspects of social constructs of identity, ableism, and racism influence individuals' experiences within various contexts. This kaleidoscope analogy underscores the nuanced and multifaceted nature of human experience, influenced by multiple layers and aspects, with evolving patterns emerging depending on our focus. While we may initially see one layer, it is constantly influenced and reflected by unseen layers within the structure of society, shaping the intricate patterns within people's experiences.

3.8 Alternative Approaches

3.8.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA) is an analytical approach that identifies patterns or themes within data, considering the researcher's subjectivity and positionality (Campbell et al., 2021; Byrne, 2022). Similar to IPA, RTA involves the researcher actively interpreting emergent themes, emphasising reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Unlike IPA, RTA combines deductive and inductive methods, allowing a more comprehensive understanding of the data through both emergent themes and theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

However, for studies aiming to emphasise marginalised voices without theoretical bias, IPA's idiographic focus is preferable. It allows each participant's voice to emerge clearly, free from preconceived frameworks, capturing the nuanced individual experiences of marginalised groups. RTA, while useful for broader patterns across larger datasets, might not delve as deeply into individual perspectives as IPA, which prioritises detailed case-by-case analysis before synthesising across cases. This makes IPA more suitable for studies focused on the intricacies of personal lived experiences within specific marginalised communities.

3.8.2 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a systematic approach that develops theories from qualitative data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, focusing on social processes (Tie et al., 2019; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This inductive method allows theories to emerge naturally from the data without preconceived notions influencing the analysis (Bowen, 2006). Unlike grounded theory, IPA prioritises subjective interpretation and detailed examination of individual experiences.

3.8.3 Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis concentrates on the content and structure of stories, placing emphasis on the individual narrative as a mechanism for sense-making (Patterson, 2018). Although both methods can be used to analyse lived experience, the approach and focus differ. Narrative analysis focuses more narrowly on the structure and content of the story, providing a contextual and personal understanding of lived experience (Patterson, 2018). IPA emphasises interpretation and mean-making, thus more focused on the individual’s subjective experience which is more fitting for this study.

3.8.4 Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis explores how language is used to achieve personal, social, and political endeavours (Starks & Trinidad, 2010). It focuses on how language is used to construct social reality and shape our understanding of the world. The goal of this research is to understand how people make meaning of their lived experiences rather than how they use language to construct their social reality; therefore, IPA is more aligned with the focus of my study.

3.9 Research Process

3.9.1 Participants

For IPA, Smith et al., (2022) suggest in-depth semi-structured interviews with 4-10 participants. They suggest sample size is dependent on the degree of commitment to the richness of individual cases and organisational constraints. The issue is quality rather than quantity. Thus, IPA studies usually benefit from focusing on a small number of cases (Smith et al., 2022). Larger data sets tend to impede the time, reflection and discourse required for successful analysis.

The participant inclusion criteria are detailed below:

- They self-identified as Black or of Black heritage, based on their own experiences and understandings.
- They were assigned female at birth (AFAB). Sex assigned at birth is generally based on biological factors; however, gender is a social construct (Phillips, 2005). This study is concerned with individuals who are AFAB and socialised as female to uncover how participants' experiences have been influenced by societal gender norms.
- Participants were aged 16-18 years, therefore at an educational stage where they could reflect on their experience of UK educational settings. They were at a life stage where they had the capacity to reflect on the impact masking and camouflaging had on their experiences.
- Participants self-identified as masking or camouflaging their autism. Masking and camouflaging are fairly new social constructs that were briefly explain in

the information sheet (see Appendix E). Autistic individuals may consciously or unconsciously camouflage and mask their Autistic traits (Hull et al., 2017). It was helpful to explore with participants who were conscious of their camouflaging behaviours to reflect on how this shaped their experience, and impacted them in education.

- Finally, they were able to communicate in English and were comfortable with an online verbal interview of up to an hour, with breaks where needed.
- Participants were asked about personal characteristics and demographic information. This data provided transparency and context for the participants' lived experiences (see Table 3).

Table 3

Participants

Name	Poppy	SS	Maia	Lily
Age	17 years	17 years	17 years	16 years
Ethnicity	Mixed (Ghaniain & Irish)	Caribbean-English	South American-Caribbean	Mixed (Italian, Irish, Scottish, Grenadian & Bajan)
School support	EHCP	Exam access arrangements	EHCP	SEN support
Diagnosis(es)	Autism	Autism, dyslexia, anxiety, ADHD	Autism, ADHD	Autism

3.9.2 Recruitment

A recruitment poster was shared on the researcher's social media pages (LinkedIn, Twitter, TikTok, and Facebook, see Appendix F). It was further disseminated by followers and others. Interested candidates who met the inclusion criteria were directed to contact via email for further details, the information sheet and the consent form. The study required a minimum of four participants (Smith et al., 2009).

3.9.3 Data collection

Four participants were interviewed using semi-structured, non-directive methods, which allow for flexible, open-ended responses to collect rich qualitative data (Smith et al., 2022; Braun et al., 2016). The interviews were conducted online via the Tavistock Zoom account, and the sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The guidance set out by Smith et al. (2022) was used to develop the interview questions. Draft interview questions were developed with follow-up questions to help prompt further information and used in the pilot interviews, before finalising the interview schedule (see Appendix G). Participants were offered adjustments, such as turning off cameras, taking breaks, meeting beforehand, and having a support person present. To enhance understanding, I adapted the language of the questions and clarified complex terms, like "microaggression." Participants received the final questions in advance to minimise anxiety and cognitive demand.

Pilot interviews were conducted to refine the interview questions. The first pilot with a 16-year-old Black girl who masks and camouflages learning difficulties, led to simplifying the question language and creating additional prompts to facilitate understanding. A second pilot with another 16-year-old Black girl, masking and camouflaging Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), prompted further language adjustments after questions were taken literally (see Appendix H). This feedback also led to the development of a short script reminding participants to reflect on primary and secondary experiences and all aspects of their identity (i.e., autism, race, gender).

3.9.4 Data analysis

The analytical process in IPA involves an iterative and inductive cycle that is flexible yet maintains a focus on how participants make sense of their experiences within specific contexts (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2022). This method moves from descriptive to interpretative stages, aiming to deeply understand participants' perspectives and utilising psychological principles to analyse their meaning-making efforts within specific contexts (Reid et al., 2005).

Data analysis followed these seven steps:

Step 1. Reading and re-reading

Interviews were transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature. The audio recordings were then reviewed multiple times to manually correct any transcription errors. Transcripts were then read and re-read to facilitate active engagement and familiarity with the data. Notes of reflections and thoughts were kept capturing first impressions that may have been lost with subsequent reading and observations (Smith et al., 2022).

Step 2. Exploratory noting

The transcript was analysed line by line in Word, with initial annotations highlighting noteworthy elements, an approach that helps identify the distinct ways participants discuss and perceive various issues and experiences (Smith et al., 2022). This process involves making annotations during transcript review, blending the steps of reading and noting without strict rules. These annotations represent varying depths of interpretation and can be exploratory, focusing on content; linguistic, focusing on language use; or conceptual, involving a more analytical examination of the data (Smith et al., 2022).

Step 3. Constructing Experiential statements

This step involved reducing the volume of detail while retaining the most important aspects of the exploratory notes. It shifted from working with the transcript to working with the exploratory notes (Smith et al., 2022). Experiential statements combine description and interpretation, focusing on key aspects of a text section within the context of the entire text, aligning with the hermeneutic circle. (Smith et al., 2022). This step increasingly incorporates the researcher’s perspective while still closely engaging with the participants' lived experiences.

Step 4. Searching for connections across experiential statements

In this step, experiential statements were drawn together to produce a structure to highlight all of the most interesting and important aspects of the participant’s account using the manual method of cutting up the experiential statements (see Appendix I). Each statement was placed on a table so they could be moved around, connections drawn and organised into clusters of statements that align. This involved being open-minded and flexible to look at clusters in unique ways and determining whether the clusters reflect the participant’s experience. (Smith et al., 2022)

Stage 5. Naming the personal experiential themes and consolidating and organising themes

Each cluster was assigned a descriptive title reflecting its characteristics (Smith et al., 2022). These clusters were defined as the participant's Personal Experiential Themes (PETs); they encapsulate the analytical constructs derived from the entirety of the participant's narrative. PETs were then put into a table, including sub-themes,with illustrative quotes and their transcript page number (see Appendix J). This provides an evidence trail of the exact location in the interview which prompted the statement and a reminder of what was said to stimulate this process (Smith et al., 2022).

Stage 6. Continuing the Analysis of Other Individual Cases

This step involved systematically repeating the initial five steps for each subsequent participant. By treating each participant's account individually, this approach maintained IPA's idiographic commitment (Smith et al., 2022).

Stage 7. Working with PETs to Develop Group Experiential Themes Across Cases

The final step involved searching for convergence and divergence across the PETs to create Group Experiential Themes (GETs, Smith et al., 2022). This began with scanning each table of PETs considering similarities and differences at a wider level, but also looking more closely at specific sub-themes and experiential statements. This was an iterative process, where some PET sub-themes were pulled out and placed into different GETs for best fit (Smith et al., 2022). This process was completed manually to facilitate ease of finding patterns (see Appendix K). As with the PETs, each GET was given a descriptive title reflecting its characteristics and encapsulating the analytical construction grounded within the data of all participants (Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al. (2022) suggest a high-quality piece of IPA considers how each individual participant influences the GETs, therefore, a table was produced for each GET and is displayed in figures 8-12 in the findings chapter.

Research question 2

Research question two will be answered in the discussion chapter in line with the kaleidoscope analysis outlined. It will focus on the intersections of disability, race, and gender, using a *DisCrit* lens. Other researchers have taken a similar stance in analysis (Cameron & Greenland, 2019; Shonibare, 2021).

3.10 Ethical Considerations

The British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (2021) provides ethical principles and guidelines for psychologists conducting research (BPS, 2021). These principles include respect for the autonomy, privacy, and dignity of individuals, groups and communities, scientific integrity, social responsibility, and maximising benefit and minimising harm (BPS, 2021). Ethical approval was granted by the Trust Research Ethics Committee at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust (see Appendix L).

3.10.1 Respect for the Autonomy, Privacy, and Dignity of Individuals, Groups and Communities

This study is motivated by a commitment to respect the dignity of the participants and amplify their voices, taking into account their intersectional identities which span race, gender, neurodiversity, and religion, among others. Language can discriminate against certain groups whether it is intentional or not; reflecting and promoting existing oppressive ideologies (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020). This study seeks to use respectful terminology that challenges oppressive ideologies. Participants were consulted on their preferred language descriptors, with most of the study using identity-first language, except in cases where a participant preferred person-first language (Kenny et al., 2016). This approach ensures that the language used in the study respects and reflects the identities and preferences of the participants.

3.10.1.1 Valid Consent

To ensure informed consent, participants were provided with information sheets and consent forms, detailing the research aims and their right to withdraw. Participants were given time to decide on their involvement; one opted out after inquiry, while others joined immediately or after consideration. Due to the participants' age, consent was sought directly from them, adhering to the principle of 'Gillick competence', which presumes those over 16 capable of informed consent if they show sufficient understanding (Health Research Authority [HRA], 2024). All participants confirmed understanding the information, which was reiterated at each interview's start.

3.10.1.2 Confidentiality

Participants were advised that their data would be discussed with a research supervisor, disseminated at conferences, and published at a future date. The participant information sheet advised that they might be able to identify their experiences due to the small participant numbers; however, to protect their anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and identifying details were altered. The data was securely stored on Microsoft’s One Drive, which is linked to the researcher’s Tavistock email account and accessed via the researcher’s laptop. All data was only used for the purpose within which they were collected and will be deleted after a specific period in accordance with GDPR guidelines.

3.10.2 Scientific integrity

Research should be executed to maintain high quality and robustness, focusing on the integrity and validity of the design to ensure the findings are credible and applicable across various conditions, and free from researcher bias (BPS, 2021; Golafshani, 2003; Leung, 2015; Rodon & SesÃ, 2008). Quality hinges on well-planned scientific design, risk management, and clear protocols for addressing difficulties (Johnson et al., 2020). Transparency about research aims and context-specific scientific evaluations is crucial (Nowell et al., 2017). This study's design is detailed step by step for transparency, clarity, and potential replication. Smith et al. (2022) recommend Yardley's (2000) principles for assessing validity and quality in qualitative research as a highly relevant and pertinent framework.

3.10.2.1 Sensitivity to context

Yardley (2000) stresses that analysis and interpretation should be contextually sensitive to the data and the dynamics between researcher and participant. It is also recommended that researchers deeply understand their chosen method's philosophical foundations and the relevant concepts of their study topic for a nuanced and thorough analysis. This approach has been applied in the previous sections, demonstrating a robust grasp of the philosophical bases of IPA and *DisCrit*, as well as the specific issues related to Black Autistic masking and camouflaging females.

The researcher must demonstrate the various meaningful ways that they have been sensitive to the social context (Smith et al., 2022). This study fundamentally revolves around the notions of individual and group identity. The opening chapter elaborates on how these perceptions of self and others are intricately connected with sociocultural, political, and historical contexts. Moreover, the repercussions of local and global occurrences have profoundly contextualised this study, significantly shaping its design and results, thereby underlining the importance of contextual sensitivity in research.

The relationship between the researcher and the participant is crucial for ethical, high-quality, insightful research. As the researcher takes on a listener role, they contribute to what is said actively and passively through verbal and non-verbal prompts that evoke relative identities and shared understandings (Mishler, 1986; Ochs, 1997; Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997). Thus, interpreting meaning must involve consideration of the researcher's characteristics and actions (Yardley, 2000). In this study, the researcher shares some of the participants' characteristics as a Black neurodivergent female, which informed the approach. To maintain analytical rigour, interviews were debriefed with a colleague and the research supervisor; as suggested by Brantlinger et al. (2005), a detailed research diary was kept to track the analysis process (see Appendix M).

Inevitably, there is a power imbalance in research, with the researcher often seen as the expert controlling the interview process (Yardley, 2000). To address this, participants were encouraged to ask questions before and during the interview, received the interview questions in advance to prepare, and could have a trusted person present during the interview. They were also reminded of their rights to withdraw, skip questions, or take breaks, and were thanked for their valuable contributions to the research.

3.10.2.2 Commitment and rigour

Commitment involves sustained involvement with the subject, honing the requisite skills and competence for the applied methods, and delving deeply into the relevant data (Yardley, 2000). Adherence to rigorous methods involves maintaining a systematic approach, ensuring data saturation, and addressing potential biases. This study demonstrated commitment and rigour through extensive literature reviews and sensitive engagement with the current sociocultural narratives of autistic individuals. High-quality data collection was prioritised, enhancing data analysis through practised interview techniques and critical reflection (Smith et al., 2022). Pilot interviews refined questions and interviewing skills, and feedback from these sessions was used to adjust the questions appropriately. The research also emphasised treating participants with compassion and respect, crucial for gaining trust and ensuring ethical integrity. Data was meticulously analysed using a systematic, iterative process to ensure the reliability and credibility of the findings (Levitt et al., 2018).

3.10.2.3 Transparency and Coherence

Research should demonstrate coherence or logical consistency in its methods, analysis, and interpretation. Transparency refers to presenting all relevant research processes, allowing for a clear understanding of the study's methods and findings (Yardley, 2000). This methodology chapter provides a detailed and descriptive account of the rationale for the chosen method. This involves transparency of philosophical paradigm, study design, and the participant recruitment and interview stages. The researcher’s identity and biases have been outlined, and a reflexive statement has been included. Additionally, selected extracts from the interviews have been included in the findings chapter, and one of the full transcripts and all experiential statements are included in the appendices (see Appendix N). Furthermore, coherence and transparency have been considered when explaining the rationale of using another theoretical framework with IPA; an illustrative model has been produced for clarity. This aligns with Smith et al. (2022) assertion that high-quality IPA details the complexity of analysis.

3.10.2.4 Impact and Importance

Yardley (2000) emphasises that research should significantly impact the field and address crucial questions, demonstrating the relevance and potential application of findings (Swanson et al., 1997). The social responsibility section indicates the intention for the impact of this study within the educational psychology profession. This study has an emphasis on research-in-context by focusing on the phenomenon of Autistic masking and camouflaging in educational settings; the findings should provide insights that can be applied within the profession to promote better outcomes (Swanson et al., 1997). Transferability in qualitative research relates to the extent to which findings from one study can be applied to other contexts or settings. It assesses the generalisability of the findings, enabling researchers to consider whether their results hold true beyond the specific study context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2010). Thick description is a strategy employed to ensure the transferability of qualitative data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Employing thick description, as suggested by Korstjens & Moser (2018), involves detailed contextual reporting to aid the application of findings to other settings, allowing readers to judge the relevance to their own contexts.

Some analyses become significant by introducing new perspectives that advance understanding of a subject, rather than fully explaining the data (Yardley, 2000). Initially appealing to a niche audience, these innovative but complex scholarly works can greatly influence future research when applied practically, leading to new ways of interpreting and understanding topics.

Qualitative researchers often emphasise the socio-cultural impacts of their studies, viewing research as inherently political (Burman & Parker, 1993; van Dijk, 1997; Yardley, 1997). This approach contrasts with the objectivity pursued in quantitative research, yet can complement and attempt to explain the findings documented in quantitative studies. This study aims to shape how educational professionals and society perceive Black, Autistic, masking and camouflaging females, emphasising their unique experiences, rights and needs rather than depicting them as deficient (Oliver, 1990; Swain et al., 1993).

3.10.2.5 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity Statement

Bracketing in phenomenology involves setting aside personal biases to maintain objectivity, a practice crucial for the trustworthiness of research (Langdridge, 2007; Tufford & Newman, 2012). However, interviewers can still subtly influence the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This is especially pertinent for a neurodivergent, Black female researcher with two daughters who mask and camouflage Autism, DCD, and ADHD. It was necessary for the researcher to critically evaluate the influence of their subjectivity on the research and of the research on them whilst acknowledging each participant’s unique context.

Nevertheless, the researcher embraced her own lived experience as a strength in interpreting the data. Through ‘reflexive bodily empathy’ (Finlay, 2006), where the researcher experienced embodied responses to the data, the researcher was able to engage in a reciprocal process with the participants in the interviews. The research process moved between being detached and self-aware, attempting to bracket pre-assumptions yet also using them as a source of insight, and being open and critical (Finlay, 2008b). Given this tension, bracketing remains an imperfect but necessary process. To support this, the researcher kept a reflexive diary and engaged with a supervisor, enhancing the reflexivity and integrity of the research process.

3.10.3 Social Responsibility

This study aims to enhance the understanding of EPs and related professionals about the intersection of autism, gender, and race by focusing on the unique challenges Black Autistic females face, particularly those who mask and camouflage in the UK education system. It seeks to promote inclusive and equitable educational practices by bringing attention to a group often overlooked in research.

Amplifying the voices of underrepresented groups like Black Autistic females enhances their representation and acknowledges their unique experiences within the academic community. This study aims to address gaps in literature by focusing on their intersectional experiences—exploring how identities can both privilege and oppress—thus enriching our understanding of identity complexities (Crocetti et al., 2018; Crocetti & Salmela-Aro, 2018). Prioritising these perspectives contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse challenges faced in UK educational settings.

3.10.3.1 Giving Advice

The interviewees may seek advice, recognising the researcher's dual role as a

Trainee EP and their identity as a Black woman. The researcher will ensure that any advice provided is within the scope of their role as a Trainee EP, such as evidence-based knowledge and strategies for learning and emotional regulation. For advice outside of their expertise, the researcher will refer interviewees to appropriate individuals within the educational setting or professional services.

3.10.4 Maximising Benefits and Minimising Harm

Given the potentially distressing nature of the study's topic, questions will be sensitively framed, weighing the emotional risks against the benefits of gaining insights. Support organisations will be listed on the consent form, and a debrief will follow each interview to help manage any emotional distress (see Appendix O). The study aims to empower participants and influence professionals to consider intersectionality and cultural differences in their work, which is expected to benefit broader communities, not just the study's focus group.

3.10.4.1 Risk

The participants are Autistic young people who may be considered vulnerable due to their age and autism. It is important to avoid projecting neurotypical ideals onto them, due to the potential harm this may cause. Psychological expertise and knowledge of autism will be utilised to ensure they are comfortable, both with the sensory environment and in expressing themselves at their own pace. Each participant will be debriefed post-interview and referred to support services if necessary to address any anxiety or uncomfortable feelings that may arise. Safeguarding responsibilities will be clearly outlined at the start of each interview to prepare for any potential disclosures.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Overview

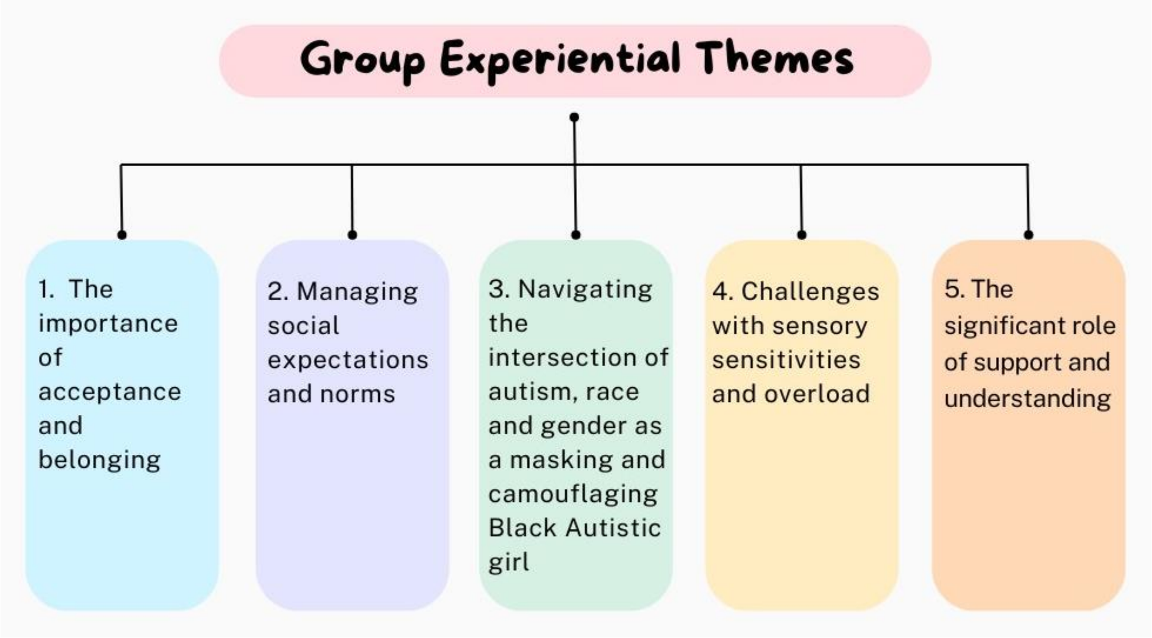
This chapter presents the IPA findings of the four interviews. Data analysis was undertaken in response to research question 1:

What is the lived experience of masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girls?

The chapter will commence with a brief descriptive summary of the girls’ individual experiences and PETs. Figure 7 below shows the identified GETs:

Figure 7

Overview of GETs



The chapter will follow with a detailed presentation and analysis of how the PETs formed the GETs. It will close with a summary to answer research question one.

4.2 Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

This section summarises each girl's experience, followed by their PETs. Appendix J contains a table of each girl's PETs, including illustrative quotes that formed the PETs.

4.2.1 Poppy

Poppy is 17 years old and currently attending a private school studying A levels. She was diagnosed with autism at 14, following a 6-month inpatient stay due to deteriorating mental health. Poppy identifies as Autistic with mixed race (Ghanaian and Irish) ethnicity. Poppy has an EHCP.

During Year 4 of primary school, Poppy began to feel uncomfortable and tried to assimilate with her peers. She then attended a private, all-girls, faith secondary school with predominantly White, middle-class pupils in central London. Poppy felt *"weird and different"* (p6) due to differences in several aspects of her identity. Most of her peers did not look like her; their interests centred on makeup, clothes, and *"fancy"* (p8) dinners. Poppy realised her communication style differed, and environmental sensory aspects affected her in a way that she could not articulate. Poppy faced racial harassment, including racial microaggressions, stereotyping, and direct and indirect use of the N-word, with no support. Poppy masked her feelings and camouflaged her autism with humour, telling untruths to fit in, pushing her hobbies away, and copying the behaviours of others to assimilate.

The cost of masking and camouflaging was severe: deteriorating mental health, self-harm, decreased self-esteem, and dramatically reduced school attendance. Poppy was admitted as an inpatient due to her mental health needs, where she received an autism diagnosis. This enabled her to understand herself through an Autistic lens, which started a journey to self-discovery. Poppy stopped masking. She expressed herself through piercings, prioritising comfort in her attire, and asserting her needs at school. The school responded with understanding, reasonable adjustments, and by providing a trusted key adult for her to confide in.

Table 4.

Poppy's PETs

Main theme	**Subthemes**
P1. The cost of masking	P1.1. Mental health P1.2. Education P1.3. Emotions
P2. Navigating the challenges of being Black and Autistic	P2.1. The intersection of autism and race P2.2. Acceptance and judgement from the Black community
P3. Navigating an educational environment marked by racial bias	P3.1. Microaggressions, harassment, and stereotyping P3.2. School enabling racial harassment P3.3. Conditional acceptance
P4. Feeling weird and different	P4.1. Sensory sensitivities P.4.2. Social understanding and awareness
P5. Trying to fit in and make friends	P5.1 Use of humour P5.2. Copying behaviours P5.3. Giving up hobbies and hiding hurt feelings
P6. The importance of support and understanding	
P7. Diagnosis leading to understanding and unmasking	P7.1. Self-understanding P7.2. Understanding of others P7.3. Unmasking

4.2.2 SS

SS is 18 years old and currently studying with a personal tutor in a library. After Year 11, she took a two-year break from education due to stress and anxiety. Diagnosed with autism, ADHD, and anxiety, she identifies as neurodivergent with English Caribbean ethnicity.

SS attended mainstream primary and secondary schools in London. She remembers struggling socially and eventually abandoning the idea of making friends by Year 5. Instead, she spent time with her brother and cousin. When she started secondary school, she became conscious of how she was being perceived by others. She adapted to fit in with peers who were not the *“right type of people”* (p3). She altered her appearance by wearing uncomfortable clothes and styling her hair differently, suppressing her needs, to fit in.

SS faced racial harassment, including microaggressions and indirect and direct use of the N-word. SS also experienced a lack of support for racial issues. Despite not receiving her diagnosis until after leaving school, SS had familial support and some exam accommodations due to anxiety. COVID-19[2] lockdowns provided her with the time and space for self-reflection. This enabled the self-understanding and confidence to return to school in Year 11 feeling more like herself.

SS researched ADHD and autism, recognising traits within herself. This led to the pursuit of a diagnosis. Diagnosis facilitated meaning-making of her experiences and feelings.

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[2] COVID lockdowns occurred in 2020 and 2021 in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The public were instructed to stay at home, non-essential services and schools were closed and social distancing restrictions were put in place.

Table 5

SS's PETs

Main themes	**Subthemes**
S1. 'The Trials and Tribulations' of being Black and Autistic in the UK	S1.1. Racial discrimination and abuse S1.2. The intersection of autism, race, gender, and generation
S2. Sensory overload and regulation	S2.1. Sensory sensitivities S2.2. Sensory regulation
S3. Managing neurotypical classroom expectations	S3.1. Teacher perceptions and understanding S3.2. Masking learning needs
S4. Support from friends, family, and school	
S5. Acceptance	S5.1. Neglecting needs to fit in S5.2. Prioritising needs and self-acceptance

4.2.3 Lily

Lily is 16 years old and currently attending a college that functions as a home education hub three days a week. Diagnosed with autism just over a year ago, she is still processing this new understanding of herself and thus identifies as having autism. She describes her ethnicity as being mixed with Irish, Scottish, Italian, Grenadian and Bajan.

Her educational journey has been complex. In mainstream primary school until Year 3, Lily faced bullying, prompting her transition to home education. Nursery was a carefree time, but primary school brought challenges. She did not mask initially, yet her peers perceived her as 'weird.' She became aware of social and racial differences, and endured microaggressions related to her skin colour and hair care practices. Her emotional distress was misread by teachers.

She experienced racial abuse at camp, being called the N-word and mistreatment, including someone pouring a bucket of freezing cold water over her to score points. In school, a ‘friend’ caused physical harm. Lily’s mother made several attempts to work with the school to stop bullying and to advocate for her, but the school did not support her; thus, Lily’s mother gave her the choice to be home-educated.

Lily became home-educated, speaking of the advantages of engaging in interesting activities with a community of people. She recognised the complexities of being comfortable in this way of learning and having opportunities to be alone, but missing out on opportunities to learn social cues and practice social interactions.

Lily finds the home education hub more bearable as she receives individualised support and adjustments. Her journey continues as she navigates masking and self-discovery.

Table 6

Lily’s PETs

Main theme	**Sub-theme**
L1. School rejection and negative perceptions lead to home education.	L1.1. Negative perceptions L1.2. Rejections
L2. A ‘fight for’ survival to navigate social expectations and acceptance	
L3. Challenges with sensory and social demands	L3.1. Sensory demands L3.2. Social demands
L4. Positive personalised support	L4.1. Family and friends L4.2. Education
L5. The delicate balance between seeking personal comfort and navigating social interactions	
L6. Navigating challenges at the intersections of autism and race as a masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girl	

4.2.4 Maia

Maia is 18 years old and due to start a new educational setting next year. Diagnosed with autism at the beginning of secondary school, she identifies as Autistic with South American-Caribbean ethnicity. Maia has an EHCP.

Maia attended a mainstream primary school and was sent to a PRU in Year 6 following what appears to have been a fixed-term exclusion. She was permanently excluded from her first secondary school. She attended various specialist settings throughout her time in secondary education. She recently attended a college but left following a lack of support and understanding of her needs. Maia describes learning challenges that were never identified but impacted her capacity to understand verbal instructions, sustain attention, and remember maths skills.

Maia's educational journey is marred by exclusion. Exclusion from peer group extra-curricular activities due to negative perceptions at primary school. Exclusion and rejection from peers and teachers through bullying, unmet learning needs and negative perceptions. Exclusion through several moves to alternative provisions, and specialist settings. This impacted Maia's sense of belonging and self-esteem. Following an exclusion that led to home education, Maia began to look for love through romantic relationships with boys, where she was sexually exploited and blackmailed. Her traumatic experiences of exploitation have significantly impacted her self-esteem and self-perception.

Table 7

Maia's PETs

Main theme	**Sub-theme**
M1. Complexities faced when forming and maintaining friendships	M1.1. Social awareness and understanding M1.2. Fitting in M1.3. Maintaining friendships

M2. School experiences of exclusion impacting sense of belonging and self-esteem	M2.1. Negative perceptions M2.2. Bullying M2.3. Rejection and lack of empathy lead to emotional distress M2.4. Internal and external exclusions
M3. Facing societal discrimination and prejudices as a masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girl	M3.1. Racist, ableist, and sexist microaggressions M3.2. Others see race before autism M3.3. 'Acting White'
M4. The significant role of support and understanding	M4.1. Maternal M4.2. Educational M4.3. Friend M4.4. Friend M4.5. Unmet learning needs
M5. Masking leading to exploitation and harm	M5.1. Self-perception and self-understanding M5.2. Sexual exploitation M5.3. Reflection on vulnerabilities
M6. Experiences and societal stereotypes influences approach to relationships	

4.3 Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

GETs are derived by analysing multiple individual cases to identify common patterns and divergences within shared experiences (Smith et al., 2022). These themes reveal shared aspects of how the four girls understand and manage their experiences, highlighting both common coping strategies and the nuanced complexities they encounter.

This section provides a detailed analysis of the GETs using illustrative quotes from the interviews. To aid the readers' understanding, the following typographic features have been used in the interview quotes:

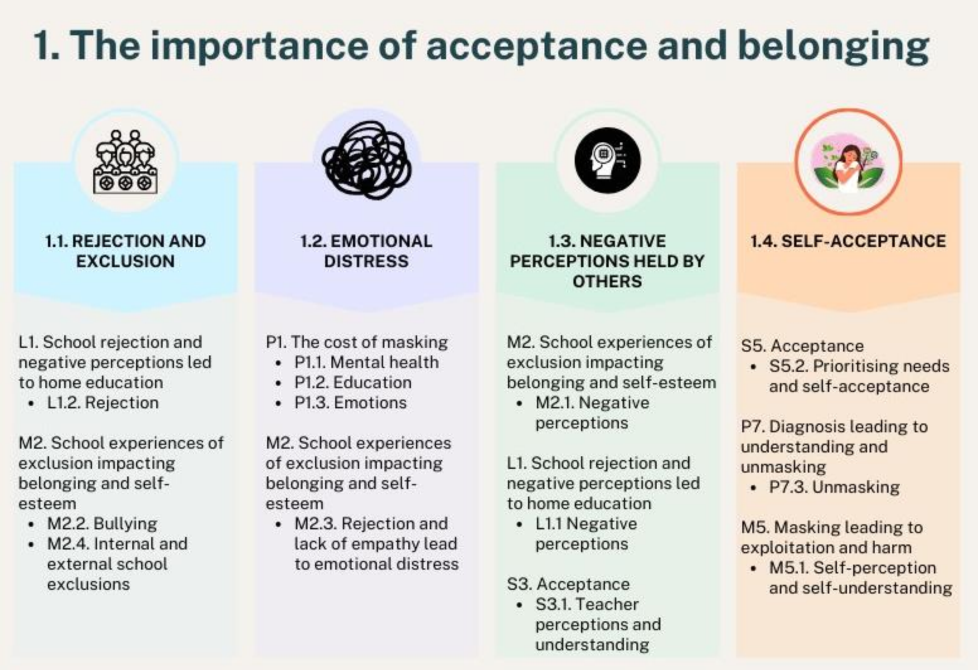
- Verbatim quotes from participants are italicised.
- The referencing style is that the transcript page number will follow quotes.

- Contextual information such as laughs, pauses, and words added for interpolation are denoted using square brackets “[ ]”
- Where quotations have been cut, ellipses in square brackets “[…]” are used.
- Shifts in sentence structure/thought are denoted using “-“.

4.3.1 GET 1 – The importance of Acceptance and Belonging

Figure 8

GET 1 The importance of Acceptance and Belonging



1. The importance of acceptance and belonging

1.1. REJECTION AND EXCLUSION

L1. School rejection and negative perceptions led to home education
- L1.2. Rejection

M2. School experiences of exclusion impacting belonging and self-esteem
- M2.2. Bullying
- M2.4. Internal and external school exclusions

1.2. EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

P1. The cost of masking
- P1.1. Mental health
- P1.2. Education
- P1.3. Emotions

M2. School experiences of exclusion impacting belonging and self-esteem
- M2.3. Rejection and lack of empathy lead to emotional distress

1.3. NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS HELD BY OTHERS

M2. School experiences of exclusion impacting belonging and self-esteem
- M2.1. Negative perceptions

L1. School rejection and negative perceptions led to home education
- L1.1 Negative perceptions

S3. Acceptance
- S3.1. Teacher perceptions and understanding

1.4. SELF-ACCEPTANCE

S5. Acceptance
- S5.2. Prioritising needs and self-acceptance

P7. Diagnosis leading to understanding and unmasking
- P7.3. Unmasking

M5. Masking leading to exploitation and harm
- M5.1. Self-perception and self-understanding

The girls’ sense of acceptance and belonging significantly impacted how they made sense of their experiences. Rejection, exclusion, and negative perceptions of others had a direct influence on the girls’ emotions, mental health, and self-acceptance.

4.3.1.1 Rejection and Exclusion

Lily experienced rejection through school staff ignoring, dismissing, and invalidating incidents of bullying:

> *"They really wouldn't mention […] bullying or anything, it would just be me having to tell my mum and she would have like meetings with them; they never did anything."* (p10)

Lily felt rejected by her peers when she asked their opinion of her being home-educated. As Lily retells this, she laughs, which may have been her masking her true feelings of hurt or disbelief.

> *"I [laughs] remember asking my classmates like, oh like how would you feel if I left. And like everybody said like, oh I don't think I'd care that much…"* (p12)

Maia experienced school rejection by being placed in isolation, receiving fixed-term and permanent exclusions, and being moved to alternative educational settings. Bullying felt like further rejection; the repeated negative comments about Maia's appearance and mental health considerably impacted her self-esteem and self-perception, which led to school non-attendance:

> *"most of the time they were just talking about how underweight I looked [...] literally one time the teacher was like oh yeah you're so skinny [...] so I just didn't wanna go."* (p26)

The rejection and exclusion she experienced contributed to the vulnerable position that Maia came to be in:

> *“that is when my life kind of spiralled down again [...] I wasn't in school so [...] the only thing I was doing was on my phone and that's when I started [...] speaking to more boys and then actually I did meet up.”* (p26)

4.3.1.2 Negative Perceptions Held By Others

Some of the girls faced negative responses from others when they were just being themselves. Maia described herself as happy and confident in primary school, yet as she got older, others labelled her:

> *“I actually got called mentally ill by a lot of the people in my school [...] they’d be like, Maia, you're actually mentally ill. That's the type of names that used to come back to me when I was younger, just because I used to express myself.”* (p8)

Lily had a similar experience. She shared that she was free to be herself at nursery, but others held negative perceptions of her in primary school:

> *“in nursery I found those like the easiest time of like my life, because I just felt really free to be like how I was. So, when I went into primary school, I never really learned how to mask, so that's why loads of people [...] saw me as weird.”* (p3)

Maia was conscious of teachers’ negative perceptions of her. One teacher expressed their thoughts to her:

> *"I guess every teacher that I would have been in the classroom with would say, Maia keeps us on our toes [...] my Year 6 teacher, he actually left and he said he left because of me."* (p11)

Lily was also aware of negative teacher perceptions about her behaviour; behaviour that was in response to distress from racial harassment and a need for support: *"my mum had a meeting with the teacher, and she was saying that like my behaviour was bad, that I would never put my hand up in class when I needed help and that I would scream in the hallways"* (p11). This was echoed by SS: *"my teachers would just say that I was just like, a troubled student. I was just aggressive. I will have an attitude and just stuff like that"* (p5). Instead of perceiving their behaviour as a means of communication influenced by their differences, the teaching staff attributed the girls' actions to their innate qualities.

SS asserts that negative perceptions and stigmas held about neurodivergent students were due to a lack of teacher awareness and understanding: *"a lot of teachers [pause] they didn't have any knowledge whatsoever when it came to neurodivergent pupils. So, they just assumed that, yeah, you were just causing problems"* (p6).

4.3.1.3. Emotional distress

In response to feeling she did not belong, Poppy described working so hard to conceal her emotions that she did not know she had any:

> *"I had been masking so long that like I literally didn't have emotions […] I couldn't name a single emotion […] when I felt it."* (p26)

Masking impacted Poppy's self-worth, identity, and had a detrimental impact on her mental health:

> *"It really was really bad [...] and I like self-harmed and stuff like that. I did that consistently [...] from age twelve [...] I did not cope with it well [...] it caused me loads of mental problems, like it gave me depression and like anxiety [...] Honestly, it was terrible."* (p15)

Eventually, Poppy's depression and exhaustion impacted her school attendance, and she dropped two GCSE subjects:

> *"Everyone just thought […] oh, she's crazy and like she's dead or something […] I was always late. I never went to any PE ever. I always skipped PE. And just, like mostly lateness and [...] being […] depressed or too tired to go in at all."* (p17)

Poppy's mental health deteriorated further, and she then became an inpatient: *"I was put in inpatients for like six months […] I just thought I was really weird and that like my brain didn't work properly […] I had never ever seen, like, a like Black Autistic girl"* (p16). Poppy internalised the emotional distress of not feeling accepted or a sense of belonging with other people to the point that she thought it was a reflection of something within her, such as her brain, being broken.

Maia experienced emotional distress as a result of interactions with teachers:

> *"If a teacher has really, really emotionally, made me emotional, then I just can't – […] I shut off from the teacher. I can't even speak to them […] my relationships with a lot of teachers have been really passive-aggressive."*

Maia describes complete disengagement from teachers who had caused her emotional upset, which mirrors an account she gave about how a close friend in primary school treated her, which confused her at the time. It may be that Maia interpreted this as how to behave towards people who hurt her. It may also have been a coping mechanism to manage her feelings. This approach seems driven by a need for personal space, likely a strategy to prevent escalation into rudeness or confrontational remarks, as she later states:

> *"But when I need my own space, I really need my own space before I blow up on you and I kind of do more damage than I want to do."* (p24)

It also appears to be a complex emotional task, balancing empathy and self-preservation by defending against being emotionally invested:

> *"So that's why I kind of have to […] shut off and not talk to people. But I can get […] rude and [...] start throwing jabs at people and just start saying a lot of rude stuff [...] I don't mean to say it because, obviously, sometimes it does come from a place where I actually do want to say it. But it's just like I don't want to say it because it's rude and I don't like upsetting people and I don't like seeing people upset."* (p24)

This demonstrates the complex and competing demands the girls faced, which often resulted in emotional distress.

4.3.1.4. Self-acceptance

All girls were diagnosed with autism between Years 7 and 12 of school (age 11-17), following years of masking and not understanding themselves. The diagnosis gave them a sense of clarity, self-understanding, and self-acceptance. SS explains:

> *"when I when I found out [...] I had autism and ADHD, and even Dyslexia as well, [...] it made me feel a lot better, because it made me feel like most of these things that I've struggled with in my life without actually realising it, there is a reason behind it."* (p11)

Similarly, Poppy's diagnosis helped her make sense of her experience. She also began to express herself in the ways that she wanted:

> *"I had like self-harm scars and stuff. And it was like, well, there's no hiding anymore. Like. You know, that's how I felt. As I started expressing myself more, I got a bunch of piercings."* (p19)

Poppy recognised that she could be herself and still make friends:

> *"So like even if you want to be friends with someone who also looks like kind of normal-ish. Like, it doesn't mean they won't like you just cause like you look different or act differently like. They will just see you as a human being."* (p27)

Maia recognised that not being herself took its toll and advised against it:

> *"I feel like if you're not your true self, then you won't ever really know who you are […] That's how you can kind of fall down into the path of feeling, like I said, ugly, not loved, not like all of these things, cause you're masking up all your behaviours, you're not being yourself to people that you feel like are meant to love you."* (p54)

She acknowledges that others' words and perceptions led her to mask and stop being her true self:

> *"never let other people's words determine your future or how you view yourself, because that's how you can really get down into the path of, like I said, self-destruction and not understanding yourself."* (p53)

4.3.2 GET 2 – Managing Social Expectations and Norms

Figure 9

GET 2 Managing Social Expectations and Norms

2. Managing social expectations and norms

2.1. SOCIAL AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING

M1. Complexities faced when forming and maintaining friendships
- M1.1. Social awareness and understanding

L5. The delicate balance between seeking personal comfort and navigating social interactions

P4. Feeling weird and different
- P4.2. Social understanding and awareness

2.2. TRYING TO FIT IN AND FRIENDSHIPS

M1. Complexities faced when forming and maintaining friendships
- M1.2. Fitting in
- M1.3. Maintaining friendships

L2. A 'fight for' survival to navigate social expectations and acceptance
L3. Challenges with sensory and social demands
- L3.2. Social demands

S5. Acceptance
- S5.1. Neglecting needs to fit in

P5. Trying to fit in and make friends
- P5.1. Use of humour
- P5.2. Copying behaviours
- P5.3 Giving up hobbies and hiding hurt feelings

The girls had to cope with neurotypical social expectations and societal norms. This proved challenging due to their social awareness, differences, and understanding, which led them to employ masking and camouflaging to fit in, make, and maintain friendships.

4.3.2.1. Social Awareness and Understanding

Maia struggled with social understanding, so when the complexity of ambivalent social interaction entered one of her friendships, she was left confused. It appeared her friend was using passive-aggressive behaviour to communicate upset, but Maia did not understand or know how to respond:

> *"she was gonna come up and hug me, and I was like aww, and she was like, oh, I'm not speaking to you. And then she walked away from me. Yeah, and I was just like what the hell?"* (p13)

Maia realised she misread social cues in a lot of her relationships: *"I click with people and then they always do something to me that makes me realise that I haven't really clicked with them"* (p43). Lily recognised that her need for solitude limited her opportunities to learn social cues: *"I had that sort of group for a while, but sometimes I'd be a bit isolated, and – but I didn't really mind that because I like being by myself, but I think I didn't exactly get to learn about social cues that much"* (p12). Lily had no interest in a lot of conversations, so used scripts as a strategy to help her participate in conversations: *"I always have like a script when I need to like talk to people."* (p4).

Poppy didn't understand why she was perceived differently:

> *"I just didn't know why some people would just think I was being weird or like thinking I was always like joking around and I was like never serious [...] I just felt like I was like in a whole different world. Like it was so weird. And […] so judgemental."* (p6)

Poppy describes herself as more *“socially conscious”* (p4) from Year 4 of school. She began to notice differences in her social communication and emotional expression to her peers, which led to her assimilating because she felt *“weird and different”* (p4):

> *“I didn’t act the same as other people and I didn’t know how to start conversations [...] naturally my like facial expression […] usually stays the same, and my tone of voice usually stays the same.”* (p4)

> *“when I got upset – erm and I didn’t really know why, cause like everyone […] would be able to communicate It […] I would be upset and then I would just be angry and then I’d feel angry and then I’d start crying because it was like (pause). And I didn’t understand […] But then […] like Year 4 and up […] I realised like, oh, I’m different […] I started to, like, want to assimilate with everyone.”* (p4)

4.3.2.2. Trying To Fit in and Friendships

Maia moved in popular circles but was not fully integrated, remaining on the margins. She was often labelled *'weird'* by others suggesting a lack of understanding or acceptance within her social circle: *“I was just the weird one that hung out with the popular kids. Because there's always that one that's kind of like (pause) there but they're not really there, and that was me. And I always, I kind of, always had a falling out with them because I guess I'm really opinionated, and I stand strong on my beliefs”* (p11). Maia felt her challenges with fitting in were influenced by how her peers viewed her, which demonstrates the intersubjective nature of this experience:

"I was always seen as the weird one or you know (pause) just the girl that is all over the place […] The girl that has her mind everywhere." (p22).

Lily described an embodied experience of fitting in and friendships. Lily felt it was a mental and physical challenge to meet others' expectations, so she forced herself to socialise. She likened this to a physical fight for survival, leaving her exhausted and requiring recovery time:

> *"I used to find like hanging out with them like fighting for my life. Like I just need to like be friends with them and that would be an exchange of a friendship. And next I'd be like that's over with I can wait until like the next three months to see them again, and like go through this again. So, I feel like as you know, I can never really live up to any expectations because I was just like, mentally and physically I wouldn't be able to catch up with things."* (p6)

Lily often masks due to embarrassment, longing to be *'better',* which appears to be a self-criticism of perceived flaws:

> *"With a lot my friends I just kind of accept that - like I feel like I need to mask because I feel embarrassed […] but every now and again I'm like, why can't I be like better? Why can't I be normal and like, you know, see them most of the time?"* (p16)

SS struggled with making friends and gave up: *"it was just mainly, just difficulty making friends and to a point where at like, around like year six, year five, I just didn't end up trying. I was just like, well, this is just how it is, I suppose"* (p4). As SS became more self-aware in secondary school, she prioritised others' needs over her own, resulting in exhaustion and diminished self-esteem: *"I was such a people* *pleaser, and I just wanted my friends to like me [...] after I hung out [...] with my friends, I would just come home and be very exhausted, because I've kind of just felt like I was putting on this sort of act, I suppose. Just to appease people"* (p5). *"I think my self-esteem probably did go down. Because I always- every time I was at school, I always felt like I had to be some type of way"* (p10). SS' describes these experiences in a temporal manner, explaining differences in her social interactions based on her acceptance and self-awareness at different ages.

Maia lost friendships due to others' misunderstanding her: *"A lot of people stopped being friends with me just because they didn't understand me"* (p25). To fit in, Maia described showing people different personalities: *"I could only be my true self by myself [...] I just have a lot of personalities that I show to people"* (p33). Maia is unconditionally loyal to maintain friendships. She tends to obsess over friends, expecting them to be her friends exclusively: *"I become really obsessive over people or possessive over them"* (p33). Having lost friendships in the past, Maia's actions may be driven by a need for genuine connection and fear of losing it.

Poppy wanted to have straight hair to fit in aesthetically with the other girls. To mask her feelings, when everyone laughed at her for wearing a straight wig, she laughed it off:

> *"everyone made fun of me […] I didn't want to say that like I actually wanted to have straight hair and […] that was when I kind of started like having the whole like laugh everything off kind of thing being like I know like stupid ha ha."* (p5)

Poppy used humour to mask her feelings: *“my behaviours would be different and people wouldn't understand. So I would just have to be like, Oh, I'm just kidding, or something”* (p5), camouflage her behaviours: *“I was always quite funny in primary school but like, it was like became my personality because I felt like I had nothing else to give like”* (p11), and make friends: *“all I wanted was to be able to make friends with people […] it was like really masking, just intensified […] Everything was a joke”* (p6). Lily also used humour to make others like her and have friends, even if it contradicted her feelings: *“Cause I just wanted to feed like laughter and all that stuff, like the only way they'd like me is by kind of making fun of myself”* (p13).

Poppy copied behaviours to fit in and make friends. She did this without fully understanding the nuance of when to apply the social rules. Therefore, she did not understand or notice when she had upset someone:

> *“I just found out that she's crying. I asked her about it, and she was like, you know, I, it just made me really upset, and I was like, I didn't even know […] I didn't even realise, cause I, I just thought that, you know, it's normal to joke like that.”* (p10)

Lily used perfectionism as a way to please others and fit in:

> *“cause I always needed to be like perfect I guess, because I just feel like […] I won't be able to catch up with everybody.”* (p5)

Poppy made friends by assimilating with everyone, abandoning her much-loved hobby of playing with the Littlest Pet Shop toys and the YouTube channel she had devoted to it:

> *“I've managed to make friends when I became like more assimilated into everyone - when I kind of like (pause) I like, I kind of just like pushed away on my old hobbies and stuff like that.”* (p11)

> *“I got too scared that I get bullied, like, because I was too old to be like playing with toys.”* (p6)

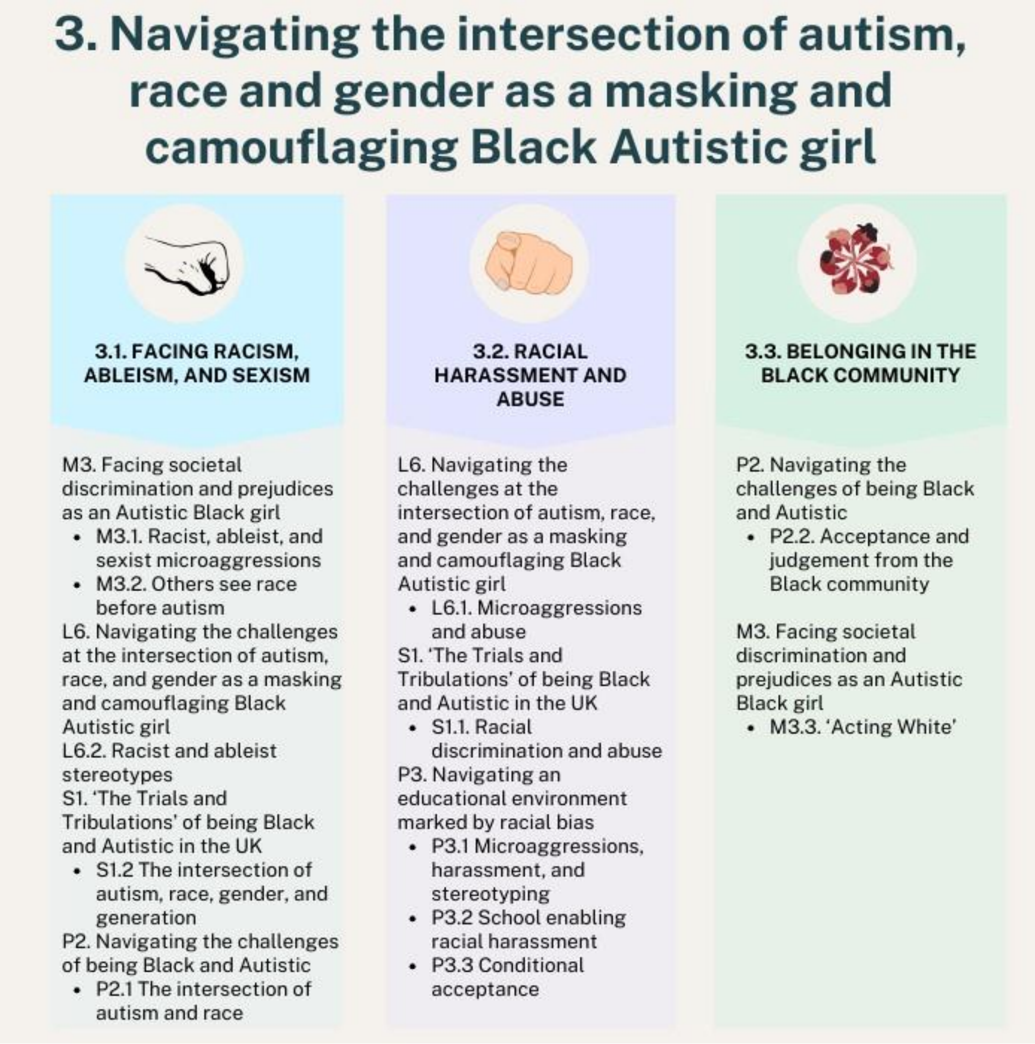
Masking feelings and physical responses were mentioned, with Poppy masking her hurt feelings in response to others making fun of her: *“it was just really lonely and embarrassing because I like felt like I was letting them do that”* (p18), and Lily masking her physical response to excitement to fit in: *“loads of people didn't like that [...] I had to stop like kind of physically expressing myself”* (p5).

Lily longed for friendships where she could be herself without social demands or expectations. She found this with a couple of people who were like her: *“I have another Autistic friend and we just - we don't even look at each other, we just look forward and we walk, and we just talk”* (p17). This demonstrates how her desired social interactions and friendships differ from social norms.

4.3.3. GET 3 – Navigating the Intersection of Autism, Race, and Gender as a Masking and Camouflaging Black Autistic Girl

Figure 10

GET 3 Navigating the Intersection of Autism, Race, and Gender as a Masking and Camouflaging Black Autistic Girl



3. Navigating the intersection of autism, race and gender as a masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girl

3.1. FACING RACISM, ABLEISM, AND SEXISM

M3. Facing societal discrimination and prejudices as an Autistic Black girl
- M3.1. Racist, ableist, and sexist microaggressions
- M3.2. Others see race before autism

L6. Navigating the challenges at the intersection of autism, race, and gender as a masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girl
L6.2. Racist and ableist stereotypes
S1. 'The Trials and Tribulations' of being Black and Autistic in the UK
- S1.2 The intersection of autism, race, gender, and generation

P2. Navigating the challenges of being Black and Autistic
- P2.1 The intersection of autism and race

3.2. RACIAL HARASSMENT AND ABUSE

L6. Navigating the challenges at the intersection of autism, race, and gender as a masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girl
- L6.1. Microaggressions and abuse

S1. 'The Trials and Tribulations' of being Black and Autistic in the UK
- S1.1. Racial discrimination and abuse

P3. Navigating an educational environment marked by racial bias
- P3.1 Microaggressions, harassment, and stereotyping
- P3.2 School enabling racial harassment
- P3.3 Conditional acceptance

3.3. BELONGING IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

P2. Navigating the challenges of being Black and Autistic
- P2.2. Acceptance and judgement from the Black community

M3. Facing societal discrimination and prejudices as an Autistic Black girl
- M3.3. 'Acting White'

All girls described facing racism, ableism and sexism from peers and teaching staff in the forms of microaggressions, harassment, and abuse. This was not tackled or eradicated by the educational settings. The girls' experience was that there was no support from adults within these settings. There were also experiences of judgement and a lack of acceptance from the Black community, which further impacted self-esteem.

4.3.3.1.Facing Racism, Ableism, and Sexism

Maia experienced common, everyday ableist jokes and comments in secondary school: *“people love to make jokes about disabilities or joke about people that go into the SEN department”* (p36). Lily experienced people assuming a certain ‘look’ for autism. She highlights the racialised, gendered, and appearance-based nature of assumptions about autism: *“if you're pretty then people like often like overlook it […] people will say like you have like a certain look for autism or something”* (p19). It seemed ableism was commonplace and there were no direct consequences for those making the jokes and comments.

Maia witnessed misogyny in school: *“A lot of boys are very misogynistic. Even girls, some of them have internalised misogyny in them […] the whole thing with boys, they like to try to make girls feel beneath them”* (p37). SS experienced misogyny from teachers: *“There used to be very misogynistic teachers that would basically stop the girls from like playing PE or doing specific things because they were like, you're not good at it anyway. So, what's the point?”* (p6)

All girls described being subjected to racial stereotypes and microaggressions. Racial stereotypes affected Maia’s self-perceptions, self-esteem, and demeanour:

> *“I don't want to generalise and say people don't, but […] people always say, you know, Black women are the least attractive. Black women are this, Black women look like men […] Black women look like Paul Pogba […] I've even got*

> *it said to me […] that is another reason why I don't even post on social media […] I'm so insecure about myself."* (p38)

Maia highlighted how racial stereotypes influenced how she was treated compared to her White peers:

> *"But I don't think people would label a White girl that is bitching about something or not even bitching about something but like trying to explain herself, aggressive, having attitude, being sassy or being like, all these things. They only say that about Black girls […] so I guess that's where the microaggression comes from."* (p36)

Maia emphasised that the prominent aspect of her identity was her Blackness:

> *"I feel like as a Black girl I have been discriminated against because before people see me as a girl, or anything, they just see me as Black [...] sadly that is what I will always be labelled as before anything else. Just either, Black, aggressive, or strong."* (p39)

She explained that others only perceive Black girls with what are deemed masculine traits: aggression, independence, and strength. It seems Maia has experienced that society often overlooks the softer side of Black women:

> *"they don't let Black women be seen as soft or emotional or have feelings. They just see Black women either strong or aggressive."* (p36)

For this reason, Maia stresses a distinct difference between being a Black Autistic to being a White Autistic:

> *“before they see the autism, they're always going to see my race. I thought this is why it's really different to be Black and Autistic, than White and Autistic.”* (p35)

> *“I just feel like as a young Black girl - as even Being a Black girl, forget autism, is hard enough.”* (p53)

Lily further stressed that the 'angry Black girl' stereotype, rooted in perceptions of Black girls as more masculine, often results in misunderstandings of their emotional distress. This is particularly problematic for Black Autistic girls, as distress can be a frequent state experienced by Autistic people in schools:

> *“with a lot of Black girls, it's kind of like you’re more masculine - that like loads of people just see you as that way so when you're like sharing […] signs of […] distress it’s like oh she's just being like you know typically angry and all of that stuff which (pause) it's like it's such a damaging stereotype especially when you're like Autistic.”* (p20)

Poppy was also treated like the ‘angry Black girl’ when she talked passionately. Her passion was misinterpreted by others as anger:

> *“if I'm talking about something I have a lot of interest in, then that's like some of the only times that my voice tone changes or like […] I talk faster. Like just cause I'm passionate about it […] But like people are like, oh I'm not arguing with you.”* (p14)

In an example of demand avoidance, a common Autistic trait, Maia points out that Black stereotypes are often used to explain behaviours, without consideration of autism: *“I don't like anyone telling me what to do, like I just don't like it. I just can't do it [...] I do get that some things can be seen as attitude. But I also think that there's certain things I do that should be an explanation to why I act a certain way”* (p42). However, she expresses that her diagnosis could protect her from stereotypical labels: *“I'm very lucky and happy that I got a diagnosis because I don't have to like - I don't have to be labelled as the aggressive Black girl, I could just be Autistic”* (p45).

Lily also found that other explanations would be sought rather than autism due to her race and appearance: *“I think there's like a lot of assumption with like Black girls or like pretty girls, that it's not autism but it's like something else”* (p18). At the age of 7, when she was a small child, she was labelled as ‘aggressive’ due to a sensory need for tactility and an emotional expression of empathy. The possibility of a neurodivergence was negated by a racial stereotype: *“I was really affectionate and like I have really like a lot of empathy for people, so back in school like I used to hug people really tight but […] I think that was more considered me being like aggressive”* (p18).

Poppy highlights the racialised and gendered perceptions of autism: *“People act like it only affects White people and like boys […] autism is a human condition not a like White person condition”* (p28). SS further explains: *“When it comes to Autistic Boys, (pause) erm, boys don't mask as much as girls do, because it has to do with societal norms where girls are expected to act in a specific way in society”* (p13).

Poppy discusses the racialised nature of subcultures that tend to be popular with Autistic people. Judgement from others and a lack of Black representation compounded her feelings of difference and isolation:

> *"Especially with being Black as well because like if you're White like people just think like it's fine that you can be into any subculture you want because like then no one's gonna be like, wow, you're such a fake White person [...] whereas counterculture, you're still all White people. And so even if you're a Black person going there, it's like, there's literally no one there who's like me […] Even though it's meant to be like alternative (pause) to the stereotype. It's still no one that looks like you. So it's like - It's just helpful to have someone."* (p31)

This led Poppy to feel like she didn't fit in with White or Black people, even though she has physical features attributed to both races. Her autism was an added layer to the difference she felt, further demonstrating her intersectional experience:

> *"cos I'm like mixed - and like my skin's quite light but then like my features are like more African. And so it's like not White enough to be White, especially for the people at my school. And then […] not Black enough to be Black. And then, on top of that, my brain works differently."* (p26)

This led to Poppy wanting to be White and neurotypical and feeling self-hatred:

> *"I really hated like myself a lot. I like, honestly, I just literally was like, I wish I was like White and like normal […] (you) want to look White because […] everything would be easier honestly."* (p26)

SS sums up the intersectional experience of a Black Autistic girl in the UK:

> *“it also doesn’t help when you’re Black as well because obviously […] you have to deal with like the trials and tribulations of being Black in the UK as well [...] it just makes it 1000 times more difficult.”* (p13)

4.3.3.2. Racial Harassment and Abuse

Lily was physically hurt by another student and recalls other similar situations on camping trips:

> *“I got really happy that we were working together doing an art project, and she took my arm and she'd like smashed it on the desk. Not like smash, but like she hit on the desk, and my mum saw it, and it turned out that I had a contusion.”* (p9-10)

> *“somebody paid someone with P’s to throw a cold bucket of water on me[…] they just really didn't like me at all, and they would just say F off all the time [...] I was the only Black like person in my group.”* (p9)

Lily felt hated and mistreated and recalls lots of people not liking her. She was unsure whether this was racial discrimination, yet, on reflection, she is conscious she was one of few Black people at camp and in school:

> *“I’m not really sure, like, about like discrimination. I just know nobody really liked me in school […] I always felt different, like because everybody else is White.”* (p9)

Lily endured constant racial microaggressions about her hair, which led to emotional distress: *“oh, your hair smells because I could have product in it, but they weren't used to the same product [...] so I think there was one time I just turned red and I* *screamed and I started crying"* (p11). Lily's response was later described by her teacher as bad behaviour (see section 4.3.1.2). She also faced racial microaggressions intended to communicate the inferiority of her skin colour: *"she wanted like a fly to like land on it, like we were acting like it was a butterfly […] I put my hand out […] they were like it wouldn't like wanna go on your skin, they don't like brown skin"* (p8).

Racial microaggressions and stereotypes became part of Poppy's everyday school experience:

> *"If they saw like black dirt anywhere, they'd be like, that's you, like you're going on the table or like if there was like, I don't know, something like a black poster they're like, oh, you're getting all over the posters like it's meant to be a white background."* (p7)
>
> *"people assuming that I'm like less intelligent and stuff like that"* (p6)
>
> *"my teacher, she came up behind me. She's like, oh, you would know like the whole gang violence. Me? Why would I know about that?"* (p13)

SS faced the use of the N-word by peers: "She *was just yelling a bunch of just racial slurs. And obviously, when people started retaliating [...] she went crying to one of the, erm, Black teachers [...] and yeah, he was basically just defending her"* (p6), and teachers: *"there was even a situation with a teacher who, English wasn't her first language, but she was basically like, what's wrong with saying the N-word. And she pretty much fully said it in a PSHE lesson"* (p6). Poppy also experienced peers using the N-word: *"like some people said the N-word there, which is shocking"* (p6).

Poppy was one of a few Black young people in her school; she often refers to there being *“so many of them”* (p8) harassing her, which led to feelings of distress and isolation:

> *“It was horrible, I hated it, it was really horrible. I just felt really lonely because I just didn't understand.”* (p14)

Poppy describes her peers thinking it was inevitable that she would speak up about colonialism because she was Black. Their responses indicated that only she was affected by the topic, exasperating her feelings of difference and isolation:

> *“in like geography, when we're talking about, Rwanda and stuff. Like how the geography and colonisation, how it affects the geography and like everyone turning to me or something [...] or like giggling if I started talking about it or […] when we were learning about slavery, people talking over it like they didn't care […] oh of course she's talking about it she's Black.”* (p14)

The school did not acknowledge or tackle the racism Poppy experienced: *“I like did not feel in any way that I would be able to go and tell anyone. At all. There was like no Black staff either”* (p21). Similarly, SS received no support to tackle blatant overt racism: *“It seemed like we couldn't go to our teachers about [...] serious matters, like this, that affects pretty much almost our everyday lives [...] they just don't do anything about it [...] it would make us feel angry and upset”* (p7).

SS was particularly shocked that the Black male deputy headteacher defended the perpetrators by using ignorance and language as a defence: *"We couldn’t even go to Black teachers and sort of be defended when stuff like this happened"* (p6). He prioritised the comfort of White people over the empowerment of Black youths in the school: *“I wanted to start a Black history club when I was in like, Year eight. I went to him and he said, no, because he said that it's gonna offend some people or make people feel some type of way [...] it was the same deputy head teacher for all of these situations”* (p7).

Having to cope with racism with no recognition, validation or support led SS to reflect on how, societally, Black girls are stereotyped as aggressive for responding to the negativity they receive:

> *“I find a lot of Black girls get called aggressive just for speaking our minds. Just for not putting up with people just being rude to us and being negative towards us. We get called aggressive for basically, somewhat retaliating, if that's the word, against people just being, just negative to us.”* (p12)

4.3.3.3. Belonging in the Black Community

Poppy found that she was judged by the same racial stereotypes by some people within the Black community. Her hobbies, her appearance, and the genres of music she enjoyed were racialised as White. This led to further feelings of difference, isolation, and confusion at being rejected by her own community:

> *“then the same people stereotype their own people and get mad if they don't like one thing. So it just doesn't make any sense.”* (p28)

Maia was judged for not participating in Black culture, wearing her hair straight, dying it blonde, and speaking negatively about Black men:

> *“he was like basically saying how I'm racist saying like the stuff about Black men, and how that it's only because I want to be White, like I'm not even really Black.”* (p51)

Both girls’ responses to others' assertions that they were ‘acting White’ were initially upset, but then they recognised that no one should make another feel like they are a different race because of not fitting a racial stereotype. Poppy intellectualised her response by considering the logic behind others’ judgements. She then considered cultural differences as a reason for some Black people’s perceptions:

> *“Not that there's anything wrong with White people, but it's like you're just not like, like you're just like genetically not.”* (p30)

> *“Enjoy your hobbies, and if other Black people are like (pause) judgemental. Like, one, if you have family who, like in Africa, like you have to acknowledge the like difference there […] Because like, there is like a big difference, culturally-wise, than like being a Black person in London, which is way more multicultural.”* (p28)

> *“Don't listen to people who are like, you're not Black, you're not Black anymore because you like something […] people are just so mean and it's like […] it logically doesn't make any sense.”* (p28)

Maia shrugged it off, again using logic: *“Even if I did want to straighten my hair, who cares? It's a hairstyle”* (p51). This could be deemed a defence mechanism or literal thinking, which is often associated with autism.

4.3.4 GET 4 – Challenges with Sensory Sensitivities and Overload

Figure 11

GET 4 Challenges with Sensory Sensitivities and Overload

4. Challenges with sensory sensitivities and overload

L3. Challenges with sensory and social demands
- L3.1. Sensory demands

S2. Sensory overload and regulation
- S2.1. Sensory sensitivities
- S2.2. Sensory regulation

P4 Feeling weird and different
- P4.1. Sensory sensitivities

Sensory sensitivities and overload were common embodied experiences for the girls. They had to manage daily aspects of their environments that they found uncomfortable, emotionally distressing, and physically draining. They struggled to understand and articulate these experiences at the time.

The everyday sensory aspects of school life created anxiety and overwhelm for Lily. Lily described overload from the journey on public transport to get to school. This included sensitivities to the noise, visual stimuli, people being in very close proximity, and lighting. Lily was overwhelmed before she arrived at school. She was then hit with the same sensory issues in the school environment and had to face social demands on top of that.

> *“obviously there's lots of noise, there's lots of lights, there's so many different things that you're trying to process* [*…*] *and next I'd have to like think about my social life and next like you know, I'd have to see people again and again and again and like it was just too much.”* (p7)

SS also encountered daily sensory discomfort in school. In the hallways: *“It's always loud, because there's just a bunch of different students just running and just making a bunch of noise”* (p7). In the classroom: *“It was just loud, and I couldn't even, couldn't focus on what was happening. I needed my headphones”* (p7). SS did not understand what she was experiencing: *“even when I'm having, like sensory overload, which I didn't know what that was at the time, I just thought I was just like - it was just loud. And everything was just a bit too much”* (p5). SS’ peers had negative comments about her sensory overload response: *“I will just end up just like yelling or just being a bit like jumpy, I suppose. And people just make it seem like I'm having a problem that I'm just being like, emotional and just being a basket case”* (p7).

Poppy worried about her peers’ perceptions of her response to sensory overwhelm:

> *“certain sensory things, like, if I got really frustrated, I would like just like cry, but like frustration crying and like with different noises, but then I was like worried people would think that was weird.”* (p3)

Poppy was unaware of how she would be perceived by wearing the same jumper daily, something she did for comfort:

> *"I was really unaware of like, like looking a certain way or anything like, I had no kind of like concept of that. So like I would just wear the same jumper like every single day, and like not change and I would wear it inside out."* (p3)

The school environment was so demanding that it exhausted Lily; she needed complete rest to recover, which indicates the physical embodiment of the demands she experienced. This led to feeling like she was failing. When someone perceives themselves as failing, it can be seen as a shortcoming within themselves; this could have been a barrier to Lily knowing how to seek support: *"it's so demanding for me and next I feel like I'm failing, but I don't know how to ask for that help."* (p6)

Although SS experienced sensory overload, she also used sensory experiences to regulate the stress of masking:

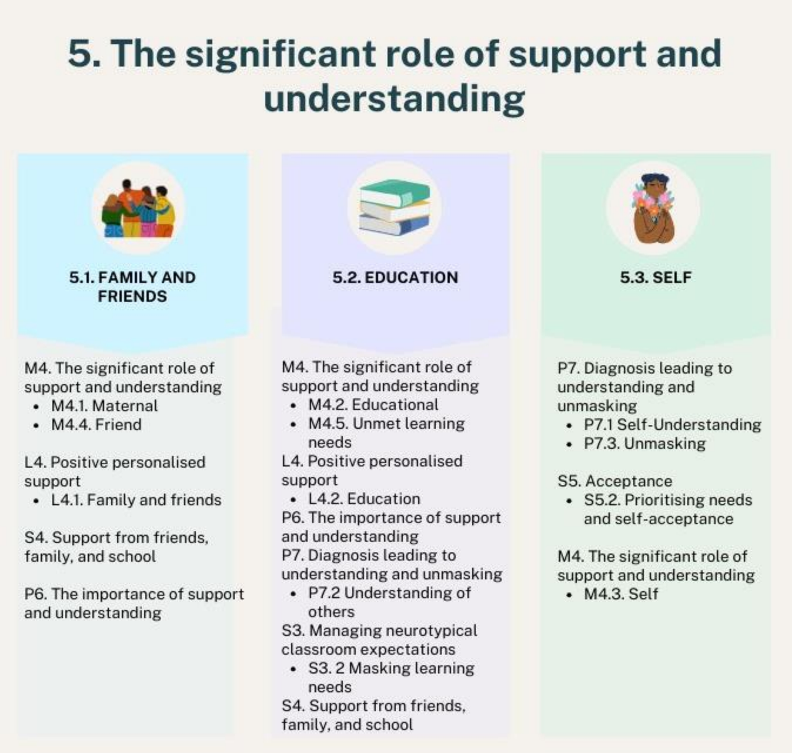
> *"either playing instruments, listening to music and just doing all those type of things. Because I feel like music is a great way to sort of express how you're feeling. So it kind of just, like relaxes you knowing that there are some songs that can pretty much relate back to how you are feeling."* (p8)

Not only was music sensory regulatory, but the song lyrics were relatable and possibly articulated how she felt when she may not have had the words to.

4.3.5. GET 5 – The Significant Role of Support and Understanding

Figure 12

GET 5 The Significant Role of Support and Understanding



5. The significant role of support and understanding

5.1. FAMILY AND FRIENDS

M4. The significant role of support and understanding
- M4.1. Maternal
- M4.4. Friend

L4. Positive personalised support
- L4.1. Family and friends

S4. Support from friends, family, and school

P6. The importance of support and understanding

5.2. EDUCATION

M4. The significant role of support and understanding
- M4.2. Educational
- M4.5. Unmet learning needs

L4. Positive personalised support
- L4.2. Education

P6. The importance of support and understanding
P7. Diagnosis leading to understanding and unmasking
- P7.2 Understanding of others

S3. Managing neurotypical classroom expectations
- S3. 2 Masking learning needs

S4. Support from friends, family, and school

5.3. SELF

P7. Diagnosis leading to understanding and unmasking
- P7.1 Self-Understanding
- P7.3. Unmasking

S5. Acceptance
- S5.2. Prioritising needs and self-acceptance

M4. The significant role of support and understanding
- M4.3. Self

The girls’ ability to navigate the challenges they encountered was considerably influenced by the positive support and understanding of their families, especially their parents, friends, and some school staff. Conversely, a lack of support and understanding within the school environment notably impacted their experiences. Understanding their diagnosis played a crucial role in the girls’ journey toward self-acceptance.

4.3.5.1. Family and Friends

During Maia’s periods of isolation at school, her mother actively supported and advocated for her:

> *“my mum wasn't really happy about me being in isolation. I don’t think any parent would be. So yes, my mum was always trying to fight for me not to be in isolation.”* (p15)

Maia’s mother provided comfort, support, and affection without judgment:

> *“I could really put my trust into my mum, and I could always go to her for help and affection.”* (p29)

Lily’s mother also advocated for her in school in response to bullying and physical harm. Lily’s mother further protected her from harm by giving her the choice of home education when the school failed to respond appropriately: *“She was like, that's it. Like, do you wanna become home-schooled or something?”* (p11) She also understands her sensory needs and makes accommodations to ensure she is comfortable: *“Like with the dimmable lights, like all of that stuff, like she kind of knows, about my comfort sort of things and stuff that calms me down”* (p7).

SS’ family “*has been very supportive”* (p9) and encouraged her to be her authentic self: *“you don't have to feel like you need to mask in public just to fit in”* (p11). Poppy’s parents supported her by learning about autism to develop their understanding: *“them learning more about it, I think, is like the main support (pause) that helps”* (p17).

Maia acknowledged that she projected her stress from masking all day in school, on her mum when she got home. She felt she had no control over it:

> *"I would just kind of keep everything in throughout the day, I would just be really nasty to my mum, and I actually - I don't like being nasty to my mum."* (p32)

Although her relationship with her mother is close and trusted, Maia refrains from sharing certain things with her mum to avoid causing her self-blame or guilt. Her explanation indicates a protective instinct towards her mother's emotional well-being:

> *"I just don't want my mum to feel guilty."* (p29)

When SS stopped masking and started prioritising her own needs, she made friends with other neurodivergent young people who provided support: *"the friend group I have now, most of us are neurodivergent. So, we all kind of, are aware of each other's needs"* (p11). Lily also found friendships with similar peers to be a source of support and understanding: *"I have a friend, and he's like Black, and he has autism and it's just good to have kind of have that like understanding of people similar"* (p21). Maia appreciated the support and understanding of her best friend: *"She's just really sympathetic to me like she always understands me to a tee […] I think that's what's really nice about it is that she validates my feelings, but then also gives me a different perspective of a situation"* (p34).

The girl's experiences with similar peers indicate the crucial role and need for understanding in genuine, reciprocal friendships and social interactions.

4.3.5.2 Education

Maia recalls being close to a teacher in a special school with whom she could be her true self with because she shared a lot of personal information with her. She became a trusted adult: *“I could be myself around her […] she just kind of became my little person I used to speak to” (*p44). Maia also found comfort with a teacher in the SEN department of her mainstream secondary school: *“I'd go into the SEN department, and chill with […] Mrs X [...] she was my favourite person that - I really loved the SEN teacher”* (p16).

Lily appreciated having someone trusted to speak to when she was stressed and to advocate for her when she had shut down from overwhelm:

> *“I think it's definitely really important to have somebody to talk to - like somebody obviously nice that you can like tell stuff to like when you're feeling stressed.”* (p23)

Maia attended a PRU that had a welcoming, family-like environment with neurodivergent children like her. Similarities with peers may have facilitated her sense of belonging and comfort:

> *“a lot of people there did have even autism or ADHD or like dyslexia. And it's just kind of like - the whole- it was, it was just really - had a family - it was just nice.”* (p12)

The PRU was also supportive and had open communication with Maia’s mother:

> *“E was a really good headteacher and I think she really did try to further my mum to help me or help my mum in helping me as well. And she was really understanding.”* (p12)

When Maia was engaging in online activity with boys, her parents and school became very concerned. They incorporated support for online safety into her EHCP:

> *“there was a lot of stuff about me not being safe online and not being safe with boys and that was actually in my EHC plan.”* (p21)

Yet, Maia did not receive appropriate support for her learning needs. Maia’s experiences suggest she may have undiagnosed learning needs, particularly with her concept of numbers and time. She struggled throughout school, particularly in maths. Some teachers highlighted her needs, suggesting she might have had dyscalculia; however, she never received the appropriate support, which led to her avoiding most lessons: *“I truly believe if I got the right support and the right team behind me, I could have probably maybe pushed for a 6 in GCSE, but I didn't”* (p22). Maia struggles to concentrate, which may be due to not understanding what is being taught: *“I can't concentrate for more than a minute. And [...] when I'm given anything, even something that I might have learned 5 times, I still don't get it and I think it's just because […] not all teachers try and sit down with people and try and to understand them individually”* (p23).

Maia’s frustration stemmed from teachers’ inflexible teaching methods**,** which failed to address her individual learning needs. Despite seeking help, she remained unable to grasp the material effectively. Had teachers adapted their approach to accommodate her, Maia believes she could have achieved significantly more academically:

> *“They just think this is a certain way for that individual. I'm going to do it that way. I don't care what you think or how you feel, I'm just gonna work with you how I think you should be worked with […] I could have gone so far if I got the right help.”* (p24)

Lily echoes Maia’s sentiments on adaptive teaching by explaining how a different approach supported her learning:

> *“In primary school, when I had the one-on-one lessons, that was really good, because it wasn’t just sitting down and like just doing stuff, like we'd creatively learn something with this like one teacher.”* (p20)

Poppy felt a lack of understanding of the fact that autism can have different presentations can lead to others assuming mental health difficulties rather than autism as a cause. This has implications for misinterpretation and misdiagnosis, which can lead to inappropriate support and intervention:

> *“They just think […] you're just crazy […] most people don't even know that there's autism that is not like, that doesn't affect you like on an intellectual level. So, people don't even know that ASD is even the thing half the time.”* (p23)

Lily feels schools could make things more comfortable and bearable for Autistic young people by offering individualised support:

> *“just more like catering to that person's needs, but obviously not like to an unrealistic level, like there's always gonna be things that aren't gonna be 100% comfortable, and you can't do much about it, but just to do like the little that you can to make things easier.”* (p18)

Lily appreciates college being relaxed and not putting demands on her in terms of her attendance:

> *“ I think because they're aware of me having it they're a bit more, like relaxed on me like when it comes to my attendance and like If I can't come to college so they're not like really like oh why didn't you do this? Why didn't you do that? So that's like it feels better to not have all that stress put on.”* (p20)

Poppy also found school more bearable when demands were reduced:

> *“So they kind of eased up, with like telling me to take out my piercings and stuff. So honestly, it was like the changes were good like and made it bearable to like be in school.”* (p20)

Poppy found that external professionals' involvement and official diagnosis helped facilitate change in her school:

> *“to have that as like a blueprint, so they can actually understand. And so they like kind of have to help you like […] I had a social worker at that time as well.”* (p18)

4.3.5.3. Self

On reflection, Poppy realised she had not been herself the whole time that she was at school, but the diagnosis helped her gain her authentic identity:

> *“I hadn't been myself (pause). For the whole time I was at that school and even before. So I was just kind of just gaining my identity back, like on the outside.”* (p21)

Being diagnosed with and learning about autism helped Poppy to understand herself and that her autism was affecting her mental health:

> *“I had like a lot of other mental difficulties that like took priority […] also like autism affected like those things.”* (p17)

Diagnosis supported Poppy’s self-acceptance: *“Now's a lot different like, I like myself a lot more. Like still not a hundred percent, but like, it's like, I won a lot of it back because I've met other people who are similar to me”* (p27).

Poppy also learnt how autism affects her and the benefits as well as disadvantages of masking and camouflaging:

> *“try to like notice when you do it and why, and if it's like, something like: this is just gonna make this conversation go a lot easier or something like - If it's gonna make something easier, then like that's fine, as obviously it's not affecting […] the way you think about yourself.”* (p27)

For SS, COVID lockdowns provided the space and opportunity to self-reflect and prioritise her own needs. This helped her be herself when she returned to school:

> *“So I feel like during lockdown, it was a lot of self-reflection. And then, as soon as I went into year 11, I did feel a lot like me, I suppose.”* (p10)

Similarly to Poppy, diagnosis helped SS make sense of her experiences and gave her a reason for her lifelong struggles:

> *“When I found out [...] I had autism and ADHD, and even Dyslexia [...] it made me feel a lot better, because it made me feel like most of these things that I've struggled with in my life without actually realising it, there is a reason behind it.”* (p11)

Maia spoke about supporting yourself through self-talk. This facilitates self-reflection, enabling one to better understand themselves, as demonstrated by SS through lockdown. Maia explains why this can be helpful:

> *“you should talk to yourself because you’re never gonna find someone that understands you more than you.”* (p54)

4.4 Deeper Interpretation

Smith et al. (2022) suggest deeper levels of interpretation, honing in on an even more detailed micro-analysis of the data that connects back to the whole interview and group experiences; this offers a sophisticated level of analysis. Two subjects stood out in the interviews: the intersubjective nature of the word ‘weird’ and the embodied and intersubjective experience of hair.

4.4.1. ‘Weird’

Maia and Poppy used the word ‘weird’ 31 times between them, and their data featured heavily in the themes of acceptance and belonging.

Merriam-Webster dictionary offers two definitions for the word weird:

1**:** of strange or extraordinary character

2**:** of, relating to, or caused by witchcraft or the supernatural

Historically, individuals accused of witchcraft faced horrific treatment; their persecution and marginalisation stemmed from fear and societal biases – 84% of those accused were women (Behringer, 2004). Similarly, the girls have described feelings of isolation, unfair judgement, and treatment, and misunderstanding due to neurotypical biases. This is not to say that the girls consciously chose to describe their alignment with the historical treatment of women accused of witchcraft, but it demonstrates the unconscious use of language and its meaning. Black Autistic girls may not only feel ‘strange’ or ‘extraordinary’, but they may also feel outcast or not a part of this world. Treweek et al. (2019) interviewed Autistic adults and found most thought others perceived them as weird. They suggest this is weird in comparison to neurotypical behaviour and as though Autistic people inhabit their own world.

This aligns with Poppy’s feelings:

> *“I just felt like I was like in a whole different world. Like it was so weird.”* (p6)

4.4.2. Hair

An inextricable aspect of Black girls and women’s identity is how they relate to and present their hair (Johnson & Bankhead, 2013). Knowles’ (2016) song entitled ‘Don’t

Touch My Hair' refers to hair being a part of Black women's identity connected to their feelings, soul and pride. She appears to suggest that people who touch Black women's hair without their consent, do not understand the pain and emotional toll Black women carry due to the generational trauma of Black people.

Although hair did not feature as a theme of its own, it featured across the themes of racial discrimination, sensory differences, and fitting in. Poppy talks about wanting to have straight hair. It appears that she wanted to fit in, she did not want others to touch her hair, but she was also sensory averse to her hair texture, describing it as 'knotty'.

> *"no one had hair like me and I wanted my hair to like flow down. Rather than being puffed up, like it would just never work. But when I did, people would just put their hands in it."* (p13)

Maia was told that she was *"not even really Black"* (p51) due to straightening her hair. hooks (1989) describes straightening hair not as an effort to look White but as a rite of passage to adulthood. She describes braids and plaits as symbols of innocence and youth, where comfort was imparted through the combing and parting of hair. Yet, comfort may not be the experience of all; the management of Black hair is a sensory experience that is embodied and processed differently depending on hair texture and neurodiversity.

Poppy had an intersectional experience of people constantly touching her hair:

> *"so one time I pulled this girl's hair back, like, and she was like, I don't understand. She's so mad at me. I was like, you just spent like an hour touching my hair when I told you no."* (p13)

It was an invasion and disrespect of personal space. There was also the pain of hands trying to run through the texture of her hair which she described as *“knotty”* (p13). Poppy did not witness this happening to other people in her school, so she did not comprehend the social interaction. A combination of racial microaggression, the unpredictable nature of the act and sensory aversions created a disempowering and confusing experience, particularly for a Black and Autistic individual. Maia observed Black women being devalued and discriminated against for the texture of their hair, 4C hair being the tightest curl pattern[3]. Looser curl patterns tend to be associated with lighter skin tones, and 4C hair types are associated with darker skin tones and perceived as ‘hard to manage’. (Johnson & Bankhead, 2013). This demonstrates colourism[4] in the natural hair community:

> *“Black girls that have 4C hair get, honestly just get discriminated against because of their hair texture.”* (p39)

Race-based hair discrimination is the unjust treatment or bias against individuals based on their natural hair texture, style or cultural hairstyles (Equality and Human Rights Commission [EHRC], 2022)**.** In UK schools, this can manifest through policies and school dress codes that ban specific hairstyles commonly worn by racially

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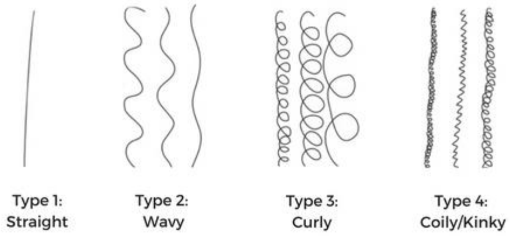
[3] A curl pattern reflects the shape and structure of hair’s natural curls or waves. There are four main types: Type 1 (straight), Type 2 (wavy), Type 3 (curly), and Type 4 (coily/kinky). Each type has subtypes (a, b, and c) that further describe the curl degree. For example, a 3a curl pattern features well-defined, springy curls in an S-shaped pattern, while a 3c pattern consists of dense, volume-packed ringlets. Although both are considered curly, their curls are distinct (haircode, n.d.).



(NaturAll Club, n.d.)

[4] Colourism refers to prejudice or discrimination, especially within a racial or ethnic group, favoring people with lighter skin over those with darker skin (Daftary et al., 2023)

minoritised groups, disproportionately affecting people with afro-textured hair (EHRC, 2022; Campbell, 2022). The EHRC (2022) issued guidance stating that students should not be prevented from wearing their hair in natural afro styles at school, and uniform policies that ban certain hairstyles without exceptions on racial grounds are likely to be unlawful. Despite progress, hair discrimination remains a significant issue in schools and other public spaces (The Guardian, 2022).

4.5 Summary of Findings

The findings highlight the nuanced and intersectional experiences of Black Autistic girls in UK education, and their experiences of masking and camouflaging, aligning with previous research. Acceptance and belonging played a crucial role in their making sense of their experiences. Negative perceptions related to autism, race, and gender led to rejection and exclusion, which negatively impacted their self-esteem and their ability, capacity, and desire to access education within an educational setting. This supports several studies' findings (Cook et al., 2021; Halsall et al., 2021; Bassett, 2022; Chapman, 2020).

Navigating experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and autism led to confusion and distress. Their social differences exacerbated this challenge. Heidegger posits that individuals are placed in a world of pre-existing objects (Smith et al., 2022). Pre-existing societal objects such as racism, ableism, sexism, and neurotypical norms operate insidiously, making them difficult to articulate. Furthermore, there is no explicit rulebook when it comes to societal norms; they are often learned through reading social cues, but for Autistic individuals, these can be missed. The girls felt silenced, isolated, and unsupported within educational settings that were sometimes inadvertently complicit in discrimination. Their marginalised identities—autism, race, and gender create a double jeopardy, echoing Lewis & Arday (2023) and Fierros & Conroy (2002).

Following diagnosis, many of the girls gained self-understanding, which improved their self-image and led to self-acceptance and, in some instances, peer acceptance. This aligns with Cook et al.'s (2021) theme of 'authentic socialising as an alternative to camouflaging'. Both Poppy and SS recommended forming friendships with like-minded individuals with the same interests, and both found that they were then able to stop masking and camouflaging, be their authentic selves and feel happy. However, aligning with Limburg (2016), finding their authentic selves required work because Poppy felt she had no identity and SS needed time and space away from others to self-reflect to figure out what her interests were.

Support and understanding were spoken about as being crucial for the girls. Supportive family and friends acted as protective factors for them, and despite traumatic educational experiences, some individual staff members provided adjustments, care, empathy, and personalised relationships. This highlights the positive impact individuals within challenging systems can have and underscores the influence of positive intersubjectivity on an individual's experience.

5.0. Discussion

5.1. Overview

In keeping with the Kaleidoscope analysis approach outlined in the methodology chapter, this discussion chapter presents the final lens of the kaleidoscope, the *DisCrit* theoretical framework*,* to consider the girls' intersectional experiences, answering research question 2:

How can the findings from research question one be understood using a *DisCrit* and intersectionality lens?

This will be answered by using each of the GETs. Finally, this chapter will outline the practical implications of the findings from both research questions for professional practice and for Autistic individuals who may be masking and camouflaging.

5.2 Understanding Through a *DisCrit* Lens Considering Intersectionality Theory

This study took a critical realist, social constructionist stance, assuming unequal power dynamics, using non-neutral discourse, and considering conflicts of interest between unequal individuals in socially constructed groups such as race, gender, and class (Budd, 2020). *DisCrit* focuses on the intersection of race and disability yet does not negate other identity social constructs, including gender, class, and sexuality. The aim is to deconstruct the structures that seek to separate aspects of socially constructed identity. Intersectional work on race and disability is naturally complex and intertwined (Annamma et al., 2016a). Consequentially, there will be overlap in the themes discussed below. This discussion cannot progress without acknowledging the role of Whiteness and ability in societal structures of normativity.

Societal structures of normativity

DisCrit recognises that the social constructs of Whiteness and ability are the normative cultural standard in society (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Watts & Erevelles, 2004). Individuals who do not meet these standards are ranked and grouped accordingly, with divergence from the norm viewed as a deficit (Annamma et al., 2016a). One of the cultural and societal standards is the normative belief in the superiority of Whiteness, justified and reinforced through pseudo-sciences such as eugenics, phrenology and craniology (Valencia, 1997; Madriaga et al., 2011; Lewis & Arday, 2023). This 'science' postulated that people of colour were incapable of intelligence; laws, policies and programs were created to discourage the production of certain groups of people (Menchaca, 1997). A racial hierarchy was constructed with Whiteness at the top and Blackness at the bottom (Annamma et al., 2016a; Hook, 2008). Although it might be assumed that Whiteness refers to individuals with white skin, it must be acknowledged that Whiteness was not always the 'property' of poor White individuals or certain immigrant groups such as Eastern Europeans who were considered 'feebleminded' (Roediger, 1991; Selden, 1999). Consequentially, if race were not explicitly tied to ability, it would simply be a racial difference that does not carry any significance to the individual or group (Annamma et al., 2016a).

DisCrit posits that economic advantages are given to those who can claim Whiteness and/or normalcy, suggesting Whiteness and ability as 'property' (Harris, 1993; Annamma et al., 2016a).

Annamma et al. (2016a) assert that in Disability Studies race tends to be considered as a mitigating factor rather than fully critiquing the role of Whiteness in special education (Bell, 2006; Blanchett, 2006; Blanchett, 2010; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Reid & Knight, 2006). Similarly, in the field of Critical Race Theory, special education and disability are often omitted or insufficiently represented, although they have many overlapping concerns and interests (Coard, 1971; Connor, 2008). Social stratification embeds White privilege while often relegating Black or Brown individuals to oppressed statuses, mirroring the gendered disparity where maleness equates with privilege, and femaleness with subordination (Johnson, 2017; McIntosh, 1988). These societal attitudes and beliefs are rooted in structural inequalities that affect access to jobs, property, education, and opportunities (Johnson, 2017). This structure is upheld by the White male elite to preserve their class advantages and dominance. Addressing the economic forces and policies that sustain inequality, subjugation, and discrimination is a challenge (Johnson, 2017). This discussion will relate back to societal structures of normativity in understanding the girls' experiences. It will attempt to deconstruct the structures and processes that uphold the present state.

5.2.2 The Importance of Acceptance and Belonging

Masking and camouflaging for acceptance

As found in several studies (Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015; Belek, 2023; Halsall et al., 2021), a desire to be accepted and fit in appears to influence Autistic masking and camouflaging, which is consistent with the findings from this study, as participants were attempting to fit in with the majority neurotype. Simultaneously, they wanted to be accepted by their White peers and the Black Community, which aligns with Radulski's (2022) findings of a Black neurodivergent individual struggling with acceptance from both communities.

Black people often assimilate in majority White environments to cope with racism, fit in and be accepted (Jacob et al., 2023; Lewis & Arday, 2023; Spates et al., 2021). Poppy described a Black peer who received less racial harassment than she did and shared this was due to her attending a private primary school and seemingly assimilating socially, having aligned social behaviours and interests. This was a challenge for Poppy due to her neurodiversity and lack of experience in private educational settings. Poppy was aware of how differently her Black peer was treated by her White peers, which reinforces Fanon's (1986) assertion that Black people construct their identity under the influence of the 'White gaze'. This highlights how race, disability, and perceived class (from attending a private school) can intersect and overlap to create a unique experience based on an individual's socially constructed identity.

Poppy further explains that when compared to another Black peer, with similar mental health concerns to her own, Poppy was supported by the school, and her Black peer was not. Poppy believes this was because she was considered more intelligent and likely to achieve high GCSE grades. Although Poppy held identities that are typically oppressed, she was recognised by her school as having high cognitive ability, a trait revered in Whiteness and white supremacy culture (Elliot, 2016; Annamma et al., 2016a). This demonstrates inequity in allocating resources and support, reinforcing the notion that those who can claim ability receive economic advantages (Annamma et al., 2016a). It also highlights the nuance of intersectionality; on one hand, Poppy experienced discrimination due to her race and neurodiversity, yet on the other hand, she was prioritised for support due to her cognitive ability. Both of Poppy's experiences, compared to her Black peers, indicate conditional acceptance, where an individual's inclusion is based on conditions; this is a nuanced and complex social dynamic (Blachnicka-Ciacek & Budginaite-Mackine, 2022).

Rejection and exclusion based on notions of normalcy

The school's treatment of Poppy's Black peer mirrors the larger societal exclusion of individuals deemed untreatable (Thompson, 2021). This perspective is influenced by a structure of normativity that permeates health systems: the medical model, which views bodies deviating from normative standards as deficient, inferior and needing treatment (Pearson & Rose, 2023). Hence, both school staff and society may perceive children who do not conform to these norms in a similarly negative light (Thompson, 2021; Collins, 2003; Mirza, 1998). Those labelled as disabled or inferior are often undervalued as contributors to a capitalist society, leading to a lack of investment in their futures and, thus, unequal allocation of resources (Tomlinson, 2016). The education system, driven by policy and funding, aims to credential all young people at higher levels, emphasising the need for educational attainment in knowledge-driven economies (Tomlinson, 2016). However, this aligns with the myth of meritocracy, where resources are distributed based on privilege within society based on class, race or gender rather than individual talents or efforts (Bal & Doci, 2018; Bellow, 2004).

The girls experienced exclusion in numerous ways, including racial harassment, bullying, rejection, and isolation. Maia was labelled 'mentally ill' by her peers because her communication style was different to the majority. Poppy was called 'crazy' by her peers due to the presentation of her emotional distress. In all experiences, others' perceptions and labels based on neuro-normative, racialised stereotypes minimised and dismissed their emotional and physical distress, thus marginalising and isolating them. Autism is framed through a neurotypical medical model perspective; the same model that has developed knowledge that marginalises and misrepresents the experiences of certain groups or individuals, also known as epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). This prompts consideration of the structures that construct what is ‘normal’, ‘crazy’ or ‘mentally ill’.

The role of societal structures in exclusion

Foucault posits that governmentality, the complex dynamic of power, control, and governance within society, extends beyond state politics (Foucault, 1988). Governmentality involves a wide range of control techniques that influence how institutions, including schools, regulate behaviour and allocate resources (Gordon, 1991; Foucault, 1988). For children and young people, this can be observed through misdiagnosis and missed diagnosis of need, especially in marginalised groups (Diemer et al., 2022; Giwa-Onaiwu, 2016; Liang, 2022). Diagnosis tends to lead to support and resources, which was the case for all participants. However, Maia was the only participant to be diagnosed in her early teenage years, yet, her learning needs remained undiagnosed, and she was still excluded from schools. Foucault (1988) describes marginalised people as having little room for manoeuvre as their liberties are very limited, which suggests that those marginalised have less power and rights. NAS research suggests that those from marginalised communities are less aware of their rights due to how professionals engage with them (Corbett & Perpepa, 2017).

The Timpson Review of School Exclusions (1999) indicated that Autistic children, among other SEND pupils, were disproportionately likely to face school exclusion, a trend partly due to unequal access to diagnosis. School behaviour policies are often informed by neurotypical standards and expectations, which means those who cannot meet those expectations are often excluded. School staff’s lack of understanding of needs can make students vulnerable to being misunderstood and sanctioned. This was evident in the participant's data, for example, SS being perceived as troubled rather than being recognised as having sensory and learning needs; Maia and SS observing neurodivergent students being punished for automatic behaviours such as stimming, and Poppy’s presentation not being recognised as neurodivergent until she became an inpatient where staff were trained and knowledgeable of neurodivergent traits and presentation.

Maia was excluded in several different ways due to school behaviour policies. She was internally excluded, subjected to a ‘managed move’ (an agreement between schools for a permanent transfer), fixed-term excluded, and permanently excluded. Eventually, Maia felt unable to attend school due to repeated feelings of rejection and bullying from peers and teachers. Maia believes that the cumulative effect of this perceived rejection led to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), which happened because of an unfulfilled need to feel loved by others. Alliance for Youth Justice (2024) explains that research indicates the hyper-sexualisation of Black girls and cultural biases can mean risks such as CSE are sometimes missed by institutions. Additionally, the adultification bias is important to consider, as this has serious implications for Black children’s safety and the support they are deemed to need and subsequently receive (Davis, 2022). Maia’s experience is a stark reminder of the urgent need for safeguarding practices within educational settings that better consider marginalised identities. These experiences underscore the profound impact of not feeling accepted or belonging within the school environment. For these girls, and many other Autistic young people, rejection and exclusion become harsh realities (Ambitious About Autism, n.d.; Critchley, 2019).

Self-acceptance following diagnosis

Diagnosis appeared to bring a sense of clarity and understanding to the girls. They were all aware of their differences to normative standards, yet they did not understand why. It could be argued that the diagnosis provided a sense of belonging; belonging to a category of being that other people also belong to. However, the diagnosis had to be given by professionals following a referral process. SS explained that the challenge of getting a diagnosis felt like it was something they did not want you to have. This highlights the power held by the professionals who choose to make referrals and those making the judgement of whether the individual meets the predetermined diagnostic criteria.

The impact of diagnosis for most of the girls was that it enabled them to accept and authentically be themselves. Lily was the exception in that she was still in the process of understanding and accepting herself as she was recently diagnosed (1 year ago). This fits with Limburg's (2016) assertion that she did not know who she was when she 'dropped the mask'. She had to construct her new identity which took time. This also echoes Poppy's statement that she had zero identity because she had masked for so long.

Although diagnosis may have provided a sense of belonging or community, the girls spoke about how autism impacts individuals in different ways, thus varying presentations and needs. A finding from Belek (2023) was that it may not be possible for an Autistic space to cater for all due to differing needs for adjustments and differing presentations. Poppy spoke about the lack of Black representation in subcultures that tended to be majority neurodivergent and that in these spaces she still felt different due to being Black. Belek (2023) also highlighted a lack of representation of racially minoritised groups at the Autscape conference. Essentially, humans engage in group behaviours regardless of their neurotype, which suggests that even when adjustments are made to the environment, there will still be some who feel they do not belong or are unaccepted.

5.2.3. Managing Social Expectations and Norms

Developing individual identity assessed against social norms

All participants pinpointed a significant moment during school years 3-5 (ages 7-10) when they first became conscious of how others perceived them. This realisation marks a critical temporal aspect of their experiences, underscoring how their awareness of intersubjective dynamics in school life shifted before and after this point. This might be understood by considering Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stages, specifically stages three (Industry vs. Inferiority) and four (Identity vs. Role Confusion). Between ages 7-12, children start comparing themselves to peers, leading to feelings of pride or inadequacy based on these comparisons (Erikson, 1968). As they reach adolescence (ages 12-18), they seek a sense of self by exploring different roles and identities. Successful navigation of this stage results in a robust sense of self, maintaining personal beliefs despite others' views. Conversely, pressure to conform can lead to a weaker sense of self and identity confusion (Erikson, 1968).

While Erikson's theory has faced criticisms (Sorell & Montgomery, 2001) and does not account for neurodivergent development, the stages coincide with points in time when children’s social worlds typically tend to shift, for example, the transition from parental attachment to autonomy and peer reliance in adolescence (Delgado et al., 2022). However, it must be acknowledged that these transition stages may vary for Autistic young people with needs that require higher levels of adult intervention, supervision and care, including physical, medical, and verbal communication needs. Yet, Erikson’s theory is reflected in the experiences of the girls in this study, such as Maia's belief that one cannot truly know oneself without being authentic. The feelings of inadequacy from social comparisons during these stages may contribute to behaviours like masking and camouflaging, as found in various studies (Bargiela et al., 2016; Chapman, 2020; Tierney et al., 2016).

The role of groups influencing identity

Social practices play a considerable role in how individuals perceive their identity (Hamilton et al., 1994). Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) postulates the role that others can play in identity formation. SIT suggests that individuals socially categorise themselves and others. When individuals identify as part of a group, they develop a sense of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This social identity influences their self-esteem, particularly their feeling of belonging. Instead of viewing themselves as individuals (‘I’), they perceive themselves as a collective (‘we'). When social identity becomes prominent, group members will work towards shared goals, adhering or assimilating to group norms, beliefs, and values (Hogg, 2001; Haslam, 2001; Reimer et al., 2020). It is a theory that aligns with social constructionism as it acknowledges the role of power and politics in constructing social groups. This involves assigning positive characteristics to the ingroup and negative characteristics to those outside of the group (in-group/out-group mentality) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This leads to increased self-esteem for group members yet can marginalise those in the out-group, which explains why individuals feel the desire to be accepted and belong.

When considering intersectionality, social identity becomes complex. Individuals categorise themselves in multiple ways due to the multiple identities they hold. Social identity becomes salient depending on the context. Thus, the ways in which multiple identities come together are fluid and diffuse (Simon & Hamilton, 1994; Fenton & Smith, 2016). There are always differences in power and status between groups and categories due to notions of normality, but also between individuals and sub-groups; this influences how people relate to each other (Fenton, 2010). Consideration of social categorisation is crucial in a hierarchical social world that is defined by group distinctions and marred by harmful social stereotypes that maintain hierarchies (Tajfel, 1969; Reimer et al., 2020). Having multiple identities that hold less power and status can lead to further marginalisation and fragmentation, negatively impacting experiences and relationships (Fenton & Smith, 2016).

Marginalisation as a social process

Foucault (1977) claims that power is constituted through scientific truths, yet this power is not often granted to marginalised people. An example is the categorisation of autism based on outsider perceptions of autism. When considering SIT, in-groups generally assign negative characteristics to out-groups to increase their self-esteem and status, which in turn isolates and marginalises them (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Both Maia and Lily discussed peers expecting autism to have a specific ‘look’, suggesting a pre-conceived cognitive schema of what autism is. Maia recognised pre-conceived ideas of autism as being ableist. Lily asserted that racialised, gendered and appearance-based assumptions about autism lead individuals to assume mental health issues as an explanation of presentation that is different to the majority rather than neurodiversity*.* This indicates how individuals are grouped by pre-conceived characteristics and the negative assumptions that can be held. It also demonstrates the complexities of holding multiple identities that are assigned less status and power, whilst holding some identities that can convey privilege, such as being seen as ‘pretty’.

How ideology shapes social process to maintain social inequalities

Skinner-Dorkenoo et al. (2023) argue that broader societal systems operate across levels from interpersonal to cultural, reinforcing and producing biases in individuals. Historically, systems and structures have been utilised to maintain hierarchies of power and marginalisation (Fenton, 2016). Within psychology, disorders were created specifically for subordinated groups, which embedded their marginalisation (Fenton, 2016). Women were said to have the medical condition ‘hysteria’, understood to be a result of disturbances in the womb (Tasca et al., 2012). Black enslaved people who ran away were said to have a mental disorder known as ‘drapetomania’ (White, 2002; Willoughby, 2021). Homosexuality was referred to as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) until 1974, and AIDS was originally referred to as GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) (Ewing, 2020). The APA also listed transgenderism as a disorder (Zucker & Spitzer, 2005). Poverty, race, and disability are often conflated with criminality (Jones, 2002; Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2023). These perceptions of individuals and groups who do not meet normative standards of Whiteness and ability are embedded throughout systems through policies, laws, and standards that create constitutional divides (Johnson, 2017).

The normalisation of dehumanising disabled individuals through rights removal is evident in actions such as forced reproductive control and discriminatory immigration policies (Annamma et al., 2016a; Terry & Urla, 1995; Caps et al., 2005). In the UK, disabled individuals comprised about 60% of COVID-19 deaths, and there were several reports of illegal Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) orders being placed on disabled individuals' medical files during the pandemic (Stevens, 2021). A significant lack of media attention demonstrates the societal prioritisation of disabled lives and consideration of disability during the pandemic (Liddiard, 2023). Disability is often defined by hegemonic ideas of normalcy, with traditional views framing it as a binary condition based on professional assessments, yet autism is described as a spectrum (Annamma et al., 2016a; Annamma et al., 2016b). Some of the girls did not identify as being disabled due to not needing daily care, aligning with findings that not all Autistic people see themselves as disabled, reflecting the deep-seated societal views on disability (Kenny et al., 2016).

The ruling class gains and maintains power by creating divisions within and between social groups; they exploit social classifications and hierarchies by fuelling conflicts and tensions between groups (Johnson, 2017). They promote common sense ideological systems such as smartness and goodness to deploy normative ideas and create normative cultures (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016). Whiteness and ability are often perceived as the standard and occupy the highest position in the social hierarchy. As a result, people's individual ideas of what is 'normal' are shaped by media representations, how disability and race are categorised, and the social constructs dictated by those in positions of power (Johnson, 2017). The result is an unequal society where those who can claim Whiteness and ability are granted privileges unconsciously that often go unacknowledged (Johnson, 2017). Inequality, insidiously embedded through systems and structures, becomes an unobservable object that is difficult to articulate. Racial biases tend to be passed on in implicit, hidden and conceivably deniable ways (Skinner-Dorkenoo et al.,2023). Furthermore, individuals are socialised in an unequal society without systemic explanations for inequality; they may internalise that system, concluding that society's structure is as it should be (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021; Garcia-Sanchez et al., 2019; Roberts, 2022). Individuals may deny their societal privileges and defend against the assertion they exist (Johnson, 2017; Nnawulezi et al., 2020). Individuals can deploy psychological defences when matters arise, such as denial, which can be observed through White fragility or the claim they do not see colour or race (DiAngelo, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2022; West et al., 2021). Consequentially, society is conditioned to remain silent on matters of inequality; to be aware of and speak about systemic inequality threatens the maintenance of the status quo (Johnson, 2017).

SS provided an example of a defence deployed by her deputy headteacher in response to a peer and teacher using the N-word. She found his defence of the White peer and teacher 'shocking', presumably because he was Black and in a position of power within the school. He explained that they did not understand the meaning of the N-word due to English being their second language, and therefore did not act on racism. He also did not support SS' idea to create a Black history book club, claiming it would offend some people and make them feel uncomfortable. Dismantling Racism (2021) discusses internalised inferiority (self-hate) as a foundation of racism. An aspect of internalised inferiority is having limited choices, perceiving that the only options are to conform to Whiteness or disrupt the system (Dismantling Racism, 2021). It seems this may have been the view of SS's deputy headteacher. His assertion of offending 'some people' suggests his feelings of inferiority in managing such a situation. Although granted a position of power in the school, repeated instances of not tackling racism suggest he may have internalised notions of white superiority and acted accordingly. This exemplifies that Black and Brown individuals are not exempt from ideological influence. Hence, it is crucial for educational systems to acknowledge that diversity in leadership teams alone is not enough to tackle social inequalities.

5.2.4. Navigating the Intersection of Autism, Race, and Gender as a Masking and Camouflaging Black Autistic Girl

Reproduction of social inequalities within UK education

Entrenched inequalities related to race, class, and disability are known to permeate through the UK education system (Lewis & Arday, 2023; Blanchett, 2006; Coard, 1971). Several studies (Collins, 2003; Ferri, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) highlight how racism and ableism collaborate in tandem in schools, through normalised practices such as labelling students of colour as ‘at-risk’ for not conforming or meeting unmarked norms of Whiteness, communicating to others that the student is physically and mentally incapable (Annamma et al., 2016a). This was seen with Lily, who was labelled by her teacher as having bad behaviour for expressing emotional distress when she was being racially harassed and struggling to ask for help when she needed it. All girls were repeatedly labelled as aggressive or having an attitude by the teaching staff. SS explained that this was often due to teachers’ misinterpretation of unmet learning needs. Normative cultural standards enable school staff and society to view certain students as inferior and deficient (Collins, 2003).

Repeated labelling by peers perpetuated negative perceptions, reinforcing neurotypical standards of behaviour. For example, SS was called a ‘basket case’ due to her physical responses to sensory overload, as her response did not conform to normative neurotypical classroom behaviour. Having an outward response to sensory stimuli generally does not meet neurotypical expectations. The word ‘basket case’ carries historically offensive connotations as it was often used to depict individuals who lost all four limbs in World War I as useless and unsustainable (The Guardian, 2012). Currently, it is used to refer to someone who is functionally incapacitated from extreme nervousness or to describe countries with failing economies (The Guardian, 2012; Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This adds to the negative stigma around what is deemed a mental health concern, rather than seeing it for what it is: an emotional and physiological response to an overload of sensory stimuli.

The damaging ‘angry Black girl’ stereotype

In analysing the participant data, it is not possible to segregate their experiences of discrimination by the aspects of their identity. The negative stereotypes they were subjected to were influenced by overlapping identities. Lily and Maia spoke about the angry Black girl stereotype being rooted in societal beliefs that Black girls and women are more masculine (Goff et al., 2008; Kwate & Threadcraft, 2015). SS explained Black girls are called aggressive for simply defending themselves when others are being negative towards them. Poppy gave an example of speaking passionately about colonialism in a Geography lesson. She explained that she generally speaks with the same tone, but when she has a lot of interest in a subject, her tone changes, and she speaks faster. She said her peers would respond by saying they were not angry with her and laughing stating that it is obvious she would speak on such matters because she is Black. These perceptions and responses were based on racial stereotypes in response to behaviours that did not conform to neurotypical standards, yet were not considered neurodivergent. Poppy's explanation of her vocal tone and passion for social justice could be considered as aspects of her autism (Sharda et al., 2010). If this was commonly understood without judgement, her peers may have treated her differently. However, Poppy's example has the added layer of race. Poppy was speaking on the matter of colonialism, which can be uncomfortable for White people as it reveals and requires acknowledgement of the historical context of white superiority and white privilege (McIntosh, 1988; Ross & Butler, 2022).

Stereotyping and negative perceptions held about specific groups of individuals, maintain hierarchies of power and inequality. All of the girls explained that racial stereotypes were often the first port of call when trying to understand them, which dismissed their emotional turmoil and need for support. This supports the findings of Corbett & Perepa (2007), who identified that stereotyping and inadequate service provision hampers support for these families. Furthermore, the girls were not considered to be Autistic. Lily described this racial stereotyping as 'damaging' because emotional distress can be common in Autistic individuals, but as a Black Autistic girl, autism is often not considered. This circles back to consideration of disability in historically known Black figures who were killed due to their race, such as Emmet Till. Their increased vulnerability is negated by overlooking the role of perceptions of disability and race together; these matters cannot be examined separately (Bell, 2011; Lewis, 2022; Annamma et al., 2016a)

The conflation of race, ability, and class stereotypes in UK education

Racial stereotypes about Black intelligence intertwine race and ability, affecting educational experiences as seen in Poppy's time at a predominantly White private school (Annamma et al., 2016a). Gilborn and Mirza (2000), in a study commissioned by the DfE, discovered that Black children initially outperformed others upon entering school, but their performance aligned with or fell below the local average as they progressed. This trend was stark in the largest LA they examined, where Black students started twenty points above the national average but finished as the lowest-performing group, twenty-one points below this average. Furthermore, the study revealed that White students' performance improved annually, regardless of socioeconomic background. Following this report, the Foundation Stage Profile, a teacher-subjective measure, replaced the statutory baseline assessment used at school entry. Teacher-subjective measures were criticised during the COVID-19 pandemic as being highly biased (Crisp et al., 2024). This is because subjective approaches allow human error and bias to influence results. Considering structures of normativity influencing perception, this disadvantages marginalised groups and demonstrates the power of the government to adopt policies which can reproduce social inequality.

Black acceptance of disability

Historically, arguments that enslaved Black people were feeble-minded and lacked intelligence and were thus disabled were used to deny them citizenship rights (Baynton, 2001; Hogarth, 2017). In response, many defended themselves vigorously against the label of disability (Annamma et al., 2016a). The common use of physical disablement as punishment and the devaluation of disabled or weaker-bodied Black individuals further entrenched negative perceptions of disability among Black people (Hogarth, 2017; Reiss, 2022). Disability acceptance in the Black community could be seen as a transgenerational consequence of how disability was weaponised against Black enslaved people.

5.2.5. Challenges with Sensory Sensitivities and Overload

Whiteness and oppression as a context for responses to sensory overload

Elliott (2016) asserts that white supremacy ingrains in White individuals a disassociation from their bodies. This occurs by prioritising thinking over feeling and disregarding bodily signals and information (Elliott, 2016). Manganyi (1981) analyses racialised embodiment and claims that Whiteness rejects the body, where Whiteness equates to the mind, and Blackness equates to the bodily. Symbolically, the mind is perceived as superior and good, and the body is perceived as inferior and evil (Hook, 2008). Psychology has added to the delineation of body and mind; for example, in psychoanalytical theory, Freud (1984) depicts an ego emerging from the surface of bodily experience yet never homogenous to it, and Lacan (1977) posits a primitive disequilibrium in the *corps morcelé*. Berila (2016) highlights that oppressing and dehumanising others necessitates dissociation from embodied experiences, making it easier to harm them. Paradoxically, this process dehumanises the oppressor (Hook, 2008).

Embodied living relies on listening to one's body, feeling one's emotions, releasing passions and uniting critical thinking powers with feeling (Shapiro, 1999). Integrated embodiment promotes awareness of bodily messages, which increases the likelihood of awareness of typically unconscious thoughts. This enables more awareness and sensitivity to others' bodies and experiences (Mess, 2023). With this in mind, it makes sense that sensory sensitivities in Autistic and neurodivergent individuals are not understood by the neuro-majority, as sensory responses deviate from perceptions of normativity. It may be an aspect of why Autistic individuals often have a strong sense of justice, being more aware and sensitive to others' embodied experiences.

Autistic sensory embodied school experiences

Poppy, Lily and SS described how their sensory environment led to dysregulation that they were ostracised for expressing. SS was labelled a ‘basket case’, Lily had ‘bad behaviour’, and Poppy was ‘crazy’. SS describes not being aware of what sensory overload was at the time that she was experiencing it. Poppy describes being unaware of the response she would get from peers for wearing the same jumper every day, inside out, that was hardly washed because it was comfortable; she explains they thought it was weird. Lily's behaviour of tightly hugging, driven by her sensory and emotional needs, was misinterpreted through racial stereotypes about Black people, leading to perceptions of aggression. These responses led the girls to mask and camouflage to avoid being perceived in a negative light for their sensory sensitivities but led to them internalising stress and anxiety that they needed to recover from. For SS, she took two years out of education after Year 11, Lily would stay at home for months at a time to recuperate, and Poppy became an inpatient for 6 months due to deteriorating mental health. This demonstrates the detrimental impact on the body of an Autistic individual whose sensory environment is not adapted and they are unable to express themselves authentically.

Many Autistic students struggle in educational settings due to environments that are heavily sensory stimulating and/or do not accommodate the need for sensory inputs such as movement (Caldwell, 2017). Schools host a list of sensory issues for Autistic students, including:

- bright artificial lights,
- loud bells to signal the end of the lesson,
- variable temperatures depending on which room or building you are in,
- unexpected loud noises,

- overcrowded wall displays and visual stimuli,
- unflexible school uniform policies,
- crowded corridors and loud noise between classes,
- needing permission to use the toilet,
- strong smells in rooms like the hall and dining room,
- compulsory sitting on the carpet for lengthy periods of time in a specific seated position.

Some sensory stimuli, as well as the cumulative impact of sensory input, can lead to physical discomfort and pain in Autistic individuals (Caldwell, 2017; Caldwell, 2008). Gillingham (1995) suggests Autistic children and young people need visual and auditory tranquillity. Caldwell (2017) describes a duplex problem in schools: the environment and inadequate teacher training. Schools are typically designed by people who do not understand the sensory discomforts experienced by Autistic people, which results in environments that echo, are over-bright and lack calm spaces for sensory overload retreat (McNally et al., 2013). Many teachers have not received training on sensory needs during their teacher training; tight school budgets restrict teachers' access to up-to-date specialist training (Caldwell, 2017). Furthermore, not all training is informed by Autistic individuals or is neuro-affirmative. It is important to ensure that any training given to teaching staff on autism does not promote Autistic masking and camouflaging and rather is neuro-affirmative by promoting acceptance and flexibility or adjustments to environments, practice, and policies, rather than attempting to change the individual (Chellappa, 2023).

Caldwell (2017) explains that it is easy for a child to lose their sense of self when their feelings are not validated; they learn that they cannot trust the messages they are receiving from their bodies when their expressions of negative feelings are rejected. It is, therefore, crucial to validate their expressions regardless of how socially unacceptable they may seem (Caldwell, 2017). Caldwell (2013) suggests responding to body language to engage with Autistic children and young people as this reduces the strain on their processing system and is more meaningful. Caldwell (2017) asserts that we cannot engage an Autistic child cognitively until their sensory needs are catered for; failure to do this can lead to a school experience of survival rather than education (Caldwell, 2017). Schools often face challenges in meeting the sensory needs of children recognised as Autistic. For the participants of this study, achieving this level of understanding and accommodation was even more difficult.

5.2.6 The Significant Role of Support and Understanding

All the girls discussed the positive impact of receiving support and understanding from their families. Poppy noted that her parents' effort to learn about autism greatly supported her, while SS mentioned that her mother aided her during the diagnostic process by validating her research and encouraging her authenticity. This underscores that individuals, even without prior knowledge, can actively support and affirm Autistic individuals through learning and encouragement.

Systemic issues in the UK have significantly impacted the support and understanding available to Autistic children and young people. Austerity measures have resulted in substantial funding cuts across public services, leading to longer waiting times for autism assessments due to NHS budget reductions (British Medical Association [BMA], 2016). These funding cuts have also stretched services thin, reduced the number of available therapists, and closed 1000 Surestart Children Centres, which were essential in supporting family and child development (Smith et al., 2018; Dyson, 2023). Schools have faced severe strains, with decreased budgets leading to a shortage of resources, contributing to a high turnover of teachers and schools struggling to meet demands. Additionally, the residual effects of COVID-19 school closures have exacerbated issues in development, behaviour, and the rising number of children with additional needs (Otte, 2023).

Maia's positive school experiences, where specific individuals built relationships with her and were attuned to her needs, exemplify the impact of personalised support within educational settings. Similarly, Lily benefited from personalised support, Poppy was publicly recognised by a supportive teacher, and SS received proactive adjustments for exams even before her formal diagnosis. These instances demonstrate how individual efforts by educators can significantly enhance the educational experiences of Autistic students, effectively mitigating systemic barriers and fostering a supportive environment.

5.3 Practical Implications and Recommendations

There are many structural and systemic barriers to support, yet this study has unearthed many ways in which the data can be applied practically. The following recommendations have been informed by the participant data, considering the systemic and structural biases and barriers impacting UK education.

5.3.1 Educational Psychologists

Acknowledging social inequalities in the UK and recognising one's societal privileges is crucial (Nnawulezi et al., 2020). This includes understanding the historical contexts of norms surrounding Whiteness and ability. EPs, who are predominantly White, middle-class, and highly educated since holding a doctorate has been a requirement since 2010, must be aware of the privileges these statuses confer (Association of EPs [AEP], 2021). It is important for EPs to recognise the potential perceptions of others and the dynamics of power in their interactions with children, families, and educators. Romani et al. (2019) argue that failing to be conscious of societal norms contributes to the perpetuation of inequity.

HCPC (2023) standards require practitioner psychologists to take an active role in social justice. This is vital as when the current disciplinary power often goes unchallenged and unquestioned, the hierarchical order is normalised and hence re-enforced (Esposito & Romano, 2014; Mutman, 2004; Vrabiescu, 2017; Romani et al., 2019). Therefore, EPs must problematise silence and psychological defences by taking active stances.

Referrals

EPs should consider intersectional experiences and marginalised identities from the initial referral, and this is of particular importance when receiving requests for students with social, emotional, and mental health needs. Students should be assessed holistically, taking into account both learning and social communication needs while remaining alert to potential biases or stereotypes that could affect referrals.

EPs should review referral patterns during planning meetings with schools for variations in aspects such as gender, ethnicity, area of need, and year group. It is also vital to consider various forms of exclusion, like internal exclusions and managed moves, to ensure needs are properly recognised and addressed, promoting genuine inclusion. This approach is essential since evidence suggests that Black children and those with SEN are more likely to face exclusion (Timpson, 2019).

Consultation

EPs use consultation as a means to collaboratively problem-solve with families and school staff and devise strategies and interventions. Consultation is also an opportunity to widen the narrative about a young person (Dowling, 2003). EPs can use consultation to challenge stereotypes, misunderstandings and dismissal of needs such as those experienced by the girls in this study. EPs have the interpersonal tools to question, reflect back, and affirm others to highlight different perspectives that can disrupt normative ways of thinking about neurodiversity and social constructs such as disability, race and gender.

Intervention

EPs must ensure that the strategies and recommendations they make are neuro-affirmative, not expecting Autistic students to conform to neurotypical ideals of interactions and behaviours. Many Autistic adults have given accounts of trauma caused by ABA (Autistics Against ABA, 2017), which prompts questions about the measures used to inform evidence-based practice. An intervention may be successful in producing behaviours that meet neurotypical ideals. However, this promotes Autistic masking and camouflaging, which comes at an emotional and physical cost to the individual, prioritising the comfort of neurotypicals and reinforcing power inequities (Roberts, 2023). EPs should be informed by current knowledge developed by and with Autistic individuals. EPs should actively engage with community groups and charities that offer Autistic-led and informed training, webinars and support, considering intersectional Autistic experience. Furthermore, cultural competence is key. Therefore, EPs can use tools such as Sakata’s culturally responsive practice framework (2024; see Figure 6).

Figure 13

Culturally Responsive Practice Framework (Sakata, 2024)

Systemic work

EPs are increasingly working systemically with schools to increase capacity and make the most effective use of their limited resources. This can be done through training, staff supervision, and supporting the development of assessment, planning, and review systems through activities such as audits and feedback. EPs also face systemic barriers in terms of funding for EP training, a limited workforce, and statutory demands that may limit time for early intervention and preventative work (Atfield et al., 2023). To address these challenges effectively, EPs should consistently engage in multidisciplinary work with other agencies and professionals such as social workers, CAMHS, and occupational therapists. Collaboration with community organisations and businesses can broaden funding sources and support services. Additionally, leveraging digital tools and online platforms for training and supervision could enhance their reach and efficiency. These solution-focused strategies can help maximise impact, ensuring that even with limited resources, EPs can continue to offer critical early intervention and preventative services effectively.

5.3.2 School Staff

Since the austerity measures of 2010, schools have faced significant reductions in budgets and resources, pushing them beyond their capacity. The pressures are acknowledged, yet the participant data underscores an urgent need for substantial change to be made in schools.

Staff knowledge and understanding

All girls described others' perceptions and not being understood as a key factor in their school experiences. With this in mind, it would be beneficial for staff to engage in continuous professional development to deepen their knowledge and understanding. This can be done by engaging with Autistic-led resources and the neurodivergent community.

Adopting neuro-affirming interventions

The participant data highlights the influence of acceptance and understanding on their experience. Thus, schools should ensure that interventions are neuro-affirming, seeking to accept and understand the individual rather than attempting to make them more neurotypical. Many Autistic individuals experience alexithymia, meaning they struggle to recognise or describe their feelings (Salles et al., 2023). Poppy explained she could not name emotions she felt due to masking for so long. Yet, many interventions recommended for social skill development and emotional regulation, rely on recognising and verbally expressing emotion. It would be beneficial to consider alternative evidence-based interventions such as the *Interoception*

Curriculum (Mahler, 2019), which focuses on bodily responses rather than articulation of emotions. Furthermore, high-quality teaching strategies and reasonable adjustments must also focus on adaptations to the environment rather than changing the individual.

Addressing systemic dismissal and devaluation

Previous research and the participant data highlight the dismissal and devaluation of parental concerns (AGN, 2022). It is important to listen to parents without judgement, even if the school does not share the same concerns and it seems the setting does not have the resources or understanding to meet the child's needs. Schools must remember that they hold the power to decide who is referred to professionals and, therefore, can inadvertently become a systemic barrier to support when they do not value and listen to parental perspectives. Furthermore, the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) stresses collaboration with families.

Actively dealing with discrimination and inequity

The participants' data indicates that schools must actively tackle racism, ableism, sexism, and other discrimination. Anti-racism, anti-ableism, and anti-sexism policies should be explicitly written into school behavioural guidelines (National Education Union 2022; 2024). By explicitly including these policies in behavioural guidelines, schools convey that discrimination and bias are unacceptable within educational institutions, fostering a fairer and more equitable society. Regular PSHE lessons and assemblies can educate about discrimination and promote inclusivity beyond observances such as Black History Month, Autism awareness, and International Women's Day.

Creating inclusive physical and social environments

Most of the girls struggled with the everyday sensory demands of the school environment. To ensure the educational setting is inclusive of all sensory needs, creating accessible sensory calming spaces and providing reasonable adjustments, such as staggered class transitions, can be beneficial to sensory sensitivities and overload. Belek (2023) indicated that altered environments can challenge structures of normalcy and help Autistic individuals feel more comfortable, reducing the perceived demand to mask. SS suggested lunchtime and after-school clubs where neurodivergent children can come together to share their interests, experiences and advice on what helps and can foster a sense of belonging and comradery.

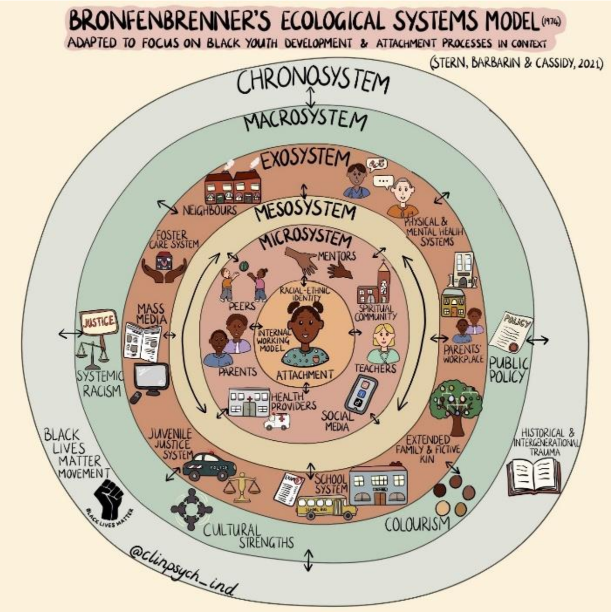
Personalised and holistic support

Assessment of learning needs is crucial to ensure they are being appropriately met and not masked. Tailored individualised support, informed by the SENCo as part of the Assess, Plan, Do, Review process (DfE, 2015), will be important to maintain and adapt support where necessary. Additionally, a trusted key adult who is attuned to the individual child and builds a relationship with them so they can feel heard, validated, and understood; moreover, they can advocate for them when needed.

5.3.3. Educational Settings and Systems

Figure 14

Adapted Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System Model (Stern et al., 2021)



Inclusive learning environments

Stern et al. (2021) discuss the systemic barriers that affect the development and attachment of Black youth, highlighting the need for adaptable settings and systems. This concept aligns with Heidegger's idea of the ‘person-in-context’ (Smith et al., 2022), emphasising that environments must be flexible to effectively support Autistic individuals, taking into account all facets of their identity.

UNESCO (2015) advocates for inclusive school environments that cater to all backgrounds and needs, emphasising that everyone should feel a sense of belonging. School policies should be adaptable, taking into account individual differences and including diversity in staff and leadership to ensure students see themselves represented. Moreover, the school culture should embrace diverse approaches and ways of thinking to genuinely support diversity (BPS DECP, 2022).

Challenging social inequity

By adapting policies and practices, schools can begin to challenge social inequalities and work towards equity. However, this can only have a partial impact because it does not challenge the dominant societal discourses and perceptions that maintain social inequalities (Healy et al., 2010). It is difficult for schools to challenge the status quo as they are measured against academic attainment which is rooted in ‘from-above’ epistemic privileged notions of knowledge (Held, 2020).

Safeguarding practices and consideration

The girls in the study demonstrated self-reflection skills that seemed to be shaped by their challenging school experiences. These experiences forced them to mature quickly, as they had to navigate complex social situations without the typical period of childhood innocence. This phenomenon aligns with the adultification often experienced by Black children, who are frequently seen as older than they are and burdened with adult responsibilities (Davis, 2022). This is further complicated by the vulnerabilities associated with autism, such as difficulties in social understanding, which can place these children in precarious situations (NAS, 2014). It is crucial for schools to recognise these challenges, avoid decisions based on stereotypes, and ensure the protection of these vulnerable groups (Davis, 2022; NAS, 2014).

5.3.4. Autistic Young People

These recommendations come directly from the girls’ interviews:

- Be yourself, otherwise, you will never know who you are. You do not need to please other people to make them feel comfortable. Even if that means you lose some people, they were not meant to be there to begin with.
- People can be mean and unkind. Do not let their words affect how you view yourself and your future.
- Never give up your hobbies. Continue to enjoy your interests, and you will automatically find other people who share your interests.

- Make friends with like-minded people. This will reduce social demands and expectations because they will share your interests and understand and accept you.
- You can also make friends with people who are different to you. Not everyone will dislike you because you look or act differently; they will see you as a human being.
- It is important to have someone that you can talk to, like a parent or friend, who can speak up for you in moments when you are unable to speak.
- Surround yourself with good people so you can ask for help when you are struggling. You need safe spaces to help you feel comfortable to do this.
- Be aware of how cultural differences might influence others’ judgements of you, especially if these judgements are coming from an older generation or family from another country where cultures and practices differ. Do not take it too personally.
- Do not listen to others who say you are not Black because of your interests or behaviour. It is a logically incorrect statement.
- Masking is not always negative; it can make a conversation easier. However, notice when you do it to make sure it is not affecting you or the way you think about yourself. Always remember who you are.
- Talk to yourself. No one understands you better than you. Self-talk and reflection can help you understand what you like, who you are, and who you want to be around.
- Love yourself to the fullest.
- Do not be ashamed to be Autistic. There is nothing shameful about being Autistic. Autism is cool.

5.4. Strengths and Limitations

A strength of this study is its novel intersectional approach to exploring Autistic masking and camouflaging in UK educational settings. The kaleidoscope analytical approach was a further strength that allowed for micro to macro level examination of the girls' experiences framed through multiple theoretical lenses. Furthermore, it included Autistic voices and had a neurodivergent researcher with lived and professional experience who could relate to and understand their experiences. Employing IPA allowed for biases to be brought to consciousness and named for transparency and integrity.

Limitations of this study were that the participants were all from London, and there may have been differences in other parts of the UK. All participants were able to verbally articulate their experiences to a stranger, which means participants who find it harder to communicate verbally to unfamiliar people would have inadvertently been excluded, resulting in specific experiences and insights being missed. Although some of the participants had other diagnoses, these were not fully explored in terms of the impact on masking and camouflaging. IPA values quality over quantity, yet this was a small homogenous sample; therefore, transferability might be considered limited. That being said, many of the insights fit with previous quantitative and qualitative studies.

5.5. Self-reflexivity

The researcher underestimated the emotional impact of exploring this topic and did not anticipate the physical pain that delving into the historical context would evoke. This reflection highlights that despite increased awareness, substantial change remains elusive. Throughout the research process, the researcher gained significant personal insights, particularly relating to their own Autistic experiences, which they hope will enhance their parenting and interactions with their neurodivergent children. The findings from the study have already led to changes in the researcher's professional practices. They have become acutely aware of neurotypical and normative ideals, experiencing physical discomfort when encountering language or suggestions that are not neuro-affirming. To mitigate bias and improve the research integrity, the researcher engaged in regular supervision and peer supervision, reflecting on their own responses and shared experiences with others.

5.6. Future research

Future research should accommodate Autistic young people who may be more comfortable communicating by other means, such as writing. This would enable more Autistic experiences to be heard and increase the knowledge base further. Co-occurring conditions such as dyslexia, ADHD, hypermobility, and dyspraxia are common in Autistic individuals; therefore, they warrant further exploration into how these conditions could be impacting Autistic individuals' experiences.

A larger scale study that includes younger voices from all backgrounds and identities, in UK primary education (Years 3-7) is a current gap in research that would be useful to understand Autistic masking and camouflaging motivations and behaviours. From the girls’ data, this appeared to be a critical stage of being aware of others’ perceptions and feeling the need to mask and camouflage to fit in. Currently, research tends to focus on adolescents and adults, and this may be due to it being more difficult to explore these concepts with younger children. This could be overcome through the use of projective techniques such as the ideal classroom/school (Moran, 2021; Williams, 2014).

Further research could use kaleidoscope analysis to explore phenomena from micro to macro level, considering individual experiences and structural and systemic influences. It could also consider other marginalised aspects of identity, such as socioeconomic status, sexuality, gender diversity, religion, and multi-lingual.

5.7 Dissemination

The findings of this thesis will be disseminated through academic conferences and peer-reviewed journal articles to reach a wider academic audience and contribute to the existing body of knowledge. Additionally, summaries of the research will be shared on various social media platforms and professional networks to engage with practitioners and stakeholders who can apply these insights in real-world settings.

5.8. Conclusion

The experience of masking and camouflaging in Black Autistic girls in UK education is unique and complex. It is influenced by a long, painful historical context of oppression and discrimination against women, Black and disabled people, that remains current today. These experiences are situated within a society structured to create and maintain social inequities based on perceptions that normalcy aligns with the concepts of Whiteness and ability.

The girls' experiences were shaped by the compounding effect of having multiple identities that are discriminated against. However, the support they received from friends and family, specific teaching staff, and diagnosis led to self-acceptance and self-prioritisation. A need for acceptance and belonging drove all the girls' behaviours and influenced their experiences; therefore developing acceptance and belonging is vital to consider in all aspects of support and intervention. However, to truly overcome these issues, social change is needed structurally and systemically.

Black Autistic girls hold multiple identities that are oppressed and discriminated against in society; they may also hold other identities that grant privilege in society like cognitive ability, accent, education, or geography. This is not to say that they no longer experience discrimination; it is to say that experiences are complex and individual. Before any other social construct, in the educational context, the girls' Blackness was considered first, and they were conscious that was how they were perceived. Professionals working with children and young people must not assume they know or understand their experience by judging them based on socially constructed identity categories. They must hold curiosity, be aware of identities that are discriminated against and actively work towards better by listening, empathising and actively dismantling and challenging social inequities.

"Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a better person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in." (King, 1959)

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Introduction

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Appendices

Appendix A

Summary of Literature Review Articles

Article	Research design	Data Collection method	Participants	Aims
Literature review question 1				
N/A				
Literature review question 2				
Lewis & Arday (2023)	Qualitative	Dialogical knowledge production & collaborative autoethnography	2 Black, neurodivergent sociologists (the authors).	To offer sociological reflections on race and neurodiversity in UK higher education.
Literature review question 3				
Milner et al. (2023)	Quantitative cross-sectional study	Self-reported questionnaires. (used existing scales used but no reference to their Cronbach alphas)	3 groups of young adults: those with an autism diagnosis, those who exhibited high Autistic traits but were not diagnosed, and those with low Autistic traits.	To investigate gender differences in the factors leading to and resulting from camouflaging behaviours among young adults with varying levels of Autistic traits.
Halsall et al. (2021)	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews	8 Autistic girls (12-15yrs), their mothers & their educators (6 teaching assistants & 1 senior staff member)	To examine the camouflaging strategies used by adolescent autistic girls who attend both mainstream and specialist resource classes, and the participants are the girls, their mothers, and their educators
Bassett (2022)	Qualitative	Focus groups	9 Autistic girls (11-21yrs) and 6 of their parents.	To explore the development of camouflaging behaviours adopted by

				Autistic girls in mainstream secondary schools.
Lai et al. (2017)	Quantitative	Self-report surveys, data from assessments	60 Autistic adults (30 female, 30 male,18-42yrs)	To quantify and explore camouflaging in Autistic men and women.
Lai et al. (2019)	Quantitative	Self-report surveys, data from assessments	60 Autistic adults (30 female, 30 male,18-42yrs)	To investigate the neural self-representation in Autistic women and its association with camouflaging.
Literature review question 4				
Belek (2023)	Qualitative	Ethnographic fieldwork involving observations, in-depth interviews, informal chats, attendance at an event and workshops.	Autistic attendees at the AutScape event who volunteered.	To explore the concept of freedom and authenticity in an autistic space.
Cook et al. (2021)	Mixed-methods (Experiment and interview)	10 minute controlled social task followed by participants watching a video of the task with the researcher identifying instances of camouflaging and discussing their camouflaging experiences.	17 Autistic adults (8 females, 6 males and 3 agender/gender-neutral individuals)	To explore the camouflaging behaviours used by Autistic adults in everyday social situations, gaining Autistic perspective on their observed camouflaging experiences in the moment.
Cook et al. (2022)	Qualitative	A follow on from their 2021 study. Participants' descriptors of camouflaging behaviours were clustered into categories using	17 Autistic adults (8 females, 6 males and 3 agender/gender-neutral individuals)	To identify camouflaging behaviours in the moment as identified by the Autistic adults.

		content analysis.		
Chapman (2020)	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews analysed with thematic analysis.	20 Autistic teenagers (10 male, 10 female), aged 13-19 years, with an ASC diagnosis and IQ above 70.	To understand the relationship between Autistic masking and mental health in Autistic teenagers.

Appendix B

Critical Assessment Skills Programme (CASP) for qualitative studies

Paper	**Question**	**Yes**	**Can't tell**	**No**
Lewis & Arday (2023)	1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	X		
	2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	X		
	3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	X		
	4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	X		
	5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	X		
	6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered? The researchers are the participants, which is addressed	X		
	7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration? Potential ethical concerns around anonymity when speaking about difficulties with institutions can be identified due to the participants not being anonymous.		X	
	8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	X		
	9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	X		
	10. How valuable is the research?	X		
Halsall et al., (2021)	1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	X		
	2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	X		
	3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	X		
	4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	X		
	5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	X		
	6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	X (positionality statement)		
	7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	X		
	8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	X		
	9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	X		
	10. How valuable is the research?	X		

Bassett (2022)	1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	X		
	2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	X		
	3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	X		
	4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	X		
	5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	X		
	6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	X (positionality statement)		
	7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	X		
	8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	X		
	9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	X		
	10. How valuable is the research?	X		
Belek (2023)	1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	X		
	2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	X		
	3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	X		
	4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	X		
	5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	X		
	6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	X		
	7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	X		
	8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	X		
	9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	X		
	10. How valuable is the research?	X		
Cook et al. (2022)	1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	X		
	2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	X		
	3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	X		
	4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	X		
	5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	X		

	6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	X		
	7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	X		
	8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	X		
	9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	X		
	10. How valuable is the research?	X		
Chapman (2020)	1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	X		
	2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	X		
	3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	X		
	4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	X		
	5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	X		
	6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	X		
	7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	X		
	8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	X		
	9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	X		
	10. How valuable is the research?	X		

Appendix C

Holland & Rees (2010) A framework for critiquing quantitative research articles

Aspect	**Questions**
Focus	What topic is the concern of this article? Can you identify measurable ‘variables’ in the title or researcher’s statement concerning their main interest? Is this an important topic for research?
Background	How does the researcher argue that the topic is worthwhile? How widespread or big a problem is it? Is the seriousness of the topic reinforced by the previous studies? Is there a thorough review of the literature outlining current knowledge on this topic? Are the key variables defined and an attempt made to consider how they can be measured? E.g. definitions of ‘pain’ or ‘anxiety’ and descriptions of scales frequently used to measure them.
Aim	What is the statement of the aim of the data collection? This usually begins with the word ‘to’, e.g. ‘The aim of this study is ‘to examine/determine/ establish/compare/etc’. If it is a randomised control trial there may be a hypothesis.
Methodology or Broad approach	Within a quantitative approach, is it a survey, experimental (RCT), or correlation study? Does seem suitable given the aim of the study?
Tool of data collection	What was the method used to collect the data? Had this been used in previous studies and so may be regarded as reliable or accurate? If not, was it piloted? Is there any mention of reliability or validity? Is there a rationale given for the choice of tool? Could an alternative tool have been considered?
Method of data analysis and presentation	Is the method of processing and analysing the results described in the methods section, such as statistical process through SPSS computer analysis, and are the results clearly presented in the results/findings section? Does the researcher clearly explain any statistical techniques or methods of presentation such as tables, graphs, pie charts?
Sample	On how many people, events, or things are the results based? If questionnaires were used, what was the response rate? If it was a randomised control trial, what was the dropout rate? Is either of these likely to have an impact on the results? Were there inclusion and exclusion criteria stated? Were these reasonable given the research question and the nature of the sample? Do they limit to whom the results may apply? What method was used to select who were included in the study (the sampling strategy)? Does the sample suffer from any kind of bias?
Ethical considerations	Did an ethics committee (LREC, or in US an Institutional Review Board ‘IRB’) approve the study? Was informed consent gained and mention made of confidentiality? Could the study be said to be ethically rigorous?

Main Findings	What did they find in answer to their aim? What were the large results that relate to the aim of the study?
Conclusions and Recommendations	Did they give a clear answer to their aim? If they stated a hypothesis, did they say if this was supported or rejected? Were clear recommendations made (who should do what, how, now)?
Overall strengths and limitations	What would you say were the aspects of the study they did well? What aspects were less successful? Did they acknowledge any limitations to the study?
Application to practice	How do the results relate to practice? Should any changes be considered?

Appendix D

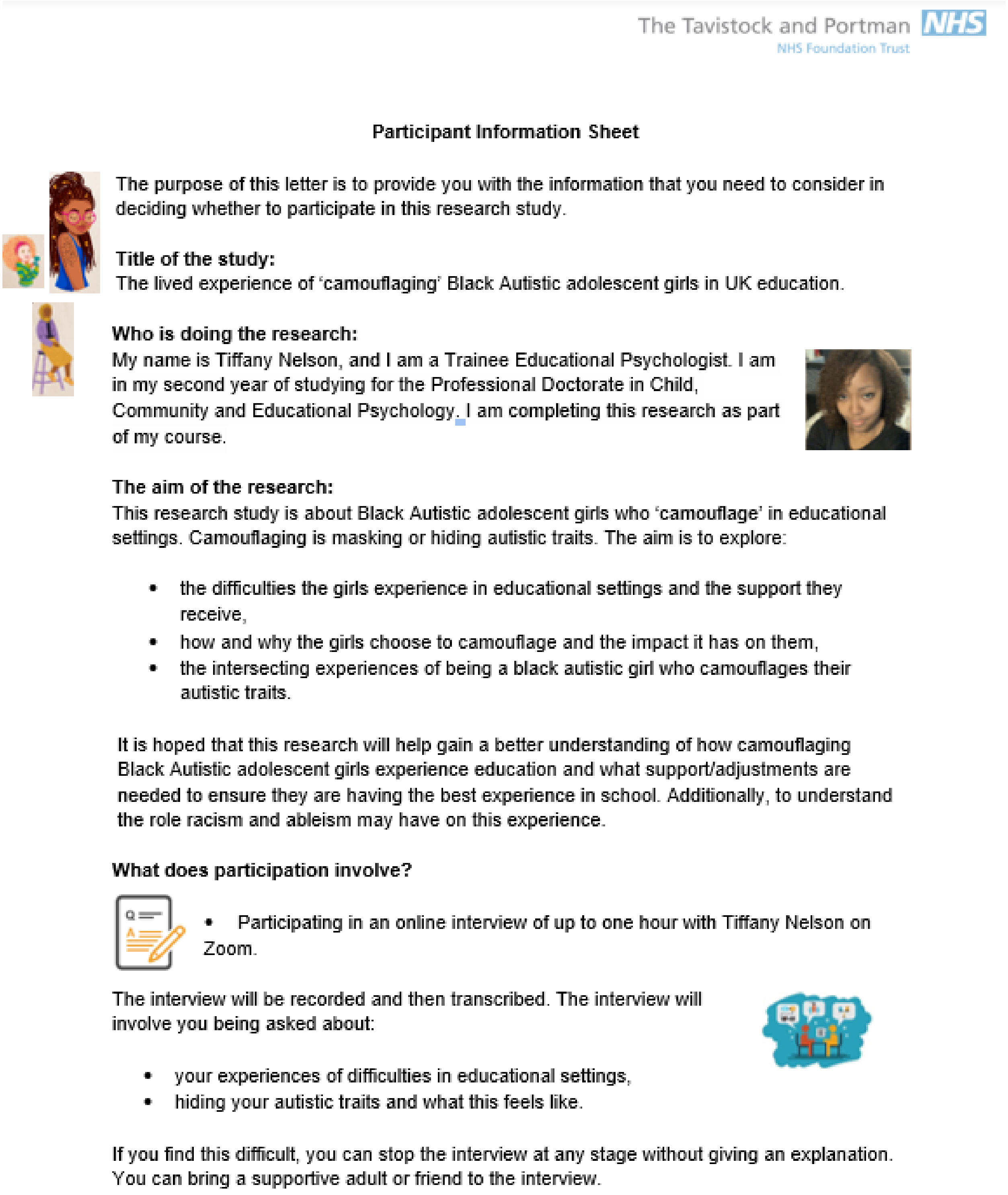
Summary of Excluded Studies

Paper	**Rationale**
LRQ 1 - What does the literature tell us about masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girls?	
Diemer, M. C., Gerstein, E. D., & Regester, A. (2022). Autism presentation in female and Black populations: Examining the roles of identity, theory, and systemic inequalities. Autism: The International Journal of Research & Practice, 26(8), 1931–1946. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221113501	Explores how autism is manifested and understood differently in female and Black populations, however, is US based
Golson, M. E., Haverkamp, C. R., McClain, M. B., Schwartz, S. E., Ha, J., Harris, B., & Benallie, K. J. (2022). Influences of student race/ethnicity and gender on autism special education classification considerations. Autism: The International Journal of Research & Practice, 26(6), 1423–1435. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211050440	Explores racial and gender disparities and implicit bias in autism identification, however, is US based
Tomlinson, S. (2016). Special education and minority ethnic young people in England: continuing issues. Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 37(4), 513–528. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2015.1073013	Does not focus on autism or Black girls specifically.
Azad, G., Holingue, C., Pfeiffer, D., Dillon, E., Reetzke, R., Kalb, L., Menon, D., Ji Su Hong, & Landa, R. (2022). The influence of race on parental beliefs and concerns during an autism diagnosis: A mixed-method analysis. Autism: The International Journal of Research & Practice, 26(5), 1176–1187. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211044345	Focuses on parental perspectives and does not focus on masking or camouflaging autism.
LRQ 2 - What does the literature tell us about Black Autistic people?	
N/A	
LRQ 3 - What does the literature tell us about masking and camouflaging Autistic girls?	
McQuaid, G. A., Lee, N. R., & Wallace, G. L. (2022). Camouflaging in autism spectrum disorder: Examining the roles of sex, gender identity, and diagnostic timing. Autism: The International Journal of Research & Practice, 26(2), 552–559. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211042131	Explores the intersection of sex, gender identity and autism, however, is US based
Beck, J. S., Lundwall, R. A., Gabrielsen, T., Cox, J. C., & South, M. (2020). Looking good but feeling bad: “Camouflaging” behaviours and mental health in women with autistic traits. Autism: The International Journal of Research & Practice, 24(4), 809–821.	Explores mental health in camouflaging Autistic women, yet is US based

https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320912147	
LRQ 4 - What does the literature tell us about Autistic masking and camouflaging?	
Bernardin, C. J., Lewis, T., Bell, D., & Kanne, S. (2021). Associations between social camouflaging and internalizing symptoms in autistic and non-autistic adolescents. Autism: The International Journal of Research & Practice, 25(6), 1580–1591. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361321997284	Explores camouflaging in Autistic adolescents yet is US based
Fombonne, E. (2020). Camouflage and autism. Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry, 61(7), 735–738. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13296	Discusses Autistic camouflaging yet is US based
Lai, M., Hull, L., Mandy, W., Chakrabarti, B., Nordahl, C. W., Lombardo, M. V., Ameis, S. H., Szatmari, P., Baron, C. S., Happé, F., & Livingston, L. A. (2021). Commentary: "Camouflaging" in autistic people – reflection on Fombonne (2020). Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry, 62(8), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13344	Commentary on US paper above
Commentary: The construct validity of "camouflaging" in autism: psychometric considerations and recommendations for future research - reflection on Lai et al. (2020). Williams (2022). Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry, 63(1), 118–121. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13468	Commentary on construct validity of a psychometric measure. Does not focus on the topic.

Appendix E

Participant Information Sheet



The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Participant Information Sheet

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this research study.

Title of the study:
The lived experience of 'camouflaging' Black Autistic adolescent girls in UK education.

Who is doing the research:
My name is Tiffany Nelson, and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist. I am in my second year of studying for the Professional Doctorate in Child, Community and Educational Psychology. I am completing this research as part of my course.

The aim of the research:
This research study is about Black Autistic adolescent girls who 'camouflage' in educational settings. Camouflaging is masking or hiding autistic traits. The aim is to explore:

- the difficulties the girls experience in educational settings and the support they receive,
- how and why the girls choose to camouflage and the impact it has on them,
- the intersecting experiences of being a black autistic girl who camouflages their autistic traits.

It is hoped that this research will help gain a better understanding of how camouflaging Black Autistic adolescent girls experience education and what support/adjustments are needed to ensure they are having the best experience in school. Additionally, to understand the role racism and ableism may have on this experience.

What does participation involve?

- Participating in an online interview of up to one hour with Tiffany Nelson on Zoom.

The interview will be recorded and then transcribed. The interview will involve you being asked about:

- your experiences of difficulties in educational settings,
- hiding your autistic traits and what this feels like.

If you find this difficult, you can stop the interview at any stage without giving an explanation. You can bring a supportive adult or friend to the interview.

Consent to participate in this research study:

Please take time to read the information carefully to decide whether you would like to participate. It is important that you understand the aims of the study and what it would involve for you.

If you choose to take part, you can change your mind at any time, and you do not need to explain the reasons for doing so. If you do participate, you can still withdraw from the study up to 3 weeks after the interview. After this, your data will be anonymized and analysed.

Confidentiality of the Data:

One of the aims of this research study is to share what young people have said about their educational experiences. I will be interviewing a small number of participants (4-10) which means you may be able to identify the experiences you shared. I may use quotes from your interview to help describe your experience in the publication of the study. For your confidentiality, what you say will be anonymised so that it cannot be linked to you. This means using a pseudonym (pretend name) when describing your views and changing any details that could identify that what was said came from you.

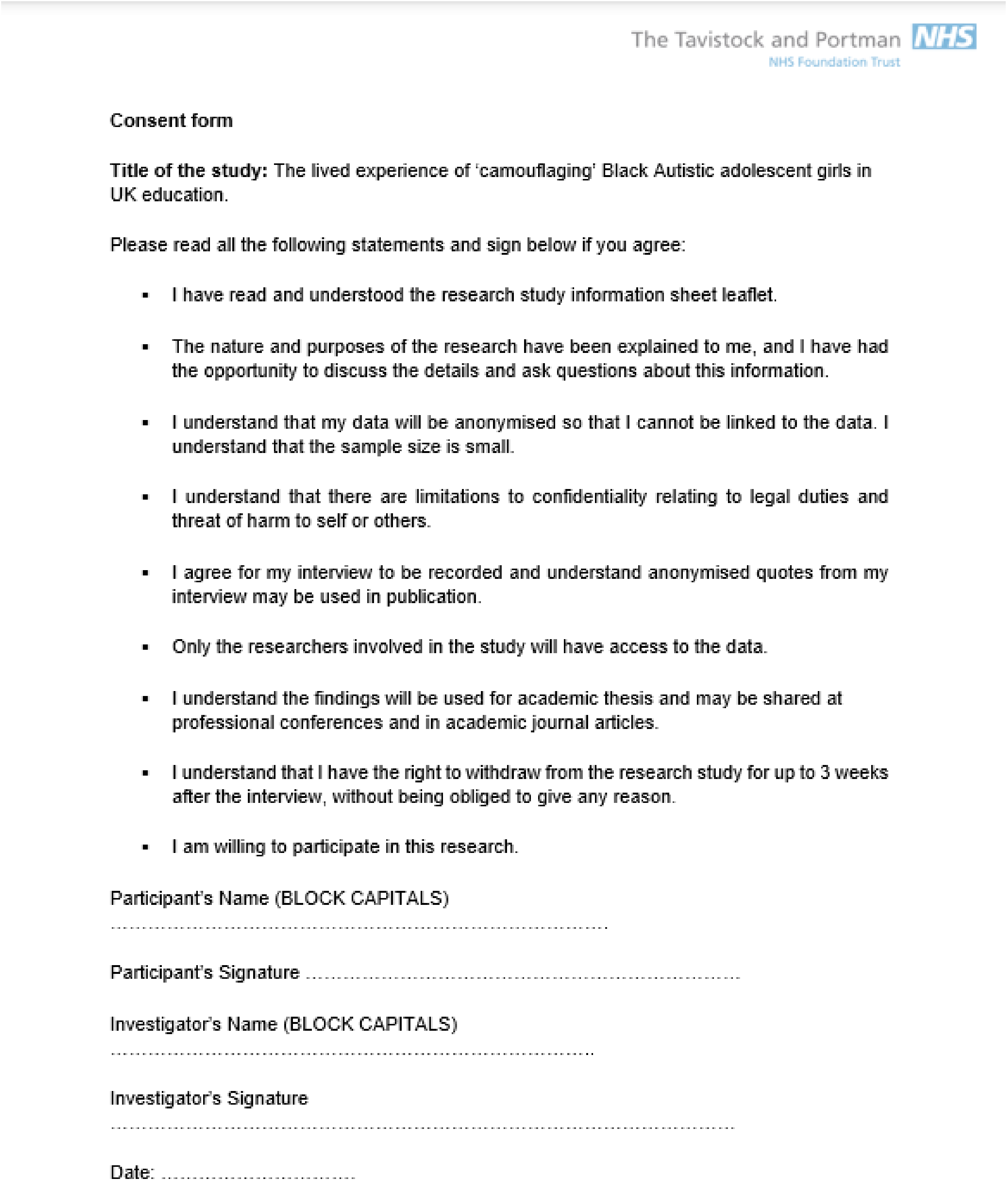
Once your interview has been transcribed, the audio recording will be deleted, and the data will be stored as belonging to the pseudonym, on an encrypted drive using password protection. All data collected will be stored for a minimum of 5 years and used in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act (2018) and the Tavistock and Portman's Data Protection Policy.

If you tell me something that makes me concerned about your safety or the safety of someone else, then I might have to share that information with someone else to ensure you or someone else is safe. However, I will aim to talk to you about this first where possible.

Further information:

This research has received ethical approval from the Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee. If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact: Paru Jeram, Senior Trust Quality Assurance Officer pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk

If you have any further questions, you can contact me by email: tnelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk or my research supervisor, Hannah Lichwa, hlichwa@tavi-port.nhs.uk



The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Consent form

Title of the study: The lived experience of 'camouflaging' Black Autistic adolescent girls in UK education.

Please read all the following statements and sign below if you agree:

- I have read and understood the research study information sheet leaflet.
- The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information.
- I understand that my data will be anonymised so that I cannot be linked to the data. I understand that the sample size is small.
- I understand that there are limitations to confidentiality relating to legal duties and threat of harm to self or others.
- I agree for my interview to be recorded and understand anonymised quotes from my interview may be used in publication.
- Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data.
- I understand the findings will be used for academic thesis and may be shared at professional conferences and in academic journal articles.
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research study for up to 3 weeks after the interview, without being obliged to give any reason.
- I am willing to participate in this research.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)
……………………………………………………………………………

Participant's Signature ……………………………………………………………………

Investigator's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)
…………………………………………………………………………..

Investigator's Signature
……………………………………………………………………………………………………

Date: ……………………………

Appendix F

Recruitment Poster

SEEKING PARTICIPANTS TO HELP WITH RESEARCH

ARE YOU A BLACK AUTISTIC GIRL?

- Do you think you mask (hide) your autistic traits?
- Do you ever try to seem less autistic in school to 'fit in'?
- Do you copy other people's behaviours to appear 'non-autistic'?

This research involves an online interview of up to 1 hour where I will ask you questions about your experiences in education.

Are you eligible?

I am looking for black autistic girls:

- aged 16-18 years,
- living in the UK,
- attending or have attended an educational setting in the UK.
- You can self-identify as autistic.

If you would like to participate and have any questions about the research please email me at:

✉ tnelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk

You can also use this QR code to email me

Appendix G

Draft Interview Schedule

- How old are you?
- What type of school do you go to?
- How would you describe your ethnicity?
- Have you received additional support in your school?
- Which county or London borough do you live in?
- What is your religion if you have one?
- Do you prefer to be called autistic or for people to say you have autism?

1) Can you tell me about when you first knew you were autistic?

1) What was primary school like for you?
Prompts: What did you like? What did you find difficult? What made things easier?

2) What did adults (teachers and parents) do to make primary school easier for you?

3) Did you hide your autism in primary school?
Follow ups: If no, why? If yes, how did you hide your autism in primary school? How did it feel? Why did you try to hide?

4) What is secondary school like for you?
Prompts: What did you like? What did you find difficult? What made things easier?

5) What did adults (teachers and parents) do to make secondary school easier for you?

6) How do you hide your autism now?
Follow ups: How does it feel? Why do you try to hide?

7) What do you think other people in school think about you?

8) Would you say there are other young people in school who are like you?

9) How would you describe being a black autistic girl?

Appendix H

Finalised Interview Schedule

- How old are you?
- What type of school do you go to?
- How would you describe your ethnicity?
- Have you received additional support in your school?
- Which county or London borough do you live in?
- What is your religion if you have one?
- For the purposes of this study, when I write about you, would you prefer me to describe you as Autistic or as having autism?

Interview Questions

I would like to consider your time in school, looking back at what you can remember in primary and secondary school. I would like to think from the perspective of you being a Black Autistic female who is (or used to) masking your autism.

1) Please describe your experiences of masking your autism in school.

2) How has masking your autism affected your schoolwork?

3) How has masking your autism affected your friendships?

4) How has masking your autism in school affected your relationships with teachers?

5) Have you ever experienced discrimination or microaggressions from peers or teachers because of your autism, gender, and/or race?
Definitions:
Discrimination is known as treating a person or group of people because of race, gender, sexuality etc.

Microaggressions are described as brief, everyday actions, statements or insults that communicate hostility and bias (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, etc.) toward a marginalised person or group. (communicated in a way where it seems like it is not an insult). For example, asking someone, “Where are you really from?” might make them feel like they don’t belong.

6) Tell me about how you manage the stress of masking your autism in school.

7) How has your family and community supported you in managing or understanding your experiences of masking your autism in school?

8) What changes would you like to see in schools to better support the needs of Autistic Black girls?

9) Have you ever felt like your experiences as an Autistic Black adolescent girl were overlooked or misunderstood by others?

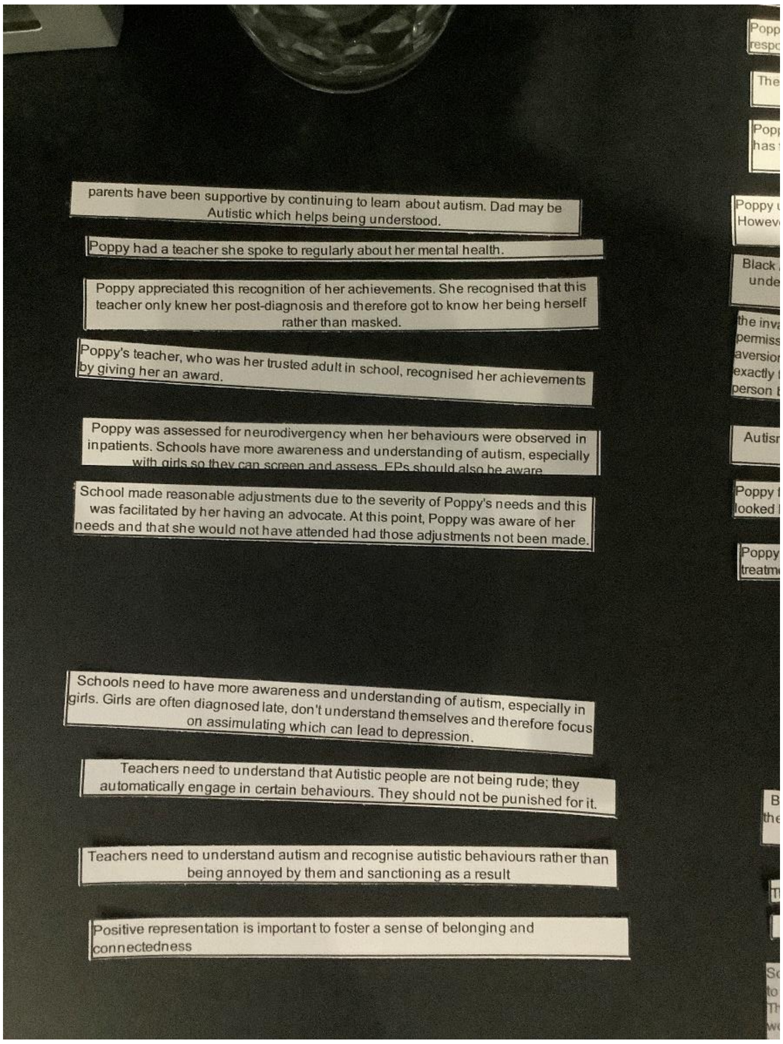
10) Please describe any positive experiences you have had in school that have helped you to feel accepted and supported as an Autistic Black adolescent girl.

11) How has your experience of masking your autism in school influenced your self-identity and sense of self-worth?

12) What advice would you give to other Autistic Black adolescent girls who may be masking their autism in school?

Appendix I

Clustering Experiential Statements



parents have been supportive by continuing to learn about autism. Dad may be Autistic which helps being understood.

Poppy had a teacher she spoke to regularly about her mental health.

Poppy appreciated this recognition of her achievements. She recognised that this teacher only knew her post-diagnosis and therefore got to know her being herself rather than masked.

Poppy's teacher, who was her trusted adult in school, recognised her achievements by giving her an award.

Poppy was assessed for neurodivergency when her behaviours were observed in inpatients. Schools have more awareness and understanding of autism, especially with girls so they can screen and assess. EPs should also be aware

School made reasonable adjustments due to the severity of Poppy's needs and this was facilitated by her having an advocate. At this point, Poppy was aware of her needs and that she would not have attended had those adjustments not been made.

Schools need to have more awareness and understanding of autism, especially in girls. Girls are often diagnosed late, don't understand themselves and therefore focus on assimulating which can lead to depression.

Teachers need to understand that Autistic people are not being rude; they automatically engage in certain behaviours. They should not be punished for it.

Teachers need to understand autism and recognise autistic behaviours rather than being annoyed by them and sanctioning as a result

Positive representation is important to foster a sense of belonging and connectedness

Appendix J

Participants' PETs Tables

Table J1

Poppy's Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Theme	**Illustrative quote**
P1. The costs of masking	
P1.1 Mental health	
Poppy's teachers liked her when she was doing well with her schoolwork. As time passed, masking led to depression, which had a negative impact on her relationships with teachers. **(p12)**	*"Cause I did well in school so my teachers like me. Erm (pause), I don't know, the like effect was more afterwards...after masking for so long and then I got really depressed. And then I would like, had a worse relationship with my teachers because I would just feel like I don't really care."*
Over time, Poppy's mental health deteriorated due to masking. Poppy experienced anxiety, stress and depression. This led to consistent self-harm from a young age (12) and insomnia and a drop in school attendance. **(p15)**	*"Yeah, so it really was really bad....and I like self harmed and stuff like that. I did that consistently. Yeah. Like from age twelve....Yeah, I just, I did not cope with it well....it caused me loads of mental problems, like it gave me depression and like anxiety....Honestly, it was terrible*
Poppy was always exhausted and fell asleep in class. This led to a drop in school attendance. **(p15)**	*"....after ages of being exhausted, I would just like fall asleep in class....all the time....it had gotten to a point where I was like I literally can't"*
Poppy was placed in inpatients as she deteriorated. She assumed she was weird and that her brain did not work properly but diagnosis helped her understand what she was experiencing was due to her being Autistic. She was diagnosed at 14. **(p16)**	*"….I did not cope. And then I got a diagnosed in 2020. Because I was put in inpatients for like six months….I just thought I was really weird and that like my brain didn't work properly….I had never ever seen, like, a like Black Autistic girl and I didn't even realise…."*
Masking decreased Poppy's self-esteem by miles for a long time. **(p25)**	*"….(masking) Decreased my self-worth….by….miles for a long time….I had zero identity that was like myself."*

P1.2 Education	
Poppy struggled to cope in school which resulted in her dropping two GCSE subjects. She ended up hated a subject she was good at and enjoyed due to her perception that the teacher was mean. **(p16)**	*“….my attendance eventually got really bad. Erm, and I (pause) dropped like - I don't know, I always wanted to drop French anyways….I dropped(pause) Geography, I think.*
Masking led to exhaustion which negatively impacted Poppy's school attendance for 3 years. **(p17)**	*“Everyone just thought….oh, she's crazy and like she's dead or something….I was always late. I never went to any PE ever. I always skipped PE. And just, like mostly lateness and….being….depressed or too tired to go in at all.”*
P1.3 Emotions	
Masking from the time she was socially conscious, diminished Poppy's ability to recognise or embody her emotions to the point that she forgot they existed. **(p26)**	*“because I had been masking so long that like I literally didn't have emotions.”*
Poppy had no idea how she felt emotionally. She only recalls feeling anger and frustration **(p26)**	*“like I had no emotions like I couldn't name a single emotion like when I felt it.”*
P2. Navigating the challenges of being Black and Autistic	
P2.1. The intersection of autism and race	
Poppy felt different and uncomfortable because she could not see other people who looked like her or acted in the same way she did. **(p3)**	***“….****because I was different to all of the other girls in my school, and so there was like not many other Black people.... I remember just, kind of feeling strange, like as people would point out.... I just felt like uncomfortable.”*
Invasion and disrespect of personal space, and sensory aversions create a disempowering and confusing experience, particularly for a Black and Autistic individual. **(p13)**	*“....people would just put their hands in it (her hair)....so one time I pulled this girl’s hair back, like, and she was like, I don't understand. She's so mad at me. I was like, you just spent like an hour touching my hair when I told you no”*
Poppy has noticed that her voice tone changes, and she speaks faster when she is talking about something she is passionate about. Poppy's passion when speaking was misinterpreted by others as anger, racially stereotyping her as the “angry Black girl” **(p14)**	*“….if I'm talking about something I have a lot of interest in, then that's like some of the only times that my voice tone changes or like….I talk faster. Like just cause I'm passionate about it….But like people are like, oh I'm not arguing with you….”*

Being Black and Autistic is different because subcultures are racialised as White. Some people will refer to Black Autistics as 'a fake white person' for engaging in subculture. **(p30)**	“Especially with being Black as well because like if you're White like people just think like it's fine that you can be into any subculture you want because like then no one's gonna be like, wow, you're such a fake White person.”
When Poppy engages in her interests which are counterculture, most people are White; they do not look like her. This may influence her sense of belonging and feelings of difference. **(p30)**	“….whereas counterculture, you're still all White people. And so even if you're a Black person going there, it's like, there's literally no one there who's like me….Even though it's meant to be like alternative (pause) to the stereotype. It's still no one that looks like you. So it's like - It's just helpful to have someone….”
Poppy understands logically that she is not acting White by engaging in her interests. However, racial stereotyping has made her feel like she is acting White. She has felt it would be easier to look White as a result. **(p30)**	“….(You) want to look White because like and everything would be easier honestly.”
Poppy recognised she would have to mask in response to racism as well as in response to her social differences. **(p8)**	“Inside like when I get really frustrated, it makes me want to cry like, but it's like, there's so many of them. Like, like, there's like no one I could really turn to and be like. You know. as I was just like, this is just how it's gonna be like, I'm just gonna have to act like everything's a joke.”
Poppy felt that she didn't fit in with White or Black people, even though physically she has features attributed to both races. Her autism was an added layer to the difference she felt. **(p25)**	“cos I’m like mixed - and like my skin's quite light but then like my features are like more African. And so it's like not White enough to be White, especially for the people at my school. And then….not Black enough to be Black. And then, on top of that, my brain works differently.”
Poppy wanted to be White and neurotypical and felt self-hatred because of the treatment she experienced from others because of her differences. **(p25)**	“I really hated like myself a lot. I like honestly I just literally was like I wish I was like a White and like normal.”
There is no one way to hold a racial identity. Typical Autistic hobbies and traits tend to be racialised. **(p27)**	“….there's not like one way to be like a Black person or a mixed race person.”
Autism is racialised as white and gendered as male by society yet it is a condition that affects all humans. **(p25)**	“people act like it only affects white people and like boys….autism is a human condition not a like white person condition….”

Poppy related to the Black people who has similar primary school experiences to her, but she wanted to be accepted and treated fairly by the majority, who happened to be White and engaged in expensive leisure pursuits, which was very different to what Poppy was familiar with and liked, thus she felt alone. **(p9)**	"I….felt really, really alone. Like I only had the like three people who lived in North London, I got on with more because like none of them went to like private primary schools or anything and like we were just like normal."
Poppy noticed everyone was doing their makeup, having fancy dinners and holidays and she was not allowed to do her makeup and her leisure pursuits were different. **(p8)**	"….it's crazy like - and like having like really fancy birthday parties and like talking about what like fancy restaurant they went to or like what holiday they went on."
P2.2. Acceptance and judgement from the Black community	
Black Autistics should enjoy their hobbies and acknowledge cultural differences to understand judgement that may come from the Black community and not take it personally. **(p28)**	"….enjoy your hobbies and if other Black people are like (pause) judgmental. Like one if you have family who like in Africa, like you have to acknowledge the like difference there."
It makes no sense for Black people to stereotype their own people. **(p28)**	"….then the same people stereotype their own people and get mad if they don't like one thing. So it just doesn't make any sense - and just be a nice person."
The Black community can be unaccepting to difference. **(p28)**	"….cause I didn't say much about the Black community and how it like often cannot be accepting…."
Black individuals from the same countries often share a sense of camaraderie, but there can be instances of vocal judgment, which Poppy chooses not to involve herself with. **(p28)**	"I only will accept that if you are nice…."
Some Black people have made her feel like she is perceived as a 'White demon' due to her facial piercings. She highlights this is how her own people have made her feel. Therefore, Poppy has experienced negative emotions and self-perceptions due to the words and treatment of some White and Black people. This is likely to have influenced Poppy's sense of belonging having both Black and White heritage. **(p28)**	"….it just makes you feel like, oh, okay, so like I'm some weird white demon now or something."
No one should make you feel like you are a different race because you do not fit a racial stereotype. **(p29)**	"Not that there's anything wrong with White people, but it's like you're just not like, like you're just like genetically not."
P3. Navigating an educational environment marked by racial bias	

P3.1. Microaggressions, harassment, and stereotyping	
Poppy's mum chose her school, which was a selective, faith, majority White school, to avoid racism in the local school. **(p5)**	“….one of his friends who went to that school like had some like experience with the school being like quite racist…..so my mum didn't want me to go there.”
Poppy was well known for her ability in Primary school, however, once she joined a majority white, private school, she was racially stereotyped as lacking in intelligence. **(p9)**	“Like in primary school, I was SPAG queen….when I went to that school no one thought that I would be intelligent.”
Poppy experienced racial microaggressions that were disguised as jokes about everyday items. **(p7)**	“If they saw like black dirt anywhere, they'd be like, that's you, like you're going on the table or like if there was like, I don't know, something like a black poster they're like, oh, you're getting all over the posters like it's meant to be a white background.”
People thought it was okay to say the N word because it is in music. They would minimise slavery by giggling when it was being taught. **(p.13)**	“….people were saying the N word - and then people like me hearing about people saying the N word and like just in general, and like in music thinking it was fine, and then like you go up to them and then they're like-“
Poppy experienced racial stereotyping and racial slurs were used towards her. **(p6)**	“there are quite a few people who are actually like (pause) like some people said the N word there, which is shocking.”
Poppy was subjected to racial stereotyping. People assumed she was less intelligent because she was Black. **(p6)**	“….people assuming that I'm like less intelligent and stuff like that….”
Poppy was racially stereotyped as having knowledge of gang violence. **(p13)**	“my teacher, she came up behind me. She's like, oh, you would know like the whole gang violence. Me? Why would I know about that? Like, why would I know about that?”
The racial abuse that Poppy experienced left her feeling lonely and confused. She couldn't understand how people who perceived her to be less intelligent, were ignorant and lacking in application of intelligence. **(p14)**	“It was horrible, I hated it, it was really horrible. I just felt really lonely because I just didn't understand.”
Poppy explains that her peers thought it was inevitable that she would have something to say about colonialism as she is Black. (maybe it only affects her and not the others?) **(p14)**	“….in like geography, when we're talking about, Rwanda and stuff. Like how the geography and colonisation, how it affects the geography and like everyone turning to me or something….or like giggling if I started talking about it or….when we were

	learning about slavery, people talking over it like they didn't care…. oh of course she's talking about it she's Black.”
P3.2. School enabling racial harassment	
Poppy's experiences of racial abuse have led her to assert that schools should not tolerate racism. They should communicate that laughing when topics of racial discrimination are being discussed invalidates the pain and suffering of human beings. Schools need to tackle this head on rather than ignore it. **(p22)**	“Just like really kind of taking it seriously….like not tolerating people joking about it….like really tell them because I feel like a lot of people they just are like ha ha you shouldn't do that….it's not a joke (pause)….It's really bad like, they're literally human beings that you're talking about….it's not like this is a fun story, like it's true.”
Poppy's school did not take racial abuse and discrimination seriously which led to her feeling there was no one she could turn to. There were no Black staff so who would understand what how she felt and what was being done to her through the different forms of racism that she experienced. **(p21)**	“I know how….it felt like when people were being like actually racist towards me, and I like did not feel in any way that I would be able to go and tell anyone. At all. There was like no Black staff either in my old school as well.”
Poppy feels that schools need to deal with racism by explicitly telling people what they can and can't do like not touching someone's hair. It is a microaggression that people need to consciously understand. **(p21)**	“So like taking it really seriously and just like, really telling people….what is bad to do….being like, you shouldn't be touching this person's hair….because I feel like people say it like in a way that it like feels distant.”
Poppy felt isolated and frustrated knowing there was no one she could turn to for help as there were so many of them racially abusing her on a regular basis. **(p8)**	“Inside like when I get really frustrated, it makes me want to cry like, but it's like, there's so many of them.”
P3.3. Conditional acceptance	
Poppy noticed conditional acceptance of another Black girl. She had the advantage of attending a prep school before and fit in more so did not receive the same racial abuse as Poppy did. **(p7)**	“….she was a lot more like talkative and like personality wise fit a lot more with them. So she like didn't really get a lot of it. And also because I just like acted slightly differently because she went to a prep school as well and like stuff like that.”
Poppy received greater acceptance and support than her friend, seemingly because the school recognised her high intelligence and deemed her more deserving of assistance. **(p18)**	“….because her attendance was far worse than mine, even though she was really intelligent. They didn't help her as much.”
P4. Feeling weird and different	

P4.1. Sensory sensitivities	
Sensory aspects would frustrate Poppy, but she was worried her emotional and communicative responses would make people think she was weird. **(p3)**	"….certain sensory things, like, if I got really frustrated, I would like just like cry, but like frustration crying and like with different noises, but then I was like worried people would think that was weird."
Poppy had no concept of looking a certain way. She reflects that people thought she was weird because of what she wore. She reflects that what she wore was comfortable for her due to her sensory needs but different to the others. **(p3)**	"I was really unaware of like, like looking a certain way or anything like, I had no kind of like concept of that. So like I would just wear the same jumper like every single day, and like not change and I would wear it inside out…."
P4.2. Social understanding and awareness	
Poppy didn't understand why she was not taken seriously which made her feel weird. **(p4)**	"I just didn't know why some people would just think I was being weird or like thinking I was always like joking around and I was like never serious."
Poppy was upset that she didn't get on with others. **(p4)**	"It made me quite upset….just feeling like I didn't really get on with like other people."
When Poppy became socially aware she noticed differences in her social communication and emotional expression to others. This led to her assimilating because she felt weird and different. **(p4)**	"when I got upset - erm and I didn't really know why, cause like everyone else kind of like if they were upset, would be like, oh, we're like, they would be able to communicate it….I would be upset and then I would just be angry and then I'd feel angry and then I'd start crying because it was like (pause). And I didn't understand…. But then….like Year 4 and up….I realised like, oh, I'm different….I started to, like, want to assimilate with everyone."
A lack of Black representation in school and in media led Poppy to feeling weird and confused. **(p4)**	"….and also just in shows and literally everything like in girlie shows it's like mostly like, White people so I was just like kind of confused"
Poppy experienced a different world that felt weird and judgemental. **(p6)**	"I just felt like I was like in a whole different world. Like it was so weird. And….so judgmental…."
Poppy became aware that she didn't act the same as others and couldn't initiate conversations. **(p6)**	"I didn't act the same as other people and I didn't know how to start conversation."
Poppy recognises that her facial expressions and tone of voice tends to stay the same. **(p8)**	"….naturally my like facial expression doesn't….it usually stays the same; and my tone of voice usually stays the same."

P5. Trying to fit in and make friends	
P5.1. Use of humour	
Poppy wanted to have straight hair to fit in with the other girls. To mask her feelings when everyone laughed at her for wearing a straight wig, she laughed it off. **(p5)**	"….everyone made fun of me….I didn't want to say that like I actually wanted to have straight hair and….that was when I kind of started like having the whole like laugh everything off kind of thing being like I know like stupid ha ha."
Poppy realised that she could turn things into a joke so people would not take her behaviours seriously, because they did not understand her behaviours. **(p5)**	"….my behaviours would be different and people wouldn't understand. So I would just have to be like, Oh, I'm just kidding, or something."
Poppy felt humour was the only part of her personality that she could offer to others. **(p11)**	"I was always quite funny in primary school but like, it was like became my personality because I felt like I had nothing else to give like."
Poppy realised she could not be herself and had to mask intensively to make friends. Others thought she was weird and were mean towards her, so she used humour to mask. **(p6)**	"….all I wanted was to be able to make friends with people….it was like really masking, just intensified…..Everything was a joke."
Poppy thought she was not good at making friends so she used lying and letting people make fun of her as masking behaviours to help her fit in. **(p10)**	"….initially it was just hard to make friends and like I used to lie a lot because I would just say that like I had certain things….Cause I just wanted to have like everything that like everyone else had."
P5.2. Copying behaviours	
Poppy saw everyone else being bitchy and mean and started copying their behaviours. She figured this was how to make friends because it was what everyone else did. **(p10)**	"It was hard to make friends. And then at one point later….probably in Year 9 or something. I started to be meaner kind of, I became more bitchy because, I was feeling bad and like everyone else did it."
Poppy copied the behaviours she observed, without fully understanding the nuance of when to apply the social rules, therefore she did not understand or notice when others were upset someone else. **(p11)**	"….at one point like someone started like crying and something….I just found out that she's crying. I asked her about it and she was like you know, I, it just made me really upset and I was like, I didn't even know…. I didn't even realise, cause I, I just thought that, you know, it's normal to joke like that."
P5.3 Giving up hobbies and hiding hurt feelings	

Poppy made friends when she assimilated with everyone, which meant pushing hobbies away and going clothes shopping with friends. Even though she made friends, she was unhappy. **(p11)**	"….then I've managed to make friends when I became like more assimilated into everyone - when I kind of like (pause) I like, I kind of just like pushed away on my old hobbies and stuff like that. I like dress the same as everyone else."
Poppy gave up her much-loved hobby to avoid being bullied by others and to fit in. **(p6)**	"….then I got too scared that I get bullied, like, because I was too old to be like playing with toys or whatever."
Everyone made fun of Poppy, so she masked her hurt feelings but felt lonely and embarrassed for masking. **(p8)**	"….it was just really lonely and embarrassing because I like felt like I was letting them do that."
P6. The importance of support and understanding	
Poppy's parents have been supportive by continuing to learn about autism. Dad may be Autistic which helps being understood. **(p17)**	"them learning more about it I think, is like the main support (pause) that helps."
Poppy had a teacher she spoke to regularly about her mental health. **(p24)**	"….there was like one teacher in particular who I really liked, erm, who's my Head of Year and he was the one who I would talk to (pause) like every week or something. And that was mainly just for like my mental health…."
Poppy's teacher, who was her trusted adult in school, recognised her achievements by giving her an award. **(p25)**	"….he chose it for me. Because he was like - my improvement over the year. And I really appreciated that….he's really nice and he like (pause) ….he's like my favourite teacher, like I will never forget him."
Poppy appreciated this recognition of her achievements. She recognised that this teacher only knew her post-diagnosis and therefore got to know her being herself rather than masked. **(p25)**	"He was a new teacher as well. I think that's what also helped. So he just like only knew me when I was like….but he saw me as awesome."
Poppy was assessed for neurodivergency when her behaviours were observed in inpatients. Schools have more awareness and understanding of autism, especially with girls so they can screen and assess. EPs should also be aware. **(p29)**	"….but like they (pause) did that because they like saw in my behaviours and I feel like if you can see in someone's behaviours like try to just see….Cause I would be in a very different position today, if like I was not diagnosed now."
School made reasonable adjustments due to the severity of Poppy's needs and this was facilitated by her having an advocate. At this point, Poppy was aware of her needs and that	"….because obviously when I became inpatient like it's like quite severe….And it was kind of like, either that or I'm just not gonna come to school like and they kind of knew that."

she would not have attended had those adjustments not been made. **(p18)**	
Schools need to have more awareness and understanding of autism, especially in girls. Girls are often diagnosed late, don't understand themselves and therefore focus on assimilating which can lead to depression. **(p22)**	"I think more awareness just like, on ASD, and especially like if you're in a girls' school as well, like how girls' with autism - differs. Like obviously not in every situation, but….if you're diagnosed late, like - a lot of the time ….girls, really focus on assimilation….They get diagnosed later and then they're just gonna be depressed because they're like, why am I acting like really weird right now?"
Teachers need to understand autism and recognise autistic behaviours rather than being annoyed by them and sanctioning as a result. **(p23)**	"I constantly got like the like blue slip warning kind of things. Because if like any behaviour that was like, I don't know, I was fiddling with my hands or like I was doodling something, or I was like doing - like tapping my fingers or something….they won't be putting me in detention because I had lack of eye contact, but it was like if they would talk to me and then I would have lack of eye contact, it's like hmm, and like you could tell it annoyed them."
Positive representation is important to foster a sense of belonging and connectedness. **(p31)**	"seeing someone else who's like still alive and like, is like doing pretty well and like engaging in stuff (pause) is like important because otherwise you're just like, wow, I'm alone. So yeah, that's just important, honestly."
P7. Diagnosis leading to understanding and unmasking	
P7.1 Self-Understanding	
The diagnosis helped Poppy feel able to be herself which involved dressing comfortably and listening to alternative music that she enjoys. **(p20)**	"It felt way better. Like literally one of my….was like, yeah, honestly, like you seem a lot like more comfortable in those clothes…."
On reflection, Poppy realised she had not been herself the whole time that she was at school, but diagnosis helped her gain her authentic identity. **(p21)**	"I hadn't been myself (pause). For the whole time I was at that school and even before. So I was just kind of just gaining my identity back, like on the outside. Because like I always knew I was there, but like I had to kind of gain it back."

Being diagnosed and learning about autism helped Poppy to understand herself and that her autism was affecting her mental health. **(p17)**	"I had like a lot of other mental difficulties that like took priority….also like autism affected like those things."
Poppy reflects that there are different levels of autism and not everyone needs constant care. She recognises that her autism does not impact her intellectual ability. **(p16)**	"….cause not everyone's on the level where they have like an actual disability, like that they need like constant care for."
Poppy did not consider autism. She thought she was weird, and her brain didn't work properly, so the diagnosis helped her to understand herself. **(p16)**	"I just thought I was just like (pause) a weirdo and I just thought my brain didn't work properly....so getting diagnosed then helped."
Poppy wishes she knew she was Autistic and that there were places to look for information that would have helped her. She believes she would have been in a different place now had she known. **(p30)**	"Cause I would be in a very different position today, if like I was not diagnosed now….I wish like other people - like, would have told me…."
Diagnosis helped Poppy understand herself better, like herself more, gain her identity, and meet people like her. **(p26)**	"So now's a lot different like, I like myself a lot more. Like still not a hundred percent, but like, it's like, I won a lot of it back, because I've met other people who are similar to me."
Neurotypical standards do not benefit Poppy, they negatively impact her levels of anxiety. **(p23)**	"….everyone says, look at me when you're talking to me. And it's like that literally doesn't add anything for me like it's just horrible like I don't wanna do that. And it's like it makes me really anxious."
Masking can be helpful if it benefits you in making a situation easier. If you choose to mask, make sure you know why you are doing it and remember who you are, so you do not lose yourself. **(p26)**	"….try to like notice when you do it and why, and if it's like, something like: this is just gonna make this conversation go a lot easier or something like - If it's gonna make something easier, then like that's fine, as obviously it's not affecting….the way you think about yourself."
P7.2 Understanding of others	
Diagnosis also helped the school understand and they were now legally required to make reasonable adjustments for Poppy. **(p17)**	"….to have that as like a blueprint, so they can actually understand. And so they like kind of have to help you like…."
People can be unkind over any form of difference, so it is best to ignore them. **(p29)**	"….anything different like people are just gonna be mean. So you should have to ignore it."

A combination of being herself and school understanding and support, made school life more bearable. **(p19)**	"So they kind of eased up, with like telling me to take out my piercings and stuff. So honestly, it was like the changes were good like and made it bearable to like be in school."
A lack of understanding of different presentations of autism can lead people to assume mental health issues instead of neurodivergent conditions. **(p22)**	"….because they just think….you're just crazy….most people don't even know that there's autism that is not like, that doesn't affect you like on an intellectual level. So people don't even know that ASD is even the thing half the time."
P7.3. Unmasking	
Poppy chose to express herself and stop masking as everyone knew all of what had happened to her so there was no point in hiding it anymore. **(p19)**	"I had like self-harm scars and stuff. And it was like, well, there's no hiding anymore. Like. You know, that's how I felt. As I started expressing myself more, I got a bunch of piercings."
Poppy realised she could not continue masking and there was no longer any reason to. **(p19)**	"….that was like at the time I was more like, everyone literally knows, like I was just like the gig is up. I literally can't act normal anymore."
Poppy was able to be herself more once she had a diagnosis because everything made sense. She started to make friends and asserted her needs in school. **(p19)**	"And then I got my autism diagnosis and I was like oh my god everything makes sense (pause) and I started drawing more and stuff. And like. I made friends outside of school as well….at school….I was just like I'm not taking out my piercings like you're joking, like I've been through enough already."
Poppy has learnt, through DBT, that if you put an emotion to something you are discussing people are more likely to listen. Poppy had learnt how to verbally communicate her emotions which contrasts to her earlier experiences of crying when feeling frustration and anger. She has learnt to externalise rather than internalise her emotions. **(p21)**	"….cause I did DBT, so this is what I learnt, like in, in, if you're discussing something, if you put like an emotion to it, like if you say like this makes me feel this way; people are more likely to listen because like if you don't tell them it's making you sad, but you're kind of implying it they don't have to think that like, they're making you upset, but if you say like this is actually making me really upset or this can make someone really upset."
You can make friends by engaging in hobbies and being a nice person. **(p28)**	"….randomly if you like engage in your hobbies, you'll randomly meet someone who has the same obvious like it always happens."

You can always be yourself. Poppy realised people will like you for being yourself even if that means you have some differences. **(p26)**	“So like even if you want to be friends with someone who also looks like kind of normal-ish. Like, it doesn't mean they won’t like you just cause like you look different or act differently like. They will just see you as a human being.”

Table J2

SS’ Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Theme	**Illustrative quotes**
S1. ‘The Trials and Tribulations’ of being Black and Autistic in the UK	
S1.1. Racial discrimination and abuse	
SS experienced racial abuse when a White girl used racial slurs in school and was defended by a Black teacher. **(p6)**	*“she was just yelling a bunch of just racial slurs. And obviously when people started retaliating....she went crying to one of the, erm, Black teachers....and yeah, he was basically just defending her.”*
A teacher, whose first language was not English, said the n word in lessons. The same Black teacher defended her. There was no support for racism, even from a Black teacher who was a senior leader in the school. **(p6)**	*“And there was even a situation with a teacher who, English wasn't her first language, but she was basically like, what's wrong with saying the N word. And she pretty much fully said it in a PSHE lesson.”*
SS recalls that it was the same Black teacher who put up barriers to defending racism and promoting black history. **(p7)**	*“....I wanted to start a black history club when I was in like, Year eight. I went to him and he said, no, because he said that it's gonna offend some people or make people feel some type of way.... it was the same deputy head teacher for all of these situations.”*
SS was angry and upset that they could not approach teachers about serious racial matters that impacted their daily lives. SS tends to speak about her experiences with racism as a collective, suggesting she was not alone in these feelings and experiences. **(p7)**	*“....it seem like we couldn't go to our teachers about.... serious matters, like this, that affects pretty much almost our everyday lives....they just don't do anything about it....it would make us feel angry and upset....”*
Black girls tend to be called aggressive when they speak their minds or respond to others being negative towards them. **(p12)**	*“I find a lot of black girls get called aggressive just for speaking our minds. Just for not putting up with people just being rude to us and being negative towards us. We get called aggressive for basically, somewhat retaliating, if that's the word, against people just being just negative to us.”*

S1.2 The intersection of autism, race, gender, and generation	
it's a lot more difficult for Black Autistic girls because they experience sensory overload, missed social cues, and can be misunderstood as rude. **(p13)**	*"it's difficult is a lot more difficult when it comes to Black autistic girls as well....there's sensory overload. There's also like, missing social cues.... you can be blunt sometimes when people just think that you're just rude."*
Boys don't mask as much because societal norms of behaviour are gendered. **(p13)**	*"....when it comes to Autistic Boys, (pause) erm, boys don't mask as much as girls do, because it has to do with societal norms where girls are expected to act in a specific way in society."*
Being Black makes the Autistic experience much harder because you have to also deal with the trials and tribulations of racism in the UK. **(p13)**	*"....it also doesn't help when you're Black as well because obviously....you have to deal with like the trials and tribulations of being Black in the UK as well....it just makes it 1000 times more difficult."*
Older people of colour tend to be resistant towards diagnoses of neurodivergent conditions due to negative stigma. Being more open to understanding conditions could help with negative perceptions held. **(p11/12)**	*"....a lot of people of colour, like older generation, they don't sort of get themselves diagnosed when it comes to stuff like that....But obviously, during that time, it was a negative stigma towards sort of neurodivergent people."*
SS experienced misogyny from teachers who stopped girls from playing sports or specific things due to perceived ability. **(p6)**	*"there used to be very misogynistic teachers that would basically stop the girls from like playing PE or doing specific things because they were like, you're not good at it anyway. So what's the point?"*
S2. Sensory overload and regulation	
S2.1. Sensory sensitivities	
SS was adapting herself to fit in with others. This involved engaging with people, clothes, hairstyles and foods that she did not like and made her feel uncomfortable due to sensory sensitivities. **(p3)**	*"So I would just like sort of deal with it. I'll just wear materials I wasn't comfortable with. I would style my hair a type of way, which I don't want."*
On reflection, SS was experiencing sensory overload. **(p5)**	*"even when I'm having, like sensory overload, which I didn't know what that was at the time, I just thought I was just like - it was just loud. And everything was just a bit too much."*
SS found it loud when walking between classes due to students running and making noise. **(p7)**	*"it's always loud, because there's just a bunch of different students just running and just making a bunch of noise."*

SS used her headphones as she found it difficult to focus on what was happening due to noise. **(p7)**	*"But since it was just loud, and I couldn't even couldn't focus on what was happening. I needed my headphones."*
Loudness created anxiety and overwhelm resulting in yelling or becoming jumpy but music helped to regulate these feelings. People would refer to her as emotional and a basket case. **(p7)**	*"I will just end up just like yelling or just being a bit like jumpy, I suppose. And people just make it seem like I'm having a problem that I'm just being like, emotional and just being a basket case...."*
S2.2. Sensory regulation	
SS ensures she has music with her to regulate the stress of masking. She feels passionate about music. **(p7)**	*"mainly just like with music, like I'm very passionate about music."*
SS likes a variety of music including R'n'B, blues, rock, jazz, classical, depending on her mood. **(p8)**	*".... r&b, blues, sometimes alternative rock, jazz....classical sometimes, depending on what mood I'm feeling."*
playing instruments and listening to music relaxes SS. She finds it relaxing knowing that some songs can relate to how you are feeling and music can be used to express yourself. **(p8)**	*"....either playing instruments, listening to music and just doing all those type of things. Because I feel like music is a great way to sort of express how you're feeling. So it kind of just, like relaxes you knowing that there are some songs that can pretty much relate back to how you are feeling."*
S3. Managing neurotypical classroom expectations	
S3.1. Teacher perceptions and understanding	
teachers' perception of SS was that she was troubled, aggressive and had an attitude. **(p5)**	*".... my teachers would just say that I was just like, a troubled student. I was just aggressive. I will have an attitude and just stuff like that."*
It should be compulsory for teachers to learn about neurodivergent pupils because she has witnessed multiple situations where teachers get mad at neurodivergent pupils for behaviours that are a part of their condition, such as ADHDers fidgeting. **(p9)**	*"it should be compulsory to do the workshops that teach you about neurodivergent pupils.... because there's been multiple situations when I've been at school where there are people with ADHD....and the teachers will get mad when they're fidgeting or rocking on their chairs and....they'll give them detentions for just doing stuff like....stimming."*
Knowledge and understanding would help teachers not to get mad and sanction students for being themselves. **(p9)**	*"I feel like teachers actually need to educate themselves on these sort of situations instead of getting mad at the students for just just being themselves."*
School never knew SS was autistic as she was diagnosed after she left. **(p10)**	*"I only got autism diagnosis about a year ago."*

If teachers had knowledge and understanding of neurodivergent pupils, they could let go of negative perceptions and see they have needs that must be supported. **(p6)**	*"....a lot of teachers....(pause) they didn't have any knowledge whatsoever when it came to neurodivergent pupils. So they just assumed that, yeah, you were just causing problems."*
S3.2. Masking learning needs	
In class, SS was masking her learning needs. She would employ expected behaviours to appear like she understood what was going on in class. **(p4)**	*"I tried to show that I'm paying attention when I have a terrible attention span. So I will sort of just stare at someone when I'm not listening at all."*
SS masked her learning needs which confused teachers when they saw her work. They were frustrated about her sustained attention skills, which likely came from a lack of understanding her learning profile and how to support. **(p5)**	*"....acting as if I know what I'm doing. Or acting like, I'm paying attention, but if you actually look at my paper, there's nothing written down. So the teachers will be like, what's happening here?....my teachers were sort of get mad about it."*
S4. Support from friends, family, and school	
Family have been supportive, encouraging her to be her authentic self to be liked rather than masking to fit in. **(p9)**	*"....my family has been very supportive."*
You don't need to publicly mask to fit into societal norms. Just be yourself, ask for help and be in safe places with good people who make you comfortable. **(p11)**	*"....you don't have to feel like you need to mask in public just to fit into, like societal norms of girls."*
Now unmasked, she has a group of friends who are mainly neurodivergent. They respect and accept each other's needs and boundaries and are very understanding. **(p11)**	*"....the friend group I have now, most of us are neurodivergent. So we all kind of, are aware of each other's needs."*
SS recommends school clubs where people can come together and share strategies to cope and regulate. **(p9)**	*"....after school clubs, where people can....come together, and....talk about their experiences, like just talk about (pause) what helps them when they're....having sort of overload. Just like, what doesn't help us we can sort of help each other...."*
SS explains the teachers were mainly supportive helping her relax even though they were unaware she was Autistic. She highlights that they were White, which emphasises a contrast with the Black teacher who was unsupportive. **(p10)**	*"I did have a lot of teachers that were supportive, which were....mainly white. To be fair, they....were very supportive....even though they didn't really have an idea of what was going on with me, they tried to be as supportive as possible."*
SS had access arrangements to take breaks during exams to support her anxiety but had to get a diagnosis of anxiety to have this support. **(p2)**	*"I had to get diagnosed with anxiety in order for that to happen so I didn't get additional time I just got my time paused."*

S5. Acceptance	
S5.1. Neglecting needs to fit in	
In primary school, it was difficult to make friends, so she stopped trying in Year5/6 and spent her time with her family who attended the same school. **(p4)**	*"....it was just mainly, just difficulty making friends and to a point where at like, around like year six year five, I just didn't end up trying. I was just like, well, this is just how it is, I suppose."*
SS was less socially conscious during primary school. It was not until her preteens that she began to consider how she was being perceived. **(p4)**	*"....because I felt like at that age, I didn't really care what I didn't really cross my mind what people thought of me until I sort of got into like, preteens, teenage years."*
SS wanted friends so she prioritised their needs over hers. She as though everything was okay even though she felt uncomfortable and was not aware that her discomfort was due to her autism. **(p5)**	*".... I was such a people pleaser, and I just wanted my friends to like me...."*
SS would feel exhausted after being with her friends because she was putting on an act, deprioritising her own needs to keep them happy. **(p5)**	*"....after I hung out....with my friends, I would just come home and be very exhausted, because I've kind of just felt like I was putting on this sort of act, I suppose. Just to appease people."*
She experienced low self-esteem because she felt she had to be a certain type of way every time she was in school. **(p10)**	*"I think my self-esteem probably did go down. Because I always, every time I was at school, I always felt like I had to be some type of way."*
S5.2. Prioritising needs and self-acceptance	
lockdown provided SS with the space and opportunity to self-reflect and prioritise her own needs. This helped her be herself when she returned to school. **(p10)**	*"....So I feel like during lockdown, it was a lot of self reflection. And then as soon as I went into year 11, I did feel a lot like me, I suppose."*
When she unmasked, prioritising her own needs, she wore comfortable clothes, read, spent time alone at times and hung out with a smaller group of people. **(p10)**	*"instead of surrounding myself with a bunch of different people, I would prefer to have a smaller group or to just be by myself sometimes."*
through research, SS thought ADHD made sense of her experiences. Her mum agreed but diagnosis took a year and she found out she could also be Autistic. Following further research, autism also made sense of her experiences. **(p12)**	*"I came to my mum, like about a year or two ago, basically saying that I think I have ADHD....because I always like, sort of research about things....I basically talked about what ADHD was, what some of the symptoms were and she was like, that makes a lot of sense....almost word for word."*

The diagnoses helped because they gave a genuine reason for her lifelong struggles. **(p12)**	*“when I when I found out....I had autism and ADHD, and even Dyslexia as well,....it made me feel a lot better, because it made me feel like most of these things that I've struggled with in my life without actually realising it, there is a reason behind it.”*
The stress and anxiety of secondary school life led SS to take two years out of education after Year 11. **(p1)**	*“I took 2 years off after secondary school because I was just dealing with stress and anxiety.”*

Table J3

Lily's Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Theme	**Illustrative Quotes**
L1. School rejection and negative perception led to home education	
L1.1. Negative perceptions	
Nursery was a time when she could be free to be herself without judgement. In primary school, most people perceived her to be weird which affected her friendships. **(p3)**	*"….in nursery I found those….the easiest time of….my life, because I just felt really free to be like how I was.* *So, when I went into primary school, I never really learned how to mask, so that's why loads of people….saw me as weird."*
Lily's behaviour was described as 'bad' by her teacher when her behaviour was communicating distress and a need for support. **(p11)**	*"my mum had a meeting with the teacher and she was saying that like my behaviour was bad, that I would never put my hand up in class when I needed help and that I would scream in the hallways."*
Teachers interpret behaviour with negative attributes instead of exploring the underlying cause of the behaviour. **(p18)**	*"….there's like a lot of assumption with like Black girls or like pretty girls, that it's not autism but it's like something else because it's just like an assumption that people make."*
L1.2. Rejection	
Lily became home-educated due to the school repeatedly mishandling bullying. **(p10)**	*"They really wouldn't mention like bullying….they never did anything. So that's why I'm home-schooled."*
Lily chose to be home-educated as she saw no point in staying in school when her classmates told her they would not care if she left. **(p12)**	*"I (laughs) remember asking my classmates like, oh like how would you feel if I left. And like everybody said like, oh I don't think I'd care that much…."*
L2. A 'fight for' survival to navigate social expectations and acceptance	
She couldn't relate to the things the others did, but she forced herself to mask and be like them. **(p3)**	*"….I couldn't really relate on certain things so….(I) try forcing myself to watch….similar series to them and all of that stuff."*

Spending time with people felt like a fight for survival just to gain friendship. She felt this was necessary as her mental and physical differences made her feel she could not live up to any expectations. **(p5/6)**	*“But I used to find like hanging out with them like fighting for my life. Like I just need to like be friends with them and that would be an exchange of a friendship. And next I'd be like that's over with I can wait until like the next three months to see them again, and like go through this again. So, I feel like as you know, I can never really live up to any expectations because I was just like, mentally and physically I wouldn't be able to catch up with things.”*
In response to people negatively reacting to her physical response to excitement about certain topics, she suppressed her physical expressions of excitement. **(p4)**	*“ I think loads of people didn't like that….I had to stop like kind of physically expressing myself.”*
Lily used perfectionism to keep up with others and prioritised their needs over her own. **(p5)**	*“….cause I always needed to be like perfect I guess, because I just feel like….I won't be able to catch up with everybody….”*
Lily used laughter and joking about to make others like her and have friends; even if it contradicted with her feelings. **(p13)**	*“Cause I just wanted to feed like laughter and all that stuff, like the only way they'd like me is by kind of making fun of myself.”*
She strived to be seen as perfect by people so tried to make a positive impression on teachers by emphasising her good qualities and accomplishments. **(p13)**	*“….the first thing I want is for people to see me as like perfect….”*
Lily masks with most friends due to embarrassment. At times she wishes that she could be 'better'. **(p16)**	*“With a lot my friends I just kind of accept that - like I feel like I need to mask because I feel embarrassed…. but every now and again I'm like, why can't I be like better? Why can't I be normal and like, you know, see them most of the time”*
L3. Challenges with sensory and social demands	
L3.1. Sensory demands	
The school environment was so demanding that it exhausted Lily, and she needed complete rest to recover. This led to missed school and feeling like she was failing but she struggled to ask for support. **(p6)**	*“….it's so demanding for me and next I feel like I'm failing, but I don't know how to ask for that help.”*
The sensory and social aspects of everyday aspects of school life created anxiety and overwhelm for Lily. **(p7)**	*“like I get so genuinely anxious and overwhelmed with it….”*

Lily is sensory averse to lighting, which has a significant impact on her regulation. **(p7)**	*"….obviously there's lots of noise, there's lots of lights, there's so many different things that you're trying to process."*
L3.2. Social demands	
More recently, conversations are hard due to the social demands and no interest in the topics of conversation. Having scripts help. **(p4)**	*"….I always have like a script when I need to like talk to people."*
Lily wants friendships where she can just be herself, with no social or sensory demands or expectations. She has this with an Autistic friend, which suggests that someone else who is Autistic or neurodivergent can bring understanding and acceptance of Lily being herself. **(p17)**	*"– I have another Autistic friend and we just - we don't even look at each other, we just look forward and we walk and we just talk."*
Masking stopped her from knowing her true self, leading to embarrassment about herself due to others' lack of acceptance and misunderstanding social norms. **(p22)**	*"….when you're around people that aren't as accepting, you start feeling embarrassed for yourself."*
L4. Positive personalised support	
L4.1. Family and friends	
Mum supports by ensuring the sensory environment is comfortable and understanding her needs. **(p15)**	*"Like with the dimmable lights, like all of that stuff, like she kind of knows, about my comfort sort of things and stuff that calms me down."*
People who are similar, have similar experiences so are understanding. It is good to be around people similar. **(p23)**	*"I have a friend and he's like Black and he has autism and it's just good to have kind of have that like understanding of people similar."*
L4.2. Education	
Individualised support and CAMHs input has supported Lily to manage in college. **(p15)**	*"….a lot of things like have become a bit more catered to since I've like paired up with CAMHs."*
Lily appreciated having someone trusted to speak to when she was stressed and to advocate for her when she had shut down from overwhelm. **(p23)**	*"I think it's definitely really important to have somebody to talk to - like somebody obviously nice that you can like tell stuff to like when you're feeling stressed."*
Lily benefitted from different teaching methods on a one to one basis that involved games and creativity. **(p20)**	*"In primary school when I had the one on one lessons that was really good, because it wasn't just sitting down and like just doing*

	stuff, like we'd creatively learn something with this like one teacher.”
Lily appreciates college being relaxed and not putting demands on her in terms of her attendance. She would prefer academic updates online to keep her caught up with her work. **(p21)**	*“And in college, I'd say, I think because they're aware of me having it they're a bit more, like relaxed on me like when it comes to my attendance and like If I can't come to college so they're not like really like oh why didn't you do this? Why didn't you do that? So that's like it feels better to not have all that stress put on.”*
Schools should offer individualised support to make school more comfortable and bearable for Autistic young people. **(p18)**	*“just more like catering to that person's needs, but obviously not like to an realistic level, like there's always gonna be things that aren't gonna be 100% comfortable and you can't do much about it, but just to do like the little that you can to make things easier….”*
L5. The delicate balance between seeking personal comfort and navigating social interactions	
Lily explains the benefits and disadvantages to home education. She engaged in fun activities with a community of people. However, it could be isolating at times which meant she missed opportunities to learn social cues, yet, she had opportunities to be alone which she enjoys. **(p12)**	*“I had that sort of group for a while, but sometimes I'd be a bit isolated, and - but I didn't really mind that because I like being by myself, but I think I didn't exactly get to learn about social cues that much.”*
To manage the stress of masking Lily goes into hibernation. She recognises that this helps to regulate her, however, she also understands that it leads to miss opportunities with friendships, and she ends up being behind her peers socially and academically. **(p15)**	*“I also can't carry on with masking, like I just drop everything…. I just kind of shut down and like - I called it my hibernation time…. it's not always like the best thing.* *And also when it comes to friendships, like, I just - I lose out on them.”*
As soon as Lily struggles to cope, people worry about her. She continues to mask and does not ask for help, even though she understands it would be beneficial for her learning. Masking has become automatic and normal. **(p14)**	*I'd never really wanna ask for help anymore….I think once you mask, it's kind of like you don't know how to go back to normal because you're so aware of it…. And you just like, you can't really help it….it's like you don't really know how you are normally anymore because you're so used to....”*
L6. Navigating challenges at the intersection of autism and race as a masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girl	
L6.1. Microaggressions and abuse	
Lily experienced a racial microaggression that appears to have communicated her skin colour was inferior. **(p8)**	*“We had like a bit of a silly like argument like basically she had her hand out and she wanted like a fly to like land on it, like we were*

	acting like it was a butterfly….I put my hand out….they were like it wouldn't like wanna go on your skin, they don't like brown skin and all that stuff.”
Lily reflects on how 7 year olds would have knowledge of racist language to be able to call something as derogatory as the N word. **(p8)**	*“….they have to get that from someone else like older, or something.”*
Lily felt hated and was mistreated by others at camp. She is unsure as to whether to attribute this to racial discrimination, however she is aware that there were barely any Black people there. **(p8/9)**	*“….somebody paid someone with P’s to throw a cold bucket of water on me…..they just really didn't like me at all, and they would just say F off all the time….I was the only Black like person in my group.”*
Lily reflects that she would not have understood whether she was experiencing racial discrimination at the time, but she recalls always feeling different as everyone else was White. **(p9)**	*“….I’m not really sure, like, about like discrimination. I just know nobody really liked me in school…. I always felt different, like because everybody else is White.”*
Lily was physically hurt by another student and recalls other similar situations. She recalls lots of people not liking her and suggests it's not necessarily her being Black, however, it appears that she may be recognising the correlation on reflection. **(p9/10)**	*“….this one girl really didn't like me as well….I got really happy that we were working together doing an art project, and she took my arm and she'd like smashed it on the desk. Not like smash, but like she hit on the desk and my mum saw it and it turned out that I had a contusion.”*
Constant racial microaggressions about her hair led to feelings of distress. **(p11)**	*“….oh, your hair smells because I could have product in it, but they weren't used to the same product…. so I think there was one time I just turned red and I screamed and I started crying.”*
L6.2. Racist and ableist stereotypes	
People assume black girls or pretty girls can't be Autistic. **(p18)**	*“I think there's like a lot of assumption with like Black girls or like pretty girls, that it's not autism but it's like something else because it's just like an assumption that people make.”*
Lily's affection and sensory needs were misinterpreted as aggression, which tends to be a word attributed to black girls. **(p17)**	*“….I was really affectionate and like I have really like a lot of empathy for people, so back in school like I used to hug people really tight but….I think that was more considered me being like aggressive….”*
People expect autism to have a certain look and do not want to label people who are pretty; they would prefer to label as 'crazy' rather than Autistic. **(p19)**	*“….if you're pretty then people like often like overlook it….people will say like you have like a certain look for autism or something.”*

The 'angry black girl' stereotype, rooted in perceptions of Black girls as more masculine, often results in misunderstandings of their emotional distress. This is particularly problematic for Black Autistic girls, as distress can be a frequent state experienced by Autistic people in schools. **(p19)**	*“with a lot of Black girls, it's kind of like you’re more masculine - that like loads of people just see you as that way so when you're like sharing….signs of….distress it’s like oh she's just being like you know typically angry and all of that stuff which (pause) it's like it's such a damaging stereotype especially when you're like Autistic.”*

Table J4

Maia's Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Theme	Illustrative quote
M1. Complexities faced when forming and maintaining friendships	
M1.1. Social awareness and understanding	
Maia had an ambivalent friendship that often confused her. This friend also attended the PRU and seemed jealous of Maia. **(p13)**	*"….she was gonna come up and hug me, and I was like awww, and she was like, oh, I'm not speaking to you. And then she walked away from me. Yeah, and I was just like what the hell?"*
Maia misjudged her friends as trustworthy, and they betrayed her trust and made her feel worse about herself with their judgements. This ended their friendships. **(p28/29)**	*"I felt really disgusted in myself because they were, cause they were really judgmental people."*
Maia's experience of being judged has made her non-judgemental of others. **(p30)**	*"I am the least judgemental, you can tell me a lot of stuff."*
Maia has found that when she thought she met someone that she got on well with, she later discovers through their actions that they did not actually get on and they did not understand or accept her. **(p43)**	*"….the thing is that I click with people and then they always do something to me that makes me realise that I haven't really clicked of them."*
M1.2. Fitting in	
Maia's assertive communicative style her beliefs and opinions caused friction with her peers. She was part of the popular group but not fully integrated, remaining on the margins. She was perceived as 'weird' suggesting a lack of understanding or acceptance within her social circle. **(p11)**	*"….I was just the weird one that hung out with the popular kids. Because there's always that one that's kind of like (pause) there but they're not really there, and that was me. And I always, I kind of, always had a falling out with them because I guess I'm really opinionated and I stand strong on my beliefs."*
Maia's struggle to fit in was due to her peers viewing her as weird and erratic. Processing information in a different way led to further distancing from peers. **(p22)**	*"I was always seen as the weird one or you know (pause) just the girl that is all over the place….The girl that has her mind everywhere, can't do this."*

Maia cannot be her true self anyone but herself. She shows people different personas. **(p33)**	*"I could only be my true self by myself…. I just have a lot of personalities that I show to people. I have so many different personalities."*
M1.3. Maintaining friendships	
Maia maintained friendships by being unconditionally loyal and supportive. **(p25)**	*"I think that's how….I've maintained friendships because they'd be all Maia is quite- like she's really much of a true friend that she'll stick with you no matter what."*
Maia lost friendships because her friends did not understand her or the different ways that autism presents. **(p25)**	*"….a lot of people stopped being friends with me just because they didn't understand me."*
Maia can obsess over a friend, placing them on a pedestal and expecting them to be exclusively her friend. **(p33)**	*"I become really obsessive over people or possessive over them."*
Maia would like more friends but struggles with putting her best friend on a pedestal. **(p34)**	*"Because I do want to have more friends, but it's just like, I just put Z on a really high pedestal, like so high."*
M2. School experiences of exclusion impacting sense of belonging and self-esteem	
M2.1. Negative perceptions	
In her early primary school years, Maia could express her true self, characterized by happiness, engagement, and confidence, despite some shyness. However, in the later years, her self-expression led to others labelling her as mentally ill, marking a change in her experience. **(P8)**	*"Well, in primary school....as I got older, I actually got called mentally ill by a lot of the people in my school....they'd be like, Maia, you're actually mentally ill. That's the type of names that used to come back to me when I was younger, just because I used to express myself."*
Parents were wary of inviting Maia to events due to gossip following an outburst of emotional dysregulation at a sleepover and negative parents' perceptions of her mother's parenting. **(p10)**	*"I didn't get invited to nothing really. They just saw me, a lot of the parents, I guess, saw me as or saw my mum as the lady that can't control her kids."*
Maia was aware of less than positive teacher perceptions about her and that diagnoses were being considered to explain her presentation. **(p11)**	*"I guess every teacher that I would have been in the classroom with would say, Maia keeps us on our toes….my Year 6 teacher, he actually left and he said he left because of me."*
M2.2. Bullying	
Towards the end of primary school, peers started calling her weird and mentally ill. They made fun of her eyebrows which made her conscious of her appearance. **(p13)**	*"They said they think I'm mentally ill and stuff and just always calling me weird and they always used to speak about my eyebrows."*

Teasing and bullying by boy peers and teachers about her appearance led to school non-attendance. **(p26)**	*"It was rubbish and most of the time they were just talking about how underweight I looked so it just it didn't make me - yeah literally one time the teacher was like oh yeah you're so skinny."*
Being labelled as 'ugly' and other derogatory terms such as 'marga' deeply impacted her self-esteem, led her to believe she wasn't attractive. This constant negative labelling created a longing for love and acceptance. Consequently, it affected her self-image to the extent that she stopped sharing her photos on social media. **(p32)**	*"I think it also goes back to me wanting to be loved because I never ever felt like I was pretty. Because….those primary school friends they called me ugly. They called me marga, they called me all the names under the sun and that's when I kind of, I stopped posting myself on social media because I just like, you know, I don't like the way I look."*
M2.3. Rejection and lack of empathy lead to emotional distress	
Maia experienced many issues with teachers because she voiced her opinions and disagreements. Her maths teacher moved her because she found her disruptive. This led to her running away or hiding around the school and her mum being called. **(p15)**	*"I had a lot of issues with a lot of the teachers in the school because, like I said I'm really opinionated, and I just wouldn't really let people boss me around if I feel that I'm being dealt with wrong. I just wouldn't let it happen….I guess my maths teacher, because she found me so disruptive, she moved me into different class…."*
Her response to emotional distress caused by teachers is to completely disengage, indicating a coping mechanism to manage her feelings. Her interactions with many teachers are characterised by passive-aggressive behaviour, notably giving them the cold shoulder. This approach seems driven by a need for personal space, likely a strategy to prevent escalation into rudeness or confrontational remarks. **(p24)**	*"But if a teacher has really really emotionally, made me emotional, then I just can't - I'm just, I shut off from the teacher. I can't even speak to them, like you can, you can kind of tell when I don't want to speak to you. I will make it very known and yeah, my relationships with a lot of teachers have been really passive-aggressive."*
Maia's disengagement from others who really upset her could have been a form of emotional regulation. It may have been a complex emotional response that balanced empathy and self-preservation by defending against being emotionally invested.**(p24)**	*"….I don't mean to say it because obviously sometimes it does come from a place where I actually do want to say it. But it's just like I don't want to say it because it's rude and I don't like upsetting people and I don't like seeing people upset."*
Maia's teacher invalidated her feelings and dismissed her assertions that two girls were harassing her in class. **(p42/43)**	*"….there's 2 girls in class that were kind of giving me dirty looks and the teacher basically invalidated my feelings and dismissed what happened to me basically say that none of the girls in the class do that type of stuff."*

Maia believes schools need to change a lot to accommodate Black Autistic girls. Understanding and empathy is needed to manage unmet needs and behaviour issues. Schools need to explore their own practices rather than assuming home issues are the underlying cause of behaviour. **(p41)**	*“….I feel like schools should be more sympathetic or more understanding. Instead of just assuming….I mean obviously school should always assume something's happening at home, but I feel like they jump to it too quickly.*
M2.4. Internal and external school exclusions	
The initial years of primary school were the happiest for her until a shift occurred in Year 5, marked by less supportive teachers and a new Headteacher. This change in the school's leadership seemed to impact the support and understanding she previously enjoyed, leading to her transfer to a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). **(p9)**	*“But I got put in a PRU and I think I've got excluded from primary school in year 6 or year 5 like 5 times and when my mum tried to move me from the school, they wouldn't let me”*
Maia received fixed term exclusions and was made to attend a PRU to avoid permanent exclusion. This process was unclear and confusing. **(p11)**	*“….you see the thing with these exclusions (pause) is that they didn't like permanently exclude me or like say I can't come back in the school. They would just say, oh, Maia is excluded, but she can still come back. So my mum was really confused….”*
Maia was 'kicked out' of her first secondary school after a year. **(p15)**	*“I think I was only there in Year 7 and then I left. No, I didn’t even leave, they kicked me out.”*
When Maia started her new secondary school, she got into a fight outside of school over a boy. The school found out and placed her in isolation for a week as a result. **(p15)**	*“I got in a fight with this girl and now I come back to school, I guess the school have found out about it, and they ,they say to me, you know, we're gonna put in the SLT unit.”*
Being permanently excluded from her first secondary school disrupted her established friendships. She was then repeatedly placed in isolation in her next secondary school. **(p26)**	*“I went to the same secondary school as them and obviously - But like I said, after a year being in….I got kicked out and they put me in the SLT”*
Not attending school had negative and risky consequences for Maia. She looks back with regret, but learned wisdom and growth as she now understands the dangers and pitfalls of her actions. **(p26)**	*that is when my life kind of spiralled down again, because that is when I started - I guess, cause I don't, I wouldn't do anything in the daytime. I wasn't in school so really and truly, the only thing I was doing was on my phone and that's when I started, I guess speaking to more boys and then actually I did meet up with, this is like when I was 13,*
Maia still masked in special school as she felt some of the teachers did not understand or care. **(p40)**	*“I wouldn't really be my true self, even at like, special schools.”*

M3. Facing societal discrimination and prejudices as an Autistic Black girl	
M3.1. Racist, ableist, and sexist microaggressions	
White girls are less likely to be stereotyped as aggressive or having an attitude when they assert themselves, unlike Black girls who face stereotyping and microaggressions. **(p36)**	*"But I don't think people would label a white girl that is bitching about something or not even bitching about something but like trying to explain herself, aggressive, having attitude, being sassy or being like, all these things. They only say that about Black girls….so I guess that's where the microaggression comes from."*
Maia is affected by the portrayal of Black women as unattractive and inferior to women of other races. She attributes this to social media and many Black men devaluing and disrespecting Black women in public, enabling other races to do the same. **(p38)**	*"I don't want to generalise and say people don't, but….people always say, you know, Black women are the least attractive. Black women are this, Black women look like men….Black women look like Paul Pogba….I've even got it said to me….that is another reason why I don't even post on social media….I'm so insecure about myself"*
Maia has seen Black women being devalued and discriminated against for the texture of their hair and for being dark-skinned. **(p39)**	*"black girls that have 4C hair get, honestly just get discriminated against because of their hair texture."*
In secondary school, people make jokes about disabilities including autism and those who access the SEN department. **(p36)**	*"….people love to make jokes about disabilities or joke about people that go into the SEN department."*
Maia considers comments like 'you don't look or sound Autistic' as discriminatory, reasoning that there is no specific appearance or sound characteristic of autism. **(p37)**	*"(it's) even discrimination to even say that someone doesn't look Autistic because what does autism look like?"*
Maia has experienced sexism and misogyny from boys trying to make girls feel beneath them. She recognises that some girls have internalised misogyny but cannot make sense of this. **(p37)**	*"….a lot of boys are very misogynistic. Even girls, some of them have internalised misogyny in them….the whole thing with boys, they like to try to make girls feel beneath them."*
Black girls are often typecast as strong and independent, but rarely seen as gentle or feminine. Society often overlooks the emotional and softer side of Black women, categorizing them as either strong or aggressive. **(p36)**	*"....they don't let Black women be seen as soft or emotional or have feelings. They just see Black women either strong or aggressive."*
M3.2. Others see race before autism	

Being a Black girl is challenging in itself, without the added factor of Autism. **(p53)**	*"I just feel like as a young Black girl - as even Being a black girl, forget autism, is hard enough."*
Maia struggles to follow instructions that she does not agree with. She has been referred to by a teacher as having an attitude, a stereotypical trait attributed to Black girls, rather than her autism being considered as an explanation of how she presents in class. **(p42)**	*"I don't like anyone telling me what to do, like I just don't like it. I just can't do it….. I do get that some things can be seen as attitude. But I also think that there's certain things I do that should be an explanation to why I act a certain way."*
Maia knows she will always be labelled and judged as Black before any other aspects of her identity. **(p39)**	*"I feel like as a Black girl I have been discriminated against because before people see me as a girl, or anything, they just see me as black....sadly that is what I will always be labelled as before anything else. Just either, Black, aggressive or strong."*
Others perceive my race before my autism, and my racial identity is always the first aspect they notice. Being Black and autistic is distinctly different from the experience of white Autistic individuals. **(p35)**	*"….before they see the autism, they're always going to see my race. I thought this is why it's really different to be Black and Autistic, than White and Autistic."*
Maia appreciates being diagnosed as it provided self-understanding. Without the diagnosis she feels she would be perceived as just the aggressive black girl. **(p44)**	*"I'm very lucky and happy that I got a diagnosis because I don't have to like - I don't have to be labelled as the aggressive Black girl, I could just be Autistic."*
M3.3 'Acting white'	
Maia has experienced people of all races telling her she acts/wants to be White because she does not fit Black stereotypes, participate in Black culture and straightens her hair. **(p51)**	*"….he was like basically saying how I'm racist saying like the stuff about black men, and how that it's only because I want to be White, like I'm not even really Black."*
Maia refutes others' assertions that her hair styling choices are indicative of a desire to be another race. She views her hair as versatile representing an appearance choice rather than a racial identity. **(p51)**	*"….even if I did want to straighten my hair, who cares? it's a hairstyle."*
M4. The significant role of support and understanding	
M4.1 Maternal	
She refrains from sharing certain things with her mum to avoid causing her self-blame or guilt. Her explanation indicates a	*"I think you wouldn't want to hear stuff about your child being (pause) you wouldn't want to hear something about (pause) your child (pause) being (pause) I guess -(pause) How do I say it?"*

protective instinct towards her mother's emotional well-being. **(p14)**	
Maia wants to protect her mother from some of her experiences as she is not ready to tell her certain things, although her mother knows a lot of what has happened to her. **(p14)**	*"I feel like even if your child says, you know….this isn't your fault that it's happened to me. I feel like you would still blame yourself because this your child."*
Her mum fought for her not to be placed in isolation **(p16)**	*"….my mum wasn't really happy about me being in isolation. I don't think any parent would be. So yes, my mum was always trying to fight for me not to be in isolation."*
Maia is close to her mum and her mum provides comfort and support without judgement. However, for some topics she finds it is easier to speak to strangers which may be influenced by the judgemental responses from her friends and also her feelings of disgust and regret and protection of her mum. **(p29)**	*"I guess as someone that does know me, it will just make me feel uncomfortable, telling them. I feel like just the different dynamics of relationship. It just (pause) I don't feel (pause) I just don't want my mum to feel guilty."*
Maia has a trusting relationship with her mum because she provides support and affection without judgement. Her mum is like a friend. **(p29)**	*"….I could really put my trust into my mum and I could always go to her for help and affection…."*
Maia reflects that her mum knew she was vulnerable, and she feels guilt that she lied to her mum when she was trusted unconditionally. **(p30)**	*"It's kind of sad, like that now I'm thinking….that she believes my words, but I mean it's kind of good that she wanted to believe my word because that kind of means she trusts me.*
Maia's mums response to the things that she did made her feel loved and understood. **(p30)**	*"….it just made me feel like she really loved me…."*
Maia projected her stress from masking all day in school, on her mum when she got home. She felt bad about it but felt no control over it. **(p40)**	*"….it's kind of really sad but because I would just kind of keep everything in throughout the day, I would just be really nasty to my mum and I actually - I don't like being nasty to my mum."*
Maia's mum has supported her by encouraging her to engage in public speaking and getting the right professional support. She has encouraged counselling for Maia to explore all her experiences and heal from them. **(p40)**	*"….my mum, she's always trying to like push me out there. So she's trying to make me like not be so shy."*
M4.2 Educational	
Maia recalls being close to a teacher in a special school who she could be her true self with because she shared a lot of personal information with her. She became a trusted adult. Maia	*"….I could be myself around her….she just kind of became my little person I used to speak to…."*

contradicts earlier statements that she could only be herself when alone and that special schools were worse; these were likely exceptions. **(p45)**	
Maia often visited the SEN department to find comfort and regulate her emotions with the SEN teacher, who was her favourite person and someone she deeply cherished.**(p16)**	*"I'd go into the SEN department, and chill with….Mrs X….she was my favourite person that - I really loved the SEN teacher.*
Maia attended a small, all girls, special school where the staff took the time to listen to her and get to know her. It was her favourite school setting and she felt a sense of belonging. **(p45)**	*"it was so small. It was like a little family…."*
school and parents became very concerned about her online activity with boys. It formed part of her EHCP. **(p21)**	*"there was a lot of stuff about me not being safe online and not being safe with boys and that was actually in my EHC plan"*
Home school communication was open and supportive at the PRU. **(p12)**	*"E was a really good headteacher and I think she really did try to further my mum to help me or help my mum in helping me as well. And she was really understanding."*
The PRU had a welcoming, family-like environment with neurodivergent children like Maia. Similar peers may have facilitated her sense of belonging and comfort. **(p12)**	*"a lot of people there did have even autism or ADHD or like dyslexia. And it's just kind of like - the whole- it was, it was just really - had a family - it was just nice."*
M4.3. Self	
Self-talk and reflection can help you understand yourself, what you like and the type of people you want to around. **(p54)**	*"you should talk to yourself because, you're never gonna find someone that understands you more than you."*
M4.4. Friends	
Maia appreciates the friendship she has with her best friend as she can be herself with her and her friend helps her to think from different perspectives and navigate social situations. **(p34)**	*"she's just really sympathetic to me like she always understands me to a tee…. I think that's what's really nice about it is that she validates my feelings, but then also gives me a different perspective of a situation."*
M4.5. Unmet learning needs	
Maia may have undiagnosed learning needs, particularly with her concept of number and time. A These needs were identified by some teachers, however, she never received the appropriate support. This led to her avoiding most lessons. **(p22)**	*"I truly believe if I got the right support and the right team behind me, I could have probably maybe pushed for a 6 in GCSE, but I didn't"*

Maia struggles to concentrate which may be due to not understanding what is being taught. **(p23)**	*“I can't concentrate for more than a minute. And….when I'm given anything, even something that I might have learned 5 times. I still don't get it and I think it's just because ….not all teachers try and sit down with people and try and to understand them individually.”*
Maia found that when she asked for help, she still did not fully understand. This led to her not asking for help as it proved futile. **(p23)**	*“I do try to ask for help, but when I do ask for help it doesn't - I don't - I still don't understand the help, it's not enough for me to understand.”*
Maia was frustrated that teachers do not adapt their teaching approach to the individual child. If this happened for her, she would have achieved far more academically. **(p23)**	*“They just think this is a certain way for that individual. I'm going to do it that way. I don't care what you think or how you feel, I'm just gonna work with you how I think you should be worked with….I could have gone so far if I got the right help.”*
M5. Masking leading to exploitation and harm	
M5.1. Self-perception and self-understanding	
Masking can lead to a path of self-destruction when you can't be yourself and don't understand yourself and prioritise others' words and perceptions. It is crucial to be around people you do not need to mask around. **(p53)**	*“….never let other people's words determine your future or how you view yourself, because that's how you can really get down into the path of, like I said, self-destruction and not understanding yourself.”*
Masking can stop you from knowing who you are leading to you having negative self-perceptions and being unsure of yourself so it is important to be around people that you can be yourself with. **(p54)**	*“I feel like if you're not your true self, then you won't ever really know who you are….That's how you can kind of fall down into the path of feeling, like I said, ugly, not loved, not like all of these things, cause you're masking up all your behaviours, you're not being yourself to people that you feel like are meant to love you.”*
Masking made Maia try to be someone she was not which took it's toll. **(p54)**	*“I was trying to be someone I'm not. And when you're trying to be someone that you're not, it can take a toll on you.”*
Maia found masking exhausting so went to sleep as soon as she got home which affected her sleep pattern. She couldn't be herself in school but could unmask when she got home. **(p39)**	*“I'll be really exhausted throughout the day. So I'll just come home and instantly sleep then that's why I'd also be up at night so late.”*
M5.2. Sexual exploitation	
Masking can lead many Autistic people to being harmed and exploited by others. **(p53)**	*“I feel like masking is really the root to the problems of why a lot of autistic people and like even not Autistic Black girls…. but Autistic people go down into exploitation and you know just a lot of harmful things I feel.”*

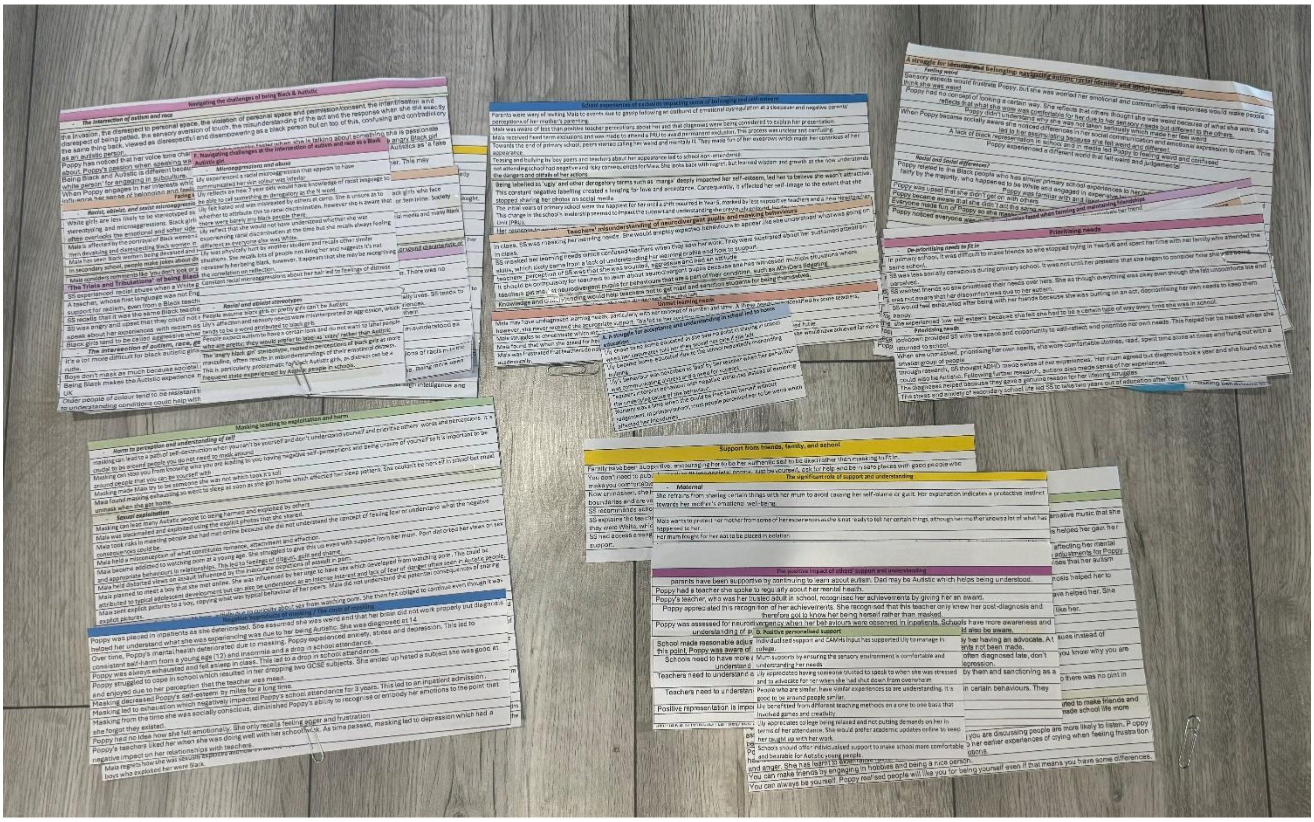
Maia was blackmailed and exploited using the explicit photos that she shared. **(p21)**	*"he basically said to me like, erm, if I don't want him to expose these pictures of me (pause) then I should send him a hundred pounds…."*
Maia took risks in meeting people she had met online because she did not understand the concept of feeling fear or understand what the negative consequences could be. **(p17)**	*"when I was younger I didn't really grasp, I guess or have the understanding of being scared about something like that."*
Maia held a misconception of what constitutes romance, attachment and affection. **(p17)**	*"so I viewed stuff like kidnapping and just things of that kind of sort kind, as romantic, like that's how I used to look at it."*
Maia became addicted to watching porn at a young age. She struggled to give this up even with support from her mum. Porn distorted her views on sex and appropriate behaviours in relationships. This led to feelings of disgust, guilt and shame. **(p18)**	*"it just made me go down a rabbit hole of not….being able to stop myself from watching it basically. And I felt really guilty every time I watched it."*
Maia held distorted views on assault influenced by the inaccurate depictions of assault in porn. **(p18)**	*"I used to think it was really cute. Just because of how porn was showing it."*
Maia planned to meet a boy that she met online. She was influenced by her urge to have sex which developed from watching porn. This could be attributed to typical adolescent development but can also be understood as an intense interest and lack of fear of danger often seen in Autistic people. **(p19)**	*"I did really want to do it because I was like, I need to do this because adults do it and I think - I would just (pause) I just wanted to do it because it - something in my brain said that had to do it."*
Maia sent explicit pictures to a boy, copying what was typical behaviour of her peers. Maia did not understand the potential consequences of sharing explicit pictures. **(p21)**	*"cause I do remember that I did actually like send explicit pictures….but I would never do it now, but like when I was younger I didn't get the concept of not doing that, just because everyone was kind of doing it as well and just because I just felt like if I did it, he would like me more."*
Maia became sexually involved with boys, initially due to curiosity about sex from watching porn. She then felt obliged to continue even though it was overwhelming and uncomfortable. **(p27)**	*"….it was too much for me."*
M5.3. Reflections on vulnerabilities	

Maia believed boys when they told her they loved her a day after meeting. On reflection, she feels gullible for buying him an expensive gift when he ended up sexually exploiting and blackmailing her. **(p22)**	*"I would just believe anything that someone would say to me like, someone could say they love me after a day of meeting them and I would be like, oh my gosh, like this person, they love me."*
Maia discusses her future daughter as if speaking to herself indicating self-reflection through projection. This suggests she is using the idea of a future child as a mirror to understand and come to terms with her own past experiences and actions. **(p27)**	*"….hopefully my child doesn't do the things I did just because I want my child to be a bit more under- not understanding actually….because as a 13 year old, you're just still a child and you don't actually know what you're doing."*
Maia expresses a lot of regret for becoming sexually involved with boys at a young age. She also felt betrayed by her friends who judged her when she confided in them. **(p28)**	*"I still feel so disgusting for a lot of the things that I did."*
Maia suggests what a counsellor would tell her, self-soothing through projection, explaining to herself that she was a child and did not understand the concept of what she was engaging in. **(p28)**	*"I guess a counsellor they would say, you know you was still a child, like when you're doing stuff as a child is, I guess it's not really seen as anything because you was a child, you don't really understand concept of it."*
Maia reflects that if she verbally expressed how she was feeling inside to others, she may not have engaged in sexual activity in a way that became a form of self-harm and other forms of self-harm. **(p31)**	*"….if I did speak up a bit more. Then I don't think I would have done a lot of the things I did when I was younger. But, cause I didn't, cause I always keep things inside."*
Maia feels regret but recognises that she was young and should not be ashamed. **(p31)**	*"people shouldn't be ashamed of doing what they did when they was younger because they was just kids."*
On reflection, Maia recognises how morally wrong it was for much older boys to be sexually involved with her and the vulnerable situation she was in. **(p32)**	*"….now I've grown up and I actually understand why it's wrong…."*
Maia knows she was taken advantage of and that this happens to lots of girls, but also boys. She recognises the gendered nature of who is seen as a victim. **(p33)**	*"….it happens to a lot of girls."*
Maia regrets how she was sexually exploited and how it made her feel and still feel. It has influenced her perception of men, in particular Black men as the boys who exploited her were Black. **(p45)**	*"I'm regretful of the way it's happened and how it's made me feel."*
M6. Experiences and stereotypes influencing approach to relationships	

Maia's traumatic experiences with Black boys and her perception of Black men's disrespect towards Black women has pushed her away from being attracted to Black men. **(p48)**	*"I've been so traumatized by Black boys that I just have to let go of them."*
Maia experiences leads her to perceive Black men as disrespectful to women of all races. This may be influenced by a combination of her own or observed experiences or a racial stereotype. **(p48)**	*"….because Black men don't even respect Black women. It just gives leeway for other men to not respect Black women…."*
Maia seems to have associated all Black men with causing trauma, devaluing and disrespecting. By 'letting them go' she appears to be prioritising her needs for love, compassion, and displaying femininity. **(p48)**	*"It's hindered Black women and it's hindered them from finding love and finding compassion and being able to be feminine and just looking to themselves…."*
Maia is drawn to White, middle-class boys and avoids those who seem inauthentic. This preference could subconsciously reflect her own desire to avoid masking her true self. **(p46)**	*"I actually only like white guys, but it has to be like a particular kind of white guy…."*
Maia has specific perceptions and beliefs on what constitutes and differentiates social classes in the UK. **(p46)**	*"Even our middle class really has to do with like your tax bracket, but then at the end of the day people don't view it as that. I feel that people view it as who you hang around, how you dress and kind of what your parents do for a living in a way."*
Maia notes that Black women find White men more appreciative of their 4C hair and have better experiences dating them compared to dating Black men, though she recognises that not all Black men are alike. **(p49)**	*"….he's just made me feel like a princess."*

Appendix K

Clustering PETs to create GETs



Appendix L

Tavistock Research and Ethics Committee (TREC) forms and letters of approval

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW OF STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECTS

This application should be submitted alongside copies of any supporting documentation which will be handed to participants, including a participant information sheet, consent form, self-completion survey or questionnaire.

Where a form is submitted and sections are incomplete, the form will not be considered by TREC and will be returned to the applicant for completion.

For further guidance please contact Paru Jeram (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

FOR ALL APPLICANTS

If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters. You need only complete sections of the TREC form which are NOT covered in your existing approval

Is your project considered as 'research' according to the HRA tool? (http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/index.html)	[✓ Yes]/No
Will your project involve participants who are under 18 or who are classed as vulnerable? (see section 7)	[✓ Yes]/No
Will your project include data collection outside of the UK?	Yes/[✓ No]

SECTION A: PROJECT DETAILS

Project title	An Intersectionality View: The Lived Experiences of 'Camouflaging' Adolescent Black Autistic Girls in UK Education		
Proposed project start date	01 March 2023	**Anticipated project end date**	**30 April 2024**
Principle Investigator (normally your Research Supervisor): Jude Mortell			
Please note: TREC approval will only be given for the length of the project as stated above up to a maximum of 6 years. Projects exceeding these timeframes will need additional ethical approval			
Has NHS or other approval been sought for this research including through submission via Research Application	**YES (NRES approval)** ☐ **YES (HRA approval)** ☐ **Other** ☐		

System (IRAS) or to the Health Research Authority (HRA)?	**NO** ☒
If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters.	

SECTION B: APPLICANT DETAILS

Name of Researcher	Tiffany Nelson
Programme of Study and Target Award	M4 Doctorate Child, Community and Educational Psychology
Email address	tnelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk
Contact telephone number	07889754087

SECTION C: CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Will any of the researchers or their institutions receive any other benefits or incentives for taking part in this research over and above their normal salary package or the costs of undertaking the research? **YES** ☐ **NO** ☒ If **YES**, please detail below:
Is there any further possibility for conflict of interest? YES ☐ **NO** ☒
Are you proposing to conduct this work in a location where you work or have a placement? **YES** ☐ **NO** ☒ If **YES**, please detail below outline how you will avoid issues arising around colleagues being involved in this project:

Is your project being commissioned by and/or carried out on behalf of a body external to the Trust? (for example; commissioned by a local authority, school, care home, other NHS Trust or other organisation). *Please note that 'external' is defined as an organisation which is external to the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust (Trust)	**YES** ☐ **NO** ☒
If **YES**, please add details here:	
Will you be required to get further ethical approval after receiving TREC approval?	**YES** ☐ **NO** ☒

If **YES**, please supply details of the ethical approval bodies below AND include any letters of approval from the ethical approval bodies (letters received after receiving TREC approval should be submitted to complete your record):	
If your project is being undertaken with one or more clinical services or organisations external to the Trust, please provide details of these:	
If you still need to agree these arrangements or if you can only approach organisations after you have ethical approval, please identify the types of organisations (eg. schools or clinical services) you wish to approach:	
Do you have approval from the organisations detailed above? (this includes R&D approval where relevant) Please attach approval letters to this application. Any approval letters received after TREC approval has been granted MUST be submitted to be appended to your record	**YES** ☐ **NO** ☐ **NA** ☒

SECTION D: SIGNATURES AND DECLARATIONS

APPLICANT DECLARATION

I confirm that:

- The information contained in this application is, to the best of my knowledge, correct and up to date.
- I have attempted to identify all risks related to the research.
- I acknowledge my obligations and commitment to upholding ethical principles and to keep my supervisor updated with the progress of my research
- I am aware that for cases of proven misconduct, it may result in formal disciplinary proceedings and/or the cancellation of the proposed research.
- I understand that if my project design, methodology or method of data collection changes I must seek an amendment to my ethical approvals as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

Applicant (print name)	Tiffany Nelson
Signed	
Date	31 January 2023

FOR RESEARCH DEGREE STUDENT APPLICANTS ONLY

Name of Supervisor/Principal Investigator	Jude Mortell

Supervisor –

- Does the student have the necessary skills to carry out the research?
  YES ☒ **NO** ☐
- Is the participant information sheet, consent form and any other documentation appropriate?
  YES ☒ **NO** ☐
- Are the procedures for recruitment of participants and obtaining informed consent suitable and sufficient?
  YES ☒ **NO** ☐
- Where required, does the researcher have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance?
  YES ☒ **NO** ☐

Signed	
Date	3 February 2023

COURSE LEAD/RESEARCH LEAD

Does the proposed research as detailed herein have your support to proceed? YES ☒ NO ☐

Signed	A Styles
Date	03.02.2023

SECTION E: DETAILS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

Provide a brief description of the proposed research, including the requirements of participants. This must be in lay terms and free from technical or discipline specific terminology or jargon. If such terms are required, please ensure they are adequately explained (Do not exceed 500 words)

There is limited research exploring the educational experiences of young people who camouflage their autistic traits in the UK. The literature describes camouflaging as a way autistic people hide their autistic traits to fit in with their neurotypical peers, but it can lead to misdiagnosis, missed diagnosis and missing out on essential support in education. It appears that adolescent girls camouflage to reduce the stress and feelings of rejection and misunderstanding from others. Camouflaging can lead to the perception that an individual is functioning well and has no problems, when they are in fact experiencing difficulties due to the interaction between their autism and the context. The research shows camouflaging has detrimental effects including burnout, depression and anxiety. The literature about camouflaging tends to focus on autistic females. There is limited research on further social constructs such as race and ethnicity. Leading UK autism charities and studies call for further research to understand the interplay (Autistic Girls Network, 2022; Corbett & Perepa, 2007). This led me to consider intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), how social constructs such as gender and race can intersect to shape the individual experience.

Societal perceptions of autism are influenced by diagnostic tools, media, and research that is based on White, middle classed, cis-gendered males. Current research demonstrates limited consideration of how social constructs intersect to shape the autistic experience. This research study is an exploratory and emancipatory study; aiming to amplify the voices of those who hold identities not represented in research.

The aim is to give a voice to a group ordinarily marginalised in society. Employing camouflaging strategies suggests they are used to hiding their true feelings and thoughts. This research will give them the opportunity to express their true feelings anonymously without being judged or having the fear of rejection or non-acceptance. The aim is for the participants to have a safe, reflective space to express their authentic selves.

Participants will be black females aged 16-18, in an educational setting in the UK. They will have an autism spectrum condition diagnosis (including Asperger's and Pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified PDD-NOS) and self-identify as camouflaging their autistic traits. Participants will be asked personal characteristics and demographic information at the start of the interview (see appendix A). This data will provide transparency and context for the participants lived experiences. Participants will be required to attend an online interview for up to an hour.

This study will use phenomenology to make sense of their individual experience. It will look further using Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Connor et al., 2021) to make sense of the impact of wider levels, in keeping with developmental psychological theory. This study also aims to understand the role of power, oppression, privilege, and structures using a DisCrit theoretical framework and intersectional lens. The study will answer two research questions:

1. What is the lived experience of camouflaging black autistic adolescent girls?
2. How can the findings from research question one be understood using a DisCrit and intersectionality lens?

1. Provide a statement on the aims and significance of the proposed research, including potential impact to knowledge and understanding in the field (where appropriate, indicate the associated hypothesis which will be tested). This should be a clear justification of the proposed research, why it should proceed and a statement on any anticipated benefits to the community. (Do not exceed 700 words)

This research aims to understand the lived experiences of camouflaging black autistic adolescent girls better, what support they need in education, and any barriers they face to identification and support. The hope is to understand the demands that they face in education and the support that they need to inform educational settings. The aim is that educational settings can be informed of the reasonable adjustments that need to be made from the perspective of an autistic young person, in keeping with 'nothing for us without us'. This is the notion that policies and decisions should not be made without the direct participation of individuals from the group affected.

Additionally, this research aims to understand the role multiple identities play in their lived experience (intersectionality). There may be cultural differences and issues of power that have contributed to the perception held of the young person and their family and/or their perceptions of the educational system/setting. These may have

affected factors such as diagnosis and support. There is limited research that explores this, yet UK research demonstrates significant differences by ethnicity, gender and demographics (Roman-Urrestarazu et al., 2021).
This has significant relevance to the role of the EP as it will add to the current knowledge within the profession and support EPs' cultural awareness and competence which is an essential skill required in EP practice (DECP, 2002). It is vital for EPs to understand the challenges faced systemically and structurally to work towards organisational change, especially for those minoritised. Intersectionality has been added to the HCPC proficiency standards (coming in September 2023) highlighting its importance and relevance to the role. I hope my research can open up the minds of EPs and other professionals to consider intersectionality and cultural differences in their work. This will support all communities.

2. Provide an outline of the methodology for the proposed research, including proposed method of data collection, *tasks* assigned to participants of the research and the proposed method and duration of data analysis. If the proposed research makes use of pre-established and generally accepted techniques, please make this clear. (Do not exceed 500 words)

Methodology and methods: The research will be qualitative using semi-structured interviews analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This will give rich data into the lived experience of the participants through the lens of their lifeworld (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2021).

Data collection: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a minimum of 4 participants and a maximum 8 participants (Smith et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews will be used as they are non-directive and open-ended, thus the interviewee can respond in their own way providing rich qualitative data that can be analysed for meanings, constructions, and interpretations (Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016). Interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed. Interviews will be held online using my Tavistock zoom account.

I have used the guidance set out by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2021) to develop my interview questions (see appendix B). I have developed a list of draft interview questions with follow up questions to help prompt further information. I will ask participants if there are any adjustments that they need. I will use my professional knowledge and experience to adapt the language that I use in the questions and in the way that I communicate. I will offer non-verbal ways of communicating, such as using the emojis on Zoom. Following consent, I will send the draft questions in advance of the interview to reduce cognitive demand and anxiety in the participants.

Data analysis: The focus of this study is experience therefore I will use phenomenology for the analysis, through a DisCrit lens. Phenomenology acknowledges that all experiences must be understood in the context of the person experiencing them and how they see the world (Langdridge, 2007). Hence, the individual's world is 'lived' rather than the world is separate from the individual who is experiencing it. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) seeks to understand this lifeworld, thus it will be employed in the data analysis. IPA will support the understanding of the meaningfulness of individual experiences; to understand their lifeworld in terms of space, time, embodiment, and interaction with others. Phenomenology is in keeping with social constructionism as it concerns how individuals actively construct meaning in their experiences and understand the world as it appears to them (Langdridge, 2007). Phenomenology also recognises that there are always complex issues in an individual's life which need to be seen in the context of biographical history and the social climate. Husserl refers to the individual as inseparable from the world and Heidegger speaks of the 'person-in-context' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2021). Intersectionality takes a similar stance in understanding that individuals have a unique experience due to their multiple identities; this experience is grounded in the oppressions and privileges constructed in society at a systemic level. DisCrit focuses on how racism and ableism systemic oppression in terms of race and ability circulate interdependently in society to uphold notions of what is 'normal'. IPA discourages researchers from incorporating theory early in the research so as not to bias the lens (Abrams et al., 2020). For this reason, my research will consider the individual in context by taking a DisCrit and intersectionality lens to analyse the lifeworld presented by the participants by using a second research question.

Interviews will be transcribed, and data will be analysed, line by line, using the lifeworld themes of spatiality, temporality, embodiment and intersubjectivity. Each unit of meaning will be coded, and codes will be linked to create emerging themes. Once all interviews have been themed, overarching themes will be determined. Themes will be described in the manner they were presented by the interviewee, as reduction is an important aspect of phenomenology (Langdridge, 2007). Data will then be interpreted an intersectionality and DisCrit lens, focusing on the intersections of race, gender, and disability to answer the second research question. There are several researchers who have taken this stance in analysis (Shonibare, 2021; Haegele, Zhu & Holland, 2019; Hagai et al., 2020;

- Interviews will be conducted over a three-month period
- Data analysis will be conducted over a six month period to allow for the process of transcribing and iterative analysis using the various lenses.

SECTION F: PARTICIPANT DETAILS

3. Provide an explanation detailing how you will identify, approach and recruit the participants for the proposed research, including clarification on sample size and location. Please provide justification for the exclusion/inclusion criteria for this study (i.e. who will be allowed to / not allowed to participate) and explain briefly, in lay terms, why these criteria are in place. (Do not exceed 500 words)

A recruitment poster (see Appendix C) will be shared on the social media pages of the researcher (LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook). Interested participants who meet the inclusion criteria will be asked to contact me via email. They will then be sent the information sheets and consent forms. I will also share the recruitment poster on the Facebook page of The Autistic Girls Network who are a charity that I have liaised with. Smith et al. (2009) suggest 4-10 participants, I will aim for a minimum of 4 and maximum of 8 due to the time I have available.

The inclusion criteria will be individuals who:

- were assigned female at birth.
- identify as being black, so I can explore the experience of being black and autistic.
- are aged 16-18 years so that they will be at a stage in their education where they can reflect on their experience of UK educational settings. They are also likely to be at a life stage where they have the capacity to reflect on whether they camouflage.
- Will be able to verbally communicate in English
- identify as camouflaging their autism. Camouflaging is a fairly new social construct that I will briefly explain in the information sheet (see appendix E). Autistic individuals may consciously or unconsciously camouflage their autistic traits. It is useful to explore with participants who are conscious of their camouflaging behaviours so they can reflect on how this has shaped their experience, providing insights into how this has impacted them in education.
- are comfortable with an online verbal interview of up to an hour, with breaks where needed.

4. Please state the location(s) of the proposed research including the location of any interviews. Please provide a Risk Assessment if required. Consideration should be given to lone working, visiting private residences, conducting research outside working hours or any other non-standard arrangements.

If any data collection is to be done online, please identify the platforms to be used.

Interviews will be conducted online using the researcher’s Tavistock Zoom account.

5. Will the participants be from any of the following groups?*(Tick as appropriate)*

☐ Students or Staff of the Trust or Partner delivering your programme.
☐ Adults (over the age of 18 years with mental capacity to give consent to participate in the research).
☐ Children or legal minors (anyone under the age of 16 years)[1]
☐ Adults who are unconscious, severely ill or have a terminal illness.
☐ Adults who may lose mental capacity to consent during the course of the research.
☐ Adults in emergency situations.
☐ Adults[2] with mental illness - particularly those detained under the Mental Health Act (1983 & 2007).
☐ Participants who may lack capacity to consent to participate in the research under the research requirements of the Mental Capacity Act (2005).
☐ Prisoners, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).
☐ Young Offenders, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).
☐ Healthy volunteers (in high risk intervention studies).
☐ Participants who may be considered to have a pre-existing and potentially dependent[3] relationship with the investigator (e.g. those in care homes, students, colleagues, service-users, patients).
☒ Other vulnerable groups (see Question 6).
☐ Adults who are in custody, custodial care, or for whom a court has assumed responsibility.
☐ Participants who are members of the Armed Forces.

[1] *If the proposed research involves children or adults who meet the Police Act (1997) definition of vulnerability[3], any researchers who will have contact with participants must have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance.*

[2] *‘Adults with a learning or physical disability, a physical or mental illness, or a reduction in physical or mental capacity, and living in a care home or home for people with learning difficulties or receiving care in their own home, or receiving hospital or social care services.’ (Police Act, 1997)*

[3] *Proposed research involving participants with whom the investigator or researcher(s) shares a dependent or unequal relationships (e.g. teacher/student, clinical therapist/service-user) may compromise the ability to give informed consent which is free from any form of pressure (real or implied) arising from this relationship. TREC recommends that, wherever practicable, investigators choose participants with whom they have no dependent relationship. Following due scrutiny, if the investigator is confident that the research involving participants in dependent relationships is vital and defensible, TREC will require additional*

information setting out the case and detailing how risks inherent in the dependent relationship will be managed. TREC will also need to be reassured that refusal to participate will not result in any discrimination or penalty.

6. Will the study involve participants who are vulnerable? YES ☒ NO ☐

For the purposes of research, 'vulnerable' participants may be adults whose ability to protect their own interests are impaired or reduced in comparison to that of the broader population. Vulnerability may arise from:

- the participant's personal characteristics (e.g. mental or physical impairment)
- their social environment, context and/or disadvantage (e.g. socio-economic mobility, educational attainment, resources, substance dependence, displacement or homelessness).
- where prospective participants are at high risk of consenting under duress, or as a result of manipulation or coercion, they must also be considered as vulnerable
- children are automatically presumed to be vulnerable.

7.1. If YES, what special arrangements are in place to protect vulnerable participants' interests?

- Asking participants how they prefer to communicate, i.e. phone, email, Teams chat
- Opportunities for participants to ask questions before giving consent
- Ask participants the language they prefer, i.e. identity first
- Provision of translators.
- Ensuring interviews are appropriately paced to allow the participant processing time.
- I must be aware of any neurotypical ideals that I may be projecting onto my participants, and the risk of harm this may cause. My participants may find it difficult to express themselves, so I will use my psychological skills and understanding of autism to build rapport, check they are comfortable with the sensory environment, and help them communicate as little or as much as they want to.

If YES, a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check **within the last three years** is required.

Please provide details of the "clear disclosure":

Date of disclosure: 07/08/21 – 07/08/21
Type of disclosure:
Organisation that requested disclosure: Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust
DBS certificate number:001745663539

*(NOTE: information concerning activities which require DBS checks can be found via https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dbs-check-eligible-positions-guidance). Please **do not** include a copy of your DBS certificate with your application*

7. Do you propose to make any form of payment or incentive available to participants of the research? YES ☐ NO ☒

If **YES**, please provide details taking into account that any payment or incentive should be representative of reasonable remuneration for participation and may not be of a value that could be coercive or exerting undue influence on potential participants' decision to take part in the research. Wherever possible, remuneration in a monetary form should be avoided and substituted with vouchers, coupons or equivalent. Any payment made to research participants may have benefit or HMRC implications and participants should be alerted to this in the participant information sheet as they may wish to choose to decline payment.

8. What special arrangements are in place for eliciting informed consent from participants who may not adequately understand verbal explanations or written information provided in English; where participants have special communication needs; where participants have limited literacy; or where children are involved in the research? (Do not exceed 200 words)

I will offer to discuss the information sheet and consent form with each participant by phone, email or Zoom (please see Appendix E and F). I will ask how they prefer to communicate and if they have needs that I need to be aware of or need further support.
I will provide a video of me reading the information that they can watch alongside reading the sheet to support any literacy needs. The information sheet will include icons to support the written information.

SECTION F: RISK ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

9. Does the proposed research involve any of the following? *(Tick as appropriate)*

☐ use of a questionnaire, self-completion survey or data-collection instrument (attach copy)
☒ use of emails or the internet as a means of data collection
☐ use of written or computerised tests
☒ interviews (attach interview questions)
☐ diaries (attach diary record form)
☐ participant observation
☐ participant observation (in a non-public place) without their knowledge / covert research
☒ audio-recording interviewees or events
☒ video-recording interviewees or events
☐ access to personal and/or sensitive data (i.e. student, patient, client or service-user data) without the participant's informed consent for use of these data for research purposes
☐ administration of any questions, tasks, investigations, procedures or stimuli which may be experienced by participants as physically or mentally painful, stressful or unpleasant during or after the research process
☐ performance of any acts which might diminish the self-esteem of participants or cause them to experience discomfiture, regret or any other adverse emotional or psychological reaction
☐ Themes around extremism or radicalisation
☐ investigation of participants involved in illegal or illicit activities (e.g. use of illegal drugs)
☐ procedures that involve the deception of participants
☐ administration of any substance or agent
☐ use of non-treatment of placebo control conditions
☐ participation in a clinical trial
☐ research undertaken at an off-campus location (risk assessment attached)
☐ research overseas (please ensure Section G is complete)

10. Does the proposed research involve any specific or anticipated risks (e.g. physical, psychological, social, legal or economic) to participants that are greater than those encountered in everyday life?

YES ☐ **NO** ☒

If **YES**, please describe below including details of precautionary measures.

11. Where the procedures involve potential hazards and/or discomfort or distress for participants, please state what previous experience the investigator or researcher(s) have had in conducting this type of research.

There may be discomfort or distress for participants if they are retelling difficult experiences. I previously conducted semi-structured interviews with parents of autistic girls, so have some experience of this. I found active listening and empathy were helpful in those interviews as well as debriefing afterwards. I will draw on my professional psychological knowledge and skills and my knowledge and experience of working with autistic adolescent children. I feel the participants may feel more comfortable being open with me seeing that I am a black female and knowing my experience with autism.

12. Provide an explanation of any potential benefits to participants. Please ensure this is framed within the overall contribution of the proposed research to knowledge or practice. (Do not exceed 400 words)

NOTE: Where the proposed research involves students, they should be assured that accepting the offer to participate or choosing to decline will have no impact on their assessments or learning experience. Similarly, it should be made clear to participants who are patients, service-users and/or receiving any form of treatment or medication that they are not invited to participate in the belief that participation in the research will result in some relief or improvement in their condition.

Existing research demonstrates that camouflaging autistic black female voices have not been sought out. They are underrepresented, therefore there is little evidence to suggest that they are listened to. One of the motivations behind this study is to respect the dignity of the participants and their community by amplifying their voices and perspectives. The benefits to the participants are that it may be one of few, if any times, they have been asked to share their experiences and been listened to. The findings may help them better understand their own experiences by giving them a reflective space within which to voice them.

Sharing the findings may help participants normalise their experiences as they may see that they are not alone. It may aid in their understanding of how their multiple identities intersect and shape their experiences. Additionally, the research may provide them with knowledge of how ableism and racism have an impact on individual experience; and how this may pertain to the multiple identities that they hold.

Sharing the findings will also contribute to how professionals view camouflaging black autistic adolescent girls and hopefully positively influence their practice. Knowledge of this contribution is a benefit to participants. Participants may gain indirect benefits if the awareness of their presentation is increased, and adjustments/supports are put in place from the knowledge that they have provided.

13. Provide an outline of any measures you have in place in the event of adverse or unexpected outcomes and the potential impact this may have on participants involved in the proposed research. (Do not exceed 300 words)

I will ask each participant if they would like to have a supportive adult or friend present or nearby to help support adverse or unexpected outcomes. I will also ask before the interview, if they are happy to provide me with the details of a supportive adult/parent that I can check in with if I am concerned about their well-being during or after the interview.

If I notice that the participant is becoming upset or distressed, I will ask them if they need to take a break and remind them that they can end the interview with no need for an explanation. If I feel that they are becoming very distressed, I will take the decision to end the interview and offer support.

Following debrief, I will offer to contact on an agreed date within a few days to check on their well-being. I will also offer additional avenues for support in the debrief. I will also advise that they can contact me by email with any questions.

14. Provide an outline of your debriefing, support and feedback protocol for participants involved in the proposed research. This should include, for example, where participants may feel the need to discuss thoughts or feelings brought about following their participation in the research. This may involve referral to an external support or counseling service, where participation in the research has caused specific issues for participants.

- I will debrief all participants when the interview ends.
- This will involve reading and emailing a debrief sheet (Appendix G)
- Additional time for the participant to ask questions and the opportunity to discuss any feelings that may have arisen from the interview (within my expertise).
- I will also give the participants the option to contact me afterwards with any questions. This will give them time to process the interview.
- I will also signpost to services that can support any anxiety or negative cognitions that arise as a result of taking part in the interview.

15. Please provide the names and nature of any external support or counselling organisations that will be suggested to participants if participation in the research has potential to raise specific issues for participants.

- Samaritans provide confidential emotional support at any time by calling 116 123 or emailing jo@samaritans.org
- Shout 85258 a free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope
- The National Autistic Society website has lots of information and advice about autism
- The Autistic Girls Network website has information about autism and links to many resources

16. Where medical aftercare may be necessary, this should include details of the treatment available to participants. Debriefing may involve the disclosure of further information on the aims of the research, the participant’s performance and/or the results of the research. (Do not exceed 500 words)

N/A

FOR RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN OUTSIDE THE UK

17. Does the proposed research involve travel outside of the UK? ☐
YES ☒ **NO**

If YES, please confirm:

☐ I have consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website for guidance/travel advice? http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/

☐ I have completed ta RISK Assessment covering all aspects of the project including consideration of the location of the data collection and risks to participants.

All overseas project data collection will need approval from the Deputy Director of Education and Training or their nominee. Normally this will be done based on the information provided in this form. All projects approved through the TREC process will be indemnified by the Trust against claims made by third parties.

If you have any queries regarding research outside the UK, please contact academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk:

Students are required to arrange their own travel and medical insurance to cover project work outside of the UK. Please indicate what insurance cover you have or will have in place.

18. Please evidence how compliance with all local research ethics and research governance requirements have been assessed for the country(ies) in which the research is taking place. Please also clarify how the requirements will be met:

SECTION G: PARTICIPANT CONSENT AND WITHDRAWAL

19. Have you attached a copy of your participant information sheet (this should be in *plain English*)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials.

YES ☒ **NO** ☐

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

20. Have you attached a copy of your participant consent form (this should be in *plain English*)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials.

YES ☒ **NO** ☐

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

21. The following is a participant information sheet checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.

☒ Clear identification of the Trust as the sponsor for the research, the project title, the Researcher and Principal Investigator (your Research Supervisor) and other researchers along with relevant contact details.
☒ Details of what involvement in the proposed research will require (e.g., participation in interviews, completion of questionnaire, audio/video-recording of events), estimated time commitment and any risks involved.
☒ A statement confirming that the research has received formal approval from TREC or other ethics body.
☒ If the sample size is small, advice to participants that this may have implications for confidentiality / anonymity.
☒ A clear statement that where participants are in a dependent relationship with any of the researchers that participation in the research will have no impact on assessment / treatment / service-use or support.
☒ Assurance that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw consent at any time, and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
☒ Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.
☒ A statement that the data generated in the course of the research will be retained in accordance with the Trusts 's Data Protection and handling Policies.: https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/
☒ Advice that if participants have any concerns about the conduct of the investigator, researcher(s) or any other aspect of this research project, they should contact Simon Carrington, Head of Academic Governance and Quality Assurance (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)
☒ Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

22. The following is a consent form checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.

☒ Trust letterhead or logo.
☒ Title of the project (with research degree projects this need not necessarily be the title of the thesis) and names of investigators.
☒ Confirmation that the research project is part of a degree
☒ Confirmation that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw at any time, or to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
☒ Confirmation of particular requirements of participants, including for example whether interviews are to be audio-/video-recorded, whether anonymised quotes will be used in publications advice of legal limitations to data confidentiality.
☒ If the sample size is small, confirmation that this may have implications for anonymity any other relevant information.
☒ The proposed method of publication or dissemination of the research findings.
☒ Details of any external contractors or partner institutions involved in the research.
☒ Details of any funding bodies or research councils supporting the research.
☒ Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

SECTION H: CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

23. Below is a checklist covering key points relating to the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Please indicate where relevant to the proposed research.

☐ Participants will be completely anonymised and their identity will not be known by the investigator or researcher(s) (i.e. the participants are part of an anonymous randomised sample and return responses with no form of personal identification)?
☐ The responses are anonymised or are an anonymised sample (i.e. a permanent process of coding has been carried out whereby direct and indirect identifiers have been removed from data and replaced by a code, with no record retained of how the code relates to the identifiers).
☒ The samples and data are de-identified (i.e. direct and indirect identifiers have been removed and replaced by a code. The investigator or researchers are able to link the code to the original identifiers and isolate the participant to whom the sample or data relates).
☐ Participants have the option of being identified in a publication that will arise from the research.
☒ Participants will be pseudo-anonymised in a publication that will arise from the research. (I.e. the researcher will endeavour to remove or alter details that would identify the participant.)
☒ The proposed research will make use of personal sensitive data.
☐ Participants consent to be identified in the study and subsequent dissemination of research findings and/or publication.

24. Participants must be made aware that the confidentiality of the information they provide is subject to legal limitations in data confidentiality (i.e. the data may be subject to a subpoena, a freedom of information request or mandated reporting by some professions). This only applies to named or de-identified data. If your participants are named or de-identified, please confirm that you will specifically state these limitations.

YES ☒ **NO** ☐

If **NO**, please indicate why this is the case below:

NOTE: WHERE THE PROPOSED RESEARCH INVOLVES A SMALL SAMPLE OR FOCUS GROUP, PARTICIPANTS SHOULD BE ADVISED THAT THERE WILL BE DISTINCT LIMITATIONS IN THE LEVEL OF ANONYMITY THEY CAN BE AFFORDED.

SECTION I: DATA ACCESS, SECURITY AND MANAGEMENT

25. Will the Researcher/Principal Investigator be responsible for the security of all data collected in connection with the proposed research? YES ☒ **NO** ☐

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

26. In line with the 5th principle of the Data Protection Act (1998), which states that personal data shall not be kept for longer than is necessary for that purpose or those purposes for which it was collected; please state how long data will be retained for.

☐ 1-2 years ☐ 3-5 years ☒ 6-10 years ☐ 10> years

NOTE: In line with Research Councils UK (RCUK) guidance, doctoral project data should normally be stored for 10 years and Masters level data for up to 2 years

27. Below is a checklist which relates to the management, storage and secure destruction of data for the purposes of the proposed research. Please indicate where relevant to your proposed arrangements.

☐ Research data, codes and all identifying information to be kept in separate locked filing cabinets.
☒ Research data will only be stored in the University of Essex OneDrive system and no other cloud storage location.
☐ Access to computer files to be available to research team by password only.
☐ Access to computer files to be available to individuals outside the research team by password only (See **23.1**).
☐ Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically within the UK.
☐ Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically outside of the UK.

NOTE: Transfer of research data via third party commercial file sharing services, such as Google Docs and YouSendIt are not necessarily secure or permanent. These systems may also be located overseas and not covered by UK law. If the system is located outside the European Economic Area (EEA) or territories deemed to have sufficient standards of data protection, transfer may also breach the Data Protection Act (1998).

Essex students also have access the 'Box' service for file transfer:
https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/it-services/box

☐ Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, e-mails or telephone numbers.
☒ Collection and storage of personal sensitive data (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political or religious beliefs or physical or mental health or condition).
☒ Use of personal data in the form of audio or video recordings.
☒ Primary data gathered on encrypted mobile devices (i.e. laptops).

NOTE: This should be transferred to secure University of Essex OneDrive at the first opportunity.

☒ All electronic data will undergo secure disposal.

NOTE: For hard drives and magnetic storage devices (HDD or SSD), deleting files does not permanently erase the data on most systems, but only deletes the reference to the file. Files can be restored when deleted in this way. Research files must be overwritten to ensure they are completely irretrievable. Software is available for the secure erasing of files from hard drives which meet recognised standards to securely scramble sensitive data. Examples of this software are BC Wipe, Wipe File, DeleteOnClick and Eraser for Windows platforms. Mac users can use the standard 'secure empty trash' option; an alternative is Permanent eraser software.

☒ All hardcopy data will undergo secure disposal.

NOTE: For shredding research data stored in hardcopy (i.e. paper), adopting DIN 3 ensures files are cut into 2mm strips or confetti like cross-cut particles of 4x40mm. The UK government requires a minimum standard of DIN 4 for its material, which ensures cross cut particles of at least 2x15mm.

28. Please provide details of individuals outside the research team who will be given password protected access to encrypted data for the proposed research.

N/A

29. Please provide details on the regions and territories where research data will be electronically transferred that are external to the UK:

N/A

SECTION J: PUBLICATION AND DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

30. How will the results of the research be reported and disseminated? ***(Select all that apply)***

☒ Peer reviewed journal
☒ Non-peer reviewed journal
☐ Peer reviewed books
☒ Publication in media, social media or website (including Podcasts and online videos)
☒ Conference presentation
☐ Internal report
☐ Promotional report and materials
☐ Reports compiled for or on behalf of external organisations
☒ Dissertation/Thesis
☐ Other publication
☐ Written feedback to research participants
☒ Presentation to participants or relevant community groups
☐ Other (Please specify below)

SECTION K: OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES

31. Are there any other ethical issues that have not been addressed which you would wish to bring to the attention of Tavistock Research Ethics Committee (TREC)?

SECTION L: CHECKLIST FOR ATTACHED DOCUMENTS

32. Please check that the following documents are attached to your application.

☒ Letters of approval from any external ethical approval bodies (where relevant)
☒ Recruitment advertisement
☒ Participant information sheets (including easy-read where relevant)
☒ Consent forms (including easy-read where relevant)
☐ Assent form for children (where relevant)
☐ Letters of approval from locations for data collection
☐ Questionnaire
☒ Interview Schedule or topic guide
☐ Risk Assessment (where applicable)
☐ Overseas travel approval (where applicable)

34. Where it is not possible to attach the above materials, please provide an explanation below.

Appendices

Appendix A – Participant characteristics and demographic questions
Appendix B – Draft interview schedule
Appendix C – Recruitment poster
Appendix D – Participant information sheet
Appendix E – Consent form
Appendix F – Debrief sheet

Appendices

Appendix A – Participant characteristics and demographic questions (to be asked at the beginning of the interview)

- How old are you?
- What type of school do you go to?
- How would you describe your ethnicity?
- Have you received additional support in your school?
- Which county or London borough do you live in?
- What is your religion if you have one?
- Do you prefer to be called autistic or for people to say you have autism?

Appendix B – Draft interview schedule
1) Can you tell me about when you first knew you were autistic?

1) What was primary school like for you?
Prompts: What did you like? What did you find difficult? What made things easier?

2) What did adults (teachers and parents) do to make primary school easier for you?

3) Did you hide your autism in primary school?
Follow ups: If no, why? If yes, how did you hide your autism in primary school? How did it feel? Why did you try to hide?

4) What is secondary school like for you?
Prompts: What did you like? What did you find difficult? What made things easier?

5) What did adults (teachers and parents) do to make secondary school easier for you?

6) How do you hide your autism now?
Follow ups: How does it feel? Why do you try to hide?

7) What do you think other people in school think about you?

8) Would you say there are other young people in school who are like you?

9) How would you describe being a black autistic girl?

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Appendix C – Recruitment poster

SEEKING PARTICIPANTS TO HELP WITH RESEARCH

ARE YOU A BLACK AUTISTIC GIRL?

- Do you think you hide your autistic traits?
- Do you ever try to seem less autistic in school to 'fit in'?
- Do you copy other people's behaviours to appear 'non-autistic'?

The research involves an online interview of up to 1 hour where I will ask you some questions about your experiences in education.

Are you eligible ?

I am looking for black autistic girls:

- aged 16-18 years,
- living in the uk,
- attending or have attended an educational setting in the uk,
- with a diagnosis of autism

If you would like to participate and if you have any questions about the research please email Me:

tnelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Appendix D – Participant information sheet

Participant Information Sheet

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this research study.

Title of the study:
The lived experience of 'camouflaging' Black Autistic adolescent girls in UK education.

Who is doing the research:
My name is Tiffany Nelson, and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist. I am in my second year of studying for the Professional Doctorate in Child, Community and Educational Psychology. I am completing this research as part of my course.

The aim of the research:
This research study is about Black Autistic adolescent girls who 'camouflage' in educational settings. Camouflaging is masking or hiding autistic traits. The aim is to explore:

- the difficulties the girls experience in educational settings and the support they receive
- how and why the girls choose to camouflage and the impact it has on them
- the intersecting experiences of being a black autistic girl who camouflages their autistic traits

It is hoped that this research will help gain a better understanding of how camouflaging Black Autistic adolescent girls experience education and what support/adjustments are needed to ensure they are having the best experience in school. Additionally, to understand the role racism and ableism may have on this experience.

What does participation involve?

- Participating in an online interview of up to one hour with Tiffany Nelson on Zoom.

The interview will be recorded and then transcribed. The interview will involve you being asked about:

- your experiences of difficulties in educational settings,
- hiding your autistic traits and what this feels like.

If you find this difficult you can stop the interview at any stage without giving an explanation. You can bring a supportive adult or friend to the interview.

Consent to participate in this research study:

Please take time to read the information carefully to decide whether you would like to participate. It is important that you understand the aims of the study and what it would involve for you.

If you choose to take part, you can change your mind at any time and you do not need to explain the reasons for doing so. If you do participate, you can still withdraw from the study up to 3 weeks after the interview. After this your data will be anonymized and analysed.

Confidentiality of the Data:

One of the aims of this research study is to share what young people have said about their educational experiences. I will be interviewing a small number of participants (4-8) which means you may be able to identify the experiences you shared. I may use quotes from your interview to help describe your experience in the publication of the study. For your confidentiality, what you say will be anonymised so that it cannot be linked to you. This means using a pseudonym (pretend name) when describing your views and changing any details that could identify that what was said came from you.

Once your interview has been transcribed, the audio recording will be deleted, and the data will be stored as belonging to the pseudonym, on an encrypted drive using password protection. All data collected will be stored for a minimum of 5 years and used in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act (2018) and the Tavistock and Portman's Data Protection Policy.

If you tell me something that makes me concerned about your safety or the safety of someone else, then I might have to share that information with you or someone else is safe. However, I will aim to talk to you about this first where possible.

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Further information:

This research has received ethical approval from the Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee. If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact: Paru Jeram, Trust Quality Assurance Officer pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk

If you have any further questions, you can contact me by email: tnelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk or my research supervisor Judith Mortell, jmortell@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Appendix E – Consent

Title of the study: The lived experience of 'camouflaging' Black Autistic adolescent girls in UK education.

Please read all the following statements and sign below if you agree:

- I have read and understood the research study information sheet leaflet.
- The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information.
- I understand that my data will be anonymised so that I cannot be linked to the data. I understand that the sample size is small.
- I understand that there are limitations to confidentiality relating to legal duties and threat of harm to self or others.
- I agree for my interview to be recorded and understand anonymised quotes from my interview may be used in publication.
- Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data.
- I understand the findings will be used for academic thesis and may be shared at professional conferences and in academic journal articles.
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research study for up to 3 weeks after the interview, without being obliged to give any reason.
- I am willing to participate in this research.

Participant’s Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)
…………………………………………………………………….

Participant’s Signature
………………………………………………………………………………………..

Investigator’s Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)
…………………………………………………………………..

Investigator’s Signature
………………………………………………………………………………………

Date: ………………………….

Appendix F – Debrief form

Debrief:

The lived experience of ‘camouflaging’ Black Autistic adolescent girls in UK education.

Thank you for taking part in this research study. I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me, and I recognise that this may have been a difficult thing to do so thank you.

The purpose of this research was to hear the perspectives of black autistic adolescent girls who camouflage (hide) their autistic traits. There is limited research on camouflaging autism in young people and I have found no research asking for the experiences of black autistic adolescents.

I am interested how being a camouflaging black autistic female is experienced in educational settings and how those different identities (race, disability, gender) might intersect and shape that experience. For this reason, I will analyse your interview attempting to understand how you view your experience. I will then take your views and attempt to understand how race, disability and/or gender may have influenced your experience.

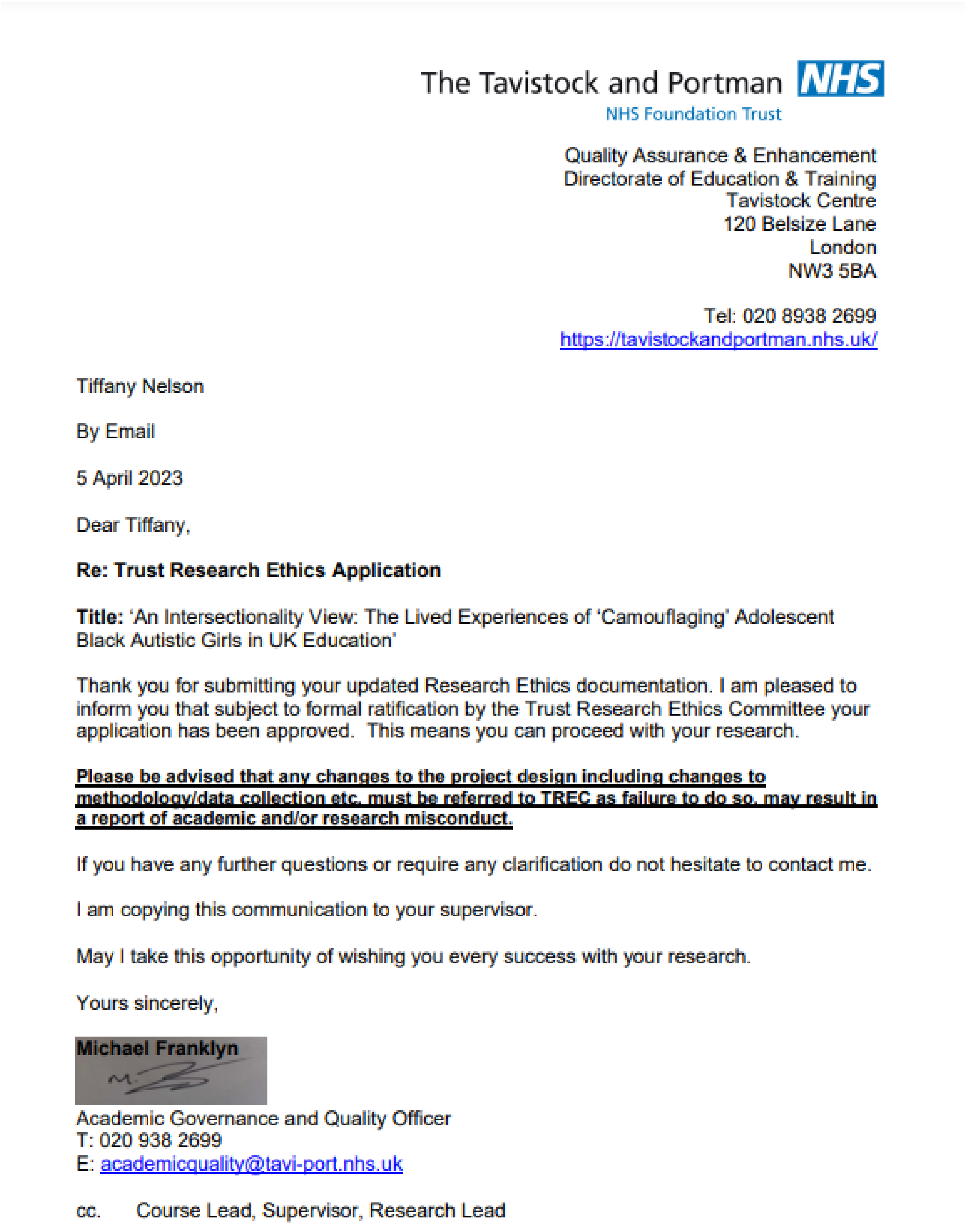
I will share my finding by writing a thesis, which is a document I submit to gain my doctorate qualification. The thesis will detail the research, its purpose and aims and what I found. I will share my findings at professional conferences, and I hope to have the research published so it can be shared widely among professionals. My hope is that professionals, such as Educational Psychologists who work with young people in schools, will gain an understanding of the experiences of camouflaging autistic black adolescent females. With these experiences I would like to make recommendations for ways of working that can improve experiences for young people like you.

If you do participate, you can still withdraw from the study up to 3 weeks after today. After this I will begin anonymizing and transcribing your interview.

If there is anything we have spoken about today that causes any upset or uncomfortable feelings, I can spend some time speaking about this with you today. If you would like to contact me after the interview to discuss, you can email me at tnelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk I would also encourage you to speak to a friend, family, or supportive adult.

I have listed below some organisations that you can contact anonymously:

- Samaritans provide confidential emotional support at any time by calling 116 123 or emailing jo@samaritans.org
- Shout 85258 a free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope
- The National Autistic Society website has lots of information and advice about autism
- The Autistic Girls Network website has information about autism and links to many resources



The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Quality Assurance & Enhancement
Directorate of Education & Training
Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Tel: 020 8938 2699
https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/

Tiffany Nelson

By Email

5 April 2023

Dear Tiffany,

Re: Trust Research Ethics Application

Title: 'An Intersectionality View: The Lived Experiences of 'Camouflaging' Adolescent Black Autistic Girls in UK Education'

Thank you for submitting your updated Research Ethics documentation. I am pleased to inform you that subject to formal ratification by the Trust Research Ethics Committee your application has been approved. This means you can proceed with your research.

Please be advised that any changes to the project design including changes to methodology/data collection etc, must be referred to TREC as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

If you have any further questions or require any clarification do not hesitate to contact me.

I am copying this communication to your supervisor.

May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Franklyn

Academic Governance and Quality Officer
T: 020 938 2699
E: academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk

cc. Course Lead, Supervisor, Research Lead

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW OF STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECTS

This application should be submitted alongside copies of any supporting documentation which will be handed to participants, including a participant information sheet, consent form, self-completion survey or questionnaire.

Where a form is submitted and sections are incomplete, the form will not be considered by TREC and will be returned to the applicant for completion.

For further guidance please contact Paru Jeram (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

FOR ALL APPLICANTS

If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters. You need only complete sections of the TREC form which are NOT covered in your existing approval

Is your project considered as 'research' according to the HRA tool? (http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/index.html)	[✓ Yes]/No
Will your project involve participants who are under 18 or who are classed as vulnerable? (see section 7)	[✓ Yes]/No
Will your project include data collection outside of the UK?	Yes/[✓ No]

SECTION A: PROJECT DETAILS

Project title	An Intersectionality View: The Lived Experiences of 'Camouflaging' Adolescent Black Autistic Girls in UK Education		
Proposed project start date	01 March 2023	**Anticipated project end date**	**30 April 2024**
Principle Investigator (normally your Research Supervisor): Jude Mortell			
Please note: TREC approval will only be given for the length of the project as stated above up to a maximum of 6 years. Projects exceeding these timeframes will need additional ethical approval			
Has NHS or other approval been sought for this research including through submission via Research Application System (IRAS) or to the Health Research Authority (HRA)?	**YES (NRES approval)** ☐ **YES (HRA approval)** ☐ **Other** ☐ **NO** ☒		
If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters.			

SECTION B: APPLICANT DETAILS

Name of Researcher	Tiffany Nelson

Programme of Study and Target Award	M4 Doctorate Child, Community and Educational Psychology
Email address	tnelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk
Contact telephone number	07889754087

SECTION C: CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Will any of the researchers or their institutions receive any other benefits or incentives for taking part in this research over and above their normal salary package or the costs of undertaking the research? **YES** ☐ **NO** ☒ If **YES**, please detail below:
Is there any further possibility for conflict of interest? YES ☐ **NO** ☒
Are you proposing to conduct this work in a location where you work or have a placement? **YES** ☐ **NO** ☒ If **YES**, please detail below outline how you will avoid issues arising around colleagues being involved in this project:

Is your project being commissioned by and/or carried out on behalf of a body external to the Trust? (for example; commissioned by a local authority, school, care home, other NHS Trust or other organisation). *Please note that 'external' is defined as an organisation which is external to the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust (Trust)	**YES** ☐ **NO** ☒
If **YES**, please add details here:	
Will you be required to get further ethical approval after receiving TREC approval? If **YES**, please supply details of the ethical approval bodies below AND include any letters of approval from the ethical approval bodies (letters received after receiving TREC approval should be submitted to complete your record):	**YES** ☐ **NO** ☒
If your project is being undertaken with one or more clinical services or organisations external to the Trust, please provide details of these:	

If you still need to agree these arrangements or if you can only approach organisations after you have ethical approval, please identify the types of organisations (eg. schools or clinical services) you wish to approach:	
Do you have approval from the organisations detailed above? (this includes R&D approval where relevant) Please attach approval letters to this application. Any approval letters received after TREC approval has been granted MUST be submitted to be appended to your record	**YES** ☐ **NO** ☐ **NA** ☒

SECTION D: SIGNATURES AND DECLARATIONS

APPLICANT DECLARATION

I confirm that:

- The information contained in this application is, to the best of my knowledge, correct and up to date.
- I have attempted to identify all risks related to the research.
- I acknowledge my obligations and commitment to upholding ethical principles and to keep my supervisor updated with the progress of my research
- I am aware that for cases of proven misconduct, it may result in formal disciplinary proceedings and/or the cancellation of the proposed research.
- I understand that if my project design, methodology or method of data collection changes I must seek an amendment to my ethical approvals as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

Applicant (print name)	Tiffany Nelson
Signed	
Date	31 January 2023

FOR RESEARCH DEGREE STUDENT APPLICANTS ONLY

Name of Supervisor/Principal Investigator	Hannah Lichwa

Supervisor –

- Does the student have the necessary skills to carry out the research?
  YES ☒ **NO** ☐
- Is the participant information sheet, consent form and any other documentation appropriate?
  YES ☒ **NO** ☐
- Are the procedures for recruitment of participants and obtaining informed consent suitable and sufficient?
  YES ☒ **NO** ☐
- Where required, does the researcher have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance?
  YES ☒ **NO** ☐

Signed	
Date	2023

COURSE LEAD/RESEARCH LEAD Does the proposed research as detailed herein have your support to proceed? YES ☒ NO ☐	
Signed	
Date	2023

SECTION E: DETAILS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

Provide a brief description of the proposed research, including the requirements of participants. This must be in lay terms and free from technical or discipline specific terminology or jargon. If such terms are required, please ensure they are adequately explained (Do not exceed 500 words)

There is limited research exploring the educational experiences of young people who camouflage their autistic traits in the UK. The literature describes camouflaging as a way autistic people hide their autistic traits to fit in with their neurotypical peers, but it can lead to misdiagnosis, missed diagnosis and missing out on essential support in education. It appears that adolescent girls camouflage to reduce the stress and feelings of rejection and misunderstanding from others. Camouflaging can lead to the perception that an individual is functioning well and has no problems, when they are in fact experiencing difficulties due to the interaction between their autism and the context. The research shows camouflaging has detrimental effects including burnout, depression and anxiety. The literature about camouflaging tends to focus on autistic females. There is limited research on further social constructs such as race and ethnicity. Leading UK autism charities and studies call for further research to understand the interplay (Autistic Girls Network, 2022; Corbett & Perepa, 2007). This led me to consider intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), how social constructs such as gender and race can intersect to shape the individual experience.

Societal perceptions of autism are influenced by diagnostic tools, media, and research that is based on White, middle classed, cis-gendered males. Current research demonstrates limited consideration of how social constructs intersect to shape the autistic experience. This research study is an exploratory and emancipatory study; aiming to amplify the voices of those who hold identities not represented in research.

The aim is to give a voice to a group ordinarily marginalised in society. Employing camouflaging strategies suggests they are used to hiding their true feelings and thoughts. This research will give them the opportunity to express their true feelings anonymously without being judged or having the fear of rejection or non-acceptance. The aim is for the participants to have a safe, reflective space to express their authentic selves.

Participants will be black females aged 16-21, in an educational setting in the UK. They will have an autism spectrum condition diagnosis (including Asperger’s and Pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified PDD-NOS) and self-identify as camouflaging their autistic traits. Participants will be asked personal characteristics and demographic information at the start of the interview (see appendix A). This data will provide transparency and context for the participants lived experiences. Participants will be required to attend an online interview for up to an hour.

This study will use phenomenology to make sense of their individual experience. It will look further using Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Connor et al., 2021) to make sense of the impact of wider levels, in keeping with developmental psychological theory. This study also aims to understand the role of power, oppression, privilege, and structures using a DisCrit theoretical framework and intersectional lens. The study will answer two research questions:

3. What is the lived experience of camouflaging black autistic adolescent girls?
4. How can the findings from research question one be understood using a DisCrit and intersectionality lens?

30. Provide a statement on the aims and significance of the proposed research, including potential impact to knowledge and understanding in the field (where appropriate, indicate the associated hypothesis which will be tested). This should be a clear justification of the proposed research, why it should proceed and a statement on any anticipated benefits to the community. (Do not exceed 700 words)

This research aims to understand the lived experiences of camouflaging black autistic adolescent girls better, what support they need in education, and any barriers they face to identification and support. The hope is to understand the demands that they face in education and the support that they need to inform educational settings. The aim is that educational settings can be informed of the reasonable adjustments that need to be made from the perspective of an autistic young person, in keeping with ‘nothing for us without us’. This is the notion that policies and decisions should not be made without the direct participation of individuals from the group affected.

Additionally, this research aims to understand the role multiple identities play in their lived experience (intersectionality). There may be cultural differences and issues of power that have contributed to the perception held of the young person and their family and/or their perceptions of the educational system/setting. These may have affected factors such as diagnosis and support. There is limited research that explores this, yet UK research demonstrates significant differences by ethnicity, gender and demographics (Roman-Urrestarazu et al., 2021).

This has significant relevance to the role of the EP as it will add to the current knowledge within the profession and support EPs’ cultural awareness and competence which is an essential skill required in EP practice (DECP, 2002). It is vital for EPs to understand the challenges faced systemically and structurally to work towards organisational change, especially for those minoritised. Intersectionality has been added to the HCPC proficiency standards (coming in September 2023) highlighting its importance and relevance to the role. I hope my research can open up the minds of EPs and other professionals to consider intersectionality and cultural differences in their work. This will support all communities.

31. Provide an outline of the methodology for the proposed research, including proposed method of data collection, *tasks* assigned to participants of the research and the proposed method and duration of data analysis. If the proposed research makes use of pre-established and generally accepted techniques, please make this clear. (Do not exceed 500 words)

Methodology and methods: The research will be qualitative using semi-structured interviews analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This will give rich data into the lived experience of the participants through the lens of their lifeworld (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2021).

Data collection: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a minimum of 4 participants and a maximum 8 participants (Smith et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews will be used as they are non-directive and open-ended, thus the interviewee can respond in their own way providing rich qualitative data that can be analysed for meanings, constructions, and interpretations (Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016). Interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed. Interviews will be held online using my Tavistock zoom account.

I have used the guidance set out by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2021) to develop my interview questions (see appendix B). I have developed a list of draft interview questions with follow up questions to help prompt further information. I will ask participants if there are any adjustments that they need. I will use my professional knowledge and experience to adapt the language that I use in the questions and in the way that I communicate. I will offer non-verbal ways of communicating, such as using the emojis on Zoom. Following consent, I will send the draft questions in advance of the interview to reduce cognitive demand and anxiety in the participants.

Data analysis: The focus of this study is experience therefore I will use phenomenology for the analysis, through a DisCrit lens. Phenomenology acknowledges that all experiences must be understood in the context of the person experiencing them and how they see the world (Langdridge, 2007). Hence, the individual's world is 'lived' rather than the world is separate from the individual who is experiencing it. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) seeks to understand this lifeworld, thus it will be employed in the data analysis. IPA will support the understanding of the meaningfulness of individual experiences; to understand their lifeworld in terms of space, time, embodiment, and interaction with others. Phenomenology is in keeping with social constructionism as it concerns how individuals actively construct meaning in their experiences and understand the world as it appears to them (Langdridge, 2007). Phenomenology also recognises that there are always complex issues in an individual's life which need to be seen in the context of biographical history and the social climate. Husserl refers to the individual as inseparable from the world and Heidegger speaks of the 'person-in-context' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2021). Intersectionality takes a similar stance in understanding that individuals have a unique experience due to their multiple identities; this experience is grounded in the oppressions and privileges constructed in society at a systemic level. DisCrit focuses on how racism and ableism systemic oppression in terms of race and ability circulate interdependently in society to uphold notions of what is 'normal'. IPA discourages researchers from incorporating theory early in the research so as not to bias the lens (Abrams et al., 2020). For this reason, my research will consider the individual in context by taking a DisCrit and intersectionality lens to analyse the lifeworld presented by the participants by using a second research question.

Interviews will be transcribed, and data will be analysed, line by line, using the lifeworld themes of spatiality, temporality, embodiment and intersubjectivity. Each unit of meaning will be coded, and codes will be linked to create emerging themes. Once all interviews have been themed, overarching themes will be determined. Themes will be described in the manner they were presented by the interviewee, as reduction is an important aspect of phenomenology (Langdridge, 2007). Data will then be interpreted an intersectionality and DisCrit lens, focusing on the intersections of race, gender, and disability to answer the second research question. There are several researchers who have taken this stance in analysis (Shonibare, 2021; Haegele, Zhu & Holland, 2019; Hagai et al., 2020;

- Interviews will be conducted over a three-month period
- Data analysis will be conducted over a six month period to allow for the process of transcribing and iterative analysis using the various lenses.

SECTION F: PARTICIPANT DETAILS

32. Provide an explanation detailing how you will identify, approach and recruit the participants for the proposed research, including clarification on sample size and location. Please provide justification for the exclusion/inclusion criteria for this study (i.e. who will be allowed to / not allowed to participate) and explain briefly, in lay terms, why these criteria are in place. (Do not exceed 500 words)

A recruitment poster (see Appendix C) will be shared on the social media pages of the researcher (LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook). Interested participants who meet the inclusion criteria will be asked to contact me via email. They will then be sent the information sheets and consent forms. I will also share the recruitment poster on the Facebook page of The Autistic Girls Network who are a charity that I have liaised with. Smith et al. (2009) suggest 4-10 participants, I will aim for a minimum of 4 and maximum of 8 due to the time I have available.

The inclusion criteria will be individuals who:

- were assigned female at birth.
- identify as being black, so I can explore the experience of being black and autistic.
- are aged 16-21 years so that they will be at a stage in their education where they can reflect on their experience of UK educational settings. They are also likely to be at a life stage where they have the capacity to reflect on whether they camouflage.
- Will be able to verbally communicate in English
- identify as camouflaging their autism. Camouflaging is a fairly new social construct that I will briefly explain in the information sheet (see appendix E). Autistic individuals may consciously or unconsciously camouflage their autistic traits. It is useful to explore with participants who are conscious of their camouflaging behaviours so they can reflect on how this has shaped their experience, providing insights into how this has impacted them in education.
- are comfortable with an online verbal interview of up to an hour, with breaks where needed.

33. Please state the location(s) of the proposed research including the location of any interviews. Please provide a Risk Assessment if required. Consideration should be given to lone working, visiting private residences, conducting research outside working hours or any other non-standard arrangements.

If any data collection is to be done online, please identify the platforms to be used.

Interviews will be conducted online using the researcher's Tavistock Zoom account.

34. Will the participants be from any of the following groups?*(Tick as appropriate)*

☐ Students or Staff of the Trust or Partner delivering your programme.
☐ Adults (over the age of 18 years with mental capacity to give consent to participate in the research).
☐ Children or legal minors (anyone under the age of 16 years)[1]
☐ Adults who are unconscious, severely ill or have a terminal illness.
☐ Adults who may lose mental capacity to consent during the course of the research.
☐ Adults in emergency situations.
☐ Adults[2] with mental illness - particularly those detained under the Mental Health Act (1983 & 2007).
☐ Participants who may lack capacity to consent to participate in the research under the research requirements of the Mental Capacity Act (2005).
☐ Prisoners, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).
☐ Young Offenders, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).
☐ Healthy volunteers (in high risk intervention studies).
☐ Participants who may be considered to have a pre-existing and potentially dependent[3] relationship with the investigator (e.g. those in care homes, students, colleagues, service-users, patients).
☒ Other vulnerable groups (see Question 6).
☐ Adults who are in custody, custodial care, or for whom a court has assumed responsibility.
☐ Participants who are members of the Armed Forces.

[1] *If the proposed research involves children or adults who meet the Police Act (1997) definition of vulnerability[3], any researchers who will have contact with participants must have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance.*

[2] *'Adults with a learning or physical disability, a physical or mental illness, or a reduction in physical or mental capacity, and living in a care home or home for people with learning difficulties or receiving care in their own home, or receiving hospital or social care services.' (Police Act, 1997)*

[3] *Proposed research involving participants with whom the investigator or researcher(s) shares a dependent or unequal relationships (e.g. teacher/student, clinical therapist/service-user) may compromise the ability to give informed consent which is free from any form of pressure (real or implied) arising from this relationship. TREC recommends that, wherever practicable, investigators choose participants with whom they have no dependent relationship. Following due scrutiny, if the investigator is confident that the research involving participants in dependent relationships is vital and defensible, TREC will require additional information setting out the case and detailing how risks inherent in the dependent relationship will be managed. TREC will also need to be reassured that refusal to participate will not result in any discrimination or penalty.*

35. Will the study involve participants who are vulnerable? YES ☒ NO ☐

For the purposes of research, 'vulnerable' participants may be adults whose ability to protect their own interests are impaired or reduced in comparison to that of the broader population. Vulnerability may arise from:

- the participant's personal characteristics (e.g. mental or physical impairment)
- their social environment, context and/or disadvantage (e.g. socio-economic mobility, educational attainment, resources, substance dependence, displacement or homelessness).
- where prospective participants are at high risk of consenting under duress, or as a result of manipulation or coercion, they must also be considered as vulnerable
- children are automatically presumed to be vulnerable.

7.1. If YES, what special arrangements are in place to protect vulnerable participants' interests?

- Asking participants how they prefer to communicate, i.e. phone, email, Teams chat
- Opportunities for participants to ask questions before giving consent

- Ask participants the language they prefer, i.e. identity first
- Provision of translators.
- Ensuring interviews are appropriately paced to allow the participant processing time.
- I must be aware of any neurotypical ideals that I may be projecting onto my participants, and the risk of harm this may cause. My participants may find it difficult to express themselves, so I will use my psychological skills and understanding of autism to build rapport, check they are comfortable with the sensory environment, and help them communicate as little or as much as they want to.

If YES, a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check **within the last three years** is required.

Please provide details of the "clear disclosure":

Date of disclosure: 07/08/21 – 07/08/21
Type of disclosure:
Organisation that requested disclosure: Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust
DBS certificate number:001745663539

(NOTE: information concerning activities which require DBS checks can be found via https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dbs-check-eligible-positions-guidance). Please ***do not*** *include a copy of your DBS certificate with your application*

36. Do you propose to make any form of payment or incentive available to participants of the research?
YES ☐ **NO** ☒

If **YES**, please provide details taking into account that any payment or incentive should be representative of reasonable remuneration for participation and may not be of a value that could be coercive or exerting undue influence on potential participants' decision to take part in the research. Wherever possible, remuneration in a monetary form should be avoided and substituted with vouchers, coupons or equivalent. Any payment made to research participants may have benefit or HMRC implications and participants should be alerted to this in the participant information sheet as they may wish to choose to decline payment.

37. What special arrangements are in place for eliciting informed consent from participants who may not adequately understand verbal explanations or written information provided in English; where participants have special communication needs; where participants have limited literacy; or where children are involved in the research? (Do not exceed 200 words)

I will offer to discuss the information sheet and consent form with each participant by phone, email or Zoom (please see Appendix E and F). I will ask how they prefer to communicate and if they have needs that I need to be aware of or need further support.

I will provide a video of me reading the information that they can watch alongside reading the sheet to support any literacy needs. The information sheet will include icons to support the written information.

SECTION F: RISK ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

38. Does the proposed research involve any of the following? *(Tick as appropriate)*

☐ use of a questionnaire, self-completion survey or data-collection instrument (attach copy)
☒ use of emails or the internet as a means of data collection
☐ use of written or computerised tests
☒ interviews (attach interview questions)
☐ diaries (attach diary record form)
☐ participant observation
☐ participant observation (in a non-public place) without their knowledge / covert research
☒ audio-recording interviewees or events
☒ video-recording interviewees or events
☐ access to personal and/or sensitive data (i.e. student, patient, client or service-user data) without the participant's informed consent for use of these data for research purposes
☐ administration of any questions, tasks, investigations, procedures or stimuli which may be experienced by participants as physically or mentally painful, stressful or unpleasant during or after the research process
☐ performance of any acts which might diminish the self-esteem of participants or cause them to experience discomfiture, regret or any other adverse emotional or psychological reaction
☐ Themes around extremism or radicalisation
☐ investigation of participants involved in illegal or illicit activities (e.g. use of illegal drugs)
☐ procedures that involve the deception of participants
☐ administration of any substance or agent
☐ use of non-treatment of placebo control conditions
☐ participation in a clinical trial
☐ research undertaken at an off-campus location (risk assessment attached)
☐ research overseas (please ensure Section G is complete)

39. Does the proposed research involve any specific or anticipated risks (e.g. physical, psychological, social, legal or economic) to participants that are greater than those encountered in everyday life?

YES ☐ **NO** ☒

If **YES**, please describe below including details of precautionary measures.

40. Where the procedures involve potential hazards and/or discomfort or distress for participants, please state what previous experience the investigator or researcher(s) have had in conducting this type of research.

There may be discomfort or distress for participants if they are retelling difficult experiences. I previously conducted semi-structured interviews with parents of autistic girls, so have some experience of this. I found active listening and empathy were helpful in those interviews as well as debriefing afterwards. I will draw on my professional psychological knowledge and skills and my knowledge and experience of working with autistic adolescent children. I feel the participants may feel more comfortable being open with me seeing that I am a black female and knowing my experience with autism.

41. Provide an explanation of any potential benefits to participants. Please ensure this is framed within the overall contribution of the proposed research to knowledge or practice. (Do not exceed 400 words)

NOTE: Where the proposed research involves students, they should be assured that accepting the offer to participate or choosing to decline will have no impact on their assessments or learning experience. Similarly, it should be made clear to participants who are patients, service-users and/or receiving any form of treatment or medication that they are not invited to participate in the belief that participation in the research will result in some relief or improvement in their condition.

Existing research demonstrates that camouflaging autistic black female voices have not been sought out. They are underrepresented, therefore there is little evidence to suggest that they are listened to. One of the motivations behind this study is to respect the dignity of the participants and their community by amplifying their voices and perspectives. The benefits to the participants are that it may be one of few, if any times, they have been asked to share their experiences and been listened to. The findings may help them better understand their own experiences by giving them a reflective space within which to voice them.

Sharing the findings may help participants normalise their experiences as they may see that they are not alone. It may aid in their understanding of how their multiple identities intersect and shape their experiences. Additionally, the research may provide them with knowledge of how ableism and racism have an impact on individual experience; and how this may pertain to the multiple identities that they hold.

Sharing the findings will also contribute to how professionals view camouflaging black autistic adolescent girls and hopefully positively influence their practice. Knowledge of this contribution is a benefit to participants. Participants may gain indirect benefits if the awareness of their presentation is increased, and adjustments/supports are put in place from the knowledge that they have provided.

42. Provide an outline of any measures you have in place in the event of adverse or unexpected outcomes and the potential impact this may have on participants involved in the proposed research. (Do not exceed 300 words)

I will ask each participant if they would like to have a supportive adult or friend present or nearby to help support adverse or unexpected outcomes. I will also ask before the interview, if they are happy to provide me with the details of a supportive adult/parent that I can check in with if I am concerned about their well-being during or after the interview.

If I notice that the participant is becoming upset or distressed, I will ask them if they need to take a break and remind them that they can end the interview with no need for an explanation. If I feel that they are becoming very distressed, I will take the decision to end the interview and offer support.

Following debrief, I will offer to contact on an agreed date within a few days to check on their well-being. I will also offer additional avenues for support in the debrief. I will also advise that they can contact me by email with any questions.

43. Provide an outline of your debriefing, support and feedback protocol for participants involved in the proposed research. This should include, for example, where participants may feel the need to discuss thoughts or feelings brought about following their participation in the research. This may involve referral to an external support or counseling service, where participation in the research has caused specific issues for participants.

- I will debrief all participants when the interview ends.
- This will involve reading and emailing a debrief sheet (Appendix G)
- Additional time for the participant to ask questions and the opportunity to discuss any feelings that may have arisen from the interview (within my expertise).
- I will also give the participants the option to contact me afterwards with any questions. This will give them time to process the interview.
- I will also signpost to services that can support any anxiety or negative cognitions that arise as a result of taking part in the interview.

44. Please provide the names and nature of any external support or counselling organisations that will be suggested to participants if participation in the research has potential to raise specific issues for participants.

- Samaritans provide confidential emotional support at any time by calling 116 123 or emailing jo@samaritans.org
- Shout 85258 a free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope
- The National Autistic Society website has lots of information and advice about autism
- The Autistic Girls Network website has information about autism and links to many resources

45. Where medical aftercare may be necessary, this should include details of the treatment available to participants. Debriefing may involve the disclosure of further information on the aims of the research, the participant's performance and/or the results of the research. (Do not exceed 500 words)

N/A

FOR RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN OUTSIDE THE UK

46. Does the proposed research involve travel outside of the UK? ☐
YES ☒ NO

If YES, please confirm:

☐ I have consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website for guidance/travel advice? http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/

☐ I have completed ta RISK Assessment covering all aspects of the project including consideration of the location of the data collection and risks to participants.

All overseas project data collection will need approval from the Deputy Director of Education and Training or their nominee. Normally this will be done based on the information provided in this form. All projects approved through the TREC process will be indemnified by the Trust against claims made by third parties.

If you have any queries regarding research outside the UK, please contact academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk:

Students are required to arrange their own travel and medical insurance to cover project work outside of the UK. Please indicate what insurance cover you have or will have in place.

47. Please evidence how compliance with all local research ethics and research governance requirements have been assessed for the country(ies) in which the research is taking place. Please also clarify how the requirements will be met:

SECTION G: PARTICIPANT CONSENT AND WITHDRAWAL

48. Have you attached a copy of your participant information sheet (this should be in *plain English*)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials.

YES ☒ **NO** ☐

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

49. Have you attached a copy of your participant consent form (this should be in *plain English*)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials.

YES ☒ **NO** ☐

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

50. The following is a participant information sheet checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.

☒ Clear identification of the Trust as the sponsor for the research, the project title, the Researcher and Principal Investigator (your Research Supervisor) and other researchers along with relevant contact details.

☒ Details of what involvement in the proposed research will require (e.g., participation in interviews, completion of questionnaire, audio/video-recording of events), estimated time commitment and any risks involved.

☒ A statement confirming that the research has received formal approval from TREC or other ethics body.

☒ If the sample size is small, advice to participants that this may have implications for confidentiality / anonymity.

☒ A clear statement that where participants are in a dependent relationship with any of the researchers that participation in the research will have no impact on assessment / treatment / service-use or support.

☒ Assurance that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw consent at any time, and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
☒ Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.
☒ A statement that the data generated in the course of the research will be retained in accordance with the Trusts 's Data Protection and handling Policies.: https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/
☒ Advice that if participants have any concerns about the conduct of the investigator, researcher(s) or any other aspect of this research project, they should contact Simon Carrington, Head of Academic Governance and Quality Assurance (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)
☒ Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

51. The following is a consent form checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.

☒ Trust letterhead or logo.
☒ Title of the project (with research degree projects this need not necessarily be the title of the thesis) and names of investigators.
☒ Confirmation that the research project is part of a degree
☒ Confirmation that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw at any time, or to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
☒ Confirmation of particular requirements of participants, including for example whether interviews are to be audio-/video-recorded, whether anonymised quotes will be used in publications advice of legal limitations to data confidentiality.
☒ If the sample size is small, confirmation that this may have implications for anonymity any other relevant information.
☒ The proposed method of publication or dissemination of the research findings.
☒ Details of any external contractors or partner institutions involved in the research.
☒ Details of any funding bodies or research councils supporting the research.
☒ Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

SECTION H: CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

52. Below is a checklist covering key points relating to the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Please indicate where relevant to the proposed research.

☐ Participants will be completely anonymised and their identity will not be known by the investigator or researcher(s) (i.e. the participants are part of an anonymous randomised sample and return responses with no form of personal identification)?
☐ The responses are anonymised or are an anonymised sample (i.e. a permanent process of coding has been carried out whereby direct and indirect identifiers have been removed from data and replaced by a code, with no record retained of how the code relates to the identifiers).
☒ The samples and data are de-identified (i.e. direct and indirect identifiers have been removed and replaced by a code. The investigator or researchers are able to link the code to the original identifiers and isolate the participant to whom the sample or data relates).
☐ Participants have the option of being identified in a publication that will arise from the research.
☒ Participants will be pseudo-anonymised in a publication that will arise from the research. (I.e. the researcher will endeavour to remove or alter details that would identify the participant.)
☒ The proposed research will make use of personal sensitive data.
☐ Participants consent to be identified in the study and subsequent dissemination of research findings and/or publication.

53. **Participants must be made aware that the confidentiality of the information they provide is subject to legal limitations in data confidentiality (i.e. the data may be subject to a subpoena, a freedom of information request or mandated reporting by some professions). This only applies to named or de-identified data. If your participants are named or de-identified, please confirm that you will specifically state these limitations.**

YES ☒ **NO** ☐

If **NO**, please indicate why this is the case below:

NOTE: WHERE THE PROPOSED RESEARCH INVOLVES A SMALL SAMPLE OR FOCUS GROUP, PARTICIPANTS SHOULD BE ADVISED THAT THERE WILL BE DISTINCT LIMITATIONS IN THE LEVEL OF ANONYMITY THEY CAN BE AFFORDED.

SECTION I: DATA ACCESS, SECURITY AND MANAGEMENT

54. **Will the Researcher/Principal Investigator be responsible for the security of all data collected in connection with the proposed research? YES** ☒ **NO** ☐

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

55. **In line with the 5th principle of the Data Protection Act (1998), which states that personal data shall not be kept for longer than is necessary for that purpose or those purposes for which it was collected; please state how long data will be retained for.**

☐ 1-2 years ☐ 3-5 years ☒ 6-10 years ☐ 10> years

NOTE: In line with Research Councils UK (RCUK) guidance, doctoral project data should normally be stored for 10 years and Masters level data for up to 2 years

56. Below is a checklist which relates to the management, storage and secure destruction of data for the purposes of the proposed research. Please indicate where relevant to your proposed arrangements.

☐ Research data, codes and all identifying information to be kept in separate locked filing cabinets.
☒ Research data will only be stored in the University of Essex OneDrive system and no other cloud storage location.
☐ Access to computer files to be available to research team by password only.
☐ Access to computer files to be available to individuals outside the research team by password only (See **23.1**).
☐ Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically within the UK.
☐ Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically outside of the UK.

NOTE: Transfer of research data via third party commercial file sharing services, such as Google Docs and YouSendIt are not necessarily secure or permanent. These systems may also be located overseas and not covered by UK law. If the system is located outside the European Economic Area (EEA) or territories deemed to have sufficient standards of data protection, transfer may also breach the Data Protection Act (1998).

Essex students also have access the 'Box' service for file transfer:
https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/it-services/box

☐ Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, e-mails or telephone numbers.
☒ Collection and storage of personal sensitive data (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political or religious beliefs or physical or mental health or condition).
☒ Use of personal data in the form of audio or video recordings.
☒ Primary data gathered on encrypted mobile devices (i.e. laptops).

NOTE: This should be transferred to secure University of Essex OneDrive at the first opportunity.

☒ All electronic data will undergo secure disposal.

NOTE: For hard drives and magnetic storage devices (HDD or SSD), deleting files does not permanently erase the data on most systems, but only deletes the reference to the file. Files can be restored when deleted in this way. Research files must be overwritten to ensure they are completely irretrievable. Software is available for the secure erasing of files from hard drives which meet recognised standards to securely scramble sensitive data. Examples of this software are BC Wipe, Wipe File, DeleteOnClick and Eraser for Windows platforms. Mac users can use the standard 'secure empty trash' option; an alternative is Permanent eraser software.

☒ All hardcopy data will undergo secure disposal.

NOTE: For shredding research data stored in hardcopy (i.e. paper), adopting DIN 3 ensures files are cut into 2mm strips or confetti like cross-cut particles of 4x40mm. The UK government requires a minimum standard of DIN 4 for its material, which ensures cross cut particles of at least 2x15mm.

57. Please provide details of individuals outside the research team who will be given password protected access to encrypted data for the proposed research.

N/A
58. Please provide details on the regions and territories where research data will be electronically transferred that are external to the UK:
N/A

SECTION J: PUBLICATION AND DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

35. How will the results of the research be reported and disseminated? *(Select all that apply)*

☒ Peer reviewed journal
☒ Non-peer reviewed journal
☐ Peer reviewed books
☒ Publication in media, social media or website (including Podcasts and online videos)
☒ Conference presentation
☐ Internal report
☐ Promotional report and materials
☐ Reports compiled for or on behalf of external organisations
☒ Dissertation/Thesis
☐ Other publication
☐ Written feedback to research participants
☒ Presentation to participants or relevant community groups
☐ Other (Please specify below)

SECTION K: OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES

36. Are there any other ethical issues that have not been addressed which you would wish to bring to the attention of Tavistock Research Ethics Committee (TREC)?

SECTION L: CHECKLIST FOR ATTACHED DOCUMENTS

37. Please check that the following documents are attached to your application.

☒ Letters of approval from any external ethical approval bodies (where relevant)
☒ Recruitment advertisement
☒ Participant information sheets (including easy-read where relevant)
☒ Consent forms (including easy-read where relevant)
☐ Assent form for children (where relevant)
☐ Letters of approval from locations for data collection
☐ Questionnaire
☒ Interview Schedule or topic guide

☐ Risk Assessment (where applicable) ☐ Overseas travel approval (where applicable)
39. Where it is not possible to attach the above materials, please provide an explanation below.

Appendices

Appendices

Appendix A – Participant characteristics and demographic questions (to be asked at the beginning of the interview)

- How old are you?
- What type of school do you go to?
- How would you describe your ethnicity?
- Have you received additional support in your school?
- Which county or London borough do you live in?
- What is your religion if you have one?
- Do you prefer to be called autistic or for people to say you have autism?

Appendix B – Draft interview schedule

1) Can you tell me about when you first knew you were autistic?

1) What was primary school like for you?
Prompts: What did you like? What did you find difficult? What made things easier?

2) What did adults (teachers and parents) do to make primary school easier for you?

3) Did you hide your autism in primary school?
Follow ups: If no, why? If yes, how did you hide your autism in primary school? How did it feel? Why did you try to hide?

4) What is secondary school like for you?
Prompts: What did you like? What did you find difficult? What made things easier?

5) What did adults (teachers and parents) do to make secondary school easier for you?

6) How do you hide your autism now?
Follow ups: How does it feel? Why do you try to hide?

7) What do you think other people in school think about you?

8) Would you say there are other young people in school who are like you?

9) How would you describe being a black autistic girl?

Appendix C – Recruitment poster

SEEKING PARTICIPANTS TO HELP WITH RESEARCH

ARE YOU A BLACK AUTISTIC GIRL?

- Do you think you mask (hide) your autistic traits?
- Do you ever try to seem less autistic in school to 'fit in'?
- Do you copy other people's behaviours to appear 'non-autistic'?

This research involves an online interview of up to 1 hour where I will ask you questions about your experiences in education. I will send you the questions in advance.

Are you eligible?

I am looking for black autistic girls:

- aged 16-21 years,
- living in the UK,
- attending or have attended an educational setting in the UK,
- you can self-identify as autistic.

If you would like to participate and have any questions about the research please email me at:

✉ tnelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk

You can also use this QR code to email me

Appendix D – Participant information sheet

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Participant Information Sheet

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this research study.

Title of the study:
The lived experience of 'camouflaging' Black Autistic adolescent girls in UK education.

Who is doing the research:
My name is Tiffany Nelson, and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist. I am in my second year of studying for the Professional Doctorate in Child, Community and Educational Psychology. I am completing this research as part of my course.

The aim of the research:
This research study is about Black Autistic adolescent girls who 'camouflage' in educational settings. Camouflaging is masking or hiding autistic traits. The aim is to explore:

- the difficulties the girls experience in educational settings and the support they receive
- how and why the girls choose to camouflage and the impact it has on them
- the intersecting experiences of being a black autistic girl who camouflages their autistic traits

It is hoped that this research will help gain a better understanding of how camouflaging Black Autistic adolescent girls experience education and what support/adjustments are needed to ensure they are having the best experience in school. Additionally, to understand the role racism and ableism may have on this experience.

What does participation involve?

- Participating in an online interview of up to one hour with Tiffany Nelson on Zoom.

The interview will be recorded and then transcribed. The interview will involve you being asked about:

- your experiences of difficulties in educational settings,
- hiding your autistic traits and what this feels like.

If you find this difficult you can stop the interview at any stage without giving an explanation. You can bring a supportive adult or friend to the interview.

Consent to participate in this research study:
Please take time to read the information carefully to decide whether you would like to participate. It is important that you understand the aims of the study and what it would involve for you.

If you choose to take part, you can change your mind at any time and you do not need to explain the reasons for doing so. If you do participate, you can still withdraw from the study up to 3 weeks after the interview. After this your data will be anonymized and analysed.

Confidentiality of the Data:

One of the aims of this research study is to share what young people have said about their educational experiences. I will be interviewing a small number of participants (4-8) which means you may be able to identify the experiences you shared. I may use quotes from your interview to help describe your experience in the publication of the study. For your confidentiality, what you say will be anonymised so that it cannot be linked to you. This means using a pseudonym (pretend name) when describing your views and changing any details that could identify that what was said came from you.

Once your interview has been transcribed, the audio recording will be deleted, and the data will be stored as belonging to the pseudonym, on an encrypted drive using password protection. All data collected will be stored for a minimum of 5 years and used in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act (2018) and the Tavistock and Portman's Data Protection Policy.

If you tell me something that makes me concerned about your safety or the safety of someone else, then I might have to share that information with someone else to ensure you or someone else is safe. However, I will aim to talk to you about this first where possible.

Further information:

This research has received ethical approval from the Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee. If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact: Paru Jeram, Senior Trust Quality Assurance Officer pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk

If you have any further questions, you can contact me by email: tnelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk or my research supervisor Hannah Lichwa hlichwa@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Appendix E – Consent

Title of the study: The lived experience of ‘camouflaging’ Black Autistic adolescent girls in UK education.

Please read all the following statements and sign below if you agree:

- I have read and understood the research study information sheet leaflet.
- The nature and purposes of the research have been had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information.
- I understand that my data will be anonymised so that I cannot be linked to the data. I understand that the sample size is small.
- I understand that there are limitations to confidentiality relating to legal duties and threat of harm to self or others.
- I agree for my interview to be recorded and understand anonymised quotes from my interview may be used in publication.
- Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data.
- I understand the findings will be used for academic thesis and may be shared at professional conferences and in academic journal articles.
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research study for up to 3 weeks after the interview, without being obliged to give any reason.
- I am willing to participate in this research.

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Participant’s Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)
…………………………………………………………………….

Participant’s Signature
……………………………………………………………………………………..

Investigator’s Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)
…………………………………………………………………..

Investigator’s Signature
………………………………………………………………………………………

Date: ………………………….

Appendix F – Debrief form

Debrief:

The lived experience of 'camouflaging' Black Autistic adolescent girls in UK education.

Thank you for taking part in this research study. I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me, and I recognise that this may have been a difficult thing to do so thank you.

The purpose of this research was to hear the perspectives of black autistic adolescent girls who camouflage (hide) their autistic traits. There is limited research on camouflaging autism in young people and I have found no research asking for the experiences of black autistic adolescents.

I am interested how being a camouflaging black autistic female is experienced in educational settings and how those different identities (race, disability, gender) might intersect and shape that experience. For this reason, I will analyse your interview attempting to understand how you view your experience. I will then take your views and attempt to understand how race, disability and/or gender may have influenced your experience.

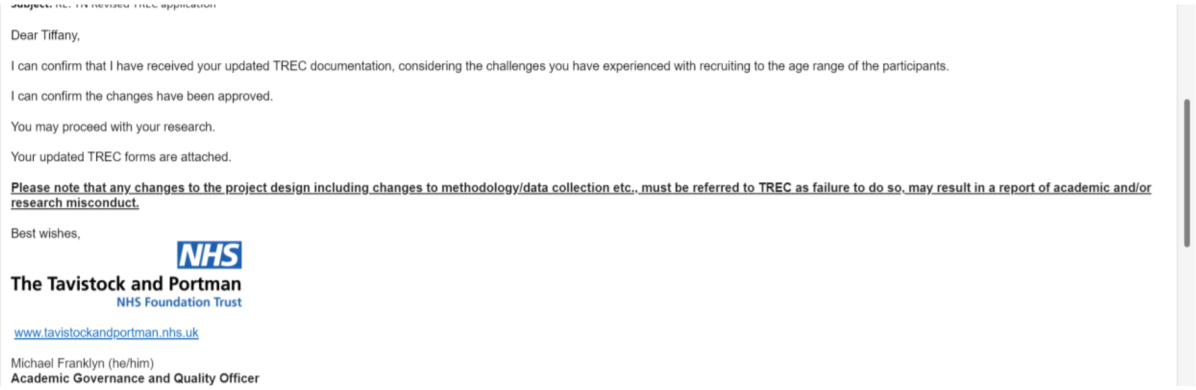
I will share my finding by writing a thesis, which is a document I submit to gain my doctorate qualification. The thesis will detail the research, its purpose and aims and what I found. I will share my findings at professional conferences, and I hope to have the research published so it can be shared widely among professionals. My hope is that professionals, such as Educational Psychologists who work with young people in schools, will gain an understanding of the experiences of camouflaging autistic black adolescent females. With these experiences I would like to make recommendations for ways of working that can improve experiences for young people like you.

If you do participate, you can still withdraw from the study up to 3 weeks after today. After this I will begin anonymizing and transcribing your interview.

If there is anything we have spoken about today that causes any upset or uncomfortable feelings, I can spend some time speaking about this with you today. If you would like to contact me after the interview to discuss, you can email me at tnelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk I would also encourage you to speak to a friend, family, or supportive adult.

I have listed below some organisations that you can contact anonymously:

- Samaritans provide confidential emotional support at any time by calling 116 123 or emailing jo@samaritans.org
- Shout 85258 a free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope
- The National Autistic Society website has lots of information and advice about autism
- The Autistic Girls Network website has information about autism and links to many resources



Subject: RE: TN Revised TREC application

Dear Tiffany,

I can confirm that I have received your updated TREC documentation, considering the challenges you have experienced with recruiting to the age range of the participants.

I can confirm the changes have been approved.

You may proceed with your research.

Your updated TREC forms are attached.

Please note that any changes to the project design including changes to methodology/data collection etc., must be referred to TREC as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

Best wishes,

NHS
The Tavistock and Portman
NHS Foundation Trust

www.tavistockandportman.nhs.uk

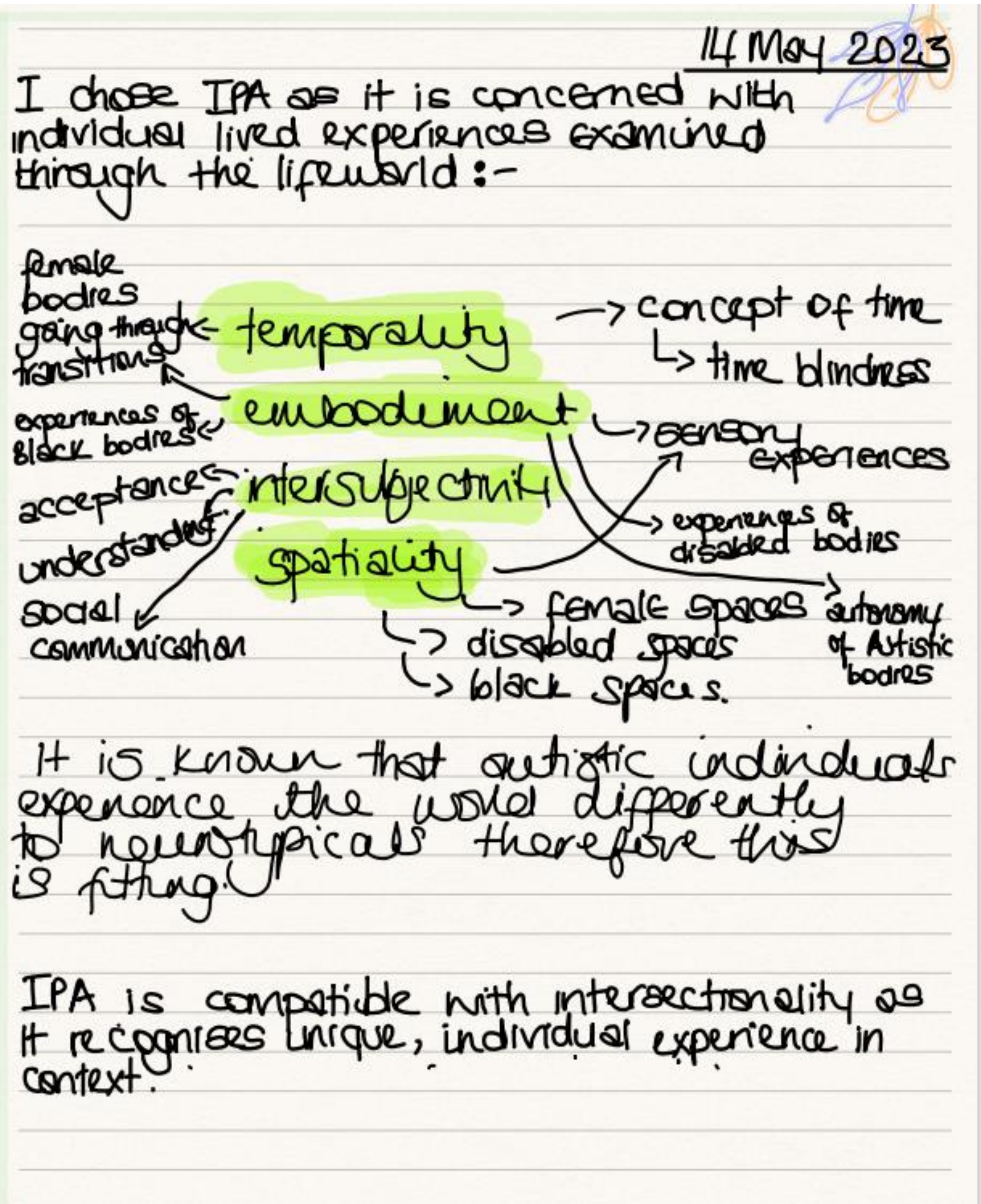
Michael Franklyn (he/him)
Academic Governance and Quality Officer

Appendix M

Reflexive Diary Extracts

Figure M1

Diary extract from 14 May 2023



14 May 2023

I chose IPA as it is concerned with individual lived experiences examined through the lifeworld:-

female bodies going through transitions ← temporality → concept of time
→ time blindness

experiences of black bodies ← embodiment → sensory experiences
→ experiences of disabled bodies
→ autonomy of Autistic bodies

acceptance ← intersubjectivity
understanding
→ social communication

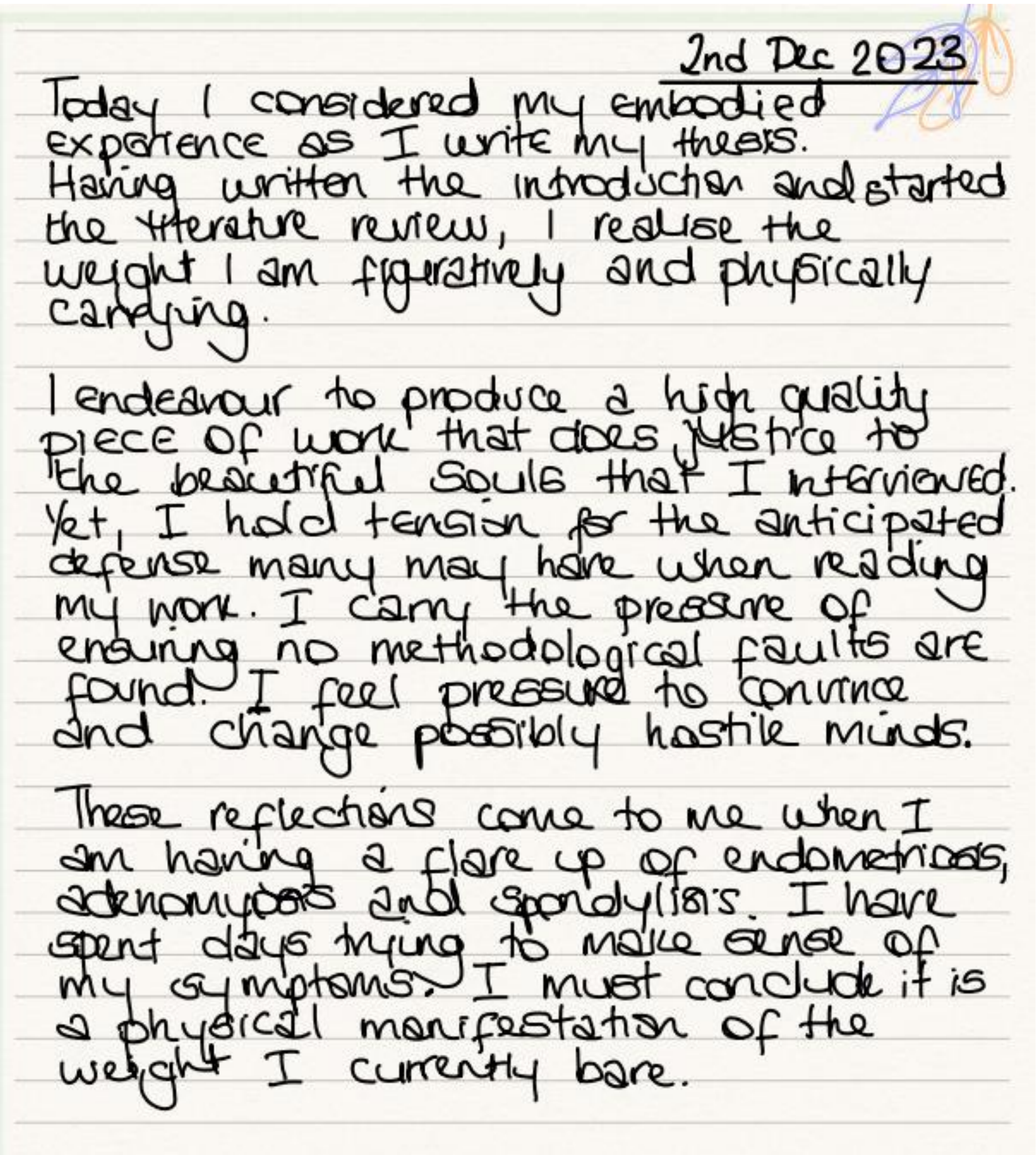
spatiality → sensory experiences
→ female spaces
→ disabled spaces
→ black spaces.

It is known that autistic individuals experience the world differently to neurotypicals therefore this is fitting.

IPA is compatible with intersectionality as it recognises unique, individual experience in context.

Figure M2

Diary extract from 2 December 2023



2nd Dec 2023

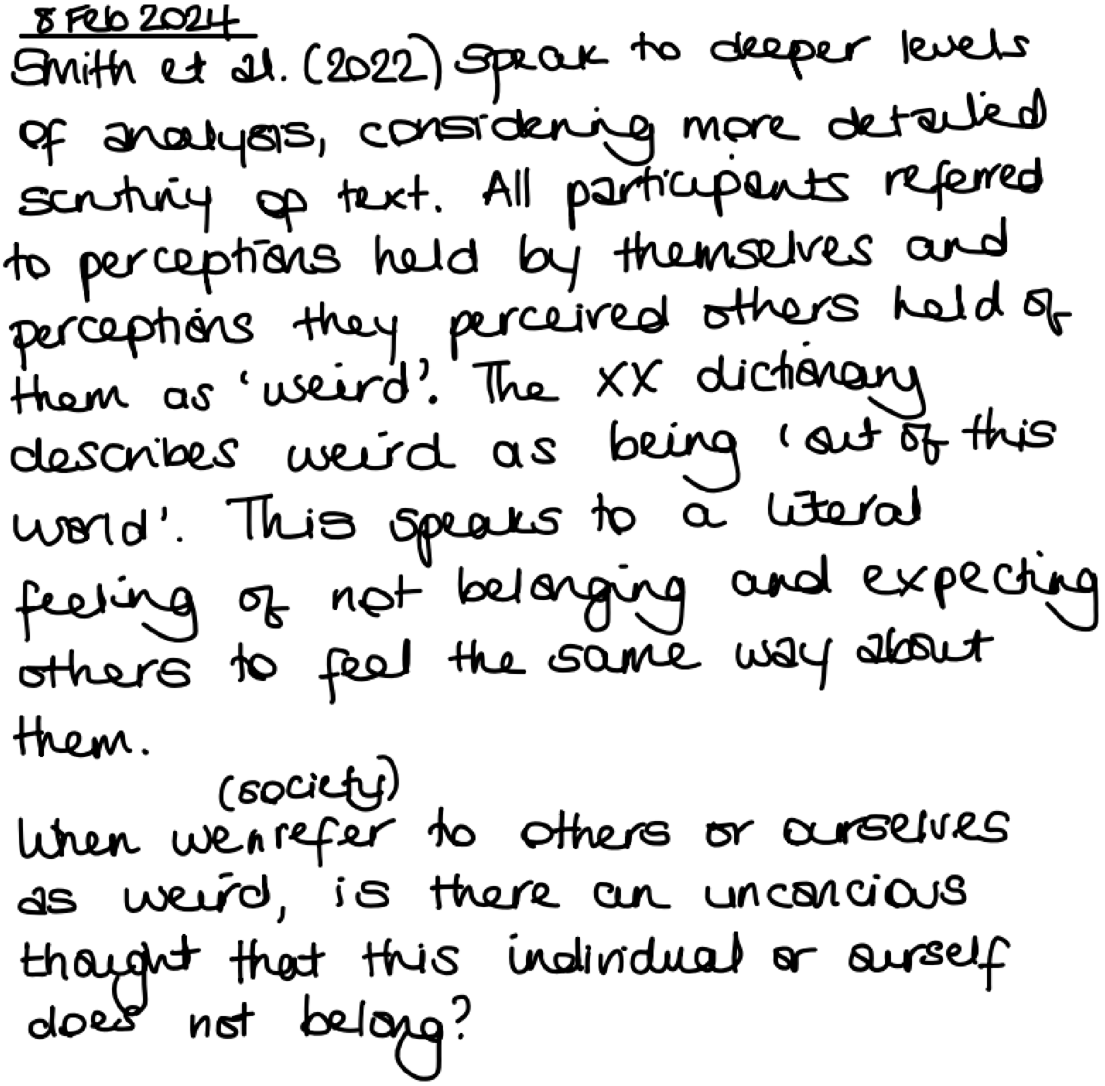
Today I considered my embodied experience as I write my thesis. Having written the introduction and started the literature review, I realise the weight I am figuratively and physically carrying.

I endeavour to produce a high quality piece of work that does justice to the beautiful souls that I interviewed. Yet, I hold tension for the anticipated defense many may have when reading my work. I carry the pressure of ensuring no methodological faults are found. I feel pressure to convince and change possibly hostile minds.

These reflections come to me when I am having a flare up of endometriosis, adenomyosis and spondylitis. I have spent days trying to make sense of my symptoms. I must conclude it is a physical manifestation of the weight I currently bare.

Figure M3

Diary extract from 8 February 2024



8 Feb 2024

Smith et al. (2022) speak to deeper levels of analysis, considering more detailed scrutiny of text. All participants referred to perceptions held by themselves and perceptions they perceived others held of them as 'weird'. The XX dictionary describes weird as being 'out of this world'. This speaks to a literal feeling of not belonging and expecting others to feel the same way about them.

When we (society) refer to others or ourselves as weird, is there an unconcious thought that this individual or ourself does not belong?

Figure M4

Diary extract from 18 April 2024

18 April 2024

In thinking about structures and systems of normality, and how we are conditioned to see whiteness and ability as the norm; I know that there are people who did not historically conform to this way of thinking and do not today.

I have wondered what makes these people different to majority. Maybe they hold aspects of identity that are discriminated against. Maybe they have seen the pain of oppression in others.

It makes me reflect on the film The Matrix. Neo had the choice of the blue and the red pill. They represented the choice between a willingness to learn a potentially unsettling and life-changing truth by taking the red pill or remaining in the contented experience of ordinary reality with blue pill.

Lana Wachowski explains the Matrix trilogy was meant to take viewers on a journey of the construction of meaning of life. The first movie laying the context, the second deconstructed what viewers thought they knew to make them feel uncomfortable and attacked, synonymous with responses to deconstructionist philosophy such as Foucault's work.

I feel that people who do not conform to societal thinking have chosen to take the red pill.

They have been unplugged from the matrix and at one with their bodies. Like Neo, they have to grapple with systemic barriers (Agent Smith and co.).

Maybe as EPs we need to be like Morpheus, using our psychology skills to support educators to take the red pill.

Appendix N

Lily's Transcript Including Exploratory Notes and Experiential Statements

Exploratory notes	Transcript	Experiential statements (exploratory, linguistic, conceptual)
	Tiffany: So the first question I had was, how old are you? Lily: 16. Tiffany: Oh brilliant, okay. And what type of school do you go to? Lily: Well, now I go to, like a college which is it's called XX, but it's just like a home education hub. Tiffany: Oh, okay. Lily: Yeah, for 14 to 16 year olds. So you just pass your GCSEs for free, and like you just learn there. So I go like 3 days a week. Tiffany: Okay. Oh, okay. And, Right, this question that I'm asking. I've asked everyone this question because a lot of times when you fill in forms and stuff, about your ethnicity they always tell you what you what boxes you can tick. And, So I just asked, I'm asking everybody, how would you describe your ethnicity? Lily: I mean, (laugh) because when people ask you, I just go along with like what I'm mixed with. So Irish, Scottish, Italian, Grenadian and Bajan. So yeah. Tiffany: Okay. Erm, and have you received additional support in school?	

	Lily: Hello, I'm not really sure what that means like in primary school I was, like I would have like, a one on one, like, learning person. And I was also like put in a like a class for like people that needed extra help. Erm but no, not, not anymore, like not in college or anything. Tiffany: And what, which London borough do you live in? Lily: I think X. Tiffany: And Okay, yeah. And what is your religion if you have one? Lily: Hmm. I mean, I'm not atheist. And I'm not like religious. I just, I like loads of different religions. Like I think they all have like a truth to it. Tiffany: Okay. Yeah, I like that. And then so, when I'm writing the thesis - when I'm writing all the research up, how would you prefer me to write about you? Would you like to be? Would you mind if I say you that you're Autistic or do you prefer to say that you have autism? Lily: Yeah, I usually hear people say they prefer saying that they, they're Autistic, but I think for me it's more. I probably prefer saying having autism because I feel like I got diagnosed but I'm still really like unsure of myself a bit. Tiffany: Okay, yeah. So when did you get diagnosed? Lily: I think it was. 2022 really? It was December. Yeah, yeah, it was last year. Tiffany: Okay, that's the last year. So not that long ago, yeah, okay. So.	

	Lily: I was on a waiting list for like 2 years, so. Tiffany: Yeah, that happens unfortunately. Yeah, okay, so when I write about you, I'll talk about you having autism, sorry with autism, having autism. Lily: Thank you.	
Nursery was the easiest time of her life. In primary school she had 2 friends as most people saw her as weird as she has not learned to mask	Tiffany: Okay. So the next questions are like the bigger questions. So when I'm asking these questions I'm sort of thinking (pause) It's for you to sort of think back - and I know you said that you don't remember everything, and that's completely fine, but I'm thinking back of like primary, secondary school, all those sort of ages of school or in education. How would you describe your experiences of like camouflaging or hiding your autism in school. Lily: I think when I was in primary school (pause). I didn't have like a lot of like - I didn't mask. I was kind of like very much, like in I found those like the easiest times of like my life, because I just felt really free to be like how I was. So, when I went into primary school, I never really learned how to mask, so that's why loads of people like - I think I only had two yeah, two friends in primary school, cause everybody kind of saw me as weird. Tiffany: Hmm.	**Nursery was a time when she could be free to be herself without judgement. In primary school, most people perceived her to be weird which affected her friendships**
Tried to be similar to other people but couldn't relate so had to force herself to do the things they liked	Lily: I think it wasn't until later when I like started to mask quite a bit, so I just kind of try - like I don’t know, try be similar to other people.	**She couldn't relate to the things the others did but she forced herself to mask and be like them.**

More recently, not in primary school, conversations were hard because of expected eye contact, lack of interest in what was being said. She had scripts for when she spoke with people. I used to force myself to make eye contact but now I have accepted that it is okay to look away. When excited about a certain topic, her voice gets more high pitched and she expresses herself physically. People didn't like it, so she tries not to fidget and physically express herself and her excitement.	I think I really - like when it came to girls like I couldn't really relate on certain things so like try forcing myself to watch like similar series to them and all of that stuff. Tiffany: Okay. Lily: But and like, and in the conversations like they used to be a bit hard for me, like I just feel like not really interested in what they kind of are saying. But more like stuff like recently not in primary school and in that age. Probably like I mean, I always have like a script when I need to like talk to people. Because like if I don't, then I'm kind of just like, I don't know, it's kind of really hard. And I feel like I don't know I won't say the right things and all of that stuff. Erm, with eye contact it's like a bit - I don’t like, oh, I used to find that really, like hard to just keep - like cause I would have to just look at them because like loads of people look at you like for so long when talking to you. Tiffany: Yeah. Lily: But now I've kind of accepted that, you know, it's fine just to look away, but yeah, I've always forced myself to just look back like so much. And like in class like I remember I used to do STEM lessons before I went to my college and I get really excited like certain topics but like loads of people were making fun of me because like, when it came to something I think my voice would get more high pitch when	**More recently, conversations are hard due to the social demands and no interest in the topics of conversation. Having scripts help.** **In response to people negatively reacting to her physical response to excitement about certain topics, she suppressed her physical expressions of excitement.**

	talking about stuff that I like, and I get really excited and I like, and you know, like I like expressing myself physically. Tiffany: Hmm. Yeah. Mmm. Lily: So yeah, I think loads of people didn't like that. So I had to stop like, fidgeting. I had to stop like kind of physically expressing myself. And yeah, I'd have to kind of make my voice a bit more like, regular. So yeah, and not seem as like excited and interested about stuff. Tiffany: Yeah. Okay, that's really interesting. How do you think you're masking your autism has affected your academic performance and your social relationships with your like peers and your teachers.	
needed to be perfect to keep up with others and 'people please'	Lily: Yeah, yeah, I think. (pause) Like, I, cause I always needed to be like perfect I guess, because I just feel like everybody - well I won't be able to catch up with everybody, so I'd always be like, really people pleasing to like teachers and like friends and like I'd always just take on everything that they would say.	**Lily used perfectionism to keep up with others and prioritised their needs over her own.**
‘fighting for my life' by hanging out with them just to have friendship. Felt that I could never	If they ask me stuff like, oh do you want to meet up then, but I really like I never had the physical ability for it, like. When I used to hang out with my friends, I say used to because now I'm like, as I say, like I'm more comfortable with myself. Tiffany: Okay. Hmm.	

live up to any expectations due to not being able to catch up mentally and physically. There were moments where attendance was gone because she needs rest when things get overwhelming. She then feels like she is failing but doesn't know how to ask for help.	Lily: But I used to find like hanging out with them like fighting for my life. Like I just need to like be friends with them and that would be an exchange of a friendship. And next I'd be like that's over with I can wait until like the next three months to see them again, and like go through this again. So, I feel like as you know, I can never really live up to any expectations because I was just like mentally and physically I wouldn't be able to catch up with things. Tiffany: Okay. Hmm. Lily: So yeah, and academically. I've just been loads of moments by like my attendance is actually gone because I like agree to stuff. I don't explain that I can't like - I don't know, like I just, I constantly kind of need rest when things get overwhelming. So I kind of just, I'm like, okay, that's it. Like I'm not going anymore. Tiffany: Okay. Yeah. Lily: And like there's been a time where I haven't been to school for like 3 months because, yeah, it's just so it just like it's so demanding for me and next I feel like I'm failing, but I don't know how to ask for that help. Tiffany: Right, okay. What do you think was demanding like in the classroom? What did you find demanding? Lily: Literally just like when I would arrive at this college like, like lights and like everybody that was there and like the journey there,	**Spending time with people felt like a 'fight for' survival just to gain friendship. The differences she experienced mentally and physically made her feel she could not live up to any expectations.** **The school environment was so demanding that it exhausted Lily, and she needed complete rest to recover. This led to missed school and feeling like she was failing but she struggled to ask for support.**

She felt overwhelmed and anxious going to school because of the journey there, the lights, seeing people too much. Full lights are difficult for her to cope with. Turning off lights and dimming lights are helpful	like I get so genuinely anxious and overwhelmed with it as well. Tiffany: Okay. Yeah. Lily: And next I'd have to like think about my social life and next like you know, I'd have to see people again and again and again and like it was just too much I think, where I don't know, but, I have people in the college that like help me with like certain things so if I get overwhelmed I can go to like a send up. But yeah, I was mostly just like being in the situation, I feel like overwhelmed going to like school and yeah. Tiffany: I think what you were just speaking to there, it sounds very much like sensory, a lot of sensory things that were quite demanding for you before you've even gone into school. Lily: Yeah, yeah, like the train ride and all that stuff like this Tiffany: Yeah because obviously there's lots of noise, there's lots of lights, there's so many different things that you're trying to process. At the same time and then you're going into school. And they're putting all those demands on you again and I think schools are quite, erm, they're quite sensory heavy. Lily: Yeah, it's the light as well like I go to therapy and like my therapist turns off the light to me and it just relaxes me so much. Tiffany: Oh. That's really good to know. Lily: Yeah, yeah here at home as well. I've got dimmable lights, so it's really helpful.	**The sensory and social aspects of everyday aspects of school life created anxiety and overwhelm for Lily** **Lily is sensory averse to lighting, which has a significant impact on her regulation.**

	But yeah, when I go to like my sister's house, she's got like full on lights and I just find it so like oh like I can't take it. Tiffany: So I wrote about discrimination and microaggressions. So I know one of the questions was around whether you have faced any kind of discrimination or microaggressions in school, like maybe from your teachers or your peers or both. Lily: Hmm. I'm trying to think. I remember this one time with a girl. We had like a bit of a silly like argument like basically she had her hand out and she wanted like a fly to like land on it, like we were acting like it was a butterfly - anyway a bit disgusting but this was in primary school.	
A girl told her that a butterfly would not want to land on her skin because butterflies do not like brown skin	And like I put my hand out, like we were both like just innocently being and next they were like it wouldn't like wanna go on your skin, they don't like brown skin and all that stuff. Tiffany: Oh wow. Oh.	**Lily experienced a racial microaggression that appears to have communicated her skin colour was inferior.**
She was called the N-word and questions where children of 7 yrs old would get this language, assuming they would hear it from some older.	Lily: And I'm trying to think that's been other times. I don't have much recollection. I remember in camp, on camp somebody called me the N word and that was like that was like seven years old so yeah I wasn't like - Tiffany: You were 7? Lily: Yeah, and there it's like - a lot of these things like - the kind of - like they have to get that from someone else like older, or something. Tiffany: Yes.	**Lily reflects on how 7 year olds would have knowledge of racist language to be able to call something as derogatory as the N word.**

She felt hated at camp as she was treated horribly and told to F off all the time. She uses shorthand for expletives rather than the whole word. She doesn't know if it was discrimination but there were barely any Black people there. She always felt different because everyone else was white and recognises that may have been underlying things, but she would not have realised at the time. She was physically hurt by a peer who initially lied when confronted but then admitted to it. Lily says she is not sure if these situations were	Lily: But yeah, they really hated me. I remember on camp like we have this thing called P fare. So you pay for services with P's. And somebody paid someone with P's to throw a cold bucket of water on me. And it was freezing cold. I know, I had to get like a whole change of clothes and everything, but they just really didn't like me at all, and they would just say F off all the time. Tiffany: Hmm. Okay Lily: I was the only Black like person in my group. And I really do love camp, that was like my first time going, I had a really bad experience - but every other time it's been good. But it's always just like - you're - there's barely any Black people on camp. And, yeah, I'm not really sure, like, about like discrimination. I just know nobody really liked me in school. Tiffany: Okay. Hmm. Lily: And like I always felt different, like because everybody else is White. There was one black kid in my class. He was adopted by 2 White parents. So yeah, I just, you know, obviously that might have been underlying things, but I wouldn't really have caught on. Tiffany: Yes. Lily: This one, yeah, this one girl really didn't like me as well, like. I think one time I got really happy that we were working together doing an art project, and she	**Lily felt hated and was mistreated by others at camp. She is unsure as to whether to attribute this to racial discrimination, however she is aware that there were barely any Black people there.** **Lily reflects that she would not have understood whether she was experiencing racial discrimination at the time but she recalls always feeling different as everyone else was White.**

racial but she is aware others saw her differently - she's repeated this twice so may be aware of the racial intent	took my arm and she'd like smashed it on the desk. Not like smash, but like she hit on the desk and my mum saw it and it turned out that I had a contusion. Tiffany: Oh my gosh. Lily: Yeah. I know and the next when my mum told the school, she ended up lying and then she finally admitted it in the end. But yeah, it was just like - I'd have like certain situations like that where it's like - it's not really anything to say that I'm Black, but like loads of people just didn't really like see me the same. Tiffany: Yeah. Yeah, and what did the school - your mum went, what did the school do?	**Lily was physically hurt by another student and recalls other similar situations. She recalls lots of people not liking her and suggests it's not necessarily her being Black, however, it appears that she may be recognising the correlation on reflection.**
The school handled bullying really bad, generally by ignoring it. mum would have meetings with school, and nothing was done so she is now homeschooled	Lily: They really like handed, handled it in like a really bad, like I remember. Like any time, genuinely if kids got hurt and especially me in the playground, like they just wouldn't mention it at all. They really wouldn't mention like bullying or anything, it would just be me having to tell my mum and she would have like meetings with them; they never did anything. So that's why I'm home-schooled. So yeah. Tiffany: When did you start home, home education? Lily: I think. It was around seven years old. I was in primary school from like late four to like late six, maybe the start of seven. Tiffany: Okay, seven years old. Not Year seven? Lily: Yeah. Yes, seven years old.	**Lily became home-educated due to the school repeatedly mishandling bullying.**

Lily's teacher described her behaviour as 'bad'. Her behave was communicating when she was stressed and didn't understand the work but struggled to ask.	Tiffany: So that is Year 2, I think, is it? Year 2 or Year 3 at school? Lily: I was in Year 3 when I left, yeah. Tiffany: Okay, okay. So why did you leave at that point? Do you think? Lily: There was this situation where, the teacher - my mum had a meeting with the teacher and she was saying that like my behaviour was bad, that I would never put my hand up in class when I needed help and that I would scream in the hallways. Tiffany: Okay. Hmm. Lily: So like I told my mum like that's not true - like I do like put my hand up - and I think there's, there was, I was really highly stressed in school, so they might have been one time where I might have done that.	**Lily's behaviour was described as 'bad' by her teacher when her behaviour was communicating distress and a need for support.**
People would constantly tell her that her hair smells because she had to use hair products which they did not have to because their hair texture was different to hers.	But it was because like constantly I remember when I came to school like loads of people would be like, oh, your hair smells because I could have product in it, but they weren't used to the same product. And I'd go - turn red, like it used to be fine. And next thing just be constantly, so I think there was one time I just turned red and I screamed and I started crying. So I had to have a substitute like teacher to take me out of class to help me. So yeah, my mum was like fed up with it. Tiffany: Okay. Hmm. Lily: She was like, that's it. Like, do you wanna become home schooled or something?	**Constant racial microaggressions about her hair led to feelings of distress**

Mum gave Lily the option to be home-schooled. Lily asked classmates what they would think and they said they did not care.	Tiffany: Yeah, okay, and how did you feel about that at that time? Lily: I mean, I kind of thought it was like interesting and I, I (laugh) remember like asking my classmates like, oh like how would you feel if I left. And like everybody said like, oh I don't think I'd care that much or anything. Tiffany: Oh. Lily: I know, so I was just kind of like, yeah, I might as well leave. But after that I thought it was fun to like be able to do quite a lot of stuff - with like - on Facebook you have so many home education groups. So they've got entertaining activities so yeah.	**Lily chose to be home educated as she saw no point in staying in school when her classmates told her they would not care if she left.**
Home education can be fun as there are lots of entertaining activities. There are groups of people but sometimes it was a bit isolating. she didn't learn much about social cues as a result. she seems to understand the pros and cons as she actually enjoyed being alone at times but being isolated is not the same.	Tiffany: Yes. Oh wow. I don't think this is one of my questions, but could you tell me a bit more about being home educated? Like what did you do? How did it make you feel and yeah. Lily: Yeah, sure. I didn't - like it's really like good with costs because you can do so many like activities. Like I did horse riding, I did rock climbing. Erm tennis, swimming, all of that. So, I had like a group of people I'd see at different places because loads of people think that like you won't make a lot of friends. Tiffany: Hmm. Yeah. Lily: But yeah, I had that sort of group for a while, but sometimes I'd be a bit isolated, and	**Lily explains the benefits and disadvantages to home education. She engaged in fun activities with a community of people. However, it could be isolating at times which meant she missed opportunities to learn social cues, yet, she had opportunities to be alone which she enjoys.**

To make friends, she would make others laugh and make fun of herself, even when she was being serious about her feelings. She thought it was the only way to make them like her and she was happy with that.	- but I didn't really mind that because I like being by myself, but I think I didn't exactly get to learn about social cues that much. Once I was, once I was in a group I was like the clown. Cause I just wanted to feed like laughter and all that stuff, like the only way they'd like me is by kind of making fun of myself. So I just like do that and being weird like it was kind of like a good thing for them because they just laugh and I was happy with that. Tiffany: Hmm. Yeah. Lily: But at the same time, like when it came to being serious about my feelings, like it would just be kind of corny, if that makes sense. Tiffany: Yeah, yeah. Okay. Let me see what my other questions were. So. When you were in school How do you think masking your autism affected your relationships with your teachers? Lily: I can't really remember the primary school.	**Lily used laughter and joking about to make others like her and have friends; even if it contradicted with her feelings**
I people please so tell teachers everything good things about me to make a good impression,	Tiffany: That's okay. Cause you've been home educated since a Year three up until you've just started college. Lily: Yeah. Yeah. So, I mean, in college now, I have loads of teachers because, as I say I can't help it, the first thing I want is for people to see me as like perfect, so I people please, and I just - I talk about everything good about me so that they have that impression so I don't have to worry. Tiffany: Okay. Yeah.	**She strived to be seen as perfect by people so tried to make a positive impression on teachers by emphasising her good qualities and accomplishments.**

As soon as she falls down, teachers worry about her and she feels like she cannot be genuine with them. She understands it is better for her learning to be herself and to ask for help when she needs it, but she is so aware that she cannot stop masking because she doesn't know how. Masking has become normal. When she can't cope with masking anymore, she 'drops everything, shuts down and hibernates' by staying at home. She recognises that it is not always the best thing because she loses out on friendships. This is similar to her views on home education and asking for help. she recognises it helps her but also can disadvantage her socially/in learning	Lily: So a lot of my teachers think that I'm like really good at this, really good at that. Tiffany: Hmm. Lily: But it's the second that, like, I kind of fall a bit down, like I feel like they're really worried about me with that stuff, and it makes me feel a bit like, I can't be genuine with them. And you know I'd really like to because, you know, it's better to learn that way so they can cater to my needs and all that stuff. And like I'd never really wanna ask for help anymore, because I feel like - like bad so yeah, that also like affects my studying. Tiffany: Hmm. Yes. So do you think - would you say then that you are still masking, like when you're in college? Lily: Erm, yeah, so like – certain – type - because it becomes better - but like I think once you mask, it's kind of like you don't know how to go back to normal because you're so aware of it. Tiffany: Yeah. Lily: And you just like, you can't really help it. And it's like you don't really know how you are normally anymore because you're so used to the ... Tiffany: Yeah, okay. Could you tell me about how you manage the stress of masking your autism in college - I guess now. Lily: Well, yeah, generally (pause) like as I said, like I drop everything.	**As soon as Lily struggles to cope, people worry about her. She continues to mask and does not ask for help, even though she understands it would be beneficial for her learning. Masking has become automatic and normal.**

In school, she manages better as there is individualised support and a key person. Mum helps with sensory comforts like lighting and food. She also helps with routine	When it came to like therapy - like once I was, once I felt like - that's still okay - like I can't be myself. And I just like I can't - I also can't carry on with masking, like I just drop everything. I stay at home for like months. That's why when COVID happened, I was like, finally I can just stay in and I wouldn't want to go out at all. Tiffany: Yeah. Yeah. Lily: Like literally I just stayed in - like I would go out maybe twice a month, three times a month and that would just be to the shop or like throwing out the rubbish. Tiffany: Yeah. Hmm. Lily: So, yeah, like, I just kind of shut down and like - I called it my hibernation time. Tiffany: Hmm, yeah. Lily: But it's not always like the best thing. And also when it comes to friendships, like, I just - I lose out on them. Tiffany: Okay. Lily: And it makes me feel like I'm behind again so I feel even worse. Tiffany: Yeah. Okay. I do have a question on friendships. What was I going to say? So. Has your family and community supported you in managing or understanding your experiences of masking your autism. Lily: Erm, I mean, in college like, a lot of things like have become a bit more catered to since I've like paired up with CAMHs.	**To manage the stress of masking Lily goes into hibernation. She recognises that this helps to regulate her, however she also understands that it leads to miss opportunities with friendships and she ends up being behind her peers socially and academically.** **Individualised support and CAMHs input has supported Lily to manage in college.**

	So like - I don't know, if I'm struggling with something I just like will have somebody I can go to. With my mum, I think she's just like, yeah, like she'll help me out in the house. Tiffany: Hmm.	**Mum supports by ensuring the sensory environment is comfortable and understanding her needs**
Friends understand that sometimes she struggles mentally and that is why she is not talking to them.	Lily: Like with the dimmable lights like all of that stuff like she kind of knows, about my comfort sort of things and stuff that calms me down. So yes, she'll help me with that. I like having a routine of like what to eat and all of that stuff. Erm, with friends, I think like they're aware of how I can be so they like know that if I don't talk to them it's just because like, I'm kind of not mentally feeling - but it's not the case with like every friend.	
Lily masks with most friends because she feels embarrassed. She likes friendships where she can be together but be in silence. She has a few friendships like this, but wishes she wasn't like this.	Tiffany: Hmm. Okay. So do you have like any sort of close friends? Friends that you feel that you don't have to mask around. Lily: Erm, it's very much like - It's like barely anyone really like I had a neighbour but she moved. Tiffany: Oh. Lily: So I can't, she's moved really far away. So yeah, I can't see her anymore.	
	With a lot my friends I just kind of accept that - like I feel like I need to mask because I feel embarrassed, kind of when I don't anymore. I think, I'm like, I dunno - the thing that I like with friends is just being able to be in silence of them and have a good time. Tiffany: Yeah.	**Lily masks with most friends due to embarrassment. At times she wishes that she could be 'better'**

She enjoys being with friends in the same space, without eye contact, comfortable when in silence and having the same values. She has this with a friend who is also Autistic. People assume Black girls or pretty girls can't be Autistic	Lily: So I've got a few friends like that. So I just like enjoy it while I can, but every now and again I'm like, why can't I be like better? Why can't I be normal and like, you know, see them most of the time and yeah, all of that stuff. Tiffany: Okay. I want to go back to something you said before about what you would like with your friends you'd like to just be with them and be in silence? Lily: Hmm. Yeah. Tiffany: What would that look like? What would you be doing with them? Lily: Hmm. It's more like just - I really like walking with people. And I remember like - it doesn't even just have to be silence - but I love walking around London with friends and like I have a few – I have another Autistic friend and we just - we don't even look at each other, we just look forward and we walk and we just talk. But like with silence, like it's just more like we share the same values so we're like in the same space and like, we're together. But we're comfortable with just not saying anything. So like if I go to, like as I said my neighbour's house, we could just stay together and be silent for like the whole time basically. I really like that. So yeah. Tiffany: Yeah, no, I'm sorry I have to ask I was interested because it sounds- that kind of just sounds like being with somebody that you like.	**Lily wants friendships where she can just be herself, with no social or sensory demands or expectations. She has this with an Autistic friend, which suggests that someone else who is Autistic or neurodivergent can bring understanding and acceptance of Lily being herself.**

She was called aggressive for showing her affection and empathy for others through tight hugs Teachers can assume students are rude rather than looking deeper into behaviour. they should talk with classmates to see if they can support Schools should offer individualised support to make school more comfortable and bearable.	And you're just being - but without any demands. Lily: Yeah exactly that. Yeah, exactly that. Tiffany: Yeah, okay, okay. What changes would you like to see in schools to better support the needs of Autistic Black girls? Lily: Erm, I think there should, when it comes to like (pause) I don't know the signs are really hard to phone with somebody that's not diagnosed sometimes. And I think there's like a lot of assumption with like Black girls or like pretty girls, that it's not autism but it's like something else because it's just like an assumption that people make. Tiffany: Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Lily: So I think like- because for me I was really affectionate and like I have really like a lot of empathy for people so back in school like I used to hug people really tight but they re – I think that was more considered me being like aggressive and like all of that stuff. So I think, when it comes to like teachers like sometimes they'll just say stuff that can be like, you know. Erm passed off as quite, I don't know rude instead of actually going deep into the problem instead of actually like wondering why somebody's like the way they are. And I think it should be more like, talked about with like classmates and like what they can possibly help with.	**People assume Black girls or pretty girls can't be Autistic** **Lily's affection and sensory needs were misinterpreted as aggression, which tends to be a word attributed to black girls** **Teachers interpret behaviour with negative attributes instead of exploring the underlying cause of the behaviour.**

People don't want to label you if you are pretty because they think autism has a certain look. They think when she is overwhelmed, she is just crazy rather than Autistic Black girls are seen as more masculine so their distress can be misinterpreted as typically angry, which is damaging when you're autistic	And all of that stuff, like if somebody doesn't like a certain something, they can just make it apparent. Tiffany: Yeah. Lily: If needed. So yeah, just more like catering to that person's needs, but obviously not like to an realistic level, like there's always gonna be things that aren't gonna be 100% comfortable and you can't do much about it, but just to do like the little that you can to make things easier, I think that would be good. Tiffany: Yeah, that makes sense. Have you ever felt like your experiences as an Autistic Black adolescent girl were overlooked or misunderstood by others. Lily: Yeah, definitely. I think (pause) there's more like this thing where it's seen as like (pause) this is weird instead of Autistic or like, oh she's got bad social skills maybe. And like I think if you're - if you're pretty then people like often like overlook it, like if you don't - people will say like you have like a certain look for autism or something - that's not true - so yeah, most of the time if you're pretty, then people don't wanna put that label on you, they think that it's like, ewww, like why would you want to, you know, say that about yourself and all of that stuff? Tiffany: Yeah. Yeah. Lily: So that like - there'll be loads of people that won't believe it, or they'll just be like - yeah.	**Schools should offer individualised support to make school more comfortable and bearable for Autistic young people.** **People expect autism to have a certain look and do not want to label people who are pretty; they would prefer to label as 'crazy' rather than Autistic.**

One-to-one lessons with creative adaptive teaching was good. It involved games and a different way of learning to others. College does not make demands of her attendance because they are understanding of her needs. This alleviates her stress. However they do not support with catching up on	And I think (pause) - yes, sometimes it can be kind of seen like - when I get overwhelmed with stuff, like I think it can be more seen like oh she's just crazy and all of that stuff. And you know, with a lot of Black girls, it's kind of like you're more masculine - that like loads of people just see you as that way so when you're like sharing like signs of you know distress it's like oh she's just being like you know typically angry and all of that stuff which (pause) it's like it's such a damaging stereotype especially when you're like Autistic. Tiffany: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, no, I definitely hear that. Okay. Could you describe any positive experiences that you had in school that helped you to feel accepted and supported as an Autistic Black adolescent girl. Lily: Hmm. In primary school when I had the one on one lessons that was really good, because it wasn't just sitting down and like just doing stuff, like we'd creatively learn something with this like one teacher. Tiffany: Oh yeah. Lily: So like she do games for me to like learn how to - and I really worked for me. In primary school I'd like write everything backwards, like even my name. I don't know why my brain did that. But, yeah, it was just, it was really helpful for me to learn in a different way from other people. Tiffany: Yeah. Yeah. Hmm. And was that in a small group?	**The 'angry black girl' stereotype, rooted in perceptions of black girls as more masculine, often results in misunderstandings of their emotional distress. This is particularly problematic for Black Autistic girls, as distress can be a frequent state experienced by Autistic people in schools.** **Lily benefitted from different teaching methods on a one to one basis that involved games and creativity.**

academic work that she has missed. She would like their support with that She got so used to masking she didn't know who she was or how to be. she was	Lily: It was sometimes in a small group, sometimes just one on one. So yeah, that was good. And in college, I'd say, I think because they're aware of me having it they're a bit more, like relaxed on me like when it comes to my attendance and like If I can't come to college so they're not like really like oh why didn't you do this? Why didn't you do that? So that's like it feels better to not have all that stress put on. Tiffany: Yes. That's brilliant. And if you're - like with your attendance if you're not in, do they do anything to help you catch up on any work that you've missed? Lily: That's the one thing I don't like is that they don't really do, like they don't really help me with the stuff to do at home like - Yeah, there's not a lot of information, so I prefer if they did that. Tiffany: Hmm. How would you want them to do that? Lily: Erm, basically my history teacher, he has like Google classroom so you can see every - like the worksheets and all of that stuff. I - he's the only teacher I can like do homework with at home because like he has this stuff up, but my math teacher doesn't have it. My English teacher doesn't have anything. So yeah. Tiffany: They probably just don't know how to use it.	**Lily appreciates college being relaxed and not putting demands on her in terms of her attendance. She would prefer academic updates online to keep her caught up with her work.**

embarrassed around people who weren't accepting and was constantly second guessing herself becasue she did not understand. Positively, she feels special for feeling things and emotions more which gives her clues about things	Lily: Yeah, my English, my English teacher doesn't, but my, maths teacher does, but every, sometimes when I come to class it's like there's nothing that happened the whole day and he'll be like, oh, you don't need to catch up on anything, like it's fine. I'm like, oh, okay. Tiffany: Okay. How has your experience of masking your autism in school influenced your self-identity and your sense of self-worth? Lily: I feel like, As I said, like I don't really know how I be or how I act because you get so used to it that it's like How am I actually really? Tiffany: Hmm. Lily: And I don't know, I think you get loads of - when you're around people that aren't as accepting, you start feeling embarrassed for yourself. You're like, oh my god, am I doing something embarrassing like every second? Because you're not sure exactly what's wrong. Tiffany: Hmm. Okay. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Lily: But you have an idea that maybe I'm doing something wrong? But at the same time, like (pause) in a positive way, it makes me feel like – there's - I have so much more like feelings for things and emotions. And I care about - like it's different for everybody, like some people say that they feel less empathy or more empathy or like more monotone or high pitch or kiddish or yeah all of that stuff.	**Masking stopped her from knowing her true self, leading to embarrassment about herself due to others' lack of acceptance and misunderstanding social norms** **Lily experiences heightened empathy and attunement, viewing her intense emotions as a positive aspect that makes her feel unique.**

Important to have someone nice to talk to when you are stressed. Sometimes it's too hard to alert people so someone else like your mum or a friend can do it for you. it's good to have friends who are similar so they understand your experiences. She has a black autistic friend.	And it just makes me feel like, I don't know, I'm true to like my feelings quite a bit. Tiffany: Yeah. Lily: Like when it's not - when it doesn't come to masking, just generally I feel, I dunno- I feel special in a way, like everybody's special, but it just makes me feel like. I dunno - like, yeah, yeah. Tiffany: Yeah, I know what you mean. I do know what you mean, cause it's like you feel more. So that kind of gives you more clues about things. Lily: Yeah, yeah. Exactly, yeah, like. Yeah. Tiffany: Yeah, okay. The last question I have is what advice would you give to other Autistic Black girls who may be masking their autism in school. Lily: Erm. I think it's definitely really important to have somebody to talk to - like somebody obviously nice that you can like tell stuff to like when you're feeling stressed, like whether it be a friend or your parent because I feel like sometimes it's too hard to like alert people. Tiffany: Yeah. Lily: So you need somebody to alert like people for you. So like, you know, if you - if you just like shut down in certain situations you need your mum to maybe, you know, tell somebody or your friend to tell your other friends like, okay, I don't think she's feeling too well. Tiffany: Yeah. Yeah.	**Lily appreciated having someone trusted to speak to when she was stressed and to advocate for her when she had shut down from overwhelm.** **People who are similar, have similar experiences so are understanding. It is good to be around people similar.**

	Lily: Erm and I think. Probably like it's quite nice. Okay, as I said, I have a friend and he's like Black and he has autism and it's just good to have kind of have that like understanding of people similar. That have similar experiences. So yeah, just. All of that, all of that support is good to understand yourself a bit more. That way. Yeah, that's what I say. Tiffany: That's good. So that's all the questions that I had. But is there anything else that you think I should know? Anything that maybe I've missed? Lily: I'm not too sure, I don't think so.	

Appendix O

Participant Debrief

Debrief:

The lived experience of 'camouflaging' Black Autistic adolescent girls in UK education.

Thank you for taking part in this research study. I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me, and I recognise that this may have been a difficult thing to do, so thank you.

The purpose of this research was to hear the perspectives of black autistic adolescent girls who camouflage (hide) their autistic traits. There is limited research on camouflaging autism in young people, and I have found no research asking for the experiences of Black Autistic girls.

I am interested in how being a camouflaging Black Autistic female is experienced in educational settings and how those different identities (race, disability, gender) might intersect and shape that experience. For this reason, I will analyse your interview, attempting to understand how you view your experience. I will then take your views and attempt to understand how race, disability and/or gender may have influenced your experience.

I will share my findings by writing a thesis, which is a document I submit to gain my doctorate qualification. The thesis will detail the research, its purpose and aims and what I found. I will share my findings at professional conferences, and I hope to have the research published so it can be shared widely among professionals. My hope is that professionals, such as Educational Psychologists who work with young people in schools, will gain an understanding of the experiences of camouflaging Autistic Black adolescent females. With these experiences, I would like to make recommendations for ways of working that can improve experiences for young people like you.

You can still withdraw from the study up to 3 weeks after today. After this, I will begin anonymizing and transcribing your interview.

If there is anything we have spoken about today that causes any upset or uncomfortable feelings, I can spend some time speaking about this with you today. If you would like to contact me after the interview to discuss this, you can email me at tnelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk I would also encourage you to speak to a friend, family, or supportive adult.

I have listed below some organisations that you can contact anonymously:

- Samaritans provide confidential emotional support at any time by calling 116 123 or emailing jo@samaritans.org
- Shout 85258, a free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope.
- The National Autistic Society website has lots of information and advice about autism.
- The Autistic Girls Network website has information about autism and links to many resources.