# MASKING AND UNMASKING

## DRAMATHERAPY'S POTENTIAL FOR AFFIRMING NEURODIVERGENT IDENTITY



*from a literature review by Thalia Chappell in fulfilment of MSc Dramatherapy at Queen Margaret University, 2025.*

**Many neurodivergent individuals engage in "masking" behaviour, especially women and girls. When a client 'masks', it may complicate the therapeutic relationship and case conceptualisation whilst the therapy builds safety and trust. In dramatherapy, where fantasy and pretend are used during therapeutic engagement, this may not be the case. The use of dramatic mask has potential dramatherapeutic applications for the process of "unmasking" for autistic clients.**

**Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent individuals, particularly autistic women[1]**, may hold a carefully managed version of the self. This is **the "mask"**, which is **curated, and performed instinctively yet deliberately[2]**, **designed to elicit acceptance in neurotypical spaces** and **involves disavowal of certain emotional states, bodily urges, and anxieties[3]**. **Masking is tiring**: it can be involuntary and result in feelings of alienation from the "true self". The mask is **a specific role which is felt to be demanded** of the self-analysing autistic/nd individual, **by settings which impose expectations of neurotypicality**. Social camouflaging behaviour still occurs outside of social settings, suggesting that it is deeply conditioned. In masking, **the autistic performance is disallowed[3].** However, dynamism in role performance is not inherently problematic, even when held roles are conflicting or contradictory[4]. **Dramatic masks are used to reveal rather than conceal**, as is the dramatic role in dramatherapy[5]. Through the use of dramatic projection, disowned parts of the self can be brought to life and safely explored[6].

**References**

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## Existing research

A **previously suggested function of dramatherapy for autistic girls may be to enable them to "practice how to behave", "rehearsing and replaying social skills until they are integrated into behaviour", further developing the mask[1]** and, potentially, relegating the unmasked self to the shadow[6]. While there is a place in dramatherapy for social skills development, **"the purpose of dramatherapy structures and processes is to enable [clients] to feel confident to let go of their disguises"[5].**

**Dramatherapeutic mask work that facilitates communication between a "private mask" and "public mask" has been explored, but not with an autistic client group[7]**. Maria Hodermarska reflects on her son's "performance of autism": his internal role repertoire and how he brings this into external performance through **the use of dramatherapy structures to reflect on, externalise, and expand his internal experience of autistic self[8]**.



## Case study proposal and associated risks

Approaching **the unmasked self as the Jungian shadow[6]** is a clear structure in which dramatherapy could facilitate unmasking. **Work with dramatic mask as a transitional object** has intuitive utility for this purpose, **providing aesthetic distance[5].** Risks: Mask-work can be highly evocative and **challenging for the dramatherapist to contain**. **Mask-work should be approached gradually** and **de-roling is likely to be more challenging** than in other role work[7]. A 1:1 alliance is therefore suggested.

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