expected to fit in. Nevertheless, "camouflaging is not necessarily a beneficial behaviour, and should not be regularly expected or encouraged for individuals with ASC" (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2521), rendering training programs questionable. Representations of autism in the media likely set out to educate the public on autism but have involuntarily created and reinforced stereotypical expectations on what it means to be autistic (and equally, to appear so). Additionally, it can be argued that they have also increased the demand for autistic individuals to fit in, have jobs, friends, and relationships, and contribute to society. The latter may even be vindicated by extraordinary abilities that should be used for the greater good.

There is a plethora of instances in the novels where characters consciously try to mask or camouflage their deviance. I have previously discussed different forms of deviant behaviour and placed them on a gamut. Most notably, I distinguished between visible and invisible deviance, both of which may result in stigmatisation. However, 'invisible' deviance can be more easily camouflaged by avoiding social interactions. Visible deviance, such as being wheelchair-bound, will often lead to immediate stigmatisation and is more difficult to conceal. For autistic individuals, visible deviance may be reduced by adapting clothing styles, haircuts, or body language. It also includes losing 'autistic' body language such as hand flapping. However, since autists usually struggle with social interactions, their difficulties lie with camouflaging their 'invisible' deviance which is significantly harder to accomplish.

Masking and Camouflaging in Autism Portrayals

Masking and camouflaging techniques vary from individual to individual, and they are equally diversely portrayed in the novels. I have thus chosen but a selection of instances to demonstrate some ways in which these techniques are applied in fiction. In *The State of Grace*, Grace has chosen to hide her autism diagnosis. However, this leads to her having anxiety over 'being found out'. She puts it as follows:

> Being a human is a complicated game – like seeing a ghost in the mirror and trying to echo everything they do. Or like walking in step, but with someone trying to trip you up – and you're juggling at the same time, with people pelting more and more balls at you. Then, just when you get the hang of it, someone starts flashing a torch in your eyes and then yelling in your ear.
> I'll be mid conversation and listening and responding in all the right places, then someone will say something on the other side of the room – a snatch of something that my brain will pick up. I'll lose the thread for a second, and when I tune back in I've lost my way. And then the other person might – for a split second – look at me oddly or scratch their nose and I'll start thinking, No, Grace, you've lost it, and by then I've fallen even further behind, and I remember that my face has probably stopped making the appropriate shapes (interest, listening, concerned, thoughtful – I have a full repertoire, as long as I don't get distracted) and then I panic. (*State of Grace* 1)

Grace describes her struggle to keep up with the conversation as 'a complicated game'. This is a conscious form of constant camouflaging, which would have been successful if the conversation had ended earlier. However, in this generalised example, Grace crosses the threshold of her concentration which sends her spinning into a loop of over-thinking and anxiety from which she cannot recover ('I panic'). Social interactions are not only a source of joy or contentment for many people (depending on the interaction of course) but also the glue of a community. Thus, fear of social interaction will not only lead to constant stress but avoiding social interaction will also result in loneliness. The unwillingness to participate in social interactions – for whatever reason -, is the equivalent of surrender in the negotiation of deviance. Grace wants to be or at least appear normal, otherwise she would not even try to 'play the game'. Yet, she participates with a huge disadvantage ('someone trying to trip you up') which is intensified by her own anxiety over being perceived as deviant, being stigmatised, and ultimately ending up alone.

Her 'repertoire' of faces is a straightforward example of masking; Grace does not see the point in making these faces, since they do not come naturally to her, but she has learned to mime them to satisfy

others. Caitlin (*Mockingbird*) describes how she was taught emotions with the help of a facial expression chart:

> … I have looked at that chart about a million times to try to figure out which emotion goes with each face. I'm not very good at it. I have to use the chart because when I look at real faces I don't Get It. Mrs. Brook says people have a hard time understanding me because I have Asperger's so I have to try extra hard to understand them and that means working on emotions. (*Mockingbird* 18–19)

When her father praises her for doing a good job at school, she makes "a smiley face with … [her] mouth" (*Mockingbird* 43). The choice of words demonstrates how this is not an intuitive reaction but one she had to learn and now displays for the satisfaction of others. Moreover, the 'smiley' face is a direct reference to the chart, instead of her showing how she is genuinely happy – which she likely is, but would not usually communicate by smiling.

Generally speaking, body language is an important part of communication. In *What to Say Next* Kit observes how David's posture seems unnatural: "David shrugs, up and down, like he's being manipulated by an amateur puppeteer. His body language, I realize now, is as stilted as everything else about him" (181). Here, Kit sees through David's efforts of camouflaging by displaying certain forms of learned body language; his camouflaging is unsuccessful although he might not realise it himself. Her choice of words ('amateur puppeteer') is a direct hint towards David's masking, which encompasses his whole character and demeanour. Yet Kit also realises that she, like everyone else, only ever gets to see his façade.

Sensory overload or hyposensitivity might cause an individual to stim, including hand flapping or spinning in circles. This is, of course, a form of visible deviance since it can already be perceived from afar. Thus, "[r]espondents described attempting to minimise their self-soothing or 'stimming' behaviours, and their responses to sensory overstimulation, in order to make their condition less obvious to others" (Hull, Petrides,

and Allison et al. 2525). However, this comes at the cost of not being able to self-soothe as effectively.

> [David:] My hands flap side to side, and my legs shake up and down. I look like a bird readying for flight I haven't flipped like this since the sixth grade, when Miney filmed me on her phone and explained that if I ever wanted to have any friends, I needed to stop. And to my amazement, next time I caught myself doing it, I was able to quit; I replaced the motion with silent counting, though by then the damage had already been done. (*What to Say Next* 147)

When David finds out that his notebook was stolen and made public online, his reaction is so emotional that he automatically starts stimming. Here, the magnitude of the event – and presumably also the fact that he is at home with his family – overrules his conscious decision not to stim visibly ('I was able to quit'); his bodily reaction is a reflex that can only be suppressed to a certain extent. It is comparable to shaking, an involuntary reaction most people have to emotionally disturbing news.

> [Kit:] I think back to middle school, when we'd have to pick players for dodgeball in gym. David was always chosen last. I imagine him standing there, looking two feet above everyone else's heads, his hands flapping at his sides – something he still does occasionally, though I'm not sure he realizes it … . (*What to Say Next* 248)

Kit recalls how David's stimming was a visible sign of his deviance and how it reinforced his stigmatisation. However, not only is it very likely that David was already aware of his outsider status, but his stimming is an indicator that this situation was stressful for him, thus he was presumably also aware of the 'significance' of being chosen last. Interestingly, her account is slightly different. While David claims he hasn't 'flipped like this since the sixth grade', Kit reports that he still occasionally flaps his hands, presumably an involuntary and unconscious reaction on David's side, i.e. something over which he has no control because he can only reduce the reflex but not switch it off completely.

Conversely, David would quite likely suppress his hand flapping if he knew he was doing it – after all, it is a recurring topic of the novel how he tries to fit in and camouflage or mask his autism.

In the first example, Grace also hints at hidden rules that dominate conversations, such as 'listening and responding in all the right places' or making 'appropriate' faces. The fact that nearly all characters analysed for this study mention rules for social interactions underlines how important they are to them. Not only do autists have to invest time and effort into learning them, but these rules also dominate their realities to the point that a character will point them out explicitly. David has even written these rules down in a notebook:

> 'Oh my God, D. Have I taught you nothing?' she [Miney] says.
> 'You've taught me lots of things. I didn't mention her weight, if that's what you're worried about.'
> 'What are we going to do with you?' she asks, and my stomach clenches. Freshman year, when I would find myself in trouble at school on a biweekly basis, Principal Hoch would pose this question, which is both idiomatic and rhetorical. *What are we going to do with you?* Like I was a group project.
> Just once I'd like the answer to be: *nothing*.
> Just once I'd like the answer to be: *You are just fine as is*.
> Just once I'd like the question not to be asked in the first place. (*What to Say Next* 82)

David anticipates his sister's worries and counteracts them by stating that he did not mention Kit's weight during their conversation. He not only has internalised this rule but is able to reflect on it afterwards, albeit not capable of analysing for himself what went wrong. Secondly, although David is trying to fit in, he is labelled as deviant by the headmaster, or in this case, problematic. Here, David has internalised the stigma and he is willing to work towards being 'more normal'; however, he still dreams of being accepted the way he is. Metaphorically speaking, the 'group project' could refer to society, i.e. a general tendency towards making autists fit in.

Finally, masking and camouflaging touches upon the communication barrier between autists and neurotypicals, or rather their different forms of communicating. Learning to read and display facial expressions is not simply linked to appearance but can be compared to learning a new language. Similarly, neurotypicals are unable to 'translate' some autistic behaviours, such as stimming. Researchers have also suggested that 'behavioural problems' such as hitting or screaming may need to be reframed as communication attempts or forms, leading scientists to believe that many behavioural symptoms of autism actually serve a function (Kern Koegel 387). The communication barrier also gave rise to the double empathy problem, which was first described by Damian Milton in 2012 (Milton et al. 1901). Essentially, it opposes the idea that a lack of understanding can be solely attributed to the autistic participant, instead suggesting that the problem

> is based in the social interaction between two differently disposed social actors, the disjuncture being more severe for the non-autistic disposition as it is experienced as unusual, while for the 'autistic person' it is a common experience. (Milton 884)

In other words, neurotypical persons are so used to being understood that they do not assume the fault to lie with them. Contrary to this binary of normalcy and deviance, Milton's theory states that both participants are willing to display empathy (Milton 884), yet autists are assumed to have none according to supporters of the conservative movement.

> One could say that many autistic people have indeed gained a greater level of insight into non-AS society, and more than vice versa, perhaps due to the need to survive and potentially thrive in a non-AS culture. Conversely, the non-AS person has no pertinent personal requirement to understand the mind of the 'autistic person' unless closely related socially in some way. (Milton 886)

However, even those 'closely related' may have their own agendas and narratives, thus one cannot expect the debate around labels to end anytime soon.

Additionally, although autists can suppress some of their behaviours and needs for the benefit of 'fitting in' and appearing normal, they might require a different outlet. For example, David mentions how he became conscious of his hand-flapping and was able to stop it for the most part. However, the flapping served a specific function and let him cope with his emotions. Thus, whenever he is overwhelmed, he now consciously applies methods such as counting pi. Chapter 19 demonstrates how shaken up David is when his notebook gets stolen, as it consists of him repeatedly counting to the 1095th decimal. Yet, it also becomes obvious how counting is not a full replacement for stimming, presumably because it is not physical in nature.

> Pi doesn't work. Neither does the periodic table. I try simple counting, and I make it all the way to three hundred thousand, but I cannot let any of it go. My notebook is in the public domain. Kit must have read the whole thing by now. … Which means that it's all over: us sitting together at lunch, the Accident Project, me being in any zone. (*What to Say Next* 167)

David mentions several of his techniques to calm himself. Interestingly, the initial shock was great enough for his old habits to resurface, thus he could not suppress the hand-flapping. This hints toward involuntary physical reactions that are at least partly subconscious and need actively to be repressed. Such reflexes could potentially be likened to people flinching as an instinctive reaction to pain or fear; behaviours that are very difficult to suppress.

I assume that David uses these techniques successfully on a regular basis. The fact that they do not work, however, shows how the anticipated consequences are too terrible to be counteracted by counting or repetition. On a more abstract level, this instance hints towards the layer of camouflaging he has created to hide his deviance. David also seems mostly worried about things returning to what they were before; pre-

sumably because he saw a way out of his deviance and an opportunity to make friends, although Kit holds a special part in his heart. It shows how strongly he desires to be part of the community and engage in meaningful relationships, to the point where he is willing to put in all the effort to learn the rules and hide his identity.

Nearly all characters have self-soothing techniques such as counting, with some of them also mentioning hand flapping.

Examples of stimming in the novels

- Ted (*London Eye Mystery*) either listens to shipping forecasts or makes them up in his own head to calm himself down (cf. 40). When Salim disappears, however, his emotional reaction is so strong that he opts for movement: 'I jumped onto my bed, down next to the lilo where Salim had slept the night before, and banged my fist against the wall, then jumped up on the bed again and down again, wall again … . I hadn't done the routine in years. I'd forgotten how good it felt.' (70)
- Trueman (*Trueman Bradley*) usually does calculations in his head to calm himself, but when he is caught out or panics he has a tendency to fall to the floor: 'I could feel my face burning with embarrassment. I remembered my childhood habit of falling to the floor when I got nervous or over-excited, but I hadn't done this for a long time. Usually, I could resist the urge to fall and would try my best to act as if nothing was wrong. Although my breath became rapid and I'd start to feel dizzy, I was always able to maintain my dignity.' (8–9) (cf. 26, 210, 220…)
- Caitlin (*Mockingbird*) uses counting and a technique she calls 'stuffed-animaling' where she squints her eyes so that everything becomes blurry; she also finds comfort in her stuffed animals: 'If you take the monkey bars and the people and blur them together they get soft and fluffy and kind just like a stuffed animal. And you can forget about where you are and pretend you're somewhere else like under your bed with your stuffed animals.' (36)
- For Grace (*State of Grace*) it is soothing to go to the stables, listening to music, or taking a bath, but she also mentions watching 'Walking

> with Dinosaurs': 'I just want to sit here all evening, because then my brain might just stop whirring around. It's like a million shooting stars flying out in different directions and I can't make them stop and then I can't sleep. The dinosaurs help. The beanie hat I've got on helps too. It sort of stops the thoughts from shooting around.' (22)

At times, autists might find sensory input soothing, such as listening to music, being hugged, wearing certain clothes, or being wrapped in blankets, but also swinging or spinning in circles. Such familiar sensations can drown out other sensory input, thus decreasing it to an acceptable level.

Ironically, masking and camouflaging are both helpful for reducing stigmatisation and consequent harassment, as well as harmful to the individual's mental health due to identity loss, unsuccessful camouflaging, and the constant anxiety over being found out. Technically, the activist movement is seeking to reduce the pressure to 'fit in' by normalising autism as a different form of cognitive function, however, at present we are still a long way from this. On the other hand, being 'sufficiently' autistic and displaying the right symptoms is critical for getting the help and support an individual needs[10]. Due to increased (stereotypical) awareness of autism by the public, this can also result in unwanted help, overestimation, or further stigmatisation.

By merging different diagnoses (labels) under the label of Autism Spectrum Disorder, the medical discourse contributed to the continued fight over labels, as well as the creation of new subdifferentiations, including high- and low-functioning, to indicate levels of abilities, need for support, but also stigmata. The labels used within the autism discourse are thus also closely linked to ideas of normality, deviance, ableism, and acceptance. Additionally, at least two opposing understandings of autism exist, which might both be misleading in that they

10 German researcher Hans Wocken coined the term 'Etikettierungs-Ressourcen-Dilemma' ('Labelling-Resources-Dilemma', *own translation*), emphasising how help and resources are attached to labels such as medical diagnoses.

are narratives and thus not objective. As of now, there still exists a communication barrier between autists and neurotypicals, which is at times reinforced by the conservative movement and ideas of 'mind-blindness', lack of 'Theory of Mind', and a rhetoric of sadness. However, within the literary discourse, portrayals tend to focus on a certain set of stereotypes. Thus, these portrayals are neither comprehensive nor necessarily representative. Instead, they might have gained their own momentum by focusing on gifted individuals with specific communication patterns – honest, literal, and lacking comprehension of linguistic conventions.