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## **Employment and Neurodiverse Librarians**

**By Amelia Anderson, Assistant Professor, Old Dominion University**

We often talk about best practices in hiring librarians, as well as supporting their professional growth. However, there are a number of neurodiverse librarians and library employees whose needs are going unmet throughout both processes. The term neurodiversity is a broad term which refers to differences in individuals' neurological functioning, and can be used as an umbrella term to describe variations such as ADHD, anxiety, depression, and autism spectrum disorder, among many others. In this post, I will explore autism as a form of neurodiversity in the library and information science (LIS) field, pointing out the need for providing more appropriate supports for workforce development for our peers on the autism spectrum.

### **A Note on Approaches Used**

To preface this discussion, a few major points must be addressed. First, this is written using person first language, as is commonly used in the literature ("person with autism" instead of "autistic"). However, it is noted that this trend is shifting, and many individuals prefer to be described as autistic, not as "having autism." This is a longer conversation than this post allows for, but it should be noted that the approach used here is not without much thought and consideration, and that as every person has different preferences language usage should always err on the side of how a person describes him or herself. Next, this is written from the point of view of a neurotypical – that is, I am not on the autism spectrum myself. However, I believe strongly that voices of individuals with autism should be included in these conversations; quotes throughout are from autism self-advocates in the LIS field and my hope is that this post can serve as a conversation starter, inspiring more work in this area and more contributions in collaboration with and from self-advocates themselves.

### **Autism in the Library**

As I have studied the intersection of autism and librarianship for more than five years, I can say that it certainly appears that librarians are becoming more and more aware of providing services for their patrons with autism. A Google search alert that I have set up for keywords related to autism and libraries sends me a notification more often these days, and it is rare to attend a conference in which at least one session does not have "autism" in the title or description. However, these are largely articles and sessions about children and their library experiences. We talk about sensory storytimes and assistive technologies and fidget toys – all of which is important and adds to the conversations librarians need to be having in order to best serve their communities. And autism is in your communities, whether you realize it or not. Recent prevalence estimates have autism rates at 1 in every 59 individuals in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).

Children with autism become adults with autism and the prevalence remains the same. Therefore, it only makes sense that we begin having as many conversations in the field about adults on the spectrum and their library experience as we do about children. However, there is a distinct lack of information about adults on the autism spectrum within the library field, and a lack of literature about neurodiversity in the library profession. As one public librarian on the autism spectrum says, "In the library world, conversations about autism are often predictable. They focus on autistic children or adults as users, and the challenges that they may present. Much less common, it seems, are discussions of the positive contributions that autistic people can make to a library, as library users but also as front-line librarians" (Spectrum, 2017, para. 1)

## **Autism in the Profession**

Circumstantial evidence suggests that librarianship is an appealing profession for many adults on the spectrum. This is of course a broad generalization, and is not meant to signify that librarianship is right for every person with autism. Just like anyone else, every person with autism is different and has individual interests and skills. Again, though, through personal experiences of researching and presenting about the intersections of autism and libraries I have had conversations with many of my peers who are both librarians and on the autism spectrum. I've been invited into a Facebook group for librarians on the spectrum "and their allies" (With these interactions, I know that it is a good fit for some, and might be made even better with fewer barriers to entry and more workplace supports.

Despite knowing through personal networks that there is a strong cohort of librarians on the autism spectrum, there is very little literature, research based or otherwise, to share their stories. In 2013, librarian and autism self-advocate Emily Lawrence stated: "there is virtually nothing in the LIS literature discussing Autistic librarians or information professionals" (p. 103). Since that time, the contributions here are slowly growing and, though not large in quantity, there are multiple published accounts of individuals on the autism spectrum and their experiences working in librarianship (Eng, 2017; Lawrence, 2013; Spectrum, 2017; Wyss, 2014; Zupon, 2013). Within these few published works, librarians on the spectrum largely describe a love of the profession and potential for a fulfilling career. As Charlie Remy describes: "Being a librarian lets me surround myself with information and satisfies my intellectual curiosity" (Eng, 2017, para. 10). And a children's public librarian says: "I love that we as a society still value leisure reading enough to keep public libraries open, and stocked with robust children's collections. For me, it is worth it to rise to the challenge; I feel a great deal of positive energy from the work that I do" (Spectrum, 2017, para. 4).

Librarian self-advocates are also making presentations at national events. A panel at the 2018 Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) highlighted the experiences of academic librarians on the spectrum, and a panel presentation at the Targeting Autism Forum (2018) invited librarians on the spectrum to share their stories and experiences, highlighting both some of the benefits and some of the barriers to entry and to continued success in the profession (Anderson, Gibson, Wyss, Remy, & Hanson-Baldauf, 2018; Bonanno, Remy, Burks-Abbot, Diorio, & Miller, 2018).

Though some librarians on the spectrum describe successes in these publications and presentations, underemployment and barriers to entry remain a recurring theme. Despite knowledge and education, many librarians with autism describe setbacks in successfully gaining entrance into the workforce. Or, are woefully underemployed, unable to use their skills and instead relegated to repetitive tasks such as shelving books. As librarian Philip Zupon describes as he graduated with his MLIS, "(s)o here I am today pleased with what I have accomplished so far but also wondering if there is something that I could have or should have done differently that would have enabled me to become the full-time professional librarian that I envisioned I would be by now.... I could blame everything on my Asperger's Syndrome as I have done in the past. Maybe I didn't ask enough questions or talk to more librarians ahead of time and consequently, I missed out on some social cues unique to the library profession that I should have picked up a long time ago that held the keys or secret code needed to open the right door that all individuals who wish to have a successful career as a librarian must enter" (Part III, 2013, para. 8).

## **Next Steps**

Our profession needs to do better. A core value of librarianship, as detailed by the American Library Association, is diversity: "We value our nation's diversity and strive to reflect that diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve" (American Library Association, 2004, para. 6). As a profession that prides ourselves on serving our diverse communities shouldn't this also reflect in the workforce we employ?

But stories are beginning to be shared, and to be heard. Drawing attention to this area is only the first step. Personally, I plan to work with librarian self-advocates to gain a better understanding of their experiences with both hiring and workplace practices, helping to collect and present their stories through qualitative studies. My hope is that these conversations are just the beginning of a comprehensive shift toward inclusivity in the profession, and that neurodiverse candidates and employees will finally get an equal opportunity for gaining entrance into and contributing to the LIS field.

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**About the author:** Dr. Amelia Anderson is currently an assistant professor of library science in the Darden College of Education and Professional Studies at Old Dominion University. She was a research assistant for Project PALS (Panhandle Autism Library Services) and project coordinator for Project A+, both funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and implemented through Florida State University's College of Communication and Information. These experiences shaped her research and interest in the intersection of neurodiversity and library experiences, particularly for young adults and adults. She previously worked as a public librarian.