

Autistic Employees in Canadian Academic Libraries Barriers, Opportunities, and Ways Forward

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Article abstract

There is little research on the employment of autistic librarians and library support staff, and yet there are many ways in which libraries are a good fit for autistic individuals. As the prevalence of autism grows, academic libraries represent a viable option for meaningful and inclusive employment for autistic employees, provided library managers and administrators create environments that value diversity and inclusion. The main purpose of this study was to obtain information from autistic staff currently or recently employed in academic libraries in Canada about the current difficulties and barriers they experience in the workplace, the opportunities that working in a library gives to autistic employees, and potential accommodations they feel would allow them to excel and thrive in their workplaces. A questionnaire was developed to collect the data, designed to respond to our research questions. Through qualitative analysis we identified the following themes in the survey results: library as unsafe space, social difficulties in the workplace, difficulties requesting accommodations, and a need for improved understanding of autism.





Autistic Employees in Canadian Academic Libraries: Barriers, Opportunities, and Ways Forward

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ABSTRACT

There is little research on the employment of autistic librarians and library support staff, and yet there are many ways in which libraries are a good fit for autistic individuals. As the prevalence of autism grows, academic libraries represent a viable option for meaningful and inclusive employment for autistic employees, provided library managers and administrators create environments that value diversity and inclusion. The main purpose of this study was to obtain information from autistic staff currently or recently employed in academic libraries in Canada about the current difficulties and barriers they experience in the workplace, the opportunities that working in a library gives to autistic employees, and potential accommodations they feel would allow them to excel and thrive in their workplaces. A questionnaire was developed to collect the data, designed to respond to our research questions. Through qualitative analysis we identified the following themes in the survey results: library as unsafe space, social difficulties in the workplace, difficulties requesting accommodations, and a need for improved understanding of autism.

Keywords: *ableism · accommodation · autism · diagnostic disclosure · employment*

RÉSUMÉ

Il y a peu de recherches sur l'emploi des bibliothécaires et du personnel de soutien autistes dans les bibliothèques, et pourtant il existe de nombreuses manières dont les bibliothèques conviennent bien aux personnes autistes. À mesure que la prévalence de l'autisme augmente, les bibliothèques universitaires représentent une option viable pour un emploi significatif et inclusif pour les employé.e.s autistes, à condition que les gestionnaires et les administratrices.teurs des bibliothèques créent des environnements qui valorisent la diversité et l'inclusion. L'objectif principal de cette recherche était d'obtenir de l'information auprès du personnel autiste actuellement ou récemment employé.e dans les bibliothèques universitaires au Canada sur les difficultés et les obstacles actuels

qu'ils rencontrent en milieu de travail, les opportunités que le travail en bibliothèque offre aux employé.e.s autistes et les aménagements potentiels qui, selon elleux, leur permettraient d'exceller et de s'épanouir dans leurs milieux de travail. Un questionnaire a été développé pour collecter les données, conçu pour répondre à nos questions de recherche. Grâce à une analyse qualitative, nous avons identifié les thèmes suivants dans les résultats de l'enquête : la bibliothèque comme espace non sécuritaire, les difficultés sociales en milieu de travail, les difficultés à demander des aménagements et le besoin d'une meilleure compréhension de l'autisme.

Mots-clés : *accommodement · autisme · capacitisme · divulgation diagnostique · emploi*

RESearch into how employers can best support autistic employees has grown in recent years, and we are now able to define more clearly best practices and environments that allow neurodiverse employees to thrive. Library work environments, including academic libraries, have not been studied in terms of success in supporting autistic employees. Library literature, being services orientated, also focuses primarily on assisting autistic users and not the lived experience of autistic workers (Moeller 2019). This article reports on a small, preliminary survey of autistic librarians and library support staff in the Canadian academic community. The main objective of this study is to obtain information from autistic people currently or recently employed in Canadian academic libraries about the benefits and difficulties they face in this work setting. The results of this study can then be used to inform library managers and administrators as they strive to improve recruitment, hiring, and management practices. Additional more expansive surveys are necessary to garner more conclusive and significant findings. This paper is grounded in social model of disability theory, whereby we examine the social disadvantages and limitations that are applied to those who do not meet a societal view of ableness (Oliver 2009) and to focus less on the ability levels of the individual and more on the characteristics that make up a “disabling world” (Oliver 2009, 8).

Literature Review

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by difficulties with communication and social interactions which can inhibit people with ASD from “fitting in” within traditional working environments. It is estimated that one of every 50 Canadian children (ages 1-17 years) are on the autism spectrum (Public Health Agency of Canada 2022). As Giles-Smith and Popowich noted, as these children become adults, they face significant challenges entering the workforce and maintaining meaningful employment (Giles-Smith and Popowich 2020). Canadian libraries need to support autistic employees and ensure that any barriers to their integration into the libraries work environment are identified and addressed (Parr and Hunter 2014). In addition, research shows that perceptions of autistic people

depends more on the characteristics of the perceiver, whether they have experience with autism and what their level of ASD knowledge is (Morrison et al. 2019). As a result, Canadian library administrators need to work with all employees to increase understanding of ASD to improve outcomes for autistic employees. As some have identified, hiring committees tend to choose candidates with similar qualities to ourselves, who “fit in” with our work culture in a process of reproduction (Grummell, Devine, and Lynch 2009). The 2019 *Accessible Canada Act* encourages organizations to demonstrate that they have removed barriers to accessibility, including attitudinal and employment barriers in order to receive funding from the Canadian government (Accessible Canada Act 2019). To this end, as a profession, we need to collect data on our progress and evaluate how well autistic employees are supported and accommodated in Canadian academic libraries.

The history of higher education in North America is rooted in ableist perspectives and practices (Moeller 2019). As A. Morrison argues, universities display intrinsically ableist values (Morrison 2019). In recent years, the model of academic accommodation versus disability activism has led to the rethinking of this ableist characteristic of higher education and corporate culture, including academic culture. It has shifted to be more critically aware of justice and equity in the workplace. Waisman-Nitzan, Gal, and Schreuer describe a new “justice climate” that pervades work environments and that plays a significant role in “the integration of diverse populations in the workplace” (2019, 483). Within this setting, employers often find themselves divided between a corporate voice, focusing on dividends and outputs, and a social-personal voice seeking to ensure all employees are valued and able to contribute (Waisman-Nitzan, Gal, and Schreuer 2019). In fact, many of the accommodations discussed by employers in Waisman-Nitzan et al.’s study of employer’s attitudes towards accommodations for autistic employees should really be offered to all employees. They are cost-effective, sustainable, and beneficial arrangements that help create the best possible work outcomes (2019). In their recent survey of employees, Waisman-Nitzan, Gal, and Schreuer found that there are consistent areas of employment where autistic employees require accommodation, specifically “job performance communication, attitudes and interpersonal communication, daily workplace routines, and the physical and sensory environment” (2021, 1). Their participants also stated that an atmosphere of “closeness, trust, and togetherness” was essential for the success of inclusivity in the workplace (Waisman-Nitzan, Gal, and Schreuer 2021, 7).

Pionke’s work on how library employees perceive disability notes that findings of ableism are contrary to the traditionally held beliefs that are held as core to libraries and librarianship (Pionke 2019, 2020). Oud’s 2018 study showed 8% of librarians with invisible disabilities faced discrimination and 13.5% experienced harassment in the

workplace. Sixteen percent of disabled librarians experienced microaggressions such as minimizing statements and being uncomfortable around the disabled person (Oud 2018).

The digitized work environment and possibilities for remote work may also prove helpful in providing the accommodation and flexibility to support those with ASD. Tomczak discusses the possibility of creating “smart home” and “smart office” environments where all employees could manage the light, noise, smell, temperature of their environments in order to create a physical workspace that suits their specific needs (Tomczak 2021). However, remote working is not always favourable to autistic employees, with a recent study showing that autistic employees who moved to remote work showed deterioration in mental health and in job satisfaction, some of the causes given by respondents were the lack of routine from physically going to work and decreased personalized work supports (Goldfarb, Gal, and Golan 2021).

Despite growing emphasis in academia on diversity and inclusion, employees with autism often fear that seeking an accommodation will be viewed negatively by their peers, and so ASD employees often revert to what is known as “masking” to limit discrimination and stigma in the workplace (Romualdez, Walker, and Remington, 2021). Masking or camouflaging is a coping strategy for social situations and can include hiding certain ASD behaviours, using techniques to appear “socially competent” and preventing others from seeing their social difficulties which may lead others to think they function well though they still experience difficulties and can impact a person’s mental health (Hull et al. 2017). Frequently reported consequences of camouflaging are exhaustion, loss of identity and mental health difficulties and this technique of camouflaging likely exists on a continuum across this population (Hull et al. 2020). Indeed, the academic work environment demands such conformity to social norms from all diverse employees, as employees are expected to “create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (Hochschild 1983, 7) because “the manner in which we publicly express our emotions is linked to whether or not we are behaving authentically” (Xu 2012, 87). Conforming to the social rules of an environment like academic faculty (to which many academic libraries ascribe), requires them to demonstrate collegial behaviours, among others (Xu 2012). In a faculty environment, employees often need to “follow or comply with ‘suggestions’ offered by individuals in positions of authority, regardless of whether these propositions were in their best interest” (Xu 2012, 91).

Research in this area underscores the importance of working with employers and colleagues to reduce the stigma toward autism, as it is the bias of the recipient of autism disclosure that leads to discrimination (Romualdez, Walker, and Remington 2021). The reaction of the recipient of disclosure determines how a person with

autism views disclosure (Romualdez, Walker, and Remington 2021). Indeed, a greater knowledge of autism on the part of the colleague or employer is associated with an increased willingness to interact with ASD individuals while the age of the perceiver has an impact as well, with older adults rating autistic adults as more awkward, with a diagnosis or official label of autistic reducing older adults' willingness to interact with those with a diagnosis of ASD (Morrison et al. 2019). A 2018 study of Canadian librarians with disabilities and their experiences in the workplace underscored the issue of employer perceptions of disabilities with managers rating their workplace climate significantly higher in terms of diversity and accessibility than those working in Canadian libraries (Oud 2018). In fact, despite 61% of respondents indicating they "sometimes, often or always" experienced microaggressions in the workplace due to their disability, managers and supervisors in the study had higher confidence in the accessibility and inclusion of their institutions, highlighting the lack of awareness of those in management positions as to the true experiences of those working with disabilities in their workplaces (Oud 2018).

Methods

This survey was conducted using Microsoft Forms, a tool selected due to its ease of use, privacy, and data storage capabilities. The survey consisted of 34 questions which were a mix of multiple-choice pre-set answers and long-form open-ended questions. Participants had the right to skip questions, as no question was mandatory, and to withdraw from the survey at any time prior to completion. Survey questions asked about experiences of those with ASD while working in Canadian libraries, with particular emphasis on potential barriers, including accommodations. The University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board reviewed and approved the research plan including the survey instrument, with considerations for data storage and privacy plans. The finalized survey was sent to 15 library associations representing all provinces and territories and both academic and public library settings. The survey was open for one month from March 17th to April 17th of 2022 and survey data was analysed using descriptive data analysis using a mixed methods approach. Both researchers coded and analysed the results separately and then reviewed for commonalities, analysis of the data was grounded in the social model of disability (Oliver 2009).

Participants

Nineteen participants initiated the survey; 13 completed. Three participants had been diagnosed with ASD by a health care professional and 10 identified as a person with ASD but with no official diagnosis. Most participants (81%) were currently employed

in a Canadian academic library, and of those employed in academic libraries a majority (70%) were new to the profession, having worked for 5 years or less. Overwhelmingly, most respondents had less than 15 years of experience working in academic libraries (92%). In terms of age demographics, most respondents were from the 30-39 years age bracket (69%) followed by the 50-59 bracket (23%) and the majority identified as female (62%), with representation for male, non-conforming and agender groups. Half of the participants (53%) had professional Master's degrees, suggesting that half were professional academic librarians, with 2 participants holding doctoral degrees. 23% had either a high school diploma or a college diploma. 69% were from the librarian or archivist categories, while 30% were either library technicians or support staff.

Results

The survey questions were comprised of closed and open-ended questions, yielding some quantitative results and other more thematic results. Ten respondents (76%) had not discussed their ASD with their employer, the reasons for which we will document further in the thematic breakdown of the answers to open ended questions below. Seven respondents (53%) indicated they had some interaction with clients (up to 50% of the workday), while four (31%) had significant interaction (over 50% of the workday), showing that most worked with the public on a regular basis, and were not in "behind the scenes" positions. Forty-six percent of respondents (6) said ASD was a challenge in their work, while many (39%) were unsure if ASD was an advantage or disadvantage. Only 15% (2) thought ASD offered advantages in their work. Although 8 (61%) of respondents answered in the affirmative to the question, "Are you aware/were you aware of the process for requesting a workplace accommodation at your place of employment?", comments from the open-ended questions suggest that these processes are exceedingly difficult and time consuming. The majority of respondents (69%) did not request an accommodation, citing fear of negative consequences, wanting to manage any issues on their own and lack of awareness of the accommodation process as reasons for not requesting an accommodation; only one respondent stated that they did not require an accommodation as the reason for not requesting. Of the four people who requested an accommodation, only one person reported having success with the process. Partial accommodation and somewhat helpful results were reported for two of the four respondents who requested an accommodation. Three of these people formally requested accommodations. Two of those had their requests partially granted and one was refused. The person who informally requested accommodations had it granted and felt positive about the ease of the request.

Seven people pointed to accommodations that would help them perform their work better. The most requested or sought after accommodations included the following: work from home (6), modifications to physical surroundings to reduce overstimulation or sensory issues (lighting, ear buds, room for movement) (5), control over own schedule/flexibility (when tasks are done and time between tasks) (3), and the ability to communicate/contribute in a way that best suited them (3). Some noted the advantageous modifications put in place during the Covid-19 pandemic were taken away again when health restrictions were removed. At home, issues such as lighting, noise, distractions, and in-person meetings were either negligible or under the employee's control.

Themes from the Qualitative Survey Responses

The last six questions of the survey were open ended questions that aimed to give survey participants a chance to frame, in their own words, the nuances of working as an autistic person in an academic library. Four main themes emerged.

1. Library as Unsafe Space:

The most prominent theme in our survey responses was library as an unsafe space. We defined this theme as feelings or experiences that led a person to feel uncomfortable, singled out, or targeted in the workplace. This included workplace harassment and bullying where overt and covert behaviours directed at a person caused emotional, financial, social, or physical harm. Almost all respondents (11) indicated they fell into this category. While some people did have positive experiences with their colleagues and administrators, terms such as “threatening”, “microaggressions”, “bullying”, “left out”, “unsafe”, “passive aggressive”, “marginalized”, “over-scrutinized”, “othered”, “target”, “invalidated”, “dismissed”, “bias”, and “unwelcoming” were pervasive throughout the survey responses.

Library leadership was often noted to have contributed to this feeling of unsafe space. Within survey responses, we detected a distinct distrust of administration, as they were often viewed as simply “ticking boxes” with respect to inclusion in the workplace initiatives. Some participants pointed out that autism was often not included in EDI initiatives at all except as it related to students. Others avoided talking to higher ups about their diagnosis and so could not comment on their support or lack thereof. This implied lack of confidence in administration was summed up by one person thus: “I don’t want to call attention to myself or take a chance on learning that the library is not as inclusive.” Another participant, who did not disclose their diagnosis to administration, stated that, “I’m sure they would be [inclusive/supportive] in theory, but I am not at all confident that things would pan

out in practice.” Only one survey respondent felt their administrator was supportive stating, “She provides me with new opportunities to interact with members of the community as well as various organizations. I think she just thinks of me as me and helps me to grow in my abilities through new experiences.”

Comments about interactions with colleagues were more positive but, unfortunately, this was grossly outweighed by negative experiences. Some colleagues refused to believe an ASD diagnosis, minimized the significance of ASD, were envious of accommodations, reported common autistic behaviours such as stimming to administration, or generally bullied those who talked and acted differently. Many respondents admitted to masking their autism or being selective in who they disclosed it to for fear of these actions and microaggressions.

a. Subtheme: Job Precarity

Job precarity was defined in this study as actual negative consequences or fear of potential negative consequences related to the position itself. Beyond feeling left out and “othered” at work, five survey respondents expressed a fear that their autism would impact their job security or how they perform in their job. As a result, these library employees did not want to call unwanted attention to themselves or their work by revealing their diagnosis. This fear was heightened for those who did not hold permanent or tenure track positions. One person wrote, “if I had tenure . . . I would be far more comfortable being open about my diagnosis.” Fear of losing their employment is a real concern for autistic people who are grossly underemployed, even more so than other disability categories (Hendricks and Wehman 2009; Scott et al. 2015; Hensel 2017; Hayward, McVilly, and Stokes 2018; Nicholas et al. 2018; Scott et al. 2018). As one respondent noted, “I’m not formally diagnosed, and am afraid of being let go ‘for other reasons’ if I divulge or seek a diagnosis and divulge that. This has happened to people I know when they’ve mentioned diagnoses. Suddenly, they’re being over-scrutinized and reasons are found to dismiss them.” Fear of jeopardizing their position encouraged masking and refusal to seek out accommodations.

2. Social Difficulties in the Workplace

Social difficulties in the workplace were defined as experiences and feelings of awkwardness, shyness, uncomfortableness, or uncertainty in interactions with colleagues and administration.

Eight survey respondents mentioned having problems with social interactions at work either in formal meetings or informal settings. This was expected given social difficulties are a defining characteristic of autism. Respondents talked about the expectations and difficulties of socializing at work. One person commented,

“Communication is often a problem as people want to have face-to-face verbal meetings all the time and talk a subject to death,” while another said, “my job calls for frequent interactions with colleagues, other staff, and library users. Neurotypical people have no idea how much of their communication is ‘telepathic.’”

The energy put into social interactions was described as “exhausting” and “frustrating.” One survey respondent noted, “I can easily withdraw from conversations or groups . . . I have to work hard to maintain a social agenda in the workplace.” Survey respondents often stated they needed time to recover from social interactions at work. Six people expressed a desire to work from home at least part time to mitigate the stress and energy involved in meeting social expectations. One person noted the difficulty of returning to campus after the Covid-19 pandemic. Another questioned the expectation that they should even have to be social at work, “Also, not requiring a person to have a good social aspect to their job would be nice. Being conversational with my co-workers should not be something that is discussed in my performance meeting unless a counselor is involved.” To lessen the difficulty of socialization, some participants pointed out they would prefer written communication or online meetings rather than face to face meetings.

a. Subtheme: Masking/Camouflaging

Hull et al. (2017) defines camouflaging (also referred to as masking) as coping strategies used to hide or compensate for autistic characteristics to appear as though they are “socially competent” and functioning well despite their actual difficulties. To fit in at work and live up to a certain expectation of socialization, six respondents admitted to some level of masking or “social camouflaging.” As one of the study participants said, “I have learned my social behaviours from copying others rather than intuitively knowing them.” Efforts to hide autistic characteristics and tendencies ranged from copying co-worker's behaviours, ensuring eye contact, and consciously engaging in informal conversation. They also indicated they adapted the way they worked to meet, as one person put it, “society’s standards of communication.”

This masking required considerable effort and several mentioned negative consequences using words and terms such as “pressure,” and “difficult to navigate.” One person wrote, “it’s exhausting trying to pretend to be like my coworkers day in and day out when I want to work in a different style than them.” More severe consequences of masking among the study group included depression, anxiety, burnout, and suicidal thoughts.

3. Difficulties Requesting Accommodation

Accommodation was defined in this study as changes in rules, practices or policies that make it easier or possible for an individual to participate in the workplace. They are intended to lessen stress on a person and increase their comfort and

productivity. Accommodations vary and may come at a high cost and tailored specifically to an individual or they may be low cost and beneficial for all employees. The accommodations requested among survey respondents included the ability to work from home, modification of physical surroundings to limit sensory difficulties, more control over their time, and the ability to communicate in the way they can best express themselves (i.e. written vs spoken).

Four participants had requested an accommodation either formally or informally. Whether or not they requested an accommodation, participants expressed several difficulties with the process. The first problem was the lack of a clear process. Guidelines or procedures were either difficult to find or simply non-existent at their institution with no one designated to assist or knowledgeable enough to help them navigate the accommodation process, making the process timely and confusing. One person said of the experience, “There was no standard application or procedures from my experience that any manager or HR directed me to after I self-disclosed in my application, during the interview and after I got the position.”

Others expressed frustration with the formality of the process, in particular the requirement of medical documentation or “proof” of their diagnosis to explain the necessity of the requested accommodation. The requirement for medical documentation was prohibitive for one participant who could not afford the cost of an assessment, whereas another person felt the requirement was unnecessary given they knew better than their medical provider what accommodations would be best for them. This frustration was expressed by one respondent who wrote, “When asking for accommodations that are reasonable, they use the union to say that I have to be treated the same as everyone else and I can't have special treatment, despite the fact that I am disabled, and although they say they will accommodate me, they make it extremely difficult to get the accommodations, with me requiring precisely worded letters from doctors detailing every minute detail of my work experience and how to change it.”

Others did not request accommodation as this would mean declaring a disability that they would rather keep private. As one person stated, “My sense is that the process of declaring makes it a big event, and the head librarian needs to know so an accommodation plan can be made. I worry about bias, implicit or explicit.” In addition, another person found their accommodation caused resentment among colleagues who felt it was unfair or unnecessary.

Respondents had many suggestions for improving accommodations processes at their institutions. These included the removal of documentation from a medical professional, a clear and documented process for requesting an accommodation, a list of possible accommodations to refer to, and human resources staff trained to guide

people through the process. Another respondent stated that management should play a bigger role in informing people about why accommodations are made for some people without revealing personal information. One respondent summed up the general feeling among study participants relating to the accommodation process: “It takes a very persistent person who is used to advocating for themselves to see it to the end of the process of requesting an accommodation.”

4. Need for Improved Understanding of Autism

Seven respondents indicated a need for improved education and awareness of autism in the workplace. This is defined as training, education, and discussion related to autism, autistic people and their experiences in the workplace. Survey results showed that autistic employees felt their colleagues and administrators demonstrated a lack of understanding of autism by either not believing the person was autistic or relying on stereotypes. Respondents indicated that any autism education that takes place at their institution is focused on understanding students' needs. The idea that staff members can also be autistic and their potential difficulties and needs in the workplace are not addressed in EDI initiatives. As one person said, “It’s also not talked about in EDI training as if autistic people are just patrons and couldn’t work at the library.”

People expressed a desire for training initiatives such as seminars, workshops, and webinars to be included as part of the institutions EDI programming with autistic people leading these initiatives. Respondents felt more education would lead to more support in the workplace as colleagues would better understand their behaviour and explicit need for accommodations. One respondent commented, “I think [library colleagues] could be supportive if they understood the full spectrum of ASD. Right now, a lot of staff only think of ASD as a stereotype.” Other respondents said a lack of autism awareness prevents them from disclosing their diagnosis. They fear this revelation would result in negative attention.

Interestingly, and tangentially tied to a desire for increased autism education in the workplace, some survey respondents expressed gratitude for the opportunity to take part in this survey and were hopeful that it would begin a dialogue in libraries. As one participant shared, “there doesn’t seem to be an understanding yet that autistic people are also working in academic libraries – we’re already there! I’m glad to see this might be changing and I’m looking forward to seeing the results of this study.”

Discussion

The goal of this study was to survey autistic librarians and library support staff in the Canadian academic community to obtain information about the benefits and difficulties they face while at work. These results, while preliminary, can be used to make recommendations for library managers and administrators to improve recruitment, hiring, and management practices.

The most prominent theme in this study was libraries as unsafe spaces. While this is unfortunate, it is in line with other research on autistic people's experiences in the workplace. Autistic people frequently face harassment and discrimination in the workforce (Booth 2016). University libraries cannot claim to be the exception as Oud's study also showed that librarians with invisible disabilities faced discrimination and harassment in the workplace (Oud 2018).

It is not surprising then that a need for improved understanding of autism was also a theme in this study. Morrison et al. showed that experience with autism and level of knowledge of ASD impacts a neurotypical person's perception of autistic people more so than the autistic person's presentation or social behaviour (2019). Knowledge does not help a neurotypical person recognize autism, but it does "soften" how they perceive a person when they are aware that they are autistic (Morrison et al. 2019). As a result, library administrators need to do more to educate themselves and their staff by including this in EDI initiatives. The failure to understand autism and autistic staff's experiences at work is a failure to have an inclusive workspace and perpetuates the ableism that is prevalent in academic culture.

In academia, autistic people stand out in a culture where people are expected to fit in. To minimize their standing out, autistic employees in this study admit to masking or camouflaging. The use of camouflaging varies from person to person as does its effectiveness (Hull et al. 2017; Hull et al. 2020; A. Morrison 2019). Given the lived and feared consequences of exhibiting autistic traits in the workplace it is obvious why many respondents felt the need to hide or mask their autism. This common behaviour among autistic people is utilized to help them fit in but the consequences of masking can be negative (Hull et al. 2020). As Hull et al. point out, "Camouflaging is not necessarily a beneficial behaviour, and should not be regularly expected or encouraged for individuals with ASC [Autistic Spectrum Condition], as this may risk increasing mental health problems" (2017, 2521).

Masking adds to the workload burden of the autistic individual. In addition to meeting the demands of their position they also feel a need to do their job while hiding their true self and behaviours that help them deal with stress. The difficulties of masking were expressed as "exhausting", and one respondent indicated the practice

“provokes depression, anxiety and burnout.” As Hull et al. (2017) argue, the burden of changing or modifying a behaviour invariably falls to the autistic employee. One respondent echoed this sentiment,

There are a lot of issues due to different communication styles. But when the norm is convinced they're right, the other person is deemed wrong. Because of the deficit model through which autism is usually seen, it's almost impossible to get people to understand that when two parties have a different communication style, both can work to improve the relationship. That always falls to me to adapt to colleagues who do not adapt one bit, but who will make sure to make me pay when I fail to do it to their liking.

Further, effective masking or camouflaging can have a detrimental effect if it is done too well. Many respondents revealed co-workers do not believe their diagnosis as they do not witness the autistic behaviours that the autistic person works so hard to hide. Without seeing these behaviours or the struggle to hide them, colleagues can sometimes be jealous of their accommodations, seeing them as unnecessary. As one participant writes, “[Library colleagues] refuse to believe I am autistic . . . and are passive aggressive towards accommodations and supports that I am using.” As A. Morrison writes, “What might be seen like a blessing – the ability to ‘pass’ as neurotypical – can be experienced as exhausting, alienating, and ‘traumatic’” (2019, 707).

On a practical level, when an autistic person seeks accommodations, effective masking or camouflaging can hinder or halt this process. Accommodations may be denied as the employer does not see the behaviours the autistic person struggles to control. “They don’t believe me about my autism. Whenever I bring up supports I need they don’t believe I need them to function (as I have been functioning, very poorly, without support until now).” The feared consequences of refusing to mask or failing to do so effectively included appearing rude or weird, experiencing microaggressions from colleagues, feeling left out, and being let go from their job. The Canadian Association of Research Libraries’s (CARL) Diversity Census and Inclusion Survey acknowledges these fears, “A diverse and inclusive organization not only has heterogeneous employees, but also adapts to each person’s needs such as disabilities, religious and cultural differences, and varied ways of thinking and working. This means ensuring that employees do not have to engage in “covering” behaviour, downplaying who they really are for fear of being judged, excluded, or actively discriminated against” (CARL 2022).

Seven respondents felt the accommodation process was unnecessarily difficult with few supports to help guide a person through the system. One person wrote, “Whether or not it’s intentional, there are no clear guidelines and practices and if there are any, I wasn’t directed towards them or where I could refer to them.” Moeller

points out that the lack of a formal, transparent process for seeking accommodations in academia is another way in which disabled people are seen as veering from the norm (2019). Moeller states that disabled people in higher education are seen as the exception and so their needs are addressed as such and on an individual basis. Universities follow a deficit model of disability and are “neither designed nor constructed to acknowledge the possibility of anyone with disabilities, except as necessary to remain in compliance with legal mandates” (Moeller 2019, 458). Furthermore, Oud’s study on Canadian academic librarians with disabilities showed that of the librarians who did not seek accommodations, 17% indicated that this was due to problems with the process: either they did not know how to request an accommodation or there was an absence of a process all together at their institution (Oud 2018). Of the 68% of respondents who did not seek an accommodation, 71% participants did so because they feared a negative impact at work. In fact, only 51% of people with invisible disabilities said their supervisor was fully aware of their disability (Oud 2018). In the current study, fear of negative consequences was the most cited reason for not seeking accommodations.

The irony of a difficult accommodation process is that many, if not all, accommodations mentioned by respondents could easily be implemented at low or no cost. For instance, the ability to use noise cancelling headphones, provide feedback through email rather than face-to-face, and to have buffer time between social interactions might change some processes but do not require much financial commitment. This calls into question why formal documentation is required for simple requests and practices – some of which were proven to work during the Covid-19 work from home period.

While there are many barriers, survey respondents still felt libraries were a good place for autistic people to work. There were many benefits to working in libraries and it is also seen as a place autistic people can use their talents. In order to maximize their abilities, there needs to be an increased understanding of autism through education and training for all staff and administrators. Autistic staff members can help shape these initiatives.

Limitations and Future Research

This study aimed to uncover the lived experience of autistic employees in Canadian academic libraries and, as such, was limited by a very narrow scope. Expanding the study to include American academic libraries, or to include Canadian public libraries would provide tangential results that would complement and further the aims of this study. Participants were recruited from Canadian library association email lists and Canadian library employers. Those who had previously worked in Canadian academic libraries but were no longer employed would not have been aware of the

study unless they were still on their library association's listserv, which they may not. This limitation deprived our study of potentially useful information by learning if their leaving was related to lack of support or difficulties regarding accommodations for their ASD.

Without a clear idea of the number of employees with ASD working in Canadian academic libraries, it is not possible to determine how representative our study's findings are of all autistic people in Canadian academic libraries. A larger participant sample would improve our ability to generalize, but more needs to be known on the percentage of those working in Canadian libraries, and in the academy, who are neurodiverse, to make firm assertions on the significance of the findings. Academic libraries are representative of a specific academic culture based on faculties within higher education and so the experience of who work within such a specific collegially base environment cannot be generalised to other work settings within Canada or libraries in general.

Finally, this is an exploratory study of academic library employees. The study was conducted by neurotypical librarians as a starting point to understand the lived experiences of autistic people in academic libraries. Libraries would benefit from studies designed and conducted by autistic people.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to conduct a preliminary survey of employees with ASD working in Canadian academic libraries to identify barriers and opportunities. Several important themes presented in the responses to this survey: library as unsafe space, social difficulties in the workplace, difficulties requesting accommodations and a need for improved understanding of autism. Respondents provided clear examples of areas which require attention in Canadian academic libraries and provide a path forward for library managers and leaders to ensure employees with ASD are provided with a supportive and inclusive work environment.

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Appendix I: Survey Questions

1. Have you been diagnosed by a health care professional with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)? (Please see definition at the beginning of the survey)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No. I identify as a person with ASD but have not received a formal diagnosis.
- ☐ No. I have not been diagnosed with ASD and do not identify as a person with ASD. (Note: This answer leads to the end of the survey as they are not eligible)

2. Are you currently employed in a Canadian academic library?

- ☐ Yes (Note: This answer leads to question 2A and B)

2A. How long have you been employed in academic Libraries?

- ☐ 0 – 5 years
- ☐ 6 – 15 years
- ☐ 16 – 25 years
- ☐ Over 25 years

Comment:

2B. Have you discussed your ASD with your employer?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Comment:

- ☐ No (Note: This answer leads to question 2C, D, E and F)

2C. Have you been employed in academic libraries in the past 5 years?

- ☐ Yes (Note: this answer leads to question 2D)
- ☐ No (Note: This answer leads to the end of the survey as they are not eligible)

Comment:

2D. Are you actively seeking employment in academic libraries?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Comment:

2E. Do you feel your ASD played an important role in no longer being employed in academic libraries?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Partially
- ☐ Unsure

Comment:

2F. Did you discuss your ASD with your last employer?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Comment:

3. Age:

- ☐ 18 – 29 years
- ☐ 30 – 39 years
- ☐ 40 – 49 years
- ☐ 50 – 59 years
- ☐ 60 and older

4. Gender – How do you most identify?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Trans-male
- ☐ Trans-female
- ☐ Non-conforming
- ☐ Non-conforming

- ☐ _____
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

5. Select the categories that describe your formal education. Select all that apply.

- ☐ High school diploma or equivalent
- ☐ College diploma
- ☐ Bachelor's degree (e.g. B.A, B.Sc.)
- ☐ Professional Master's degree (e.g. MLIS, MLS, MIS, MBA)
- ☐ Subject Master's degree (e.g. M.A., MFA)
- ☐ Doctorate degree
- ☐ Other (Please specify): _____
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

6. What category most closely describes your current /most recent position?

- ☐ Archivist
- ☐ Library support staff
- ☐ Library support staff working in an administrative/managerial role
- ☐ Librarian
- ☐ Librarian working in an administrative/managerial role
- ☐ Other (Please specify)
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

7. In your work do you have or did you have:

- ☐ Little interaction with clients (less than 10% of the workday)
- ☐ Some interaction with clients (up to 50% of the workday)
- ☐ Significant interaction with clients (over 50% of the workday)

Comment:

8. Do you feel your ASD has:

- ☐ Been primarily advantageous in your work
- ☐ Been primarily challenging in your work

- o No impact on your work
- o Unsure

Comment:

9. Are you aware/were you aware of the process for requesting a workplace accommodation at your place of employment? (Please see definition at the beginning of the survey)

- o Yes
- o No

Comment:

10. Have you ever sought an accommodation (either formally or informally) due to your ASD?

- o Yes (Note: This answer leads to question 10A, 10B, 10C, 10D)

10A. What was the accommodation requested? Please explain.

10B. Was the accommodation granted?

- o Yes
- o No
- o Partially

Comment:

10C. Was the accommodation helpful?

- o Yes
- o No
- o Partially
- o Unsure
- o Not applicable

Comment:

10D. Please provide any thoughts on the ease or difficulty of requesting an accommodation.

- o No (*Note: This answer leads to question 10E*)

10E. Why didn't you request an accommodation? Select all that apply.

- o I don't require accommodation
- o I would prefer to manage any issues I have on my own
- o Fear it would be denied
- o Fear it would result in negative consequences
- o I didn't know I could request an accommodation
- o Unsure how to make this request
- o Other

Comment:

The following questions are designed to capture your thoughts, experiences, and feelings on working in Canadian academic libraries as an autistic person or someone who identifies as an autistic person.

11. What are the advantages or benefits of working in an academic library as an autistic person?

12. What are the barriers or difficulties of working in an academic library setting as an autistic person?

13. In general, do you feel your library's leadership is inclusive/supportive of those with ASD? Please explain.

14. In general, do you feel your colleagues are inclusive/supportive of those with ASD? Please explain.

15. What could your workplace do to improve support for autistic people?

16. As an autistic person, is there anything else about working in academic libraries you would like to share?