**Abstract:**

This article examines common trends and challenges shared amongst autistic librarians along with advice regarding the topic for both autistic and non-autistic librarians. The article seeks to fill the gap in the literature regarding neurodiversity as a form of diversity in the library staff, with a focus on autism.

**Article:**

Although the library field professes inclusivity of all types of diversity, there are often disconnects between our core values and practice, particularly in relation to neurodiversity in our workforce. Indeed, autistic librarians face many challenges in the workplace. While we are all different, there are a number of trends that occur amongst autistics working in the library field. This article seeks to address some of these trends as well as common challenges faced by autistic librarians. Topics covered include sensory difficulties, social cues, office politics, unwritten rules of the workplace, misunderstandings, discrimination, strengths of autistic librarians, and advice for allistic librarians.

**Common Challenges Amongst Autistic Librarians**

Some of the most common challenges autistic librarians face in the workplace stem from the difference in neurotype itself. Allistics, otherwise known as non-autistics, communicate much differently than autistics. The divide makes it difficult for autistics to discern body language and social cues that are non-explicit. Similarly, unwritten rules and office politics often go right over our heads. Flexible rules are even more difficult as they apply differently in different situations.

One of the key body language or social cues autistics struggle with is eye contact. We may avert our eyes or stare, but it’s not because we’re lying or challenging you. Rather, we may be uncomfortable with eye contact, not know the right amount of eye contact, or something else in the room may have caught our eye. This is especially a challenge in meetings with supervisors or administrators who expect us to be paying attention. We are paying attention, but if we’re too focused on keeping the right amount of eye contact, then chances are we’ll miss part of the conversation.

Some autistics are great at eye contact! We’re not all the same and our challenges are in different areas. However, some autistic library professionals who are great at eye contact may actually be masking very well.

Masking is a term describing when an autistic pretends to be allistic. It is an especially common trait in Assigned-Female-At-Birth (AFAB) Autistics. Many AFAB autistics grew up with hyperfixations that were deemed acceptable for young girls. For example, horses, dolls, playing house, or even books *1*. Some hyperfixations even translate into careers, such as librarianship.

Other social cues that may be missed are tonal cues. I often struggle with understanding whether someone is mad, serious, or joking. When such struggles are translated to the library, it can be off-putting to coworkers and patrons due to misinterpretation.

Unwritten and/or flexible rules also contribute to misunderstandings. Say, for example, that Phil the Branch Manager should never be disturbed when his door is closed. An autistic librarian might knock on the door for a question that seems important to them, and Phil gets upset because his door was closed. Regardless of the importance of the question, if Phil never told the autistic librarian not to disturb him when his door is closed, the autistic librarian often has no clue that rule is in place unless another librarian told them. Another example would be when it is okay to waive a fine. Waiving fines may be up to the discretion of the librarian, but when a number of autistics think in black and white, exceptions to rules are difficult to discern. The rules for waiving fines may need to be explicitly spelled out for the autistic librarian instead of being asked to use their discretion.

On top of the plethora of misunderstandings from missed social cues and unwritten or flexible rules, there is also the conundrum of office politics. While other autistic librarians have cited this as an area of struggle for them, I had never truly understood what the term “office politics” meant. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, office politics is a plural noun meaning “the activities, attitudes, or behaviors that are used to get or keep power or an advantage within a business or company.” Seeing the definition puts some of my own struggles into perspective. I never understood why people would put each other down to get ahead. If there’s one position open, shouldn’t it go to the person who’s most earnest, honest, and hardworking rather than the one who pushed others down to prop themselves up? Especially in the library field, which cites inclusion and is built off of core values such as intellectual freedom, education and lifelong learning, preservation, diversity, social responsibility, and service, shouldn’t we be building each other up rather than shoving each other down?

Yet, in my conversations with other autistic librarians, they cited being bullied out of jobs, downgraded from full time, or having the fear that they soon would lose their job for reasons that seemed very much to imply office politics at play. How can we fight office politics if they’re so hard for us to understand? Is there a class on how to handle office politics? If so, I’d love to take that class.

Another challenge faced by autistic librarians is that it is very common for autistics to have comorbidities, or additional diagnoses beyond autism *2*. As a result, even the most committed and enthusiastic workers may be forced to use numerous sick days for reasons beyond their control. The reason is always valid, but allistics might begin to think their autistic colleagues are making excuses to be absent from work.

**Ableism in the Workplace**

Autistic librarians face barriers in the workplace that allistic librarians might not have thought about. Amongst those barriers are the inability to stim freely, harsh criticisms over behaviors we may not have noticed, and the rejection of self-diagnosis. Additionally, ignorance regarding the neurotype of autism in general leads to barriers and ableism in the workplace.

Recently, I have been allowing myself to stim freely in most situations. Stimming is defined by Merriam Webster as “a self-stimulatory behavior that is marked by a repetitive action or movement of the body”. In Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), stimming takes on a variety of forms. We use stimming to express our emotions, soothe overstimulation, counter understimulation, and just generally in day-to-day life. Stimming can take the form of fidgeting, making noises, rocking, flapping, sensory-seeking behaviors such as nail-biting and skin-picking, and much more. Stimming is a freeing experience: I flap my arms when I’m happy or content, rub my thumb in circles on the back of my other hand or fidget with my skirt when anxious, and turn to my infinity cube when bored or understimulated.

But “most situations” does not necessarily include the library. As I write this article, I am preparing to begin a new position at my local public library, and I’m scared that stimming freely in the library will out me as autistic before I’m ready. Part of masking, or pretending to be allistic, involves suppressing the urge to stim. Being open about my differences is important to me; but after being open in my last library position resulted in me being looked down upon, the fear is overpowering.

Ableism means people will look at someone stimming and go “stop that” without thinking about why the person is doing it. Suppressing stims in stressful situations can lead to extreme distress. Extreme distress can lead to meltdowns. Meltdowns can lead to termination. Termination does lead to extended periods of unemployment. To prevent judgment, autistic librarians may search for other stims that aren’t as noticeable or suppress their stims entirely. It’s not healthy for an autistic to suppress their stims.

Stimming is a healthy behavior for autistics. If not for allistic judgment, misunderstandings, ignorance, and/or fear of all of the above, many autistics would likely engage in this behavior much more than they currently do.

Ableism isn’t limited to annoyance towards healthy stimming. Many autistics receive harsh criticisms for behaviors outside of their control. For example, autistics have different tones of voice for each emotion than allistics might for those same emotions. We may be monotone. We may be blunt or straight to the point. We’re not trying to be rude. It’s just how our brains work.

Boundaries not set in clear stone can also be a problem. If we know we’ve crossed a line, we will immediately apologize. But sometimes we can see we’ve crossed a line and not know why, and the issue will repeat until someone tells us what we’re doing wrong. Some helpful feedback I’ve received include “Don’t ask personal questions” and “Don’t stand too close to other people.” But I’ve also received “Don’t stare” and “Stop arguing” when I didn’t think I was doing those things.

These are milder examples of criticism, but other criticisms can be harsh and feel like harassment or bullying. Constant scolding can impede on self-esteem. If something problematic has occurred in the workplace, explain your side calmly and allow us to give our side of the story too. Often, we are not intentionally doing things to annoy you. Rather, we might not even notice we’re doing them. Don’t assume we’re doing things on purpose without asking. Chances are, it may be a misunderstanding. Even if it wasn’t, autistics tend to have the habit of being brutally honest about why they’re doing what they’re doing. Not all autistics, but a good number of them.

My last point in this category is the rejection of self-diagnosis. Many colleagues believe that if you are not officially diagnosed by the “proper” authorities, your diagnosis is not valid. Yet, in some areas, the “proper” authorities may repeatedly overlook you or others who present similarly to you. This is the case with many AFAB and non-stereotypical autistics. Research has shown that AFAB autistics are better at masking and tend to have more hyperfixations that fit their assigned gender than Assigned-Male-at-Birth (AMAB) autistics *3*. Furthermore, diagnosis is very expensive and autistic AFAB persons of color have an even lower chance of being properly diagnosed than white autistic AFAB individuals. An AFAB individual often receives a large number of misdiagnoses before finally landing on autism, yet many cannot afford to go to multiple doctors and psychiatrists in order to get a proper diagnosis, even if they rightfully suspect their correct diagnosis. As a result of these immense barriers, a large majority of the autistic community accepts self-diagnosis. I recommend our allistic allies do as well.

It is extremely helpful for library professionals to understand that autism doesn’t have a “look”. It can sometimes be hard to identify, and no two autistics are exactly the same. If you know one autistic, you know one autistic.

**Strengths of Autistic Librarians**

Discussion thus far has been on some of the challenges autistic librarians face in the workplace, from their own autistic traits to challenges from allistic coworkers. I would like to place some attention now on the strengths of autistic librarians.

It may seem counterintuitive or cliche to say the hyperfixations are a strength, but when you are intensely interested in a topic, you learn a lot about it. One autistic librarian that I have spoken with has intense interest in publishing trends, which makes them an asset in collection development. Another autistic librarian may be a rockstar at reader’s advisory due to how well they understand their patrons, while yet another can be fantastic at Storytime due to their interest in reading aloud and interacting with children. Autistic librarians tend to notice patterns that allistic librarians might not. For instance, I can find a book out of place or worn down at a glance while shelving other books.

**Why Autistic Representation Matters in the Library**

It’s hard to put to words exactly what autistic representation in the library would look like to patrons looking in, but coming from an autistic’s standpoint, I can confirm it’s just as important as other forms of representation.

Autism is stigmatized. If I had known when I was a child that I was autistic, I would have been paralyzed with fear for my future. My parents likely would have as well. This is in part due to misinformation and in part due to not seeing as many examples of success. Only recently are we beginning to see authentic autistic characters represented in media and only recently has it become more common for successful autistic individuals to admit they’re autistic.

Imagine if you were a child who felt you couldn’t succeed in life because of their developmental differences. Imagine if your mom brought you to the library and you struggled due to sensory differences. If no one there understood you, your family might leave in tears.

But what if a librarian went up to you, handed you a fidget or some noise-dimming headphones or another form of sensory tool, and said, “Don’t worry. I was in your place once. I found a way to succeed, and you will too. You have a good future ahead of you.”

How would you feel?

To me, representation matters. There’s a value in seeing yourself in the workforce. In seeing yourself in adults and literature and media. This is especially true for highly stigmatized groups such as autistics.

In addition to openness and acceptance of autistic children, I would like to advocate for programming specifically catered towards neurodiverse audiences. Autistic and otherwise Neurodiverse librarians are a great resource for such programming, considering library staff also serve as library patrons.

As a library patron, I personally have often felt disappointed in the past regarding the lack of neurodiverse programming available in my library system, especially neurodiverse programming for patrons who didn’t fall under the “youth services” umbrella. One librarian I spoke with while doing my research mentioned Adult Sensory Storytimes. Research shows there is no particular age where you are too old to be read aloud to *4*. This is why Adult Storytimes are rising in popularity. Adult Sensory Storytimes are Storytimes catered to adults with sensory differences. It is an intriguing concept worth looking into.

Another form of autistic programming for older patrons is gatherings or information sessions. Many AFAB autistics were diagnosed later in life, many of them more recently. Information sessions for newly diagnosed autistics and gatherings with autistics with more experience ties into the ALA core values of education and lifelong learning, diversity, intellectual freedom, access and more.

**Why Autistics Are Drawn to Libraries**

Like a number of other autistic librarians, libraries are one of my special interests. Autistic librarians tend to be enthusiastic about what we love. Our different perspective offers value to the library workspace and allows us to relate to autistic patrons more easily than our allistic peers.

One thing that draws many to library work, both autistic and allistic, is the fulfillment we get from helping others. Amongst autistics, this is especially important due to the aforementioned lack of understanding in office politics and the strong desire to work in a job with meaning. In libraries, it’s clear how we helped someone in every interaction with a patron. And clarity is important to many autistics.

Another draw to librarianship is the structure. There may seem to be an infinite number of topics a patron might bring up in a library, but at the bottom line, one can use the same structure to deal with most inquiries. Ask how you can help them. Ask clarifying questions if needed. Help the patron. A number of inquiries in the public library especially are “where’s the bathroom?,” “I need help printing.,”, “how do I check out books?,” “I need a library card,” “where can I find my holds?,” and so forth. Reader’s advisory uses the structure previously mentioned and there are tools, such as NoveList, to help with that. Library programs follow a set structure or outline most of the time, like Storytime often starting and ending with the same songs and books being chosen based on a theme. Basically, one often knows what to expect in the library, occasional unusual questions aside.

Lastly, many autistics are drawn to the library early on because of their hyperfixations and intense interests. With its core values of education and lifelong learning and the policy not to judge a person by what they’re reading, what better place to learn all about a topic than the library! Not to mention all the materials are there, and the librarians are perfectly willing to help you find more.

**Advice for Allistic Librarians**

In this article, you’ve learned a little about autism and autistic librarians in the workplace. Now, how can you be an ally?

The first step is not to assume you know all about your autistic coworker just because you read this article or some other book about autism, particularly if that book was by an organization that sees autism as a disease to be cured. Autistic allies and researchers value actually autistic voices far above those of parents or siblings of autistics.

Reading this article is a good start, but I repeat that no two autistics are the same. As the adage goes, “If you know one autistic, you know one autistic.” If you want to know more about how to support your autistic coworker, ask them. In private is best, because they may not want to flaunt their autism to the world. Being open about one’s autism can lead to discrimination and stigma due to ignorance, although that is something I and many other autistic librarians hope to change.

Additionally, don’t expect our work style to be the same as everyone else. If we’re passionate about the work, our efficiency shoots up. Read up on execution function and the struggles of executive dysfunction. Know that we’re not lazy when we struggle to do something. There can literally be a block in our brains and bodies preventing us from doing the thing. Leverage our strengths and we can be a huge asset to the library.

Know that our tone and level of bluntness doesn’t mean we’re angry or mean or sarcastic or so on. Autistics can be blunt. Many of us are not good at small talk, and blunt is just the way our brains work. If you’re not sure how an autistic meant their tone, *ask them*.

We thrive on structure. We rely on knowing our schedule in advance and on said schedule not changing frequently. If there is a change, please let us know ahead of time, as soon as you can, preferably through a form of written communication such as email.

Be clear with your expectations as a branch manager or supervisor. Don’t assume the unwritten or flexible rules are obvious, clear, or easy to parse. Oftentimes, that’s a misconception and even allistic or neurotypical library workers could use some clarification. Also, make sure you’ve given your expectations in writing. Verbal conversations can be easy to forget as time passes.

Finally, if an autistic coworker asks for clarification or for something to be explained to them differently, or if they ask for an accommodation that may seem unusual to you, don’t get annoyed. Listen to them and, presuming the proper HR processes are in place, provide what’s requested. Autistic librarians oftentimes know what they need. And, what they need is often different from what you need.

**Some Words For My Fellow Autistic Librarians**

Don’t be ashamed for being different. Autism can be a struggle, but it can also be a strength. Don’t use autism as an excuse for something you’ve perceived yourself having done wrong. Half the time in self-perceived mistakes, you didn’t do anything wrong, you simply did it differently, and those who don’t know anything about autism might take the use of autism as an excuse the wrong way.

Find the library department or area in which you excel. Some autistics thrive on being at the front desk. Others prefer the technical or less front-facing side, like interlibrary loan or collection development. Whatever your passion, that’s where you’re going to succeed.

Don’t listen to imposter syndrome. You’re great at what you do. Don’t doubt it.

Find supportive coworkers. They can help you when the going gets tough. Oftentimes, a supportive coworker can even immensely help you navigate those office politics or confusing instructions that you naturally struggle with.

Lastly, understand it’s okay to have different goals than those around you. I knew early on I didn’t want to be a supervisor or branch manager, and I’ve come across other autistic librarians who share that sentiment. Having different goals isn’t bad. In fact, it can be an advantage.

Don’t give up if you struggle to keep a job at first. We need you in this field and losing one job, or two or three, may just be fate telling you that that wasn’t the right environment for you to thrive in. Many autistics struggle when not surrounded by the right people. But the right environment is out there, and every library is different. Don’t give up!

If you’re allistic and reading this article, I thank you for taking a step towards fully accepting your autistic coworkers. If you’re an autistic librarian reading, I hope I’ve done our struggles justice.

Below are some books and resources I recommend for learning about Autism. A note: while Asperger’s is considered by many autistics as an outdated term, there are some who still identify with it, and it can be a useful term to know for finding information about a certain presentation of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

**Books:**

*Nerdy, Shy, and Socially Inappropriate: A User Guide to an Asperger Life* by Cynthia Kim

*Aspergirls: Empowering Females with Asperger Syndrome* by Rudy Simone

*Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age* by Sarah Hendrickx

*Spectrum Women: Walking to the Beat of Autism* Edited by Barb Cook and Michelle Garnett

*Beyond the Wall: Personal Experiences with Autism and Asperger Syndrome* by Stephen Shore

*Aspergers and Adulthood: A Guide to Working, Loving, and Living With Aspergers Syndrome* by Blythe Grossberg

*Your Life is not a Label: A guide to Living Fully with Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome* by Jerry Newport

*The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome* by Tony Attwood

**Websites:**

Aane.org Asperger/Autism Network

Spectrumnews.org

Wrongplanet.net

Musingsofanaspie.com

Endnotes

1 Hendrickx, Sarah. *Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015.

2 Cook, Barb, and Michelle Garnett, eds. *Spectrum Women: Walking to the Beat of Autism*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018.

3 Hendrickx, Sarah. *Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015.

4 Trelease, Jim. *Jim Trelease's Read-Aloud Handbook*. Edited by Cyndi Giorgis. New York: Penguin Books, 2019.