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Assessing the Experiences of Autistic Academic Librarians in Positions of Leadership: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at Autistic academic librarians occupying leadership positions and how being Autistic affects their leadership capacity. Through analyzing five different interviews I conducted, I found that being Autistic posed challenges to adopting these roles by making it difficult to deal with a lack of control and master informal social skills. At the same time, being Autistic also proved beneficial by providing interviewees with greater emotional intelligence and the capacity to communicate directly with others in the library. I conclude this paper by talking about additional paths of inquiry related to Autism and leadership in the academic library environment.

Keywords: Autism, Academic Libraries, Leadership, Intersectionality

INTRODUCTION

As a whole, there is no shortage of literature on the topic of leadership in the academic library environment. If one was to conduct a search in Google Scholar on “Academic Library” AND “Leadership”, one would come up with over 30,800 journal articles and other scholarly resources on the topic. This thereby suggests that this is a very well-studied topic.

While considerable literature exists on the topic of leadership in the academic library environment and while much of this (including works such as “Our Journey of Building Trust: Case Studies of BIPOC Women Leaders in Academic Libraries”) focuses on the experiences of individual leaders in the academic library environment, very little to none focuses on the experiences of Autistic librarians. If one searches “Autistic” AND “Academic Librarian” AND “Leadership” in the Central Michigan University library catalog, 0 results would come up. While the number of results in Google Scholar is somewhat higher (73) for this same search, most results tend to focus on the experiences of Autistic patrons or Autistic academic librarians more generally.

It is ultimately hard to know for sure what percentage of academic librarian and, more specifically, academic librarians in positions of leadership are/identify as being Autistic. What is known, however, is that according to a study by the CDC conducted in 2017, “an estimated 5,437,988 (2.21%) adults in the United States have ASD” (Key findings, 2024). If these numbers carry over to those in the library profession, then this would make neurodiverse and specifically Autistic individuals a minority in the library profession even compared to groups such as BIPOC individuals where “in the U.S., 87.8% of the 179,000 librarians identified as white...” (Mi et al.,

2023, p. 48; Anderson, 2018). When narrowed down to specifically include those in leadership roles, those percentages are probably even lower and likely contributed to the relative difficulty in getting a substantial number of interviewees for this study. With that being said, however, these numbers also make these interviews all the more valuable.

The interviews drawn off of in this case study are all of Autistic academic librarians (either medically or self-diagnosed) in positions of leadership in the United States. In order to make these experiences visible, this paper will be divided into four parts. The first of these parts will be a literature review where I go through the existing literature on two topics pertinent to my study. Once that is done, I will then go through the methodology which I used to recruit participants for this study and the process which I adopted in terms of identifying which questions I asked participants. Moving forward from there, the next portion of this paper will focus on looking at the interviews I conducted and identifying key themes which came up in the interviews. Finally, the fourth portion of this study before the conclusion will center around additional observations made as part of this study.

As an Autistic academic librarian myself who has served in various leadership capacities before this, sharing these stories occupies a space of deep importance especially given the scarcity of current literature on the topic. To eventually allow all individuals to rise more equitably into positions of leadership in the academic library environment, it is necessary to share actual Autistic voices and share them in a way that these individuals want to be heard. For this reason, I will be using identity first language (“Autistic librarians” rather than “librarians with Autism”) when referring to individuals throughout this case study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned previously, I am an Autistic Academic Librarian who has occupied several leadership positions on committees I have served as the chair or co-chair for. These committees include the CMU Libraries Curriculum committee, Accessibility committee, and Sustainability committee. I first became interested in this topic as a result of the experiences serving on these committees and the challenges which came with these roles. Some of these challenges included effectively communicating my thoughts and having to deal with a lack of control over what others were working on. These challenges were interesting because they in many ways align with the characteristics of Autism, a condition which according to the CDC is characterized by a need for control, difficulty communicating one's thoughts effectively, and difficulty with certain aspects of emotional intelligence (Drigas et al., 2021; Signs and symptoms, 2024). This ultimately raised my interest in whether Autistic academic librarians who have held positions of leadership similar to myself feel that being Autistic has affected, either positively or negatively, their capacity to act as leaders in the academic library environment.

In order to identify whether being Autistic has an impact on an individual's capacity to succeed as a leader in the academic library environment, one thing that I needed to do was conduct a literature review. The two topics which I conducted a literature review on were leadership in the academic library environment and Autism in the library and, more specifically, academic library environment.

Part 1: Leadership

As mentioned earlier, there is no shortage of literature on leadership in the library environment or, more specifically, on leadership in the academic library environment. To assess this literature in a wholistic manner, the approach which was taken was looking for themes or references to particular leadership competencies across the literature. When looking at literature on the topic of leadership in the academic library environment, three key competencies came up frequently.

The first of these competencies, as highlighted in the leadership literature, was an ability to adapt to change. As is highlighted in recent literature on the topic, the capacity to adapt to change comes in two main forms. The first of these forms involved being able to adapt to changes one did and did not see coming (Mi et al., 2023; Hadley, 2023; Aslam, 2019). In addition to this, a second component of being able to effectively deal with change in the academic library environment came in the form of being able to guide others through and manage that change as well as being able to energize stakeholders to be excited about those changes being made (Lazarus et al., 2019; Hernon et al., 2006).

In addition to being able to deal with change, another leadership capacity which came up frequently in literature on the topic was being able to effectively communicate. The first way this came up in the literature was through emphasizing the importance of being able to foster open communication amongst constituents and library faculty/staff. Doing so ensures that everyone understands what each other does, knows how to work together, and effectively understands your beliefs and attitudes as subordinates to you (Mi et al., 2023; Ashiq et al., 2021; Wong, 2017; Aslam, 2019).

To conclude, the third main leadership competency which was identified as being important in literature on the topic of library leadership and, specifically, leadership in the academic library environment was possessing a degree of emotional intelligence. Within the literature, the three forms of emotional intelligence which were emphasized as being important were being able to manage one's emotions effectively, being able to make others feel that they were being supported emotionally, and being able to understand emotions in others (empathize) (Mi et al., 2023; Lazarus et al., 2019). In some of the literature on this topic, being empathetic to colleagues was described as coming from being of a marginalized background and was connected to being a better advocate for one's colleagues and their needs (Mi et al., 2023).

These three characteristics, in addition to matching up with my own observations of important leadership competencies, are also of note because they align closely with challenges associated with being Autistic (Signs and symptoms, 2024). In seeing this, this further sparked my interest into understanding the extent to which being Autistic affects one's capacity to rise into a position of leadership and/or be a successful leader in the Academic Library environment and led me to focus extensively on the second aspect of my literature review-works that focus on the topic of Autism in the academic library environment.

Part 2: Autism in Academic Libraries

In addition to literature on leadership in the academic library environment, another area of literature which I did a literature review of as part of this study related to the topic of Autism in the library environment. For literature on the topic of Autism in the library environment, two main divisions can be seen to emerge. The first of these divisions which this area of scholarship can be

seen to be divided into is that of scholarship centered on the experiences of library services for Autistic patrons in the academic library and general library environment. Likewise, the second division which this scholarship can be seen to be divided into is scholarship focusing on the experiences of Autistic librarians and, more specifically in some cases, Autistic academic librarians.

As part of the first section, scholarship focusing on library services for Autistic patrons, the main conclusion which is drawn is that all library faculty and staff would benefit from neurodiversity training because of the way that even if a staff member knows that a patron is neurodiverse, they still may not know how to assist that patron (Anderson, 2018; Braumberger, 2021; Anderson et al., 2024; Shea et al., 2022; Napp et al., 2022). That is due to the nature of Autism being a so called “invisible disability” (Anderson et al., 2024). Likewise, in terms of that literature focusing on the experiences of Autistic librarians and, more specifically, Autistic academic librarians, the main conclusion which is drawn is that while many Autistic librarians and more specifically academic librarians find meaning in their work, systematic barriers still exist in terms of higher ups understanding the characteristics of Autism and there being an environment where individuals would feel safe about coming out about their disability (Anderson, 2018; Braumberger, 2021; Anderson et al., 2024; Shea et al., 2022; Napp et al., 2022; Anderson, 2018).

While different in their approach, both of these literary approaches seem to adopt the view that making individuals aware of the characteristics of Autism through training and including Autistic voices in this process are essential to moving forward in a meaningful direction. Through this study, I hope to study these voices while also drawing more specifically on the experiences of Autistic academic library leaders, a group which is not explicitly addressed in the literature.

METHODS

The approach I took for this study was to develop a ten-question questionnaire which I would use to interview five to ten Autistic academic librarians who were or had formerly held positions of leadership. These ten pre-distributed questions were developed using a combination of my own background knowledge and previously used questions mentioned in the journal article titled “Job Seeking and Daily Workforce Experiences of Academic Librarians.” My hope was that the combination of these ten questions would identify whether the interviewees’ leadership competencies align with those highlighted in the literature on the topic (as well as with my own experiences) and identify how Autism affected their ability to act as leaders in the Academic Library Environment. The questions can be found below:

- Tell me a bit about yourself. What is the current role you hold at the library which you work at?
- What leadership roles have you held in the academic library environment up to this point? This could include formal supervisory roles or serving as the chair of a library committee.
- What would you say makes a good leader in the Academic Library environment? What characteristics do you feel make you a good leader?
- What aspects of library leadership do you feel that you have particularly struggled with or have had to work on?

- Next, I am going to ask you to describe your experience with Autism. When was it diagnosed? How has this condition tended to manifest itself in your work life?
- Do you receive accommodation within your workplace related to Autism? Are you open with your colleagues about being Autistic?
- Do you feel that the way Autism has manifested in your work environment has affected, either positively or negatively, your ability to act as a leader in the Academic Library environment? If so, how?
- Do you feel like there are any other things/aspects of your identity that have affected your leadership experience? If so, how have they affected your approach to leadership and your skills/struggles in serving as an academic library leader?
- What do you feel your experiences say about the inclusivity of your workplace to neurodiverse faculty and staff? Have you noticed if this seems to correlate with patron experiences?

In order to recruit the interviewees for this study, I adopted four main approaches. These four approaches were, respectively, reaching out to former coworkers of mine who I was aware were Autistic and who held leadership roles, reaching out through online forums centered specifically around the topic of Autism in the library environment or in academia more broadly such as the “Autistics in Libraries and Their Allies” and the “Autistic Researchers Researching Autism” Facebook groups, reaching out to individuals conducting studies/compiling works of scholarship on the topic of Autism in the academic library environment, and reaching out to the Association of College and Research Libraries Universal Accessibility interest group. These approaches yielded a total of 5 interviewees. While not the ten that I was initially hoping for, I feel that the interview results I got from my five participants provide enough background to draw preliminary conclusions related to my topic. These participants represented individuals from varying leadership backgrounds, with participant one being the head librarian of the education library at a medium sized private university in New England, participant two being the director in the publishing department at a large midwestern university, participant three being the head of research and instruction services at a large public university library in the southern United States, participant four being a library director at a sub-campus of a large midwestern university in the United States, and participant five being the director of Learning Engagement at the main library of a large university in the southwestern United States.

After recruiting participants, I then sent them the questions ahead of time for the purpose of allowing them to prepare for the interview. When sending out the questions, I gave the participants two options for answering the questions. The first option, which was taken by 4 out of the 5 participants, was to do the interview online. The second option was to write out the answers to the questions provided. This was done for accessibility purposes. I incentivized participation in the study by offering a 10-dollar Amazon gift card for anyone who agreed to be interviewed/answer the questions I provided.

RESULTS

In interviewing participants, I was able to identify how being Autistic both helped and hindered them when acting as leaders in the academic library environment. During these interviews, I found that many of these hinderances and helpful aspects connected to the core capacities of leadership

identified in the literature. These capacities were the ability to communicate effectively, the ability to deal with change/give up control, and the possession of a degree of emotional intelligence. I also noticed that the hinderances and strengths mentioned in many cases aligned with some of my own strengths and weaknesses as a leader, many of which I partially attributed to myself being Autistic. I will first go through how being Autistic made their attempt to rise into and succeed in positions of leadership in the academic library environment more difficult. After doing that, I will then go through how some of my interviewees said that being Autistic has in some cases helped them act as leaders in the academic library environment.

Challenge One: Dealing with Change/Lacking Control

As a whole, the first main way that being Autistic was described by interviewees as representing a challenge to succeeding in their roles as academic library leaders was because it made it in some cases difficult to deal with sudden change or a lack of control over one's schedule. Sudden changes and/or a lack of control over one's schedule, as described by interviewees, became increasingly prominent as one rose into higher positions of leadership. For participant one, this lack of control came in the form of not knowing her regular work schedule and not being able to have control over her regular work schedule. This lack of control over her schedule came as a result of the supervisory role she had as an academic library leader. This supervisory role was over both student workers and non-student workers. Having to/feeling a need to step in to take over an absent individual's spot resulted in a very irregular schedule for this individual. Participant one attributed part of the difficulty in dealing with this change to have come from her being Autistic. Participant four, a library director at a sub-campus of a large midwestern university, noted similar difficulty in dealing with the sudden absences of student workers and attributed difficulty dealing with this instability to being Autistic. Other interviewees, such as interviewee five, described how subordinates coming up to her for questions with little notice made maintaining a regular work schedule difficult as well.

As a part of these interviews I conducted, participants brought up numerous additional examples of how important maintaining control was to them not only in their work schedule, but also in their work environment. One example of how being unable to maintain control in one's work environment made leadership work difficult came in the form of participant one's description of how much she disliked unstructured work-related events and how this made certain aspects of her work as a leader difficult. Other participants described how important maintaining control in their work environment was by describing ways leadership allowed them to maintain this control and how being able to do so made their work much easier. One example of this came in the form of participant two's description of how much she valued being able to be in control of meetings because it allowed her to structure them in a way that would enable her to more effectively communicate her thoughts.

As can be seen here, many individuals I interviewed said that a need for control and the lack of ability to obtain that control in the academic library environment in which they worked was one of the main things that was particularly challenging to them. Like with other challenges faced in the work environment (some of which I will bring up later in this paper) this one also is distinctly challenging because it is not something that can be easily accommodated for and is in many ways simply an aspect of the job.

Challenge Two: Social Skills/Cross Departmental Communication

In addition to dealing with change, another challenge which the librarians I interviewed said they faced in terms of being a leader and which they at least partially attributed to being Autistic involves difficulty with social interactions and communication in the greater university environment. This is different from communication internally in the library environment. Communication, as mentioned earlier, was also one of the key characteristics associated with being an effective leader in the leadership literature.

In conducting my interviews, multiple participants mentioned that the social interactions which came from their work could be particularly draining. For participant one, participant three, participant four, and participant five, there were frequent mentions of how challenging maintaining eye contact and maintaining an approachable demeanor could be for their work. All individuals attributed this to being Autistic, and the exhaustion which came from these social interactions was especially pronounced amongst those in public facing roles.

In addition to saying that social interactions within the library environment with patrons were made more exhausting as a result of being Autistic, interviewees also mentioned that being Autistic also made interdepartmental university communication difficult. For participant three, he referenced having a more difficult time navigating university rules and hierarchies than other colleagues due to challenges mastering unspoken rules of communication. Participant three partly attributed this to being Autistic. This same sentiment was echoed by participant four when she described her difficulty understanding campus politics and figuring out whether faculty and administrators, when they tell her something, are telling her the whole truth. Even individuals who were good at communicating with individuals in their own departments, such as participant two, faced similar challenges when attempting to communicate with individuals in the larger university environment.

With all that being said, it is clear that the need for social skills with patrons and the ability to understand social norms in the context of cross departmental communication, in addition to representing a fundamental part of leadership like was reflected in the academic library leadership literature, has represented a considerable challenge to the individuals interviewed as part of this study. It is also clear that many participants attributed being Autistic at least partially to why these sorts of things were difficult.

Benefits One and Two: In-Library Communication amongst Colleagues and Emotional Intelligence

In addition to presenting challenges to being successful in positions of leadership within the academic library environment, interviewees also mentioned how being Autistic in some cases actually proved beneficial in terms of being an academic library leader. In the interviews I conducted, interviewees identified two main ways that being Autistic proved beneficial in terms of their capacity to serve as academic library leaders.

The first way interviewees said that being Autistic made them more effective academic library leaders was because it made their in-library communication more effective. Participant four brought this up when she said that she tends to be very direct in her speech with coworkers,

thereby making clear what needs to be accomplished. While not directly attributed to Autism by this individual, I did find this worth noting due to the way that, according to resources such as Milestones Autism Resources, Autistic people tend to be more direct in their speech (Best communication practices, n.d.). Participant one also directly stated that being Autistic has assisted them in terms of in-library communication due to the way that, according to her, being Autistic has made her have to work harder to understand people in terms of communication. This has made her particularly good at communicating and at resolving communication-based conflicts between colleagues.

Another way that participants said being Autistic benefited them in terms of acting as leaders in the academic library environment was because it ultimately made them more empathetic/emotionally intelligent. For participant one, she mentioned that her dedication to her job and desire to be a good boss and colleague has made her extra empathetic to the needs of her subordinates. Participant one directly linked this to being Autistic. Likewise, participant three also mentioned that being Autistic has made him extra empathetic by allowing him to understand that everyone comes from a different background and needs certain support. This has led him to give a lot more grace to subordinates as well as being willing to advocate for the needs of others by building a space where everyone can feel felt and understood. Finally, participant five also stated that although she had struggled with emotional intelligence due to being Autistic earlier on in her life, she mentioned that as a result of having to actively focus on learning how to understand and manage their own emotions they had gotten considerably better at it compared to other people.

As can be seen here, in addition to acting as a challenge, these case studies also show how being Autistic can also bring its own strengths in terms of acting as a leader in the academic library environment, whether interviewees recognized it or not. To conclude this look at the interviews I conducted with Autistic academic librarians in positions of leadership, I will bring up a few additional things that were brought up in this discussion that might represent interesting additional lines of scholarship.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

In addition to the points brought up above, there were a number of additional observations from these interviews which were worth noting and which could open up into additional lines of scholarship. Those additional observations can be found described in more detail through the two paragraphs below.

Intersectionality

To start off, we will begin by looking at intersectionality and how various intersectional identities affect the experiences of Autistic academic librarians in positions of leadership. In terms of intersectionality, three references came up as part of these interviews. The first of these was made by participant three and related to him having formally diagnosed ADHD and self-diagnosed Autism. Rather than describing this as detrimental, this individual instead stated that having a formal ADHD diagnosis was beneficial because it helped him get many accommodations at work that both benefited him as an Autistic individual and as someone with ADHD.

While this form of intersectionality may have been somewhat positive for participant three, there were other forms of intersectionality that made acting in leadership capacity for those who I

interviewed more difficult. One that was brought up by both participant one and participant three was that of being a woman in academia and being Autistic. For participant one, the intersectionality of being a younger woman and being Autistic meant that individuals would oftentimes come to her with simple tasks that were well below her paygrade. This, according to participant one, made acting as a leader more difficult and exaggerated the effects of being Autistic due to the way that these extra miscellaneous tasks created extra instability in her work schedule, something which she stated she had a hard time dealing with as a result of being Autistic. Participant one personally felt that if she was male, she would not have gotten these sorts of below-her-paygrade questions.

For participant three, on the other hand, the intersectionality of being a woman and being an Autistic person made leadership in the form of connecting to student workers supervised by her more difficult due to the fact that she does not present in a particularly feminine manner and does not, in her words, "...smile on demand..." like many of the students at the university where she works might think women should do. This, she feels, has been an obstacle largely due to the fact that she lives in a fairly conservative area of the country where this would be expected of women. When combined with her dislike of small talk and direct communication style, something which despite her not attributing it to Autism is a characteristic of it, she says she has noticed that she can come off as intimidating to many student workers (Best communication practices, n.d.). This thereby complicates her capacity to serve as a leader in the academic library environment.

In conclusion, these experiences highlight the complexity of intersectionality in the workplace as it relates to Autistic academic librarians in positions of leadership. While some intersectional identities may prove beneficial, others exacerbate the challenges that come with being Autistic. These circumstances ultimately highlight the complexity of this topic as a whole and provide an interesting new avenue for research.

Accessibility of Workplace to Autistic Patrons and Employees

In addition to intersectionality, another notable complexity which came up when interviewing participants as part of this study was the overall inaccessibility of their library workplaces to neurodiverse individuals and how that compared with the experiences of the librarians themselves. I will go into each in more detail in the following paragraphs.

To start, we will begin by going through the experiences of these librarians in terms of how accommodating their workplaces are to neurodiverse individuals. With the exception of participant three who mentioned that their workplace felt accommodating due to their colleagues being openly neurodiverse, most participants reported that there were very few if any initiatives that had been explicitly adopted to accommodate to neurodiverse employees. At best, these accommodations just came from natural privileges that come with a leadership position such as having the opportunity to work from home. This was how it was for participant two. For some participants, they had accommodations which could be made available. With that being said, the ones that they did need (such as being able to host remote meetings) were not an option at their place of work and due to their roles. This was the case for participant one. For participant five, accommodations were largely unavailable and requesting them could illicit pushback from neurotypical colleagues.

While difficulties getting accommodations were in some cases attributed to certain participants being located in more conservative areas of the country, this was by no means a

consistent determinant. Indeed, this can be seen in the way that of the 5 librarians from diverse universities that were interviewed, only 2 reported being particularly open with colleagues about being Autistic. One of these individuals was participant three, a librarian who reported that his higher ups were openly neurodiverse themselves but who were nevertheless located in a very conservative area of the United States. This seems to emphasize the point brought up in earlier literature about the importance of promoting education in the workplace about neurodiversity and the needs of these individuals.

CONCLUSION

As can be seen here, the situation regarding the experiences of Autistic academic librarians is a complicated one. On one hand, individuals who are Autistic bring unique challenges to their workplace including social skills in cross departmental or public facing contexts and in terms of dealing with change. On the other hand, however, they also bring things that they are strong at such as possessing a strong degree of emotional intelligence and being able to communicate library tasks directly to colleagues. In addition to this, studying the experiences of Autistic academic library leaders also opens interesting lines of inquiry related to topics such as intersectionality and accessibility in this environment. While the limited number of individuals looked at here ultimately restricts how far this study can be applied, it nevertheless identifies some noteworthy trends that could be looked at further in the academic library environment and used to make the library environment a more equitable place in terms of leadership development and represents the importance of listening to neurodiverse voices in making these changes.

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