Neurodivergent Supervisors Leading Change in Libraries

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Abstract

Neurodiversity employment research has drawn attention to inequities in various workplaces, especially in technology fields, but has yet to examine librarianship, a profession that may be especially appealing to neurodivergent people. Furthermore, most neurodiversity at work research largely examined questions centering on neurodivergent employees and/or their neurotypical managers. Rarely does the research explore topics related to, or even imply the presence of, neurodivergent managers in any field. This research-in-progress paper reports on the experiences of neurodivergent supervisors, a voice sorely under-represented in the literature. The paper will report on insights from interviews with 17 neurodivergent library supervisors that examine barriers and opportunities they experienced in their roles. This research builds upon Annabi and Locke's (2019) theoretical framework to identify key barriers and enablers to the employment of neurodivergent people in libraries and illuminate key organizational characteristics of libraries at play. This work is grounded in critical studies highlighting the interplay between individual, organizational, and institutional characteristics that impact the experiences of library supervisors. The paper reports on the initial analysis of interviews with neurodivergent library managers which revealed areas of significance specific to supervisory roles: barriers to success, enablers of success, understanding and supporting differences in the workplace, and advocating for and leading organizational change.

Introduction

In the United States, neurodivergent people, such as those who are autistic, dyslexic, or who have ADHD, encounter a variety of barriers to inclusion in the workplace, including negative stereotypes and stigma, fear of discrimination, isolation, and an inaccessible work environment.[1] These barriers result in significant unemployment or under-employment of neurodivergent people. For example, autistic young adults are three times less likely to secure employment compared to any other disabled group.[2] Neurodiversity employment research has drawn attention to such inequities in a variety of workplaces but has not yet examined neurodiversity employment in libraries, a profession that may be especially appealing to neurodivergent workers.[3] While the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that 10.8% of adults currently live with some form of cognitive disability, only 3% of librarians report having any type of disability.[4] Neurodiversity employment remains underexamined in librarianship, and the experiences of neurodivergent library supervisors, in particular, have been overlooked by library literature.[5] The majority of the scholarship that addresses neurodiversity in libraries focuses on the provision of services, programs, and resources for neurodivergent patrons and often takes a problem-solving approach to inclusion. Meanwhile, the strengths and embodied knowledge of neurodivergent people remain significantly absent from the library literature, with the exception of a few articles written by or featuring autistic librarians.[6] Furthermore, neurodiversity employment work has largely focused on the perspectives and experiences of neurodivergent employees and their neurotypical managers. There is little in the literature that focuses on or speaks to the experiences of neurodivergent managers. This research aims to address both gaps in the literature. Our research aims to improve our understanding of and ability to support neurodivergent librarians, including library supervisors.

Theoretical Framework

We ground our work in Annabi and Locke's Organizational Interventions Mitigating Individual Barriers Framework (OIMIB).[7] We draw on this framework for three reasons:

1. Currently, OIMIB is the only established framework grounded in critical perspectives examining neurodiversity employment specifically.[8] The framework is grounded in the neurodiversity paradigm and critical studies to challenge notions of normalcy that have long been socio-politically and socio-culturally constructed and institutionalized as systems of inequity – in this case, ableism – permeating our workplaces.[9]

2. The framework also emphasizes the critical perspective that systems of inequity interact and may be based on other dimensions of identity (e.g., race, gender, disability) that form and preserve the socio-politically constructed notion of normal that preserves the power of the dominant group and

marginalizes the "others."[10] This is evident in the framework focus on individual differences, especially important for neurodiversity employment.

3. Most neurodiversity research represents the neurotypical priorities and perspectives.[11] The critical epistemological lens through which OIMIB was developed provides the lens necessary to give voice to neurodivergent people and utilizes a strength model rather than a deficit model often present in employment literature.

OIMIB includes five components to demarcate individual-, intervention-, and organizational-level constructs that influence neurodivergent individuals' experiences in the workforce. OIMIB posits that neurodivergent individuals experience workplace barriers and opportunities differently based on their individual identity, individual influences, and environmental influences. These individual differences also influence how and whether a neurodivergent employee or supervisor utilizes any neurodiversity employment programs, accommodations, or support structures and whether they deploy their own coping methods to mitigate their experience of barriers and opportunities in the workplace. In this model, organizations deploy neurodiversity diversity interventions (such as autism acceptance training) in order to (1) mitigate barriers in the workplace for those neurodivergent employees and (2) mitigate negative attitudes toward and improve the knowledge about neurodiversity that neurotypical employees may have. Knowledge and attitude constructs informed by the Theory of Planned Behavior ([TPB] Ajzen[12]), in turn, influence barriers and opportunities that exist in the workplace for neurodivergent people.

Individual Experience is an individual-level construct grounded in Individual Differences Theory of Gender[13] and neurodiversity literature to depict intersectional identities of neurodivergent employees and includes three sub-constructs: 1) individual identity (personal demographics and career items); 2) individual influences (personal characteristics and influences); and 3) environmental influences (cultural, economic, policy, and infrastructure influences). The interplay between these constructs explains the varied ways in which neurodivergent employees and neurodivergent supervisors experience barriers in the workplace and can secure, persist, and advance in employment.

Barriers and Opportunities are organizational-level constructs. Societal and organizational structures grounded in normative and ableist expectations about how professionals should communicate, interact, and behave create barriers for neurodivergent librarians and supervisors in the workplace. Although library practitioners and library researchers have drawn their attention to issues of access and accessibility for library patrons, minimal library literature draws on critical disabilities studies. Most library literature on the topic of disability aligns with the medical model of disabilities, in which so-called 'impairments' are viewed as problems to be solved instead of the social model of disability, which focuses attention on the societal conditions and barriers that construct disability and inequitable access, and posits that it is society that needs to change, not the individual.[14] Hence, we use OIMIB which introduces barriers as existing in the environment from the lens of neurodivergent employees which is a critical contribution to the current inclusion paradigm that permeates librarianship.

Embodied Knowledge (Individual Coping Methods) is an individual-level construct focusing on how neurodivergent individuals exercise agency and deploy individual coping methods to respond to barriers. We extend the construct of individual coping methods to focus on embodied knowledge grounded in neurodiversity movement language and critical disability theory, particularly the concept of complex embodiment.[15] This construct recognizes that neurodivergent librarians have developed knowledge and expertise through their experiences living and working in places that are not built for them. This embodied knowledge includes tactics like strategic disclosure and masking, developing informal networks, seeking informal mentors, and ignoring barriers, to more severe responses, such as changing personal characteristics or leaving their job. We know very little about the coping methods that neurodivergent librarians and managers use to mitigate barriers in library professions. We posit that not all the methods previously identified in OIMIB will be relevant to neurodivergent librarians.

Organizational Intervention Characteristics is an intervention-level construct that includes the characteristics of libraries and various inclusion programs/interventions preventing, mitigating, and

eliminating the barriers neurodivergent librarians experience. Intervention characteristics influence the extent to which barriers and opportunities exist and the level at which they negatively or positively impact neurodivergent librarians. For our study, we look at methods and practices deployed.

Knowledge and attitudes of neurotypical librarians is an individual-level construct informed by the Theory of Planned Behavior[16] to specifically measure the potential impact of organizational interventions on neurotypical librarians' and supervisors' behaviors and, ultimately, the challenges and opportunities facing employees with autism. For neurodivergent employees, as for disabled library workers, supervisors contribute to positive or negative work experiences as well as organizational culture and practices. [17] Recent studies indicate that library administrators and supervisors often lack an understanding of disabilities, especially invisible disabilities such as autism and dyslexia, or hold negative attitudes or stereotypes, which creates barriers to workplace inclusion. Research suggests training and education for library managers and co-workers to enhance inclusion[18] and emphasize moving beyond acceptance training to know-how (practice-based) training for lasting impact.[19] This study will examine the impact of neurodiversity acceptance and practical 'know-how' for library managers, supervisors, and other employees who play a role in fostering inclusion of neurodivergent librarians.

Table 1. Constructs and Subconstructs of OIMIB

Individual Level		Organizational Level	
Individual Experience	▪ Individual identity ▪ Individual influences ▪ Environmental influences	**Knowledge and attitudes of neurotypical employees**	▪ Knowledge ▪ Attitudes ▪ Intentions ▪ Practical know-how
Embodied Knowledge (Individual coping methods)	▪ Informal networks ▪ Informal mentoring ▪ Individual changes ▪ Ignoring barriers ▪ Change-agent mindset ▪ Using "special interest" or strengths for career ▪ Using tools to support needs ▪ Disclosing diagnosis ▪ Requesting accommodations ▪ Identity development ▪ Consistently high performance ▪ Leaving the profession	**Opportunities**	▪ Culture of diversity & inclusion ▪ Employee education ▪ Positive colleague relationships ▪ Flexible arrangements ▪ Control over environment ▪ Meeting communication needs ▪ Trauma-informed approach
		Barriers	▪ Stereotyping ▪ Stigma ▪ Discrimination ▪ Isolation/exclusion ▪ Poor colleague relationships ▪ Inappropriate environment ▪ Neurotypical expectations ▪ Unmet communication needs ▪ Lack of employer knowledge/familiarity of neurodiversity ▪ Lasting impact of stress ▪ Accommodations processes

Method

This study focuses on autism and ADHD to build on existing research on autism and ADHD employment. Its goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences associated with these two forms of neurodiversity and allow for representation across other forms of identity, including gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. This study is being carried out in four phases. In **Phase 1**, we investigate the barriers and enablers that neurodivergent librarians and supervisors encounter in the workplace by conducting semi-structured interviews grounded in feminist interview techniques that share power with participants. Phase 1 leverages qualitative methods to refine and adapt OIMIB to the context of libraries librarianship. Using the refined OIMIB framework, these interviews focus on individual differences, barriers and opportunities in the library workplace, and neurotypical librarian knowledge and attitudes. Findings from Phase 1 will inform **Phase 2** to conduct nationwide surveys of 75-100 neurodivergent

librarians and supervisors and 100-150 neurotypical library supervisors and employees to identify further and validate barriers and enablers. **Phase 3** will draw on the previous phases and employ participatory design to create a high-impact curricular module, for use in library organizations and MLIS programs, that is aimed at not only changing attitudes but also developing practical 'know-how' for retaining and advancing neurodivergent librarians. The design phase will also include input from neurodivergent librarians and self-advocates and will draw on existing literature on professional education and neurodiversity inclusion. In **Phase 4**, we will deliver and assess the effectiveness of the curricular module through workshops with librarians across the country. The assessment will measure participants' change in knowledge, attitudes, and practical know-how and will inform additional revisions to the curriculum.

In this research-in-progress paper, we report insights from 17 interviews with neurodivergent library supervisors. Therefore, this paper will report on the following research questions:
1. What barriers and enablers to workplace inclusion and empowerment do neurodivergent library supervisors experience?
2. How do neurodivergent library supervisors navigate workplaces that may not be designed for them?

We use critical epistemology in which we examine the interplay of the constructs from the neurodivergent employee's perspective. Critical disability studies serve as a theoretical lens for this work, particularly scholarship on models of disability and the societal assumptions and beliefs about disabilities.[20] Critical disability studies as a lens draws attention to structures and systems, to the knowledge of disabled people themselves, and to ableism and its far-reaching impacts. To this end, we leverage feminist interview techniques[21] that shift power to neurodivergent participants to question and present alternative interpretations and ways of working and being that challenge normative expectations and inform our theoretical understanding of the nature of their experiences at work in libraries.

Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

Data collection began in February, 2023 and concluded in August, 2023, including interviews with seventeen neurodivergent library supervisors. We designed an interview protocol to investigate aspects of the conceptual framework outlined above, as well as experiences that might be distinct to the supervisory role. All interviews were conducted virtually and recorded using Zoom, then transcribed and anonymized. The qualitative data from the interview transcripts were analyzed using an iterative approach to content analysis outlined by Miles et al, including data collection, data condensation through coding, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions, all of which were grounded in the conceptual framework.[22] Data analysis began with post-interview memoing and was followed by data reduction through deductive and inductive coding.[23] An intercoder process was used as a method for reflexivity and dialogue among researchers with the goal of increasing clarity and consistency in data analysis.[24] Intercoder reliability, using percent agreement, reached 94% between two independent coders.

Preliminary Findings: Emerging Areas of Significance

Throughout the interviews with neurodivergent library supervisors, we observed areas of significance relevant to barriers to success, opportunities for success, understanding and supporting differences in the workplace, and advocating for and leading organizational change. Below, we highlight the most noteworthy preliminary themes related to key components of the framework across both ADHD and Autists. We stop short of exploring how framework concepts interrelate, until data collection and analysis is complete, or providing comparative analysis across neurotypes in this preliminary stage of analysis.

Barriers to Success- OIMIB

Neurodivergent library supervisors encountered many of the same barriers to success and inclusion as their library colleagues, including negative stereotypes and stigma, fear of discrimination, isolation, and an inaccessible work environment, all of which are in keeping with existing research. Unclear expectations were discussed as a barrier by 13/17 supervisors, who often became aware of unwritten expectations when they were questioned or reprimanded for doing something 'wrong.' Supervisors also highlighted the need for changes in organizational culture to be more welcoming of differences and different ways of working. Doing so would ideally minimize the need for masking and the cost associated

with constantly "performing" in the workplace. Participants shared that often they carried the burden of educating their colleagues, adapting their workplace environment, and navigating workplace norms and practices that were created without them in mind. This burden came with mental, emotional, and physical costs, and was exhausting to the extent that it impacted their personal lives as well as their professional experiences. This is particularly challenging being in the manager role - as managers are both subject to these barriers, and responsible for addressing them for their direct reports.

Opportunities for Success - OIMIB

During the interviews, library supervisors also highlighted enablers of inclusion and success, such as flexibility and autonomy. A flexible work schedule, the ability to work from home, and the ability to be self-directed were also enablers. Participants also discussed the importance of the physical and sensory environment and appreciated when their supervisory role provided the benefit of a private workspace that allowed control over lighting, noise, and potential interruptions. Supervisors were often expected to check in on other library workers and be available as needed, so they valued the ability to close a door or put up a sign and take some quiet time to work independently without interruption.

Strengths of a Neurodivergent Supervisor – OIMIB Individual Experience & Individual Coping Methods

Neurodivergent librarian supervisors observed that although they encountered challenges in being a supervisor, they also felt that their neurodivergence was an asset to that role. For some this meant being more understanding of differences and empathetic toward their direct reports. For example, Carmen stressed the strengths of being a neurodivergent supervisor, saying,

> *"I feel like it helps me be more direct with people of like, this is what I expect. This is why, let me know if you have questions. And I think it helps me be more, tolerant is not the right word, but maybe patient with people where I don't take people's things personally. It's just like, well, this is just how people are, you know? And it helps me, I think, I spend so much of my time just like helping people work with other people. And I think it helps me navigate interactions between people in a better way. And because establishing boundaries for myself is so important, I think it helps me help others with their boundaries."*

Supervisors also shared strategies they had learned to make themselves effective that were transferrable to how they support and work with their reports, especially neurodivergent reports. For example, using a template to guide conversation during one-on-one meetings, which helped both the neurodivergent supervisor and employee prepare in advance for the meeting and know what to expect throughout.

Advocating for and Leading Change – OIMIB Individual Coping Methods

About two-thirds (11/17) of participants reported using the power associated with their supervisory role to change aspects of their organization or to hire other neurodivergent library workers. Nova shared that she felt that one of the strengths she brought to her role was *"the ability to, especially like being a supervisor position, having the ability to hire other neurodivergent people who would struggle in other industries or maybe like really struggle with interviews."* Other library supervisors discussed ways that they were leading change in their libraries, such as making modifications to hiring practices to make them more neuroinclusive, or altering library policies for improved clarity and transparency. This emphasis on change was discussed in more depth by neurodivergent supervisors when compared to the interviews we conducted with neurodivergent librarians who did not have supervisory roles. While some neurodivergent librarians did mention their attempts to advocate for or lead change, such as organizing a book group around neurodiversity, neurodivergent supervisors tended to discuss their role as change agents as an essential part of their approach to leadership in their library. Many of them drew on their lived experience as a neurodivergent person to identify areas needing improvement, such as unclear policies or inconsistent workflows. Furthermore, their understanding of differences and empathy for their library team drove them to improve working conditions for everyone, from allowing flexibility in schedules to carving out library space for private offices for all the librarians. Lastly, neurodivergent supervisors stressed the importance of advancing neurodivergent librarians into leadership roles because of the strengths they bring to leadership positions. They indicated that neurodivergent library leaders could offer new perspectives and innovative ideas for advancing the work of libraries and the profession itself.

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