
Look Out! Ableism is Loose in the Library

Inclusivity and Equity for Librarians
with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT Ableism is rampant in the profession of academic librarianship. While there has been stress on other minorities such as racial and ethnic, little attention is paid to those with disabilities. Disability is often treated as a medical condition that needs to be cured. The focus is on the disability, not the person. Much better for considering the entire individual is the social justice model. It is unfair and oppressive to exclude people from being hired as academic librarians or keeping their jobs at academic libraries because of a disability. The disability may have nothing to do with job responsibilities, but because an individual has a disability, the person is stigmatized as a problem and not “normal.” Libraries only want to hire those who are “normal.” Library staff need to understand disability better, treat those with disabilities as people, make the library a caring community, and be willing to provide reasonable accommodations.

Atla has a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee. Part of the committee’s charge is “Increasing members’ competency with issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism through active support and training.” This essay deals with disability and ableism in libraries. I performed my own survey (Litwak 2022) and described the results. It is not hard to find news articles, blog posts, and presentations about racism. Antiracism is definitely important, but what about librarians with a disability? Talk of diversity, inclusion, and equity is in the air. What do inclusion and equity really mean? For our purposes, equity means fair treatment for all, not only for some. This is a social justice matter. It’s not fair to exclude people because of some attribute that may have nothing to do with their job skills and experience. Inclusion, then, seeks to create equity. People of all

sorts can apply for librarian positions, and if they can meet the requirements, other attributes, such as disability, should not matter. However, in real life, such attributes do matter. This issue matters because it affects lots of people in negative ways. It has affected me personally. The (mis)treatment of librarians and library staff due to a disability is called ableism. Lindsay and Fuentes (2020, 178) state that this “refers to unwanted, exploitative or abusive conduct against people with disabilities that violates their dignity and security.”

Let’s begin by defining disability vocabulary. First, within disability studies, there is disagreement over saying a “disabled person” or “a person with a disability.” I will use the latter because the first suggests that “I am my disability,” and “that is all that matters about me.” The latter, on the other hand, suggests that a person may have one or more characteristics that significantly hinder interactions with the world around them on a daily basis. So, what does disability mean, what are we talking about? The meaning of disability depends upon the lenses that one uses to consider the subject.

There are different models for understanding this topic. These are the Medical model, the Deficit model, the Rehabilitation model, and the Social model. Seibers (2008, 3) asserts that in the Medical model, a person is seen as having an “Individual defect lodged in the person, a defect that must be cured or eliminated if the person is to achieve full capability.” The disability is a medical problem that needs to be fixed, and little attention is given to the individual beyond being a patient. The related Deficit model sees the person with the disability as lacking something. This leads to seeing the person with a disability as “lesser.” Schomberg (2017, 120) explains that within Western cultures, “being publicly disabled has historically led to censure, hostility,” and suspicion that the individual is using the disability to gain sympathy. According to Schomberg and Highby (2020, 21), the Rehabilitation model focuses on, “Recovery and adjusting the personalities of disabled people to the existing environment,” not changing the environment. This is similar to the Medical model in that the focus is on enabling an individual to overcome her disability to perform required job duties. The Social model focuses not on the individual, but on the environment. Those with disabilities are a minority group that faces discrimination because with a disability, they are not “normal.” For many “normal” people, the exclusion might be unconscious. Connor et. al. put this more stridently, however, stating that, “Disability is not a thing or condition affecting

people but instead a social negation serving powerful ideological commitments and political aims.” (2008, 447) That may sound harsh unless one has been “assigned,” consciously or unconsciously, the “disabled” moniker. I am concerned about the Social model. In this model, those with a disability:

- Are a minority group that faces discrimination, because with a disability they are not “normal”
- Have a socially-defined impairment
- Are a product of social injustice, leading to exclusion and oppression
- Have a stigma for identity
- Pose challenges for services, employment, and more
- Face attitudes of the “normal”
- Struggle with expectations to adhere to American values and ideologies: “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps”
- Face barriers created by those without a disability, i.e., “normal”

It can be a struggle to have a visible or apparent disability. Hidden disabilities can be significant challenges as well, but they often do not affect one’s ability in an interview. As these items indicate, it is not the one with the disability who sets him/herself apart as not normal. It is those who are “normal” who set the bar higher than anyone with a disability can reach. This is ironic in that those perceived as normal will, given enough time or experiences, develop a disability.

WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?

Getting hired or keeping one’s position has proven very difficult for (potential) librarians with disabilities. Other minority groups often seem more able to obtain positions. There is significant discrimination against many groups, but those with a disability may have a harder time getting hired. Many, if not most, higher-ed institutions claim equity and inclusion in hiring. Librarians with disabilities are not treated equitably. Since such librarians are not considered “normal” and institutions want to hire “normal” people, such applicants will not get past an initial interview. Such employers are treating those with disabilities unfairly. The applicant should be considered with no value given to the disability. If a disability could interfere

with performing the job that the applicant is seeking, the employer should find some way to ascertain if the disability matters for the position. For example, if an applicant wears a leg brace all the time, that is irrelevant to a position as a reference librarian, a cataloger, or other positions in an academic or theological library. This is even more relevant now since the pandemic required librarians to serve patrons more online. That change ameliorates the challenges that some librarians with a disability might face. For me, it means that I can use Zoom to view a student's paper without struggling to see the student's computer screen by looking over his shoulder. I can also easily demonstrate to users the details of performing searches in databases.

It is only fair that a potential employer not assume that because one has a disability, the applicant is stupid or mentally incapable of performing the duties of the position. I have a significant visual impairment due to a cluster of problems that came with the genes responsible for the eyes and eyelids. That does not affect my ability to provide reference and instruction. My impairment did not prevent me from earning a PhD in New Testament studies. It does not keep me from reading Greek, Hebrew, German, French, Latin, or Aramaic. I regularly walk patrons over to the right spot in the stacks to help them look for resources. I make scans of lexicon entries for students who do not know the biblical languages. This list of tasks is not bragging. These tasks are common job responsibilities or requirements for theological librarians doing public services. My disability, regardless of what some interviewer thinks is true by looking at me, does not interfere with me learning more about library instruction, interacting with patrons, or doing my job well.

It may be reasonable to see some apparent disabilities as making success in a particular position somewhat unlikely. Someone who uses a wheelchair might have difficulty reshelving books in a seven-foot tall shelving unit. I read of an interview with a person who had a significant hearing impairment to the point that he could not seem to hear questions from the interviewers. That could make success in the library challenging as well. However, a prospective employer ought to give an applicant with a disability the chance to explain why the disability will not prevent him or her from performing job duties. The ADA describes what questions an interviewer may or may not ask of a person with a disability (Employee Disability Resources Center 2017). Schomberg and Highby (2020, 207-20) and the

Office of Disability Employment Policy (n.d.) offer other resources for interviewing someone with a disability. It is the responsibility of the applicant to talk about the disability in order to answer unasked questions. The interviewer needs to strive to let go of preconceptions about what “disabled people” can accomplish. These assumptions can be major barriers to applicants, as they have been to me.

In academia, assumptions are made about what a “normal” environment and “normal” worker is. As one country-western song put it, “normal is just a setting on the washing machine.” These assumptions create barriers for librarians and other library workers. Value is placed upon people’s minds and thoughts. According to Evans et al., while this “value could create greater room for people with physical disabilities,” it can present difficulties for those with psychological impairments. Evans et al. (2017, 205) assert that these could include learning disabilities, autism, and other forms of neurodiversity. One study examined the job-seeking experiences of librarians with autism. According to Anderson (2021), employment rates are lower than the general population. Autistic LIS grads are regularly un- or under-employed. Disclosure helped some, but hurt others. Autism is often an invisible or hidden disability. It manifests itself in many ways. Like others who “pass,”—i.e., do not have an apparent disability—such individuals may struggle after being hired. Those with mental health issues will face stigma and prejudice. It is no surprise that those with hidden disabilities avoid disclosing them unless and until necessary.

Requesting accommodations is a problem as well. Some find it necessary to request accommodations. Obtaining accommodations can be difficult or risky as well. Suggesting that accommodations will be helpful during an interview may raise “red flags” as employers consider what those might cost. There is also the concern that other employees will wonder why they did not get such an accommodation. The work environment for those with disabilities can be harder than for others. While many libraries provide accommodations for students, they do not provide similar accommodations for library faculty and staff.

While not specifically about librarians, one study of faculty and staff at a multi-campus university found that a much larger percentage of faculty and staff with disabilities felt excluded (shunned or ignored) and experienced intimidating, offensive, or hostile conduct. Evans et. al. (2017, 212) state that this included bullying and harass-

ment that faculty and staff without disabilities do not normally experience. Schomberg (2017, 117) described the case of one librarian whose coworker tried to get the librarian terminated because she had diabetes. Granted that diabetes, like other ailments, needs to be managed, it is wrong to attempt to get someone fired simply because the person has a disability. If there was any doubt that there is a problem, these studies and experiences should dispel those doubts. It would be one thing to be terminated because of unacceptable behavior, such as racial slurs or inappropriately touching someone else. It is quite another to be terminated because of a medical condition. Unfair! It is true that some disabilities may make an employee work more slowly than others, but the slower person needs to know the expectations of the organization. If one meets those expectations, then the disability should be irrelevant.

FINDING EMPLOYMENT WITH A DISABILITY

Job ads for librarian or other library staff positions often claim to be inclusive. Yet, if a library basically “writes off” an entire minority group, it is inclusive in name only. According to the World Health Organization and World Bank (2011), approximately 15 percent of people in the world have a disability. Oud (2019, 169) asserts that, “Librarians with a disability are an example of...an overlooked group. Librarians with disabilities form a substantial minority within librarianship, with estimates of 3.7 percent in the United States and 5.9 percent in Canada.” In 2019, Atla ran a demographic survey, in which they asked about disabilities among the membership. According to the survey, “140 individual-type members responded to the survey out of 513 current individual-type members at the time the survey was distributed (27.3%). Of the 140 respondents, the membership class breakdown of respondents was: emeritus – 9, retired – 10, student – 11, and individual – 110.” (Atla Director of Member Services 2022). Individual members were those who joined Atla as individual members. This includes members who joined as individual, student, emeritus, or retired. From the survey data, I am interested in the responses from individuals and students, not retired or emeritus because they may have developed a disability long after retiring. 6.54 percent of individual members reported having a disability, and 9.09 percent of student members reported having a disability. These numbers are better than that for the ALA or those in Oud’s research,

but still do not reflect the 15 percent of the world's population. These statistics suggest, as Koford (2018, 3579) states, that “people with disabilities are underrepresented in librarianship and library work.”

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Having described the issue and why it is important, it is time to consider what to do about it. Many, if not most, people may not be aware of their ableist perspective. One might subconsciously hold an opinion about the capabilities and/or burdens of an employee with a disability, but not be aware of the presence and indeed power of such presuppositions. Therefore, it is imperative that those without disabilities reflect on the possibilities for someone who has a disability to be a coworker or supervisor. To borrow from the real estate world, the core problem is attitude, attitude, attitude. What disabilities would actually make a person incapable of performing job duties at a reasonable level? There may be disabilities that would in fact make performing a specific role in the library a challenge. However, that should not be assumed. Such assumptions create stress for those with disabilities who may fear job loss simply because of a condition that they have no control over. In fact, ableist assumptions often lead a person with a disability to depression, low self-esteem, and social isolation. Moeller (2019, 455) asserts that, “existing processes designed to address disability treat its existence as a problem in need of a solution, and in doing so, further contribute to the workplace precarity experienced by library workers.” The assignment of everyone to two groups, able-bodied or disabled, is not helpful for treating all employees fairly. If (potential) employers saw those with disabilities as people, not disabilities, it could help enormously. Librarians care about patrons. The library faculty and staff should likewise be a caring community for each other. Jessica Schomberg (2017, 121) offers several suggestions for how to change the situation:

- Recognize that more people have disabilities than you are aware of, and these disabilities fluctuate. Disabilities also might not manifest themselves, but that does not mean that they are nonexistent.
- Build a caring community through potlucks and having group projects in order to help solve problems and keep the burden of a task off of one person.
- Allow employees to work from home when practical.

- Provide clear information to employees about performance and timelines.

ASGCLA (2015) also offers helpful tips, such as:

- Promote job sharing, in which each person contributes one's knowledge and skills.
- Other staff members and supervisors must respect an individual's privacy.
- Provide an opportunity for someone with a disability to explain it can also be helpful in dealing with false assumptions.
- Ensure that there is good lighting, not only in the stacks, but work and break areas, and no glare.
- Make sure, for libraries in the U.S., that workspaces comply with the ADA and sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Acts of 1973.

Academic and theological librarians with disabilities are not objects to be feared or pitied. Supervisors and other library staff need to see those with disabilities as people, not as a medical problem to be solved. They are people like any library staff member. They want to be respected. They want to avoid being considered “less” than those without disabilities. Think about what it would be like to be considered less or incapable because of something you have no control. They want to get the job done, even if that does require some accommodations. They want to contribute to the organization. They want the same recognition, opportunities, and support that other library workers get. Like any job applicant, they want a fair chance to make the case for a library to hire them. As academic and theological librarians, who learn constantly and care about patrons, it is time to treat library staff with disabilities the same way. Most of us probably know the sense of being treated unfairly, incompetent, or judged as “less.” Let us extend that desire to how those with disabilities are viewed and treated. We can do better. Let us strive to do so.

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