In The Library With The Lead Pipe

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NEURODIVERSITY IN THE LIBRARY: ONE LIBRARIAN’S

2 Comments
In Brief:

The literature about neurodiversity and libraries is heavily skewed toward libraries accommodating neurodivergent patrons. There is little written about librarians who are neurodivergent and their professional experiences. In this interview, Charlie Remy, an academic librarian who has autism, discusses his autism, his professional experience, and what others can do to create a more inclusive neurodiverse profession.

By Alice Eng

Diversity is a word frequently used in the library profession. The literature that currently exists typically focuses on gender, ethnic, cultural, and sexual diversities. One group rarely mentioned is the neurodivergent. According to the National Symposium on Neurodiversity at Syracuse University, the neurodivergent “include those labeled with Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Dyscalculia, Autistic Spectrum, Tourette Syndrome, and others.”

The neurodivergent have always been a part of the community but are now formally recognized as a group of the U.S. population. A 2014 survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that 1 in 45 children, ages 3-17, have been diagnosed
with autism spectrum disorder. Yet the neurodivergent are noticeably absent in the library workforce and literature. Emily Lawrence’s essay, “Loud hands in the library: Neurodiversity in LIS theory & practices,” offers one theory as to why: an overall lack of diversity within librarianship itself. Other reasons might include people not disclosing their autism or people not self-identifying as having autism.

This prompted me to interview Charlie Remy. Charlie is the Electronic Resources and Serials Librarian at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC) and happens to have autism. He was willing to share his professional experiences with me with the intention of bringing attention to this overlooked group.

**When were you diagnosed with Autism?**

**Charlie:** I was diagnosed at the age of 23 when I was in library school. Several years earlier my parents suggested I read *Beyond the Wall* by Stephen Shore. It’s a memoir written by an adult on the spectrum. My parents immediately thought of me when they read it and I concurred with them! It described a lot of experiences similar to those in my childhood (intense special interests, social awkwardness, sensory sensitivities, etc.). By the time I received the diagnosis, it was just a confirmation of what I already knew. I just wanted to make it official in case I needed accommodations in the future. It also felt somewhat awkward to participate in autistic organizations without an actual diagnosis. Learning about autism in my early 20s was comforting because I now understood the *why* for many things in my life. The dots were...
starting to connect. My childhood in the 1980s and 1990s occurred when there was limited knowledge in the medical community about “high functioning” autism. Part of me was somewhat frustrated by finding out about this so late, but it’s not productive to focus on something which was out of my control.

What drew you to the field of librarianship?

Charlie: I decided to become a librarian for 3 primary reasons: early childhood exposure to public libraries, an extremely positive undergraduate library experience, and my love for information in all formats.

My parents took me to the public library at least once a week when I was a child. They exposed me to the many wonderful things libraries offer such as access to information, technology training, interesting people, a culture of lifelong learning, etc. I feel fortunate that my parents demonstrated the value of libraries to me as some kids have never set foot in libraries. Back in 1995 I learned how to use the Internet at my local public library. I participated in summer reading programs and enjoyed conducting research for school projects.

I attended Elon University in North Carolina where I had an amazing undergraduate library experience. Endearingly called “Club Belk” by students, Belk Library was my home base during college. I practically lived there. It had comfortable furniture and was inviting, innovative, and featured great print and electronic resources. I considered many of the librarians to be my mentors. Being socially awkward with unique interests, I didn’t
participate much in the collegiate social scene, so the library was where I did a lot of my socializing. Elon invested a great deal of money into library acquisitions at the time since they had to reach a certain book volume count in order to meet Phi Beta Kappa’s library requirement as part of the chapter application process. This resulted in me requesting many, many books (and even databases!), most of which were purchased. I feel like I had somewhat of an impact on that library collection. As an alumnus, I choose to earmark my donations to the library where they use the money to purchase Spanish language materials (I was a Spanish major). They send me a list of the titles they purchase so I know exactly how my money is used.

Finally, I love information in all formats. In particular, I’m a “news junkie” who obsessively consumes local, national, and international news, mostly in the form of online video (I love newspapers but, unfortunately, I don’t have the time to keep up with them). I entered college wanting to be a broadcast journalist but after taking a few introductory courses, I quickly realized that it wasn’t for me. Too much of a focus on appearance, ratings, and profits and not enough on the public good. Being a librarian lets me surround myself with information and satisfies my intellectual curiosity.

It sounds like you had already decided to become a librarian before being diagnosed. After receiving a formal diagnosis, how did you decide to go forward with applying for jobs and interviewing? Did you think this was something you wanted to disclose early in the process or not at all?
Charlie: Yes, my decision to become a librarian wasn’t directly related to my autism diagnosis but I will say that libraries can be good places for autistic people to work!

I usually disclose to people after I get to know them for a couple reasons:

- I want them to get to know all aspects of me and not just think of the diagnosis. Autism is just one part of my identity. It doesn’t completely define who I am.
- I want to be sure they’re mature enough to “handle” this information. Some people don’t seem to understand the significance of this diagnosis.
- Sometimes it’s really not important that they know. Especially in the case of acquaintances with whom I have more of a surface relationship.

I did disclose my autism once during an on-campus interview at another library. The interview was going so well and I felt genuinely comfortable with the search committee, so I disclosed when a pertinent question came up (I think they were asking me about some of my autism-related [professional] scholarship on my CV). After disclosing, they remarked that there were likely many faculty on the spectrum at their university (whether diagnosed or not) which was probably true!

I disclosed when I was offered my current job here at UTC since I requested a special schedule accommodation (a compressed workweek of Monday-Thursday, 4 ten-hour days). This hadn’t been done before at my library and once I explained the reason for why
I was requesting it they allowed me to have this schedule. A compressed schedule gives me an extra day to rest from work, both physically and emotionally. It really works well for me and I’m fortunate that they’ve been willing to accommodate this request. Other than that, I don’t receive any formal accommodations.

**How did the interviewers telling you that they suspected many of their faculty to be on the spectrum make you feel?**

**Charlie:** Their response was validating. I felt a sense of acceptance for who I was and it was refreshing that I could be so open with them. I didn’t end up getting the job. The chair of the search committee personally contacted me and explained that they offered it to someone with more supervisory experience. I thought it was kind of them to tell me exactly why they chose someone else. I couldn’t offer them that part of what they were looking for.

**You mentioned people not understanding the significance of the diagnosis. Can you tell me more about that?**

**Charlie:** I’m on the “high functioning” end of the spectrum which means that I can easily blend in as neurotypical. It’s not that I purposefully try to hide my autism, but my characteristics are more subtle. Once people get to know me they can start seeing my autistic quirks. Therefore, sometimes when I tell people I’m on the spectrum, they might say “Really? Are you sure?” or “I never would’ve known!” I realize that they’re probably trying to be nice but it comes across as dismissive and patronizing and causes me to feel like I need to
prove my diagnosis. It also makes for an awkward conversation because it's hard to easily respond to those comments, especially if you don't know the person well. Autism can be very much misunderstood. Many associate it with characteristics such as being completely non-verbal, of physically rocking back and forth or flapping hands, which don't apply to me.

Can you describe the characteristics of your autism? I know some of the more well-known characteristics include sensitivity to sound and touch, but obviously every person is different.

Charlie: Yes—we like to say that when you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism. Each person’s characteristics are different and of varying intensities. Here are some characteristics that I have:

- Linear, concrete thinking. It’s challenging for me to conceptualize abstract concepts or ambiguity. I can struggle to process complex information that I’m not familiar with and might need it explained multiple times. Math was extremely challenging for me in school and to this day I prefer to avoid math if possible.
- Sensitivity to sudden loud sounds that I’m not expecting (noisy motorcycles, sirens, dogs barking, phone suddenly ringing, etc.).
- High anxiety overall.
- Easily overwhelmed; when I have a lot of things to accomplish, I get very overwhelmed because everything has the same sense of urgency to me. It's
challenging for me to prioritize sometimes.

- Poor gross and fine motor skills. I received occupational therapy in middle school.
- Obsessive compulsive/perfectionistic. I constantly check over the work I do to make sure there aren’t any mistakes. I check my alarm clock multiple times before I go to bed to make sure it’s set properly.
- Transitions between tasks are challenging, especially if I’m not done with a task and need to move on to something else. I prefer to finish my current task and then move on to the next one.
- I often speak what’s on my mind and have trouble filtering my thoughts. It’s hard for me to adapt to expectations in certain social situations (you don’t say this that way to that person, etc.) since I tend to act the same way in all situations. I’m an open book and often state the obvious even if it’s considered rude.
- Special interests. Most people on the spectrum have intense interests where they become very knowledgeable on certain topics since they spend so much time researching and thinking about them. My special interests include television news and the media in general, current events, Spanish language, and world travel. When I was a child I used to love to collect things like keychains, small flags of countries around the world, coffee mugs from TV stations across the country, etc.
- I’m a very intellectually curious person so I ask a lot of questions, some of which can be quite detail oriented. This can annoy others in a meeting or classroom environment.
- I’m detail oriented. I tend to focus on the
minutiae and lose the forest for the trees. This can be an asset in librarianship where little details can be important.

I think most people find interviewing to be overwhelming and sometimes stressful. How do you handle the interview process?

Charlie: Interviewing in higher education settings can be very tiring and stressful, regardless of whether one is autistic or not. As I mentioned earlier, my autistic characteristics tend to be more subtle so interviews are tiring, but, other than that, not too bad. I’ve been told by several people that my phone interviews are strong which helps get me in the door. (When I was a child, my parents always made me make calls to other people and businesses myself instead of doing it for me, so I’m very comfortable on the phone.) I prepare, prepare, prepare ahead of the interview (looking at the website and taking notes on the library and parent institution, researching the presentation question and formulating my own thoughts/experience with the topic). The two most challenging aspects of interviews for me are: being scrutinized throughout the process (even if it’s during the more informal social gatherings—you’re still being judged on what you say/how you act so I need to be extra careful) and at the end when I’m waiting for a response about whether I’ve gotten the job or not. Waiting is painful for me because I tend to obsess over the unknown, second guess myself after the interview, etc. It’s always a relief to finally be told whether I have a job offer or not. Even if it’s not an offer, at least the waiting process and its uncertainty is over.5

Are there things like library projects or
professional development projects which you accomplished not knowing you could?

Charlie: I have a great deal of anxiety when it comes to numbers (math calculations, e-resource usage statistics, quantitative information in general). Math has always been a weakness for me academically and I required a lot of tutoring in high school to get through it successfully. Hard work, practice, and good tutors were essential. The least favorite part of my job has to do with numbers (such as usage statistics, cost per use, inflationary increases, etc.). When I started in the profession 6+ years ago, I hardly knew how to use Microsoft Excel. Since then I have gradually developed skills and confidence with how to more effectively use this program and save myself time and effort. In my opinion, quantitative data often lacks context and can therefore offer limited insights. The reality is that libraries always need to prove their value proposition (as they don’t tend to generate revenue), especially in times of budgetary challenges, and numbers are an essential part of this.

Another area of challenge has been managing the work of others. Last spring my library created a part-time position to help me manage our electronic resources. Up until then, I was the only person managing the entire lifecycle of our e-resources (procurement, setup, maintenance, troubleshooting, assessment, etc.). We hired an awesome person who’s detail oriented, diligent, trustworthy, and efficient. In the time since, he’s gone to full-time—splitting time between e-resources and interlibrary loan.

Prior to this, I had never managed anyone on a
regular basis so I've had quite a learning curve (not because of the person but rather myself simply learning how to manage others). I've noticed two challenges: assigning projects and providing him with clear instructions on what I need him to do. Assigning tasks requires time and letting go. It requires planning and clear instructions so the person understands how to complete it in the way you want. On numerous occasions I've found myself being unclear with him (assuming that he knows something when I shouldn't assume, not fully planning out the task and then realizing more parts need to be added to it which results in him having to go back and redo them, etc.). I get frustrated with myself but then acknowledge that I'm new at supervising others and I have to refine my skills in this area. The other challenge is that he's so good at accurately completing projects in a short amount of time that I struggle to keep up with him! I find it difficult to balance all the work I myself have to get done while trying to maximize his position and delegate tasks to him.

**Do you look for professional groups or organizations that specifically deal with librarians and neurodiversity?**

**Charlie:** To my knowledge, no specific organizations of this type currently exist which is why I founded a Facebook group called [Autistics in Libraries and Their Allies](http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2017/neurodiversity-i...) last year. It currently has nearly 100 members but it's not very active. I try to post relevant news articles a few times per month and occasionally others do so, but I haven't yet figured out how to engage people on a deeper level. It can be challenging to get people's attention these days with all the information that exists online.
Do you think groups devoted specifically to neurodiversity issues would be beneficial?

**Charlie:** Yes, I think a structured organization would be helpful to advocate for our interests on a number of levels such as patrons and employees. I also think it would be important for an organization like this to be actually led by autistics. I love the Autistic Self Advocacy Network’s slogan “Nothing About Us Without Us.” For too long, autism-related organizations have tended to not include our voices in the discussion or in their leadership ranks. This needs to change since we’re capable and, I would argue, know the most accurate version of our triumphs and challenges since we live them every day.

Have you ever felt discriminated against in the workplace for disclosing your autism?

**Charlie:** Not that I know of. Nobody has commented anything to my face, but it’s possible that they might hold a certain set of assumptions due to my having disclosed. I’m hoping that my disclosure and openness about autism will help them better understand neurodiversity and the range of experiences of those on the spectrum. I’d rather be known for my contributions at work instead of a diagnostic label.

Why do you think there is so little literature about the neurodiversity of librarians?

**Charlie:** I think some of this has to do with the continued societal focus on children with autism, although this is slowly changing. Autistic kids grow up and deserve meaningful employment opportunities. In addition,
professional organizations such as the American Library Association should have diversity initiatives that include neurodiversity. Many large research libraries have diversity residency programs for new graduates of library schools. I’d love to see a few neurodiverse residency programs at academic libraries. These could serve as a good professional entry point for those on the spectrum. Finally, more librarians on the spectrum need to feel comfortable enough to disclose so these conversations can happen.

**What advice would you give to professionals with autism (librarians or students studying to be librarians) about finding success in the field?**

**Charlie:** Experience, experience, experience! Whether it’s volunteering, working part-time, internship, etc., I cannot emphasize this enough. Nearly all library jobs require some kind of experience regardless of whether someone has an MLS. Even many paraprofessional jobs require library experience. Hopefully they’re attending library schools with autism support programs on their campuses that can help them prepare for the job search with mock interviews, career fairs, resume preparation, etc.

Sometimes a person’s valuable and, perhaps, unique skillset might be able to “compensate” for their social awkwardness during interviews. Therefore, it’s important that they showcase their skillsets via a website, portfolio, multimedia, etc.

**What advice would you give to a manager who is hiring a librarian with autism?**
Charlie: First, have an open mind and don’t define the person by their autism! Autism is an important part of our identities but it’s only a part. Some of the qualities I look for in a good boss are: ability to listen and provide reassurance when I doubt myself, patience with my quirks (such as asking endless questions), providing clear and detailed instructions, flexible and willing to make accommodations when necessary, and a clear and direct communicator who will regularly provide me with constructive feedback (especially when it comes to navigating office politics!).

What professional goals do you have that you have not yet accomplished?

Charlie: I would eventually like to work at a small, private liberal arts college that’s closer to my aging parents in the Northeast. I like the strong sense of community at these schools as well as their commitment to preparing students to be engaged global citizens who embrace lifelong learning. In many respects, higher education has become more focused on job preparation instead of liberal arts and sciences that provide students with a solid base (critical thinking, reasoning, writing, reading analytically, etc.) no matter what kind of career they choose.

As the world of e-resources and library collections in general continues to evolve, it’s important that I develop my knowledge and skillset so they don’t become stagnant. This also means exploring new technologies. Yes, I’m a millennial, but this doesn’t automatically make me a techy person. The older I get, the more flexible and open to new things I...
become. Hopefully, this will serve me well as librarianship and higher education progress onward.

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References


4. This interview was conducted via email. Any changes to the transcript for publication are minor and intended to improve clarity; the interviewee's ideas and words have not been changed.

5. I think many people identify with Charlie's reaction to the interview process regardless of his neurodivergence.

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autism  neurodiversity
Thank you for this article! I’m in the pseudo-diagnosis area (therapists say it's obvious but nothing on paper just yet) of my life and find myself looking for others like me working in library land. I'm always happy to read about how other folks on the spectrum are navigating their careers.

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