Title –The experiences of neurodivergent Library and Information Science [LIS] professionals working in academic libraries – a case study

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Abstract: Literature on the experiences of neurodivergent LIS professionals working in academic libraries is sparse. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that librarianship may be an attractive profession for neurodivergent adults, significant challenges remain. This paper discusses a case study undertaken in a large research-intensive university in England. This case study investigates the experiences of neurodivergent LIS individuals, examining the impact of recruitment practices, the workplace environment, daily work and tasks, and their professional skills as perceived through the lens of neurodivergency. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with six participants who identified as neurodivergent. A reflexive approach was taken to the research and thematic analysis used to analyse the results. This research finds that neurodivergent individuals encounter challenges with recruitment, the physical and sociocultural environment, and their daily work. This includes challenges with panel interviews, the sensory environment, the "unspoken rules" of social, professional expectations, and a conflicting desire for novelty and routine. Access to adjustments vary and are reliant on individual and institutional knowledge of neurodivergence, and the psychological safety required to disclose. Neurodivergent individuals are keen to use and develop their skills, however, employers appear nervous to discuss professional development opportunities. Although neurodivergent individuals are cautiously optimistic about their experiences, there is a need for increased understanding within the sector of their lived experiences to provide support. This paper puts forward recommendations for practice and identifies areas for future research that will help to improve the experiences of neurodivergent professionals.

Highlights:

- Interviews were conducted to explore experiences of neurodivergent professionals working in an academic library

- Findings identify several challenges during the recruitment process and in the workplace

- Findings reveal access to adjustments vary and are reliant on individual and institutional knowledge of neurodivergence, and the psychological safety required to disclose.

- Findings propose that neurotypical allies should share the emotional toll of being neurodivergent in a neurotypical world through learning, advocacy and support.

- Practice-based suggestions are put forward to improve experiences of neurodivergent library professionals

Data statement: The data supporting these findings are not openly available due to reasons of sensitivity but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Introduction

The origins of the concept of neurodiversity are frequently attributed to Harvey Blume and sociologist Judith Singer, having been developed over twenty-five years ago (Blume, 1998; Singer, 1999). More recently, this notion has been re-evaluated with attribution shifting to one that was collectively developed by activists and communities of neurodivergent individuals (Botha et al., 2024). Despite increasing discussion of the workplace experiences of neurodivergent employees within the domains of organisational psychology, disability studies and human resource management, there persists a lack of research sufficiently supported by empirical evidence generally (Doyle & McDowell, 2022), and within the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) specifically (Anderson, 2018).

As a historically homogenous profession (Mackinlay, 2019a) there has been an increasingly visible commitment within the field of librarianship to place equity and diversity at the heart of professional practice (American Library Association [ALA], 2024; Poole, 2020). How these commitments are realised, and how they relate to the experience of neurodivergent LIS professionals, remains uncertain (Anderson, 2021b; Chapman, 2024).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that librarianship may be an attractive profession for neurodivergent adults (Eng, 2017; Spectrum, 2017). The most recent Workforce Mapping exercise undertaken by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals

[CILIP] (CILIP, 2023), however, notably lacks information about the rates of disabled and neurodivergent individuals within the LIS profession in the UK. This reflects a wider failure to map the rates of neurodivergent individuals in the workplace generally, and to analyse their experiences (McDowall et al., 2023). The LIS sector has much work to do to understand the makeup of its own workforce in terms of neurodiversity, and to explore the experiences of neurodivergent LIS professionals (Anderson, 2018; Fitzpatrick & Walsh, 2023a).

The findings presented in this paper go some way in addressing the lack of empirical evidence about the experiences of neurodivergent individuals in the LIS workforce. A qualitative case study undertaken in an academic library in the UK provided insights into employees' experiences and the impact of recruitment practices, the workplace environment, daily work and tasks, and their professional skills as perceived through the lens of neurodivergency.

Terminology

The language and terminology used in discussions of neurodiversity are extremely important (Chellappa, 2023). The terms and labels used in academic discourse, as well as by neurodivergent individuals themselves to self-identify, are subject to debate (Brown, 2011; Doyle, 2020). Similar to the approach taken by McDowall et al. (2023), this paper will use the terms neurodiverse and neurodiversity in the spirit of a definition that attempts to convey the concepts of neurological difference using language associated with biological diversity and political activism (Baumer & Frueh, 2021). The term neurodivergent will be used to describe individuals who identify as having one or more neurodivergent conditions (see Appendix A). Individuals who do not identify as having one or more such conditions will be referred to as neurotypical. This is in recognition that individuals who do not identify as neurodivergent are generally considered to be more typical of socially constructed cognitive norms (Walker, 2021). We will be adopting identity-first language throughout in accordance with a social model of disability that perceives neurological difference as something that should be socially accommodated, rather than cured (Crosman, 2019). We recognise that neurodivergent individuals may wish to use terms or language that best reflects their experiences, values, and identities as individuals, and that these may differ to those outlined here.

Literature Review

This review synthesises existing research of experiences of neurodivergent individuals within the workplace. It considers peer-reviewed articles, particularly within the fields of disability studies and organisational psychology, where research into the experiences of neurodivergent individuals within the workplace are more advanced. Additional consideration is given to grey literature such as reports, blog, webpages, and news articles. These are included in recognition of the lack of peer-reviewed literature, particularly within the domain of LIS, as well as desire to include material that allows neurodivergent individuals to describe their experiences in their own words. This is in acknowledgement of the expertise of the neurodivergent community, and in recognition that neurodivergent individuals are more likely to produce knowledge via less conventional routes (Bernard et al., 2023).

Job-seeking and recruitment

Neurodivergence, unemployment, and job-seeking

Thompson and Miller (2018) suggest that the neurodivergent population have unusually high rates of unemployment when contrasted to the general population. Krzeminska et al. (2019) support this finding, suggesting that the figure is as high as 85-95%. More recent research has suggested that when compared to other disabilities neurodivergent individuals have been disproportionately prevented from entering the workplace (McDowall et al., 2023).

Frequently, discussions surrounding the under- or unemployment of neurodivergent individuals are discussed in relation to the disability employment gap[1] (Doyle & McDowell, 2022) and linked to the unemployment rates for other hidden conditions or disabilities (Khan et al., 2023). Research shows that barriers faced by neurodivergent people in seeking and acquiring employment can include reluctance to disclose neurodivergence to employers for fear of stigma (Johnson & Joshi, 2016), and a perception that practical support will be lacking once employed (Rai, 2023).

Discussions regarding the motivations of organisations to support neurodivergent individuals in job-seeking are commonly linked with strategic drivers to diversify workforces to deliver on organisational inclusivity commitments (Miller, 2022; Mor Barak, 2015). A distinct feature that emerges in the business and management literature is a desire to attract

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[1] "The disability employment gap is the difference between how many disabled people are in work compared to how many non-disabled people are in work" (Together Trust, 2023, para 3). Recent statistics place the disability employment gap in the UK at 29% (Powell, 2023).

neurodivergent individuals to leverage the skills of neurodivergent talent for competitive advantage (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Comaford, 2017; Ortiz, 2020) based upon employer perceptions of the skills and strengths of neurodivergent individuals (Krzeminska et al., 2019). Research has revealed, however, that when asked to be explicit about the professional strengths of neurodivergent individuals, discrepancies emerge between the perceptions of employers versus those of neurodivergent individuals themselves (McDowall et al., 2023). This has led to accusations that discussions surrounding the employability of neurodivergent individuals have been misappropriated in this context (Stenning & Rosqvist, 2021).

Neurodivergence and recruitment practice

In an attempt to remove the barriers neurodivergent job-seekers experience, organisations – including those in the LIS domain - are increasingly reviewing their recruitment practices through a lens of neuroinclusion (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development [CIPD], 2024; Fair Library Jobs, 2022; Komposiori, 2022). Organisations are motivated to remove these barriers, it has been claimed, for societal reasons (Bruyère et al., 2016), and to comply with relevant UK legislation requiring workplaces to ensure they are not discriminating against individuals (Equality Act 2010).

Researchers frequently find that typical recruitment practices may be a barrier to neurodivergent individuals entering the workplace (Bewley & George, 2016; Davies et al., 2023; Krezeminska et al., 2019; Vincent, 2020). Hurley-Hanson et al. (2020) find that the practice of creating job roles to standard templates which emphasise generic soft skills may not attract neurodivergent candidates. Palumbo (2022) supports this, suggesting that neurodivergent candidates may have difficulty in conceptualising what a job may be like in practice based on the generic nature of job descriptions.

Literature also addresses the challenges neurodivergent candidates face with competency-based interviews. Cooper et al. (2018) suggest that interviews put neurodivergent individuals at a substantial disadvantage, more so than neurotypical candidates. This notion is supported by the work of Dunn et al. (2018), Doyle (2019) and Fitzpatrick and Walsh (2023c). Davies et al. (2023) highlight that successful performance at interview is frequently dependent on demonstrating a high-level of interpersonal skills that are tacitly, rather than explicitly, expected of candidates. Doyle (2019) suggests that neurodivergent candidates may struggle

as a result of these unspoken, social expectations. Other common interview practices may also provide challenges, such as the use of open-ended or multiple-part questions, with the suggestion that neurodivergent candidates may struggle to process and answer questions within the time allowed (Crane et al., 2009).

The matter of whether to disclose neurodivergence during any stage of the recruitment process presents a significant barrier (Khan et al., 2023) and factors influencing this decision are complex. Concerns include perceived attitudes and biases of hiring managers against neurodivergent candidates (Carreo et al., 2019). This reticence to disclose prohibits neurodivergent candidates from accessing adjustments that may support them in their application (Dobusch, 2020). Although some literature provides recommendations for adjustments to recruitment that could support neurodivergent candidates generally (Palumbo, 2022), and within the LIS domain (Fitzpatrick & Walsh, 2023c; Komposiori, 2022), a more flexible attitude is required towards recruitment practice for the benefit of both neurodivergent and neurotypical candidates (Davies et al., 2023).

Neurodivergence and workplace experiences

Workplace environment – physical

Once neurodivergent individuals enter the workplace, the physical environment can substantially impact their overall experience and performance. Environmental factors such as temperature, sound and lighting are common areas of concern for neurodivergent individuals, who may be particularly sensitive or prone to sensory processing difficulties (Weber et al., 2022). Fitzpatrick and Walsh (2023a) find similar reported experiences in their survey of neurodivergent library workers. Having some control over the physical environment is therefore important to neurodivergent individuals to improve their experiences of the physical library environment (Anderson, 2021b). Doyle (2020) and Weber et al. (2022) argue the need to develop more empirical evidence to assess the impact of environmental adjustments.

Workplace environment – sociocultural

The sociocultural workplace environment, and the emphasis given to soft skills, relationship-building, networking, and socialising, can be a source of stress for neurodivergent individuals (Fitzpatrick & Walsh, 2023b). This is particularly observed in qualitative research where neurodivergent individuals are surveyed or interviewed about their own experiences, with

observations regarding the "unwritten social rule(s)" (Davies et al., 2023 p. 1758) and a sensation that "everyone is playing a different game" (Fitzpatrick & Walsh, 2023b, p. 6).

As a result of these pressures neurodivergent individuals may be more prone to masking[2] as a way of assimilating into prevalent workplace sociocultural norms (Anderson, 2021b; Fitzpatrick & Walsh, 2023b; Pearson & Rose, 2021), and avoiding accidental disclosure, stigma, and discrimination (Davies et al., 2023). Consequently, this reduces neurodivergent individuals' sense of psychological safety (McDowall et al., 2023), ability to socialise whilst at work (Doyle, 2020), and limits access to potential supportive social accommodations (Khan et al., 2023).

Professional strengths and skills

The professional strengths and skills of neurodivergent individuals are occasionally explored within the literature. Doyle (2019) describes this as "understanding the benefits of cognitive difference" (para. 3). Some commonly cited strengths include hyperfocus, creativity and innovative thinking (McDowall et al., 2023), an aptitude for recognising complex patterns (Shein, 2020) and an ability to complete repetitive tasks to a high degree of accuracy (Austin & Busquets, 2008). It is important, however, to keep in mind the range of conditions that can be encompassed when discussing neurodivergence (see Appendix A) and the individual professional strengths of neurodivergent employees in LIS (Anderson, 2021b).

It is more common for research to explore the workplace experiences of neurodivergent individuals in relation to challenges encountered, rather than in relation to professional skills and strengths. Doyle and McDowall (2022) suggest this is a consequence of the medical model of disability's continued influence on the discourse which posits that individuals are disabled as a result of an impairment that requires fixing (World Health Organisation [WHO], 1980). Krzeminska et al. (2019) also state that "historically, neurodiversity literature, in any context, has predominately been written from a top-down, medical assistance, or diagnostic view" (p. 456).

Increasingly, a social model of disability that encourages disability to be viewed as a consequence of societal barriers rather than as a result of medical difference is being advocated (Scope, 2014; Sense, 2022). Subsequently, a shift in focus has been suggested to

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[2] "Masking is the act of supressing or concealing neurodivergent traits in schools and workplaces in order to appear neurotypical" (The Brain Charity, 2023, para 4).

ensure that research into the experiences of neurodivergent individuals is both "context-sensitive and inclusive" (Doyle & McDowall, 2022, p. 372), positioning the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals in the workplace as central to research best-practice (Stenning & Rosqvist, 2021) to explore both the strengths of neurodivergent individuals and the barriers they face described in their own words.

Neurodivergence within LIS research and practice

Within the LIS domain much of the literature related to the experiences of neurodivergent individuals is focused on that of library users (Eng, 2017). Giles-Smith and Popowich (2023, p.2) suggest that this tendency may be due to the "services orientated" nature of library literature. This literature shares many of the common features from the broader research. The need to provide inclusive services in line with equality, diversity, and inclusion institutional and legal requirements are explored (Dow & Bushman, 2020). The LIS literature also reflects on neurodivergent library users' experiences of the sociocultural and physical library environments (Boyer & El-Chidiac, 2023; DuBroy, 2019; Mackinlay, 2019b). Within the academic library domain there is a tendency for research to focus on the experiences of autistic library users, rather than to consider the experiences of neurodivergent individuals more holistically or where multiple neurodivergent conditions may co-exist or intersect (Anderson, 2021a; Braumberger, 2021; Shea & Derry, 2019). Both Lawrence (2013) and later Tumlin (2019) find a lack of LIS research that addresses the concept of neurodivergence in this way.

Although there appears to be an increasing interest within the LIS domain as to how to accommodate the needs of neurodivergent library users, approaches to this research have been critiqued. Lawrence (2013) contends that much of the LIS literature is implicitly or explicitly founded on a "medicalized approach to neurological difference" (p.3.) that can reinforce unhelpful tropes about neurodivergent individuals. Hinson-Williams (2024) also suggests that the LIS research potentially perpetuates harmful stereotypes from other domains by reinforcing a deficit-based views of neurodivergence. Although Lawrence (2013) finds that LIS professionals should "…cultivate the requisite knowledge and sensitivities to make the profession safe for a wide variety of persons who present in a range of different ways" (p.6.), both the skew of the LIS literature that does exist, and the scarcity of literature of neurodivergent LIS staff experiences, indicates that there is still work to be done.

Methodology

The study described in this paper was conducted as part of the first author's dissertation research during her MA Library and Information Services Management at the University of Sheffield. It sought to redress the limitations of the LIS literature by exploring the experiences of LIS professionals within an academic library context as perceived through the lens of their neurodivergence and in their own words. Specifically, this study considers the following research questions:

1. How do neurodivergent LIS staff working in an academic library describe their workplace experiences, including recruitment, the physical and sociocultural environment, and their daily work and tasks?
2. What accommodations or adjustments within the LIS workplace environment are most valued by neurodivergent staff, how are these accessed, and what is their impact?
3. What professional skills and strengths do neurodivergent staff describe themselves as having, and in what ways are these harnessed and developed within the LIS profession?

A case study approach employing qualitative data collection methods was taken to address these questions. Interviews were held with six participants who identified as neurodivergent and who were recruited from within the current pool of LIS staff within an academic library in a large research-intensive university in England. As the first author was also an employee of this academic library, she was able to disseminate information about the project and recruit willing participants via the internal staff mailing list. The participants varied in terms of their roles within the library, their level of seniority and the length of time they had been employed at the organisation. All participants identified as neurodivergent, with most participants explicitly referring to one or more neurodivergent conditions during their interview. Participants were assigned a code between P1 and P6 to maintain their anonymity.

Prior research into the experiences of neurodivergent individuals has been criticised for its lack of inclusion (Walker, 2021). It is therefore essential, as recommended by Tumlin (2019), that neurodivergent voices are the ones leading the conversation about their experiences within the research. One suggested way of facilitating this is utilising qualitative research methods that enable ".... neurodivergent participants to provide open responses that are less restricted" (Bernard et al., 2023, p.52). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to shape and influence the discussion, which was important when discussing potentially

sensitive experiences such as microaggressions, direct or indirect discrimination, or other forms of marginalisation in the workplace related to the stigma of being neurodivergent.

Interviews were conducted virtually using Google Meet, with introductory open-ended questions and subsequent prompts designed to facilitate discussion around five key topics: job-seeking, recruitment and selection; daily work and tasks; physical work environment; sociocultural work environment; and professional skills, strengths and professional development.

The notion "nothing about us without us" was integral to this methodological approach which sought to amplify the voices of neurodivergent individuals and platform their experiences (Bernard et al., 2023). This is also in acknowledgement of the expertise and knowledge that neurodivergent individuals have which may have hitherto been underexplored and unrepresented within LIS research.

Engaging in reflexivity throughout the research project was also prioritised. [Author One]'s reflexive practice extends beyond utilising reflexive thematic data analysis and is intended as a way to situate herself as a researcher professionally, interpersonally, and contextually within her research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023), as well as in acknowledgement of her own journey to understand her professional and personal experiences through the lens of her neurodivergence.

Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to find meaning in the data to address the research questions, whilst allowing for flexibility throughout the analysis stage. Braun & Clarke's six phase approach was used, consisting of: data familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2022). NVivo was used to store, organise and code data.

Findings

The themes that emerged from participant interviews were rich and complex, influenced by participants' positionality and their lived experiences of being neurodivergent in society and within the workplace. Six dominant themes emerged:

1. Familiarity, recall and "thinking on your feet"
2. The physical, sensory world

3. Social connections, masks and authenticity
4. Routine, structure, disruption and procrastination
5. Luck, professional skills, and development
6. Being neurodivergent in a neurotypical world – the emotional toll

Familiarity, recall and "thinking on your feet"

Participants frequently connected their familiarity with typical recruitment practice in the sector with their level of comfort and preparedness for the process. P1 explained that their experiences of applying for their current role as being "a standard that I was used to" and P4 noted that "most universities seem to be pretty standard in the way that they accept applications….so I was quite familiar with what to expect." P3 linked this notion of familiarity to their own professional experience, explaining that "when I've applied for jobs in this particular area it's been better…because I've been working in libraries for long I kind of know what they're looking for."

Participants distinguished between the different stages of recruitment. Frequently, the requirement to provide a written application was framed more positively than experiences of panel interviews. Familiarity and clarity were key contributors to this. P4 explained that "they [the library] were quite clear about advising you to address each part of the person specification." Knowing what to expect from written applications resulted in P2 knowing that they could "make a good account of [themselves] on paper." P6 went as far as to state that they "quite enjoyed that kind of thing. I love a good application."

This is contrasted starkly with participants' overwhelmingly negative experiences of panel interviews. P3 explained that "I do tend to get interviews. But when it comes to the interview I don't do so well." P2 relayed that they had been conscious of their difficulties with interviews prior to the diagnosis of their neurodivergence, but had no insight as to the cause:

> "I had no idea about my condition. I only knew that I had a problem at the interview stage in that I could get interviews because I could write a good job application…I was going to interview after interview after interview. And I think it's superfluous to say that it was a very, very dispiriting and depressing experience." (P2)

The difficulties experienced with interviews were frequently associated with challenges related to recall. P4 expressed that successful performance at interview is "about thinking on your feet and how you interpret quite a broad question," and this was something they were

not good at. Other participants identified the need to "answer something on the fly" (P1) and "give a good account of yourself in the moment" (P5) as challenges. Frequently, participants related these challenges to being able to process information and issues with short-term and working memory that are associated with neurodivergent conditions. P1 described the sensation of information given by the interview panel as going "straight out the window," while P3 struggled with going off topic, explaining that "my mind goes everywhere." P5 described a similar experience:

> "I can just be on a roller coaster that I'm not quite in control of and I genuinely won't know where I've been by the end of a sentence or a point." (P5)

When invited to reflect on potential adjustments that could support with interviews, receiving interview questions in advance was a common answer, as this helps with preparedness, alleviates anxiety and mitigates challenges with recall. P6 relayed an experience where this adjustment had been provided, describing it as "helpful" and that it had made them more "comfortable" as they'd been able to prepare. P5 expressed that having interview questions in advance would help to remove "the nervousness about uncertainty." Although P2 did support having interview questions in advance, they acknowledged that seeking this adjustment was reliant on them themself "knowing about my autistic condition" and a greater "general level of knowledge" of employers knowing what adjustments to offer neurodivergent candidates.

The physical, sensory world

All participants reflected on their physical work environment in relation to their sensory experiences and made distinctions between their environments when working on campus and working from home.

Participants expressed that working from home enabled a greater degree of personalisation and control of the space. P4 expressed that it was "really nice to set up the way I want it." P6 linked their positive experience of working from home as being a consequence of being able to "control the space," noting that attending to their sensory needs by being able to "blast some music" or "jump in the shower" was important. P1 explained that the personalisation and visual appeal of their home working environment was important, suggesting that a positive, sensory environment is important in terms of comfort and motivation:

> "It's my own space. I can decorate it and use it as necessary or in a way that's appealing to me. Because if it's appealing I'm going to want to use the space. So, when I want to use the space I'm going to do the work." (P1)

By contrast, the lack of control of the physical environment whilst working on campus was flagged as a challenge. As a result of sensory processing difficulties common with neurodivergent conditions, the sensory environment on campus caused multiple issues, including the lack of natural lighting or the prevalence of fluorescent lighting, and the inability to modify temperatures in office spaces. The most prevalent sensory issue was that of noise, which ranged from being "distracting" (P1, P3, P5) to "actively distressing" (P4). Sources of noise varied from those caused by ambient or outside sources – such as air conditioning units and building works – to noise from colleagues. The latter was a particular source of stress for participants, frequently arising from open-plan office and hot-desking environments. P3 recounted a recent experience of attempting to complete online training where this became a problem:

> "The other day I was trying to do some online training, and it…involves a lot of reading. And you see people just talking for ages…not just five minutes, but for, you know, a couple of hours…I was reading the same line over and over again. But of course, I can't tell them to shut up. It's not fair. It's a shared space." (P3)

In order to mitigate the impact of noise-related stress, multiple participants referred to noise cancelling headphones – either their own personal headphones or those that had been provided as a result of a Display Screen Equipment [DSE] workplace assessment. However, participants were ambivalent about their use. P3 described them as "limiting." P5 expressed that their colleagues may "see you with headphones on and…think, 'Oh they don't want to be disturbed.' Whereas…I'm just keeping myself busy, so I don't interact with you or overhear you." These comments reveal a tension between the measures participants use to manage their sensory environment and how they may be perceived by others.

Further tension emerges when participants reflected on their need to control their sensory environment in consideration of others working in open-plan offices. Participants discussed the ways they tried to mitigate their personal discomfort with as little impact on others as possible. This included sitting at the same desk and personalising their workspaces within the confines of what was practical in a hot-desking environment. Both P4 and P5 explained that

having personal items to make changes to their sensory environment was important, with P5 describing a "working on campus kit" which they referred to as a "coping mechanism."

When invited to consider further changes to their physical working environment that would support with managing sensory challenges, multiple participants described smaller, personal spaces such as putting up dividers or "partitions" (P3) to reconfigure open-plan spaces and having access to quiet spaces to withdraw. This was encapsulated by P4, who articulated how this would help manage feelings of overstimulation or overwhelm:

> "It feels like aren't any quiet spaces for me to just crawl away…somewhere where if I wasn't working just like to decompress…that would be ideal, having somewhere to go and cocoon." (P4)

Social connections, masks and authenticity

Participants reflected on their social experiences within the workplace as a neurodivergent individual, considering their ability to make connections and how their need to mask impacted their ability to be authentic.

Multiple participants expressed difficulties in interpreting social cues and how this impacted their ability to communicate. Participants spoke about problems with making eye contact (P2), using a suitable tone (P3) and a preoccupation with "looking like I'm actually listening" rather than "actually listening" in conversation (P4). P1 spoke about their tendency to speak over colleagues in conversation:

> "I have to be very careful to not talk over people because my brain moves so fast ahead of my mouth [laughter]. But then I end up talking over people. And that's not something you want to do to anybody." (P1)

P3 stated that they "talk far too much," while P4 described their fixation on how they were perceived by others:

> "How am I being perceived? I want to behave. I'm giving off a first impression... I'm trying to be polite and nice but it's literally constantly like "Am I smiling enough? Am I being polite?" But not being too – not withdrawn – but you know what I mean? I don't want to be too quiet or, you know, "Am I making people laugh?" It's this whole thing." (P4)

This fixation on how participants are perceived was reinforced by the reported comments of neurotypical colleagues. P2 explained "it's been pointed out to me that I haven't said anything at some meetings and that's because if I don't feel I have anything important to say." This was a source of frustration for P2 who expressed a desire that their "way of communicating, of being in certain social situations, of…being silent when I feel that I have to" was accepted.

All participants spoke about masking in order to mitigate these social challenges and the impact that this had. P6 explained that they were "constantly having to manage…how I'm presenting myself", describing themselves as "high masking." P1 reflected on how their ability to mask had been impacted by the pandemic, and that this impacted their connections with colleagues, describing it as:

> "I lost my mask before I knew it was there. And I don't know how to bring that mask back. In some ways it's great that I don't have it because I put a lot of pressure on myself. But part of me misses it because I miss interacting with my team in the ways that I used to." (P1)

For P5, the need to mask made it difficult for them to assess their authenticity in the workplace:

> "Through many years of socialisation and being out in a kind of non-neurodivergent world…I've built in a lot of masking and coping so I don't think…I…know what my authentic self is at this point." (P5)

By contrast, P4 described a workplace culture which encouraged "people to share their experiences about things like neurodivergence with disability or their sexuality." When reflecting on their ability to be authentic within the workplace, P6 stated that they did feel they could be their "authentic self at work" but that they were still "very much figuring out what my authentic self looks like" when perceived through a lens of their neurodivergence.

Routine, structure, disruption and procrastination

A central theme that emerged when participants discussed their daily work and tasks was the notion of schedule and structure, and challenges with interruption and procrastination. P2 and P3 described their daily work as being shaped by routine, running through a list of regular duties that were informed by a timetable of activities such as staffing "circulation hubs" or

"help desks" and "cataloguing." By contrast, other participants described the nature of their work as more flexible and less governed by a timetable of commitments. P1 described their role as "reactive" and the nature of their work as "ad-hoc." P4 expressed that "I don't really have a typical day, and I certainly don't have…a routine." P6 also noted "there is no routine."

Some participants expressed an appreciation for variety in their work, whilst also recognising the challenges this could cause. P1 described that working in a reactive way as "that type of instant activity that kind of satisfies the brain" whilst also expressing that they had "trouble sticking to a schedule." This had created tension with neurotypical supervisors, who had difficulty in understanding P1's approach to work:

> "I think one of my biggest challenges is what I think is structure against what my supervisors may think is structure…my schedule, you know, the way I structured it, the way I tried to work with the managers and senior managers to try and structure it…never worked." (P1)

P5 explored similar issues, stating that "one of the main challenges" in their present role was "ironically the freedom." They described a stark contrast with a previous role that had been more structured, and that working with less structure was something they had been working on "with successive line managers."

P4 described the impact of moving between different tasks or "context switch" on their routine. For them, dealing with "different projects or groups and issues" and attending multiple meetings, often back-to-back, felt quite "jarring." They explained that their "natural inclination" was to "stay on focus" and "do things straight away," but they often couldn't do that as they were required to be "immediately straight into something which could be about a completely different topic."

This issue of task shifting was expressed by other participants in relation to being interrupted or distracted. P1 explained that tasks could be delegated "last minute", and that this could impact the flow of their work. Procrastination was also a significant factor on participants' motivation and ability to remain on task. P5 described their inability to stay with one task as "bouncing around." P1 expressed that their ability to focus was influenced by how interesting they found the task. P6 expressed similar sentiments:

"I will probably spend the first couple of hours procrastinating and looking at this long to do list that I need to do and…just…flick between different things. And then as the day goes on and I realise it's…now the afternoon and I haven't done as much as I thought I should. That's when I'll cram absolutely everything into an afternoon and get it done. And then that's the day over and then I'll repeat it the next day [laughter]." (P6)

Luck, professional skills and development

Participants varied in their comfort and ability to articulate their professional skills. Both P4 and P5 expressed difficulties in being able to identify their professional skills. P4 found it "really hard" and P5 speculated that discussing professional skills would not be "the most popular question for a lot of people or the most comfortable" within the context of the research interviews. P6 explained that they often had to ask others to be able to conceive of their professional skills:

"I asked my partner. I was like "What do you think it is?" I find it quite difficult to reflect on my strengths." (P6)

This difficulty in expressing and taking ownership of professional skills can also be seen in the tendency for participants to link their appointments to roles or professional progression to luck or chance, rather than a result of skill or experience. Both P1 and P2 reflected that they had "got lucky" or had obtained their role as the result of "a stroke of luck." P2 expressed that they felt luckier than other neurodivergent individuals "to be in permanent employment at all." Reflecting on professional strengths, P4 commented "I don't feel I have any. I have a lot of conversations with my manager where I feel like I've just fallen into every job I've ever had."

When participants did name particular skills, all bar one specifically referred to having good "attention to detail." P3 remarked that they were good at "basically anything that involves very close attention to detail and not making mistakes, doing a repetitive task and keeping your attention on it." P2, P4 and P6 linked this skill with their neurodivergence, with P4 commenting that they were "naturally quite detail orientated because of the autism."

More than one participant reflected that they had strong soft skills, with P1 expressing that they were good at supporting colleagues and "nurturing" relationships. Although P4

expressed that they sometimes struggled to put themselves "in someone else's shoes", they also stated:

> "I think…because I've had a pretty hard time in the past being *different* (in inverted commas) I think that's made me a lot more compassionate and understanding when I'm trying to help other people." (P4)

P3 stated that they had strong written communication skills and drew a connection between this and their neurodivergence:

> "Something I've noticed is that when people are sending emails sometimes it can come across maybe tactless…because there's no tone in emails so some people don't realise. Whereas…I've spent my life in fear of being misunderstood I'm quite good at being clear in email and sort of phrasing it in a way that looks quite sort of nice." (P3)

These comments reveal a connection between professional skills and neurodivergence that goes beyond innate ability. Interestingly, this also uncovers that for some professional skills have emerged as a result of coping with the impact of being neurodivergent within society and within the workplace. P5 reflected on this when describing their organisation skills, acknowledging that they had developed these skills as a "coping mechanism" because of their neurodivergence.

When invited to reflect on whether they felt their professional skills were valued in the workplace, and how these skills were developed, participants expressed that whilst they themselves frequently felt the value in the work that they did, opinions on whether these were valued by others were mixed. P4 found their role "enriching." P6 felt that they could "make a difference" with certain aspects of their role. Whereas some participants explained that their managers found the work they did "immensely valuable" (P1), or that their line manager had helped them conceive of their professional skills and "realise these things about themselves" (P5), other participants expressed frustration with the lack of support they'd been given regarding their development. P2 stated that whilst they were "very keen that my employer uses my potential" that significant and systemic barriers existed that prevented that from happening:

> "Employers can define career paths for people without disabilities but there's a gaping hole where strategy for people with disabilities should be…I think that decisions have

been taken about my duties and about my development without consulting me and that is a cause of immense frustration because I think my employer is frightened of discussing these things with me…There is a barrier in being honest and frank about the barriers to career progression that exists for disabled and neurodivergent people because they're frightened of being accused of discrimination I think." (P2)

Being neurodivergent in a neurotypical world – the emotional toll

The emotional impact of being neurodivergent in a neurotypical world appears across all themes and emerged in the discussion of multiple topics. Emotions such as anxiety and stress dominated, expressed by all participants in relation to their workplace experiences of recruitment, the physical and sociocultural workplace environment, and daily work and tasks.

Although the causes of these emotions varied from participant to participant, some commonalities emerged. Participants frequently spoke about the stress and anxiety caused by dealing with unfamiliar or ambiguous situations and environments. This became apparent when participants described their experiences of panel interviews, with all participants describing these as "stressful" or "anxiety-inducing." P4 explicitly made the connection between that stress and unfamiliarity:

> "I mean everything about the day of an interview is overwhelming from the start, right? So, often you're wearing clothes that you're trying to look smart. So, I'm normally in clothes and shoes that I don't find comfortable. I'm usually visiting a new building with people I don't know. Maybe an area that I don't know. Sort of all of that is intimidating." (P4)

P5 described their challenges with ambiguity, and their concern that their need for clarity may be misinterpreted by others:

> "Sometimes I think you can be conscious of asking too many questions, especially because it can come across as either kind of interrogatory or nitpicking or something like that. I think a lot of times it's difficult to try and get across "I'm not, like, taking the mick or anything. I'm just legitimately trying to understand what you mean." Because I think to a lot of people their meaning is obvious." (P5)

A feeling of frustration was also a common sentiment expressed by participants, both with themselves and with others. P1 expressed frustration with their own neurodivergence and

how this created difficulties in the workplace. P1 described the sensation as their "brain not being the nicest to them" and that this impacted their ability to stay on task.

For P2, their frustration was expressed in relation to the advocacy and emotional labour required to have their neurodivergence understood and accommodated. They articulated that this was "emotionally draining" and stated that they had to "emphasise" things related to their neurodivergence "over and over again. Just as with many things to do with my disability, I feel I have the burden of having to explain things over and over and it wears me down."

This emotional toll can also be seen in P6's comments related to masking and managing how they are perceived at work. They described the need to "second guess" themselves and having "to think about what you can and cannot say in that [the work] environment" as "exhausting."

Reflecting on their experiences of working in the academic library sector, some participants felt that those working in libraries tended to be "a nice bunch" who were "quite accommodating" of people with differences (P3). This was echoed by P4 who stated that the "the amount of effort put into things like EDI…kind of shows that it's an accepting, open workplace where we encourage discussion about things." P5 concurred with these sentiments to a degree, expressing that academic library workplaces were better than other workplaces. P2 was similarly restrained, expressing that there was perhaps "greater awareness" about neurodivergence within the sector. They remained clear, however, on their broader point that "the picture of increasing awareness is very mixed" expressing that the obstacles neurodivergent people face are "continuing and persisting" and that "although there may be general greater awareness about neurodivergence, this is accompanied by a "damaging" spread of half-truths and myths about neurodivergent conditions."

Discussion

Interpretative framework visualisation

These findings present a rich and detailed picture of the experiences of neurodivergent LIS individuals working in an academic library. Although participant's experiences were influenced by a number of individual factors - such as the nature of their neurodivergence, their journey of seeking a formal diagnosis, and differing roles and levels of seniority within the organisation - common features and similar phenomena emerged. This enabled the development of the themes explored in the previous section, as well as an interpretative

framework that relates these themes explicitly to the study's research questions. Connecting each theme is the need for adjustments and strategies – at both a personal and organisational level – to support neurodivergent individuals. At the heart of this framework is the emotional toll, expressed by research participants throughout in relation to every theme. This toll is a manifestation of the impact of operating as a neurodivergent individual in a predominantly neurotypical environment. Figure 1 represents this interpretative framework visually, which will be explored in the discussion that follows.
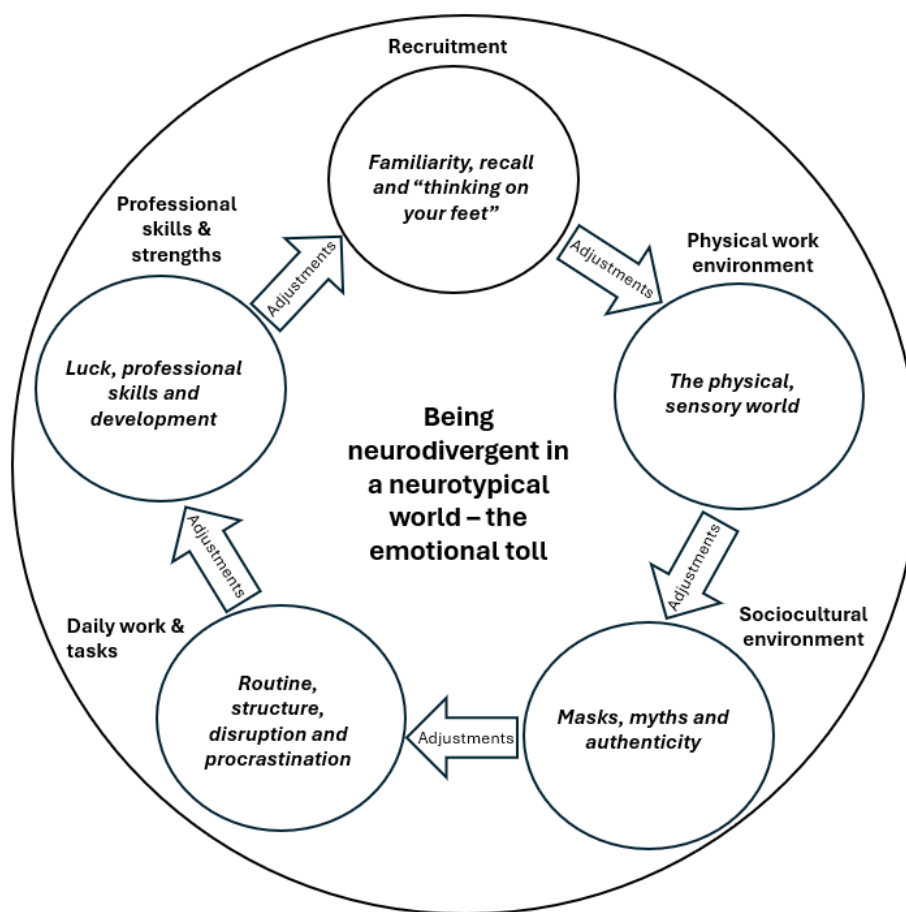

Figure 1 Interpretative framework visualisation

Interpretations

Recruitment

All research participants were keen to reflect on their experiences of recruitment within the sector as perceived through the lens of their neurodivergence. Participants spoke about common recruitment practices, such as submitting a written application and progression to a panel interview if successfully shortlisted, with the former being discussed more positively than the latter.

The research of Hurley-Hanson et al. (2020) and Palumbo (2022) indicates that neurodivergent individuals may struggle at the application stage due to the practice of using standardised job templates against which applications are assessed. Participants in this study, however, frequently expressed that the expectations surrounding written applications were clear and that they were comfortable with the process.

By contrast, participants expressed significant problems with panel interviews, exposing the substantial challenges they present. Multiple neurodivergent conditions are associated with working memory impairments which can increase the cognitive load neurodivergent individuals experience (Le Cunff et. al., 2024). Participants in this study described their difficulties in responding to ambiguous or multiple-part interview questions with no time to reflect, prepare or recall pertinent information. This supports the findings of Crane et al. (2009), Doyle (2019) and Dunn et al. (2018) which highlights the difficulty neurodivergent candidates experience in processing and answering questions in the context of an interview.

To mitigate these challenges, all participants expressed a desire to receive interview questions in advance. Some participants had already experienced this, reporting the positive impact this had on their experience and performance. Fitzpatrick and Walsh's (2023c) findings recommend that interview questions are provided in advance to all candidates, irrespective of the disclosure of a neurodivergent condition. It is also a key principle within the Fair Library Jobs Manifesto (2022). There remains, however, an ambivalence within the sector regarding this practice manifesting as a reticence to adopt this approach consistently and proactively (Komposiori, 2022). This reinforces the impression that panel interviews are testing if you can "react to six questions quickly" rather than what someone is going to be doing "in the job most of the time." (P5)

Physical work environment

This study finds that the physical work environment and, specifically, the sensory environment has a substantial impact on neurodivergent individuals. Substantiating the findings of Weber et al. (2022), research participants universally expressed challenges with their sensory environment. Noise was cited by all participants as the predominant cause of sensory stress. This supports the findings of Fitzpatrick and Walsh (2023a) where respondents to a survey of neurodivergent LIS professionals found "noise and distractions hard to deal with" (p.3) and the volume and nature of noise in library spaces as "overwhelming" (p.4).

This study exposes the impact of on campus working practices on the sensory environment. Both hot-desking and open-plan offices were explicitly linked by participants to the difficulties they experienced. These practices result in generally noisier working environments and reduce the control neurodivergent individuals have which has been found to be an important mechanism for managing sensory challenges (Anderson, 2021b). Often, these adaptations are not visible and are a way for neurodivergent workers to "negotiate" working in spaces that are not accommodating of their sensory needs (Fitzpatrick & Walsh, 2023a).

Formal adjustments for neurodivergent individuals to help manage the physical environment are explored within the literature (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2019, Black et al., 2020) and are supported by comments from participants who refer to their own adjustments. The implementation and effectiveness of formal adjustments, and how these are accessed, however, can be impacted by various factors. Frequently, individual or groups of managers act as both facilitators and arbitrators of requests. This study finds that the ability to disclose and seek support for neurodivergent conditions in the workplace is influenced by the interpersonal relationships at play, and whether or not neurodivergent individuals have psychological safety in those relationships. This substantiates the findings of McDowall et al. (2023). This is true across discussion of all topics where adjustments may feature but was particularly referenced regarding the physical work environment. This reveals a tension that manifests as wariness and caution, with participants expressing the need to be "oblique" (P3) when raising the issue of adjustments and suspicion that management may not be "accommodating" of such requests (P1).

Sociocultural environment

This study reveals the desire and the difficulties experienced by neurodivergent individuals in making social connections in the workplace. This substantiates the findings of Doyle (2020) who highlights that neurodivergent individuals have a reduced ability to socialise within the workplace. Pearson & Rose (2021) suggest that, often, neurodivergent individuals feel the need to "pretend to be normal" (p. 53) in order to be socially accepted by neurotypical peers. This phenomena manifests within this study as the preoccupation of participants with how they're being perceived by others, and concern that their difficulty in presenting in socially acceptable ways will be misunderstood. Participants expressed both the "assumption" and "fear" of being disliked or "judged" (P2, P3) as a consequence of being neurodivergent. This

drives both the conscious and unconscious modification of behaviour, or masking, leading to a form hyper-vigilance to ensure they are "behaving" (P4) in line with the accepted sociocultural norms within the workplace (Pearson & Rose, 2021; Anderson, 2021b; Fitzpatrick & Walsh, 2023b).

It was difficult for participants to reflect on their ability to be their authentic selves at work. Some participants could not easily separate "what is neurodivergency and what is me" (P1), not only due to challenges with introspection which made it difficult for participants to conceptualise the extent of their own "personal difference" (P6), but also as a reflection that neurodivergent individuals have multiple intersecting identities that combine to inform their "unique social experiences and worldview" (Settles & Buchanan, 2015, p.160).

The notion of authenticity within the workplace is contestable (Rosh & Offermann, 2013), exposing a tension in the "delicate balance between sharing who you are and adapting to various expectations and unwritten rules of professional conduct" (Perkins, 2024, para. 3). "Unwritten social rules" are a particular point of stress for neurodivergent individuals (Davies et al., 2023, p.1758), exacerbating a tendency to mask or hide true feelings, rather than risk getting things wrong (Fitzpatrick & Walsh, 2023b). Although participants expressed a desire to be authentic, and to make meaningful connections with others, they do not easily conceive of how this can be accommodated by improvements in neuroinclusive practice. Instead, participants settle for simply "being understood" (P2) rather than envisioning any changes in the sociocultural environment, expressed as resignation that that's just not "how it works" (P5).

Daily work and tasks

There is both a tension and a balance that emerges from the study between neurodivergent individuals' need for both variety and routine in their work. Some participants were highly conscious of this incongruity, relating it specifically to their neurodivergence and acknowledging this as a "contradiction" (P5). Being able to work flexibly and have a level of control over their work was also expressed by participants, supporting the findings of Fitzpatrick & Walsh (2023b) where autonomy over tasks was also found to be important. Participants, however, also expressed difficulties when obtaining this autonomy, and that not having someone "dictating…tasks" (P6) or holding participants "accountable" (P1) could compound issues they experienced with procrastination or meeting deadlines. Common

mechanisms for maintaining focus and completing tasks, such as list-making, were attempted by participants, sometimes following the advice of a manager. Their ultimate efficacy, however, is unclear as participants who made such lists spoke of things "falling by the wayside" (P1) and "procrastinating" regardless (P6). This exposes a potential disconnect between how neurotypical managers and neurodivergent staff perceive structure and productivity, leading to "crossed wires" (P1).

Challenges with executive function are frequently reported by neurodivergent employees, including but not limited to "attention regulation, planning, prioritizing, organization and time management" (Doyle, 2020, p. 115). These challenges, however, may not be widely understood by neurotypical managers due to staff reluctance to disclose neurodivergence, and a lack of individual or organisational knowledge about neurodivergency. Participants expressed concern that managers "didn't really understand disability" and that this had "caused a few problems over the years" (P2). This supports the findings of McDowall et al. (2023) which reveals that there is still much to be done to improve awareness of neurodivergence. Overall, this study finds that there is potentially the "awakening of greater awareness" (P2) within the sector, however, neurodivergent LIS professionals still report this as "hit and miss" with a need for more to be done to consider "how our systems may be restrictive and in need of change" (Chapman, 2024, para 1&2).

Professional skills and strengths

An important dimension to this study was to enable participants to explore their professional skills and strengths through the lens of their neurodivergence. This was motivated by a desire to partially redress the issue that exists in much of the literature where the experiences of neurodivergent individuals focus on limitations and challenges, perpetuating a deficit model of disability (Doyle & MacDowall, 2022).

Some participants expressed familiarity with the skills and attributes typically associated with their neurodivergence, recognising these as professional strengths. Being able to work accurately to a high-level of detail was referenced by multiple participants, supporting the findings of Shein (20020), and Austin and Busquets (2008). Traditionally, skills in these areas have been highly sought after within the LIS profession. The fact that multiple participants articulated these as specific strengths adds support to the notion that LIS roles may be well-suited to neurodivergent individuals (Eng, 2017; Spectrum, 2017).

Some participants indicated other reasons why the LIS profession was attractive. P3 explained that they felt a kinship with the "sort of people who work in libraries" and that the work being undertaken on social justice causes made it an attractive place to work. P5 expressed they were motivated to work within the sector due the impact libraries have on the world and the role they play in communities. Justice sensitivity[3] has been typically associated with neurodivergence (Bondü & Esser, 2015), potentially accounting for the motivation of neurodivergent individuals to engage with social justice work within the profession. Although not all participants made this explicit, all research participants spoke about issues related to EDI and social justice, such as those related to their neurodivergence, disability, gender or gender identity, sexuality, age or race, within their interviews. This reveals a clear connection between neurodivergent individuals' professional interest in this work and how important they feel this area is.

It is notable that many participants expressed surprise at their ability to have obtained employment within the sector, or to have progressed to their current role. The frequent references to luck within the data is telling, indicating a distancing by participants of their professional achievements from their own skills. Not only do participants express the impact of "horrendous imposter syndrome" (P4), and how this has stymied their professional development, but other complex, external factors also contribute to barriers to professional development. This includes the potential mismatch between the perception of neurodivergent strengths by predominantly neurotypical managers and employers (Doyle & MacDowall, 2022). Within the LIS domain there continues to be a lack of insight into the experiences of neurodivergent individuals working within the sector (CILIP, 2023), potentially compounded by the myth that "libraries…are inherently good" (Ettarh, 2018, para 1) so there is less work to be done. However, this study finds that academic libraries are not exempt from the challenges that exist in other work environments for neurodivergent individuals (Lawrence, 2013).

Limitations and contributions

Although this is a small-scale study it addresses a significant gap in current LIS research and practice to understand the experiences of neurodivergent professionals working in the academic library sector. A case study approach allowed for the experiences of individuals to

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[3] "Justice sensitivity is the tendency to notice and identify wrong-doing and injustice and have intense cognitive, emotional, and behavioural reactions to that injustice" (Edge Foundation, 2024, para 1).

be viewed within a specific context. This also lays the foundation for similar case studies to be conducted at other locations within the sector to substantiate findings. In addition, further comparative qualitative studies could be undertaken in future research that could explore the experiences of neurotypical individuals in comparison to neurodivergent professionals.

Interviews with participants were conducted via Google Meet. Although this allowed for a certain degree of accessibility in regard to accommodating the communication preferences of the neurodivergent participants interviewed, this may have impacted communication or other cues.

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for participants to shape the narrative of the interviews based on their lived experiences. This resulted in vast amounts of complex and rich data which was far greater than could be analysed in its entirety within the scale and scope of this study. Careful consideration was therefore given as to what to include or exclude to best address the study's research questions.

Recommendations

Recommendations below are presented in alignment with the interpretative framework presented in Figure 1. They offer both theoretical and practice-based suggestions that may lead to improvements to the experiences neurodivergent LIS professionals.

Recruitment

- **Finding** - Neurodivergent individuals experience significant challenges with panel interviews due to ambiguity, uncertainty, and short-term and working-memory problems typically associated with neurodivergent conditions.
- **Recommendation** – Typical recruitment practices within the sector should be considered and reviewed through a lens of neuroinclusion, with an emphasis on accessibility and inclusive by design approaches. The principles of the Fair Library Job Manifesto (2022) related to interview practice should be adopted, including sharing questions in advance to all candidates irrespective of a disclosure of neurodivergence.

Physical work environment

- **Finding** – Due to heightened sensory processing sensitivity, neurodivergent individuals experience challenges with their physical work environment. These issues

are compounded by open-plan office layouts and hot-desking practices that have increased as a result of adopting hybrid working practices following the Covid-19 pandemic.

- **Recommendation** – Equality Impact Assessments[4] should be undertaken, proactively and retrospectively, to evaluate the impact of hybrid working practices introduced during the pandemic on neurodivergent employees. Detail should be provided to neurodivergent individuals as to the level of environmental control they can have in library staff spaces, including temperature, lighting and noise. Managers should improve their knowledge and awareness of the impact of the sensory environment on neurodivergent individuals so as to better facilitate potential adjustments. Libraries should consider adopting noise zoning policies to staff spaces, analogous to those in student spaces, to provide clarity of expectation and a choice of suitable working spaces to suit all auditory sensory needs.

Sociocultural environment

- **Finding** - Neurodivergent individuals wish to build connections within the workplace but experience difficulties in doing so and are preoccupied with behaving in ways that will be perceived as socially acceptable by others. This results in increased masking, reducing neurodivergent individuals' ability to be their authentic selves within the workplace.

- **Recommendation –** Further research is required to fully explore the barriers neurodivergent individuals face with sociocultural LIS professional environments. Managers should increase their knowledge and awareness of the impact of masking on neurodivergent individuals. When strategising organisational cultural values, library senior management should seek out the input and feedback of neurodivergent individuals. This will facilitate inclusive by design practice and guard against organisational values that tacitly reinforce hegemonic and neurotypical perspectives.

Daily work and tasks

- **Finding** - Neurodivergent individuals express a conflicting desire for both variety and routine in their daily work. Difficulties with executive function make managing,

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[4] "An equality impact assessment (EIA) is an evidence-based approach designed to help organisations ensure that their policies, practices, events and decision-making processes are fair and do not present barriers to participation or disadvantage any protected groups from participation" (UK Research and Innovation [UKRI], 2021, para 3).

prioritising and organising work challenging. Solutions to these challenges are sometimes offered by managers, but these are frequently not suited to neurodivergent ways of working.

- **Recommendation** – Expectations around the level of flexibility neurodivergent individuals have in managing their workload should be clear and unambiguous, taking into consideration preferences for neurodivergent ways of working. Managers should improve their knowledge of executive function difficulties faced by neurodivergent individuals, and work in collaboration with neurodivergent staff to develop strategies that can support. Measures for assessing productivity within LIS workplaces should be focused on outputs and deliverables, rather than the ways in which tasks are achieved, to fully accommodate neurodiversity in approaches.

Professional skills and strengths

- **Finding** - Neurodivergent individuals have skills and strengths that are valued and sought after by the LIS profession. Individuals are keen to professionally develop but encounter barriers that are both intrinsic and extrinsic. Neurodivergent individuals struggle to conceive of their own professional strengths. Employers appear nervous to discuss career progression and opportunities with neurodivergent and disabled employees.

- **Recommendation** – Career pathways should be clearly defined and developed to account for neurodivergence within the LIS profession. This could include identifying and facilitating alternative routes into the profession that considers how to dismantle the systemic barriers disabled and neurodivergent individuals face in seeking employment. Managers should improve their skill and confidence in proactively discussing professional development with neurodivergent employees through training and increased awareness, adopting a person-centred, individualised approach to understanding the skills and aspirations of neurodivergent employees. This could be achieved through pre-existing mechanisms, such as the annual appraisal process, or developed as an additional activity.

Conclusion

This study is an initial attempt to investigate the experiences of neurodivergent individuals working within the LIS profession, addressing the lack of practice- or evidence-based

research that exists. Work to improve the experiences of neurodivergent individuals should continue, founded on the expertise of neurodivergent professionals. Neurotypical allies can support by developing their own knowledge and sharing the emotional labour with neurodivergent colleagues through advocacy and support. More needs to be done at an individual, organisational and sectorial level to understand the challenges neurodivergent individuals face and to expose the systemic barriers neurodivergent individuals encounter regarding disclosure and access to adjustments. Before this can be undertaken, however, there needs to be a recognition within the sector that these systemic barriers exist at all.

Although commitments to equality and diversity are central principles within the LIS profession, the preoccupation with the experiences of neurodivergent library users has resulted in a sectorial blind spot. At best, this suggests a lack of curiosity to engage in the complex work required to view the experiences and barriers faced by staff through a truly intersectional lens. At worst, it exposes a problem that is perpetuated by the myths that those who work in the sector like to tell themselves about themselves, about the sector, and about one other. This "vocational awe" (Ettarh, 2018, para 1) obfuscates the scope of work required to improve the experiences of disabled and neurodivergent individuals. Without acknowledging that a library is a workplace just like any other there remains a risk that the sector will not fully address the barriers that exist for neurodivergent professionals, nor develop effective mechanisms to overcome them.

Acknowledgements

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Appendices

Appendix A – Neurodiversity, neurodivergence and neurodivergent conditions

The terms neurodiversity and neurodivergence are frequently used as an umbrella term to include a number of neurodivergent conditions. Although there have been critiques of how the research considers and defines what conditions should or should not be included (Russell, 2019), commonly agreed upon conditions include:

- Autism
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD] and Attention Deficit Disorder [ADD]
- Dyscalculia
- Dysgraphia
- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Tourette Syndrome

Occasionally, a distinction is made within the literature between conditions that are considered developmental and innate, and those that are acquired (Doyle, 2020). In addition to those listed above, other conditions that may be included under the term neurodivergent conditions are:

- Mental health conditions
- Neurological conditions including brain injury