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## “There’s Just No Real Way to Win”

Disabled Archivists and Professionalism’s Paradox

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# “There’s Just No Real Way to Win” Disabled Archivists and Professionalism’s Paradox<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** Centring around first person accounts, this article shows how some disabled archivists have experienced many different ableist expectations and assumptions in their work: through requirements in job descriptions, performance, and productivity and attitudes around comportment, accommodations, and disability. Drawing on a wide array of literature on disability, affect, and the archival profession while using data collected through interviews with disabled archivists, this article highlights some affective dimensions of archival labour. Interviewees’ past experiences led to an acute awareness of how they might or might not be perceived as “professional.” And managing this awareness and their concerns led to a variety of strategies: participants described overperforming, denying their own needs, and “pushing through” as well as expending significant amounts of time, energy, and work in anticipating, navigating, and managing others’ feelings and ableist attitudes. Together, these findings outline some of the ways disabled people experience the archival profession, perform labour that might be less legible and under-recognized, and feel about their place in the profession. Moreover, such labour illustrates a double bind for disabled archivists – what we might call a paradox of archival ableism. As they navigate others’ assumptions about disability – discriminatory opinions about capabilities,

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harmful behaviour, and ableist expectations – they simultaneously have to over-perform, advocate for their own worthiness for accommodations, and balance the ways these efforts might counteract, contradict, or work against each other. In other words, the paradox of archival ableism is how ableism produces a double bind of having to prove that one is both capable of work and also deserving of the very accommodations needed to do the work and how these efforts often work against each other.

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**RÉSUMÉ** Centré sur les récits à la première personne, cet article montre comment des personnes en situation de handicap ont expérimenté des attentes capacitistes et des suppositions dans leur travail : à travers des exigences particulières dans les descriptions de tâches, des facteurs de performance et de productivité, en plus d'attitudes autour de comportements, d'accommodations et d'handicaps. S'appuyant sur un large éventail de travaux académique sur le handicap, les affects et la profession archivistique, en plus d'utiliser des données recueillies lors d'entrevues avec des archivistes en situation d'handicap, cet article souligne des dimensions affectives du travail archivistique. Les expériences passées de personnes interrogées ont résulté en une conscience aiguë de la façon dont elles pourraient être perçues – ou non – comme des « professionnelles. » Gérer cette prise de conscience et ces préoccupations ont mené à une diversité de stratégies : des personnes participantes ont souligné avoir dépassé les objectifs de performance, niant ainsi leurs propres besoins. Elles ont également souligné devoir « pousser » plus qu'il ne le faut et ont dû avoir à gérer les sentiments des autres et leurs attitudes capacitistes. Réunis ensemble, ces résultats évoquent quelques-unes des situations vécues par les personnes en situation de handicap, incluant la réalisation de travail moins tangible et peu reconnu. Ces résultats ont une incidence sur comment ces personnes se sentent dans la profession. De plus, un tel travail illustre une double association pour les archivistes en situation de handicap, ce qui pourrait être nommé le paradoxe de l'archivistique sans limitation fonctionnelle. Pendant que les personnes en situation de handicap naviguent à travers les idées préconçues, qui peuvent inclure des opinions discriminatoires concernant leurs capacités, des comportements nuisibles et des attentes capacitistes, elles doivent surperformer, défendre leur propre dignité à travers les accommodements et équilibrer les manières dont ces efforts peuvent aller à l'encontre, contredire ou se nuire les uns les autres. En

d'autres termes, le paradoxe de l'archivistique capacitiste réside en la manière dont le capacitisme produit une double association provenant d'une nécessité de prouver que la personne peut à la fois travailler de manière efficace, d'une part, tout en méritant les mêmes accommodements nécessaires pour effectuer ce travail, d'autre part, soulignant comment ces situations se trouvent souvent les unes contre les autres.

## Introduction

At the virtual event *Tiger Talks #4: Dismantling the Culture of Professionalism*, part of the Tiger Talk series of events celebrating Alice Wong's memoir *Year of the Tiger*,<sup>2</sup> Sandy Ho and Vu Le discussed the concept of professionalism. Ho powerfully lamented,

I think that when we say “professionalism” that’s really a not so subtle way . . . of saying who gets to belong and who doesn’t. And really in communities that I’m from as a disabled person, that’s often folks who are not palatable in whatever way that they’re presenting. There are folks who maybe are non-verbal, are deaf or blind, are neurodivergent. The expanse of when it comes to the way professionalism and these ideas and myths resurrect and just keep upholding ableist notions of who gets to thrive in certain sectors is absurd, and it’s complete trash. And yeah, I just – there’s nothing but rage for professionalism.<sup>3</sup>

Ho's words call into question the ways that “professionalism” excludes disabled people and intersects with notions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Ho and Le's conversation on dismantling the exclusionary aspects of professionalism resonates with those in the archival field – a profession centred around often-standardized processes, approaches, and work – to help us think through the impacts of such norms. This article, focusing on the exclusionary aspects of professionalism, asks, What are the ways the archival field constructs, maintains,

2 Alice Wong, *Year of the Tiger: An Activist's Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2022).

3 LongmoreInstitute, “Tiger Talks #4: Dismantling the Culture of Professionalism with Vu Le and Sandy Ho,” February 7, 2023, YouTube video, 56:40, <https://youtu.be/miVQLcAjeg?feature=shared>.

and enforces notions of professionalism, and what are the impacts for disabled people navigating this landscape of employment?

Centred at the intersection of disability and archival work, we address the many ways in which the archival profession shapes disabled archival workers' realities through what is and is not understood to be "professional." This work engages with and builds on a subset of archival studies that specifically addresses the affective impacts – the "visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion"<sup>4</sup> – of archives. While many scholars have explored the affective aspects of archives for those who use them, we engage with Marika Cifor and Anne Gilliland's poignant question "What ethical imperatives and dilemmas does a consideration of affect present for practicing archivists?"<sup>5</sup> to focus on affect *for* and *on* archivists. To address this, we first orient our research within a wide range of scholarship: we outline many projects that have addressed the ways in which marginalized and minoritized people can be affectively impacted by archives as well as the ways that LIS workers experience their jobs. And we turn to concepts of "professionalism" to show how many scholars and practitioners have rightfully been critical of the many exclusionary norms of the archival profession. Building on this wide range of knowledge, we interviewed 12 disabled archival workers about their experiences working in archives, outlining three main findings through which we invite readers to question and critique concepts of professionalism alongside the powerful articulations of interviewees: First, we show how some interviewees experienced many different ableist expectations and assumptions in their work: through requirements in job descriptions, performance, and productivity and attitudes around comportment, accommodations, and disability. We expand upon these experiences in our second finding: how interviewees' past experiences led to an acute awareness of how they might or might not be perceived as "professional." Managing this awareness and their concerns led to a variety of strategies for navigating expectations and perceptions, which formed our third finding: participants described instances of overperforming, disregarding their own needs, and "pushing through" while also noting the significant investment

4 Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

5 Marika Cifor and Anne J. Gilliland, "Affect and the Archive, Archives and Their Affects: An Introduction to the Special Issue," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 1–6, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9263-3>.

of time, energy, and effort involved in anticipating, navigating, and managing others' feelings and ableist attitudes. Together, these findings outline some of the ways disabled people experience the archival profession, perform labour that might be less legible and un- or under-recognized, and feel about their place in the profession. This labour helps us outline an important dimension of how ableism shapes the archival profession: it creates a double bind of simultaneously having to overperform to prove one's capability while also advocating for accommodations – efforts that might counteract, contradict, or work against each other.

## Literature Review: Affect, Archives, and Professionalism

### Affective Impacts of Archives

We began this project thinking about the affective or emotional impacts of archives for marginalized or minoritized people. Laying a foundation, Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez outline the important stakes of archival representation – how users of community archives countered the abject erasure they felt in mainstream archives.<sup>6</sup> Many have built upon this work to investigate the ways in which people marginalized by race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality feel about their representation in archives and the ways community archives can produce a profound sense of ontological, epistemological, and social belonging.<sup>7</sup> Further extending this work by focusing on disability, Gracen Brilmyer has investigated the ways that disabled archival users are impacted by

6 Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, "To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives," *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): 56–81, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.79.1.56>.

7 For example, see Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci, and Marika Cifor, "To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise: Community Archives and the Importance of Representation," *Archives and Records* 38, no. 1 (2017): 5–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2016.1260445>; Joyce Gabiola, Gracen Brilmyer, Michelle Caswell, and Jimmy Zavala, "It's a Trap: Complicating Representation in Community-Based Archives," *American Archivist* 85, no. 1 (2022): 60–87, <https://doi.org/10.17723/2327-9702-85.1.60>; Ana Roeschley and Jeonghyun Kim, "Something that Feels Like a Community': The Role of Personal Stories in Building Community-Based Participatory Archives," *Archival Science* 19, no. 1 (2019): 27–49, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09302-2>; Heather MacNeil, Wendy Duff, Alicia Dotiwalla, and Karolina Zuchniak, "If There Are No Records, There Is No Narrative': The Social Justice Impact of Records of Scottish Care-Leavers," *Archival Science* 18, no. 1 (2018): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-017-9283-2>.

their representation, misrepresentation, and erasure in archives,<sup>8</sup> showing how disabled people come to anticipate such erasure in ways that inform their sense of belonging in archives.<sup>9</sup> They have also used interviews with disabled people to show the ways that archival spaces – through their complete or partial inaccessibility – can shape disabled patrons' experiences of archives. They highlight that, even when spaces are accessible or people are willing to help increase accessibility, the subtleties of inaccessibility also produce a sense of alienation and can bring deeper awareness of one's self not belonging in a space and not having access to one's histories.<sup>10</sup>

Just as users are impacted by archival representation and decision-making, so too are workers impacted by their jobs. Many scholars and practitioners have shown how disabled workers in information professions more broadly are impacted by places of employment. Jess Schomburg highlights how ableism within library work "creates an environment of toxic individualism."<sup>11</sup> And Joanne Oud, through a survey of disabled librarians, illustrates many facets of being a disabled employee: despite having some positive experiences, many interviewees reported difficulties in their workplaces, such as microaggressive assumptions that they were less productive or less capable or less skilled because of their disabilities, or understood that their employers thought of them as incompetent or less-than in comparison to non-disabled workers.<sup>12</sup> Others shed light on how librarians concealed their disabilities and had concerns

- 8 Gracen M. Brilmyer, "It Could Have Been Us in a Different Moment. It Still Is Us in Many Ways: Community Identification and the Violence of Archival Representation of Disability," in "Sustainable Digital Communities: iConference 2020," ed. Anneli Sundqvist, Gerd Berget, Jan Nolin, and Kjell Ivar Skjerdingsstad, *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, vol 12051 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 480–86, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43687-2\\_38](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43687-2_38).
- 9 Gracen Mikus Brilmyer, "I'm Also Prepared to Not Find Me. It's Great When I Do, but it Doesn't Hurt if I Don't": Crip Time and Anticipatory Erasure for Disabled Archival Users," *Archival Science* 22, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-021-09372-1>.
- 10 Gracen Brilmyer, "They Weren't Necessarily Designed with Lived Experiences of Disability in Mind: The Affect of Archival In/Accessibility and 'Emotionally Expensive' Spatial Un/Belonging," *Archivaria* 94 (Fall/Winter 2022): 120–53.
- 11 Jessica Schomburg, "Disability at Work: Libraries, Built to Exclude," in *The Politics and Theory of Critical Librarianship*, ed. Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2018), 111–23, 118.
- 12 Joanne Oud, "Academic Librarians with Disabilities: Job Perceptions and Factors Influencing Positive Workplace Experiences," *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research* 13, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v13i1.4090>.

about disability disclosure<sup>13</sup> – especially when intelligence levels and perceived “laziness” had been used as excuses to discriminate against disabled and d/Deaf people of colour<sup>14</sup> – and therefore experienced fear,<sup>15</sup> isolation, and otherness and felt unsafe and unsupported in their workplaces and career development.<sup>16</sup> In other words, experiences of ableism are complicated by intersecting identities, where workers of colour have to navigate, as Michelle Khuu states, the “unspoken – but intentional – whiteness to library culture which affects how disabled people of color move within the building.”<sup>17</sup>

Drawing from insights provided by this literature and using the same data used in this article, we have recently reported on the ways that disabled archivists experience disclosure at their jobs. While some interviewees with more apparent disabilities described feeling fear around being forced to disclose, others reported avoiding applying to jobs altogether. They show the complex decision-making around disclosure as well as the ways that disabled people navigate job applications and interview processes when they may or may not need or want to disclose. Through these interviews, they showed not only how some physical requirements are unnecessary or could easily be accommodated but also how such requirements function as significant barriers for disabled workers as they shape disclosure decision-making.<sup>18</sup>

13 Michelle Khuu, “Make the Library Loud: Removing Communication Barriers for Library Workers with Hearing Loss,” *Up//Root*, November 17, 2021, <https://www.uproot.space/features/make-the-library-loud>.

14 Khuu, “Make the Library Loud.”

15 Oud, “Academic Librarians with Disabilities.”

16 Kirsty Fife and Hannah Henthorn, “Brick Walls and Tick Boxes: Experiences of Marginalised Workers in the U.K. Archive Workforce,” *International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion* 5, no. 1 (2021): 7–8, <https://doi.org/10.33137/ijidi.v5i1.34667>; Schomberg, “Disability at Work”; Christine M. Moeller, “Disability, Identity, and Professionalism: Precarity in Librarianship,” *Library Trends* 67, no. 3 (2019): 455–70, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0006>; Shanna Hollich, “What It Means for a Disabled Librarian to ‘Pass’: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Inclusion, Identity, and Information Work,” *International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion* 4, no. 1 (2020): 94–107, <https://doi.org/10.33137/ijidi.v4i1.32440>; Khuu, “Make the Library Loud”; Susan Rathbun-Grubb, “Voices of Strength: A Survey of Librarians Working with Chronic Illnesses or Conditions,” *Journal of Library Administration* 61, no. 1 (2021): 42–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1845546>.

17 Khuu, “Make the Library Loud.”

18 Veronica Denison, Gracen Mikus Brilmyer, and Tara Brar, “‘Once I Show Up ... They’re Not Going to Hire Me’: Job Searches, Interviewing, and Disclosure for Disabled Archivists,” in *Preserving Disability: Disability and the Archival Profession*, ed. Gracen Mikus Brilmyer and Lydia Tang (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, forthcoming).



Together, these works illustrate a complex affective landscape for disabled users and workers. They show the immense impact of archives; through representation and erasure, patrons can feel erased in history, can come to expect their own erasure, and can experience a sense of not belonging in archival spaces. The ways ableism is experienced are also informed by other aspects of one's identity. For example, disabled people of colour have to navigate both the whiteness and ableism in LIS professions, and disabled workers can be excluded in a number of ways: through discriminatory attitudes of colleagues; expectations for high productivity; and barriers, fears, and biases around disclosure and accommodations – all of which can create and exacerbate feelings of being unsafe, unsupported, misunderstood, or insecure within one's job.

### Archives and "Professionalism"

While many information professionals are impacted by their work, the archival profession is shaped through many specific qualifications, expectations, and expertise.<sup>19</sup> In his canonical 1986 piece on professionalism, Richard Cox articulates that "the difference between an occupation and a profession has often been said to be that the latter possesses *values, norms, and symbols* that transform work to a calling" – what he defines as "professional culture."<sup>20</sup> As such, Mark Greene defines professionalism within archives as "the characteristics of internalizing a common set of values. . . . defining our importance, and claiming power."<sup>21</sup> This section focuses on the concept of professionalism and the ways it is constructed through norms, is underscored by personal identity and individualism,<sup>22</sup> and shapes workers' experiences of archives.

One formative aspect of archival professionalism is the way that archival education codifies certain values through the training, expertise, and knowledge that an individual often requires in order to be perceived as a professional

19 Margaret Crockett, "Continuing Professional Development and the Hallmarks of Professionalism: An Overview of the Current Environment for the Record-Keeping Profession," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 1 (2007): 77–102, 84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00379810701376621>.

20 Richard Cox, "Professionalism and Archivists in the United States," *American Archivist* 49, no. 3 (1986): 229–47, 232, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.49.3.p0vg1v6410254574> (emphasis added).

21 Mark A. Greene, "The Power of Archives: Archivists' Values and Value in the Post-Modern Age" (presidential address, Society of American Archivists annual meeting, San Francisco, CA, August 29, 2008), 3, <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/GreeneAddressAug08.pdf>

22 Richard J. Cox, *Archival Anxiety and the Vocational Calling*, illustrated ed. (Duluth, MN: Litwin Books, 2011).

archivist.<sup>23</sup> Many have highlighted the ways professionalism is established through education, as MLIS degrees are often required for employment and – while not always required for archival jobs – are nonetheless seen as significant indicators of professionalism.<sup>24</sup> The skills and values acquired during archival education<sup>25</sup> shape the way work is expected to be completed, the way people are trained, and, consequently, the people who are hired who then conform to these norms. Thus, in the workplace, professional status is often achieved by successfully performing basic and essential administrative tasks,<sup>26</sup> having certain skills<sup>27</sup> and demonstrating “respect for the principles, norms, and methods accepted by the record-keeping profession, continued personal development, and professional discretion.”<sup>28</sup> This can include not only the skills it takes to perform archival work but also expected metrics for productivity.<sup>29</sup> And, importantly, scholars and practitioners have highlighted how these factors shape the profession into “a calling.”<sup>30</sup> Professionalism often becomes an aspect of an archivist’s identity.<sup>31</sup> It exists, with a multiplicity of definitions for different members of the

23 Cox, “Professionalism and Archivists in the United States,” 232–33; Karen Benedict, *Ethics and the Archival Profession: Introduction and Case Studies* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003); Crockett, “Continuing Professional Development and the Hallmarks of Professionalism,” 84.

24 Rachel A. Koenig, Viviana Alejandra Rodriguez, and Adam P. Sima, “Attitudinal Attributes of Professionalism in Health Sciences Librarians,” *Journal of Library Administration* 61, no. 1 (2021): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1845544>.

25 For some critical identifications of values in archival education, see Anne Gilliland, “Neutrality, Social Justice and the Obligations of Archival Education and Educators in the Twenty-First Century,” *Archival Science* 11, no. 3–4 (2011): 193–209, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-011-9147-0>; Nicole A. Cooke, Kellee E. Warren, Molly Brown, and Athena N. Jackson, “It Starts at Home: Infusing Radical Empathy into Graduate Education,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (October 4, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v3i2.123>.

26 Benedict, *Ethics and the Archival Profession*, 24.

27 Anne Daniel, Amanda Oliver, and Amanda Jamieson, “Toward a Competency Framework for Canadian Archivists,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 7, no. 1 (February 20, 2020), <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol7/iss1/4>.

28 Mary Neazor, “Recordkeeping Professional Ethics and Their Application,” *Archivaria* 64 (Fall 2007): 47–87, 60.

29 Daniel, Oliver, and Jamieson, “Toward a Competency Framework for Canadian Archivists,” 3.

30 Cox, “Professionalism and Archivists in the United States,” 232; William M. Sullivan, *Work and Integrity: The Crisis and Promise of Professionalism in America*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 38.

31 Dominique Luster, “Professionalism: As Pursuit of Archivist Identity” in *Archival Values: Essays in Honor of Mark A. Greene*, ed. Christine Weideman and Mary A. Caldera (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2019) 248–256.

field,<sup>32</sup> and it can likewise significantly shape feelings of imposter syndrome<sup>33</sup> for those who do not conform to such standards or whose workplaces insufficiently support archival staff.<sup>34</sup>

The concept of professionalism has been critiqued especially by those who have historically been negatively impacted by its norms, as "the discourse around professionalism often fails to interrogate underlying assumptions and thus serves to promote a white, heteronormative, ableist perspective where the existence of any 'professional' whose body or mind does not represent this default is erased by an 'ideal' model of what it means to be professional."<sup>35</sup> Michelle Khuu powerfully outlines

the boundaries of what is considered acceptable behavior and what it means to look "professional," boundaries that exclude dark skin color and markers of visible disability.

Whiteness defines professionalism as speaking with impeccable North American English. This culture which derides African American Vernacular English as uncouth and classless in one breath and appropriates it in the next, is the same culture that punishes people with dyslexia, intellectual disabilities and acquired brain injuries, regardless of the value contained within the words.<sup>36</sup>

Paraphrasing April Hathcock's critique, Stephanie Rosen notes, "whiteness is why LIS diversity initiatives have onerous application requirements; and whiteness is what is recruited, promoted and retained as a result."<sup>37</sup> What is

32 Daniel, Oliver, and Jamieson, "Toward a Competency Framework for Canadian Archivists"; Luke Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Traditions in American Archival History," *American Archivist* 54, no. 2 (1991): 160–75, 174, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.54.2.w42580v137053675>.

33 April K. Anderson-Zorn, Michael Andrew Davis, Danielle Nowak, and Alison Stankrauff, "Our Comeback Story: Impostor Syndrome in the Archival Profession," *American Archivist* 84, no. 2 (2021): 502–19, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-84.2.502>.

34 Kristen Chinery and Rita J. Casey, "Archivists at Work: Stress and Mood Effects in a Gendered Profession," *American Archivist* 84, no. 2 (2021): 445–67, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-84.2.445>.

35 Moeller, "Disability, Identity, and Professionalism," 461.

36 Khuu, "Make the Library Loud."

37 Stephanie Rosen, "Accessibility for Justice: Accessibility as a Tool for Promoting Justice in Librarianship," *In the*

more, professionalism's influence on archivist identity, as some have pointed out, creates the opportunity for more unequal working conditions and pay<sup>38</sup> by promoting individualism and personal responsibility for success through conformity to such norms.<sup>39</sup> Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith describe how, "as practitioners in this field, we have inherited a professional and institutional culture of toxic ambition. . . . As an archival professional, you're meant to keep a straight face, a stiff upper lip, to toe the line."<sup>40</sup> They highlight how students are expected to work for free, wages are subpar, and expectations around productivity are high. Likewise, Emily Drabinski examines professionalism, a core value of librarianship, with an approach that calls for inclusion, continuous examination of identity, and value that exists outside of hierarchy and the power imbalances created through professionalization.<sup>41</sup> And Juris Dilevko articulates how such hierarchies can be obscured: "By holding out the promise of social mobility through individual effort, professionalism contributes to the 'ideology of classlessness.'"<sup>42</sup> Others, such as Kirsty Fife and Hannah Henthorn, have examined how the archival profession has "been slow to implement any training engaging with privilege, oppression, or intersectionality. This implies that this area of professional development is not seen as core to professional competencies."<sup>43</sup> Such critiques identify some of the ways that academic ableism, as Jay T. Dolmage names in higher education, shows up through neoliberal, ableist ideals of who is "productive," "valuable," or "expendable." Dolmage shows not only the many barriers to surviving academia but also

*Library with the Lead Pipe*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2017/accessibility-for-justice/>. See also April Hathcock, "White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, October 7, 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity/>.

- 38 Emily Drabinski, "Valuing Professionalism: Discourse as Professional Practice," *Library Trends* 64, no. 3 (2016): 604–14, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0005>; Koenig, Rodriguez, and Sima, "Attitudinal Attributes of Professionalism in Health Sciences Librarians," 14.
- 39 Juris Dilevko, *The Politics of Professionalism: A Retro-Progressive Proposal for Librarianship* (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2009), 85.
- 40 Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith, "An Introduction to Radical Empathy in Archival Practice," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021): 1–21, 2, 18, <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v3i2.171>.
- 41 Drabinski, "Valuing Professionalism," 605.
- 42 Dilevko, *The Politics of Professionalism*, 85.
- 43 Fife and Henthorn, "Brick Walls and Tick Boxes," 23.

the precarious positions of disabled workers who "make it" inside, as they are heavily policed through policies, procedures, and expectations shaped by race, class, and gender.<sup>44</sup>

These works are among a plethora of criticisms of the standards of professionalism that imbue limited, exclusionary, and dated viewpoints – often with whiteness and ableness at the centre<sup>45</sup> – as norms within the profession.<sup>46</sup> They show how professionalism, when taken as the norm, "transform[s] work to a calling."<sup>47</sup> Yet that same sense of personal connection, and the overwork and individualism that it creates, produces a deep sense of alienation and exploitation for disabled and other marginalized or minoritized workers. The ways disabled employees' needs can be seen as problems demanding solutions can increase precarity for already precariously employed people<sup>48</sup> and can produce empty promises of diversity and inclusion.<sup>49</sup>

Building on these bodies of literature, this research addresses many factors that frame disabled workers' realities. By centring the affective impacts of archives, we turn toward disabled archivists' lived experiences to question how the concept of professionalism is felt. We take the aforementioned critiques of the many norms within LIS histories and professions as a starting place from which to explore disabled people's experiences in the field.

44 Jay Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

45 Rosen, "Accessibility for Justice."

46 Shanna K. Kattari, Miranda Olzman, and Michele D. Hanna, "'You Look Fine!': Ableist Experiences by People With Invisible Disabilities," *Affilia* 33, no. 4 (2018): 477–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109918778073>; Mario H. Ramirez, "Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative," *American Archivist* 78, no. 2 (2015): 339–56, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.78.2.339>; Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, ed., *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017); Michelle Khoo, "Make the Library Loud"; Andrew Flinn, "An Attack on Professionalism and Scholarship? Democratizing Archives and the Production of Knowledge," *Ariadne*, no. 62. (January 30, 2010), <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue/62/flinn/>; Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee, "Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i1.10>.

47 Cox, "Professionalism and Archivists in the United States," 232.

48 Moeller, "Disability, Identity, and Professionalism," 460; Hollich, "What It Means for a Disabled Librarian to 'Pass!'"

49 Fife and Henthorn, "Brick Walls and Tick Boxes," 7–8.

## Methods

The data for this article was collected through 12 semi-structured interviews with disabled archivists located in the US and Canada. In order to qualify, participants needed to (a) self-identify as disabled; (b) have worked as an archivist or in an archivist-related job within an archives, special collection, or museum or have completed an archives-related degree (such as a master of archival studies or a master of library and information science) in the past 15 years in the US and/or Canada; and (c) be at least 21 years of age at the time of recruitment. Each participant received a small honorarium as compensation for their time and labour, and interviewees could specify whether they wanted to be interviewed by either or both of the principal investigators for the project. Each interview was recorded with the consent of the interviewee, and that recording was transcribed and then coded in an iterative manner, using constant comparative analysis, to allow themes to emerge within and across interviews.<sup>50</sup>

We are working from an interpretivist paradigm, where we are part of the social situations that we are reporting on; however, each member of the research team comes with their own positionalities that inform the ways they relate to the work. The first author writes from their position as a white, non-binary, disabled, and chronically ill person in academia and from a middle-class background. The second author identifies as a white, disabled, cisgender woman who was a first-generation college student. The third author identifies as a queer, chronically ill, Asian American transracial adoptee. And the fourth author identifies as a disabled, neurodiverse, brown, and Canadian woman. Given our many identities, some of us relate to certain findings more than others; are both insiders and outsiders to this research in different ways; and acknowledge the complexities in sick, disabled, d/Deaf, mad, neurodivergent, and chronically ill experiences as they intersect with race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, size, and other life experiences.

Consent and care are central to this research since we were asking disabled people to reflect on their experiences, thoughts, and feelings around navigating accessibility in the workplace, primarily in archives settings, many of which were difficult. Each interviewee read and signed in advance a consent

<sup>50</sup> John Lofland, David Snow, Leon Anderson, and Lyn H. Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2005).

form, where they could specify whether they wanted to be identified by name, a pseudonym, or confidentially (e.g., as "Participant 1"). They also could specify if they wanted any identifying institution/organization names to be anonymized within their transcripts. The decision to give each participant the choice to be named is deeply rooted in community practices; we credit each of them for their knowledge, vulnerability, and contributions to this work, without which this article would not be possible. Further, consent is ongoing: we send each interviewee all of the quotations from them that we plan to use for each manuscript, and they have an opportunity to change how they are cited or described as well as to edit, redact, or change any of their quotations. Then, we send each interviewee a draft of each manuscript we write, and they can make any additional changes and suggest any edits to the manuscript overall. We are incredibly grateful for their time, care, and contributions to each of the pieces and for their vulnerability in sharing their experiences with us for this public venue.

## Findings

### **Finding 1: Experiences of Ableist Expectations and Assumptions**

Many interviewees identified expectations and assumptions around professionalism that were imbued with ableism in different professional settings. Some described how they experienced different expectations around their physical abilities, which impacted how they participated as professionals. One interviewee, Jade Finlinson, a white paraplegic with complex physical disabilities who uses a wheelchair for mobility, spoke about interviewing for jobs as a wheelchair user and experiencing physical expectations within job descriptions. She stated, "I didn't apply for a couple of jobs because they put in the job descriptions that you have to be able to climb ladders. And . . . if that's part of the job description, they're not even going to put me past another level." Participants discussed how these physical expectations and assumptions shaped what they were expected to do in their positions as archivists. Chris Tanguay, a queer, white, gender-ambivalent woman with reoccurring depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and thoracic outlet syndrome, spoke about expectations around performance that fell outside of their main tasks: "The head of the department . . . always focused on public speaking, and I was told that was why I didn't get a promotion into another position: because he assumed I wouldn't be able to speak to groups

even though that wasn't the main point of the job." Another interviewee, Michelle Ganz, a mixed-race (Indian and Polish) disabled woman who is severely deaf and very nearsighted and wears assistance devices, a hearing aid, and glasses to interact with the world, recounted expectations around phone calls at work and how frequently people would forget or disregard her access needs:

I had to be on the calls that my boss was on and . . . sometimes I would have to hand the phone off to someone else, which is problematic for me because my phone streams directly into my hearing aid. So I can't just hand the phone to someone else. . . . And I remember a situation quite clearly, where . . . I was trying to listen to the phone call while talking to someone, which is not a thing I can do. And then she [my boss] said, I need to get on this phone and grabbed the phone out of my hand. . . . After it was all over, she informed me that I just need to figure out my disability, because that was unacceptable. And I went home crying that day.

Michelle's words highlight not only how expectations around professional workplace comportment can be incompatible with disabled people's ways of communicating and working but also how these expectations can be harmful to disabled workers.

Participant 3, a white woman from a middle-class background, who has an invisible disability (dyslexia), spoke about colleagues who used ableist language:

I had a colleague who, when I first met them and while I was disclosing to them, implied that they were dyslexic too. At the time, I was very happy to have someone who "understood me" and was an ally. I took their statement at face value, but they were referring to when they made a mistake or inverted something. I had never encountered something like this before. No one has ever said they were "kind of dyslexic" so flippantly to me before. I was disappointed.

The use of *dyslexic* to imply negative traits or quirks and to reinforce stereotypes, as she describes, also illustrates how ableism shows up in archival jobs. Raegan Swanson, a second-generational white settler with an invisible physical disability and a learning disability, similarly spoke about the harms of such assumptions,



specifically around her writing disability:

I've had employers who are archivists . . . or employers who are like volunteer board members who go, "Oh, do you even know how to like write? Can you write like words?" And I'm like, "I have a f\*cking master's degree." . . . It's been across the gamut of assumptions . . . that I am not someone who has the ability for rational thought. And so that, in a professional workplace, has been extremely unsettling.

Her words highlight the ways stigma around disability come into play in the workplace.

Interviewees also identified other ableist norms around professional behaviour outside of physical day-to-day requirements. For example, interviewees spoke about how they experienced expectations around productivity at different archives. Participant 2, who has multiple invisible disabilities (psychiatric, neurodevelopmental, and musculoskeletal), reflected, "I think that comes down to the wider issues with the field, where everyone's so overworked, there's just a ludicrous expectation on every archivist and archives worker to produce so much work, to be publishing so much. . . . I feel like a lazy asshole. . . . [It] can be really difficult for a lot of us to actually fit into this very Western colonial concept of what professionalism is." Along these lines, Raegan talked about the pressure to have to "do everything" at a community archives. She said,

On the physical side: always the assumption that you can help move boxes all the time has proved to be a little bit more difficult, especially since, again, I worked in community archives where you literally do everything, right? So I scrubbed floors and I negotiate loans with major museums, all within a 24 hour period. So the assumption [is] that you can literally pick up the boxes and help with the moving – and we use my personal car to do this work because you're doing it "for the community" rather than as part of a larger organization.

While not all of these are professional tasks, her words identify some of the pressures of working as an archivist at a small organization where she stretches herself thin "for the sake of the community" – often pushing past her physical limits.

Furthermore, many interviewees spoke about expectations around behaviour. Chris, for example, spoke about trying to move positions at their workplace and how they were informed about expectations, specifically around their behaviour:

Before I disclosed, I faced a lot of discrimination from some of the people I worked with who are no longer working with me. . . . I've had people tell me at my job that they're looking for shiny, happy, outgoing people, which has held me back a bit. . . . I've tried to advance into professional-level positions at my place of work, and I think because of anxiety and depression I have definitely screwed up job interviews.

They continued, saying, “We are a profession of introverts, so expecting everyone to be super outgoing is, I think, kind of unreasonable.” And Participant 2 described how many people might not “fit” within the assumptions of the profession:

This definitely comes out with disability, but also comes out with other aspects of professionalism, like gender presentation and stuff, where there's this expectation that everyone's going to fit, like there's a mould. And if you fall out of this professionalism mould, that impacts how you're viewed and how hireable you are. And I do think that has a really adverse effect on people with disabilities.

These statements illustrate some of the expectations and assumptions around what individuals are expected to do at their jobs – lift boxes, manage multiple physical and social tasks, or demonstrate certain personality traits associated with being “professional” – and the impacts these can have on disabled archival workers. These lived experiences lay a foundation for this article as they are evidence of how disabled people witness the ways in which others think they should act, work, or behave.

### **Finding 2: Awareness of How One Is Being Perceived**

Building on the first finding were participants' descriptions of how the assumptions and expectations they experienced led to an acute awareness of how they might or might not be perceived as “professional.” Participant 2 spoke about how

difficult it was to determine whether or not disability was impacting an interaction. They stated,

Sometimes it's difficult to tell if something's actually impacting something or not – like whether people are reacting adversely to something or not. And something that I used to struggle with is, because I have Scheuermann's Disease, I can't sit up straight – like it's not really possible. And so one thing I really worry about is interviews or situations where I'm supposed to [be] professional and I seem like I'm slouching or lazy or unprofessional, and really, I just have a deformed spine.

They contextualized their awareness as, "not specific interactions, but it's more like I have eyes, you know what I mean?" Zachary, an Autistic, white, cis, heteroflexible man, similarly remarked, "I can think about [colleagues] being unable or unwilling to provide things . . . and disliking something about my communication with them up to and including the point of being vengeful." A participant who wished to remain anonymous told us that they were unsure if the animosity they experienced at work came from ableism; however, such treatment from "the head archivist was definitely coming from a place of ableism. But my immediate supervisor didn't seem to like anyone, so I don't think it was necessarily the disability that was the issue. But at the same time, if I said I couldn't physically do something, she would respond, 'I have no sympathy for that. This is what you were hired to do.'"

Not being able to tell whether hostility was directed at them because they were disabled and/or needed accommodations was a place of anxiety for some participants. Zakiya Collier, a Black, queer, chronically ill, and disabled cisgender woman living with systemic lupus erythematosus and other long-term and autoimmune conditions, alternatively spoke about how, in different workplaces, different aspects of their identity would be affirmed or ignored:

I definitely find that, in different spaces, disability is highlighted for me when I find that it's not being considered or when maybe I expect that I'll be seen as a person based on the basis of one identity. So, like [in one job, I remember] thinking that like, "Oh yes, my Blackness is being affirmed

and accepted and that's great." And then I'm like, "Oh wait . . . queerness is an afterthought. And disability is like not a thought. Or if it's a thought, it's like an administrative thought and not like interpersonal."

Their words highlight their awareness of how disability can be ignored, not considered, or relegated to administrative purposes.

Other participants worried about how they were being perceived by colleagues, supervisors, and peers even when they did not experience direct animosity. Participant 5, a disabled, gay Black man with chronic back pain who often depends on muscle relaxers to perform daily tasks, reflected on having a less legible disability and how people might perceive him as incapable of doing his job:

I think a lot of the way that I feel people perceive me is just based on how I look, right? I'm a tall Black man. . . . I think that people who see that and don't visibly see somebody who has some sort of support tool or assistance tool, they don't see that person as deserving accommodations. When it comes to professionalism, I'm just very mindful . . . of wanting to make sure people saw me as somebody who could do the job.

Participant 5 also spoke about not using the office's designated room for resting – which would help him with his chronic pain – because of the way he might be perceived: "There have been times where I have not gotten to it [the resting room] because maybe the lunchroom was really busy. Or maybe, like, maybe there's somebody in the lunchroom I didn't want to . . . see me go into the resting room." Due to his awareness of how he might be perceived, he sometimes would not use the room when in pain. He continued, stating how it impacted his anxiety about how he is perceived, "One of the worries that I had [was that] someone's going to tell the senior leadership that, 'Hi, [participant's name] is going to the resting room all the time.'" Many participants described being concerned about whether or not they were being perceived as being "professional" and/or "capable" as well as how their disabilities might impact such perceptions.

Concerns around professionalism extended to conferences and networking opportunities as well. Jade, for example, recalled,

At a lot of convention centres, there are miles of carpeted hallways. Just getting from one place to another can be exhausting. A few times, I ended up not going to some of the panels I wanted to see because I was tired from getting around. I know I could ask for help and have someone push me, but even when I attended with colleagues or met people there, I wouldn't necessarily want to be pushed around a professional conference.

Participant 5, thinking about using accessible seating areas, asked, "At a conference with my peers, if I'm sitting in the seating that's like the accessible needs seating, what does it mean for people to see me sit there, you know? Is that something that I would want to be associated with me? And what would that make me? How would that affect me, you know?"

Awareness around being able to participate in activities, conferences, and networking in accessible ways – in addition to around being perceived as professional *and* the ways ableism was experienced as framing disability as unprofessional – extended beyond participants' immediate jobs and into many activities associated with the archival profession. Jade articulated her awareness and shared reality with other disabled people: "It's like we [disabled people] have a similar understanding of how navigating the world is different. . . . And trying to be professionals in a world where you're seen differently." Her words summarize many participants' reflections on how they might be perceived differently in the profession. The first two findings show how previous interactions – as evidenced through other people's expectations and assumptions – then were somewhat internalized: participants described this awareness of how they might be perceived as "unprofessional" or incapable of doing their work, which was informed by ableist notions of professionalism.

### **Finding 3: Responses to Expectations and Perceptions**

Participants' previous experiences and their subsequent awareness around how they might be perceived within the profession, led to different strategies for navigating notions of professionalism. Some interviewees described how their concerns around other people's perceptions of them led to, as Jade articulated, how "I'm trying to convince somebody that I can do the job or that I'm capable." She continued, elaborating on how "it's a double-sided thing, where I don't want to be seen as not having the skills to do it. It might just take me a little

extra time. And asking for more time, or trying to make it known that it's harder for me to do certain things, can make the opposite perception stick. So, it's hard to balance that." Participant 2 spoke about multiple aspects, including being disabled, that informed how they were trying to prove themselves, stating, "I'm definitely overperforming, but I don't know if I can say that's specifically because of my disabilities or because I'm so scared of not having a job because I am so precariously employed that I am overperforming. . . . Because I'm disabled and because I'm trans, it's so much harder for me to get a job that I need to be 100 percent better than everyone else." Joy Rowe, a cisgender queer woman in Canada with hearing aids, who is a white settler who is unprecariouly housed and employed, spoke about precarity and her advocacy for a more accessible work environment: "It helped with people who were interested in it. It didn't help with the two people who were extremely hostile and just kept on using those things of like, 'Oh, you're just a term worker and you're not going to be here very long, so we don't have to take any of this.'" And convincing people had a negative impact on some participants. Jade continued, talking about her experience of convincing others of her skills: "Part of my professional journey has been learning to be more outgoing. . . . Beyond navigating physical barriers, it can be really exhausting – body and mind." The labour and stress around trying to convince others of their ability to do their work, in addition to precarious and contract employment, took a toll on many participants, as these words show.

Other interviewees spoke about not only trying to prove themselves but also often pushing through their discomfort or well-being in order to prove themselves as professional. Concerned about whether different professional events would have chairs, Raegan talked about when an event could be "something that you really want to participate in professionally, it's like, 'Okay, at what point do I just push through and deal with the exhaustion and pain on my own personal time? Or do I take breaks during the day to kind of deal with that?' That's kind of the trickiest part." For some participants, this strategy produced a lot of stress and anxiety. Participant 5 recounts, "There was a lot of stress there. . . . If I am not doing all of these things, if I'm not presenting myself in all these great ways, then I'm not going to have my contract renewed, or I'm not going to be made a permanent employee, you know. It was very much like trying to be 'on' all the time, you know?"

While some participants "pushed through" in order to prove themselves, others did so in order to save or allocate time off. Zakiya discussed managing

chronic illness by rationing time off from work, reserving sick days for more severe flare-ups, and pushing through less-intense pain days. They describe being aware of how "I don't know if there's an extended sick period coming up. And so it just feels like I'm rationing [sick days] . . . kind of doing a scale, like they do at the doctor's office, for myself, like, 'Is it a seven? Okay. If it's seven and above, you should take sick time. If it's not, power through and just be in pain to avoid the stress of figuring out what would happen next [with work].'" Raegan spoke about how she evaluates

the value of the thing that I'm trying to do versus how I'm going to end up at the end of the day. So, if it's a community event and it's something super important to me, then I will push through. If it is something where . . . the emotional connection to it isn't there, then I have a harder time pushing through. . . . I'm going to go home and take some meds and sleep this off.

Many participants spoke about pushing through to their own detriment in order to maintain work expectations, obligations, and personal investments in community work.

Another strategy for navigating others' expectations that some participants shared was outing themselves as disabled and advocating for their needs. Participant 7, a white woman with visible and invisible disabilities, spoke about different strategies for asking for help doing physical tasks. In regard to not being able to retrieve items off shelves due to potentially falling, she said, "I had to remind [a coworker] that I wasn't going to do that. And he begrudgingly, because he didn't want to come into the building, agreed that, 'Yeah, I can do that.' And he could come on Saturday when I wasn't here. And so he made that work. My students . . . I'm up front that that's part of the job description. . . . they know that that's going to be part of what they do." Many participants spoke about self-advocacy as a tool to manage expectations, describing their persistence in continually speaking up for their own needs. For example, Participant 4, a white, cisgender woman who has non-epileptic seizures, illustrated how the continual need to advocate "puts me in a position where I'm probably the most annoying person on staff." Chris noted how "I felt like I needed to be more vocal about it [being disabled] because you know, this [the discrimination they were facing] was wrong, and the best way to get rid of the stigma is to talk about it and be open and up front about it."

Participant 3 noted how “I don’t wear my disability on my sleeve. You would not see it or know unless I disclosed. I guess you wouldn’t necessarily know . . . and so that puts me in a unique position . . . but it’s still there, and it’s still going to hurt when it’s not recognized.” And Jade described how “I got better at just . . . being a thorn in somebody’s side. You get better at explaining yourself.”

However, participants also illustrated how self-advocacy came with its own stress and concerns. Jade spoke about “having to convince myself that it was okay to ask for help, that I would still be seen as a competent professional.” Raegan also spoke about the difficulty: “Part of it is that I’ve had to get used to that part of talking about myself . . . and dealing with people being extremely rude or doubting what I have to say and how to not take that too personally while like I’m trying to either do my work or, you know, just live my life. Which is something that I definitely struggle with at a personal level.” And Participant 4 spoke about the impact of having to continually advocate for her needs, stating, “It can be hard to kind of describe the cumulative effect of always having to be the person who is pushing . . . for the things that I need.” She continued, remarking, “On an everyday level, it’s become sort of imperceptible, but in . . . key moments, it also produces a lot of anger.” And Participant 2 spoke about the toll it has taken on them in navigating the profession:

I generally have a lot of difficulty keeping up with the stress level at work, which is especially difficult with having an anxiety disorder where I already can’t regulate that level of stress very well. . . . Sometimes I can barely sleep at night, which is not a healthy way to live. . . . Regardless of my disability and regardless of when I disclose it, like even in situations where I have disclosed it, I find that it doesn’t actually change the expectation at all.

Participant 7 told us about how “I’ve tried not to get to the point where I’m crying [while] telling my colleagues. And so, I probably haven’t gone into as much depth. But you know, they know what they need to know. They don’t know beyond that.” While self-advocacy was a major way in which interviewees navigated professionalism, it also came with stress, difficulty, and anger as they nonetheless could encounter discrimination, doubts, or colleagues forgetting about their access needs. Therefore, some also managed how much information they disclosed.



Lastly, interviewees spoke about trying to navigate other people's feelings – managing others' discomfort, downplaying their own needs, and performing emotional labour in order to be understood or taken seriously. Jade told us about being an introvert but having to be extroverted to make others comfortable:

I had to change my personality when I became disabled to avoid being talked over or talked down to. I learned to be up front – to be the first in the room to extend my hand in order to show, "Hey, I can talk, you can speak normally to me, I'm a person . . ." just to make sure that everybody felt comfortable *so I would feel comfortable*. It can be sort of stressful because it's not really my personality deep down.

Participant 4 also told us about the amount of work she puts into managing others' feelings: "It just feels like an impossible thing . . . like I'm doing this kind of mothering, or this . . . emotional labour where I think, 'What does this person respond to? What approach should I take to convince them this is important?' And then inevitably, it just backfires because it's actually impossible." She continued, elaborating on how she feels having to perform emotional labour and guess what will work in order for people to provide the support that she needs: "It makes me extremely angry. . . . I don't know, it often feels like there's just no real way to win." Joy spoke about

having people dismiss it [her access requests] so easily, or being told that my want for a closed office would be . . . creating a conflict for somebody else, made it really easy for me to minimize what I needed. . . . Like, Oh, if I want a relationship with my coworkers . . . [and] if I want to show solidarity with my other term workers and like work on this problem, I have to not do the disability thing.

And Participant 2 spoke about the general ethos of the archival field and how disabled people might dismiss their own needs as a strategy for survival. They stated, "We kind of play it off or underplay it out of, really, a fear of what would happen if we were advocating for ourselves more in the field. Because . . . I think archives have much more of an ableism problem, at least in my experience, than libraries." Managing other people's feelings had an impact on many participants – feelings of anxiety, stress, anger – which added to the amount of time

and energy they spent convincing others that they could do their job, pushing through or past their own limits for their work, and advocating for themselves.

## Discussion

The interviewees' words show a complex landscape for disabled archival workers. Answering our first research question around the ways that the archival field constructs, maintains, and enforces notions of professionalism, the first finding shows the ways that the disabled archivists we interviewed have witnessed and experienced ableist expectations and assumptions: job descriptions that have physical requirements, a workplace emphasis on public speaking, day-to-day expectations around comportment and productivity, and adverse ableist stigmas around disability. Such expectations and assumptions not only excluded some interviewees from applying for jobs but also were harmful; as Participant 2 noted, "[It] can be really difficult for a lot of us to actually fit into this very Western colonial concept of what professionalism is," or as Chris told us, "I faced a lot of discrimination from some of the people I worked with." Their experiences laid a foundation for many interviewees' awareness around how they might be perceived as disabled people in the archival profession, answering the second question that guided this research on the impacts, for disabled people, of navigating this landscape of employment. Some, such as Participant 2, described worrying about how they might be perceived as "lazy or unprofessional," or being concerned with being seen, as Participant 5 expressed, "as somebody who could do the job." Such concerns led to our third finding: participants had different strategies for navigating expectations and perceptions such as convincing, pushing through, advocating for themselves, and managing others' expectations and discomfort around disability. Jade told us about the amount of work she puts into making "sure that everybody felt comfortable so I would feel comfortable," and Participant 4 remarked on the amount of "emotional labour" and time spent deciding on effective approaches to manage others' feelings. To note, these findings begin with *witnessing* how others think workers should act and perform – evidence that shapes interviewees' awareness around how they might be perceived and in response to which they develop a repertoire of strategies.

These findings take up the nuanced, affective impacts of archives – the way archives can shape feelings of ontological, epistemological, and social belonging<sup>51</sup> – and shift focus to the other side of the reading room desk. We show how archives can impact some marginalized and minoritized people not only through the ways people are represented in records but also through workplace standards and professional expectations. Building on the many issues highlighted through disabled librarians' experiences,<sup>52</sup> we highlight the immense impacts of archives on disabled workers' lives and, importantly, the impacts of concepts of professionalism. While many have outlined the archaic and harmful ways in which the archival profession affects workers and needs to change – the perspectives learned in archival education; the exploitative nature of internships; the precarious work; and the many white, Western, abled standards that are embedded in the archival field<sup>53</sup> – these interviewees' words show how ableism is intertwined with what Cox names the "values, norms, and symbols that transform work to a calling"<sup>54</sup> and the affective impacts of this.

Adding to the existing literature – which has rightfully drawn attention to the many standards of LIS professionalism that imbue limited, exclusionary, and dated viewpoints – the interviewees' words first help us to highlight the many barriers to archival jobs that are produced through concepts of professionalism: how Chris did not get promoted due to their divergence from the professional standard of "shiny, happy, outgoing people" or Jade did not apply for jobs that had physical requirements. Furthermore, because of the ways that ableism pervades the archival profession – through both inaccessibility and biases around disability – many interviewees described concerns about being perceived as unprofessional because they needed accommodations, which impacted how they could participate in professional events. For example, Zachary told us about unsupportive, hostile, and sometimes vengeful coworkers, and Raegan spoke about the discrimination she has experienced, where employers have assumed she was incapable of writing or performing some tasks. Jade contextualized

51 Caswell, Migoni, Geraci, and Cifor, "To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise."

52 Khuu, "Make the Library Loud"; Moeller, "Disability, Identity, and Professionalism," 460; Hollich, "What It Means for a Disabled Librarian to 'Pass'"; Oud, "Academic Librarians with Disabilities"; Schomberg, "Disability at Work," 118.

53 Schlesselman-Tarango, ed., *Topographies of Whiteness*; Cifor and Lee, "Towards an Archival Critique."

54 Cox, "Professionalism and Archivists in the United States," 232.

how such biases affect how “I wouldn’t necessarily want to be pushed around a professional conference,” and Participant 5 remarked about being concerned with using accessible seating, asking, “Is that something that I would want to be associated with me? And what would that make me? How would that affect me, you know?” Ableism, as these words show, creates barriers and limits disabled people’s participation in opportunities for professional development, having obvious impacts on their employment and advancement in their careers.

And because of the ways that the profession is hostile to many historically marginalized identities – the complexity of the ways that professionalism excludes disabled people, people of colour, queer and trans people – some interviewees described not always being able to locate hostility as associated with ableism specifically. For example, Participant 2 remarked how, “I don’t know if I can say that’s specifically because of my disabilities or because I’m so scared of not having a job. . . . Because I’m disabled and because I’m trans.” This facet both complicates the labour of securing accommodations while managing perceptions of capability *and* adds to the anxiety of navigating many barriers to gaining and keeping employment as multiply-marginalized people who experience interlocking forms of discrimination. Interviewees’ various axes of identity inform each of their singular experiences in complex, impossible-to-tease-apart ways.

This data tells a story about how normative attitudes, barriers, and standards around professionalism shape these disabled archivists’ *sense of belonging*. Unlike Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, who outline how archives contain the possibilities to confirm that “I am here,” “we were here,” and “you belong here,”<sup>55</sup> this research shows how ableist structures, in their entwinement with other forms of discrimination/oppression, shape not only feelings of “I am not here” but also feelings of “I/we cannot be here” and “I/we don’t belong here.” Todd Carmody poignantly states, “In work societies, we become a *we* first and foremost as workers. Only those whose activities are recognized as work, however, can join this *we*.”<sup>56</sup> Our data emphasizes the ways that some of our interviewees experienced the boundaries of this *we* that delineates the avenues of belonging in the archival profession. For example, the many experiences described above – from

55 Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, “To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing,” 34.

56 Carmody emphasizes how those outside of the white, abled, male archetype perform essential labour that often goes unrecognized. Todd Carmody, *Work Requirements: Race, Disability, and the Print Culture of Social Welfare* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 6.

physical barriers in job descriptions, discriminatory attitudes and animosity around disability, and colleagues forgetting access needs to inaccessible working conditions and professional events – underscored, as Participant 2 pointed out, that “archives have much more of an ableism problem, at least in my experience.” And some of these experiences outlined the social dimensions, where ableist assumptions and expectations are pervasive, as Participant 2 notes: “Even in situations where I have disclosed it, I find that it doesn’t actually change the expectation at all.” In other words, participants illustrated managing their acute awareness of how, as Participant 2 states, “if you fall out of this professionalism mould, that impacts how you’re viewed and how hireable you are,” producing constellations of feelings and, furthermore, additional labour around navigating the ableist “values, norms, and symbols” of the archival profession.

Second, this research highlights the profound responses to such barriers, assumptions, expectations, and stigmas – how some have developed a repertoire of ways of managing others’ expectations, assumptions, and perceptions.<sup>57</sup> And this labour is complex: interviewees described how they at once needed to “push through” their own needs and thresholds to their own detriment “to convince somebody that I can do the job or that I’m capable,” yet they also needed to self-advocate, especially if colleagues “don’t see that person as deserving accommodations.” These experiences put words to the complexity of the labour that some disabled people perform in response to assumptions about disability and expectations around professionalism and work. From overperforming, denying their own needs, and “pushing through” to the energy it takes to anticipate, predict, navigate, and manage others’ feelings and ableist attitudes, these interviews identify the immense amount of time and energy that disabled people put into managing norms of professionalism – in addition to the amount of time they spend planning, worrying, crying, and feeling around such expectations. Some of this labour echoes what Mia Mingus identifies as “the forced intimacy and emotional labor I am supposed to constantly be engaged in so people won’t be ‘mad’ at me, because as disabled people know all too well, able bodied people will not help you with your access unless they ‘like’ you. This is a very real and dangerous caged reality that I and many other disabled people live in.”<sup>58</sup> In line

57 Carmody, *Work Requirements*, 6.

58 Mia Mingus, “Forced Intimacy: An Ableist Norm,” *Leaving Evidence* (blog), August 6, 2017, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/08/06/forced-intimacy-an-ableist-norm/>.

with Mingus's words, this work highlights the additional labour – labour that might be invisibilized and unrecognized – that disabled archivists perform in sometimes precarious, hostile environments in order to navigate accessibility, employment, and belonging in an exclusionary profession.

Importantly, we focus here on how this labour illustrates a *double bind for disabled archivists*: as they navigate others' assumptions of disability, discriminatory opinions about capabilities, harmful behaviour, and ableist expectations, they simultaneously have to overperform, self-advocate their worthiness for accommodations, and balance the ways these efforts might counteract, contradict, or work against each other. Jade articulates this in this way: "It's a double-sided thing where I don't want to be seen as not having the skills to do it. It might just take me a little extra time. And asking for more time, or trying to make it known that it's harder for me to do certain things, can make the opposite perception stick. So, it's hard to balance that." This paradox – which we might call *the paradox of archival ableism* – is another barrier to the archival profession for disabled people, producing extra forms of labour through self-advocacy, "pushing through" or trying to prove ourselves, and balancing how these might work against each other. Ableism produces this impossible scenario; as Participant 4 told us, "It often feels like there's just no real way to win," and as Participant 2 articulated, "Regardless of my disability and regardless of when I disclose it, like even in situations where I have disclosed it, I find that it doesn't actually change the expectation at all." This research underscores not only the labour of anticipating, managing, advocating, and feeling but also how this labour might be illegible to those unfamiliar with the experiences of disabled people and might go unrecognized as part of the work one performs to be an archivist – to gain employment, renew contracts, navigate precarious employment, advance in one's career, and participate fully in the profession. And it shows how much of this work is impossible because of the ableist expectations and assumptions that pervade archival jobs and standards of professionalism. Margaret Price articulates how "thinking about disability and access in terms of individual bodies not only does an inadequate job of explaining both disability and access but also tends to exacerbate inequity and block efforts at inclusivity."<sup>59</sup> This work, too, identifies the ways that individualism – in this case, in the

<sup>59</sup> Margaret Price, "Time Harms: Disabled Faculty Navigating the Accommodations Loop," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (2021): 257–77, 258, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8915966>.

context of professionalism – produces a “no-win” situation, one that excludes and harms disabled people.

Navigating this paradox of archival ableism – the way ableism produces a double bind of proving both that one is capable of work and also deserving of the very accommodations needed to do the work *and how these efforts often work against each other* – takes a toll. Price, through interviewing disabled faculty members, illustrates how “when [accommodations] processes move slowly, academic workers experience material costs – harms – for which they then must figure out some way to compensate.”<sup>60</sup> Not only can accommodations processes be harmful, not always lead to increased access, and be time consuming to actually use, but processes frequently produce a “loop” that “is arduous to traverse, must be traversed over and over again, and exacts costs not only of time and money but also of emotion.”<sup>61</sup> Khuu stresses the “emotional toll of spending months fighting to access reasonable accommodations, social isolation in the workplace, being accused of faking disability or job loss.”<sup>62</sup> Brillmyer likewise outlines the “emotionally expensive” aspects of archival inaccessibility – “the emotional cost of yet another space where inaccessibility is prevalent, compounded, and accumulated.”<sup>63</sup> In alignment with these works, we emphasize an additional layer to the expense of inaccessibility that arises through professionalism: the impossible task of advocating against ableism – to be seen both as capable of doing a job *and* deserving of accommodations that make that work accessible. Not only does this research highlight, as Participant 4 described, the “cumulative effect of always having to be the person who is pushing,” it also highlights how, due to the prevalence of ableism in the archival profession, one must also balance advocating for accessibility and/or accommodations with how this might work against perceptions of disabled archivists as “employable” workers.

60 Price, “Time Harms, 264.

61 Price, “Time Harms,” 272.

62 Khuu, “Make the Library Loud.”

63 Brillmyer, “They Weren’t Necessarily Designed with Lived Experiences of Disability in Mind,” 149.

## Conclusion

Responding to Sandy Ho's rage for professionalism, Vu Le identifies how "professionalism has kind of trained us to think that there's like a professional work self and then there's like a personal, you know, self where we can actually be our full selves. I feel like we lose this idea of our full selves. We cannot really be our full selves when we are forced into these roles of professionalism."<sup>64</sup> This article, through highlighting disabled archival workers' experiences, illuminates some of the ways the archival profession has produced and continues to produce a set of standards to which disabled people might not fit and the ways that this *feels*. Participants articulated how ableist standards, expectations, and attitudes shaped their access to accommodations, daily work, and employment – within a landscape of precarious employment, contract work, and, in the US, access to healthcare. We add to the important conversations about disability and labour by expanding what labour looks like for disabled archival workers: the amount of (often un- or under-recognized) time, energy, and work that goes into navigating accommodations, deciding whether or not to apply to a position that has physical requirements, pushing oneself past limits, recovering from pushing through, proving oneself or convincing others, performing "emotional labour," and *the amount of time spent feeling the impacts of this work*. These strategies show not only the amount of extra labour that goes into strategizing around what approaches might most effectively enable one to be seen as capable or as "deserving" of accommodations and weighing options and strategies to gain access and support *but also the paradox of archival ableism that is created through professionalism – how these efforts might contradict or work against one another*. The interviewees' words highlight the very real-world implications of ableism – how the stress, violence, and additional work produced through and experienced because of ableism compounds in a profession that might exclude many people, shape their sense of (un)belonging, and therefore limit their access to employment, financial stability, and other vital resources.

Within LIS, the concept of professionalism is continually being refuted, redefined, and expanded through new models and calls to action. Drabinski redefines professionalism as "a guard against, as well as a facilitator of, change. More than anything else, valuing Professionalism means valuing the work of

64 LongmoreInstitute, "Tiger Talks #4."



articulating the present and responses to it.”<sup>65</sup> Daniel, Oliver, and Jamieson outline a competency framework for professionals that includes approval and support from the archival community (archivists, employers, and educators) and is reflective of the current profession but also easily updatable, as the profession quickly evolves; adaptable; and future-proofed.<sup>66</sup> They state, “We need to be more transparent so we can continue to attract individuals with diverse skills and not be seen as an esoteric subset of information specialists.”<sup>67</sup> And others have advocated for better support of a diverse array of perspectives<sup>68</sup> as well as the involvement of communities and non-professionals “to re-think how future professionalism and scholarship might be supported in a more collaborative, inclusive and democratic context.”<sup>69</sup>

While many may not be surprised by the prevalence of ableism within concepts of professionalism – as it shapes and is shaped by many norms – we, through highlighting the ways that ableism creates a double bind for disabled archivists, show how there is much more work to be done to both understand its impacts and dismantle the many forms it takes. This research aligns with and builds on this work to emphasize the need for radical change within the profession as ableism produces not only exclusionary aspects and feelings of unbelonging<sup>70</sup> for disabled archival workers but also new forms of illegible labour (in addition to how the profession might cause disability: repetitive tasks, on-the-job injuries, stress, overworking, and anxiety around the ways boundaries get pushed through precarious labour, unpaid internships, and therefore jeopardizing workers’ access to healthcare). And when disabled archivists are consumed with labouring for basic rights, they are less likely to have time for the invaluable work that disabled workers do in perceiving disability in records, processing records in new ways, and changing archives to better serve disabled users and people who want to better understand disability history. To put this another way, if the archival profession wants to better serve disabled users and

<sup>65</sup> Drabinski, “Valuing Professionalism,” 608.

<sup>66</sup> Daniel, Oliver, and Jamieson, “Toward a Competency Framework for Canadian Archivists,” 6.

<sup>67</sup> Daniel, Oliver, and Jamieson, “Toward a Competency Framework for Canadian Archivists,” 12.

<sup>68</sup> Koenig, Rodriguez, and Sima, “Attitudinal Attributes of Professionalism in Health Sciences Librarians,” 17.

<sup>69</sup> Flinn, “An Attack on Professionalism and Scholarship?”

<sup>70</sup> Such themes of belonging in a workplace also echo Marx’s concept of alienation as the process that separates the worker from their labour (in addition to their product).

people interested in better understanding disability history, there is much work needed to cause less harm and better support more disabled archivists and to undo the many double binds that can make our work impossible.

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