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Shhh-tereotypes: A Conversation among Librarians with Hearing Loss

By Jill Cirasella, Lee Ann Fullington, Monica Berger, and William Gargan

Abstract

We are four hard of hearing librarians dependent on hearing aids. Our hearing loss complicates our work, often in ways that are not apparent to colleagues and patrons. In this article, based on our panel at the 2021 LACUNY Institute, we share our experiences, challenges, and self-accommodations, and offer suggestions for supporting and effectively communicating with hard of hearing colleagues.

Keywords

Hearing loss, hard of hearing, hearing aids, invisible disabilities, librarians

Author Biographies

Jill Cirasella is Associate Librarian for Scholarly Communication at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), where she is also the librarian for audiology and speech-language-hearing sciences, among other subjects.

Lee Ann Fullington is Associate Professor and reference and instruction librarian at Brooklyn College, CUNY. She is a co-editor of the book *Reflections on Practitioner Research: A Practical Guide for Information Professionals* (ACRL Publications, 2020).

Monica Berger is Associate Professor, Instruction and Scholarly Communications Librarian, at New York City College of Technology, CUNY. In addition to her work as an instruction librarian, she supports faculty and undergraduate researchers' scholarship through workshops and consultations.

William Gargan, a past-president of LACUNY (1983–84), served as the Language & Literature Librarian at Brooklyn College for nearly 40 years until his retirement in 2018. He continues to review books in the fields of English & American literature for *Library Journal* and *Choice*.

Introduction

The “Library Bill of Rights” from the American Library Association (ALA) states that libraries should provide resources for “all people of the community the library serves” and that “a person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views” (1996). In “Services to People with

Disabilities,” an official interpretation of the “Library Bill of Rights,” the ALA expands on these basic tenets, making explicit that they apply to people “of all ages and abilities” (2018). The document also addresses a library’s responsibility to staff with disabilities: “Training should include effective techniques for . . . working with colleagues with disabilities. Libraries should adopt policies to ensure that people with disabilities have an opportunity to serve as members of the library staff, administrative units, and governing boards” (2018).

Nevertheless, there is far more in the library literature about patrons with disabilities than about staff with disabilities. For example, a content analysis of 198 articles about disability and accessibility makes no mention of library workers, only patrons (Hill, 2013). However, in the past few years, there have been several publications about library workers with disabilities, including a qualitative study of academic librarians with disabilities (Oud, 2019); a book chapter that blends lived experience with critical disability theory (Schomberg, 2018); a special journal issue devoted to disabled adults in libraries, with some articles focusing on disabled library workers (Schomberg & Hollich, 2019); and a wide-ranging book written for disabled library workers and their supervisors (Brown & Sheidlower, 2021). Also, a literature review about invisible disabilities in the workplace appeared in the journal *Library Management*; it is not specific to library workers but, given its venue, it is clearly intended to inform library managers about issues that may affect their employees (Syma, 2019). Hearing-related disabilities are mentioned in these works but are not the focus. At the writing of this article, we have seen only one article dedicated to the topic of librarians with hearing loss (Cheney, 2021).

All four co-authors of this article have hearing loss and use hearing aids, and as colleagues at the City University of New York, we have had occasion to discuss our experiences with each other. Lee Ann and Jill in particular have been immersed in conversation on the topic and are now preparing to conduct rigorous qualitative research into the professional experiences of academic librarians with hearing loss. However, we realized that we don’t need to wait until we have research findings to begin sharing how hearing loss complicates librarians’ interactions and identities, often in ways that are not apparent to colleagues and patrons.

Together, we seek to offer a glimpse into the lived experiences of hard of hearing librarians, and to share important considerations about working with hard of hearing colleagues. Each of us brings a unique perspective, as we are at different points in our careers and have different hearing loss trajectories. Still, as we are all public-facing librarians, we have quite a bit in common, including interactions with impatient patrons and encounters with harmful stereotypes about hearing loss.

Shhh-tereotypes: Stereotypes about Hearing Loss

We use the term “shhh-tereotypes” to refer to the pervasive stereotypes and misconceptions about people with hearing loss. One of the most common stereotypes

about hearing loss is that it is almost always connected to aging, which can lead to disbelief or dismissal when younger people say or otherwise signal that they're hard of hearing. Also, a common misconception is that simply speaking loudly should make it possible for hard of hearing people to hear and comprehend what's been said. Further, many people mistake hearing loss for lack of intelligence, lack of attentiveness, aloofness, rudeness, or lack of caring.

Misconceptions about hearing aids abound as well. These include the belief that hearing aids give users normal hearing and fully resolve the challenges associated with hearing loss. They are wonderful and essential devices, but life with hearing aids sounds different from life with normal hearing. Also, there is a largely unquestioned attitude that a smaller or more easily obscured hearing aid is a more desirable hearing aid. Indeed, many hearing aid brands boast that their products are nearly invisible, implying that hearing aid users should want to hide their disability.

The challenges created by stereotypes about hearing loss are compounded by the stereotype of libraries as quiet spaces where librarians shush patrons who speak above a whisper. Attitudes within the profession factor in as well. For example, librarianship is a service-oriented profession, and there is, rightly, a shared commitment to providing excellent and equitable service to all patrons. However, there has historically been far less interest in the needs of library workers with disabilities. Thankfully, this is changing—in addition to the recent publications about disabled library workers cited above, the discussion is being advanced on Twitter, often with the #CripLib hashtag.¹

What's Missing from the Stereotypes?

In addition to misconceptions that require correcting and stereotypes that need resisting, there are some key facts about hearing loss that aren't widely known among people with normal hearing. For example, for those with hearing loss, even just one-sided hearing loss, making meaning from sounds requires extra work and often a little extra time. And that extra cognitive load causes fatigue.

Also, with or without hearing aids, hearing loss makes it difficult to pick out foreground noises from background noises, and difficult to determine the location of sounds. Also, it's counterintuitive but true: people with hearing loss often find loud noises especially unpleasant or uncomfortable. Further, hearing loss is often

¹ The hashtag #CripLib combines “crip,” which is short for “cripple” and refers to disability culture and pride, and “lib” for “libraries.” The hashtag is used on tweets addressing the “intersection of disability and libraries,” particularly during monthly Twitter chats on the subject (<https://criplib.wordpress.com/>).

accompanied by tinnitus, the sensation of ringing, buzzing, or other sounds that aren't actually there. And, adding insult to injury, tinnitus itself can interfere with hearing—sounds need to be clear enough to distinguish from the tinnitus.

Many people are also unaware that hearing aids are generally not covered by medical insurance—in the United States, they're usually considered optional, sometimes even classified by insurance companies as “cosmetic devices.” Further, hearing aids have varying levels of technological sophistication. A simpler, less expensive hearing aid may work wonders for one person but be almost useless for another. Offhand comments that someone should get hearing aids are rarely made with a full understanding that the appropriate aids might be very expensive, often prohibitively so. Unfortunately, such comments are also rarely made with kindness.

Relatedly, as much as people might theoretically know that looking “normal” does not mean that someone doesn't have a disability, in practice many people fail to account for the possibility of an invisible disability. Similarly, they may not appreciate that disclosing a disability or asking for an accommodation can be a difficult thing to do.

Our Hearing Stories

Lee Ann: My hearing loss is hereditary, and my father, grandmother, and great-grandmother all used hearing aids. I've used hearing aids for over 15 years. My hearing was never perfect, and I was already failing hearing tests in elementary school. I knew from my relatives' experiences that my hearing would deteriorate over time and that I would need hearing aids by the time I was 30, just as my father did. My hearing loss is not uniform, and my audiogram, or visualization of my hearing test, shows that I have moderate to severe loss in both ears, across all frequencies. In short, if I'm not using my hearing aids, speech is very hard for me to hear and comprehend. As I'm deaf on certain frequencies, or tones, I simply cannot hear some speech and sounds. Lower voices are troublesome for me, and I miss words or even stretches of conversation depending on the rise and fall of the speaker's voice. Ironically, I hit my breaking point when I was a notetaker for disabled students as a postgraduate in Liverpool, England. It wasn't that I couldn't understand the lecturers' accents but that I could no longer hear well enough to comprehend the speakers in the lecture hall, no matter where I sat.

Jill: My hearing loss happened suddenly in 2015. From one day to the next, my left-side hearing cut out—not entirely but quite drastically. At the same time, tinnitus, or a persistent ringing in the ear, kicked in. As it happened, the hearing loss and tinnitus were my first two symptoms of a brain tumor known as an acoustic neuroma or vestibular schwannoma. The tumor was removed, but the hearing loss and tinnitus will always be with me. I use a hearing aid on my left side, which helps not only my hearing but also my tinnitus, as tinnitus fades when auditory signals to

the brain improve. But when I'm not using my hearing aid, I hear an incessant, infernal high-pitched tone, which further complicates my hearing.

Monica: My hearing loss was gradual over many years and wasn't perfect even when I was a child. Likely, most of my hearing loss was the result of not wearing earplugs at concerts and when playing music—I grew wiser about using earplugs far too late. I realized my hearing had become a problem when I noticed that I couldn't hear the higher-pitched birds when birdwatching. I also couldn't hear my fellow birders when riding in cars with them. At work, my hearing loss became very concerning when I couldn't hear my colleagues in meetings. Ironically, I also switched my functional job over to instruction and reference from technical services and electronic resources around the time my hearing loss became especially pronounced. I went for my first audiology test almost ten years ago and found out that my hearing loss was mostly in high registers but serious enough that I was advised to get hearing aids. I got my first hearing aids in 2015, and they've been helpful, but only so helpful, at work and in louder social settings where I often struggle to hear. I'm excited about getting a new set of hearing aids this year because I understand they have much better technology.

Bill: My hearing loss was typical of that associated with aging. Having been plagued by hearing infections since childhood, I began having my hearing tested fairly regularly beginning in my early 30s. The hearing tests revealed that I was gradually losing high-frequency tones. As time went on, I realized that I couldn't hear people, most often women, whose voices were in a higher register. Hearing tests in my late 40s revealed that I was losing frequencies in the lower registers as well. Because the hearing loss was so gradual, I didn't really notice a problem, except at meetings. It was only in the last few years before my retirement in 2018 that I found I also had difficulty hearing the students in the English and reading courses I taught in addition to my work as a librarian.

I started using hearing aids in 2016, and while they weren't perfect, they were helpful. I should have gotten them three to five years earlier. Perhaps, part of the reason I waited was the expense. The first hearing aid I purchased cost around \$2000: I paid \$1200 and the hearing aid benefit provided by the union covered \$800. Since then, however, the union benefit has improved greatly. The two hearing aids I'm currently wearing didn't cost me anything out of pocket. With the price of hearing aids coming down, I hope cost will become less of an obstacle for everyone, whether or not they have a hearing aid benefit.

Hearing Loss at Work

Hearing Loss at the Reference Desk (Lee Ann)

As a reference and instruction librarian, I spend a fair amount of my time at the reference desk helping students or doing in-depth research consultations by

appointment. At our library, the reference desk also doubles as a computer assistance desk and is in a high-traffic area. Contrary to the stereotypes regarding libraries, our library is noisy and there is a lot of ambient noise that carries, from students conversing at the printer stations or on their way into a class in the auditorium adjacent to the reference desk. When I'm helping someone at the reference desk, I often must pause our interaction when the background noise swells. My hearing aids amplify not just the patron's speech but also all that other noise, and I can't parse out what is being said. If the reference interview feels like it may take a while, and I'm not the only librarian at the desk, I often take the student into the classroom adjacent to the desk so I can hear well. This isn't always possible, but when it is, it allows me to work with the student more effectively. I'm at the point now where I feel comfortable enough to be open with patrons about my hearing loss, hearing aid use, and difficulty in noisy situations.

Our library has an open-plan office for the reference librarians, so I do not have a private and quiet space to meet with students. For reference appointments, we have designated consultation stations in the open computer lab area near the reference desk. To avoid having to negotiate in-depth reference consultations at these consultation stations, I book the classroom for reference appointments whenever possible.

Phone reference is quite difficult for me—if the phone rings and I'm the only available person at the desk, I need to take my hearing aid out, make sure I don't drop it, place it down, and then pick up the phone and turn up the volume on the handset. Though my hearing aids are supposed to work with the phone, they actually don't. I can hear better if I take one aid out and turn up the phone volume, but if there's a lot of background noise, or if the call is breaking up or there's noise on the caller's end, I can't make out what the person is asking. The call becomes a litany of "Sorry? Pardon? Can you repeat that? Sorry? Sorry, I am hard of hearing..." Thankfully, my colleagues will answer the phone when they are on the desk with me, sparing me and the caller an anxious and possibly frustrating interaction.

Even with hearing aids, I can't hear sounds coming from behind me, so if our assistant is at the other side of our circular reference desk and we have our backs to each other, they need to get up and tap me to get my attention. This of course places the burden on them to get my attention, which may be uncomfortable for them. Even though I've told them it is okay to tap me, they may not want to touch a co-worker. I must always explain to new staff members that I'm hard of hearing and that I'm not ignoring them but truly can't hear them if I'm not facing them.

Furthermore, when the library's emergency door alarms go off, I either can't hear the alarm or can't tell which direction the sound is coming from. Many times, a patron has come up to me and said, "Can you please turn off the alarm?" and I have bewilderedly responded, "The alarm is going off?" Often, they look at me as if I am

joking or being rude, or they are in total disbelief that I truly cannot hear the alarm. This is one example of how the stereotype of “looking too young” for hearing aids complicates interactions at the reference desk.

To prevent additional complications, I began to keep hearing aid batteries stashed at the reference desk, so a dying battery during a reference shift doesn't send me racing to my office desk for a new one. When the battery is running low, the aid beeps (only audible to me) every couple of minutes until I change the battery, or the hearing aid turns off when the battery runs out. This beeping interferes with hearing and makes it even harder to focus on what someone is saying. I don't always remember to take extra batteries with me to teach, though—and this mistake has caused me to have to choose between teaching with one functional ear and stopping the class to run down the hall to the office to get a new battery. Neither option is ideal, of course.

Hearing Loss and Face-to-face Instruction (Monica)

Lee Ann mentioned the problem of hearing aid batteries dying during teaching, which is quite a disconcerting experience. Unfortunately, my office is not close to the library classrooms, so, unlike Lee Ann, I don't have the option of excusing myself for a quick dash down the hall. Thankfully, this has happened to me only a couple of times. As to the conditions for our face-to-face instruction, the rooms where I often teach can be loud. Our main classroom gets incredibly overheated in the winter, and we have to run a fan on high to make the room bearable. Needless to say, the fan makes hearing very, very difficult. Our other classroom has intense white noise due to air blowers and partial walls. The sound reminds me of being on an airplane. Over time, I've learned to avoid doing workshops in that space.

My teaching style includes providing discussion prompts, sharing student research topics, as well as general Q & A. This involves soliciting information from students. I've learned that moving around the room to get closer to the speaker helps me hear questions and responses. Many students have accents, mumble, or speak softly, so this strategy is especially needed in one-shot instruction sessions where I have not met the students before and am not acclimated to how they communicate. Over time, I learned to position myself in the middle of the room, which helps in terms of facilitating movement to hear better. As do many instruction librarians, I especially like working one-on-one during one-shots. I appreciate being able to clearly hear and communicate with students. For me, this takes on a special meaning. Unfortunately, teaching can really tire me out. I recently realized that this is a result of the cognitive load of struggling to hear.

How I began to disclose my disability more publicly during teaching begins with my friendship with one of our English instructors. We're candid with each other, and she told me she noticed my behavior of getting very close to her students when I am having difficulty hearing them. When I was teaching one of her classes, she called

me over and said, “Can I have a little chat with you after the workshop is done?” After the class, she said, “Monica, you know the students might find it kind of creepy when you get so close to them. You should just announce that you have a hearing disability, ask them to talk as loudly and clearly as possible, and tell them you may need to move close to them to hear them.” This was a pretty amazing moment: I felt I was given permission to do something that I had been reticent about. And that’s when I began telling my classes that I’m hearing impaired and asking students and instructors to please be kind and speak loudly and clearly.

I feel that disclosing my disability benefits students. I’m making myself more vulnerable to students, which may help them feel less uncomfortable with the power dynamic between us. Many students themselves have visible or invisible disabilities, and my disclosure models positive behavior to students who might not speak up about their own disabilities. I’m still practicing openly disclosing my hearing loss, whether it’s in social situations or professional situations with colleagues.

In terms of online instruction, I love teaching on Zoom because I can always hear the students and their instructors. It’s wonderful to be able to control the volume as well as have the option to communicate via chat. On Zoom, I teach with PowerPoint, which I do not use in routine face-to-face one-shots. I use slides to share discussion prompts and questions. Most students are very uncomfortable speaking up, whether in person or in remote instruction. When I invite them to use chat to respond, the experience has been quite successful. Although Zoom is far from ideal for teaching search strategy, it works well for the more conceptual aspects of information literacy instruction and eases many communication barriers.

Hearing Loss and Meetings (Bill)

My first realization that I was having an issue came during meetings, particularly when listening to people whose voices were in a higher range. I found various ways to accommodate my disability—for instance, by sitting near the person I had the most trouble hearing. This worked for a long time.

However, maybe five or six years before my retirement, I realized I needed a new approach. One thing I did was buy a hearing assistive device at RadioShack. This proved particularly useful for small group meetings. (It also worked well for off-Broadway productions in smaller venues that did not provide the assistive listening headsets generally available in Broadway theatres.) However, it did not work well for larger auditorium venues like the one used for our faculty senate meetings.

As I served both on the faculty senate’s steering committee and as a representative from the library department, I needed to listen closely to the proceedings and report on them at our monthly department meetings. This was challenging not only with my initial hearing assistive device but also with my hearing aids, as they work best

at a range of about eight feet. They failed to capture the questions and comments from speakers throughout the auditorium. I found the answer in a small Olympus digital recorder. It allowed me to record the meeting and upload the recording to my computer, where I could review parts of the meeting as necessary, take notes, and prepare my report. The recorder served as a real godsend for me in the last few years before my retirement.

Benefits and Complications of Remote Work (Jill)

I worked remotely full time for 18 months due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and at the time of writing am transitioning to a hybrid schedule. Like many people who work from home, either on a permanent basis or temporarily due to Covid-19, I have a complex mix of feelings about working remotely. But as it relates to my hearing, working from home is fantastic, for several reasons.

On Zoom, I can do research consultations looking at the patron rather than sitting side-by-side with them at a computer. Like most people with hearing loss, I am not trained in speechreading but tacitly understand how people move their mouths when they make different sounds. Having facial information to augment the audio input aids my comprehension significantly. Similarly, during meetings I am face-to-face with everyone who has their camera on—there's no need to carefully choose a seat so that everyone will be on my good side. And all Zoom accounts now include a closed captioning feature, which isn't perfect but is good enough to assist me, and seems to be getting better as time goes on.

Different people have different preferences based on the nature of their hearing loss, but I always choose to wear earphones when I'm on Zoom. I can't wear my hearing aid at the same time, but the earphones pipe sound directly into my good ear, which somehow, for me, makes the sound more immediate and easier to process. I don't get much benefit from the earphone in my left ear, but there are two earphones, and I tend to wear them both, just because it's a nuisance to have one dangling.

Of course, there's sometimes internet glitchiness on my end or someone else's. Audio and video gaps are troublesome for everyone, but lost and clipped words are more troublesome for those with hearing loss, for whom some words are *already* lost and clipped, even when the audio is perfect. Still, on balance, I do better with unmasked interactions over Zoom than I do with masked and distanced interactions in person.

Also, as I have some additional neurological problems caused by my brain tumor, I have appreciated not having to go through the vestibular obstacle course and auditory assault of taking the subway, navigating the 34th Street subway station, and negotiating the crowds around the Graduate Center, which is across the street from the Empire State Building. I was always aware that my commute was hard on my brain and balance system, but my time working remotely helped me understand

just how grueling it is. When I don't commute, I feel much better: less drained at the start of the workday, less fatigued overall, and less beset by headaches.

Of course, working from home has some downsides too. My eyes and vestibular system can't handle spending all day on screen. At some point, my vision starts to swirl and reading becomes difficult. I'm currently experimenting with text-to-speech tools so I can listen to readings or listen while I *also* read. Even though my hearing is compromised, I can still absorb things by listening when I can no longer absorb them by reading.

As I prepare to return to on-site work, I find myself quite anxious—both for pandemic-related reasons and because of how hard it will be to hear in-person reference patrons. If both the patron and I are wearing masks and there's a plexiglass barrier between us, communication could become quite difficult, especially given that our reference desk arrangement puts patrons on my bad side. I will do my best to provide high-quality reference assistance at the reference desk, but I am aware that I may need to request some kind of accommodation—possibly a dispensation from in-person reference, or possibly some kind of assistive device.

Discussion

As our panel discussion progressed and we answered questions posed by both audience members and each other, the relationship of fatigue and cognitive load came to the forefront. The extra work our brains must do to process what we are hearing (or not hearing due to hearing loss) often causes fatigue. We may become exhausted after teaching, doing a reference desk shift, or attending conference presentations, due not only to the physical exertion but also to the added cognitive work we do to parse out and comprehend speech. For example, Lee Ann mentioned that she has anxiety about taking minutes at department meetings; she worries about missing what's said and about taking longer to process what she hears. Monica noted that conferences can be particularly draining for those with hearing loss. Many spaces don't have microphones, and in those that do, many speakers refuse to use them, saying either that they'll just talk louder or that they have loud voices and don't need a mic. In these situations, with the delay in our brains processing what we hear and trying to make sense of garbled sounds, we find ourselves constantly playing catch-up. All the cognitive work involved in straining to hear presentations, interacting with other attendees, and dealing with background noise throughout can cause overwhelming fatigue.

During the discussion, it also became clear that each of us is becoming more comfortable with disclosing our needs rather than hiding that we use hearing aids. For example, in the library classroom, Monica and Lee Ann both start their lectures by telling students that they're hard of hearing and may need to ask them to speak up or repeat themselves. By disclosing that we are hard of hearing, we are also

modeling to students that they need not be ashamed of disabilities and should not be afraid to ask for accommodation.

Prior to obtaining hearing aids, we did not realize how much effort we were exerting to adapt to our hearing loss. This lack of awareness can lead to delays in acquiring hearing aids. Also, hearing aids are expensive, so one may delay getting them due to the monetary outlay. Though inexpensive amplification products exist, not all hearing loss can be addressed with these devices. For moderate to severe hearing loss, simply amplifying sound is not a solution and more sophisticated hearing devices are necessary. They can be programmed to address an individual's hearing loss across all frequencies and must be dispensed by an audiologist. As hearing aid users, we are grateful to our union at CUNY for providing excellent coverage for hearing aids.

If you do not have hearing loss but have colleagues who do, we encourage you to reach out to your colleagues and gently ask what they may need. Please do not assume they are aloof or rude if it seems they are not hearing you—they are not ignoring you intentionally! It may truly be that they cannot hear you depending on where you are positioned, or that they do not realize you are talking to them. They may need you to get their attention before addressing them one-on-one or in meetings. Please afford them the benefit of the doubt. If you are not sure if your colleague is hard of hearing, reading their body language can be helpful in determining if you were heard. Kindness and consideration on both sides can go a long way for both you and your colleague.

Conclusion

The purpose of our panel was to draw attention to stereotypes that exist regarding libraries, librarians, and hearing loss. Our conversation highlighted ways we each have managed our hearing loss at work, and how our hearing loss affects our work. We wanted our conversation to encourage others to participate and share their experiences. As this panel was on Zoom, we could also take questions via the chat, and we had both a spoken conversation and a textual conversation running concurrently. Because the LACUNY Institute was online and attendance was not constrained by geography, our panel attracted attendees from across CUNY and beyond, and we made connections with other librarians with hearing loss. We have stayed in touch and shared resources with these other librarians. We can support each other with seeking accommodations, managing challenging situations, finding audiologists, and understanding hearing aid benefits. This panel was a successful first step in finding and growing a support network of library workers with hearing loss within CUNY libraries and farther afield.

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