



## User diversity in public libraries

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### Abstract

**Introduction.** Public libraries shall provide services to the whole population. Consequently, librarians must relate to all types of user diversity where user diversity includes variations in functional level, gender identity, and mental health. This paper explores the diversity expertise needed among librarians to ensure inclusive library spaces and services. Moreover, the paper addresses how perspectives on user diversity can impact the shaping of library spaces and services.

**Method.** Seven personas pertaining to gender identity, functional variations, and mental health variations, were designed and used as examples in the discussion.

**Analysis.** The personas were built upon relevant theoretical and empirical papers.

**Results.** Humans differ in a variety of ways, and situational and contextual factors must be considered when addressing user diversity to obtain an applicable perspective on diversity. Consequently, librarians need knowledge of user diversity in a broader sense than what has often been applied in research and educational programmes.

**Conclusion.** Ability-based design could result in more inclusive library services and spaces for many types of people. Moreover, moving beyond the traditional binary gender identity model can include people with all types of gender identities. Finally, the level of stigma related to having a mental illness may affect how the library is perceived.

## Introduction

Human diversity is a fundamental component of all communities. In a library context, diversity is often discussed using terms such as *inclusive library services*, *accessibility*, and *community building* (Vincent, 2024). Diversity is a broad term and goes beyond variations in functional level, gender identity, mental health and cultural background. Diversity is related to all types of human attributes and can be defined as

the existence of variations of different characteristics in a group of people. These characteristics could be everything that makes us unique, such as our cognitive skills and personality traits, along with the things that shape our identity (e.g. ethnicity, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, cultural background). (Steinmetz, 2021, p. 129)

User studies often use a dichotomy approach, for example by defining people as having a disability or not. Human characteristics, however, may change during a lifetime or according to contexts or situations (Wobbrock et al., 2018). Moreover, people are made up of many different characteristics. Consequently, a person may, for example, be a trans person with dyslexia or severe anxiety, or a non-binary person who is blind. It is therefore important to not apply user characteristics to place persons into certain groups but rather acknowledge that people might be diverse in many different aspects. In this paper, we take this perspective to explore how characteristics of people may influence their ability to use the library.

People may usually not pay attention to characteristics they hold which might deviate from the average population, except in situations where attitudinal, physical, or other types of barriers arise. For example, the gender identity of a person may not be relevant until gender becomes an issue, e.g., when using gender divided bathrooms in the library (Lerner, 2021) or when asked by a librarian for gender identity when registering for a library card (Robinson, 2016). Similarly, being dependent on a wheelchair may not be problematic until a person encounters an inaccessible staircase or bookshelves placed too close together to navigate between them. For people with mental health variations, certain situations, contexts, or environments can trigger emotions such as stress or anxiety.

Public libraries typically have a legal requirement to provide services to all types of people. It is often also regarded as a social responsibility for public libraries to be a safe space for everyone. When planning and providing public library services, an overall goal should be to decrease the number of situations and contexts that exclude people with certain characteristics or lacking specific abilities. However, achieving this goal requires diversity expertise among people working in and with libraries. This perspective paper explores two questions:

- What kind of diversity expertise is needed in public libraries? and
- How can different perspectives on user diversity contribute to more inclusive library services?

To set off the discussion, seven personas were constructed to provide cases to explore different aspects of diversity expertise needed in the libraries. A discussion was then added regarding different perspectives on diversity to explore whether there is potential for novel library development and research if user characteristics are regarded from a different viewpoint than the traditional dichotomy approach.

Although user diversity comprises all types of human characteristics, this paper is limited to three, namely, functional variations, gender identity and mental health variations. The reason for selecting these characteristics was to not only address disabilities, which has often been the case in the context of accessibility, but also to include other important cohorts. By including gender identity and mental health variations, a broader perspective on user diversity can be applied to show that broad diversity skills are needed in the libraries to cater to all types of users. This paper

may have relevance for researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and people involved in education for librarianship and will hopefully be useful in moving the libraries forward in becoming more inclusive.

The paper is structured as follows: The background will briefly introduce inclusive libraries and different views on diversity. This is followed by a methodology section comprising seven personas before the first question raised in this paper is explored and discussed using the personas as a starting point. Empirical studies pertaining to the personas applied are also included in this chapter. Finally, there is a discussion of user perspective on diversity, based upon the characteristics represented by the personas.

## Background

### User diversity in libraries

User diversity has been addressed in many different library contexts. For example, the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities demands that all people with functional variations shall have access to 'cultural materials in accessible formats' and 'places for cultural performances or services, such as [...] libraries' (United Nations, 2006, p. 22). Legislation may also address user diversity. For example, in Norway, the public library law emphasises that the library services should be available to all the people living in the country and the library has a special responsibility towards people who have difficulties using the library (Folkebibliotekloven, 2014). Denmark (Danske Love, 1985), Finland (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016), and Sweden (Sveriges Riksdag, 2013) are examples of other countries where libraries make this emphasis.

According to Audunson (2005), libraries represent low-intensive meeting places where patrons are exposed to people with diverse interests and values which should promote a sense of community and tolerance. Pateman and Vincent (2016), however, argue that public libraries in general are not as inclusive as commonly perceived, and they suggest a needs-based approach to library services. Pateman and Pateman (2017) call for a bigger emphasis on non-users and people with the greatest needs to transform libraries from 'institutions of social control into agencies of social change' (p. 14).

The four-space model of public libraries (Jochumsen et al., 2012) emphasises that libraries should cater for people's needs for experience, involvement, empowerment, and innovation. Four different spaces: inspiration space, learning space, meeting space, and performative space, are envisioned to enable visitors' diverse expectations of the libraries. These spaces do not all need to be implemented in the physical libraries, but when planning libraries' architecture, design, activities, and services, the model may serve as inspiration.

The skills and knowledge of librarians, administrators, policymakers, and other people working in a library play a vital role when planning services and making action plans. Consequently, librarians with diversity experience and their perspectives on diversity can lead to more inclusive library services (Hill, 2013; Vincent, 2024). A study by Pionke (2020) exploring library employees and their views on disability and accessibility showed that much work is needed to make more equitable and inclusive library spaces and programs. Similar findings are reported for other user characteristics, such as gender identity (Wexelbaum Rachel, 2018) and mental health variations (Hall & McAlister, 2021), to name a few. Librarians represent an occupational group that will meet all types of people during their work life. Building trust and showing all types of users that they can use the library on an equal basis is one measure to ensure that certain groups are not disadvantaged in accessing and understanding information via library services.

### Different views on diversity

Over the recent years, universal design has become a common approach to accommodate for user diversity, both in society in general and in context of libraries. Universal design entails designing

products, environments or services so they can be used by all people without the need for adaptation or specialised design (Persson et al., 2015). Although universal design started as a tool to increase physical access for people with functional variations, it has now become an approach to enhance social justice among people regardless of their user characteristics (Dolph, 2021). Universal design has therefore been applied in context of libraries to increase the accessibility for all types of users. For example, the American Library Association has developed a checklist to make libraries more accessible and usable (Burgstahler, 2014.). A related concept, Universal Design for Learning, has also been applied in settings such as school libraries to make inclusive educational environments (Spina, 2017).

Over the years, there have been different views on diversity, particularly in the context of functional variations. For a long time, the medical model was the dominant view on disability, with an individual focus where people were regarded as disabled due to having impairments. In the 1970s this view was challenged by, among others, Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation which claimed that disability was a relationship between people with impairments and a discriminatory society (Shakespeare, 2004). Mike Oliver introduced the term 'the social model' in 1983, which comprised a view on disability focusing on disabling barriers in society (Oliver, 2013). Another approach is the Nordic relational model, also referred to as 'the Gap model', which claims that disability occurs when there is a mismatch between a person's abilities and demands from the environment in specific contexts and situations (Jónasdóttir & Horghagen, 2024). In other words, people are disabled because of both environmental factors and due to having an impairment.

The medical, social, and gap models regard the cause of disability differently, but are still based upon the dichotomy between abilities and disabilities. This view was challenged by Wobbrock et al. (2011) who claim that it makes more sense to address what people can do rather than focusing on what they cannot do. Wobbrock et al. (2011) refer to this concept as ability-based design. Furthermore, human abilities should be regarded as a spectrum, and they can be affected by many different factors, such as disabling situations. Therefore, Wobbrock et al. (2018) state: 'designing for abilities in context leads to more usable, accessible systems for all people' (p. 62). Examples of disabling situations include divided attention, distraction, bodily motion, physical obstacles, occupied hands, cold temperatures, light levels, ambient noise, multitasking, stress, and fatigue. These are situations commonly experienced by many people. Although ability-based design is discussed in terms of interactive systems by Wobbrock et al. (2011), the basic assumptions can be transferred to a library and information science context (Berget, 2024).

In the context of gender identity, Bem and Lenney (1976, p. 48) found that androgynous individuals were better able "to do well" at both masculine and feminine behaviors' than 'sex-typed' persons, i.e. persons living up to gender stereotypes. Trans persons have a gender identity differing from the sex they were assigned at birth. Some persons do not identify as either male or female but prefer to be identified outside of the gender binary. Gender identity is hence considered to be fluid. Among trans people, various surveys find that a substantial number of persons identify as non-binary (Richards et al., 2016). Studies also reveal that many trans people experience discrimination in many areas of society (Lombardi et al., 2002). Accommodations such as gender-neutral bathrooms, providing recent transgender literature, and including gender identity or expression as part of library non-discrimination policy can make trans people feel safe in the library (Drake & Bielefield, 2017).

Mental health variations have often been associated with stigma and is frequently related to low levels of knowledge and discriminatory attitudes (Evans-Lacko et al., 2012). Research has shown that people are more likely to seek help in societies with less stigma related to having a mental illness (Corrigan et al., 2014). According to Green (2020), public libraries have great potential to reduce stigma related to mental health variations. With regards to serious mental illness, however, many librarians have expressed concerns regarding potential violent behaviour. At the same time,

librarians call for more awareness and knowledge, which may improve interactions with users with mental health variations (Pressley, 2017).

## Method

This perspective paper uses personas as a starting point to provide cases for the discussion of the questions raised regarding the need for diversity skills and the exploration of new perspectives in public libraries. The discussion evolves around the relationship between the shaping of library spaces and services and the level of inclusion. Library spaces comprise the library environment and organisation of the collection. Library services are represented through book recommendations, reference services, and events.

Personas represent fictional persons with specific characteristics, such as names, ages, and gender identities as well as characteristics of their tasks, goals, and needs (Blomquist & Arvola, 2002). Personas are most commonly used in human-centred design such as participatory design (Chang et al., 2008) and usability design (Pruitt & Grudin, 2003), but they have also been used in library and information science. Examples of the latter are use of personas to understand needs of institutional repository users (Maness et al., 2008), to support development of infrastructures for data sharing (Crowston, 2015), to visualise the competencies and tasks of data stewards (Kvale, 2021), and to illustrate factors that impact information search behaviour (Berget, 2024).

Seven personas were developed (see Table 1) that represent a variety of abilities which, under varying circumstances, may influence the use of library buildings and services. The personas reflect temporary as well as permanent impairments in addition to characteristics which may be context and situation-specific in line with the concept of ability-based design (Wobbrock et al., 2011). The descriptions of the personas are based on data from empirical studies, which we refer to in Table 1.

| Persona   | Characteristics  |
|---|--|
| <b>Alex (15)</b><br>   | A young trans person with no parental support (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019; Matsuno et al., 2022). They have not changed legal gender and has only come out to one person. Alex has many information needs related to being trans gender that are not catered for by the library and prefers to seek their information from the Internet (Cavalcante, 2016; Hawkins & Haimson, 2018; Huttunen & Kortelainen, 2021). |
| <b>Jim (39)</b><br>    | A gender-fluid PhD student with 4-month deadline for handing in their thesis causing them a high level of stress (Mackie & Bates, 2019). Reading fiction is one of Jim's favourite leisure activities, but they rarely have time to read. Jim sometimes visits the library to have a quiet place to study (Palmer, 2022).  |
| <b>Mia (45)</b><br>    | Born with severe hearing impairment and communicates through sign language and lip reading (McKee et al., 2015). She loves reading but has reduced reading skills because reading relies on a spoken language foundation. Mia has sign language as her first language (Perfetti, 2007).  |
| <b>Rob (34)</b><br>    | A single father with low income (Stack & Meredith, 2018). He is sleep-deprived which has resulted in depression and anxiety (Parfitt & Ayers, 2014). Rob spends a lot of time in the library because it is free (Igarashi et al., 2023), and his son likes to attend Storytime and borrow books.   |
| <b>Beth (24)</b><br>  | Diagnosed with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and has motor and verbal tics (Kim et al., 2023). Therefore, she prefers a noisy environment, in contrast to many other people with ASD (Shea & Derry, 2019). She loves reading books and often visits the library. Beth has just broken her leg in a bike accident  |
| <b>Tom (65)</b><br>  | Tom has depression after losing his wife to cancer (Ling et al., 2013). He does not have a huge social network and spends most of his days alone. He has been invited to many gatherings at a local day centre for people with mental illness, but he does not want to use it because of barriers related to stigma (Corrigan et al., 2014).   |
| <b>John (88)</b><br> | A retired teacher diagnosed with Parkinson disease. He has impaired mobility and incipient memory loss (Aarsland et al., 2021). He used to be a very active person attending events at the local public library but is now experiencing social isolation due to his physical and cognitive health condition (Geng et al., 2024).   |

**Table 1.** Personas

## Diversity expertise

According to previous studies (Morgan et al., 2016; Pionke, 2020), librarians have reported not feeling prepared to accommodate the broad diversity that users of public libraries represent. This section will address some situations or contexts librarians may encounter where diversity expertise is needed, either when planning the services or in meetings with library users. The following topics are addressed: the library building, organising the collection, reference services, book recommendations, and events. For each topic, the relevant personas will be addressed keeping in mind that the focus in this discussion is the knowledge needed among librarians. There are less discussions where the diversity knowledge is very apparent, e.g., understanding that a person in a wheelchair cannot access stairs.

### The library building

There are many aspects of the library building that may impact the level of inclusion. In the context of gender identity, gender-divided bathrooms represent one of the main physical barriers (Lerner,

2021; Robinson, 2016). If Alex or Jim visit a library with gender-divided bathrooms, there are two main issues: which bathroom should they use, and what attitudes towards gender identity are being conveyed by the library? It has been argued that gender-divided bathrooms do not represent a barrier if they use the 'self-identified principle' where people can choose which bathroom to use. However, some people, such as Jim, do not identify with a binary gender identity (Richards et al., 2016). In other cases, people who have not yet come out as transgender, e.g., Alex, may not want to be observed by others in the local community using a bathroom that does not correspond to the sex they were allocated at birth (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019). Some people may have a fear of being asked by others why they were using 'the wrong bathroom'. It is therefore important that librarians understand the impact of gender-divided and gender-neutral bathrooms upon the accessibility and user-friendliness for people with all types of gender identities.

With respect to sounds, library buildings pose many challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, Jim uses the library as an alternative place to study and wishes to find a quiet place to concentrate (Palmer, 2022) because they find libraries to be 'a therapeutic landscape' (Brewster, 2014; Green, 2020). For people with ASD, it has been reported that libraries should offer areas with a certain noise level (Muir et al., 2019) while avoiding the whole building being noisy (Shea & Derry, 2019). Beth, for example, has verbal tics which she is not comfortable with exposing in public and wishes to be in a room with some background noise. Rob often brings his son to the library so that he can meet and play with other children while Rob uses the library computer to get free Internet access. The 'four-space model' (Jochumsen et al., 2012) describes four different spaces relating to four different goals of public libraries: inspiration space; learning space; meeting space; and performative space. Although not all spaces may be implemented physically in all libraries, the model may serve as point of departure for designing and planning library buildings in a way that facilitates learning for Jim and Rob, playing and meeting others for Rob's son, and seeking inspiration in surroundings Beth is comfortable with. Based upon these personas with different and sometimes contradictory needs, knowledge of how to plan library buildings to accommodate varying levels of sound is essential to include as many types of people as possible.

Enabling library users' mobility in the building is also central. Some people may have permanent conditions limiting their mobility, such as John, who uses a rollator to support walking and whose condition may worsen. Others, like Rob, whose son is still in a pram, and Beth, who has broken her foot, have temporary conditions. The physical space and infrastructure of the library should, as illustrated here, take into account a variety of contexts and situations (Wobbrock et al., 2018). For example, Pionke (2020, p. 128) addresses how the doorway width of a library caused problems for a person entering with a mobility scooter and how assumptions about accessibility may result in a library having 'twenty standing workstations with one sitting accessible workstation tucked in a corner'. Having knowledge of both permanent and temporary impairments might therefore be important to ensure equal access for all types of users.

### **Organising the collection**

Previous research includes many studies of how classification systems disadvantage many groups of people, characterising their faith, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity. For Alex, who is interested in learning more about their gender identity, the organisation of books in the library about trans persons may affect them. Nowak and Mitchell (2016) discussed challenges relating to the classification of an LGBT library, using the Library of Congress classification system, pointing out that library material on identities 'such as transgender people, bisexual people, gay men, and lesbians—were listed as part of the section that begins with "Sexual deviations" and includes rather morally loaded categories such as prostitution and emasculation' (p. 6). To ensure that all types of users feel welcome in the library, it is necessary to regularly go through the classification schemes used and critically assess the organisation of the collection to avoid people feeling stigmatised by improper classification such as in the example addressed by Nowak and Mitchell.

While classification codes for non-fiction greatly affects the organisation of the collection, categories applied for fiction is also important. In this study, Beth would be an example of a person who would benefit from reading adapted books, but also Jim, Rob, Tom, and John may prefer such books because reading skills may be affected by lack of sleep, illness, or other factors (Bonifacci et al., 2008; Kamboj et al., 2005; Torres et al., 2021). Many libraries use the label 'easy reads' for certain books. This label might be purposeful to signal which part of the book collection that is useful for children who are learning to read. In contrast, such a label may have the opposite effect if the category is used to convey that the books are less demanding to read for people with reading difficulties. Previous research has shown that people with reading impairments do not want to be seen reading the 'easy' books (Berget & Fagernes, 2018; Brante, 2013; Gambrell, 2011), which entails a need for other types of category names, such as 'a little bit to read'. A term such as 'easy to read' indicates that a book is not difficult to read, and one can imagine how a person with reading impairments might feel when not being able to read these books, either. Many people with reading difficulties have impaired self-esteem (Boyes et al., 2016), and the library should not contribute to such negative feelings. Librarians therefore need to understand how to display and communicate their fiction collection based upon respect for all types of readers and an understanding that people need different types of books.

### **Reference services**

Alex has many information needs which cannot be solved at home since they do not wish to ask their family about issues relating to gender identity. As a place that is considered neutral, the public library should be a place where people can ask questions they are afraid to ask elsewhere. According to Drake and Bielefield (2017), however, trans persons prefer other sources than public libraries to find trans-specific information, such as information about legal issues, medical health, political information, or other information having impact on their daily life. If librarians do not manage to build a trusting relationship with people such as Alex, they might end up being deprived of relevant information. Several studies emphasise how trans persons use different Internet sources (Cavalcante, 2016; Hawkins & Haimson, 2018) to support their meaning-making on gender, in particular during their period of transition (Huttunen & Kortelainen, 2021).

Another persona that has implications for the reference services is Mia, who uses sign language. Previous studies have revealed that communication with librarians constitute the main barrier for many people who are deaf, because librarians do not seem prepared to communicate with library users in alternative ways (Payne, 2022; Pionke, 2020). Mia can read lips, but to be able to communicate in this way, the reference desk must be situated in an area with sufficient lightning and the librarian must be aware of the importance of looking at Mia while talking to her and to avoid mumbling. In the case of Beth, librarians must be aware that not all people are comfortable with eye contact or socialising with others (Spain & Blainey, 2015) and may prefer navigating the library collection by themselves.

### **Book recommendations**

A common task for librarians is to recommend books, either by request from library users or through book talks or displays. To ensure that all types of readers have access to high quality literature, librarians must have knowledge of causes for reading difficulties and types of adapted books. For example, while most people probably understand that people with dyslexia may struggle with reading, it might be less common knowledge that people who are deaf may also experience reading difficulties (Perfetti, 2007). Mia is an example of a library user who loves books, but who might benefit from reading an adapted book (Berget, 2022). In this case, it is important that librarians have sufficient knowledge of adapted books to ensure that adults are not given children's books, but age-appropriate books of high literary quality.

There might be other situations where people for various reasons need books that demand, e.g., less concentration or reading skills. For example, Jim, Rob, Tom, and John will all experience

impaired reading skills due to situational factors or illness (Bonifacci et al., 2008; Kamboj et al., 2005; Torres et al., 2021). It is therefore important that librarians have knowledge of the range of factors that can affect reading abilities, not only have knowledge of reading impairments such as dyslexia.

## Events

Different types of events are common in public libraries. Libraries have the potential to improve social inclusion, for example for low-income families, such as Rob's family, (Igarashi et al., 2023; Lopez et al., 2023) or people with mental health variations such as Tom (Green, 2020). Libraries have also been reported to be successful in developing sustainable dementia-friendly communities (Dickey, 2023). Tom prefers to attend events at his local library over activities organised by health care organisations. He does not want to experience the stigma he feels from visiting his local health care centre (Corrigan et al., 2014). Public libraries are not associated with such stigma and through events they may provide persons that otherwise may feel stigmatised with a place to meet which support their needs (Morgan et al., 2016). One example of such an event are memory cafes, which are very well suited for people with dementia or other forms of memory loss, such as John, who need mind-stimulating activities (Charbonneau & Rathnam, 2020). It is therefore important that librarians are aware of the potential of libraries as places not associated with stigma.

## Perspectives on user diversity

According to Morgan et al. (2016) 'equity translates to creating opportunities and removing barriers for disadvantaged groups' (p. 2034). While it is self-evident to address obvious marginalised groups, the diversity perspective in the research literature has been quite limited, for example by focusing on people with certain functional variations or other groups with so-called 'special needs' or 'high-need populations'. Although this perspective has contributed valuable empirical evidence and raised important problems for discussion, there might be a greater potential to move beyond the dichotomy of *average users* versus *people with special needs* or *people with or without disabilities*. Such divisions may result in stigmatisation of certain users while others are overlooked. There might be a better outcome to rather address abilities as something associated with a combination of personal characteristics, contexts and situations, for example through an ability-based design approach (Wobbrock et al., 2018) where all types of users are regarded, not only the people representing 'the edges'.

Terminology used may also be closely related to perspective. For example, when using the term 'people with special needs' the following question arises: 'what is a special need?'. In a library setting, people may want to enjoy a good book, need to navigate from one floor to another, use a bathroom or be able to attend an event. In all these cases, the needs of all types of users will be the same, but different solutions may be required depending on user characteristics. By addressing the solutions and not regarding some users as 'people with special needs' one also avoids the stigma of being referred to as someone who deviates from the norm and requires extra resources, which may be both stigmatising and an erroneous assumption.

In line with ability-based design, there are also many situations and contextual factors that may affect the abilities of a person (Wobbrock et al., 2018) and require different solutions. Diverging abilities may also be permanent or temporary, an issue that is often not addressed when the focus is on the dichotomy between 'able-bodied' and 'disabled'. Moreover, people with permanent functional or mental health variations may have developed coping strategies over time and be better equipped to handle certain challenging situations. Thus, it is important to also address people with temporary or situational disabilities.

There is also a relationship between the perspective on diversity and inclusion measures. For example, there is a discussion whether people who are deaf represent a disability or linguistic minority (McQuigg, 2003). In the context of public library services, such an attitude may count in

terms of action plans or budgets, where functional variations might involve different approaches than what is required to accommodate language minorities. If one mainly addresses the hearing impairment, most attention will be directed towards challenges with verbal communication and audio-based content. If the focus is rather on people who are deaf representing a linguistic minority, more attention is directed towards reading challenges and the accessibility measures may be more directed towards promotion of accessible books.

Another relationship exists between views on gender identity and the inclusion level of the library. Many trans people identify as non-binary (Harrison et al., 2012; Matsuno & Budge, 2017) making all contexts where gender matters problematic for some library users, for example when using a bathroom or signing up for a loaning card. By moving away from the traditional non-binary model, the public library may serve as a place of acceptance for trans people who are often subject to discrimination in other areas of society (Drake & Bielefield, 2017).

Mental health is often not addressed when discussing diversity in libraries. Nevertheless, it is an important characteristic to consider, because mental health variations can affect certain abilities, such as memory, concentration or reading skills. These features are shared with people with cognitive disabilities. Moreover, stigma has often been related to mental illness. Libraries are seen as non-clinical places and are therefore potentially more attractive to people with mental health variations (Morgan et al., 2016).

## Conclusion

There is a huge potential for public libraries in being an inclusive community hub for everyone. To achieve such a goal, however, libraries must accommodate all types of diversity. Moreover, librarians must be prepared to provide services appropriately for different types of diversity, keeping in mind that not all relevant user characteristics are visible. In-depth knowledge about the impact of different user characteristics on the ability to navigate or move around in a library, use library facilities, understand information that is conveyed, approach or communicate with librarians or read a book is a vital part of diversity expertise. Further, such expertise should be relevant to all types of user characteristics with a goal to reduce the number of situations or contexts where people feel excluded. Consequently, a broad spectrum of diversity issues should be addressed in library education, continuing education, seminars or other places where librarians meet to debate and plan library services keeping in mind that people will experience personal characteristics differently. A person can also belong to many cohorts simultaneously, for example being a trans person who is also blind. Having general expertise in user diversity does therefore not mean having the proper expertise for all users and contexts, but this knowledge is an important starting point to provide more inclusive library services.

This paper has addressed functional variations, gender identity, and mental health variations, but these are just a few examples to illustrate the breadth of cohorts to consider in a library. The skills and abilities of people can vary and be affected by many types of contexts and situations making it more useful to move away from limited perspectives on diversity towards, for example, ability-based design which will include a much broader representation of human variations.

With new technological developments there may be a need for different types of skills in the future than what is addressed in this paper. For example, artificial intelligence may be used to develop robust and flexible products for sign language detection and recognition for communication between hearing people and people who are deaf. Such topics, however, are outside the scope of this paper, but should be addressed in future research.

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