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## ASD Training: Knowledge, Attitudes & Perceptions of a South Georgia Police Officer

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**ASD TRAINING: KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES &  
PERCEPTIONS OF A SOUTH GEORGIA POLICE OFFICER**

by  
Heather Banks McNeal

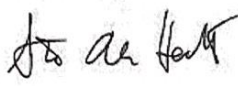
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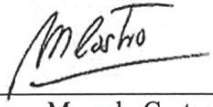
## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Heather McNeal, under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the School of Criminal Justice, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education, and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Nova Southeastern University.

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Heather Banks McNeal

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July 30, 2020

Date

### **Dedication and Acknowledgements**

This manuscript is dedicated in memory of Officer Tristin Clemmons who passed away from injuries sustained from a motorcycle accident on September 5, 2019. Tristin had a passion for policing, along with an excellent work ethic. Despite his young age and being new to the field of law enforcement, Tristin was passionate about being able to help people. He is truly missed by all at the Georgia Southern University Police Department. It was both an honor and privilege to have worked with Officer Clemmons on this research project.

The pursuit of my doctorate would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my husband, Ryan, and son, Charlie. They were understanding of the time restraints required of this endeavor, while never complaining about how it impacted them. When I would get discouraged, I could always count on Ryan to offer words of encouragement! I am beyond grateful for their amazing support!

Special thanks to Dr. Ron Wallace for his advice, guidance, and counsel at the onset of this project. I encountered many challenges along the way in the early development stages, yet Dr. Wallace had the ability to keep me on-task and motivated to do better. Additionally, I would like to thank my dear friend, Dr. Christine Ludowise, for her encouragement and direction throughout this process. She has been an amazing mentor to me for nearly twenty years, impacting my educational and professional goals more than she will ever know.

## **Abstract**

ASD Training: Knowledge, Attitudes & Perceptions of a South Georgia Police Officer  
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Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Justice and Human Services. Descriptors:  
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Knowledge, Attitudes, Perceptions

This study offered a preliminary look at the evidence to support the benefits of training South Georgia Police Officers on the phenomenon that is autism. Research suggested that there was limited experimental data available regarding why persons with ASD entered the criminal justice system, as well as how to manage them once they are there (Chovanec, 2013). Various regions of the United States embraced the importance of ASD training amongst their law enforcement officers; however, Georgia has only recently taken steps to do the same by the inclusion of a voluntary, online course regarding autism and de-escalation. Participants shared their knowledge and attitudes of ASD and police training in hopes of contributing to the future of the phenomenon.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

A vast body of literature existed on the effects of mental illness and the criminal justice system. Historically, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) was coupled under the mental health umbrella. Recently, however, ASD was identified as the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States (Brown, Hastings, Cooney-Koss, Huntley & Brasch, 2016). Furthermore, law enforcement continues to recognize a need to incorporate education on ASD amongst officers (Brown et al., 2016). This current study sought to determine how police perceive the importance of training regarding ASD and if the training received was effective, both in South Georgia, as well as any state.

Specifically, three research questions were created and utilized during the research project. First, individual perceptions were examined to determine if ASD training was deemed important to each participant. Subsequently, the participants' beliefs were explored to determine the effectiveness of the training, as well as its' impact on their work performance. Lastly, the current study scrutinized ASD training in South Georgia, while also offering a broader comparison at a national and international level.

Similar to the association with mental illness, the study of ASD has typically been incorporated into Crisis Intervention Training (CIT), which is commonly utilized by many police departments. Many law enforcement agencies have acknowledged the importance of officers to be able to recognize symptoms of ASD and subsequently develop an understanding and sensitivity to the disability (Debbaudt, 2002).

While some research was in place regarding autistic offenders in the criminal justice system across the United States, limited literature was available regarding autism as it related to training for law enforcement. Specifically, a need existed for an

exploration of South Georgia police officers' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of ASD training. According to Lashley (2009), police officers do not have the ability to diagnose any medical condition; however, the ability to recognize people who may have ASD would result in being more skillful in their responses to people who may be autistic.

What follows is a thorough discussion of how officers perceive autism before and after training.

### **Nature of the Research Problem**

While the Georgia Public Safety Training Center (GPSTC) created a two-hour online elective course on "De-Escalation and Autism" in January of 2018, was this curriculum sufficient for a South Georgia Police Officer to adequately identify and interact with an autistic individual in their professional capacity? Autistic individuals took on a variety of roles within the criminal justice system in their portrayals as defendants, victims, and/or witnesses. The severity of ASD was established on a spectrum, making some autistic individuals easier to interact with than others. Therefore, the ability to communicate with an autistic individual was of such great importance to today's police officer. Thus, providing training to police would potentially impact the knowledge and understanding of ASD and its' symptoms, as well as impact the officer's perception of ASD as it relates to the criminal justice system. To address this need in the State of Georgia, the current study examined evidence to support the benefits of training South Georgia Police Officers on the phenomenon that is autism.

### **Background and Significance**

As the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States, characteristics of autism included impaired social skills, disordered communication

abilities, and repetitive or obsessive behavior (Brown et al., 2016). Such symptoms placed autistic individuals at a greater risk for involvement in the criminal justice system (Brown et al., 2016). Therefore, all parties involved in the criminal justice system could benefit from education on ASD, especially police officers.

Chovancec (2013) examined the effects of training on police sensitivity to ASD in a study conducted in the State of Massachusetts. Data from this study was collected from officers who were administered a pre-test/post-test instrument which measured changes in the officers' knowledge, confidence, and ability to self-assess personal knowledge of ASD as it pertains to law enforcement (Chovanec, 2013). Results from this study suggested that training significantly increases an officers' knowledge of ASD, officers' self-reported confidence when interacting with ASD individuals, and officers' ability to self-evaluate personal knowledge of ASD (Chovanec, 2013).

While Chovanec's (2013) research examined ASD training for Massachusetts' police officers, further information about how the actual training affects the lived experiences of the officers is needed. Until very recently, the only training available from the Georgia Public Safety Training Center (GPSTC) with a discussion on autism was the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) Program, which is a voluntary 40-hour course. However, in September 2016, Governor Nathan Deal initiated the need for additional training for law enforcement, which expanded the CIT Program (Georgia Public Safety Training Center). The expansion included an increase in the number of training opportunities that police would receive regarding a variety of mental illnesses, addictive diseases, and other disorders including autism (Georgia Public Safety Training Center). An additional 2-hour de-escalation elective was approved beginning January 2018 titled

“Autism and De-Escalation” which familiarizes officers with the autism spectrum disorder and introduces scenarios in which officers will practice de-escalation skills and other techniques to effectively engage someone with autism (Georgia Public Safety Training Center).

The specific training course explored for the current study was the online course titled “Autism and De-escalation” as provided by GPSTC. For the current study, participants were solicited from within the State of Georgia’s law enforcement population, specifically in Bulloch County. A generic qualitative approach was utilized in the form of structured interviews to explore knowledge, attitude, and perception of ASD training. Additionally, input was sought on possible next steps to adequately prepare police to deal with autistic individuals.

### **Purpose Statement**

The intent of the current study was to expand and update the body of knowledge regarding police training within the State of Georgia on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). While a substantial amount of material existed on the phenomenon of autism, much less literature was available regarding autism as it related to training for law enforcement. Therefore, this study sought to determine the nature and police perceptions of importance and efficacy of training on ASD both in South Georgia, as well as any state. Police officers increasingly interacted with autistic individuals; however, were not adequately informed on how to identify and interact with these individuals. While the topic of mental health continued to be explored by law enforcement, did current training specifically address ASD for South Georgia police officers?

## **Definition of Terms**

In this study, the following terms were utilized throughout the course of the narrative in ways that applied with specific meaning to the context of autism and police training. These specific terms are as follows:

**Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).** According to Brown et al. (2016), individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) share varying degrees of common characteristics, including, but not limited to, a lack of social skills, disordered communication abilities, and repetitive or obsessive behaviors. Additionally, other disorders have been identified under the ASD umbrella such as Autism, Autistic Psychopathy, Autism Disorder, Asperger Disorder, Asperger Syndrome, High Functioning Autism, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder (Chovanec, 2013).

**CIT.** This referred to the Crisis Intervention Team Training which was utilized by law enforcement agencies across the United States.

**GPSTC.** This referred to the Georgia Public Safety Training Center which was located in Forsyth, Georgia. While the facility typically offered instruction in a classroom setting, it also had an online component for distant learning.

**Local Law Enforcement Agencies relevant to Bulloch County, Georgia.** This included the following: Bulloch County Sheriff's Office (BCSO); Statesboro Police Department (SPD); Georgia Southern Police Department (GSUPD); Georgia State Patrol (GSP); Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR); Portal Police Department (PPD); Register Police Department (RPD); Brooklet Police Department (BPD); Georgia Department of Revenue (DOR); and Department of Community Supervision (DCS).

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study utilized a generic qualitative inquiry approach to explore the phenomenon of ASD as it related to law enforcement. To this end, a heterogeneous group of 14 individuals participated in the current study, and data was collected with the assistance of multiple, in-depth interviews with participants over a period of two months (Creswell, 2013). Literature was researched and reviewed regarding its relevance to the concepts and approach of the current study. A variety of themes arose in conducting an exploration of the scholarly literature available on autism and law enforcement training. Specific categories included: 1) ASD and the Criminal Justice System; 2) A Thorough Review of ASD Training; and 3) Attitudes and Perceptions. Each article was selected based on its contribution to existing research on ASD training and the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of police officers relating to people who may have ASD.

An exhaustive search of literature utilizing various databases, as well as agency-specific research, revealed substantial material regarding the phenomenon of autism. However, much less literature was available regarding autism as it related to training for law enforcement. Accordingly, the following review offered insight on this specific topic both domestically as well as internationally. Some exclusions of literature from this review included law enforcement training that solely focused on crisis intervention training as it relates to mental illness. For example, any literature that placed its entire emphasis on mental health illnesses were not included due to the lack of discussion on developmental disabilities. As such, the review contained a variety of literature, which placed emphasis on ASD within the criminal justice system throughout the years, while also incorporating how attitudes and perceptions fit into the same paradigm.

Furthermore, some material was included which offered an overview of the CIT program, but again only to the extent that it related to certain themes (i.e. knowledge and attitudes).

### **Autism Spectrum Disorder & the Criminal Justice System**

Beginning in the 1940s, an explanation was sought for the phenomena of the behavioral and cognitive challenges that some individuals possessed (Chovanec, 2013). Browning, Van Hasselt, Tucker, and Vecchi (2011) continued a historical exploration with a discussion of how the 1960's deinstitutionalization process provided better accommodations for the mentally ill by eradicating state psychiatric hospitals. Viewing a similar issue from a more current perspective, Brown et al. (2016) suggested that ASD was the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States which was previously masked under the mental illness umbrella due to the lack of official diagnosis and identification of the symptoms. Therefore, by providing a brief view of the past, along with the lack of education established on ASD, it was apparent that the issue is of extreme relevance to law enforcement.

According to Hepworth (2017), individuals with ASD face many social challenges in everyday life, which can become exacerbated during the criminal justice process. ASD symptoms, such as poor communication and interpersonal skills, could be interpreted as incriminating placing those with ASD at a distinct disadvantage from the onset of a criminal investigation. Furthermore, many autistic individuals exhibit rigid routine behaviors, impairments in communication with, and understanding other people and obsessive interests (Hepworth, 2017).

Labeled as an invisible disability, ASD affects an estimated 1 in 45 people and is considered a lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder, characterized by its 'triad of

impairments': social interaction, social imagination and social communication (Hepworth, 2017). While the severity of ASD varies with each individual, the overall impairment of the disability can make the anticipation of social situations more complex. For example, an autistic individual is more likely to be confused or distressed, especially in a new social situation with uncertain outcomes, such as interactions with the police (Hepworth, 2017). Such deficits in social skills can trigger behaviors, such as physical and non-physical aggression, self-injury, and self-stimulation (i.e. flapping of hands, rocking back and forth) which could be misinterpreted by police as offending or guilty behavior (Hepworth, 2017).

In seeking research on the current state and significance of ASD and police training, it was first necessary to provide a thorough background and relevant data on this topic. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) was identified by researchers as the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States in 2015 with rates of diagnosis increasing 10-17% per year (Brown, Hastings, Cooney-Koss, Huntley, & Brasch, 2016). Characteristics of autism include impaired social skills, disordered communication abilities, and repetitive or obsessive behavior (Brown et al., 2016).

Brown et al. (2016) suggested that such symptoms might place autistic individuals at a greater risk for involvement in the criminal justice system. For example, an autistic individual may fail to respond to their name, avoid eye contact with others, or may have difficulty understanding what others are thinking or feeling (Brown et al., 2016). Additionally, these impaired social skills could cause conflict because an individual may not understand appropriate social norms of interaction, misunderstand personal space, lack appropriate social norms of interaction, lack appropriate conversation skills, or have



limited understanding of cause-effect and consequences (Brown et al., 2016). Thus, everyone involved in the criminal justice system would benefit from education on ASD, especially police officers. Specifically, the authors posited that criminal justice professionals with advanced knowledge and competencies regarding ASD were better equipped to make more informed interviewing, diversion, sentencing, and probation decisions for individuals impacted by ASD (Brown et al., 2016).

Lerner, Haque, Northrup, Lawer, and Bursztajn (2012) explored the controversy around the development of policies by the judicial and legislative state systems which lack a substantial evidence base. A specific type of ASD (high functioning) was analyzed for a possible correlation to criminal behavior. Findings suggested three unique characteristics of individuals with ASD, which included theory of mind, emotion regulation, and moral reasoning (Lerner et al., 2012). Furthermore, the authors utilized the study to make policy recommendations, some specific to the education of law enforcement regarding their interactions with autistic individuals (Lerner et al., 2012).

Tint, Palucka, Bradley, Weiss, and Lunksy (2017) posited that individuals with ASD may interact with police differently as a result of co-occurring psychiatric and medical comorbidities, frequent problem behaviors, and victimization. Additionally, it was suggested that approximately 20% of youth with ASD have interacted with police officers by the age of 21 (Tint et al., 2017). These interactions occurred for a variety of reasons, yet primarily because the police act as gatekeepers to the medical, mental health, and criminal justice systems (Tint et al., 2017). Some of the presenting issues which required police involvement included incidents at school, such as threatening to physically harm a teacher or leaving school without permission. Similarly, home-based

issues included the individual being physically/verbally aggressive towards family members, resulting in police involvement.

The research from the 2017 Tint et al. study found that aggressive behaviors were the primary concern necessitating police involvement, specifically including older individuals who had a history of aggression, lived outside the family home, and had parents with higher rates of caregiver strain and financial difficulty. Inquiries were also made regarding parent satisfaction with police involvement, with three available options: (1) the police response had a calming effect; (2) the police response increased agitation; or (3) the police response had no effect (Tint et al., 2017). Survey results indicated that police involvement had a calming effect in nearly half of all incidents (49%), while police involvement was reported to increase individuals' agitation in approximately 32% of incidents, and parents indicated that police involvement had no effect in the remaining 17% of incidents (Tine et al., 2017). In sum, this quantitative study was conducted to describe police interactions among adolescents and adults with ASD, while also suggesting a general satisfaction of most parents with their child's police encounter (Tint et al., 2017).

Similar to Brown et al.'s (2016) opinion on the prevalence of the phenomenon known as ASD, Fogden, Thomas, Daffern, and Ogloff (2016) suggested that people with an intellectual disability were a marginalized and vulnerable group. Characteristics of intellectual disability included significant impairments in intellectual functioning, coupled with difficulties in daily tasks, personal responsibility, and communication. Thus, Fogden et al. (2016) saw a need to develop a case-linkage design for a comparison of the rates of criminal victimization and offending between those with a diagnosis of

intellectual disability and a community comparison sample. Results indicated that people with intellectual disability were at an increased risk for both violent and sexual victimization and offending.

In a research method similar to Fogden et al. (2016), Fox, Aabe, Turner, Redwood, and Rai (2017) conducted a qualitative study within the United Kingdom to address the gap in knowledge of autism within the Somali community in Bristol. Specifically, many participants from the study explained that when they were told that their child had autism, this terminology was unfamiliar to them, and they were left feeling shocked and confused (Fox et al., 2017). Furthermore, it was disclosed by some participants that autism is not recognized in Somalia, nor is there a Somali word for autism (Fox et al., 2017). Conflicting messages of unimportance and disregard also occurred when a participant would share their child's diagnosis with members of their community. Therefore, goals of the research included the development of a clearer and more pronounced understanding of community perceptions with regard to people with autism; the process through which a child was identified as having autism; and the experiences and challenges of accessing and engaging with support services (Fox et al., 2017). Final conclusions from the study suggested the need to increase the understanding of ASD via a range of community channels to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and provide support to encourage families not to delay seeking help for their children (Fox et al., 2017).

### **ASD Training: A Thorough Review**

In a critical review of policy and training, Hepworth (2017) explored the current police training and criminal justice policy regarding the treatment of suspects with ASD

during the initial stages of the criminal justice system in England and Wales. Phases of the critical assessment included police response, the arrest of a suspect, the use of police caution, police custody, the interview and finally, official charging (Hepworth, 2017). During the chronological journey, Hepworth (2017) found the current state of police training regarding ASD in England and Wales to be minimal, including only a two-hour online 'mental health' training session for new recruits with a sub-section on ASD. Although ASD can co-exist with other diagnoses within these groups, Hepworth (2017) posited that providing training in this way could only result in confusion for police officers about what ASD really is, and thus, training would not be truly effective. Furthermore, Hepworth (2017) discussed Chown's (2010) study of police officer's understanding of ASD which found that 70% of surveyed police officers in England and Wales had received no formal training on ASD, and that there was significant misunderstanding of the differences between mental illnesses and developmental disabilities. While there is no expectation for a police officer to make a diagnosis of autism upon first contact with an individual, the ability to recognize its' symptoms lessens the likelihood of incorrect treatment and the use of excessive force (Hepworth, 2017). In sum, Hepworth's (2017) findings proposed that current policy and police staff training is insufficient during all initial stages of the criminal justice process.

An example of such training was the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) Initiative, which is a type of specialized police response, involving crisis intervention and de-escalation techniques developed as a result of collaboration between mental health and law enforcement professionals to respond to individuals experiencing a mental health crisis or diminished capacity (Browning et al., 2011). Unfortunately, the authors

described insufficient instruction of this topic in standard police academy, which has ultimately led to negative outcomes of encounters between law enforcement and people with mental illness (Browning et al., 2011).

Oliva and Compton (2008) continued the discussion on the CIT Initiative by specifically discussing its' evolution in the State of Georgia. The grant-funded program was implemented in 2004 with goals such as a reduction of unnecessary incarceration, as well as improving the lives of individuals with mental illnesses, addictive diseases, and developmental disabilities (Oliva & Compton, 2008). The CIT program remained a voluntary course for Georgia police officers; however, a recent addition was made to the available curriculum towards yearly certification to include an online autism and de-escalation course, again not mandated. Similarly, Compton, Broussard, Reed, Crisafio, and Watson (2015) reviewed the CIT program and found that officers who were trained accordingly appeared to be less likely to revert to force in a situation involving psychotic agitation. This particular research was also conducted in Georgia, which is of great interest to the researcher of the current study.

Available literature on ASD training suggested a variety of instructional methods for police officers to learn about the phenomenon. While some training courses, such as the CIT program, require numerous hours of face-to-face instruction, others have embraced today's technological advancements by utilizing an on-line approach, such as the afore mentioned autism and de-escalation course. Kelly and Hassett-Walker (2016) acknowledged that computer-based training was both cost effective and efficient in delivering a message; however, in their opinion, it did not provide the same quality of

training that qualified in-person training accomplishes. Thus, this opinion offered another perspective on ASD training for consideration.

On a similar note, Booth et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study which focused on how the police, as well as others in public safety, managed difficult situations involving the mentally ill. The authors, like Browning et al. (2011), recognized that training was necessary to equip police with the ability to recognize and assist someone who is mentally ill or has an intellectual/learning disability. Thus, the Booth et al. (2017) study provided a systematic review of the effectiveness of training programs aimed at increasing knowledge, changing behavior and/or attitudes of the trainees with regards to mental health, mental vulnerability, and learning disabilities. Specifically, Booth et al. (2017) found that a variety of training programs exist for non-mental health professionals, resulting in some short-term positive changes in behavior. However, the authors indicated the necessity of longer-term follow-up in the future (Booth et al., 2017).

Chovanec (2013) continued to explore the topic of police training on ASD by examining its effects on police sensitivity to the disorder. Data for this quasi-experimental study was collected from officers who were administered a pre-test/post-test instrument which measured changes in the officers' knowledge, confidence, and ability to self-assess personal knowledge of ASD as it pertains to law enforcement (Chovanec, 2013). Results from the study indicated that evidence existed which suggested that the behavioral and cognitive phenomena associated with ASD may create difficulties for ASD individuals and law enforcement officers during professional contact (Chovanec, 2013). Specifically, Chovanec (2013) found that many of her participants already had a working knowledge of ASD, to include the rookies who were fresh out of academy

training. In sum, participation in the training resulted in a significant increase in knowledge, indicating it was beneficial to the trainees (Chovanec, 2013). Additionally, this study suggested that training significantly increases an officers' knowledge of ASD, officers' self-reported confidence when interacting with ASD individuals, and officers' ability to self-evaluate personal knowledge of ASD (Chovanec, 2013). In sum, each of these outcomes should enable officers to feel a strong sense of control over a situation that involves a person with ASD.

Similar to Browning et al. (2011), Jenson (2017) examined both quantity and quality of training material on ASD provided to police officers, specifically de-escalation and communication techniques. The material reviewed was provided to officers by their individual departments and included a variety of both in-house and purchased curriculum. The CIT program appeared to be the most common model of law enforcement training found and is currently the most comprehensive training model for law enforcement and mental illness, yet it is not a mandatory program (Jenson, 2017).

Jenson's (2017) study examined three research questions to include the extent to which police are trained on ASD, the actual content of the training material, and the types of communication and de-escalation techniques officers were taught for ASD. Results suggested that an ASD diagnosis continues to grow at a higher and faster rate than schizophrenia, yet the training for police is not growing in the same proportion (Jenson, 2017). Additionally, the study revealed that there is little to no training provided for police to differentiate between high and low functioning individuals with ASD.

On a similar note, Laan, Ingram, and Glidden (2013) utilized a qualitative study to analyze existing training in the Southeastern United States to determine the overall nature

and composition of ASD training. Data was gathered by conducting scripted interviews with officials representing law enforcement training organizations from 7 southern states. Each interview allowed the authors to determine the prevalence of training related to mental disorders, nature of instruction, police perceptions of training importance and efficacy, and consistency of training with recommended guidelines for mental health training and for interacting with people with ASD (Laan et al., 2013). An analysis of the results indicated that law enforcement training in each state was inconsistent with existing guidelines for training in these areas; therefore, the authors suggested that basic recruit training may need to be re-evaluated to ensure consistency (Laan et al., 2013).

Kelly and Hassett-Walker (2016) continued the discussion on training by examining New Jersey first responders' (i.e. police, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, etc.) awareness of autism in connection with a 2008 state law mandate. Specifically, the state mandated training provided education on autism, hidden disability recognition, and response training (Kelly & Hassett-Walker, 2016). However, study results indicated that a significant percentage of first responder personnel had not completed it, which is troubling since law mandates it.

While Lerner et al. (2012) primarily utilized their study to identify specific characteristics of high functioning autistic individuals as it relates to criminal behavior, they also explored policy recommendations for the education of law enforcement. An area of concern was the issuance of the Miranda Warning to an autistic offender. Discussions by the authors included the importance of fair and equal treatment to high functioning individuals with autism, thus, solidifying the need for ASD training for all law enforcement (Lerner et al., 2012). Additionally, it was suggested that the distribution



of cards identifying ASD and strategies for interaction with an individual with ASD in crisis could lead to more positive interactions between the individual and the police (Lerner et al., 2012).

Similar to Lerner et al. (2012), Hepworth (2017) continued the discussion of possible methods to increase awareness of ASD for police officers. Autism alert cards identify a diagnosis to police, while also serving as a method to boost confidence of autistic individuals by removing concern of discrimination from authorities (Hepworth, 2017). Additionally, the use of alert cards allows for resources to be shared amongst law enforcement agencies. In the United Kingdom, there were 11 police agencies that routinely shared the information on the alert cards and Hepworth (2017) suggested that this technique would be most successful if utilized at a national level.

In addition to the implementation of ASD identification cards, Huijnen, Lexis, Jansens, and de Witte (2017) explored the creation of robot interventions which could contribute to an increased awareness of autism in children. While created specifically for KASPAR (Kinesics and Synchronization in Personal Assistant Robotics), the robot intervention template could be used by a variety of professionals, to possibly include law enforcement (Huijnen et al. 2017). In the Huijnen et al. 2017 study, the authors utilized a qualitative method to determine if robots could be practically implemented into current education and therapy interventions for children with ASD. It was suggested that interaction with robots could be empowering for children with ASD, while also overcoming various barriers experienced in face-to-face interaction with humans. Moreover, Huijnen et al. (2017) determined that robot assisted interventions can be tailored to the needs of the specific child and can be used in an identical manner as often

as needed; however, personalization to the needs of the individual child at hand is of extreme importance. Results indicated that besides requirements related to the robot itself such as appearance, the use of voice and sound, the operation, the robot's behavior and attributes/toolbox, many other factors need to be taken into account (Huijnen et al., 2017). In sum, this study offered additional and updated information on ASD, while also allowing for participant's thoughts and ideas through its methodology. Furthermore, it provided a tool for systematically developing and implementing new robot interventions, which can contribute to an increased awareness and the use of robot assisted interventions for autistic children (Huijnen et al., 2017).

### **Attitudes & Perceptions**

The final theme of importance to the current study focused on attitudes and perceptions, specifically regarding ASD and training. This theme was initially introduced by Chown's (2010) study, which explored autism awareness and understanding by the UK police service. The USA was utilized as a comparison model due to findings from a prior study where results indicated that 80% of USA officers could not identify proper characteristics of autism (Chown, 2010). Furthermore, results from questionnaires indicated that there appeared to be a considerable understanding of the differences between cognitive disability and mental illness; however, 25% of respondents saw little or no difference between the two. Additionally, 40% of respondents did not appear to understand the term developmental disability (Chown, 2010). Score results indicate that the mean US score was significantly higher than the mean UK, thus suggesting a lead that the US police service appears to have over its UK counterpart in terms of autism awareness training delivery (Chown, 2010).

Compton, Bakeman, Broussard, Hankerson-Dyson, Husbands, and Krishan et al. (2014) explored the effects of ASD training on an officers' knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The study utilized a comparison of officers with and without the CIT training based on six key constructs related to the CIT model (Compton et al., 2014). The six constructs included knowledge about mental illnesses, attitudes about serious mental illnesses and their treatments, self-efficacy for deescalating crisis situations and making referrals to mental health services, stigmatizing attitudes towards persons with serious mental illnesses, de-escalation skills, and referral decisions (Compton et al., 2014). Results indicated that CIT-trained officers had consistently better scores than non-CIT-trained officers on knowledge, diverse attitudes about mental illnesses and their treatments, self-efficacy for interacting with someone with psychosis or suicidality, social distance stigma, de-escalation skills, and referral decisions (Compton et al., 2014).

Teagardin (2011) examined law enforcement officers' understanding of ASD, as well as their general knowledge on the topic. In correlation to a specific training, it was hypothesized that there would be a significant difference between the training group and the control group on the amount of change in knowledge from pre- to post-training. Results from the study indicated that as hypothesized, the participants had an increase in knowledge from pre- to post-training. Officers in the training group had a substantial increase in their understanding of symptoms of ASD. Additionally, participants had a significant increase in their confidence concerning interaction with and identification of individuals with ASD (Teagardin, 2011).

In a continuation of how police perception can be impacted by ASD, Crane, Maras, Hawken, Mulcahy, & Memon (2016) studied the experiences and views of 394

police officers from England and Wales. According to Crane, et al. (2016), when an individual, autistic or not, encounters the criminal justice system, their first point of contact is typically a police officer. Therefore, participants in this study were surveyed to rate how easy or difficult they found various aspects of their encounters, as well as how they managed different features of ASD relevant to policing. Additionally, participants were asked to rate their knowledge of ASD, before answering questions in relation to the training they had received, and the training they would like (Crane, et al., 2016). Finally, each participant was asked to rate their satisfaction with either their overall professional performance in relation to ASD or to discuss a specific encounter which involved the police and an autistic individual (Crane, et al., 2016). In sum, results found that only 42% of officers were satisfied with how they had worked with individuals with ASD and acknowledged the need for adjustments and organizational/time constraints as barriers they faced (Crane, et al., 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework of Current Study**

A generic qualitative design was utilized to explore the current knowledge on ASD training for the South Georgia Police Officer. Structured interviews were then conducted with a population of officers from various Bulloch County law enforcement agencies. While several theories supported this framework for the current qualitative study, the procedural justice theory was specifically applicable. Watson and Angell (2007) described the procedural justice perspective as the fairness with which people were treated in an encounter with authority figures, such as police officers. Furthermore, procedural justice had its greatest impact early in the encounter, which indicated that how officers initially approach someone was extremely important (Watson & Angell, 2007).

The procedural justice theory also provided clear direction for efforts to improve police response to persons with mental illness. Similarly, persons with autism are often unintentionally non-compliant due to their disability. For example, some autistic individuals are non-verbal; therefore, a lack of response to an officer's instruction may not be done as a rebellious act. Therefore, an officer's knowledge on ASD could affect their behavior, which could also ultimately have a positive impact on the outcome of the interaction. Thus, the procedural justice theory offered a relevant framework which could be utilized to explore how persons with autism experienced interactions with police, as well as how officer behavior could shape cooperation or resistance (Watson & Angell, 2007).

While Compton et al. (2014) discussed the importance of training on an officers' knowledge, attitudes, and skills, it is equally pertinent to examine training as it relates to job performance. Specifically, one must consider the impact that a supportive organization can have on an officer's attitude and job satisfaction. Ko and Hur (2014) postulated that employees who perceive that their organization is supportive of them and committed to helping meet their socioemotional and tangible needs will reciprocate by helping the organization achieve its goals. The authors utilized a qualitative approach, along with the Federal Human Capital Survey 2008 data set and found that the moderating effect of managerial trustworthiness is consistent only with the relationship between satisfaction with family-friendly benefits and job satisfaction (Ko & Hur, 2014). Additionally, managerial trustworthiness did not moderate the relationship between satisfaction with family-friendly benefits and turnover intention (Ko & Hur, 2014).

### **Purpose, Goals, and Research Questions**

Both the current study and Chovanec's (2013) study focused on how ASD training affects officers' knowledge and self-efficacy for interacting with ASD individuals in the field. Specifically, the quasi-experimental study conducted by Chovanec (2013) focused on gathering an assessment of changes in an officers' knowledge, confidence, and ability to self-assess personal knowledge of ASD, both before and after they participated in ASD training. Results from Chovanec's (2013) study indicated that training significantly increased an officers' knowledge of ASD, as well as officers' self-reported confidence when interacting with ASD individuals. Furthermore, research confirmed that autism was the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States which suggested that the phenomenon would continue to be of great importance; thus, solidifying the need for continued research on ASD training for police (Brown et al., 2016).

Therefore, the goal of the current study was to continue exploring the importance and efficacy of law enforcement training on ASD in South Georgia, as well as any state. Each of the following research questions were derived from the arguments raised in the review of the literature and were the focus of the current generic qualitative study. It is important to notate the distinct differences between declarative and procedural knowledge, as well as what determines a conceptual understanding, as they relate to the first research question of the current study. A participant displayed declarative knowledge if they could articulate factual knowledge about ASD. On the contrary, a participant demonstrated a procedural knowledge if they had a knowledge of what ASD was; however, could not support this knowledge with facts. In sum, declarative

knowledge is knowledge about facts that can be easily articulated, while procedural knowledge is knowledge about how to do something. Furthermore, a conceptual understanding of ASD comes from more than just stating facts and methods, but rather when a participant could articulate why ASD was important. A participant showed a conceptual understanding of ASD when they could discuss their knowledge of the subject, while also applying it to the current context (i.e. its relationship to law enforcement).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

- 1) Prior to starting the training, could an officer articulate declarative and procedural knowledge and conceptual understanding of ASD and its' symptoms?
- 2) After completing ASD training, how did participation in the training impact the officer's perception of the ASD phenomenon as it related to the criminal justice field?
- 3) After completing ASD training, what did officers perceive as the next steps towards being ready to properly deal with ASD individuals?

### **CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY**

The current generic qualitative study examined the body of knowledge regarding police training of the South Georgia police officer on ASD by the utilization of structured interviews with participants. The goal of a generic qualitative inquiry, according to Percy, Kostere, & Kostere (2015), was to have the interview participants share reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences, of things in the outer world. This type of research allowed for lived experiences of individuals about the phenomenon of ASD to be described, while determining if any significant statements developed amongst participants (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, this data assisted in the development of a composite description of the essence of the experience for all participants (Creswell, 2013).

#### **Strategies of Inquiry**

Each research question was the focus of the current generic qualitative study. The sample included a variety of local law enforcement within Bulloch County, Georgia. While this county may be considered a more rural area within the State of Georgia, it was expected that each participant would come from a diverse background, which could include experience in larger, urban departments. Also, each participant would likely be in differing stages of their career, some having completed a variety of training based on their individual years of service. Other participants would still be considered in the rookie phase of their law enforcement career. Thus, participants' backgrounds would vary based on experience, coupled with training, both of which would add to the phenomenon known as ASD.



## **Participants**

The sample size included representation from the following local Bulloch County law enforcement agencies: Bulloch County Sheriff's Office (BCSO); Statesboro Police Department (SPD); Georgia Southern Police Department (GSUPD); Georgia State Patrol (GSP); Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR); Portal Police Department (PPD); Register Police Department (RPD); Brooklet Police Department (BPD); Georgia Department of Revenue (DOR); and Department of Community Supervision (DCS). Each of these agencies varied in size; therefore, it was proposed that only one interview be conducted from GSP, DNR, PPD, RPD, BPD, DOR, and DCS. Additionally, it was suggested that interviews from the BCSO, SPD, and GSUPD allowed for two officers each. Thus, the intended total sample size for the study was fourteen.

### **Exclusion and/or Inclusion Criteria**

Certain eligibility criteria were required of participants to partake in the study. For example, an officer was not eligible to participate in the study if they had a family member or close family friend who had autism. It was suspected that such intimate knowledge would impact their response results. Additionally, years of service had no impact on eligibility. It was anticipated that valuable data could be collected from both a seasoned officer, as well as a rookie. As such, years of service would be reflected in the initial participant information which was gathered at the onset of the pre-training interview. Lastly, if someone had previously completed the online training course on autism and de-escalation, they were not eligible to participate.

## **Instruments**

A pre/post structured interview process was utilized to allow the participant to disclose any prior knowledge that they had about ASD, as well as their personal views and perceptions about how ASD related to the bigger realm of mental illness within the criminal justice system. The full list of questions was provided in Appendix A. The following were examples of the types of questions that were asked as part of the Pre-Training Interview:

1. You encounter an autistic individual while conducting interviews in the field. What is the most helpful way to interact and/or communicate with the individual and why?
2. Have you ever encountered an autistic individual during your career as a police officer? If yes, how did you identify the disability as ASD?

The following were examples of types of questions that were asked as part of the Post-Training Interview:

1. Suppose you are assessing an individual in the field for information regarding illegal drug activity. Can you give an example(s) of ASD indicators that you should be trained to recognize?
2. After completion of the training curriculum, can you identify any objectives or goals which should be given consideration for future training for police?

Basic background information for each participant was gathered during the pre-interview and made part of the results (see Appendix A). Additionally, both the pre/post training interview questions were presented to a panel of experts to establish content validity of the instruments before any testing begins. Individuals who served in this

capacity had a knowledge base of the content area concerning ASD, as well as to how it was relevant to police officers. For example, mental health officials, along with law enforcement, had previously established a relationship to address the needs of the mentally ill within the criminal justice system. An individual with a similar background would be ideal to determine the content validity of the testing instruments. Additionally, if revisions or modifications were determined to be necessary, these changes would be implemented immediately, thus not delaying the progression of the study.

### **Procedures**

The aforementioned research design also allowed the researcher to condense individual police experiences with the ASD phenomenon into a full description of the issue and its' relevance to the criminal justice system. A data collection procedure was applied which involved a structured interviewing process with each participant, both prior to and after the training. The utilization of structured interviews, along with the incorporation of some "tell me more" kinds of questions, uncovered the essence of what the ASD training experience meant to each participant. Content specific interview questions allowed for a philosophical discussion about ASD and law enforcement, including subjective and objective ideas and concepts. Additionally, some general questions were incorporated into each interview if the participant suggested prior experience with the phenomenon (i.e. what have you experienced in terms of ASD during your career as a police officer; what contexts or situations have influenced or affected your experiences with ASD; etc.). The questions that were utilized in this study are provided in Appendix A.

It was intended to keep each interview structured and on task; however, additional commentary from the participant was allowed to address issues not presented by specific interview questions. Also, if any participant raised an issue or concern during the pre-interview process, this material was incorporated in the post-interview for further clarification. Attempts were made to minimize irrelevant discussions, which often arose from interview questions.

Each interview was conducted in a face-to-face setting and located in a private and quiet office setting. The office was average in size and included a desk, along with two “visitor” chairs. The researcher sat at the desk, facing the participant. The researcher anticipated each pre-training interview to take approximately 30 minutes, dependent upon how much additional conversation developed during this process. Informed consent would be requested regarding participation in the study prior to the questioning, as well as permission to record the audio from each of interview session. Post-training interviews would be conducted in a similar manner; however, it was suspected that they would last longer in duration (i.e. 45-60 minutes). Many of the follow-up questions would require the participant to reflect on the training curriculum, thus fostering additional conversation.

A strict timeline was followed to assure that data was collected swiftly and without bias. The researcher feared that a lengthy delay between completion of the online training and the post-training interview could lead to forgotten information. Furthermore, individual work schedules of the participants had to be factored into the timeline, as well as the 30-day window for completion of the online training course as provided by GPSTC. Each officer would have this amount of time to complete the

curriculum and take the final examination. Therefore, the researcher preferred that the pre-training interview occur approximately 1-2 weeks prior to the start of the training course. During this interview, each participant was requested to contact the researcher upon completion of the training curriculum. Post-training interviews would also be conducted 1-2 weeks after completion of the training course.

Pre-training interviews were conducted in a strategic method so that the researcher had adequate time to devote to each participant, as well as accommodating the participant's availability. It was expected that all interviews (both pre- and post) would be conducted over a 2 to 3-month period. This timing should allow for adequate data collection, while also accounting for the possibility that a participant requires the full deadline to complete the training.

### **Data Collection**

According to Percy, et al. (2015), data collection for a generic qualitative approach typically uses data collection methods that elicit the participant's reports on their ideas about things that are outside themselves. This includes information from the representative samples about real-world events and processes, or about their experiences (Percy et al., 2015). Data for this study was gathered utilizing scripts which were prepared for structured interviews. The scripts aligned with the specific research questions and it was expected that results would include opinions and suggestions from the participants as to the future of ASD training for law enforcement. Each interview, both pre/post, would be recorded with permission, and later transcribed with the use of Express Scribe (Version 7.03) by the author to assure prolonged accuracy of responses in the future development of themes. The pre-training interview would be utilized to gather

basic demographic information about the participant, as well as what knowledge, if any, that the participant knew about autism. Similarly, the post-training interview would be used to determine the impact of the online training.

### **Data Analysis**

Percy, et al. (2015) define thematic analysis as a process used to conduct the analysis of qualitative data. It is a generic approach to analyzing participant data that serves as the basis for many different kinds of qualitative interpretation. While three types of thematic analysis exist, the current study follows an inductive analysis.

According to Percy, et al. (2015), inductive analysis is data driven and does not attempt to fit the data into any preexisting category. It requires that any pre-understandings be set aside and each participant's data be analyzed individually. After all of the data has been analyzed, a review is necessary to determine if repeating patterns and themes exist. Any repeating patterns and themes from participants are then synthesized together into a composite synthesis, which attempts to interpret the meanings and/or implications regarding the question under investigation (Percy et al., 2015).

Many steps are included in an inductive analysis of data. In sum, the transcribed interviews from each participant need to be reviewed, seeking any sentences, phrases, or paragraphs that appear to be meaningful. This specific data needs to be highlighted and then evaluated for its relevance to the current study's research questions. Any of the highlighted data that deems to be irrelevant must be eliminated; however, items of importance should be documented and coded in writing. Further reviews of data that could be related or connected to the study should be clustered so that possible patterns

can be identified. The process of identifying patterns often requires repetitive reviews of the transcribed interviews and must be completed for each participant.

Again, Percy, et al. (2015) discussed how many generic qualitative studies rely on structured interviews for data collection. Interview questions are pre-structured, yet allow for “tell me more” opportunities. This method was displayed in the current study when the researcher asked the participant during the post-training interview if they could provide a brief synopsis of their pre-training description of ASD and its symptoms. Responses allowed for personal reflective responses of accuracy and inaccuracy. This methodology is discussed in further detail in Chapter 4.

### **Limitations**

There was an initial concern of how the participants would impact the representativeness of the study. However, the variety of law enforcement agencies included in the population pool would hopefully assist in overcoming this limitation. Additionally, to avoid sample selection bias, participants from each agency would need to be randomly selected. While this study would offer a basic overview of the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of ASD and current available training, future exploration was still necessary on a larger scale.

### **Expected Findings**

It was anticipated that the current study would produce results similar to the findings of Chovanec (2013). Specifically, Chovanec’s (2013) study suggested that training significantly increases an officers’ knowledge of ASD, officers’ self-reported confidence when interacting with ASD individuals, and officers’ ability to self-evaluate personal knowledge of ASD. It was expected that this generic qualitative study would

determine that current training on ASD for a South Georgia Police Officer was inadequate with regards to knowledge and conceptual understanding of developmental disability and its' symptoms. Furthermore, the training would likely impact the individual officer's perception of the ASD phenomenon as it relates to the criminal justice field, while also identifying future procedural steps for ASD training as deducted from participant suggestions.



## **CHAPTER 4. RESULTS**

This qualitative study was designed utilizing a structured interviewing technique to collect, organize, interpret, and describe the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of the South Georgia Police Officer concerning the phenomenon that is autism. The reported results begin with a detailed description of the processes used to collect said data, followed by a thorough analysis of the participant's individual demographics. Each research question is then discussed individually with supporting data. Significant additional findings and statements conclude this chapter with a discussion of their relevance to the research study.

### **Participants**

While a sample size of 14 participants was initially desired by the researcher, the final sample included only nine participants, offering a representation from six local law enforcement agencies. Specifically, two participants each were interviewed from the larger agencies, while only one participant was included from each of the smaller agencies. Failure to participate from the remaining four agencies was due to a variety of issues, from the lack of interest to time restraints. One individual participated in the pre-training interview process; however, could never commit to taking the training, nor the post-training interview. Therefore, this participant's data was not included due to its inability to contribute to the overall study.

### **The Interview Process**

The researcher utilized two structured instruments to facilitate the pre- and post-training interview process (Appendix A). The pre-training instrument consisted of mostly open-ended questions, which focused on background, training, and current

knowledge on ASD. The researcher welcomed extensive discussions regarding one's professional background. As previously suggested, such conversations often led to the exposure of relevant supervisory and/or training experience. Similarly, the post-training instrument utilized a series of pre-structured questions and scenarios to determine if any new knowledge was or was not learned from the training experience. Each participant was reminded of their anonymity prior to the commencement of the interviews, thus encouraging them to speak freely on their personal thoughts and opinions.

With all participants, interviews were conducted in a face-to-face manner, beginning with a brief follow-up discussion on informed consent, as well as any questions they may have regarding it or the document securing their consent. In all cases, the pre- and post-training interviews were audio recorded with an acknowledgment from each participant. On average, interviews lasted around 20 minutes; however, some were shorter, while others lasted longer. Some basic demographical questions were asked and recorded from participants at the beginning of each interview. While providing a general demographic overview of the sample population, this information also allowed for the researcher to determine the knowledge, skills, and attributes of each participant prior to their involvement in the study.

During each interview, the researcher took hand-written notes on the pre- and post-interview instruments (Appendix B) for supplemental use to the audio recordings. Special attention was given and notated on topics in which the researcher found to be significant with regards to the development of possible themes and correlations. As discussed, many questions on the instruments were open-ended which allowed for a

plethora of responses. Therefore, a variety of follow-up questions were asked when necessary and appropriate during both the pre- and post-training interviews.

Each agency was contacted by the researcher via telephone and given a brief overview of the study, as well as expectations of their involvement (i.e. time commitments of both pre- and post-training interviews and completion of the online training course). Then, each agency provided the researcher with a possible subject who could participate in the current study. The researcher then extended a formal invitation to the subject, which was accepted contingent on final approval from management. The researcher then emailed the participant both the Participant Recruitment Letter and The NSU IRB Short Form Consent to be in a Research Study Form (Appendix C), which explained the totality of the study in greater detail. When the researcher received formal approval of participation in the study by the management of said participant, the pre-training interview was executed, followed by the post-training interview at a subsequent date. As desired, interviews for all participants were scheduled and conducted over a period of two months in a centralized location.

### **Demographics**

The nine-participant sample from six South Georgia Law Enforcement Agencies offered a diverse demographic background with regards to many attributes (see Table 1). In sum, all nine participants were male; however, six participants were white, along with two black participants and one bi-racial participant. Participants' ages varied with the youngest being twenty-two years old and the oldest participant being fifty-three years of age. Each participant of the surveyed sample also described the size of their current agency based on their perception. Four of the participants viewed their agency as small,

while another four participants suggested they worked for medium-sized agencies.

Lastly, Participant P8 indicated that he was employed by a large agency.

Table 1

*Demographic Attributes of Interview Participants*

Participant	Gender	Race	Age (yrs.)	Current rank / position	Law enforcement experience (yrs.)	Perceived agency size (s, m, l)	Currently supervise employees?	Supervisory experience in previous L.E./non L.E. careers?
P1	M	W	42	Sergeant	20	M	Yes	No
P2	M	W	53	Corporal	9	M	No	Yes
P3	M	W	40	Detective	17	M	No	Yes
P4	M	W	40	Impact Agent	2	M	No	Yes
P5	M	W	39	Patrol Officer	17	S	No	No
P6	M	BR	22	Patrol Officer	<1	S	No	No
P7	M	B	39	Special Agent III	16	S	No	Yes
P8	M	W	25	Trooper 1st Class	4	L	No	Yes
P9	M	B	45	Lieutenant	15	S	No	Yes

A few additional attributes were deemed important by the researcher and therefore gathered during the pre-training interview. For example, each participant was asked to identify their current rank/position within their agency. Dependent on the individual response, a follow-up inquiry was made regarding current and/or past supervisory experience, including supervision in both law enforcement and non-law enforcement agencies. All responses were utilized to formulate an accurate description of each participant's role within their current agency, coupled with any relevant previous experience.

Furthermore, the general demographic information which was secured from each participant assisted the researcher in discovering both present and past supervisory and training experience. Specifically, if a participant indicated that they were not currently serving in a supervisory position, it did not necessarily suggest that they had no supervisory experience. For example, Participant P3 indicated that he currently does not possess any supervisory responsibilities in his position; however, supplemental questioning into his past work history established four years of experience as a Chief Deputy. Participant P3 indicated that during his tenure as Chief Deputy, a captain was responsible for the actual training of all employees; thus, Participant P3's direct involvement in the agency's training only occurred when a major change in the overall theme on a specific topic merited a change in policy (i.e. use of force).

Similarly, Participant P2 currently serves as a Corporal within his agency; yet, indicates that he has no responsibility regarding the training of his subordinates. Further questioning into his past work experience exposed a lengthy military background in the Marine Corps. In sum, Participant P2 served in various management positions as a

Marine, eventually being tasked with the instruction of safety classes on hazardous materials and waste. Participant P2 explained his duties and responsibilities as a Safety Manager, which included the selection of the training topic, as well as the actual classroom instruction of the material to over 1,500 Marines.

While Participant P8 does not currently supervise any employees within his agency, he still offers a unique and relevant contribution to the research data. Previously, Participant P8 served as a Lieutenant for a county-run fire department which utilized a hybrid method for staffing. Specifically, the department was comprised of 6 paid employees (3 fire fighters, 1 captain, 1 chief, and 1 administrative assistant) and 4 inmates. During each shift, the paid fire fighters were responsible for the supervision of a select crew of inmates from the local jail. These inmates served as fire fighters and were trained appropriately. Participant P8 was tasked with the selection and instruction of all training material. Again, while these types of responsibilities are not a part of Participant P8's current position, they are relevant to the totality of the current research study.

Participant P4 is yet another significant example of current rank not being indicative of previous supervisory knowledge or experience. While Participant P4 is currently an Impact Agent with no supervisory experience, a thorough review of his past career indicates a plethora of such duties and responsibilities. Prior to entering law enforcement, Participant P4 served as a fire fighter for approximately ten years. During this tenure, he progressed through the ranks to eventually become a captain tasked specifically with training. Participant P4 is also a certified instructor for the State of Georgia, which allows him to instruct courses relating to fire and law enforcement.

Therefore, current rank does not necessarily indicate a participant's lack of knowledge or experience regarding specific training and/or the instruction of training material.

### **Generic Qualitative Data Analysis**

Upon the completion of both pre-training and post-training interviews for each participant, the researcher prepared transcripts by utilizing Express Scribe (Version 7.03). Specifically, interviews were digitally recorded and then uploaded into the Express Scribe Software, which allowed the researcher to prepare an accurate recreation of each event into a Microsoft Word format. Each interview was transcribed, printed, organized, and examined for the possible development of themes.

The researcher initially utilized a manual coding process of data, which took place in multiple phases. Coding began manually by manipulating the qualitative data on the printed, transcribed interviews by writing codes in pencil. Then, as suggested by Percy, et al. (2015), an inductive analysis method was utilized due to its' appropriateness for virtually all qualitative studies. The first-cycle coding phase was devoted to reading each interview transcript and seeking words or phrases that would merit categorization as a key construct for attitudes, knowledge, and perceptions. Then, a continual review of relevant data (i.e. sentences, phrases, or paragraphs), which use terms and concepts drawn from the words of the participants themselves, were established and utilized to further sort and categorize the data.

Due to the manual coding during the first-cycle phase, a variety of methods were used to identify relevant data. For example, certain phrases and responses were color-coded and highlighted appropriately. Next, the researcher sorted and categorized data into several divisions (i.e. demographics, training, knowledge prior to training,



perceptions, and attitudes). The demographics division was further sorted by using such codes as gender/race/age, current rank/position, agency size, etc. Similarly, the training division utilized codes such as learning environment, instruction method, and effectiveness. The researcher also sought to establish each participant's initial knowledge of ASD, as well any pre-existing attitudes or perceptions. An Excel spreadsheet was utilized to condense pages of various participant responses into one centralized location. The second-cycle of coding was conducted manually and assisted in condensing a broad array of data into-patterns and themes. The patterns and/or themes concluded from the second-cycle of coding was the importance of officer safety, as well as the impact that communication can have on the interaction between a police officer and an autistic individual.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions for the current study were answered by using a structured interview approach. Results are best presented by establishing their relationship to each research question.

#### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 was: Prior to completion of the training, could an officer articulate declarative and procedural knowledge and conceptual understanding of ASD and its' symptoms? Again, it is significant to recall the distinct differences between declarative and procedural knowledge, as well as what contributes to a conceptual understanding of ASD. Declarative knowledge was displayed if the participant could articulate factual knowledge about ASD. However, a procedural knowledge was demonstrated if the participant had some basic knowledge regarding ASD, but lacked the

ability to factually support this knowledge. Additionally, a participant was deemed to possess a conceptual understanding of ASD when they could discuss factual knowledge on the subject, as well as any relevance to the field of criminal justice.

The researcher also asked each participant during the pre-training interview if they could define the acronym ASD or explain what “stimming” entailed. This technique was used as an additional tool to determine any pre-existing knowledge of autism. Additionally, each participant was asked to share any initial thoughts they had at the mention of autism. Results varied; however, only Participant P3 could accurately articulate that ASD was an acronym for Autism Spectrum Disorder. Furthermore, none of the participants could define “stimming”, yet several were familiar with the term after the researcher gave an explanation. Lastly, only two participants, P1 and P4, shared how a discussion on autism made them reminisce about the movie “Rain Man.” It is apparent from the results of the survey that a majority of the participants could not demonstrate a declarative knowledge of ASD prior to completing the training curriculum, but rather only had a procedural knowledge of ASD (as represented in Table 2). Results also indicated that almost all participants (88.8%) possessed a conceptual understanding of ASD prior to completing the training (as represented in Table 2).

**Table 2***Knowledge & Understanding of ASD*

Knowledge	Example Statement	Participants	% of Participants
Procedural knowledge	P9 “I don’t know what ASD stands for, but when you say autism to me, what comes to my mind is that they have an inability to process on some levels. They may be high on one level and may have a disability on another level. When you say autism to me and I think law enforcement, I just think patience. You really got to work around that communication.”	P1, P4, P5, P9	44.4%
Declarative knowledge	P3 “The acronym ASD stands for Autism Spectrum Disorder. It’s all kind of antidotal, you know there may be a child who has a hard time articulating if you ask them a question. They may be acting out or having behavioral issues, but a lot of it is the level of communication. Can you actually catch their attention and get them to focus long enough to sit down and talk with you about things.”	P3	11.1%
No knowledge	P6 “I don’t know what ASD stands for. I’ve never been exposed to it. I would not even know what symptoms to look for.”	P2, P6, P7, P8	44.4%
Conceptual understanding	P4 “I don’t know what ASD stands for off the top of my head, but the first thing that pops in my mind is “Rainman”. I think I could recognize someone with autism based on how they choose to interact. Physically, or not physically, or verbally or not verbally or if they try to speak, how do they come across verbally? You know, is there an audible issue there? I guess I try to look at everything and formulate it all and try to connect the dots if I can.”	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9	88.8%
No understanding	P6 “I don’t know what ASD stands for. I’ve never been exposed to it. I would not even know what symptoms to look for.”	P6	11.1%

Findings regarding the first research question were determined by both pre- and post-training responses. In the pre-training interviews, only one participant could

accurately define ASD. However, in the post-training interviews, each participant was questioned about the accuracy of their initial definition of ASD. A total of four participants thought they gave an accurate definition of ASD, while the other five participants suggested they gave a partially correct definition.

### **Research Question 2**

Research Question 2: After completing ASD training, how did participation in the training impact the officer's perception of the ASD phenomenon as it related to the criminal justice field? The second research question focused on information gathered from each participant during their post-training interview with no inquiries regarding the specific content included in the training course. Each post-training structured interview allowed the participant to share and reflect on any new information that they learned from the training curriculum. The researcher then provided a brief synopsis of the individual participant's initial description of ASD and its symptoms and allowed for personal reflective responses of accuracy. Additional questions were used to determine the likelihood of recommending that a co-worker participate in the voluntary online training, as well as if any knowledge gained from the training would impact their individual future interactions with an autistic individual. The results discussed in Table 3 were gathered by the researcher from post-training interviews with participants and include a variety of responses.

**Table 3***Post-training Knowledge, Perceptions, & Attitudes*

Post-training feedback	Example Statement	Participants	% of Participants
Accurate knowledge of ASD	P9 “After the training, I learned that there is a lot more autism out there that we need to be able to recognize the symptoms and stuff. I learned that we deal with it more than we know. I don’t remember exactly how I responded about what the signs of autism were before the training, but I think I was pretty accurate. I remember talking about stimming and it was a new word for me, but then I realized after the training that I’ve seen it before on several occasions.”	P3, P4, P5, P9	44.4%
Partial knowledge of ASD	P1 “I don’t exactly recall how I described autism before the training, but maybe rocking and avoiding eye contact? I guess the simple answer is I don’t think I was completely correct in thinking that I could walk into a room and spot someone immediately that was autistic.	P1, P2, P6, P7, P8	55.5%
Recommend for co-worker to complete training	P8 “I would recommend for my co-worker to take the training. I think truthfully some guys that like to get out and work and are interacting with people more than others, it would be something good for them to know about. I think there are situations where there is nothing we can do to de-escalate something and then there are.”	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9	100%

Post-training feedback	Example Statement	Participants	% of Participants
Impact on future interactions	P4 “I think the training definitely helped remind me of unawareness to autism, and if that makes more sense because I’ve had interactions with autistic individuals in the past, but it’s not something that happens on a regular enough basis. So, it’s one of those things that is good to have in the back of your mind. It’s one of those things to have almost a refresher on.”	P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8	66.6%
No impact on future interactions	P1 “I think my future interactions would be the same. I don’t think I would handle it different now than I did 5 years ago. I think I would handle it now very differently than I did 20 years ago. But again, that just comes with the experience of dealing with people.”	P1, P5, P9	33.3%
Should training be mandatory?	P9 “I actually think that autism should have a spot in basic training at a minimum.”	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9	88.8%
Should training be voluntary?	P6 “I would say to leave it as voluntary.”	P6	11.1%

In sum, the second research question focused on how the training may impact the participants’ perception of the ASD phenomenon as it related to the criminal justice field. Post-training interviews found that six participants indicated that their future interactions with autistic individuals would likely be impacted by the training. The remaining three participants disclosed that they would continue to handle any future interactions with ASD individuals as they always had done so, regardless of the training.

### Research Question 3

Research Question 3 was: After completing ASD training, what did officers perceive as the next steps towards being ready to properly deal with ASD individuals?

The third research question was utilized to explore possible perceptions from participants regarding the next steps to assure police officers are prepared to properly interact with autistic individuals. While patterns regarding knowledge and attitudes were exposed during pre-training interviews, the importance of communication and safety developed during post-training interviews.

Each participant was questioned by the researcher about how possible future interactions with an autistic individual would possibly change after the completion of the training curriculum. After lengthy discussions with each participant, the researcher determined that a common pattern existed regarding the importance of communication. Interestingly, all participants echoed prior law enforcement training, regardless of rank or tenure, of first establishing safety for all involved. After safety was determined, several participants shared the importance of proper communication with individuals to expose the totality of the scenario. For example, communication may be the determining factor in distinguishing between drug-related behavior, mental illness, or a developmental disability such as autism. Furthermore, such a conclusion could foster a situation being de-escalated, rather than unnecessarily escalated. Communication and safety were determined to be a pattern during the inductive analysis process and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Table 4 contains a variety of significant reflective statements from participants regarding several post-training perceptions of interest. Responses included what some participants perceived as the next steps for police officers to be able to properly deal with autistic individuals. Other statements were included by the researcher solely based on

their significance in the totality of the discussion. Again, results were gathered by the researcher from participant responses during post-training interviews.

**Table 4**

*Training-Related Reflective Statements*

Participant	Reflective statement
P1	“Coming out of the police academy, I think you need the training. However, if you haven’t had that training, if you have been a street cop, a patrol deputy, or whatever you want to call it, for 20 years, you have encountered enough of this that you have gotten everything that this online class teaches.”
P2	“The higher ups are the ones that need this training so that they can bleed it down”.
P3	In response to perceptions of next steps to prepare police officers to properly interact with autistic individuals: “...If you really wanted to do something up front and spend a day on doing nothing but symptom recognition for these different kinds of things because that’s what most young officers have no idea about...”
P4	“I think (the training) definitely helped remind me of unawareness to it, and if that makes more sense because I’ve had interactions with autistic individuals in the past but it’s not something that happens on a regular enough basis. So, it’s one of those things you know it’s good to have in the back of your mind. It’s one of those things to have almost a refresher on.”
P5	“If you’ve never been in contact or have never experienced an autistic person, this training will give you a heads up”.
P6	In response to why P6 suggested that younger co-workers should take the training... “Once you’ve been dealing with people for a while, I don’t think you’re really going to change how you deal with people based on like a newer person like me who is more open-minded to taking a different approach.”
P7	In response to why P7 thought the training was so important: “Agents like me are by ourselves 90% of the time. We are in the field 90% of the time and we are by ourselves and we cover such a wide, vast area... I have to be prepared to for certain situations because we don’t carry radios so I would have to revert to our cell phone to call out for help.”
P8	In response to perceptions of next steps to prepare police officers to properly interact with autistic individuals: “The only thing I could say that I saw as not part of this training because of it being in an online setting and we did it in CIT training is actually hands-on training. You know getting to talk to them and work with them...”



Participant	Reflective statement
P9	“I think I’ve always been pretty level headed on my approach. I’m not one of the officers that goes out, guns a blazing, trying to lock up everybody. I look at law enforcement from a help point of view, a help aspect and every now and then you get a chance to prosecute or execute the law. I don’t think that me personally, it would change, but I do see the need for it (the training) to be prevalent in our training so other officers could change.”

Overall, the third research question focused on what the participants perceived as the next step for law enforcement officers to be ready to properly deal with autistic individuals. Post-training interview results indicated a strong support for the Autism and De-escalation training course to be mandatory for all law enforcement officers. Specifically, all but one participant supported converting this training course to mandatory, rather than its’ current state as an elective to fulfill partial de-escalation requirements. Furthermore, all participants stated that they would recommend to a co-worker to complete this training curriculum. Thus, indicating the importance and support of continued training on autism by law enforcement officers.

### **Additional Significant Findings**

The coding of all data allowed for certain patterns to be identified. While the initial goal of the research study was to explore the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of the South Georgia police officer on the phenomenon of ASD, three specific patterns presented themselves as most prevalent amongst all participants during the inductive analysis. Each pattern subsequently developed from responses regarding training, understanding/knowledge of ASD, and the importance of safety. The patterns of training and understanding are more self-explanatory; however, the pattern of safety is a bit more complex and will require an extensive explanation, which can be found in Chapter 5.

While there was no research question that focused solely on training (i.e. preference, amount, etc.), the topic is still relevant and extremely important. The basis of the current study revolved around the “Autism and De-escalation” training course, hence any ideas, statements, etc. which were collected from each participant is applicable. Additionally, some of the reflective statements could be applied to future research, as well as being incorporated into departmental policy and procedures. What follows is a thorough review of significant additional findings from the data.

### **Training**

In analyzing responses to training, the researcher received a variety of preferences. In all pre-training interviews, each participant was questioned regarding their individual learning preference. Responses were broken down into three categories: online, face-to-face, and varies depending on topic (see Table 5). Participants P1 and P8 both preferred online training, regardless of topic. On the contrary, Participants P2, P5, and P7 each desired face-to-face instruction for all required training. Participants P3, P4, P6, and P9 each explained that online was adequate for some training topics; however, certain material should only be instructed in a face-to-face format.

An inquiry was made of each participant regarding the amount of training hours that they complete each year. The researcher learned that a mandated amount of training hours is required annually to fulfill each participant’s certification. Each agency varied in how a participant could register for training courses, as well as which courses could be taken. Interestingly, all participants indicated that their individual agency allowed, and even encouraged, the completion of training hours past the minimum requirement. However, variations occurred between participants on their individual desire to take more

than the minimum training hours. The researcher also inquired with each participant on the likelihood of them registering for a training course on a topic that they had limited knowledge on.

Table 5 indicates the preferences and percentages of participants regarding desired training environment, the probability of taking more than the minimum training requirements, as well as the likelihood of taking a training course on a topic of minimal personal knowledge. While some participants strictly desired their training in an online format, others suggested a disconnect in the online learning environment and thus supported instruction in a face-to-face format. Additionally, some of the participants indicated that their individual training format preference was dependent on the course topic. Responses also suggested that certain training topics are better suited for an online format, while other topics are taught with an increased ease in a face-to-face format.

A variety of factors also impacted responses from participants on their individual desire to take a training course on an unknown topic. For example, Participant P1 shared the unlikelihood of taking a course which trained investigators how to photograph a crime scene due to its' irrelevance in his current position. However, Participant P3 discussed a continued interest in all instruction material relevant to his current position, such as training regarding death investigations. The results discussed in Table 5 were gathered by the researcher from pre-training interviews with participants.

**Table 5***Preferences Regarding Training; etc.*

Training	Representative quote	Participants	% of Participants
Online	P1 “I prefer online training because I’m an independent learner. I gain nothing from a lecture. I gain everything from reading. So, when I physically attend a class, I’m literally either completely ignoring what’s going on, or I’m reading the course material on my computer. I’m doing whatever I want to do because it’s not doing me any good.”	P1, P8	22.2%
Face-to-face	P2 “I like face-to-face training because of the interaction. I like interacting with people. It’s not, you know, with a computer, and you just sit there. Most face-to-face classes have interactions with the other people in the class and some include group work scenarios.”	P2, P5, P7	33.3%
Varies depending on topic	P9 “Typically, I would seek out some training that would benefit traffic since I predominately do traffic law now or any good classes that you’ve had years ago that you need refreshers on because laws change.”	P3, P4, P6, P9	44.4%
Takes more than minimum	P1 “I’ve never had a shortage. The 20 hours has never been an issue, so I guess I typically start in January and since they offered online learning, I typically do all of my 20 hours online between January and February and then throughout the year, I’ll pick up more. I think I’ve had about 60 hours this year.”	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9	88.8%
Only takes minimum	P5 “I typically take what’s required and that’s it. I’ve been doing this a long time.”	P5	11.1%
Likely to take on unknown topic	P4 “I would take a class that I didn’t know a lot on if I had the time and my agency would be supportive of me taking more than the bare minimum.”	P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9	77.7%

Training	Representative quote	Participants	% of Participants
Unlikely to take on unknown topic	P1 “Well, no with an explanation. When I look through that course catalog, you know, GPSTC, they train fire, ems, so you know, no, I’m not apt to take something that is completely out of the scope of what we do. I also am not apt to take photography for criminal investigators.”	P1, P5	22.2%

Table 5 contains a variety of significant reflective statements from participants regarding several training-related issues of interest. Again, results were gathered by the researcher from participant responses during pre-training interviews.

### Summary

This chapter presented the data collection process, the interview process by which the phenomenon that is autism was described, and the findings resultant from the combination of data collected. In consideration of these research questions, the data was organized and then sorted to expose possible patterns, as well as significant findings and statements gathered from participants. Each pattern subsequently developed from responses regarding training, understanding/knowledge of ASD, and the importance of safety.

In sum, several factors affected the training component of the research. Participants varied in their desired learning environment and instruction method, both which impacted their individual perception of effectiveness. Additionally, initial knowledge of the phenomenon that is autism varied from pre-training to post-training responses, exposing accurate prior knowledge, as compared to perceived knowledge. Lastly, the importance of communication, coupled with safety was determined to be a significant pattern for the study. Subsequent conclusions from the data, such as

limitations and recommendations for further research, are discussed in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION**

The primary intention of this study was to begin a scholarly investigation into the current body of knowledge regarding police training of the South Georgia Police Officer on ASD, while also determining if future study and investigation on a larger scale might be warranted to assure officers are properly prepared to deal with ASD individuals. A generic qualitative approach, coupled with interviews with participants, allowed the researcher the opportunity to delve deeply into the concepts and constructs relating to the knowledge, attitudes, and experiences of officers regarding ASD. Furthermore, an interpretation of the research provided additional relevant areas of investigation that could benefit the law enforcement population on a much larger scale.

### **Interpretation of Results**

Initially, results from the study were interpreted through a comparison to the data introduced in the comprehensive literature review. A secondary interpretation of results allowed the researcher to identify actual patterns and themes from the participants' interviews, which were also examined to determine their relationship to the procedural justice theory. Also, it was determined that a correlation existed between the procedural justice theory and the CIT model.

Again, the second research question from the current study focused on how the training may impact the participants' perception of the ASD phenomenon as it related to the criminal justice field. Similarly, the current study's third research question focused on what the participants perceived as the next step for law enforcement officers to be ready to properly deal with autistic individuals. Each of these research questions placed emphasis on a police officer's interaction with an autistic individual, specifically

determining how the ASD training would impact them in their overall job performance. Thus, as previously discussed in Chapter 2, Watson and Angell (2007) described the procedural justice perspective as the fairness with which people were treated in an encounter with authority figures, such as police officers. Additionally, it is suggested that this theory has its' greatest impact early in the encounter, which indicated that how officers initially approach someone was extremely important (Watson & Angell, 2007).

Furthermore, Slate, Buffington-Vollum, and Johnson (2013) discussed how the CIT model (Crisis Intervention Team) clearly incorporated key elements of procedural justice. Specifically, these key elements included, from the perspective of the individual with mental illness: having a voice, participation and input into decisions that impact oneself, being listened to by the decider, being treated with dignity, respect and politeness, acknowledging one's rights, and trusting that the arbiter is concerned with one's well-being (Slate et al., 2013). During the interview process, the researcher learned that several participants had been trained in CIT at some point during their law enforcement career. Specifically, five participants (P3, P5, P7, P8, and P9) were CIT trained, which indicated their specialized knowledge of responding to persons in mental health crises.

After multiple reviews of the transcripts from each pre- and post-interview, a common concern from most participants was the initial establishment of safety, regardless of who they come into contact with. Similarly, the importance of communication was echoed by several participants, which assured that individuals are treated with procedural justice. Therefore, it could be concluded that officers who have completed the CIT training may be more likely to have a positive interaction with a



mentally ill individual and/or an autistic individual, as compared to an officer who has not taken the CIT training course. Yet, the instruction of the CIT model is not mandatory, nor does it require specific refreshers at any point after the completion of the initial 40 hours of training.

Debbaudt (2002) discussed the importance of a person's ability to differentiate a law enforcement professional from a stranger, thus encouraging personal safety. Furthermore, he suggested that programs be developed and implemented which enabled children and adults with autism to identify police officers as persons they can trust in times of need (Debbaudt, 2002). If there is a need for autistic individuals to learn about law enforcement, it can be concluded that a similar relationship needs to occur for today's police officer to learn more about autistic individuals' specific behaviors that are likely to be encountered in the field. Fear of the unknown is understandable and even expected, yet today's law enforcement has an obligation to stay informed and current on all aspects of their job.

The results from the current study supported a general desire of participants to learn more about unknown and/or unfamiliar topics. Debbaudt (2002) discussed how law enforcement will remain suspicious when they encounter persons whose behavior is not easily explained until they receive information or training to the contrary. Therefore, it can be concluded that there are substantial benefits to providing today's police officer training on the phenomenon that is autism. However, both Debbaudt (2002) and participants from this study affirmed that there is only so much that a law enforcer can learn about autism from a parent, advocate, or informational handout or videotape. Thus, direct communication between those with autism and law enforcers is recommended for

any type of training curriculum, similar to the concepts associated with the CIT model (Debbaudt, 2002). These suggestions were also evident from several participants who had previously completed CIT training during their professional career (P3, P5, P7, P8, and P9). Specifically, the CIT training incorporated face-to-face interaction with mentally ill individuals, rather than the police officer reading about it from a textbook or watching it on a video.

### **Limitations**

The researcher was concerned if the sample population would allow for an appropriate representativeness for the study. There was an initial fear that having officers from the same region of South Georgia may negatively impact results. However, this concern proved to be a moot point due to the variety of sampled law enforcement agencies, as well as the random selection of participants. While each participant currently worked for a law enforcement agency in South Georgia during the data collection process, they also possessed unique educational and professional backgrounds which allowed for varied responses. As previously discussed, the sampled population contained participants who were young and inexperienced, coupled with veterans who had backgrounds in law enforcement, the medical field, and the military. Again, participants were randomly selected by their individual agency to take part in the study; however, the results cumulatively alluded to several patterns which suggest the need for continued research.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Several patterns were evident from participant's pre- and post-training interviews. For example, an initial pattern, which was quickly established, revolved around officer

safety. The importance of officer safety is stressed at an early point in all law enforcement training; thus, it is understandable that its' relevance continues into training on autism. Participant responses cumulatively suggested that upon establishing a safe perimeter of the scene, they were more apt to have a discussion with the individual which may disclose behavior associated with a learning disability, rather than making a hasty alternative assumption involving deviant behavior.

Similarly, a pattern was discovered of the potential positive impact that specialized training between police officers and autistic individuals could have on future interactions between the two groups. Several participants disclosed past training experiences which involved site visits into the school system, hospitals, mental health facilities, etc. These site visits allowed the officer to have personal interactions with a variety of certain populations. Participants who discussed site visit experiences had typically completed the CIT training curriculum at some point in their career. Therefore, not all participants had been given the opportunity to have any interactive training prior to their day-to-day patrol.

Additionally, many participants associated ASD with children only, failing to recognize that it also can affect adults. The use of interviews fostered a more thorough conversation with many participants, which included a discussion on how children with autism grow into adults. As previously discussed, Brown et al. (2016) classified autism as the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States, often including symptoms which may place autistic individuals at a greater risk for involvement in the criminal justice system. Therefore, all parties involved in the criminal justice system can benefit from education on ASD, especially police officers.

Many participants also shared their concern for the inclusion of some type of actual interaction with autistic individuals, both as children and adults. It was speculated that this type of specialized training could be conducive to an accurate understanding of autism, as it relates to law enforcement training. However, until such training becomes mandated at a state or national level, and not just for certain agencies, there will continue to be a gap in the understanding and knowledge of autism by police officers. For example, some of the sampled populations indicated that in addition to mandated training by the state to maintain certification, their individual management required other training curriculum for a variety of reasons.

In continuing the conversation on training-related issues and concerns, several participants disclosed information which was relevant to their specific situation; however, sparked a greater interest to the researcher regarding the theme of training. Specifically, five out of nine participants had completed CIT (Crisis Intervention Team Training) at some point during their law enforcement career. Those five participants described the course as a week long, specialized training course with a portion of the curriculum devoted to dealing with the mentally ill. During this training, each participant consistently shared how their instruction included a site-visit to a school where they interacted with children who had a variety of disabilities, allowing them to gain knowledge on how to properly react in similar future interactions. This type of hands-on training was suggested as a beneficial component to be included in future training on autism.

While the CIT training appeared to be beneficial to those participants who had completed it, the researcher found it extremely incongruous that no refresher training is

required for the course. For example, consider an officer who completed the training fifteen years ago. Provided the individual keeps their overall POST certification current on an annual basis, they are considered to also remain certified in “crisis intervention”. Yet, there is no refresher course for this specific certification to allow for changes and/or updates. While this may not initially seem important, Participant P4 contributed to its’ relevance to the study. Participant P4 is currently working in law enforcement, yet also has medical training and currently works part-time as a medic. To maintain certification as a medic, Participant P4 is required to complete training updates every two years on certain topics, to include special categories such as the mentally ill, etc.

After reviewing the data gathered from all pre- and post-training interviews, the researcher questions if a more thorough study should be done on autism training in the larger scope of public safety. If those in the medical field are required to do routine updated training to maintain their certification, then should this also be required for law enforcement officers? Furthermore, are those individuals who are currently working in the medical, fire, and first-responder field being offered training such as “Autism and De-escalation”? In sum, this study has indicated the possible necessity of a more thorough review of inconsistencies regarding training for all those individuals who serve in a public safety capacity.

### **Research Implications for Future Policy and Practice**

Each participant had their own thoughts and suggestions about the future of law enforcement and the ASD phenomenon. While the consensus was the necessity of more mandated training on actual interaction with autistic individuals, there was also a suggestion which merits future research. Specifically, several participants identified the

necessity of a centralized database which would contain certain health related information and be available to all individuals in law enforcement. For example, the State of Georgia utilizes G.C.I.C. (Georgia Crime Information Center) which contains information regarding the criminal history of individuals. Each time someone is arrested and fingerprinted for a criminal offense, their information is entered into G.C.I.C. and is then accessible to certain individuals. Similarly, the Georgia D.D.S. (Department of Driver Services) maintains a database of those individuals who apply for a driver's license in the State of Georgia. When an officer makes a stop for speeding, this system allows them to verify the status of the individual's license (i.e. suspended or valid). Each of these database systems, at the local, state and national level, allow law enforcement to share information regarding the criminal activity of individuals. Thus, the creation of a similar shared database, which identified pertinent medical information, could be an asset to law enforcement.

While the aforementioned database systems are helpful in sharing information regarding ones' criminal and driving histories, they do not allow for certain information to be shared for the individual who has never been arrested or been issued a driver's license or identification card. In the State of Georgia, certain medical documentation can be submitted by an individual to D.D.S. to be included on the back of the driver's license or identification card. However, this type of medical information typically does not include information such as mental illness, learning disabilities, etc. Therefore, it was suggested that the creation of a non-criminal, shared database would be extremely beneficial to those individuals working in the public sector. Again, it would be most helpful if this information was shared both at the state and national level.

Interestingly, Participant P5 discussed how his agency was privy to an internal database which allows for medical information, etc. due to its' association to an educational institution. In sum, the students submit personal information as part of their enrollment with the institution, which allows police officers to search names when a potential emergency call is issued. Information included in the database could identify the individual as being autistic, allowing the officer to be more prepared for any interaction. Unfortunately, if the same autistic individual is located off-campus and involved in some type of situation involving law enforcement, the responding officer will not be privy to this information. Therefore, the creation of a shared database system, which included similar information, could be a tremendous tool to today's police officer.

Another implication of practice would be to consult with GPSTC about the findings from the current study. For example, it could be beneficial to those responsible for the development of training curriculum to learn about how students actually responded to the training. Currently, the only measurement available to determine the success of the training material would likely be a pass or fail score; however, the results from the current study could expose many more details to make the training course more effective (i.e. the most appropriate method of instruction, the incorporation of "hands-on" experience, etc.). Again, the officer will likely learn and retain more information about the training topic if it is instructed in the appropriate manner.

It is also suggested that education on autism become mandatory for all law enforcement officers within the State of Georgia. This could be accomplished by the training becoming a required course as part of the certification process (i.e. basic mandate) and/or it being assigned as mandatory by each individual agency. All law

enforcement agencies have the ability to require their officers to complete more than the minimum training.

Lastly, the training on autism should require some type of recertification process. For example, once the CIT program is completed, there is no additional training that is ever required. However, individuals who work in the medical field (i.e. EMT or Paramedic) are required to have periodic updates on certain topics. Such updates include new information on special categories such as the elderly or the mentally ill. As indicated from literature reviewed throughout the current study, the information that is available on the autism spectrum disorder continues to become more sophisticated; therefore, it could be interpreted that a similar recertification process is needed for law enforcement to stay current on all issues involving ASD.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Several items merit future research. The current study was conducted by using law enforcement agencies within Bulloch County, Georgia. A study using agencies in other counties throughout the State of Georgia may yield different findings due to a different sample population. Further, while Bulloch County's population is not considered small, it is likely that data gathered from a larger, metro county would produce different results due to the variations of the sample population.

Also, it is recommended that a similar study be conducted in other states. The current study focused on law enforcement agencies within South Georgia; however, it could be beneficial to examine the extent of training that other agencies across the United States place on autism. The continued examination of knowledge, attitudes, and



perceptions of police officers across the country about autism could result in the discovery of other avenues that need to be explored.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this dissertation was to offer a glimpse of how informed the South Georgia Police Officer was regarding the phenomenon that is autism. To do this, it was necessary to conduct face-to-face interviews, which aided in the gathering of potential knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions about interacting with autistic individuals. The sampled population included nine participants which were determined to come of diverse backgrounds and have varied opinions regarding potential impact from the training material.

Specifically, each participant was interviewed prior to and after the completion of the Autism and De-escalation online training course. The pre-training interview was utilized as a tool to gather basic demographic information for each participant, while also serving as a starting point to determine any prior knowledge and/or attitudes regarding autism. After the initial interview was conducted, each participant completed the online training curriculum on their own. What followed was a post-training interview with the researcher which assisted in determining any new information gained from the training material, as well as the accuracy of several pre-training interview questions.

Again, the first research question for this study sought to determine if an officer could articulate a declarative and procedural knowledge and conceptual understanding of ASD and its' symptoms prior to the completion of the training. Results indicated that four participants thought they gave an accurate definition of ASD, while the other five participants suggested they gave a partially correct definition. The second research

question focused on how participation in the training would impact the officer's perception of the ASD phenomenon as it related to the criminal justice field after completion of the training. Results found that six participants indicated that their future interactions with autistic individuals would likely be impacted by the training. The remaining three participants disclosed that they would continue to handle any future interactions with ASD individuals as they always had done so, regardless of the training. The final research question pursued to determine what officers saw as the next steps towards being ready to properly deal with ASD individuals after completion of the training. results indicated a strong support for the Autism and De-escalation training course to be mandatory for all law enforcement officers. Results found that only one participant supported converting this training course to mandatory, but all participants stated that they would recommend to a co-worker to complete this training curriculum.

Several patterns were discovered after a thorough review of all data was completed, which included the impact of how training material was instructed. Additionally, results suggested a consensus of the importance of safety in all situations, regardless of possible mental or learning disabilities. After safety is established, communication can be used as a tool to impact the outcome. Lastly, the need is still apparent for a shared database, at the local, state, and federal level, to inform public safety servants of any pre-existing illnesses or disabilities that an individual may be dealing with in hopes of de-escalating certain situations.

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## Appendix A

### Pre-Training Interview Questions

Appendix A  
Pre-Training Interview Questions

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_, Gender: \_\_\_\_\_, Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Date/Location of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

***Background***

1. What is your current rank within your agency?
2. How many years have you worked in law enforcement?
3. If you have worked in other law enforcement agencies, how would you classify the agency's size? Small, medium, or large?
  - a. Where was this agency located?
4. Do you now or have you ever served in a management-level position where you were responsible for supervising employees (can include previous careers in the private sector/non-law enforcement)?
  - a. If yes, were you responsible for over-seeing the training of the employees?
    - i. If yes, did you select the training material or was it mandated by top management?
    - ii. Did you instruct the training or rather just oversee that it was completed?

***Training***

5. Within your current agency, how are training courses selected to fulfill your annual hourly requirements? Do you have the ability to select or is it selected for you by management?

- a. If you select, how do you choose what courses you will take?
  - b. Are you allowed to take more than the required, mandated training hours?
    - i. If yes, would you take a course on a topic that you did not have much knowledge on?
6. The ASD training course is conducted in an online manner. Do you typically prefer online or face-to-face training?
- a. What is your reasoning behind the desired method?
7. Please describe any law enforcement training you may have received during your professional career regarding ASD?
- a. Explain when, where, and why?

### ***ASD***

8. What does the acronym ASD stand for?
- a. Please share what comes to mind when you hear that someone is autistic. Does it make you reflect on any past experiences with classmates or specific book or movie that you have perhaps seen?
  - b. Can you share any personal or professional knowledge that you may have from interaction with an autistic individual?
9. Would you be able to recognize the symptoms of an individual with ASD?
- a. If yes, can you give a description of the symptoms?
10. “Stimming” is a calming method that many autistic individuals utilize in some situations. This type of behavior has been confused with the behaviors that drug addicts often exhibit. How would you differentiate ASD behaviors from those actions of a drug addict?



- a. Please respond to the following scenario:
  - i. An individual is sitting on a bench in a park known for drug activity who is rocking back and forth, while repeating the same words or phrases over and over. Is this type of behavior indicative of autism or a drug-addict? How would you respond?

11. Describe a time in your career as a police officer that you may have encountered an autistic individual?

- a. How did you identify the disability as ASD?

12. You encounter an autistic individual while conducting interviews in the field. What is the most helpful way to interact and/or communicate with the individual and why?

## Appendix B

### Post-Training Interview Questions

Appendix B  
Post-Training Interview Questions

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date/Location of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What new information, if any, did you learn from the training?
  - a. Please explain your response.
2. Reflecting back on your pre-training responses (which will be read aloud by the researcher to the individual participant), do you think your description of ASD was accurate? Please support your response.
  - a. Did you correctly identify its' symptoms? Again, please support your response.
3. Describe how the training you completed better prepared you to interact with an autistic individual and any areas where you believe you still need more training to deal with this type of individual.
4. Please describe how any of your future interactions with an autistic individual may change now that you have completed the training.
5. What aspects from the training curriculum do you suggest as adequate to prepare law enforcement for proper interaction with ASD individuals? Similarly, were there any components that you classify as inadequate?
6. Many differing opinions exist on if this training should be voluntary or mandatory? Which method do you suggest and why?
7. What do you perceive as the next step in preparing a police officer to properly deal with an ASD individual?

8. After completion of the training curriculum, can you identify any objectives or goals which should be given consideration for future training for police?
9. Would you recommend that a co-worker take this training? Why?
10. Do you think the online format is adequate for this topic or rather should it be instructed in a face-to-face setting?
11. Suppose you are assessing an individual in the field for information regarding illegal drug activity. Can you give an example(s) of ASD indicators that you should be trained to recognize?
12. Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share about this process and what you concluded from it?