

**A Qualitative Case Study: Exploring Police Officers' Emotional Perceptions and
Encounters with Individuals with Autism**

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Abstract

Law enforcement officers' insufficient preparedness and lack of understanding of autism lead to challenges and misinterpretations when interacting with individuals with autism. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore law enforcement officers' understanding of autism and their preparedness for autism-related interactions after completing Project SAFE training, as proper preparation can help reduce difficulties in such encounters. Symbolic interactionism served as the guiding theoretical framework, and structured interviews were conducted with 10 Alabama law enforcement officers who participated in Project SAFE from 2019 to 2024. I analyzed two research questions using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. Findings for "How do police officers believe Project SAFE training helped them prepare for interactions with individuals with autism?" revealed three overarching themes: (1) Officers believed that Project SAFE enhanced their knowledge and understanding of autism-related interactions, (2) Officers believed the Project SAFE provided communication modifications for autism-related encounters, and (3) Officers believed the Project SAFE helped strengthen their preparedness for autism-related interactions. Findings for "How do police officers describe their gaps in autism knowledge before training?" revealed two overarching themes: (1) Officers' limited knowledge about autism before training, and (2) Officers described ASD recognition, communication, and misinterpretation as deficits in their pre-training knowledge. The findings indicated that officers perceived greater understanding and awareness of autism after completing Project SAFE. They described the training as providing useful knowledge and communication strategies that improved their sense of preparedness when engaging with individuals with autism. The implications and recommendations highlighted that officers perceived autism-specific training increased preparedness by raising awareness of behavioral cues, that officers reported learning

communication strategies they believed would assist in interactions, that officers lacked training on autism, and that officers perceived knowledge gaps as interconnected with a lack of training, contributing to difficulty recognizing behaviors, adjusting communication, and avoiding misinterpretations. Recommendations for practice included implementing mandatory autism training with refresher sessions, providing autism response toolkits, and conducting training evaluations to assess effectiveness and retention. Future research should evaluate how preparedness translates into real-world practice, incorporate perspectives from individuals with autism and their caregivers, and address limitations by conducting broader qualitative research. Through Project SAFE training, officers perceive themselves as more competent, patient, and empathetic when interacting with individuals with autism; these perceptions suggest that such training could benefit all officers who engage with the public.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

With the rise of autism awareness in recent years, media coverage has emphasized the need for greater understanding. More specifically, the interaction between law enforcement and the person with autism is at the forefront of police-community relations issues (Crichlow et al., 2020). Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), commonly known as autism, is a complex neurological developmental condition characterized by social interaction and communication patterns that present unique challenges and possibilities (Cheney et al., 2023). Hodges et al. (2020) described autism as a manifestation of a spectrum of severity, impacting each person differently, causing strains on social interaction, communication, and repetitive behaviors.

In 2018, autism was one of the most frequently diagnosed developmental disorders, with prevalence estimates showing that roughly one out of every 54 children in the United States had received an ASD diagnosis (Baio et al., 2018). Only two years later, Cakir et al. (2020) stated that the prevalence of ASD had continued to increase, and another two years later, research showed that one in 31 children under the age of eight is diagnosed with ASD (Shaw et al., 2025). Autism is a lifelong medical condition and presents daily life challenges for many (Cummins et al., 2020), where some individuals with autism are living independently and can contribute to society as productive and working-class citizens.

For law enforcement officials, there is a high probability of coming in contact with a person with autism (Wallace et al., 2022). Unfortunately, most officers receive little to no formal training in identifying and assisting individuals with autism (Gibbs et al., 2023; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). Therefore, the interaction can lead to challenges and misunderstandings, negatively impacting both the individual with autism and the officers involved (Swan & Perepa, 2019).

Communication difficulties and misinterpretations are among the most significant challenges law enforcement officers face when interacting with individuals with autism. Equally, individuals with autism may struggle to comprehend or respond to police instructions. These mutual misinterpretations often result in heightened anxiety, emotional distress, or unnecessary escalation. Kildahl et al. (2020) noted that stress and anxiety are among the most common traumatic consequences of negative encounters with law enforcement, contributing to long-term psychological harm and increased mistrust toward police within the autism community.

Moreover, unprepared officers interacting with individuals with autism cause an unfortunate consequence of dissatisfaction with the entire profession of law enforcement (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). High dissatisfaction from individuals with autism or their caregivers during encounters demands specialized training for officers (Tint et al., 2017). Research has shown that unsatisfactory rates range from 30% to an alarming 75% (Gibbs & Haas, 2020). Unsatisfactory incidents not only impact the individuals directly involved but also erode public trust in law enforcement (Chown et al., 2021). These negative encounters heighten mistrust among the community members (Tint et al., 2017). They strain community relations, emphasizing the urgency for comprehensive training initiatives (Holloway et al., 2022).

Law enforcement agencies across the country face increasing challenges in responding to the needs of individuals with autism (Gibbs et al., 2023). Current police training on autism is falling short in providing training and tools to officers to effectively and safely engage with the autism population (Cheney et al., 2023). Most officers were not adequately prepared for these encounters, with only 30% reporting they had received autism training. This left the majority underprepared for interactions that required specialized understanding and response strategies (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). Communication difficulties and sensory-related behaviors

can easily be mistaken for non-compliance or aggression, leading to avoidable use-of-force incidents (Copenhaver et al., 2019).

Research has shown that officers' unpreparedness can jeopardize community trust and contribute to dissatisfaction with law enforcement. As autism prevalence continues to rise, the potential for police interaction increases, emphasizing the urgent need for officers to undergo autism training to improve communication and response strategies (Bader & Fuchs, 2022). Such training can help prepare officers to employ more understanding and empathic policing practices (Love et al., 2020).

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was law enforcement officers' insufficient preparedness and the lack of understanding of autism, leading to challenges and misinterpretations with individuals with autism (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). Since law enforcement officials lack training in autism awareness, many encounters have escalated to negative experiences. Consequently, unpreparedness causes high dissatisfaction rates toward the law enforcement profession (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). Officers responding to autism calls with no prior knowledge of autism can be detrimental to all involved parties (Gibbs et al., 2023).

According to Massachusetts General Hospital (2023), autism is one of the fastest-growing developmental disorders in the U.S., surpassing childhood cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined. As more individuals with autism interact with law enforcement, the risk of misunderstanding increases (Shea et al., 2021). Individuals with autism are more likely to be misunderstood (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020), victimized (Copenhaver et al., 2019; Crane et

al., 2016; Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Salerno & Schuller, 2019), or confronted with force (Chown et al., 2021; Gardner et al., 2022).

Communication is the most identified challenge among the two groups. Individuals with ASD may struggle with social cues, eye contact, and expressive language, often perceived as suspicious (Wallace et al., 2021). They may also misunderstand officer instructions, especially under stress, which can impair processing and comprehension (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller). Officers may misread behaviors as aggression or resistance, lacking the awareness needed to respond appropriately (Railey et al., 2020a; Wallace et al., 2021). Kildahl et al. (2020) noted that stress and anxiety are the most common traumatic effects of negative law enforcement encounters, which can leave lasting psychological impacts and foster mistrust.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore police officers' understanding of autism and preparedness after training. Proper police preparedness can reduce challenges when interacting with individuals with autism (Gardner & Campbell, 2020). The target population for this study consisted of certified law enforcement officers who had completed Project: Strengthening Autism-Friendly Experiences (Project SAFE), an autism awareness training for first responders, within the last 60 months. Recruitment was conducted through attendance rosters that included officers throughout the State of Alabama. This study included 10 participants, and recruitment was conducted via direct email, text, and phone. The participants preferred to be interviewed face-to-face, on the phone, or via Zoom. All participants were selected to complete their interviews by phone.

Several essential steps were taken during the research process to understand and analyze the participants' thoughts and viewpoints. After the interviews were concluded, I transcribed

them. Transcribed interviews accurately capture the participants' responses (Simoni et al., 2019). Once transcribed, a member check was conducted. Member checking ensures that participants' feedback is obtained on the accuracy of the transcription and interpretations (Motulsky, 2021). Each participant received an email with their transcript, requesting that they review it for accuracy and make any necessary corrections. The transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 14, a qualitative data analysis software, and subsequently, coding began. Coding is a systematic process of categorizing and labeling data to identify patterns and themes. Coding is important as it enhances the analytical process (Elliott, 2018). Once the codes were comprehensively examined using Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis, common trends emerged, and the study's themes were identified.

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provided a guide for examining police officers' understanding of autism and their preparedness after training. Symbolic interactionism, a sociological theory originally developed by George Herbert Mead and later expanded upon by Herbert Blumer, explained how individuals assign meaning to behaviors and interactions based on their social experiences (Blumer, 1969). This theory explained how individuals create meaning through social interaction and the use of symbols. The theory holds three primary ideas: (a) individuals act toward others and situations based on the meanings they assign to them, (b) these meanings emerge from social interaction, and (c) meanings are constantly revised and interpreted through ongoing interactions and experiences (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Symbols, such as language, gestures, and observable behaviors, form the foundation of communication and interpretation, allowing individuals to construct and reconstruct understanding in dynamic contexts (Carter & Fuller, 2016).

According to Carter & Fuller (2015), the key concepts of symbolic interactionism are meaning, language, and thought. Meaning refers to the interpretations individuals assign to objects, actions, and people in their environment. Language provides the symbols through which these meanings are communicated and shared. Thought involves the internal process of interpreting, questioning, and redefining meanings as experiences unfold. These concepts explained how people shape their social realities and respond to others based on socially derived understandings (Blumer, 1969).

The propositions relevant to the study, based on Blumer's (1969) principles, were crucial in understanding how police officers understand autism after receiving specialized autism awareness training. The first proposition indicated that individuals' responses were shaped by the meanings they assigned to behaviors, which were informed by their past experiences, professional training, and surrounding social environments (Blumer, 1969). The second proposition focused on how interpretations emerged through interactions with others, emphasizing the role of shared social contexts in creating meaning (Blumer, 1969). The third proposition suggested that structured experiences allowed individuals to reinterpret and reshape meanings, leading to new ways of understanding behaviors (Blumer, 1969). Collectively, these propositions captured the core of symbolic interactionism, showing how meaning, social interaction, and reinterpretation influenced officers' understanding of autism and guided the adjustments they made in their responses.

Symbolic Interactionism guided the research by framing how meaning influences human action, how meanings are constructed, and how they are modified through experience. The propositions explained that responses were shaped by the meanings individuals attached to behaviors, that interpretations were constructed through social interactions, and that meanings

could be redefined through structured experiences such as training, allowing behaviors to be understood differently than before (Blumer, 1969). These principles provided the foundation for identifying the problem of officers' insufficient preparedness and limited understanding of autism spectrum disorder. The framework directed the development of the study's purpose by emphasizing how training could reshape the meanings officers assign to behaviors. It also guided the formulation of the research questions: Research Question 1 examined how officers believed training would prepare them for their interactions. Research Question 2 identified how officers described gaps in their knowledge prior to training. Both questions are aligned with symbolic interactionism principles that highlight the development and reshaping of meaning [autism] through lived experience and interaction [training].

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the experiences of law enforcement officers who completed Project SAFE, an autism awareness training program. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it highlighted the participants' opinions, subjective meanings, and individual thoughts. This methodology emphasized participants' perspectives, allowing their views to be expressed through detailed narratives rather than numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, this design enabled the capture of both individual accounts and shared patterns of meaning within their experiences (Yin, 2018).

Data was collected through 10 semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to describe their experiences and perspectives in detail. All participants elected to be interviewed via telephone. Also, the interview protocol was consistent across participants. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke

(2006). I became familiar with the transcripts through repeated reading, and then generated initial codes to capture key ideas. These codes were subsequently reviewed and grouped into broader categories, from which themes were developed to answer the research questions. NVivo 14 software was used to organize the data and support systematic coding. To enhance trustworthiness, coding and theme development were reviewed with the dissertation chair and committee to ensure alignment with participants' narratives. A thematic analysis requires coding of patterns and examining emerging themes within the collected data (Khokhar et al., 2020).

This methodology and design were best suited for the study because they aligned with the problem and purpose statements, which centered on understanding how training enhanced officers' preparedness and knowledge of autism after training. The research questions sought to capture officers' perceptions and reflections that could be fully explored through qualitative inquiry. Qualitative research questions were intended to examine and comprehend, rather than quantify and measure (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This alignment was consistent with examining officer preparedness after training by focusing on participants' viewpoints. Qualitative research is suited for capturing individuals' lived experiences and perspectives, making it well aligned with studies that explore meaning and understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study design further supported this alignment by allowing an in-depth exploration of a bounded group, enabling rich insights into how officers perceived their preparedness after participating in Project SAFE (Yin, 2018).

Research Questions

This study addressed two key research questions to understand officers' knowledge of autism and their preparedness following completion of Project SAFE.

RQ1

How do police officers believe Project SAFE training helped them prepare for interactions with individuals with autism?

RQ2

How do police officers describe their gaps in autism knowledge before training?

Significance of the Study

Conducting a qualitative study on police officers' understanding of autism after completing autism training lays the foundation for identifying three key areas of significance for the study. First, this study sheds light on these officers' knowledge and understanding of autism. Prior research suggests that many officers enter the field with limited exposure to autism-specific education, highlighting a critical need for targeted training (Gibbs & Haas, 2020). Second, it examined officers' perceived preparedness for autism-related calls. Officers who receive adequate autism training can reduce negative experiences (Gardner & Campbell, 2020; Love et al., 2020; Railey et al., 2020a). Third, it provided insights into prior knowledge gaps about autism. Studies have found that without formal training on autism, officers may struggle to recognize autism traits, leading to misinterpretation of behaviors (Wallace et al., 2021; Railey et al., 2020a). Overall, by examining officers' opinions, the study revealed that they believed autism training provided them with knowledge about autism, enabling them to better assist individuals with autism in their interactions.

Additionally, the study's significance lies in its potential to contribute to law enforcement practices and academic discussion. For law enforcement administrators, the study provided insights into officers' preparedness and how they described the influence of training on their readiness. It also highlighted the gaps that existed among officers prior to training, offering an important perspective for understanding. By examining the research questions, the study

contributed to the development of practical strategies for future training and to scholarly conversations on law enforcement interactions with individuals with autism. Findings that provide an in-depth analysis of the complexities of these interactions can help develop theories of cause (Fletcher-Watson, 2019) and contribute to the overall discussion and recommendations on police-community relations and neurodiversity.

Definitions of Key Terms

Autism Awareness

Understanding autism encompasses its origins, signs, and prevalence. Police officers must have an understanding of autism, as it enables them to recognize possible indicators and characteristics of autism spectrum disorder. This awareness facilitates respectful and productive interactions with individuals with autism by employing communication and de-escalation techniques to prevent confrontation (Accinni et al., 2021).

Autism Spectrum Disorder

A complex neurological condition characterized by challenges in social interaction and communication, limited interests, and repetitive behaviors. The signs and capabilities of individuals with autism spectrum disorder can vary significantly, and there is no standardized approach to diagnosis or therapy (Sharma et al., 2018).

Police-Autism Interaction

The engagements between individuals with autism and police officers. These interactions can be challenging for both parties, as officers may lack training to identify specific indicators and signs of ASD or to handle individuals with the disorder professionally and productively (Copenhaver et al., 2020).

Police Officers' Preparedness

The reference to law enforcement officers' readiness to interact with individuals with autism without resorting to force. Readiness involves officers' empathy (Baker-Eck et al., 2020), self-awareness (Love et al., 2022), and cultural competence (Mathur & Rodriguez, 2022) in understanding and accommodating the needs of individuals with autism. This preparedness is supported by comprehensive training in autism awareness, communication strategies, and ASD-specific de-escalation techniques.

Police Training

The formal training that police officers undergo prepares them for their job responsibilities. Police training programs encompass a range of topics, including defensive tactics, firearms training, and law enforcement procedures (Copenhaver et al., 2020).

Project: Strengthening Autism Friendly Experiences (Project SAFE)

Project SAFE is a four-hour autism awareness training for first responders. The training is designed to present an overview of autism, identify possible indicators that a person may have autism or another Intellectual Developmental Disability (IDD), recognize sensory-related and other challenges that persons with autism may experience when interacting with law enforcement, and discuss effective communication and de-escalation strategies. The training goal is to enable more positive and safer interactions between law enforcement (Love et al., 2020).

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of police officers interacting with the autism community. The study addressed the problem of officers' insufficient preparedness and lack of understanding of autism, which often resulted in challenges and misinterpretations of the individual. The purpose of this study was to explore how law enforcement officers perceived their preparedness after completing Project SAFE, an autism awareness training program

designed for law enforcement officials. In this chapter, I discussed symbolic interactionism as the guiding theoretical framework, which explains how officers construct, interpret, and redefine their understanding of autism through training and social interaction. Following the discussion of the theoretical framework, the chapter presented the qualitative methodology and case study design used to examine participants' perspectives. The research questions that guided the study were outlined, and the study's significance was described. Finally, key terms were defined to ensure clarity and consistency throughout the dissertation. Next, Chapter Two provided a comprehensive literature review that outlined the theoretical framework, symbolic interactionism, and further identified scholarly works that supported the basis for examining officers' understanding and preparedness for autism after training.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed in this study was law enforcement officers' insufficient preparedness and the lack of understanding of autism, leading to challenges and misinterpretations with individuals with autism (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore police officers' understanding of autism and their perceived preparedness following autism-specific training. Research suggests that effective training can enhance officer preparedness and help reduce the challenges faced by individuals with autism during police encounters (Gardner & Campbell, 2020).

This literature review comprised several key subheadings. First, the theoretical framework explained the basis for conducting this study. Included with this was an analysis of the key concepts, propositions, and various theories as they relate to the framework. Next, the origin of autism awareness, how society views ASD, and the laws that have changed over time were explored. Also, an examination of police encounters with individuals with autism and the nature of the contact. Additionally, this section identified the challenges and misunderstandings encountered during interactions with individuals with autism, emphasizing the need for officer preparedness. Next, a comparative analysis revealed the strengths and weaknesses of previous research, providing a clearer understanding of the literature on law enforcement encounters with individuals with ASD. Lastly, the chapter highlights research gaps to pave the way for further research and improvement in this field.

Extensive searches were conducted across various databases and search engines from November 2023 to August 2025 to gather relevant literature. Databases accessed included Springer, Sage Journals, EBSCO Information Services (EBSCO), ProQuest, HeinOnline, and the National University Library. Additionally, search engines such as Google and Bing were utilized

to ensure comprehensive coverage of available literature. The search parameters spanned 2018 to 2024, with carefully selected search terms to capture pertinent studies. Combinations of keywords such as *autism*, *autism training*, *law enforcement*, *autism interaction*, *autism safety*, *law enforcement response to autism*, and officer preparedness were used to refine search results.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this study was symbolic interactionism. Symbolic Interactionism emerged in the early 20th century, based on the early work of American philosophers such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey (Joas, 1993). They highlighted the importance of human experience, communication, and the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments. The theory was developed through the early writings of George H. Mead, a philosopher and social psychologist (Blumer, 1969). Since Mead did not formally publish his lectures, his students compiled and edited them into *Mind, Self, and Society* (Mead, 1934), which became the foundation of his theory. In his lectures, Mead's main contribution showed that people developed a sense of self by learning to see themselves through the eyes of others. He explained that the mind works like an inner conversation, where people use language and symbols to imagine how others will respond to them (Mead, 1934). In this process, the "Me" represented the social rules and expectations we carry inside us, while the "I" represented our personal reactions. Together, the I and the me explained how identity is formed and constantly reshaped through social interaction (Mead, 1934; Meltzer et al., 1975).

Herbert Blumer, one of Mead's students, formally coined the term symbolic interactionism in 1937 and played a pivotal role in articulating the theory as a sociological perspective (Carter & Fuller, 2016). Blumer later built on Mead's ideas, explaining that people

act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them, and that these meanings are not fixed (Blumer, 1969). Instead, meanings change as people interact with others and reflect on their experiences. This sociological theory provided insight into how individuals create and modify meaning through social interaction. It also emphasized that meaning is not fixed but emerges through experience, interpretation, and response to social cues (Blumer, 1969). This perspective became the foundation of symbolic interactionism, helping to explain how individuals continually develop new ways of understanding themselves and their surroundings.

Symbolic interactionism was established based on three core principles: (1) humans act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them, (2) meanings arise out of social interaction, and (3) these meanings are modified through an interpretive process used by the individual (Blumer, 1969). Unlike structural functionalism, which emphasizes the stability and functions of social systems, and conflict theory, which highlights power struggles and inequality, symbolic interactionism focuses on how individuals create meaning through interaction (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017).

According to Blumer (1969), in the first principle, people's actions were shaped not by the actual aspects of a situation but by the personal meanings they attached to it. This meant that behavior was influenced more by how people understood and interpreted events than by the events themselves. Mead (1934) also noted that meaning is created through language and social interaction, providing people with a shared way to make sense of situations and guide their responses. Blumer (1969) emphasized that these meanings were never fixed but changed as individuals reflected on new experiences and reconsidered their past interpretations. He highlighted the importance of individuals' subjective experiences within social settings, offering a different perspective from theories that explain behavior as being driven mainly by social

structures (Kuhn, 1964). This principle demonstrated that behavior was flexible and could shift over time, as people continually adjusted how they defined situations within their social experiences. In this way, people's actions were explained as an ongoing process of interpretation rather than a simple reaction to outside conditions.

According to Blumer (1969), the second principle was that meanings emerge from social interaction. He believed that meaning was not naturally rooted within an object or action but was constructed through exchanges with others. Blumer explained that individuals develop understandings through continuous engagement with their social environment, which is informed by patterns of communication, relationships, and prior encounters. Mead (1934) referred to this process as a social act, noting that people's interpretations were grounded in interaction with others in the community.

According to Blumer (1969), the third principle of symbolic interactionism is that people change the meaning of things through a process of interpretation they use when facing and responding to situations. This meant that meanings were not permanent and could change when new experiences and environments were introduced. Blumer explained that individuals engaged in a reflective process when confronting new situations, reassessing previous interpretations, and adjusting their actions accordingly. Mead (1934) also emphasized the role of reflexivity, noting that individuals constantly evaluate and redefine their understandings in light of new perspectives.

Propositions

In qualitative research, a proposition is a guiding assumption that helps frame the inquiry and clarify the underlying beliefs about the phenomenon being studied (Yin, 2018). Propositions help guide the exploration of how participants perceive, interpret, and respond to experiences

within their social environments. Rather than predicting outcomes, these assumptions guided the direction and focus of the study, which aimed to explore how participants' knowledge and understanding are socially constructed through interaction, experience, and reflection.

In qualitative research, propositions served as guiding assumptions for exploration, and this framework applied three specific propositions. Symbolic interactionism propositions addressed how responses were shaped by meaning, how interpretations were formed through interaction, and how new experiences allowed for the reinterpretation of behaviors (Blumer, 1969). The first proposition posits that responses are shaped by the meanings individuals attach to behaviors, which are influenced by prior experiences, training, and social context (Blumer, 1969). The second proposition stated that interpretations were constructed through social interactions with others, reflecting the ways meaning developed in social contexts (Blumer, 1969). The third proposition emphasized that meanings could be redefined through structured experiences, enabling individuals to interpret behaviors differently (Blumer, 1969). Together, these propositions reflected the principles of symbolic interactionism, highlighting that meaning, interaction, and interpretation shaped how officers understood autism and adjusted their responses through new experiences.

The first proposition of symbolic interactionism is that individuals act toward others based on the meanings they attach to behaviors, objects, or events (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). This proposition addressed how behavior was not shaped solely by objective structures, but rather by the subjective interpretations individuals constructed through symbols and shared understandings (Blumer, 1969). The underlying assumption was that human beings were reflective and active interpreters of their environment, rather than passive responders to external stimuli (Mead, 1934). The proposition was significant because it explained that social reality

depended on the process of meaning-making, which provided a basis for understanding why individuals behave differently in similar circumstances, depending on their interpretations (Blumer, 1969). This emphasis on agency and interpretation aligned with the assumption that individuals navigated their world by attaching significance to social cues, roles, and contexts (Stryker, 2008). The proposition supported the study by illustrating that officers' actions during encounters stemmed from the meanings they developed within their social and professional environments. It showed the theoretical importance of examining how those meanings could change through structured training.

The second proposition stated that meanings emerged through social interaction (Blumer, 1969). This proposition posits that meanings are not inherent in objects or behaviors, but rather arise from processes of communication, negotiation, and shared experiences with others (Mead, 1934). The underlying assumption was that social reality was collectively produced, with interaction serving as the foundation of meaning construction (Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 2001). This highlighted the essential role of symbols, such as language and gestures, in maintaining and transmitting shared understandings (Mead, 1934). The proposition was significant because it emphasized that meaning is socially embedded, arising from networks of relationships rather than isolated individuals (Blumer, 1969). This idea highlighted that social life was always changing and based on relationships, with people constantly working out their roles and expectations through interactions with others (Stryker, 2008). The proposition supported the study by providing a framework to understand how officers' interpretations of behaviors developed through their professional contacts, peer interactions, and community exchanges, reflecting the principle of symbolic interactionism that meaning emerges only through interaction.

The third proposition emphasized that meanings were not fixed but could be interpreted, redefined, and modified through interaction and experience (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). This proposition addressed the evolving nature of meaning-making, in which individuals continually reconstruct and reassess their interpretations based on new encounters and situational contexts (Stryker, 2001). The assumption underlying this proposition was that human beings were flexible and capable of adjusting their perspectives in response to changing environments, reinforcing the dynamic nature of social reality (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). The proposition was important because it demonstrated that identity, roles, and behaviors were fluid, shifting as individuals integrated new symbols, expectations, and social experiences (Stryker, 2008). This adaptability reflected the assumption that individuals not only created meaning but also reinterpreted it in light of different circumstances or planned experiences. The proposition supported the study by demonstrating that training constituted a structured interactional experience that could prompt participants to reassess their prior meanings and reformulate their interpretations, aligning with symbolic interactionism's foundational claim that meaning is continually negotiated, revised, and transformed.

Framework Application

Zach & Avugos (2024) examined co-teaching in higher education by running two jointly taught seminar courses in sport sciences and tracking students' experiences. The sample consisted of 50 undergraduate student teachers enrolled in those courses. The data included student reflections, course evaluation feedback, word clouds, and teacher reflections. The authors reported emotional (e.g., transitioning from frustration to satisfaction), social (e.g., learning to request assistance, support, and collaborate), and cognitive shifts (e.g., asking more effective questions, planning experiments) over the short, intensive course format. Symbolic

interactionism served as the theoretical framework for the study. The framework applied to this study by interpreting how learners' meanings about co-teaching were formed and revised through interaction with peers and two instructors, and how those interpretations shaped subsequent actions, such as engagement, collaboration, and question-asking. In the study, the classroom was treated as the interaction in which symbols, definitions of the situation, and negotiated meanings guided behavior change within a co-teaching pedagogy.

Thomas et al. (2023) examined a U.S. child and adolescent psychiatry training program that incorporated co-constructive patient simulation. The study consisted of eight simulation sessions with a cohort of approximately 12 participants, comprising eight fellows nearing graduation, four senior educators, and adolescent actors aged 14 to 17. Data were collected from audio recordings of sessions, post-session feedback, and trainee reflections. Symbolic interactionism was identified as the theoretical approach guiding the study, with a focus on how clinicians constructed the meaning of challenging encounters during debriefings. In alignment with Blumer's (1969) perspective, the study viewed training interactions as processes through which new meanings of clinical competence, emotional display, and patient engagement were socially constructed. This framework was used to demonstrate that meanings were not static but occurred and were revised through training. Fellows reshaped their understanding of how to conduct sensitive interviews, pace difficult discussions, and redefine what counted as appropriate professional conduct. Symbolic interactionism served as a framework for demonstrating how training reshaped interpretive frameworks, highlighting the social processes through which professional behaviors were modified.

Sari et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative study at an Indonesian teaching hospital to explore the role of feedback in clinical education. The study included four focus groups with 42

medical students, and seven interviews with clinical supervisors, conducted over a sixteen-week course. The researchers employed symbolic interactionism, outlining feedback encounters as interactive events in which students and supervisors co-produced the meaning of professional readiness and good practice. This perspective enabled the study to focus on how feedback evolved beyond simple correction to more effectively address behavioral expectations. Symbolic interactionism guided the interpretation by revealing how instructional moves, such as corrections, affirmations, and prompts, invited students to adopt new definitions of professionalism and patient-centered care. In doing so, the study demonstrated that teaching and feedback were less about transmitting fixed standards and more about negotiated processes through which meanings were created, challenged, and redefined. Students' behaviors shifted as they recalibrated their strategies in clinical settings according to the socially constructed feedback environment. This demonstrated the framework's value in explaining how teaching interactions shaped students' evolving practice.

St-Amant (2021) examined how facemasks acquired multiple and shifting meanings during the COVID-19 pandemic within a Canadian social context. The study demonstrated how individuals and groups interpreted and acted toward masks as social and cultural symbols, therefore, exploring how meaning-making through interaction shaped their use or rejection of masks. Symbolic interactionism was applied as the primary framework to explain how participants constructed meanings that were not fixed but negotiated through daily exchanges and public discourse (Blumer, 1969). In line with Blumer's assertion that meaning arises out of interaction, the study revealed that masks became symbols of safety, solidarity, or political stance depending on how people engaged with others in different settings. By examining these shifting interpretations, the study demonstrated that symbolic interactionism provided the

necessary framework for understanding how ordinary objects could acquire powerful meanings during a time of social crisis.

Salerno and Schuller (2019) conducted a qualitative study on police interactions with adults with autism, focusing on how officers interpret behaviors during encounters. The study included 35 participants aged 18 to 65 (mean age 36.9); most were White European (64.7%), 70% had post-secondary education, 60% were unemployed, 58% lived with family, and 27% lived alone. Findings revealed frequent police contact and ongoing issues with behavioral misidentification and limited officer awareness. While training efforts were noted, the central issue was officers' misunderstanding of autism-related behaviors, reflecting how officers develop interpretations through these social encounters.

Lumsden and Black (2018) conducted an ethnographic study of a police force control room (FCR) in England. They drew on a symbolic-interactionist framework to study how call handlers and dispatchers managed emotions and constructed "what counts" as police work in 999 emergency and 101 non-emergency calls. Data were collected through fieldwork within the FCR, four focus groups with frontline officers (a total of 26 officers), and observations of civilian FCR staff handling both emergency and non-emergency calls. Their interactionist analysis demonstrated how meanings about risk, role boundaries, and appropriate responses were assigned situationally under rigorous pressures. Symbolic interactionism was applied to explain how call-handlers and officers assigned meaning to incidents in real-time, shaping which calls were prioritized and how they were framed as urgent, routine, or outside the scope of police work. The framework helped reveal that decisions were not simply procedural. Still, it was the result of social interactions in which individuals interpreted others' cues, responded to organizational expectations, and redefined their roles as circumstances changed (Blumer, 1969).

By applying this theory, the study demonstrated that everyday practices within the FCR were deeply intertwined with the ongoing creation of meaning, illustrating how symbolic interaction influenced police work at both the emotional and operational levels.

Eriksson et al. (2018) studied teacher feedback practices in Swedish primary schools using a symbolic interactionism framework. The sample consisted of 13 teachers, 10 of whom were women and 3 of whom were men, who taught grades one through three to children aged seven to nine. The teachers represented a wide range of professional experience, from four to 40 years in the classroom. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather feedback practices, which were analyzed to explore how feedback shaped both academic and behavioral outcomes. The study applied symbolic interactionism to theorize feedback as a process of meaning-making between teacher and pupil. This perspective emphasized that feedback was not simply delivered but co-constructed through ongoing interactions, in which both teacher and student interpreted and reinterpreted what counted as progress, effort, or appropriate conduct. By using this framework, the study demonstrated how situational definitions, relationship histories, and classroom context mediated teachers' comments and corrections. Symbolic interactionism explained how feedback reshaped student behavior by altering the meanings students attached to their actions, making behavior change the outcome of negotiated interpretations rather than direct instruction.

These studies all employed qualitative approaches that drew on symbolic interactionism ideas. They demonstrated that when individuals begin with limited knowledge or uncertainty, structured learning or reflection enables them to reinterpret symbols and interactions in ways that foster a clearer identity, understanding, or competence. Symbolic interactionism enabled these studies to track the evolution of meaning-making over time, particularly when participants

underwent guided training. By emphasizing how individuals construct and reconstruct meaning through interaction, these studies highlight the adaptability of symbolic interactionism for examining changes in perception, behavior, and professional practice. Together, they demonstrated that the framework was useful not only for interpreting experiences but also for analyzing how training and personal experiences shape social understandings in practical contexts.

Alternate Frameworks

Several theoretical frameworks could have guided this study. The Social Constructionism, founded by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1966, emphasizes that knowledge and social realities are created through shared interactions and meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This perspective recognizes the societal processes that shape understanding. Social Constructionism tends to focus more on macro-level discourse and institutional narratives rather than individual, moment-to-moment interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Likewise, Labeling Theory, introduced by Howard Becker in 1963, centers on how others categorize individuals. The Labeling Theory centers on how deviant labels imposed by authority figures can influence identity and behavior (Matsueda, 2017). Also, this theory is more concerned with the long-term consequences of labeling and less with how meaning is negotiated in the immediate interaction.

In addition, the Social Learning Theory and Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT) represented viable alternatives for this study. Albert Bandura developed the Social Learning Theory. Bandura (1977) emphasized that individuals learn behaviors through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. This study could have been enhanced by analyzing how officers modeled responses during autism-related encounters, based on prior training or peer behavior.

Similarly, CBT was developed by Aaron Beck in the 1960s. The theory focused on the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and actions, suggesting that officers' beliefs about autism could influence their reactions in the field (Beck, 2011). However, neither framework adequately captured the social meaning-making that occurs during an officer's interaction with an individual. Symbolic Interactionism provided a more relevant examination by examining how officers interpreted behavioral cues in real-time.

In contrast, symbolic interactionism was selected because it most closely aligns with the study's emphasis on meaning-making during real-time police encounters. Unlike Social Constructionism and Labeling Theory, symbolic interactionism examines how individuals assign meaning to gestures, behaviors, and social cues within the context of the interaction itself (Blumer, 1969). This framework aligns better, as this study explored how officers interpret autism-related behaviors during face-to-face encounters after training. While all three theories addressed interpretation and meaning, symbolic interactionism offers a more realistic and interaction-focused approach to analyzing officers' behavioral responses in the moment.

Symbolic interactionism theory provided the foundation for the study, positing that people create meaning through social interactions and interpret behaviors based on the social cues and experiences available to them (Blumer, 1969). This theory guided the development of both the problem and purpose statements by providing a lens to examine how officers assigned meaning to autism and its related behaviors, and whether a transformation in officers' understanding could be achieved through training. Therefore, training became a facilitator of symbol interpretation, helping officers assign more accurate meanings to autism-related behaviors.

The theory showed that people's interpretations were not fixed but evolved (Blumer, 1969). This applied to the study because officers gained exposure to new information and experiences. Through training, officers were introduced to alternative ways of understanding autism-related behaviors, enabling them to reconsider their previous assumptions. This process reflected the theory's central idea that meaning is fluid and shaped by ongoing learning and social context (Blumer, 1969).

Research Question 1 examined how Project SAFE helped officers prepare for interactions with individuals with autism. Research Question 2 focused on identifying knowledge gaps about autism before training. Symbolic interactionism connected these ideas by offering a theoretical explanation of how officers perceive meaning in behavior and how those interpretations can evolve or remain unchanged. The framework viewed knowledge and behaviors about autism as signals that needed to be interpreted and understood. This emphasized the officers' role in making sense of those behaviors, and views training as a tool that influences how those interpretations are formed. As Yin (2018) noted, selecting the appropriate framework is essential to ensure alignment with the study's goals and research questions.

Defining Autism

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurological condition characterized by significant challenges in social interaction, communication, and behavior (Hepworth, 2017). Individuals with autism may exhibit limited interests, engage in repetitive behaviors, and struggle with understanding social cues (Wallace et al., 2022). Seminal scholars such as Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger first described autism as a distinct developmental condition, laying the foundation for subsequent research and diagnostic practices (Robison, 2017). The signs and capabilities of individuals with ASD can vary widely, making each person unique. This

variability means that there is no standardized approach to diagnosing or treating autism, which further complicates the interactions between law enforcement and individuals with autism (Sharma et al., 2018). The diagnostic framework later evolved with the inclusion of autism in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which marked a turning point in recognizing autism as a spectrum condition (American Psychiatric Association, 1980).

History and Prevalence of Autism

The term *autism* was first devised by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler in 1911 (Gupta, 2004), who described autism as withdrawal into self and disinterest in social interactions that were observed in individuals with schizophrenia. Autism is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder (Hepworth, 2017). However, it was not until 1943 that Leo Kanner, an Austrian American psychiatrist, introduced the concept of “early infantile autism” to describe a distinct condition characterized by social withdrawal, communication difficulties, and repetitive behaviors (Bauman et al., 1997). Meanwhile, in 1944, Hans Asperger, an Austrian pediatrician, described a milder form of the disorder, which later became known as Asperger's syndrome (Robison, 2017).

The prevalence of autism has increased dramatically over the past two decades (Odom et al., 2019), with current estimates suggesting that 1 in 31 children in the United States is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (Shaw et al., 2025). This rise in prevalence can be attributed to increased awareness, improved diagnostic criteria, and broader recognition of the spectrum of symptoms associated with autism (Velkoff, 2022). Identifying autism often involves recognizing certain behavioral indicators. These indicators include delays in language development (Hodges et al., 2020), difficulty with social interactions (Robison, 2017), repetitive behaviors (Bury et al., 2020), limited or excessive interests, sensory sensitivities (Hodges et al.,

2020), and difficulty understanding non-verbal cues (Harris & Coyle, 2023). While indicators vary widely among individuals with autism, they form the basis for diagnosis and intervention (Bradley et al., 2021).

The Rise of Autism Awareness

Autism awareness has progressed within society's knowledge, understanding, and acceptance (Alsehemi et al., 2017). Autism has become a norm in many households and social communities (Zwaigenbaum & Penner, 2018). While autism had been recognized as a medical condition for much of the 20th century, efforts to raise awareness and promote acceptance gained momentum in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Robison, 2017). In earlier days of autism research, the primary focus was on understanding the disorder's clinical characteristics and developmental factors (Velkoff, 2022). However, as autism became more prevalent, so did the need for greater public understanding and support for individuals with autism and their families.

One of the critical milestones in autism awareness was the establishment of Autism Awareness Month. Autism awareness refers to the understanding and knowledge of autism, including its signs, origins, and prevalence (Velkoff, 2022). In 1970, the Autism Society of America launched an awareness campaign to educate the public about autism and advocate for better services and support for individuals with the disorder (Dever, 2021). This campaign laid the groundwork for International Autism Awareness Day on April 2nd. Autism Awareness Month has become a global phenomenon, with events such as walks, cycling, fundraising, and educational initiatives held worldwide to raise awareness about autism and celebrate the unique strengths and abilities of individuals with autism. Blue became associated with autism awareness as a symbol of identification and support for individuals with autism and their families. Later, the multi-colored puzzle piece was used to represent the mysterious and complex nature of autism

(Loefgren, 2011). Many individuals and organizations have replaced the ribbon with a multi-colored rainbow infinity symbol within the last few years. Some individuals with autism and advocates viewed the puzzle piece as derogatory and believed that people with autism were being characterized as complicated, broken, and needing to be fixed (Gernsbacher et al., 2018). Also, more recently, greater awareness has been brought to the attention of identifying people with autism as “*autistic individuals*” versus “*individuals with autism.*” To some, the term “*autistic individuals*” is considered stigmatizing as it places identity-first language as opposed to person-first language, therefore defining them by autism rather than as a person (Buijsman et al., 2023). Some individuals believed that the labeling of “autistic individuals” is offensive (Bury et al., 2023), as it identifies them as who they are compared to something that they had.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, advocacy organizations, parents, and professionals collaborated to raise awareness about autism and promote acceptance and understanding in schools, workplaces, and communities. In 2005, another pivotal advocacy organization, Autism Speaks, was established. Like most autism advocacy organizations, they were established to raise awareness and provide resources for individuals with autism. In addition to raising awareness, efforts that promoted autism acceptance and inclusion gained attention (Zwaigenbaum & Penner, 2018). Advocates and self-advocates worked to combat stigma, challenge stereotypes (Grinker, 2020), and promote understanding of the diverse experiences and perspectives of individuals with autism.

The rise of social media and the internet also played a significant role in shaping the autism awareness movement. It provided a platform for individuals and organizations to share their stories, connect with others, advocate for change, and spark important conversations about representation, accessibility, and inclusion (Zwaigenbaum & Penner, 2018). The internet allowed

individuals to access information about autism in seconds. This information is displayed through medical facts and individual personal experiences.

Nature of Police Contacts with Individuals with Autism

Interaction between law enforcement officers and individuals with autism presented challenges (Gibbs et al., 2023; Grant et al., 2021). These encounters could result in misunderstandings, heightened anxiety, and unintended escalations during police encounters (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). Copenhaver et al. (2019) and Crane et al. (2016) reported high dissatisfaction rates among individuals with autism regarding their interactions with law enforcement. Also, individuals with ASD or their caregivers feared police encounters due to past negative experiences or their perception and mistrust of law enforcement (Wallace et al., 2020). Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive training programs that emphasize empathy, de-escalation techniques (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020), and effective communication strategies tailored to the unique needs of individuals with autism (Gardner & Campbell, 2020).

Diverse stakeholders, including advocacy groups, concerned citizens, non-profit organizations, and individuals, have played crucial roles in raising awareness of autism and its implications for interactions with law enforcement (Neave-DiToro et al., 2018). Officers are seven times more likely to encounter individuals with autism during their work. With these higher numbers of encounters, officers faced unique considerations when interacting with individuals with autism (Gardner et al., 2022).

Police often encountered individuals with autism for various reasons. Wandering and eloping were among the top safety concerns, as individuals with autism may wander away from home or caregivers (Chown et al., 2021). This was a special concern for individuals who are less independent or younger (Chown et al., 2021). In fact, according to the National Autism

Association (2024), the alarming wandering rate was almost half for youth-aged individuals. Due to potential unawareness of danger, this behavior prompted a call to law enforcement for assistance.

Another reason for police contact was officers responding to emergencies (Chown et al., 2021). Police responded to emergencies involving individuals with autism, such as medical issues or safety concerns (Chown et al., 2021). Moreover, individuals with autism became victims of both minor and severe crimes, just as individuals who are not classified as special needs. As they experienced victimization, they or their caregivers sought assistance from law enforcement (Copenhaver & Tewksbury, 2019).

Finally, third-party reporting of awkward behavior led to police being called to intervene in situations where the behavior is perceived as unusual or potentially threatening (Lunsky et al., 2015). This included instances of misbehavior from a person with autism (Railey et al., 2020b). Meltdowns or behavior crises that were triggered by various reasons, such as sensory overload or mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression, will usually warrant others' attention (Haas & Gibbs, 2021). These previously mentioned acts required police intervention to ensure the safety of the individual and those around them (Sreckovic et al., 2023). Therefore, effective preparedness, communication, and understanding of autism are crucial for law enforcement to ensure the safety and well-being of all individuals involved (Gibbs et al., 2023).

While individuals with autism encounter police, their behaviors and communication differences could be misunderstood or misinterpreted (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020).

Police officers may misunderstand actions as non-compliance, deceitfulness, or unruly behavior (Bagnall et al., 2023; Wallace et al., 2021). For instance, these mistaken behaviors could include repetitive movements (Wallace et al., 2022), sensory sensitivities (Chown et al.,

2021), difficulty making eye contact (Salerno & Schuller, 2019), stuttering, or difficulty formulating words or comprehending the officer's instructions (Wallace et al., 2020).

Recognition of autism behaviors by officers had been a recurring challenge that impacted the interactions with individuals with autism (Railey et al., 2020a). While some indicators, such as non-verbal or severely delayed speech, are more easily identified (Wallace et al., 2020). Communication challenges were among the most significant difficulties faced by officers (Copenhaver & Tewksbury, 2019; Crane et al., 2016; Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020; Wallace et al., 2022). The struggle was stronger than verbal communication, while others may have difficulty understanding language or expressing themselves effectively (Woodhouse et al., 2024). Therefore, comprehension difficulties further complicated the challenges faced by individuals with autism. Additionally, they may have required assistance in understanding abstract concepts, interpreting figurative language, or grasping social norms and expectations (Lampri et al., 2023). This could make navigating social situations, forming relationships, or advocating for their needs challenging (Woodhouse et al., 2024).

Officers reported uncertainty in communicating with individuals with autism (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2019). Communication challenges between officers and individuals with autism often stemmed from differences in language processing, tone interpretation, and responding under stress (Railey et al., 2020b). Individuals with autism may not respond to officers' commands in expected timelines, may become non-verbal under stress, or may interpret literal language differently (Copenhaver et al., 2020; Herbert et al., 2022). Misaligned verbal and non-verbal cues exacerbate the interaction. Officers expecting eye contact or immediate compliance can misread delays or avoidance as willful disobedience (Copenhaver et al., 2020).

Also, sensory-related issues were common in autism (Bagnall et al., 2023). Individuals experienced heightened sensitivity or hyposensitivity to sensory stimuli, such as light, sound, textures, and smells (Wallace et al., 2022). Specifically, for law enforcement, some sensory-related factors were bright flashing lights or a loud siren. The issue was that these sensory sensitivities can lead to discomfort or distress in everyday environments and may impact an individual's ability to participate in social activities or navigate their surroundings (Atherton et al., 2021), thereby adversely affecting interaction with the officer.

Acknowledgment of diversity within autism is important, as individuals with ASD exhibit a wide range of characteristics and abilities (Calton & Hall, 2022). Also, the surge in autism prevalence has prompted a reexamination of the way the justice system approaches individuals with autism (Frigaux et al., 2021). Recognizing the need for officers' preparedness, some police departments have established public safety initiatives, specialized training, and procedures to enhance respect for each other and honest interaction between people with autism (Railey & Love, 2020). The communication, comprehension, and sensory-related challenges highlighted the importance of comprehensive knowledge of autism and its characteristics for effective communication between law enforcement officers and individuals with autism (Gates et al., 2023).

Effectiveness of Autism Awareness Training

According to Railey et al. (2020a), it is essential to recognize that officers need the knowledge and skills to interpret a wide range of behaviors and respond appropriately to autism. Training was generally effective in enhancing officers' ability to recognize indicators of autism, adjust communication, and apply de-escalation strategies (Hens, 2021). Studies have shown that such awareness contributes to stronger preparedness, reduces misinterpretations that could

escalate encounters, and promotes more effective police responses (Crane et al., 2016). Across multiple studies, autism training improved officers' knowledge and confidence. Gardner and Campbell (2024) examined 259 officers who reported significant increases in knowledge and confidence immediately following training. Simulation-enhanced formats produced the largest gains compared to lecture-only sessions. Similarly, Holke et al. (2025), with 78 officers, and Salerno and Schuller (2019), with 94 officers, found growth in self-efficacy and recognition skills, reporting mean post-training self-efficacy scores that were substantially higher than their baseline scores. Smaller studies, including Kenney et al. (2024), which involved 37 officers, documented improvements, as officers consistently reported feeling more prepared and demonstrated higher post-training confidence ratings. Despite differences in sample sizes, a consistent pattern emerged across studies, showing that officers reported measurable, statistically significant improvements in preparedness after training.

Effectiveness was primarily measured through survey instruments administered before and after training. These tools captured officers' self-reported increases in knowledge, confidence, and perceptions of preparedness. While such measures provided useful immediate feedback, they also introduced limitations, as they relied on subjective perceptions rather than demonstrated behavioral change. For instance, Holke et al. (2025) employed the Police Self-Efficacy for Autism scale, which measured confidence in recognizing behaviors and adjusting responses. Salerno and Schuller (2019) focused on recognition skills, while Love et al. (2021) developed a 13-item scale specifically to assess police officers' self-efficacy in identifying autism-related behaviors, modifying communication, and applying strategies. These instruments confirmed significant gains in self-reported confidence and skills. Therefore, the data indicated that training produced immediate and measurable improvements in perceived preparedness. The

majority of studies agreed that autism training improved preparedness. Officers reported greater empathy and preparedness after training (Kenney et al., 2024). The consistency of officers' self-reports across study sizes and methods reinforced that training consistently resulted in measurable improvements in preparedness and confidence. However, studies lacked evidence of whether these attitudinal shifts produced lasting behavioral changes in real-life encounters.

Research comparing delivery formats revealed that effectiveness was not limited to a single training mode. Kent et al. (2022) found that virtual reality modules enhanced engagement and realism, which officers perceived as strengthening their preparedness, while traditional video training also improved autism awareness. Lavoie et al. (2023) demonstrated that both virtual reality and live scenario training improved de-escalation skills in mental health crisis contexts. Online modules, such as those piloted in Australia, also improved officers' awareness; however, the lack of follow-up data raised questions about their long-term impact (Aspect, 2022). Regardless of delivery method, the evidence consistently showed that officers experienced improvements in knowledge, confidence, and preparedness following training.

Collectively, the literature suggested that autism awareness training was effective in enhancing officers' knowledge, confidence, and self-perceived preparedness. The evidence was consistent across studies of varying sizes and delivery formats, reinforcing the value of structured training in shaping officers' readiness. At the same time, reliance on only one survey method, variation in sample sizes, and the lack of longitudinal designs limited the extent to which perceived effectiveness translated into lasting behavioral change. However, the data demonstrated that officers experienced measurable improvements in autism preparedness and confidence following training.

Evaluating Understanding and Preparedness of Autism

Training evaluations have been essential because agencies needed evidence that autism training enhanced officers' understanding and preparedness (Hinkle & Lerman, 2023). Evaluations conducted over the last decade had most often been brief pre and post assessments of officers' knowledge, confidence, or self-monitoring, typically using self-report questionnaires administered immediately after training (Sreckovic et al., 2023). Some studies have advanced the measurement base. Hinkle and Lerman (2023) used performance-based simulations to evaluate skill acquisition, whereas Love et al. (2021) developed the Police Self-Efficacy for Autism scale, which provided an additional reliable measure of confidence as an outcome. These results have shown immediate improvements in knowledge and perceived preparedness, including significant pre-post gains after short courses and after modality enhancements such as simulation or virtual reality (Gardner & Campbell, 2020; Hinkle & Lerman, 2023). However, the literature has continued to reveal gaps that limit practice decisions. Many evaluations had relied on self-report without behavioral or field verification, lacked longitudinal follow-up, and rarely connected training to on-duty outcomes (Railey et al., 2020a; Sreckovic et al., 2023). Recent work with custody staff had similarly measured perceived knowledge change and intentions rather than observed behavior. This reinforced the need for multi-method evaluation plans (Holloway et al., 2022). Although useful, evaluations of police autism training effectiveness have shown significant gaps. These gaps were evident in the limited examination of transfer to practice, characterized by the lack of evaluation systems for various standardized instruments, periodic refreshers, and in-service performance indicators (Kenney et al., 2024).

Project SAFE: Strengthening Autism Friendly Experiences

Project SAFE: Strengthening Autism Friendly Experiences was a structured, four-hour autism awareness training program developed specifically for first responders (Williams, 2018). Its primary goal was to improve the quality and safety of interactions between law enforcement personnel and individuals with autism or other Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) (Williams, 2018). The three primary objectives of Project SAFE were to increase officers' knowledge of autism spectrum disorder, improve their ability to recognize behavioral and sensory indicators during encounters, and strengthen communication and de-escalation strategies to promote safer interactions (Williams, 2018). The training began by offering participants a foundational understanding of what autism is, including how autism presents across diverse individuals and age groups with ASD. Officers were introduced to potential behavioral, communicative, and sensory indicators that may suggest a person has autism.

A key focus of Project SAFE was educating law enforcement personnel on the sensory processing challenges that individuals with autism often face, such as heightened sensitivity to lights, sounds, or physical touch, which can intensify during high-stress encounters with police (Williams, 2018), such as heightened sensitivity to lights, sounds, or physical touch, which can intensify during high-stress encounters with police (Crane et al., 2016; Gardner & Campbell, 2020; Railey et al., 2020b). The training equipped officers with communication techniques (Hinkle & Lerman, 2023) and de-escalation strategies (Gardner & Campbell, 2020) to promote calm, respectful, and safer interactions for all parties (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). Autism trainings provided verbal and non-verbal communication tips to reduce misunderstandings and prevent unnecessary escalation, and encouraged a shift in the officer's perspective, toward compassion and empathy (Herbert et al., 2022).

The goal of the training was to better prepare officers to identify autism-related behaviors, adapt their responses accordingly, and foster a more inclusive, respectful, and safer community policing environment. In addition, through practical training, videos, scenario-based discussions, and interactions with self-advocates, it was hoped that the officers would gain confidence in applying these strategies in real-world encounters. The broader goal of Project SAFE was to enhance law enforcement's capacity to better serve the autism community. Implementing autism training helped build stronger trust, reduce potential risks, and promote effective collaboration across the community (Love et al., 2020).

Recurring Themes and Patterns in Previous Research

Previous research on law enforcement readiness and experiences with individuals with autism has consistently identified common patterns that affect the quality and outcomes of these encounters. Multiple studies have demonstrated that officers often lack the necessary training and understanding to identify ASD-related behaviors and respond effectively (Cooper et al., 2022; Gardner et al., 2019; Wallace et al., 2020). These encounters often led to negative consequences, including misinterpretations, inappropriate use of force, and emotional distress for autistic individuals and their families (Chown et al., 2021; Railey et al., 2020a). Recent research has also highlighted the potential for autism training to improve officer preparedness and reduce adverse outcomes (Hinkle & Lerman, 2023; Kenney et al., 2024). Together, these studies suggested that the lack of autism knowledge is a systemic issue with serious consequences. However, studies have identified practical solutions, such as autism training classes, that have demonstrated success in enhancing officers' awareness, improving communication techniques, and strengthening decision-making during encounters involving individuals with autism. The next section explored the three recurring themes in the research: officers' unpreparedness and

lack of awareness of ASD-related cues; the consequences of this unpreparedness, including misinterpretations and dissatisfaction; and the effectiveness of autism training in preparing officers for these encounters.

Christiansen et al. (2023) found that even officers with some prior training often failed to recognize subtle ASD indicators. Lack of eye contact or self-stimming was frequently misinterpreted as suspicious or hostile. Gardner et al. (2020) surveyed 157 law enforcement officers in the U.S. Two-thirds were male, with an average age of 40 and 12.5 years of service. Prior to ASD-specific training, officers had limited autism knowledge, and scores averaged only 76/100. After training, scores rose to 91, indicating reference gaps in preparedness. Cooper et al. (2022) highlighted international deficits in police understanding of ASD, noting that many departments lacked standardized recognition of ASD-related behaviors and communication needs. The review emphasized continued officer unpreparedness despite increasing ASD prevalence. Overall, these studies demonstrated widespread officer unfamiliarity with ASD cues and communication needs, indicating a critical training gap.

The consequences of officers not receiving autism training are evident. Wallace et al. (2020) surveyed 460 caregivers and professionals; nearly 60% reported dissatisfactory experiences during police interactions involving autistic individuals. They reported that officers often misread sensory overload, repetitive movements, and non-verbal cues as defiance or aggression. Similarly, Railey et al. (2020a) employed mixed methods to demonstrate that families perceived officers' viewing behaviors, such as sensory overload or unusual vocalizations, as suspicious, which led to escalating interactions and poor outcomes. Hodges et al. (2020) supported these findings, noting that misinterpreted repetitive behaviors and interaction withdrawal frequently led to use-of-force incidents or unnecessary arrests.

Furthermore, Chown et al. (2021) analyzed recorded police encounters and found that misunderstandings often resulted in emotional distress for individuals with ASD and occasionally unnecessary involuntary hospital transport or force. The consistency across these studies indicated that a lack of preparedness directly correlates with increased misunderstanding, misclassification of behaviors, and consistently high dissatisfaction among autistic individuals and their families.

In Gardner et al. (2020), they delivered ASD-specific training to 157 officers. Post-training, knowledge scores jumped from an average of 76 to 91, confidence increased from 89 to 93, and self-monitoring scores improved from 88 to 93. Female officers exhibited significantly greater gains in self-confidence and were less likely to use force compared to their male counterparts. Hinkle and Lerman (2023) evaluated a performance-based approach with 91 officers and cadets. Following simulation training that utilized actors portraying individuals with autism, participants demonstrated significant improvement in de-escalation techniques, situational awareness, and communication adjustments. They reported an increased perceived level of preparedness. Kenney et al. (2024) developed a four-hour in-person professional development session attended by 27 participants. Officers completed open-ended surveys after training and reported feeling more knowledgeable, better prepared, and more confident that the strategies were feasible and applicable in real-world field encounters. Additionally, Gardner et al. (2021) reported that Johns Hopkins Children's Hospital conducted a simulation-based training study, demonstrating that combining video with role-playing increased post-test knowledge and confidence, reduced misinterpretations, and led to less forceful interventions when ASD cues were present.

In conclusion, these studies revealed a consistent pattern across recent studies that officers had limited knowledge of autism-related behaviors, which contributed to frequent misunderstandings and negative outcomes during encounters. These challenges emphasized the pressing need for specialized training that equips officers with the tools to recognize and respond appropriately to ASD cues. Evidence from multiple studies demonstrated that targeted, interactive training programs significantly improve officer preparedness, communication strategies, and decision-making. Together, these findings supported continued investment in autism-specific training to foster safer and more effective law enforcement interactions. As a result of training, many officers reported feeling more confident, more aware, and better prepared to recognize when someone might be displaying autism-related behaviors rather than acting in a non-compliant manner (Gardner & Campbell, 2020; Hinkle & Lerman, 2023).

Previous Research Gaps and Limitations

Existing sources indicated research gaps in understanding the involvement of people with ASD and encounters with law enforcement officers (Love et al., 2020; Railey et al., 2020a; Gardner et al., 2019). The focus had often been on learning about the viewpoints of criminal justice staff while overlooking the perspectives of individuals on the autism spectrum (Gibbs & Haas, 2020). Similarly, Copenhaver and Tewksbury (2019) noted that many studies have prioritized the perspectives of experts and officers over those of individuals with autism. This suggested a perception gap, where, despite writing about autism, the voices and personal experiences of individuals with autism were not adequately represented. As highlighted by Calton and Hall (2022), the issue stemmed from limited perspectives in the research. They called for more inclusive and diverse sampling strategies that would prioritize lived experiences, especially across varied demographics, environments, and severity levels. To rectify narrowed

perspectives, researchers often use a thematic approach or analysis (Khokhar et al., 2020). This method enabled the identification and exploration of key themes and patterns in the experiences. By employing this approach, studies highlighted previously overlooked issues and suggested more inclusive support and intervention strategies (Ebneyamini & Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018).

Additionally, previous research encountered methodological limitations. For example, Calton and Hall's (2022) study included only five participants, raising concerns about its generalizability. Recruitment strategies need improvement to encourage more respondents to participate in future studies. Furthermore, research by Holloway et al. (2020) indicated that interactions between the autism community and police officers were often tense and complicated, with little known about their experiences. Another significant gap identified was the lack of knowledge about the characteristics associated with autism that might have contributed to problems with law enforcement. Although these attributes were believed to influence behavior during interactions (Gibbs & Haas, 2020), further exploration was needed to understand their impact. Additionally, most research on interactions between individuals with autism and law enforcement officers has focused primarily on negative interactions (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020), suggesting the need for further examination of positive interactions.

Previous studies also faced the challenge of measuring both the extent and nature of encounters with the criminal justice system due to the lack of an official record-keeping system. Therefore, additional research was needed to address these gaps by providing alternative perspectives from the autism community through qualitative inquiry techniques (Gibbs et al., 2023). Furthermore, valuable insights could be gained by examining how autism traits affected encounters with police, so that more propositions could be developed to improve interactions between law enforcement and individuals with autism.

Summary

This chapter provided a comprehensive review of the literature on autism, officer preparedness, and symbolic interactionism as the guiding framework. The study began by outlining the theoretical foundations, emphasizing how meaning is constructed through social interactions. Key concepts such as autism characteristics, perceived officer preparedness, and knowledge gaps were explored to illustrate how officers interpreted behaviors during encounters with individuals with ASD. The chapter also traced the historical progression of autism awareness, detailing how shifting awareness and advocacy influenced public understanding.

A detailed examination of police contacts with individuals with autism followed, revealing common communication and behavioral challenges. Comparative studies identified recurring themes of officer unpreparedness, misinterpretation, and the positive impact of autism training on officer response. Research gaps highlighted limitations in sampling, methodology, and the lack of representation from individuals with autism themselves.

The literature reviewed strongly supported the need for this study by highlighting consistent gaps in officer preparedness, the consequences of inadequate knowledge and misinterpretation, and the benefits of autism awareness training. These findings supported the importance of investigating how training shaped officers' understanding of autism and where further improvements were needed to foster enhanced interactions.

In closing, Chapter Two examined how limited officer preparedness, gaps in officers' autism knowledge, and challenges in interpreting ASD-related behaviors contributed to challenges during these calls for service while highlighting research that supported the role of training in improving officer responses. The forthcoming chapter provides a detailed examination of the research methodology and design. It explored how a qualitative case study

design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of police officers' perceived preparedness and knowledge after autism training, as well as gaps in their autism knowledge. This design allowed for the examination of real-life experiences and individual interpretations. The chapter will discuss the case study approach, population and sample, study instrumentation, procedures, data analysis, and ethical assurances.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem that was studied was law enforcement officers' insufficient preparedness and the lack of understanding of autism, leading to challenges and misinterpretations with individuals with autism (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore police officers' understanding of autism and preparedness after training. Proper police preparedness can reduce challenges when interacting with individuals with autism (Gardner & Campbell, 2020). This chapter outlined a case study approach used to achieve the study's objectives. The study began with an overview of the research methodology and design, followed by a discussion of the target population and the sampling techniques employed. Next, detailed descriptions of the study procedures and data analysis steps will follow. The chapter also addressed the study's assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and potential ethical considerations that may have impacted the study.

Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the perceptions of law enforcement officers who had completed Project SAFE, an autism awareness training program. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research aimed to capture how officers interpreted and made meaning of their training experiences in relation to preparedness, and to uncover any knowledge gaps about autism. Qualitative explorations made it possible to examine the complex and individualized nature of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018); therefore, examining officers' understanding in this manner was most appropriate and could not be adequately conveyed through quantitative measures. Unlike quantitative approaches, which rely on statistical analysis, qualitative inquiry was well-suited for capturing the meanings individuals assign to experiences and for exploring issues where limited prior knowledge exists (Creswell &

Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The research questions were designed to produce detailed accounts of officers' reflections and interpretations, which required in-depth descriptions rather than numerical measures. This alignment between the study's purpose and qualitative methodology ensured that the inquiry focused on exploring the officers' perceptions.

For this qualitative inquiry, the case study design was selected because it provided a systematic structure for examining a phenomenon in depth. According to Yin (2018), case study design is most appropriate when researchers investigate "how" and "why" questions, when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident, and when multiple sources of evidence are available. These conditions aligned closely with the study's focus. The phenomenon under analysis was the preparedness and knowledge gaps among officers regarding autism. Their perspective came from the completion of Project SAFE. By using a case study design, the study captured both the individual perspectives of officers and the patterns and themes that emerged across participants.

A key strength of case study design is its ability to connect individual narratives to broader patterns of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This was critical for understanding not only how individual officers described their preparedness, but also how their collective experiences reflected the effectiveness and limitations of Project SAFE. Other qualitative approaches, such as phenomenology or grounded theory, would not have been as well aligned with the purpose of this research. Phenomenology emphasized lived experiences in relation to a universal essence, thereby narrowing the inquiry to experiential commonalities rather than perceptions of preparedness and knowledge gaps. Grounded theory, on the other hand, focused on building theory through iterative data collection and analysis, which was not the aim of this study. Instead, the case study design provided a focused yet flexible approach to examining a

bounded group of officers and their interpretations of training within the context of autism-related encounters.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed officers to describe their experiences and perceptions in detail while ensuring consistency across participants. Interviews were conducted by telephone, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, beginning with familiarization, coding, and categorization, and progressing to theme development. NVivo 14 software was used to manage the data and enhance the rigor of the coding process. To ensure trustworthiness, coding and thematic development were reviewed in consultation with the dissertation committee, ensuring that the interpretations remained aligned with participants' accounts.

This methodology and design were best suited to the study because they directly aligned with the problem- officers' insufficient preparedness for autism-related calls. The purpose was to explore officers' perceptions of preparedness and knowledge following training, and the research questions sought to capture officers' reflections. A qualitative case study provided the necessary depth, focusing on the study's context. It enabled the study to highlight both individual insights and collective themes and to make valuable contributions to the literature on police training and autism awareness.

In contrast, alternative methodologies like grounded theory or ethnography would not align with the study's objectives. According to Glaser & Strauss (2017), grounded theory focused on generating new theories from data, which differs from the objective here. This study did not aim to construct a new theory but rather to explore and describe officers' preparedness within the context of an existing training program. The ethnography emphasizes cultural behaviors over

time (Tomaszewski et al., 2020), which would not capture the immediate perspectives crucial to this study. The focus was on capturing officers' reflections within the training context, not on developing broader cultural frameworks. The case study method ensured that participants' perspectives were fully examined, revealing their thoughts about the officer's knowledge after training.

Population and Sample

The inclusion criteria required that participants be sworn law enforcement officers in Alabama, at least 21 years of age, and have completed Project SAFE training between 2019 and 2024. Exclusion criteria included reserve or auxiliary officers, civilian staff, and any officers who had not completed Project SAFE within the designated time frame. Sample eligibility is important because a study will gather data from those most likely to provide valuable and relevant insights into the phenomenon being studied (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

The target population was 84 Alabama officers. This population consisted primarily of male officers (approximately 87%), with the majority (74%) representing municipal police departments and the remainder (26%) serving in sheriff's offices. The officers held diverse ranks, ranging from front-line patrol officers and corporals to supervisory positions, including patrol officers (52%), corporals (30%), sergeants (11%), one lieutenant (5%), and one captain (2%), representing four regions of Alabama: North, Central, South, and West.

This sample was appropriate because it included only officers who had completed the autism-specific training. This ensured that participants could provide the perspectives necessary to address the research questions. Therefore, the study involved officers who could speak directly to how Project SAFE influenced their preparedness and knowledge of autism-related interactions. Although the sample size was smaller than the target population, it allowed for in-

depth qualitative exploration, which aligned with the case study design and the study's emphasis on capturing detailed accounts of officers' perceptions.

This sample was appropriate to the study problem, purpose, and research questions because it examined how sworn officers understood and perceived their preparedness to interact with individuals with autism following specialized training. Officers are the professionals most likely to initiate or respond to encounters with individuals with autism, which makes them the most relevant population for exploring the problem of officers' insufficient preparedness. Focusing on Alabama provided a generalized group that was appropriate because the state's officers reflected the realities of law enforcement work.

In this study, the census sampling strategy was applied. This occurred when recruitment efforts targeted the entire group of 84 Alabama law enforcement officers who had completed Project SAFE between 2019 and 2024. My goal was to get 15 to 20 participants. This approach was appropriate since the population was relatively small and accessible, allowing all eligible officers to be invited to participate rather than selecting a subgroup. According to Etikan and Bala (2017), census sampling would be appropriate when the entire population is small enough to be included, allowing researchers to obtain data from all members without relying on small groups. Census sampling, aligned with qualitative approaches, seeks information from an entire small and accessible population, while convenience sampling allows for the inclusion of available participants who can offer firsthand perspectives.

Convenience sampling was also applied to include officers who responded and agreed to participate. All 84 eligible officers who had completed the autism-specific training were invited to take part in the study, and the final sample consisted of those who voluntarily responded and met the inclusion criteria. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), convenience sampling is

appropriate when participants are selected based on their accessibility and willingness to participate, particularly in qualitative studies where the goal is to obtain detailed perspectives from available individuals. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 10 officers who volunteered, representing those who were both eligible and accessible at the time of recruitment. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that sampling in qualitative research focuses on selecting individuals who can best represent the topic being studied and provide meaningful information. Additionally, sampling decisions should be practical and align with the study's design, ensuring that the collected data accurately reflect real and relevant experiences. Convenience sampling was appropriate for this case study because it allowed the inclusion of officers who had completed Project SAFE and were accessible during the recruitment period, ensuring that data were gathered from those with the specific training experience.

I sent two separate recruitment emails to the 84-member population, and recruitment lasted 12 days. Within the first two days, the first volunteers began scheduling their interviews. By the end of the first week, 17 individuals had responded via email or text message. I followed up with seven individuals via email, phone, and text message on days seven through ten after the initial recruitment to confirm their interest. In total, 10 officers scheduled interview times and dates, and no additional participants were secured by the 12th and final day of recruitment. Following recruitment, data collection began immediately with scheduled interviews to ensure timely participation and maintain volunteer engagement.

Data saturation had already been reached, and data analysis had begun when one officer reached out four days later to be interviewed, so this participant was not included. Glaser & Strauss (1967) defined data saturation as the point at which no new concepts or themes emerged from continued data collection. Data saturation was reached during the eighth interview, but two

additional interviews were conducted to confirm that data saturation had indeed occurred. If new themes had emerged beyond the initial interviews, I would have expanded the sample to ensure comprehensive data collection. Since this was not the case, data collection ended after the 10th interview. According to Yin (2015), additional interviews may be unnecessary if saturation was reached before all interviews are completed. In total, 10 officers completed an interview for this study, therefore identifying the sample size.

The findings from this study can be generalized to the officers who participated. While the results are not intended to generalize to all officers nationwide, they provide meaningful insights into how officers in one bounded group constructed their understanding of autism through specialized training. The generalization of the study's findings is therefore limited to the bounded group with comparable training backgrounds, aligning with the study's focus on preparedness, knowledge gaps, and training effectiveness.

Instrumentation

In this study, various instruments were used to thoroughly assess the preparedness of law enforcement officers following training. These tools range from my role as the primary instrument to the use of audio recordings and semi-structured interviews. Unlike quantitative research, where objective tools such as surveys and statistical methods are the primary instruments, qualitative studies involve the researcher actively participating in the research process (Wa-Mbaleka, 2020). This is also true in case study research, where the goal is to capture participants' views and opinions.

As an instrument for data collection, I played an active role in interpreting officers' responses. I engaged the officers to gather their viewpoints and reported their responses. This hands-on approach by the researcher is crucial for producing deep and subjective insights (Wa-

Mbaleka, 2020). Through exploration of officers' reflections, the study revealed how training shaped preparedness and knowledge about autism.

The primary data collection instrument used in the study was an interview guide, which is available in Appendix A. I created a semi-structured interview guide for one-on-one interviews. The interview guide was developed around two research questions. The first RQ explored how officers believed Project SAFE training helped them in their interactions with individuals with autism, and the second RQ described gaps in the officers' knowledge when working with individuals with autism. There was a total of 15 interview questions. Nine questions examined RQ1, and the other six questions examined RQ2. When designing the questions, I wanted to ensure each officer's perspective could be captured. Semi-structured interviews provide in-depth, individual data by offering prompts that allow participants to elaborate as much as needed (Naz et al., 2022).

Study Procedures

The study procedure begins with obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the National University. The authorization correspondence is located in Appendix B. This approval ensures that the research complies with ethical guidelines for conducting research with human subjects (Yin, 2015). Following IRB approval on February 3, 2025, participant recruitment began.

During the study period, Project SAFE was conducted 11 times and implemented regionally across Alabama in the North, Central, South, and West regions. The four-hour, in-person training focused on awareness, recognition, and response strategies for law enforcement interactions involving individuals with autism. Participation was voluntary, and sessions were coordinated through Alabama Peace Officers Standards and Training (POST) continuing

education classes, interdepartmental training, and agency-sponsored opportunities that included surrounding jurisdictions. Each session combined lecture, discussion, and scenario-based learning focused on recognizing behavioral indicators, improving communication, and reducing misinterpretation during encounters with individuals with autism. I developed the curriculum and led the training, ensuring that the content aligned with evidence-based practices about autism and police encounters. Therefore, the training was facilitated by certified law enforcement instructors who specialized in autism awareness and crisis response. Departments determined scheduling, and officers typically attended during their normal duty hours, though participation was not mandated by POST. There were no restrictions on class size, and attendance was open to officers of all ranks and agencies throughout the state.

I recruited participants by emailing individuals using my attendance training rosters from 2019 to 2024. Once participants indicated they were interested in learning more about the study, an email and text message were sent, including a secure Calendly scheduling link. Also, a blank copy of the consent form was included in the email for participants to review and sign. The participants returned the signed consent forms to me via either email or text message. A copy of the consent form is in Appendix C. Participants were allowed to select a convenient date, time, and location for their interview. Participants had the option to meet in person, talk on the phone, or participate via Zoom video conferencing, offering flexibility in their choice. All 10 participants selected a phone interview. Courtesy reminder emails from Calendly and text messages from me were sent to participants to remind them of their interview date and time. Two participants had to reschedule their interviews due to last-minute work calls, but they completed their interviews within 4 days.

Once participants had been identified, data collection took place through semi-structured interviews. I ensured I was in a private, quiet place while conducting the interviews. Before each interview began, officers were briefed on the study's purpose. I also reviewed their rights as human subjects and discussed the procedures, risks, and benefits of the study. Since the consent forms were returned earlier, officers had ample time to read and understand them before agreeing to participate. Verbally explaining the consent process to ensure clarity is important (Taquette & Borges da Matte Souza, 2022). Officers were advised that their participation was voluntary. Officers were informed of their right to skip any question and withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. After ensuring they understood these conditions and that their participation was optional, officers gave verbal informed consent. This process is crucial for ethical research practice and for protecting participants (Taquette & Borges da Matte Souza, 2022). Once informed consent was obtained, the interview process began.

The interview guide consisted of 15 open-ended questions that guided the conversation, allowing officers to discuss their perceptions and opinions regarding their understanding of autism after training. The guide's flexibility ensured that each participant could elaborate freely on their experiences, yielding rich, detailed data (Naz et al., 2022). All interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and reliability. Recording interviews preserves the context of the conversations (Thissen, 2014). Audio recording is essential in qualitative research because it captures officers' exact words, which are later transcribed for analysis. Transcription ensures that no details are missed and that I can revisit the data as needed during the coding and thematic analysis phase.

Once all the interviews were completed, I transcribed the recordings for analysis, resulting in 65 pages of transcribed interviews. Next, I emailed each officer their transcripts,

asking them to review for accuracy and provide any additional information or clarification on their responses. None of the officers opted to make any changes to their interview transcripts. Next, I uploaded the transcripts into NVivo to begin the coding process.

It is worth noting that during each interview, I took detailed notes, used a handheld recorder to capture the officers' exact words, and used Otter.ai transcription software to record and transcribe the interviews. This multi-layered approach was important for ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the data. By having access to three sources, my handwritten notes, audio recordings, and transcriptions, I was able to cross-reference the information to confirm accuracy and consistency. This process enhanced the credibility of the findings and allowed for a more thorough and reliable analysis. To reduce personal bias during notetaking, I focused on capturing officers' words verbatim whenever possible and avoided making assumptions or judgments.

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Data Analysis

Now that the data for the semi-structured interviews had been collected, it was time to proceed to data analysis. For this study, I elected to use the Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis process. This analysis included six steps: data familiarity, initial coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, presenting themes, and reporting the findings. To achieve this, I used NVivo version 14, a qualitative data coding software. The software helped organize and code the interview transcripts.

Additionally, it allowed me to organize the data, identify emerging themes, and track recurring patterns. NVivo allows for systematic coding based on predefined themes or emergent patterns in the data (Allsop et al., 2022). NVivo made it easier to identify recurring ideas related to the officer's thoughts and opinions. Additionally, the software's ability to manage large volumes of qualitative data proved useful.

In Step 1, after member checking, I began familiarizing myself with the data. Data immersion in qualitative research involves a deep engagement with the material to identify emerging patterns and meanings (Khokhar et al., 2020). By repeatedly reading the transcripts, listening to the recordings, and reflecting on my notes, I gained a richer understanding of the officers' experiences and began to recognize recurring aspects. During this time, I made detailed notes to help me remember and envision various aspects of each interview using NVivo's annotation feature. This feature allowed me to note commonalities, uniqueness, and vast differences, as well as to record personal reflections, and to attribute variables such as rank, gender, and years of experience among the officers. To ensure that no personal bias was introduced during this stage, I again focused on the officers' verbatim words. Focusing on verbatim words helps increase credibility (Shufutinsky, 2020).

In Steps 2, 3, and 4, I coded pattern similarities, categorized codes, and then created categories. In Step 2, I produced a list of the initial codes. This was done by identifying responses that answered each research question. In Step 3, I created categories based on grouping codes with similar meanings. According to Khokhar et al. (2020), during this stage, it was important to examine the association between the codes and the category. Once categories were identified, Step 4 consisted of reviewing and identifying themes that emerged from the categorization process.

In Step 5, three overarching themes emerged from RQ1 analysis, and two overarching themes from the RQ2 analysis. Each theme was named and defined. Defining the themes helped clarify what they were about. In the final stages of the thematic analysis, I identified the overarching themes by naming them and presenting a comprehensive report. In Step 6, a comprehensive explanation of the themes was produced. According to Khokhar et al. (2020), this report should be concise and include examples that support the identification of themes, thereby validating the study. Through these procedures, the study collected detailed data. The detailed steps described here ensured that the study could be replicated and that data collection remained consistent and ethical throughout the research process. Following the completion of data collection and analysis, the study was formally closed with the National University Institutional Review Board on February 18, 2025.

Investigator triangulation was applied in this study to enhance the credibility of the data analysis. Investigator triangulation refers to the use of multiple researchers or reviewers to examine the data, which reduces the potential for bias and enhances the trustworthiness of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I collaborated with experienced PhD scholars in reviewing coding decisions and thematic interpretations. Their input provided alternative perspectives that helped ensure the themes were supported by the participants' responses rather than my assumptions. These steps created a systematic check that improved the accuracy and dependability of the findings.

Assumptions

Three key assumptions guided the process and outcomes of studying law enforcement officers' preparedness and understanding of autism after training. These assumptions included the belief that participants would provide honest responses, that their recollections would be

accurate, and that semi-structured interviews would yield detailed data. Assumptions are essential to ensuring the validity of the research findings and the study's alignment with its purpose (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The first assumption is that participants provided honest responses. Honest responses are crucial for research integrity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and the integrity of the data depends on participants' willingness to share their true opinions regarding their knowledge of autism after training. Law enforcement officers may be reluctant to disclose vulnerabilities or failures, particularly when discussing emotional preparedness or challenges they have faced in the field (Blumberg et al., 2020). However, creating a supportive and non-judgmental interview environment, along with ensuring confidentiality, helped encourage honest dialogue. Without honest responses, the study's conclusions may be skewed, undermining its legitimacy.

The second assumption was that participants offered accurate perspectives. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), qualitative research relies on individuals' ability to recall incidents, emotions, and thoughts that provide insight into the phenomenon, as memory can be imperfect, and participants may unintentionally omit details. To support objectivity, verbatim statements were reported, allowing officers' voices to speak directly to the findings and providing a more accurate account.

The third assumption is that semi-structured interviews elicited rich and detailed data. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews was designed to encourage participants to explore their thoughts and feelings beyond the surface level (Yin, 2015). The success of this method relies on how well the interview questions are crafted to solicit reflection and dialogue (Simoni et al., 2019). The open-ended questions provided the opportunity for in-depth answers, allowing

for various understandings of how law enforcement officers felt that training prepared them for their encounters with individuals with autism.

Limitations

Acknowledging and addressing limitations is crucial to ensure the credibility of the study's findings (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). For this study, a few limitations were identified. These limitations included sampling bias, generalizability of the study, researcher bias, and content and construct validity. Each limitation presents specific challenges to the study, requiring careful consideration and mitigation (Sperling, 2022). By recognizing these potential issues, the study adopted strategies to minimize their impact, therefore enhancing the validity of the findings and providing a more accurate depiction of officers' preparedness. Addressing these limitations not only strengthens the study's conclusions but also guides future research (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018).

The first limitation of this study was the potential for sampling bias, particularly self-selection bias, which was addressed by recruiting eligible officers from my training rosters, thereby providing access to the target population. The sample consisted of 10 officers who voluntarily agreed to participate after completing the Project SAFE program. Because participation was voluntary, this type of bias could lead to reduced diversity in perspectives and the possibility that officers who chose to be interviewed held stronger opinions, greater interest in autism training, or more positive perceptions of the training than those who declined. This aligned with concerns described by Creswell and Poth (2018), who noted that voluntary participation could have resulted in an overrepresentation of certain viewpoints and an underrepresentation of others, thereby limiting the diversity of perspectives. Although sampling bias could not be eliminated, the trustworthiness of the findings was strengthened through

credibility strategies. Member checking was employed to validate the accuracy of participants' statements, and thick descriptions were utilized by incorporating detailed, verbatim quotations into the findings, allowing readers to evaluate the interpretations. In addition, thematic analysis, conducted using NVivo software, ensured consistency in coding and facilitated the systematic identification of themes.

Another limitation of this study was the sample's limited generalizability. The sample was drawn solely from officers in the state of Alabama, which further constrained the generalizability of the findings. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained, qualitative research is not intended to be broadly generalizable; instead, it is evaluated on the basis of its transferability to other settings. The experiences of these officers may not have fully reflected those of officers in other states, which limited the broad applicability of the results. Because the study was not intended to be generalized to all law enforcement officers, efforts were made to demonstrate how others could determine whether the findings applied to their own settings. Transferability was supported by keeping detailed notes about the research steps, including sampling procedures, data collection methods, and participant demographics. It also included a detailed description of how the data were collected. This allowed others to decide how the results might relate to their own groups. Shenton (2004) explained that while qualitative findings are not meant to be universally applicable, they can still be credible and useful when sufficient detail is provided for others to make informed judgments.

The third limitation of the study was researcher bias, also known as positionality bias. The potential bias was introduced by my dual role as both the interviewer and the facilitator of the Project SAFE training. My dual role may have influenced which officers chose to participate in the study or encouraged some to take part. It may also have led participants to respond more

positively about the training or to withhold critical feedback out of concern for how their comments might be received. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that researcher positionality is a crucial factor in qualitative research, as it can significantly impact the credibility of the findings. I acknowledged that participants might have altered their responses to appear more positive toward me and the training. While this bias could not be fully eliminated, I emphasized to participants that honest responses were desired, whether positive or critical. I also stressed that their contributions advanced law enforcement training practices and improved future interactions with individuals with autism by remaining truthful. I also explained that my role during the interviews would remain neutral, ensuring that their perspectives guided the conversation rather than my own personal viewpoints.

Another limitation of the study involved issues related to content and construct validity. The interview questions had not undergone prior field testing, which may have affected how well they represented the study's research focus and measured the intended concepts. Without pilot testing, there was a risk that certain questions did not fully capture the scope of officers' knowledge, understanding, or preparedness, or were interpreted differently by participants. This may have influenced data accuracy by eliciting responses that reflected varying interpretations rather than participants' true experiences (Bhalla et al., 2023). Additionally, the absence of field testing limited the ability to confirm that the interview items directly aligned with the research questions. This created challenges during data analysis, requiring reordering responses and refining the alignment between interview questions and the research focus. To reduce the impact of this limitation, my PhD-experienced dissertation committee expert assisted with evaluating the interview questions. The committee reviewed the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the questions with the research purpose and findings. Based on this review, revisions were made to

refine the research questions, ensuring they more accurately reflected the data collected and the problem being addressed. Transparency in documenting these limitations and the adjustments made during analysis further enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries set by the researcher to define the extent and focus of a study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Delimitations choices were made to narrow the study's scope, which helped me manage the study and ensure that the specific research questions were addressed. Three delimitations applied to this study. They utilize a specified training program, Project SAFE, with a single participant group, and employ semi-structured interviews as the sole method of data collection.

The first delimitation was the use of the Project SAFE autism awareness training program. The training is a single autism awareness program with its own structure, delivery style, and content emphasis. This specific training program was chosen to focus the study on one defined autism awareness training experience, thereby ensuring uniformity in content, learning objectives, and delivery across participants. The rationale for this decision was to allow for a consistent evaluation of officers' preparedness following the same training, rather than introducing variation that might come from comparing multiple trainings. This delimitation was directly connected to the problem statement, which highlighted insufficient preparedness among officers, and to the purpose statement, which sought to explore officers' perceptions of preparedness and identify knowledge gaps prior to autism awareness training. Focusing exclusively on Project SAFE also aligned with the symbolic interactionism framework, as it enabled the study to examine how a single, shared training experience shaped officers' interpretations and meaning-making processes. Participants' perspectives and reported

preparedness were therefore shaped specifically by this curriculum, which may not reflect the design or outcomes of other autism-related training programs offered by different trainers, agencies, or states. This restricts the transferability of the findings beyond the Project SAFE context. However, this choice supported the research questions by providing a clear, consistent background for evaluating whether and how training influenced officers' understanding and preparedness.

The second delimitation included only sworn law enforcement officers who had voluntarily completed the Project SAFE training. Officers who had not participated in the training were excluded, which limited the comparison between trained and untrained officers. While three officers reported some limited personal exposure to autism, one officer, through children with autism as a school resource officer, and two other officers, through non-immediate family connections, all noted that they lacked formal knowledge before the training. Therefore, their understanding primarily reflected insights gained through Project SAFE rather than prior personal experience. These boundaries ensured that the study focused on officers with similar professional status, law enforcement authority, and recent exposure to the same autism awareness training, thereby directly supporting the purpose of examining officers' preparedness following Project SAFE. By excluding firefighters, paramedics, and civilian staff, such as 911 dispatchers, the study avoided perspectives that might not have aligned with the problem statement or the research questions. Existing literature showed that law enforcement professionals often lacked autism-specific training, which directly affected their interactions with individuals with ASD (Gardner & Campbell, 2020). This delimitation also reflected the symbolic interactionism framework, as it prioritized officers who had experienced consistent training and who could interpret and construct meaning from those experiences in comparable ways.

The third delimitation was the use of semi-structured interviews as the sole method of data collection. This decision excluded other approaches, such as surveys, observations, or mixed-methods designs, which might have produced different types of data. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words, providing the depth and detail needed to examine preparedness and knowledge gaps. Interviews were a reliable means of capturing participants' perceptions and lived experiences in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This choice aligned with the problem statement, which emphasized the need to understand officers' perspectives, and with the purpose statement, which sought to explore how officers described their preparedness and prior knowledge gaps following autism awareness training. This delimitation aligned with symbolic interactionism because it centered on how officers interpreted their training experiences and constructed meaning from them.

Ethical Assurances

Several ethical considerations are essential to ensure the integrity and credibility of the research. Ethical principles are crucial for maintaining ethical standards and upholding participants' trust (Husband, 2020). These considerations include transparency, voluntary participation, the right to opt out of responses, confidentiality, informed consent, data security, avoiding harm, respect for participants, accuracy in reporting, and my potential personal and professional biases as the researcher.

The study received approval from the National University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection. Transparency was ensured by clearly communicating the study's purpose, methodology, and potential impacts to all participants. I provided detailed information about how their data will be used and who will have access to it. This involved explaining the

research objectives, how their responses will contribute to the study, and any potential risks involved. Voluntary participation is a fundamental ethical principle. I emphasized to the participants that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences.

Confidentiality and data security are critical ethical considerations. Confidentiality protects participants' personal information and responses (Goodwin et al., 2020). I used pseudonyms (i.e., Officer 1 and Officer 2) in all documentation and reports to ensure that individual identities were not disclosed. While audio recording and during note-taking, I intentionally omitted identifying the officer by name or department. All data and documents were stored and will be secured for three years with password-protected files and key-locked drawers accessible only to me. Data security measures included using strong passwords, encrypted digital storage solutions, and a secure backup system to protect against data loss or unauthorized access. In research, it is crucial to safeguard participants' privacy to improve the integrity and reliability of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Avoiding harm involves ensuring that participation does not cause physical, emotional, or psychological distress (Yin, 2015). Informed consent and the right to opt out of participating or providing responses are crucial measures to prevent harm to study participants. The officers were able to make informed decisions about participating safely by ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and associated risks. I also provided a detailed verbal explanation of the process to ensure clarity about the study. Participants were given ample time to ask questions before the interview began.

Additionally, I provided participants with the option to skip uncomfortable questions, discontinue the interview, and leave at any time, empowering them to control their involvement

and reduce potential emotional distress. I handled all questions with care and could have provided support resources if participants experienced discomfort. Respect for the participants was maintained by treating all individuals with dignity and respect throughout the research process. This included being mindful of their time, their opinions, and ensuring a respectful and professional interview environment. Accuracy in reporting was achieved. I allowed officers to respond truthfully and without interference. Allowing participants to answer truthfully and without distortion is critical (Motulsky, 2021). Officers were emailed their transcripts to validate the data, ensuring that the analysis reflected participants' true perspectives and experiences.

In this study, I served in multiple roles, including being the parent to a teenage son with autism, an active parent advocate, and a law enforcement officer with over 15 years of service. Additionally, I was the developer and facilitator of Project SAFE, the autism awareness program examined in this study. I hold a national law enforcement instructor certification, have been serving as a collegiate criminal justice instructor for more than 12 years, and am a candidate for a Doctor of Criminal Justice Degree.

The training was constructed using research from peer-reviewed publications, reputable medical journals, established advocacy groups, and widely recognized autism resources. National advocacy resources, such as Autism Speaks, the National Autism Association, the Autism Society, the American Psychological Association, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the CDC, provided prevalence data to discuss what autism is, its history, and common indicators of ASD. Additionally, these sources addressed communication barriers and sensory processing challenges, and they guided the inclusion of de-escalation and environmental control techniques as effective strategies and best practices. This research-based knowledge was integrated into self-reflection activities, case examples, and scenario-based discussions. These

research-driven elements ensured that each training component translated evidence into practical law enforcement strategies. These roles provided me with both personal insight and professional competency based on evidence-based practices; however, the duality could have influenced the research process and interpretations. I ensured that these perceived biases did not compromise the truthful and accurate results established by ethical research practices.

The primary assumptions I bracketed included the expectation that training would automatically improve officers' preparedness, a predisposition to interpret responses in favor of Project SAFE's effectiveness, and a tendency to overemphasize positive perspectives due to my personal investment in the program. I recognized that these assumptions could have shaped how I approached interviews or interpreted findings if left unexamined. Although I assumed dual roles, I made them as distinctive as possible by consciously separating my personal opinions and reflections. To mitigate potential biases, I engaged in bracketing by identifying and setting aside my assumptions prior to and during data collection and analysis. I maintained notes to track any thoughts and relied on participants' verbatim words during coding and reporting to ensure that interpretations were grounded in their perspectives rather than my own. I also maintained transparency in documenting coding decisions and sought guidance from experienced researchers to ensure that interpretations accurately reflected participants' voices. Employing strategies to mitigate biases enhanced the trustworthiness of the study while reducing the influence of personal and professional experiences on the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

The study explored the significant issue of insufficient preparedness and lack of understanding of autism among law enforcement officers, which causes misinterpretations and challenges, and contributes to high dissatisfaction rates toward the profession. The research

methodology and design applied was a qualitative case study approach of 10 participants. Instrumentation includes the researcher's role, audio recordings, and semi-structured interviews. The study addressed the four assumptions. The study also identified four limitations and proposed viable methods to address them. Delimitations were identified with practical justification for their use, and ethical assurances were acknowledged to protect the integrity and trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter Four will present the study's findings. Additionally, it will provide a detailed description of the data's trustworthiness, present the results, and offer an unbiased evaluation of the findings. This chapter will be essential, as it will provide evidence supporting the study's accuracy and credibility.

Chapter 4: Findings

The problem addressed in this study was the insufficient preparedness of law enforcement officers and the lack of understanding of autism spectrum disorder, leading to challenges and misinterpretations. (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore police officers' understanding of autism and preparedness after training. Proper police preparedness can reduce challenges when interacting with individuals with autism (Gardner & Campbell, 2020).

This chapter includes a discussion of the study's findings. It also focused on the trustworthiness of the data, the study's questions and results, and the interpretation of the results in relation to the study. The findings provided insights into the preparedness officers possessed after completing Project SAFE autism awareness training. The chapter also evaluated the significance of these findings and set the stage for future recommendations.

Trustworthiness of the Data

In qualitative research, data trustworthiness is crucial to ensure the study's validity and accuracy. Trustworthiness encompasses four key criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Amankwaa, 2016). Credibility refers to the extent to which the study's findings accurately reflect the participants' experiences. The concept of transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied to other settings or contexts. Dependability refers to the consistency of the research process, which helps establish that the study and its procedures are trusted and accurate. Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings were influenced by the participants' responses rather than the researcher's bias. By addressing these components, researchers can produce reliable and meaningful results that contribute to the field.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the findings and interpretations, ensuring that the results accurately reflect the participants' perspectives (Amankwaa, 2016). Establishing credibility is critical because it enhances the study's trustworthiness and validity. This case study included a sample of 10 officers who represented diversity in terms of gender, professional rank, years of experience, and regional representation, which helped enhance its credibility. Although both male and female officers were interviewed, the majority were male officers. This detail is important because it reflects the current gender composition of many law enforcement agencies, making the sample reflective of the broader population. As such, the overrepresentation of male participants aligns with real-world demographics, thereby enhancing the applicability and credibility of the findings.

The participants held ranks ranging from officer to lieutenant, and had served in law enforcement for five to 27 years. The officers had completed Project SAFE training within the past five years (2019-2024), which provided insights from multiple training cohorts and timeframes. The sample consisted of eight officers from police departments and two from sheriff's departments, with geographic representation from the western, central, southern, and northern regions of Alabama. This variation in background and service contributed to the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Thus, the alignment between the sample and the target population strengthens the credibility of the findings (Amankwaa, 2016).

Additionally, to ensure the accuracy and quality of the data collection process, two separate recording devices were used during each interview: a handheld digital recorder and an Otter.ai transcription software. This dual-recording approach served as a quality check, enabling cross-verification of participants' statements. By not relying solely on Otter.ai, I was able to

compare both sources to ensure that all officer responses were fully and accurately captured, thereby minimizing the risk of transcription errors or technical issues. To further enhance credibility, member checking was conducted by sending interview transcripts to participants for review. Each participant was allowed to verify the accuracy of their responses and offer corrections or clarifications. None of the officers opted to make any changes or provide additional information. By involving participants in the validation process, member checking strengthens the overall rigor and reliability of the study (Motulsky, 2021). Additionally, credibility was addressed during the data analysis phase, in conjunction with member checking.

Thematic analysis was conducted systematically, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, to ensure an accurate interpretation. Codes were derived directly from the participants' words, and themes were developed only after multiple reviews of the transcripts. To prevent researcher bias, all interpretations remained grounded in the data and were supported by verbatim quotes. Direct quotes of the officers are used as evidence to support the study. When presenting findings, thick descriptions and direct participant quotes should be used to authentically and transparently reflect their lived experiences (Amankwaa, 2016). These steps helped ensure that the analysis and reporting accurately reflected participants' perspectives throughout the study.

Transferability

The research transferability of a study requires that it can be replicated for a broader population (Shenton, 2004). To support transferability, this study was conducted with transparency throughout by detailing the procedures and methods used throughout the study. All participants received a written consent form via email that clearly explained the study's purpose, potential risks, and their rights as participants. I reviewed the consent form with the officers,

covering the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and my role as the researcher. The clearly defined criteria further protected transferability. The participants were required to be at least 21 years old, sworn Alabama POST-certified officers, and must have completed Project SAFE autism training within the past five years. The sample came from a range of police and sheriff's departments across various regions of Alabama. This was to ensure the inclusion of officers with direct experience in the training and to capture a diverse range of perspectives based on gender, rank, agency type (city and county), geographic region (north, south, central, west), and years of law enforcement experience (5-27 years), and the officer's training year (2021-2024). Officers were contacted by email, phone, and text, and those who met the eligibility criteria and were willing to participate were invited to the study. This method allowed for the intentional selection of participants who were best positioned to provide insight into the study's research questions. Following these steps ensured transferability and will allow other researchers to assess whether the findings can be applied in a different setting.

Dependability

In qualitative research, dependability refers to the accuracy of the research process over time, ensuring that findings remain reliable under similar conditions (Amankwaa, 2016). To maintain the dependability of this research, participants were selected from a diverse group of law enforcement officers who had completed Project SAFE autism awareness training. Recruitment occurred from Project SAFE's attendance rosters. The sample included individuals with various levels of experience, ranging from 5 to 27 years in the field, and included ranks from officer to lieutenant.

Each participant was given a consent form detailing the study's objectives, procedures, and potential risks, which they acknowledged before participating. At the beginning of each

interview, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time or to decline answering any questions they found uncomfortable. Though steps were taken to maintain confidentiality, the risk of readers being identified was discussed. Verbal consent was obtained prior to conducting any interviews. The officers were asked, and all consented to be recorded during the interview. A single interview guide was used, and follow-up questions were asked when additional clarification was needed. Since all potential participants were sent separate recruitment emails, contacted by phone or text, and all interviews were conducted in a private location, these methods were used to preserve the confidentiality of participation in the interview.

Dependability is crucial to establishing the study's overall trustworthiness, as it demonstrates a systematic approach to data collection and analysis (Kakar et al., 2023). Following the IRB approval process, this study adhered to Yin's (2015) case study methodology and incorporated Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis process to ensure methodological accuracy. Participants were selected from Project SAFE training rosters based on inclusion criteria. Once interest was expressed, I explained the study in detail, reviewed sample interview questions, and provided a consent form along with a secure scheduling link. Participants chose their preferred interview format, with all opting for phone interviews. Before each interview, I reviewed the study's purpose, obtained verbal informed consent, and emphasized the participant's rights and the voluntary nature of the study. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews guided by 15 open-ended questions, audio-recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai, supplemented with a handheld recorder to ensure accuracy. Transcripts were returned to participants for member checking, though no edits were requested. All transcripts were uploaded into NVivo and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six steps:

familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Confirmability

According to Kakar et al. (2023), confirmability refers to the extent to which research findings are shaped by participants' responses rather than by the researcher's biases or assumptions. Confirmability in this study was addressed through multiple strategies to ensure that the findings reflected participants' perspectives rather than my own beliefs or assumptions. First, I employed the six-phase framework suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis, providing a systematic and clear approach to interpreting the data. NVivo software was used to assist with coding and organizing the data. Also, to further mitigate any bias, I remained conscious of my personal experiences as a law enforcement officer and a parent of a child with autism. I maintained detailed notes based on verbatim statements throughout the data collection and analysis process. This allowed me to focus on and be objective about the officers' actual statements rather than my own opinions. This practice helped to ensure that my perspectives did not influence the interpretation of the data. In addition, I worked independently with an experienced PhD colleague and two PhD scholars on my dissertation committee to review the coding, ensuring that themes were established from the officers' narratives and aligned with the research questions. According to Archibald (2016), investigator triangulation enhances credibility by involving multiple researchers in the analysis process, therefore reducing bias and validating the findings. These collaborative reviews strengthened the dependability of the data and supported the development of accurate themes.

This qualitative case study examined law enforcement officers' understanding of autism and their preparedness for interactions involving individuals with autism following completion of Project SAFE training. Two research questions guided the study. **Research Question 1: How do police officers believe Project SAFE training helped them prepare for their interactions with individuals with autism? Research Question 2: How do police officers describe their gaps in autism knowledge before training?** These questions framed the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Results

Project SAFE was offered statewide and accessible to Alabama Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) certified officers, regardless of agency, rank, or geographic region. It was offered 11 times during the study period and delivered regionally across Alabama, including the North, Central, South, and West regions. Participation was voluntary, and sessions were provided through statewide POST training, interdepartmental collaboration, and agency-sponsored opportunities for officers in the surrounding area. There were no class size limits, and officers from any agency or rank were welcome to attend. The overall population in this study received the same in-person training content from the same trainer. The target population consisted of 84 sworn Alabama law enforcement officers who had completed Project SAFE training between 2019 and 2024. These officers represented 73 men and 11 women. Sixty-two participants were from municipal police departments, while 22 were from sheriff's offices. The group reflected the broader composition of Alabama's law enforcement community, which is primarily male and includes both urban and rural jurisdictions. Officers trained represented various ranks, including police officers and deputy sheriffs (n = 44), corporals (n = 25), sergeants (n = 9), lieutenants (n = 4), and captains (n = 2). State-wide representation was included in West

(n = 32), North (n = 22), Central Alabama (n = 17), and South (n = 13). These officers were selected because they had direct experience with autism-specific training that aligned with the study's purpose of examining how Project SAFE prepared officers for autism-related encounters.

Two separate recruitment emails were distributed to the population of sworn Alabama law enforcement officers who had completed Project SAFE during the specified time. Within the first two days, several officers responded and began scheduling interviews, indicating early interest in the study. By the end of the first week, 17 officers had expressed interest through email or text message. Follow-up contact was made with seven additional officers between days seven and 10 of recruitment to confirm continued availability. Ultimately, 10 officers finalized an interview date and time, representing the final study sample who met the inclusion criteria and volunteered to participate. Recruitment proceeded as expected, except that I did not need to secure 15 to 20 participants as originally planned. This was because data saturation was reached after the eighth interview, when no new codes, patterns, or themes emerged. Two additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation and ensure consistency across responses.

The study employed both census and convenience sampling. Census sampling was used to invite all 84 officers who had completed Project SAFE within the previous five years, ensuring that every eligible individual had an equal opportunity to participate. Convenience sampling was then applied to include the first 10 officers who responded and agreed to participate in the interview. The final sample represented officers from multiple regions, agencies, and ranks, providing a range of participants. Demographics included gender, years of service, current or former law enforcement status, department type (municipal police or sheriff's office), rank, and regional representation within Alabama.

The participant's demographics are listed in Table 1. The sample consisted of eight men (80%) and two women (20%), which closely aligned with the training population's gender distribution of approximately 87% males and 13% females. In terms of agency type, eight of the 10 participants (80%) were affiliated with police departments, and two worked for sheriff's offices, consistent with the overall training population, in which 62 of 84 officers (74%) were from police departments.

Table 1

Participant's Demographics

Officer	Gender	Rank	Years of Experience	Agency	Alabama Region	Training Year
Officer 1	Male	Sergeant	15	Police	West	2021
Officer 2	Male	Lieutenant	18	Police	West	2024
Officer 3	Male	Corporal	12	Sheriff	Central	2022
Officer 4	Male	Police Officer	10	Police	South	2022
Officer 5	Male	Sergeant/ Investigator	27	Police/ Retired	North	2021
Officer 6	Female	Sergeant	11	Sheriff	Central	2021
Officer 7	Female	Police Officer	5	Police	West	2024
Officer 8	Male	Police Officer/ Investigator	19	Police	West	2024
Officer 9	Male	Corporal/ Investigator	24	Police	North	2021
Officer 10	Male	Corporal	17	Police	North	2022

Note: This table displays the demographic profiles of the study's participants.

Rank distribution included officers (n = 3), corporals (n = 3), sergeants (n = 3), and a lieutenant (n = 1). The rank distribution of the study sample aligned with the overall training population, with over half of the officers being frontline officers and corporals. Geographically, the sample represented various regions of the state. Of the 10 participants, West (n = 4), North (n = 3), Central region (n = 2), and South (n = 1). This reflected the broader distribution of the training population, which consisted of West (n = 32), North (n = 22), Central Alabama (n = 17), and South (n = 13).

After the volunteers agreed to participate in the study, I sent a Calendly link via text and email, a secure productivity scheduling tool. Various interview dates and times were provided to offer flexibility and accommodate their schedules. Participants had the choice of an in-person interview in a neutral private space, such as a community center or public library, a virtual interview via Zoom, or a telephone interview. I ensured that my setting was quiet and private to promote comfort and openness during each interview.

Using a qualitative case study approach, I developed an interview guide comprising 15 open-ended questions to address two research questions. Before the interviews started, I wanted to ensure that I had a backup of the interviews. I also wanted to improve interview accuracy, so I used two separate recording methods. I conducted 10 phone interviews at the participants' request. I audio-recorded each interview using a handheld recorder and utilized Otter.ai for the recording. The interviews ranged from 13 to 29 minutes, with an average interview time of 22 minutes. All participants voluntarily answered each question, including providing feedback at the end of the interview when I asked whether there was anything else they would like to share.

Data was gathered through the 10 semi-structured interviews, which resulted in 65 pages of interview transcripts. Next, I transcribed the interview responses using Otter.ai transcription

software. The transcription accurately captured the participants' responses verbatim. Sundlar et al. (2019) stated that utilizing a quality transcription product ensures accuracy and preserves the original context.

After transcription, each officer received an emailed copy of their transcript. Officers were given the opportunity to correct any errors, clarify statements, or provide additional insights by making notes in the margins. However, during the initial member checks, the officers made no corrections, further supporting the data's accuracy and credibility. However, later, during the analysis, Officer 1 made a statement that required further clarification, so I could accurately capture his thoughts. The Officer was contacted via text message and was asked to review this particular statement and offer further clarification on his statement.

I selected Braun & Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis method for coding and data analysis. According to Khokhar et al. (2020), the use of a data analysis process ensured that the findings were accurate and consistent. I used NVivo 14 software to code, organize, and categorize the data. This involved thoroughly reviewing the information numerous times to familiarize myself with the data. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), coding consists of labeling different parts of transcripts based on key topics or patterns. So next, I began the coding phase.

Coding began by separating and categorizing the interview questions by their corresponding research question, making it easier to identify common trends across the two questions. I reviewed each transcript multiple times and identified key phrases within it. Next, the words, terms, or phrases were sorted, grouped, color-coded, and categorized according to their meaning. According to Elliott (2018), categorization should ensure that the themes provide meaningful insights. Therefore, the categories were refined and identified. This refining process

was important because it involved a comprehensive analysis that combined, deleted, or separated into newly formed themes. According to Elliott (2018), only address data that clearly represent the research question were retained. Once I concluded the analysis for RQ1, I named and defined three themes. For RQ2, I named and defined two themes. Overall, the study identified five overarching themes, nine categories, and 14 primary codes to address the two research questions. Lastly, I presented a report of the results, accompanied by supporting evidence, which will follow in the upcoming sections. According to Khokhar et al. (2020), the final report is important in providing a clear and valid representation of the study's findings.

Research Question 1: How do police officers believe Project SAFE training helped them prepare for their interactions with individuals with autism?

To examine this research question, I uploaded the transcribed interviews into NVivo to begin the coding process. I meticulously reviewed each interview numerous times. To identify the most frequently used words related to RQ1, I conducted a manual review of the participants' responses to Interview Questions 1-9. Rather than using NVivo's automated word-frequency query, I manually examined the transcripts to identify terms that recurred frequently during the analysis. This method allowed for a close reading of participant responses. The most frequently mentioned words were then visually represented in a word cloud, shown in Figure 1. The word cloud revealed frequently used terms by officers, such as *indicators*, *cues*, *behavior*, *challenges*, *triggers*, *communication*, and *emotional feelings*, because their consistent use reflected common patterns in the officers' responses.

After a detailed review of the transcripts several times, I identified frequently used words and phrases that addressed RQ1. These patterns served as the foundation for the thematic

analysis, helping to identify emerging concepts across the officers' viewpoints. The analysis resulted in the development of three overarching themes that described how officers believed that Project SAFE helped them prepare for interactions with individuals with autism. Theme 1 reflected officers' belief that the training had enhanced their knowledge and understanding of autism. Theme 2 highlighted knowledge deficits in recognizing, communicating, and misinterpreting ASD. Theme 3 explained how officers believed Project SAFE strengthened their preparedness for interactions related to autism.

Figure 1

RQ1 Word Cloud



Theme 1: Officers believed that Project SAFE enhanced their knowledge and understanding of autism for autism-related interactions. The theme disclosed how officers described changes in their autism awareness, knowledge, and perceptions following the training. The three codes that were identified were *behavior cues*, *sensory triggers*, and *officer's approaches*. The code *behavior cues* were identified when officers recognized autism-related indicators. The code *sensory triggers* were assigned when officers reflected on learning about sensory-related factors that could escalate encounters. The code *officer's approaches* were named when officers described the techniques they learned to effectively interact with individuals with ASD. The following findings provided insight into the perceived impact of the training on officers' understanding and preparedness for interactions related to autism.

Based on the analysis of all 10 officers' statements, all 10 officers discussed various ways in which Project SAFE enhanced their understanding and knowledge of autism. A total of eight officers indicated that they had acquired knowledge about autism behavior clues to support autism-related encounters. The code *behavior cues* referred to officers' descriptions of learning ASD traits and behavioral indicators during training that helped them identify and appropriately respond to individuals with autism. Officer 1 explained that the training improved his ability to "pick up on the clues" of autism. Officer 3 added that the training "opened my eyes to the lack of eye contact in autistic people," and he described specific behaviors he had not previously understood. Likewise, Officer 2 mentioned learning that "some [individuals with ASD] may not like to be touched or may flap their hands," indicating the importance of recognizing subtle behaviors. Officer 6 emphasized the importance of learning that autism "does not always look the same," reflecting on the varied behavioral presentations. Additionally, Officer 9 noted that body language could be misleading, and the training helped him interpret actions more

accurately. Officer 10 had a similar experience to Officer 3's, stating that the training made him more aware that individuals with autism "may do things that seem off," but that these actions are not threatening. These statements revealed that officers believe they have obtained new insights that have shifted their understanding and knowledge of autism. Overall, the officers' feedback demonstrated that learning behavior clues played a critical role in preparing them to better recognize and manage encounters with individuals with autism in the field.

A total of seven officers discussed learning about sensory-related challenges, which helped prepare them for encounters with individuals with autism. The code *sensory triggers* referred to officers' awareness of how sensory and environmental stimuli, such as loud noises, lights, or physical proximity, may cause distress or escalation in individuals with autism. Officer 3 stated that the training "made me realize sensory overloads," noting that excess noise could prevent effective interactions. Additionally, Officer 6 learned that "bright lights" and "loud noise" could cause distress, prompting her to observe more closely. Officer 4 similarly emphasized the importance of considering a "softer voice" when an individual appeared overwhelmed. Officer 1 similarly noted that he observed a child "covering his ears and rocking back and forth," which signaled the need to reduce surrounding stimulation, a technique he had learned in training. Likewise, Officer 10 talked about how individuals with autism may "get overstimulated real quick," and this new knowledge helped him "avoid further aggravation." Moreover, Officer 9 discussed learning that being [standing] "too close or talking too fast" could create discomfort. These reflections demonstrated a shared understanding among officers that managing sensory triggers and stimuli was essential to creating safer, more de-escalated encounters. The officer's comments highlighted how environmental awareness supported better decision-making during autism-related calls. Overall, the officers' responses indicated that

recognizing and adjusting to sensory triggers was a critical skill acquired through the training, which enhanced their preparedness for autism-related interactions.

A total of seven officers discussed how they had learned various practices for handling encounters with individuals with autism. The code *officer's approaches* referred to the strategies officers learned and will apply to adjust their response when interacting with individuals with autism. Officer 2 emphasized the importance of learning, "Just getting down to their [eye] level," and explained how avoiding a forceful presence helped build trust. In addition, Officer 6 explained that she learned to be more flexible and responsive, choosing to "follow their flow" rather than relying on the typical police commanding presence. Additionally, Officer 8 stated that a main takeaway from his experience was, "Unless it is absolutely necessary, try not to become physical. Be as gentle as possible with your interaction." Officer 4 supported this view by describing how he learned about adjusting his voice [level] and distance [with the individual] to avoid being perceived as aggressive and approaching in an aggressive manner, which was also similar to Officer 6's previous comment. Likewise, Officer 10 noted that after training, he understood the importance of "backing off" and giving individuals space. These officers' reflections demonstrated the use of non-physical tactics and highlighted their value in shifting the mindset, prioritizing calmness and adaptability over control and dominance. Overall, officers explained that the training helped them to refine their approaches in meaningful ways, leading to enhanced preparedness when responding to individuals with autism.

In summary, words and phrases were captured when officers frequently described how Project SAFE helped their preparedness for autism encounters. Officers revealed that the training taught them to recognize possible autism-associated indicators, such as "no eye contact," "looking away," "delayed speech," "difficulty speaking," "not comprehending repetitive words,"

and “abnormal speaking.” These codes were grouped under the initial code, *behavior clues*, which reflected officers’ enhanced ability to detect both verbal and nonverbal indicators of autism. In addition, words such as “loud noises,” “lights,” and “sensory overload” were consolidated into the initial code, *sensory triggers*, as officers discussed possible triggers and stimuli that may exist. Furthermore, words such as “eye-level,” “lower voice,” “space awareness,” and “non-physical touch” were grouped under the initial code, *officer’s approaches*, indicating how the training helped reshape their interaction skills. These codes were then sorted into three categories, based on their commonality. The categories were: common ASD indicators, sensory challenges, and learned practices. After further examination, Theme 1 emerged, which answered the question from RQ1 by revealing how the officers believed the training helped with their autism preparation and interactions.

Theme 2: Officers believed that Project SAFE provided communication modifications for autism-related interactions. This theme explained how officers described shifting their communication styles to better respond to the needs of individuals with autism. The three codes identified were *patient*, *listen*, and *calm*. The code *patient* was identified when officers described their willingness to slow down interactions and give individuals more time to respond. The code *listen* was captured when officers emphasized learning active listening skills to better understand needs and avoid misinterpretation. The code *calm* was developed when officers discussed their efforts to regulate their emotions and body language to encourage communication. These findings illustrated how officers integrated training content into their interpersonal strategies to support safer and more effective communication during autism-related encounters.

During the transcript analysis, seven officers referenced the importance of patience or demonstrated patient behaviors when interacting with individuals with autism. The code *patient* was identified, and the officers discussed how they intentionally slowed down their behavior, modified their responses, and exercised restraint to support positive interactions. Officer 1 stated, “You have to be more patient and take your time with them [individuals with autism],” emphasizing the need to slow down and adjust normal encounters. Similarly, Officer 4 shared, “You cannot rush them,” and “Individuals with autism may need additional time.” In addition, Officer 6 had a similar response, explaining:

“Now I realize you have to wait for them to respond. Before, I would just go in, try to talk and if they didn’t talk back, I assumed they were being defiant. But now I know that some people with autism just need more time.”

Furthermore, Officer 7 noted, “Being patient goes a long way. You can’t rush them, or you’ll make the situation worse. I’ve learned to slow down and let them process things on their time.” She continued to comment, “You have to show patience. If they see you’re being patient and kind, they’ll respond better. It’s not always about control or authority. Sometimes they need to feel safe. That changed how I approach people now.” Officer 10 expressed a related sentiment by saying, “I learned just to take a breath and let them talk when they’re ready.” Officer 1 was similar to Officer 6, as both highlighted the importance of time and restraint. Additionally, Officers 7 and 10 both described internal shifts, such as waiting or breathing, to better manage these encounters. Officers’ responses revealed that patience can be a tool to apply as a strategic communication method following their training.

Six of the 10 officers described “listening” as an essential communication strategy developed through the training to improve their interactions with individuals with autism. The

code identified as *listen* referred to officers intentionally engaging in active listening and demonstrating attentiveness. Officer 5 explained, “It [training] taught me to look at the person. Listen to what the person's saying. Look at how the person's acting,” showing how training encouraged more deliberate listening and observation. In addition, Officer 6 reflected, stating, “Being able to listen and pay attention to the signs is just a great approach to interacting.” Moreover, Officer 4 emphasized the importance of careful listening to avoid frustration and confusion when communicating. Officer 8 explained that after the training, “I learned that I need to let them talk” and “just listen and give them time” and that this tactic was better for communication. Additionally, Officer 7 described a similar experience by stating, “You just have to listen without interrupting or trying to finish their sentences. They may get stuck, but that’s okay.” Together, these responses illustrated that listening was viewed as a deliberate strategy to tailor communication to the individual’s needs. These officers’ reflections revealed that listening should be used intentionally to observe, interpret, and communicate more effectively with individuals with autism. Their statements also showed that listening was often accompanied by patience, as they allowed time for responses and avoided interruptions, both of which are forms of adjusting communication. Together, these responses showed that listening was a purposeful communication strategy developed through training to support police interactions with individuals with autism.

Seven of the 10 officers discussed how the training prepared them to be calm in autism encounters. The code *calm* referred to officers intentionally maintaining a composed, steady, or emotionally regulated demeanor during interactions. Officer 2 explained that after the training, he realized the importance of staying emotionally calm, stating, “If I keep my composure and don’t come at them strong, they tend to respond better.” In addition, Officer 3 reflected on

remembering, “Calmness helps you not mirror their anxiety. If they’re already stressed and I bring more energy, it just builds up [escalates] the situation. Likewise, Officer 8 shared, “I just try to stay level and not show too much emotion,” and further discussed that heightened emotions “might worsen the encounter” if he does not remain calm.” Also, Officer 4 goes on and emphasized emotional regulation by stating:

“We have to do a really good job of maintaining our emotions, especially whenever it comes down to someone with autism. You can’t let your frustration take over because that’s when things go wrong. If I’m calm, it helps the person settle, too. That’s something I really took from the training.”

Moreover, Officer 5 stated that “The training taught me not to be so quick to escalate,” indicating a shift toward remaining calm. Officer 6 similarly emphasized the importance of “keeping yourself steady [calm],” noting that self-control enhances communication for all parties. Officer 5’s focus on calm as a response to escalation aligned with Officer 6’s emphasis on staying steady and avoiding quick reactions. Officer 2 and Officer 3 both described how a composed demeanor led to favorable responses by preventing anxiety or tension. Officer 8 and Officer 4 both noted that remaining calm helped de-escalate the encounter. These varying perspectives showed that calmness served different purposes but ultimately helped adjust communication when interacting with individuals with autism. Officers frequently described the need to stay calm when interacting with individuals with autism, using phrases such as “I try to stay calm” or “keeping calm helps them stay calm.” These repeated references supported the development of the code, highlighting a shared strategy described by officers across most interviews.

In summary, frequently used words and phrases such as “take your time,” “wait for them to respond,” and “slow down” contributed to the initial code of *patient*. In addition, statements

like “let them talk,” “pay attention to the signs,” “observe,” and “don’t interrupt” reflected *listening* behaviors. Additionally, language such as “keep my composure,” “remain calm,” “maintain emotions,” and “self-control” were aligned with maintaining *calm* during encounters. These initial codes then produced a single category based on their commonality. The category was communication strategies. After further examination, the analysis produced Theme 2. This theme directly addressed Research Question 1 by demonstrating that officers believed the Project SAFE training helped prepare them to use modified communication approaches when interacting with individuals with autism.

Theme 3: Officers believed that Project SAFE helped strengthen their preparedness for autism-related interactions. This theme focused on how officers described feeling more equipped, self-assured, and emotionally aware during these encounters. The three codes that developed this theme were *prepared*, *confident*, and *empathy*. The code *prepared* was identified when officers described feeling equipped with practical strategies and a better understanding of how to respond during autism-related encounters. The code *confidence* was named when it captured officers’ descriptions of feeling assured in their ability to handle autism-related situations. The code *empathy* was assigned when officers disclosed their heightened awareness and compassion toward individuals with ASD. These findings demonstrated how the training influenced officers’ sense of professional readiness during autism-related interactions.

Eight of the ten officers contributed to the code *prepared*, which reflected their perception that the training enhanced their readiness to interact with individuals with autism. Officer 6 explained that she is prepared for autism interactions because she now knows the indicators, which will prompt her to slow down and ask more questions. Likewise, Officer 3 stated that the training made him “more prepared,” emphasizing that he could now “recognize

sensory overload” and avoid physical escalation unless necessary. Officer 1 concurred by stating, “I’m very prepared. I feel like we were very prepared.” Similarly, Officer 2, as a school resource officer, reported, “I feel very confident that I could deal with any kid who has autism.”

Additionally, Officer 5 stated, “I think it [the training] prepared me to be able to identify if someone may be on the spectrum.” His statement reflected the training equipping him with the observational skills necessary to recognize signs of autism. Then he explained that identifying autism is a critical first step in adjusting his response. Officer 9 added that he felt more prepared due to a better understanding of behavior patterns and communication limitations. Preparedness encompassed both cognitive and behavioral aspects, indicating that officers felt better equipped after training. These officers explained that the training directly enhanced their preparedness to recognize, interpret, and appropriately respond to autism-related behaviors, which they viewed as essential for preparing for encounters with individuals with autism.

Seven of the 10 officers contributed to the code *confident*, which referred to their belief in their ability to manage autism-related interactions. Officers expressed confidence that they could apply the knowledge, communication strategies, and de-escalation techniques taught during the training to real-world encounters with individuals with autism. Officer 2 expressed, “I am confident that I could deal with any person with autism.” Likewise, Officer 6 stated, “I’m confident in identifying those signs now and answering calls related to an autistic person.” In addition, Officer 10 also shared that the training gave him confidence and that he would no longer second-guess himself. This suggested that preparation reduced uncertainty in the field. Moreover, Officer 8 reported being self-assured, stating that he felt “more confident in not just rushing in but taking time to assess.” Officer 4 also stated that the training helped him feel “confident that I can be effective without escalating things.” Finally, Officer 7’s description of

feeling “less anxious and surer of how to approach things” also demonstrated increased confidence through training. The officers revealed a shared belief that the training contributed directly to their confidence. Officers 2 and 6 similarly expressed that their confidence stemmed from a clearer understanding of behavioral signs and appropriate response strategies. At the same time, both Officer 4 and Officer 8 described feeling confident in their ability to de-escalate and slow down, suggesting a more mindful and intentional approach. Together, these reflections demonstrated that officers perceived their expansion of confidence as a sign of strengthened preparedness, facilitated by the enhanced knowledge and practical strategies acquired during the training, which they believed were crucial for preparing for autism-related calls.

Seven of the 10 officers contributed to the concept of code *empathy*, which referred to how the training fostered officers’ emotional and humanized understanding, as well as their perception of how the training helped with their interactions with individuals with autism.

Officer 1 stated:

“It [now knowing about autism] pulls you closer, and it makes you want to learn more about people who suffer from autism. To me, it makes me have empathy and want to learn more about it, trying to see what else I can do to better myself when it comes to dealing with people with autism.”

Officer 3’s perspective was:

“It [training] gave me a different perspective. Before, I didn’t really understand what they were going through. I would probably get a little frustrated if they didn’t respond or follow instructions. But now I see that they’re not trying to be disrespectful, they just don’t know how to communicate like others. That made me think more about how I approach them.”

Likewise, Officer 6 explained empathy by recognizing that individuals with autism are not deliberately noncompliant in their actions and behaviors. She expressed that the training prepared her by “definitely developing more empathy” and “understanding that we assume that they know, but they don’t know. And so, now my empathy, understanding, and my approach as an officer have to be, or should be, different.” Officer 2 shared a similar viewpoint when he discussed, “You start to realize they’re not being difficult on purpose. It makes you more empathetic to what they’re going through. That changes how you interact with them.”

Moreover, Officer 10 commented:

“The training opened my eyes. Before, I just thought they were being non-compliant or rude. But now I see them more as people instead of a problem. That mindset helps me not get frustrated and treat them like someone who needs help.”

Officers described feeling more understanding and compassionate after the training, and others reflected on how the training prompted them to reevaluate prior assumptions and to approach individuals with autism with greater patience and openness, which contributed to the development of the code.

In summary, officers frequently used words and phrases such as “equipped,” “trained,” “ready,” “capable,” and “emotionally ready.” These terms contributed to the initial code *prepared*. Additionally, terms such as “ready,” “less anxious,” “more sure,” “not rushing,” “self-assured,” “certainty,” and “controlled” were commonly used by officers, leading to another initial code: *confident*. Officers also reflected on gaining a more humanized understanding of individuals with autism, describing emotional shifts using terms such as “compassion,” “understanding,” “sensitivity,” “emotional intelligence,” and “respectfulness.” These phrases were used to form the code *empathy*. These codes then produced one category, based on their

commonality. The category was: emotional feelings post-training. After further examination, Theme 3 emerged. This theme directly addressed Research Question 1 by demonstrating that officers believed the Project SAFE training strengthened their preparedness for encounters related to autism.

Research Question 2: How do police officers describe their gaps in autism knowledge before training?

To examine this research question, I imported the transcribed interviews into NVivo to initiate the coding process. Each transcript was reviewed multiple times to ensure thorough familiarity with the data. To identify the most frequently used words related to RQ2, I manually examined the participant responses to Interview Questions 10-15. Instead of relying on NVivo's word-frequency query, I carefully reviewed the text to identify recurring terms that emerged during analysis. This method allowed for a close reading of participant responses. A word cloud displaying the most commonly used words is presented in Figure 2. The word cloud revealed limited knowledge, communication struggles, difficulties recognizing autism indicators, a lack of training, and assumptions about ASD. The recurrence of these terms reflected shared experiences among officers and pointed to common patterns in their perceived challenges.

From the word cloud and a detailed review of the transcripts, I identified frequently used words and phrases that addressed RQ2. These repeated descriptions in the officer's interviews served as the basis for the thematic analysis and revealed shared limitations in knowledge.

Figure 2*RQ2 Word Cloud*

The analysis yielded two overarching themes that described how officers expressed their knowledge gaps when interacting with individuals with autism. Theme 1 reflected officers' discussions of not having prior knowledge of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Theme 2 captured officers describing deficits in recognizing signs of ASD, communication, and misinterpretations. The complete process for generating codes for theme development is outlined in the forthcoming paragraphs.

Theme 1: Officers discussed how they did not have prior knowledge of autism. This theme described how officers recalled a lack of exposure to autism-specific knowledge prior to participating in Project SAFE. Two codes supported this theme. The code *lacked knowledge* was captured when officers discussed general unfamiliarity with autism and its behavioral characteristics. The code *lacked formal training* was identified when officers discussed their absence of structured instruction on autism. Officers described how the combination of both

limited knowledge and missing formal training contributed to gaps in their knowledge when interacting with individuals with autism.

Eight of the 10 officers contributed to the code *lacked knowledge*, which referred to officers discussing limited knowledge, awareness, and understanding of autism prior to their Project SAFE training. This code captured the absence of foundational knowledge that officers believed was necessary to effectively interact with individuals with autism. In the interviews, officers described a general unfamiliarity with autism, its characteristics, and associated behaviors. Officer 1 stated, “I did not have any knowledge of autism. I heard of autism, but never had a perspective of what autism really was.” This viewpoint was very similar to Officer 4, who stated that prior to the class, he had little knowledge of autism in general. Similarly, Officer 10 expressed, “I didn't understand autism at all. I knew the term, but I didn't know what it actually meant in practice.” Also, Officer 3 noted, “The minimum perception I had was the movie Rain Man, and that's a fictional movie,” adding, “there may have been some persons who would have suffered from autism that we didn't immediately recognize.” Additionally, officers described a lack of knowledge in recognizing the signs and cues of autism. Officer 8 stated, “I didn't know the signs at all.” Similarly, Officer 5 shared, “I just didn't know what to look for. I didn't pick up on any of the clues.” These responses proved that officers shared acknowledgment of having minimal awareness and understanding of autism, which also emphasized the lack of knowledge to recognize autism-related signs and behaviors prior to their training. Moreover, the officers' reflections on their lack of knowledge about autism demonstrated that they did not have prior understanding before the training, thereby revealing deficiencies in their knowledge when encountering individuals with autism.

Nine of the 10 officers contributed to the code *lacked formal training*, which referred to officers' discussions about the absence of prior instruction or structured guidance specifically related to autism. This code captured how officers described entering the field without sufficient information, tools, and training. Officer 6 explained, "We really didn't get a lot of [autism] training in the police academy. That was not something that was covered." Likewise, Officer 3 stated, "There's no autism-specific training that I received prior to this class," highlighting that autism awareness was not included in his academy instruction. Similarly, Officer 1 commented that "autism is not something that we're trained on." Additionally, Officer 10 recalled, "I don't remember any training that included autism prior to this one." In another example, Officer 8 reflected that the training "was eye-opening" because he had not been taught autism-related concepts before. Officer 5 also expressed that "there was never a class or course that taught us how to recognize or handle these [autism] situations." These responses demonstrated officers' shared acknowledgment of receiving little to no formal training related to autism. Likewise, the officers' reflections on the absence of autism-specific instruction revealed that this critical area was largely overlooked in both academy and police development training, thereby exposing gaps in the officers' knowledge when encountering individuals with autism.

In summary, officers frequently used expressions such as "unaware," "unfamiliar," "I wasn't aware," "did not understand," and "I did not know," which contributed to the initial code *lacked knowledge*. These terms reflected officers' self-reported lack of foundational understanding regarding autism. Similarly, phrases such as "not trained," "never had a class," "first training," and "was not taught in the academy" supported the initial code, indicating that they *lacked formal training*, which highlighted the absence of structured instruction on autism in their professional preparation. These codes then produced a category based on their

commonality. The category was: no autism awareness. After further examination, the analysis produced Theme 1. This theme directly addressed RQ2 by capturing officers' perceptions of gaps in their encounters with individuals with autism.

Theme 2: Officers described ASD recognition, communication, and misinterpretation as deficits in their knowledge of autism prior to Project SAFE. This theme highlighted how officers described specific gaps in their ability to identify, understand, and respond appropriately to individuals with autism prior to training. The analysis produced three codes that supported the theme. The code, *unaware of indicators*, was identified when officers discussed their difficulties in recognizing behavioral signs of autism. The code *lacked communication skills* was named when officers discussed challenges in effectively communicating with individuals with autism. The code *misconceptions and misinterpretations* were identified when officers discussed their tendency to misunderstand behaviors due to limited knowledge and experience. Officers described how being unaware of indicators, lacking communication skills, and having inaccurate assumptions shaped their understanding of autism and highlighted key deficits when interacting with individuals with autism.

Eight of the 10 officers contributed to the code, *unaware of indicators*, which referred to officers discussing their lack of knowledge in identifying autism-related clues, signs, behaviors, or sounds prior to training. This code captured how officers entered the field without the observational tools necessary to detect common cues or behavioral patterns associated with autism. Officer 5 explained, “I just didn’t know what to look for. I didn’t pick up on any of the clues.” Likewise, Officer 8 stated, “I didn’t know many signs at all” and then went on to express, “I was not trained on what those signs could be, so in the field, I wasn’t able to connect what I was seeing with autism.” Additionally, Officer 3 explained how dangerous not knowing autism

signs could have been when he could have possibly encountered individuals with autism, but at the time, “we didn’t immediately recognize.” Similarly, Officer 1 stated, “After going through the training, I started connecting the dots between behaviors I had seen before and autism symptoms. But before that, I wouldn’t have known what I was looking at.” These reflections demonstrated that officers were not adequately prepared to identify behavioral indicators commonly associated with autism. Additionally, the officers’ reflections on being unaware of autism-related signs and behaviors demonstrated that they lacked the necessary observational skills, thereby revealing specific deficiencies during autism-related calls.

Seven of the 10 officers contributed to the code *lacked communication skills*, which referred to officers discussing their limited ability to effectively engage or talk with individuals with autism prior to training. This code captured officers’ uncertainty in initiating, maintaining, or adjusting communication strategies when encountering individuals with autism. Officer 3 acknowledged the lack of knowledge of communication strategies, explaining, “Before the training, I had no idea how to approach or even talk to someone with autism. It was like trying to speak another language. There was a gap. I was not communicating right, and they weren’t responding.” Additionally, Officer 8 said, “I wasn’t aware that certain ways we speak, or our body language, might actually confuse or scare an autistic person. Before the training, communication was definitely something I lacked.” Likewise, Officer 2 shared that their typical methods of communication were not effective, stating that “regular communication methods just didn’t work” and that they often felt lost during those encounters. Furthermore, Officer 4 explained, “Before the training, I think we just used one approach with everybody. If someone did not respond like we expected, we didn’t know how to adjust.” These descriptions demonstrated that prior to training, officers did not possess effective communication skills for

individuals with autism. The officers' reflections on their inability to communicate effectively with individuals with autism revealed their gaps in knowledge.

Six of the ten officers contributed to the code *misconceptions and misinterpretations*, which referred to officers discussing inaccurate beliefs or misunderstandings they held about autism prior to training. This code captured how officers admitted to forming conclusions based on limited exposure, stereotypes, or portrayals in popular media. Officer 9 stated, "I always thought it [autism] was just one way. I did not realize how broad the spectrum was." Similarly, Officer 9 reflected that before the training, they believed that individuals with autism were "non-verbal and always had visible signs," indicating a limited understanding. Also, Officer 2 stated, "I thought if someone had autism, you would be able to tell right away. Like they would be rocking or not talking." Additionally, Officer 1 explained that before the training, "I used to think it was mostly kids that had autism, not adults we would run into." These statements showed that officers often trusted distorted or stereotypical depictions of autism, which contributed to inaccurate assumptions about how individuals with autism may interact. Their reflections revealed how officers described various assumptions about autism as a gap in interacting with individuals with autism.

In summary, the words and phrases used by officers during the interviews revealed patterns that led to initial codes. Phrases such as "unrecognized," "missed signs," "not trained to detect," and "no awareness of behaviors" supported the initial code of being *unaware of indicators*, as they reflected their inability to recognize or identify autism-related cues prior to training. Other terms, such as "ineffective communication," "lack of verbal tools," "did not know what to say," and "unaware of non-verbal impact," indicated a lack of effective communication strategies and contributed to a *lack of communication skills*. Phrases such as "false beliefs,"

“stereotypes,” “preconceived notions,” and “limited understanding” revealed the code *misconceptions and misinterpretations*. These codes were then sorted into three categories, based on their commonality. The categories were: recognition challenges, communication gaps, and inaccurate assumptions. After further examination, Theme 2 emerged. The theme captured gaps in ASD recognition, communication, and misinterpretations. This theme addressed RQ2 by demonstrating that officers became aware of their knowledge gaps through training, thus highlighting how they identified ASD recognition, communication, and misinterpretations as key areas of deficit.

Evaluation of the Findings

The findings for Research Question 1: How do police officers believe Project SAFE training helped them prepare for their interactions with individuals with autism? revealed that Project SAFE helped officers prepare for autism-related interactions in three capacities. First, officers detailed how the training enhanced their knowledge and understanding of autism. Most frequently, officers discussed learning to maintain minimum eye contact as the primary indicator of ASD. Other noted cues included repetitive words or actions and delayed speech, which they had not previously recognized. This finding was consistent with Salerno-Ferraro and Schuller (2020) and Gardner and Campbell (2020), who also found that autism training for police officers enhanced their knowledge and ability to recognize atypical eye contact, delayed speech, and sensory sensitivities. Next, officers discussed how they learned to modify their communication by slowing interactions, active listening, and maintaining their composure to promote calmer interactions. This finding aligned with Sreckovic et al. (2023), who observed that officers adopted slower speech, practiced active listening, and regulated their emotions after autism training. Lastly, officers discussed how the training increased their confidence, empathy, and

preparedness, indicating an emotional shift that enhanced their awareness and preparedness. This finding was supported by Love et al. (2022), who reported that autism-specific training programs boosted officers' confidence and skills, and was additionally reiterated by Railey et al. (2020b), who reported heightened self-assurance and preparedness following training. Additionally, Baker-Eck et al. (2020) findings aligned with this study when they reported that autism training helped officers develop the necessary empathy required for respectful encounters, and Railey et al. (2020a) emphasized that ongoing autism training is essential to equip officers with the understanding to approach autism interactions with empathy.

These findings aligned with the three propositions of symbolic interactionism. The first proposition held that responses were shaped by the meanings individuals attached to behaviors (Blumer, 1969). Officers applied new meanings to autism-related behaviors, recognizing indicators such as “no eye contact” or “delayed speech,” which reshaped their responses. The second proposition emphasized how interpretations were constructed through interactions with others (Blumer, 1969). Officers described how their knowledge of autism was shaped during training discussions. These interactions allowed them to hear diverse perspectives, compare experiences, and build more accurate interpretations of autism-related behaviors. The third proposition proposed how interpretations were constructed through interactions with others and how meanings could be redefined through structured experiences (Blumer, 1969). Training allowed officers to reinterpret autism-related cues, viewing behaviors once misinterpreted as non-compliance as signs of communication barriers or sensory challenges. These findings were consistent with research showing that autism-focused training improved officers' ability to recognize cues, adopt effective communication strategies, and reduce escalation (Gardner & Campbell, 2020; Hinkle & Lerman, 2023). Symbolic interactionism explained how new

meanings, learned through Project SAFE, shaped officers' preparedness and interactions. The propositions supported Research Question 1 by focusing on how officers described shifts in their preparedness after participating in autism-related training.

The findings for Research Question 2: How do police officers believe Project SAFE training helped them prepare for their interactions with individuals with autism? revealed that officers possessed significant gaps in their knowledge when interacting with individuals with autism. First, officers reported that they had no prior knowledge of autism and explained that their lack of information about autism and their lack of training contributed to this deficiency. These results align with prior research, including Salerno and Schuller (2019) and Railey et al. (2020b), which documented that most officers lack knowledge and foundational training specific to autism, and that officers often felt uncertain during autism encounters. Next, officers described their limited communication skills as a major lacking attribute when interacting with individuals with autism. Officers expressed uncertainty about how to adjust their language, tone, or body language to meet the needs of the individual, explaining that they were unsure how to approach or communicate with someone with autism and how to respond when someone did not react as expected. Railey et al. (2020b) found results consistent with this finding. They reported that officers often entered the field without the communication tools needed to effectively engage individuals with autism, leading to confusion and difficulty adjusting their approach during encounters. Additionally, officers described having limited and stereotypical views prior to training, such as only knowing what autism is from the media, the movie *Rain Man*, confirming Gardner et al.'s (2022) concerns about media-driven misconceptions.

These results aligned with the three propositions of symbolic interactionism. The first proposition posits that responses are shaped by prior meanings, influenced by experience and

social context (Blumer, 1969). Officers' accounts of being "unaware," "unfamiliar," and lacking formal training reflected the absence of established meanings to guide responses. The second proposition emphasized how interpretations were constructed through interactions (Blumer, 1969). Officers described how, without structured exposure, they developed inaccurate assumptions and misinterpretations of behaviors. The third proposition highlighted that meanings could be redefined through structured experiences (Blumer, 1969). Officers noted that Project SAFE provided an opportunity to reevaluate their perspectives and gain tools to interpret behaviors more accurately in future encounters. These findings supported research indicating that officers often enter the field with limited training in autism recognition, which can lead to misinterpretations (Crane et al., 2016; Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). Results showed that training filled knowledge gaps and supported the reinterpretation of behaviors, thereby supporting the relevance of symbolic interactionism.

Summary

Chapter Four presented findings on police officers' preparedness and understanding of autism following Project SAFE training. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 law enforcement officials across Alabama. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis process was utilized to analyze the data. Trustworthiness was established through measures of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, including member checking, dual audio recording, and participant and demographic diversity.

Research Question 1 revealed how officers believed that Project SAFE influenced their preparedness for autism-related calls. Three overarching themes emerged from the thematic analysis: officers believe that training enhanced their knowledge and understanding of autism for such interactions, that training provided communication modifications for autism-related

interactions, and that training strengthened their preparedness for such interactions. Officers described gaining awareness of behavioral clues, sensory triggers, and effective interaction techniques. Research Question 2 revealed how officers described their knowledge gaps and understanding of autism. Two overarching themes emerged: officers discussed how they did not have prior knowledge of ASD, and officers described ASD recognition, communication, and misinterpretation as deficits in their knowledge.

The findings aligned with the study's theoretical framework by illustrating how officers constructed meaning and understanding through their interactions and training experiences related to autism. These results highlighted the issue of officers' insufficient preparedness and lack of awareness about autism, resulting in miscommunication and challenges during encounters. Finally, the study concluded that Project SAFE contributed to both cognitive and emotional growth among officers and provided a foundation for understanding the training's impact on officers' professional preparedness.

Chapter Five provided an interpretation and discussion of the findings presented in Chapter Four. This chapter connected the study's results to the existing literature and the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Emphasis was placed on the officers' perspectives and their perceived differences in understanding autism, awareness of communication, and preparedness following Project SAFE training. The chapter concluded with implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and a summary of the study's overall contributions to law enforcement training and interactions with the autism community.

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The problem addressed in this study was law enforcement officers' insufficient preparedness and the lack of understanding of autism, leading to challenges and misinterpretations (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore police officers' understanding of autism and preparedness after training. Proper police preparedness could reduce challenges faced by individuals with autism (Gardner & Campbell, 2020).

The target population for this study consisted of certified Alabama law enforcement officers who had completed Project: Strengthening Autism Friendly Experiences (Project SAFE), an autism awareness training for first responders, within the past 60 months. Recruitment was conducted through attendance rosters, which included officers throughout the State of Alabama. Ten officers participated in one-on-one phone interviews. Data were transcribed and verified through member checking. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, and NVivo 14 software was used to organize codes and identify themes.

The study was guided by the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, which enabled an in-depth exploration of how officers assigned meaning to behaviors and reinterpreted them following exposure to autism training. The findings were revealed in response to two research questions, with themes emerging from participants' narratives after completing Project SAFE. For Research Question 1, "How do police officers believe Project SAFE training helped them prepare for interactions with individuals with autism?" three themes emerged. First, officers believed that the training enhanced their knowledge and understanding of autism, including behavioral indicators such as a lack of eye contact, repetitive speech patterns, and sensory triggers. Second, officers believed that Project SAFE provided communication

modifications, such as speaking calmly, using clear language, and allowing extra processing time. Third, officers reported that they believed the training strengthened their preparedness, enhanced their confidence, patience, and empathy when responding to calls involving individuals with autism.

For Research Question 2, “How do police officers describe their gaps in autism knowledge before training?” two themes were identified. First, officers acknowledged their limited prior knowledge of autism, and second, they acknowledged a lack of formal training on the subject. They also described difficulties recognizing ASD and often misinterpreting behaviors as intoxication, mental illness, or resistance. Several officers explained how these deficits could lead to challenges and misinterpretations.

This study identified several limitations, including sampling bias, a non-generalizable sample, researcher bias, and issues with content and construct validity. Each limitation could present distinct challenges that shape the scope and interpretation of the results, requiring careful consideration and mitigation (Sperling, 2022). First, sampling bias may have occurred because participation was voluntary, which could have limited the diversity of perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, the study’s transferability was restricted because the sample consisted only of Alabama officers, which may not have reflected those in other regions or states (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researcher positionality bias was another limitation, as my dual role as trainer and interviewer may have influenced responses. Finally, the last limitation was content and construct validity since the study lacked prior field testing.

By recognizing these potential concerns, strategies such as member checking, the use of officers’ thick descriptions, and investigator triangulation, along with an emphasis on transparency in documenting methodological decisions, were employed to minimize their

impact, as Shenton (2024) suggested. These efforts enhanced the validity of the findings and provided a more accurate representation of officers' preparedness. Addressing limitations not only strengthened the study's conclusions but also offered important guidance for refining future research (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018).

Chapter Five presents the study's implications, along with recommendations for practice, suggestions for future research, and a conclusion. The findings were organized to demonstrate how the results contributed to both scholarly understanding and professional practice. Together, these discussions highlighted the importance of addressing knowledge gaps through structured training and outlined pathways for continued growth in research and practice. In conclusion, the study comprehensively examined the problem of officers' insufficient preparedness and lack of understanding of autism, and its overall importance in demonstrating how structured training could minimize misinterpretations and enhance officer responses.

Implications

The themes of RQ2 showed that officers reported limited knowledge about autism before training, difficulties recognizing autism indicators, a lack of communication skills, and misinterpretations. The results revealed that officers reported limited knowledge about autism before training, which affected their ability to recognize behaviors, communicate effectively, and accurately interpret actions. Officers described distinctive knowledge gaps that could have impacted how they approached interactions with individuals with autism.

Research Question 1: How do police officers believe Project SAFE training helped them prepare for interactions with individuals with autism?

The results revealed that officers perceived greater understanding and awareness of autism after completing Project SAFE. They described the training as providing useful

knowledge and communication strategies that improved their sense of preparedness when engaging with individuals with autism. Many officers reported that the Project SAFE training was the first time they were introduced to autism. The officer's comments suggested that the training filled a critical gap in their existing knowledge and readiness. The training introduced concepts that many officers had never encountered in their careers or personal lives. Officers reported feeling better equipped to respond to situations involving individuals with autism by drawing on specific tools and strategies learned through Project SAFE. Additionally, officers reported feeling more equipped to approach autism-related interactions with greater confidence. Officers noted that the training gave them the confidence to shift their pace of talking, tone of voice, and other actions. These examples reflected a shift in the officer's perspective on preparation.

Symbolic interactionism was used to explain how individuals interpret and assign meaning to behaviors based on their social experiences and interactions. Officers in this study described a transformation in how they interpreted behaviors associated with autism, such as limited eye contact or verbal delay. Rather than perceiving these behaviors as non-compliance, officers reported a modification in meaning based on the information provided during the training. This suggested that the training helped officers revise their initial assumptions and apply new interpretations during interactions, which was the essence of the theoretical framework.

The findings from this study showed that officers perceived autism training as helpful in recognizing behaviors and responding appropriately to individuals with autism. Officers described how Project SAFE helped them identify indicators, such as a lack of eye contact, delayed responses, and sensory sensitivities, while also improving their communication and

preparedness. These findings aligned with existing research that demonstrated similar outcomes. Gardner and Campbell (2020) and Kenney et al. (2024) found that autism-specific training increased officers' ability to identify behaviors and apply appropriate responses. Likewise, Salerno-Ferraro and Schuller (2019) reported that without such training, officers experienced communication challenges, while Railey et al. (2020b) found that autism training helped officers adjust their verbal and non-verbal communication. Similarly, Gardner and Campbell (2020) noted an increase in officer confidence and preparedness after training, and Hinkle and Lerman (2023) found that performance-based training improved officers' preparedness and behavioral responses during simulated encounters. The findings highlighted important connections between officers' perceptions and the effectiveness of specialized autism training in supporting law enforcement readiness. These outcomes provided a foundation for identifying the most significant societal implications that stemmed from the findings:

Implication 1. The study indicated that the officers perceived autism-specific training as helpful, as it enhanced their awareness of behavioral cues, such as delayed responses and sensory triggers, which many officers said they had previously misunderstood. These perceptions aligned with prior research that reported similar enhancement in perceived preparedness following autism training (Gardner & Campbell, 2020; Hinkle & Lerman, 2023). They also reported that the training fostered confidence and empathy, shaping not only their tactical responses but also their professional mindset when engaging with individuals with ASD. This implication was significant because officers emphasized that prior to training, their limited awareness made it difficult for them to interpret behaviors effectively. However, after training, they believed they could recognize cues and adjust their communication. Sreckovic et al. (2023) reported that similar self-reported improvements have been documented. Although officers' perceptions may

have been influenced by their voluntary participation and prior interest in the topic, their consistent descriptions strengthened the significance of preparedness as a training outcome. These results addressed the study's purpose by demonstrating how officers described their readiness after training and aligning with Kenney et al. (2024), who discussed gaps in law enforcement autism training in the existing literature. This aligned with symbolic interactionism's focus on meaning-making through new experiences (Blumer, 1969). These results were consistent with prior research that emphasized the value of autism training, and no divergent findings emerged across participants' responses.

The societal implications of this were significant. Prior research has shown that autism training enhances officers' preparedness and improves response outcomes by increasing their knowledge of behavioral cues and environmental triggers (Hinkle & Lerman, 2023). Officers who felt confident and empathetic were less likely to escalate situations and more likely to apply learned practices during encounters, which promoted more constructive outcomes (Wallace et al., 2021). In addition, Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller (2020) emphasized that knowledge-based training improved officers' accurate understanding, reducing the likelihood of misinterpretations that could otherwise lead to conflict. Together, these findings suggest that preparedness, shaped through autism-specific training, includes officers' readiness as they develop knowledge essential for recognizing and adapting to individuals' needs.

Implication 2. The study indicated that Officers reported learning communication strategies they believed would help in interactions with individuals with autism. They described approaches such as speaking calmly, slowing their pace, allowing additional response time, and listening carefully as learned techniques. Love et al. (2020) and Railey et al. (2020b) identified effective communication adjustments for officers in their research. These strategies reflected

what officers reported they had learned during training, and their descriptions demonstrated that such communication modifications were also supported by their patience, calmness, and active listening. By reporting these changes, officers indicated that the training had shaped their approach to communication, implying that they were better able to adjust their responses to the needs of individuals with autism. This implication was important because it highlighted how communication adjustments offered practical strategies that directly influenced the tone and effectiveness of an interaction. Love et al. (2020) similarly found that officers without autism-specific training often lacked effective communication strategies, which contributed to misinterpretations, whereas autism-specific training enhanced interaction effectiveness. These findings addressed the study's problem by showing that the officers lacked knowledge of autism, which created communication gaps that limited their preparedness for such encounters. The implication also aligned with symbolic interactionism, as officers' accounts demonstrated how limited prior meanings led to misunderstandings, while training experiences reshaped those meanings through new interactions (Blumer, 1969). The interpretation of these results may also have been influenced by participants' retrospective reflections; however, the findings were consistent with prior studies, which have shown that training improves communication. No contradictory or unexpected results were reported.

The implications for society are that when communication strategies are enhanced, interactions between officers and individuals with autism are more likely to promote favorable outcomes by reducing the likelihood of misinterpretation and conflict during encounters (Gardner & Campbell, 2020). In addition, Wallace et al. (2021) noted that ineffective communication by untrained officers frequently contributed to the escalation of situations. Similarly, Railey et al. (2020b) demonstrated that communication-focused training enabled

officers to adapt verbal and non-verbal strategies, which improved the overall effectiveness of police interactions. These findings showed that the desired outcome extended to more helpful and less adversarial encounters with law enforcement.

From the study's findings, nothing in the data suggested a clear or strong improbable implication. For example, no officers reported that training made them less prepared or less confident, or that it created new misunderstandings. The officers' responses consistently suggested improvements in knowledge, communication, and preparedness. Moreover, the findings highlighted that the primary implications were positive and reinforced the value of autism-specific training.

Research Question 2: How do police officers describe their gaps in autism knowledge before training?

The results revealed that officers reported limited knowledge about autism before training, which affected their ability to recognize behaviors, communicate effectively, and accurately interpret actions. Officers described distinctive knowledge gaps that could have impacted how they approached interactions with individuals with autism. The themes of RQ2 showed that officers reported limited knowledge about autism before training, difficulties recognizing autism indicators, a lack of communication skills, and misinterpretations.

Implication 1. The study indicated that officers lacked training on autism. Officers perceived that this lack of training contributed to their limited understanding of autism and its associated behavior. Kenney et al. (2024) noted the similar gaps in officer preparedness. Most officers reported that before Project SAFE, they had received little to no formal instruction on autism, leaving them uncertain about how to identify or respond appropriately. Gardner & Campbell (2020) aligned with this study by demonstrating that autism-specific instruction

enhanced officers' ability to identify behaviors and apply evidence-based strategies. This finding was consistent with prior research that demonstrated similar gaps in autism-specific training and highlighted the continued need for structured educational approaches for law enforcement officers (Kenney et al., 2024). However, participants' retrospective accounts of their training opportunities may have influenced how they described these gaps.

The lack of training opportunities carried notable consequences for society, as it revealed systemic gaps in how law enforcement agencies prepared officers to engage with the autism community. When autism training was absent, officers lacked access to the necessary tools to build knowledge and enhance awareness. Wallace et al. (2021) emphasized that the absence of training left officers unprepared to respond effectively in autism-related encounters. Railey et al. (2020b) demonstrated that when such training was provided, it expanded officers' awareness and improved the quality of encounters. These findings showed that the desired societal outcome was connected to accessible training opportunities that ensured officers were educated on autism-related needs.

Implication 2. The study suggested that officers perceived their knowledge gaps about autism as stemming from limited training opportunities and limited personal exposure to individuals with ASD, resulting in the lack of knowledge that contributed to their difficulty in recognizing behaviors, adjusting communication, and avoiding misinterpretations. Participants described entering the field with a limited understanding of autism, which they believed hindered their ability to interpret behaviors confidently or respond appropriately. This implication was important because officers emphasized that the absence of baseline knowledge, combined with deficits in recognition and communication, created barriers that contributed to their sense of unpreparedness and increased the likelihood of misinterpretations. These results supported the

study's purpose by demonstrating that officers' lack of baseline knowledge led to recognition challenges, communication gaps, and inaccurate assumptions during interactions.

Officers described how not knowing how to identify behaviors or adjust their responses often led to misinterpretations that, in turned, shaped their sense of unpreparedness. This implication fits within symbolic interactionism because it demonstrates that officers' interpretations of behaviors were constructed from limited prior knowledge and assumptions. Without accurate knowledge to guide their meaning-making, officers misattributed behaviors such as delayed responses or lack of eye contact as non-compliance (Gardner & Campbell, 2020). Once exposed to new experiences through training, their interpretations were redefined, aligning with the symbolic interactionism principle that meaning is shaped and reshaped through social interaction and learning (Blumer, 1969). This finding is consistent with prior research that identified comparable deficiencies in autism-specific training for law enforcement officers, reflecting a continued need for officers to receive autism-specific training (Christiansen et al., 2023). However, participants' retrospective accounts of their training opportunities may have influenced how they described these gaps.

The societal consequences of this implication were that officers lack foundational knowledge, their autism recognition challenges and communication gaps enhance the likelihood of misinterpreting autism-related behaviors, which could unnecessarily escalate encounters. For instance, Sreckovic et al. (2023) reported that limited knowledge of ASD controlled officers' ability to recognize behavioral indicators and employ appropriate responses. Also, Hinkle and Lerman (2023) found that insufficient training contributed to ineffective communication and uncertainty during interactions. Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller (2020) further emphasized that without knowledge-based training, officers often relied on inaccurate assumptions that led to

inappropriate responses. Collectively, these studies suggested that addressing officers' autism knowledge deficits was essential for law enforcement interacting with individuals with autism.

All identified implications were directly supported by the findings and aligned with the officers' reported experiences. Each implication supported the officer's limited autism knowledge, difficulties recognizing autism indicators, and lack of communication tools. These findings formed the basis for practical implications, which transformed the officers' experiences and reported outcomes into realistic recommendations for law enforcement practice.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings from this study offered practical guidance for improving law enforcement training and response to individuals with autism. These recommendations were developed based on identifying preparedness challenges and addressing the knowledge gaps identified by officers who completed Project SAFE.

Recommendation 1. Implement mandatory autism-specific training for all sworn law enforcement officers, followed by periodic refresher sessions to reinforce and update knowledge and skills. The initial training should provide a foundational understanding of autism recognition, communication strategies, and response techniques, while refresher training should serve as ongoing professional development to maintain competency and awareness of best practices. Officers described how they had very limited knowledge of autism before participating in Project SAFE, which exposed a critical gap in their knowledge. Officers stated that their first exposure to autism and its characteristics occurred during Project SAFE rather than through the academy or other police instruction. This supported the need for earlier integration of autism-specific training. According to Kenney et al. (2024), making autism awareness a mandatory component would ensure that all officers developed baseline knowledge prior to entering the field. This

finding aligned with Railey et al. (2020b), who emphasized that gaps in foundational training left officers unprepared for encounters with individuals with autism. Similarly, Gardner and Campbell (2020) found that formal instruction increased response consistency across agencies. By incorporating autism training at all levels, law enforcement agencies could address the lack of early awareness identified in this study and align their practice with existing literature that stresses the importance of autism-specific, mandatory training.

In addition to initial training, officers in this study described difficulty recognizing autism-related behaviors. They explained that they had often misinterpreted behaviors such as delayed responses, lack of eye contact, or repetitive actions before Project SAFE. Officers acknowledged that these behaviors were frequently mistaken for non-compliance or substance influence, which created risks of escalation during encounters. The findings revealed that officers suggested that more training opportunities would strengthen their preparedness and improve their ability to identify behavioral cues. This recommendation aligns with Herbert et al. (2022), who noted that training effectiveness increases when behavior recognition is reinforced through applied learning, rather than lecture alone, such as through scenarios and demonstrations. Strongly emphasizing training on ASD indicators is practical and would directly respond to the deficits officers reported.

Ongoing refresher training could also be used to reinforce key principles, such as patience, attentive listening, calm decision-making, and empathy, as essential components of communication and emotional responsiveness. Officers emphasized that these communication adjustments were essential during autism-related encounters and that these behaviors were not previously known to them. These findings aligned with Railey et al. (2020a), who reported that patience was necessary for officers to accurately interpret delayed responses. Gardner and

Campbell (2020) similarly found that attentive listening helped officers recognize communication differences without relying on assumptions. In addition, Sreckovic et al. (2023) demonstrated that effective training included emotional and behavioral self-regulation, which strengthened officers' ability to remain calm in challenging encounters. Lastly, Birch (2024) advocated for empathic policing, arguing that empathy was central to building understanding while interacting with individuals with ASD.

Recommendation 2. Provide trained officers with autism response toolkits. Officers in this study emphasized that having practical strategies increased their confidence in encounters. For instance, several officers described how learning about sensory sensitivities led them to rethink their approach to using lights or touch during interactions. Toolkits containing sensory-friendly aids such as sunglasses (Sreckovic et al., 2023) and communication cards (Gardner & Campbell, 2020) would have a significant impact on strategies used in the field as on-hand resources. These results align with those of Railey et al. (2020b), who found that sensory tools improved situational readiness and supported de-escalation when used in conjunction with training.

Recommendation 3. Implement training evaluations. This recommendation called for agencies to provide routine pre and post-measures of autism training to verify any development in officers' understanding and preparedness as recommended by Gardner and Campbell (2020). According to Railey et al. (2020b), evaluations are needed to establish efficacy. Additionally, Holloway et al. (2022) noted that without evaluations, agencies would be unable to determine whether training influenced preparedness or actual behavior. Evaluations should serve as structured tools for assessing outcomes and guiding the development and enhancement of training. An evaluation plan could consist of administering pre and post-assessments to measure

knowledge gains, conducting follow-up evaluations at regular intervals, such as every six to 12 months, to assess knowledge retention, and using evaluation data to update ongoing revisions to training content. By incorporating systematic evaluations, agencies could generate evidence-based feedback (Love et al., 2021) and adjust instruction to sustain and reinforce preparedness in practice (Railey et al., 2020a).

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could examine how autism training influences officers' actual real-world encounters. Findings from this study revealed that while officers reported feeling more confident, prepared, and empathetic, their reflections were based solely on self-reported perceptions rather than observed behaviors. According to Gardner & Campbell (2020), post-training confidence did not always predict behavioral change in field encounters. Other qualitative follow-up studies could use field observations, interviews, or reviews of body-worn camera footage to examine how officers apply the skills they have learned in practice. Such approaches would provide opportunities to examine behaviors in action, allowing researchers to capture how meanings and interpretations manifest, while also addressing the limitations of relying on self-report data. Lastly, Railey et al. (2020a) emphasized that observed practice strengthens preparedness, justifying the need for research that tests whether these skills are implemented beyond the classroom. From a symbolic interactionism perspective, a qualitative design would capture how officers construct and apply meaning during real-world interactions (Blumer, 1967)

Also, future research could explore various community perspectives. Findings from this study revealed that officers recognized both their initial knowledge gaps and the perceived enhancements gained from training. However, the perspectives of individuals with autism and their caregivers were not included. Chown (2010) stated that community voices are essential for

a more complete understanding, as individuals with autism themselves must be consulted. Crane et al. (2016) supported the findings by explaining how caregivers should also be included. Also, future researchers might conduct multiple case studies that combine officer focus groups with caregiver or community focus groups to assess whether training outcomes align with the lived experiences of those most affected. This approach would address the limitation of relying solely on officer self-reports and broaden transferability beyond a single perspective. From a symbolic interactionism perspective, incorporating these voices would enhance understanding of how caregivers' meanings are interpreted, ensuring that training prepares officers not only for their profession's perceptions but also for actual viewpoints and community needs.

Future researchers could expand on this study by addressing its limitations through broader qualitative designs. To strengthen the transferability of findings, future studies could include larger and more diverse samples of officers from multiple states and agencies. Multi-site qualitative case studies or cross-agency comparisons could provide varied perspectives on how different organizational cultures and training environments influence officers' preparedness for autism-related encounters. Researchers might also conduct follow-up interviews several months or years after training to explore how officers sustain and apply what they learned in real-world settings. Different qualitative approaches would deepen contextual understanding and capture evolving interpretations within diverse contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Conclusions

This study examined how law enforcement officers described their knowledge, preparedness, and interpretation of behaviors associated with autism after completing Project SAFE training. Guided by symbolic interactionism, this study explored how officers assigned meaning to autism-related behaviors during interactions. Findings revealed that the participants

entered the training with limited knowledge of autism, lacked recognition of autism indicators, and often misinterpreted autism-associated behaviors. Through specialized training, officers reported a perceived shift in understanding that contributed to more deliberate and effective response strategies during calls involving individuals with autism.

This study examined officers' perceptions of their autism-specific preparedness, a topic previously associated with challenges and escalated encounters in the literature (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). As the prevalence of autism increased and the community expectations evolved, there has been a growing emphasis on responding appropriately to autism and neurodiverse populations (Shaw et al., 2025). The significance of this study lies in how autism training helped prepare officers for encounters with the autism community and identify their knowledge gaps regarding autism. The study documented officers' accounts of their limited knowledge before training, their difficulties recognizing autism indicators, and their reflections on how structured instruction may have influenced their sense of preparedness. The study contributed to the growing body of qualitative research by offering insights into how officers perceived their preparedness for encounters related to autism.

In conclusion, this study illustrated how officers perceived the effects of Project SAFE training. Officers described that the training enhanced their previously limited knowledge and introduced strategies that they believed enhanced their preparedness, communication, and recognition of autism indicators. The findings suggested that the training experience helped officers perceive themselves as more competent, patient, and empathetic in their approach to autism-related interactions, as it equipped them with practical strategies they believed would be useful in real-world encounters.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

(RQ1) How do police officers believe Project SAFE training helped them prepare for interactions with individuals with autism?

After attending Project SAFE training, has your general understanding of autism changed, and how?

1. Can you describe specific aspects of the training that enhanced your awareness and knowledge about autism?
2. Can you describe possible indicators of autism that you learned from the training?
3. Can you identify effective communication strategies and other techniques that may significantly impact de-escalating encounters?
4. In what ways do you feel more prepared to interact with individuals after completing the training?
5. Has Project SAFE training enhanced your confidence in handling situations involving individuals with autism? Please share examples.
6. How does any confidence affect your ability to de-escalate potentially challenging situations with individuals with autism?
7. Since completing the Project SAFE training, have you noticed a change in your ability to mitigate confrontations with individuals with autism?
8. What areas of Project SAFE training do you believe were most effective in preparing you for encounters with individuals with autism?
9. Can you share an example of when you successfully applied skills learned in Project SAFE to prevent a situation from escalating?

(RQ2) How do police officers describe their gaps in autism knowledge before training?

10. Can you share any personal or professional experiences that influenced your understanding of ASD prior to training?
11. Before attending the Project SAFE training, how would you describe your understanding and awareness of autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?
12. Can you provide an example of how the lack of awareness or understanding of autism can negatively impact an officer's encounter with an individual with autism?
13. What challenges do you still face in interactions with individuals with autism, and how could further training improve your effectiveness?
14. Are there any gaps in the training that should be addressed to improve officer preparedness further? (i.e., Content information, curriculum design, format design/delivery).
15. What additional resources or support could help you feel even more prepared and confident when dealing with individuals with autism in the future?

Appendix B
IRB Approval Letter

Removed for publishing

Appendix C

Consent Form



National University IRB
9338 Lightwave Ave., San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

Consent Form

My name is Alana N. Williams, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU). I'm asking you to take part in a research study about the preparedness of law enforcement officials when interacting with individuals with autism spectrum disorder. The name of this study is "A Qualitative Study: Exploring Police Officer Emotional Preparedness and Encounters with Individuals with Autism."

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. Are age 21 or older
2. Alabama sworn law enforcement officer
3. Have completed Project SAFE autism awareness training in the last five years.

The goal is to recruit 15 to 20 people for this study.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1:1 online via Zoom, in-person, or phone interview for approximately 45-60 minutes. The participant will choose the option.
2. Review your interview transcript for accuracy via email for 10-15 minutes

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your tenure as a law enforcement officer
- Your responsibilities as a law enforcement officer
- Your perceptions of emotional preparedness when interacting with individuals with autism
- Interactions with individuals with autism as a law enforcement officer

Risks: There are minimal foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

Benefits: If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This study may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this research.

Recording:

I would like to audio-record and/or video-record your responses from the structured interview session. You can disable the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

Confidentiality: I will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Pseudonyms will be used throughout the study. All data will be stored in a password-protected computer only accessible to the principal investigator.

Taking part is voluntary: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may stop participation at any time.

If you have questions, Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at a.williams8614@o365.ncu.edu or at (513) XXX-XXXX.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at irb@nu.edu

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____ Your Name (printed) _____ Date _____