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Exploring Goal Setting and Motivational Experiences for Adult Workers With Autism

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Abstract

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MA, Gardner Webb University, 1999

BS, East Tennessee State University, 1996

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

While the heterogeneity of autism for adults has been much more accepted over the past 40 years, research still has a broad gap to fill as there is scarce empirical evidence on how interventions, such as motivational tactics, need to be adapted to meet individual abilities and needs. Also, the number of workers entering the workforce each year is growing as a ratio. It is posited by various authors that one in 52 people are now diagnosed as having the disorder and this number has doubled over the past decade. Furthermore, 80% of this population is underemployed or unemployed, representing a huge challenge. Thus, the purpose of this study was to better understand how this population experienced motivation when exposed to SMART goal setting while at work. To explore this topic, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) qualitative study was conducted with workers diagnosed as having high functioning ASD and active in the workforce. Using a semi structured questionnaire and audio calls to collect the data, questions were posed to the participants to explore their experiences with SMART goals, a type of goal that is utilized commonly in goal setting. Answers were recorded and then transcribed. IPA was used to interpret the data once coded. All participants confirmed that when goals are assigned at work, they felt more intrinsically motivated and had more clarity and guidance for the work. By understanding motivational tendencies of this population, a better understanding of their critical needs might be gained in efforts to improve employability and advance positive social change.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Worldwide, diagnoses of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are on

the rise within the past decade (Nazeer et al., 2019). Current statistics indicate that as

many as 1 in 52 people are diagnosed as being on the spectrum at the present time. ASD

is a heterogeneous neurodevelopmental disorder that causes reductions in cognition,

communication, and social interaction skills (Jacob et al., 2019). Although most people

with the disorder are diagnosed as children as they enter their school age, many

individuals are not diagnosed until later into adulthood (Sharma et al., 2018).

Furthermore, there is an abundance of conducted studies in the literature for

children who have been diagnosed with ASD regarding symptoms, tendencies,

development, and support initiatives. This research has contributed to the creation of

many established programs for young, diagnosed school-age individuals in the form of

community programs, school programs and familial programs available. However, there

is much less known about individuals who have been diagnosed beyond high school and

who have entered the workforce as working adults (Robinson, 2019). Moreover, workers

who are diagnosed with ASD have among the highest underemployment rates of any

neurodiverse population in the workforce, and current statistics place workers with ASD

as being 80% unemployed or underemployed. This statistic, coupled with a void of both

understanding as well as developed programs for this population in the workplace,

establish a need to further understand what makes workers with ASD different and how

they may experience commonly applied work tactics by employers differently than non-

ASD workers.

Chapter 1 covers the major components and sections of the background of ASD as well as goal setting. It also identifies the problem statement along with evidence that the problem is justified, relevant, and a current issue in the workplace. Chapter 1 will also cover the current literature and explain what is known and unknown towards the identification of the knowledge gap for the topic. The purpose of the study will be discussed as well as the introduction to the research questions that support the general knowledge gap. Furthermore, the conceptual framework of goal setting and the study's nature will be discussed, which is an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and qualitative approach. Lastly, specific definitions, assumptions, significance, scope and delimitations, and limitations will be covered in the chapter.

Background

Statistically, workers who identify as being diagnosed with ASD are on the rise in the modern workplace. There are some statistics provided in the current literature that place the ratio as high as 1 in 52 workers at the present time, which is a strong increase over the past two decades (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). Consequently, there is little known about these workers in the workplace (Chen et al., 2015), given the facts that more workers identify now as having ASD (and at a vastly accelerated rate), a general lack of developmental and assistance programs for adults with ASD compared to programs available for school age children, and the general lack of knowledge and inexperience on the behalf of employers as to specific differences that these workers possess as compared to non-neurodiverse employees.

Goal setting is a motivational tactic that is predominate in the workplace today and is used by employers to improve intrinsic motivation of workers in hopes to increase production or output of individuals, teams, and organizations (Locke & Latham, 2019). Goal setting is supported by goal setting theory (GST), which is a well-supported theory in the literature that was established by Locke and Latham in 1968. The general premise of goal setting is that when goals are assigned to individuals, teams, and organizations that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART), that intrinsic motivation improves to work harder and to accomplish more (Locke & Latham, 2019). What is not covered in the literature about goal setting is how the motivational tactic is experienced by workers with neurodiversity such as ASD. For this reason, this study's aim was to understand these experiences for workers on the spectrum when SMART goals are established in hopes of contributing to the knowledge gap that exists.

Problem Statement

There is little known about how ASD workers in the workplace interact with their internal and external environments (Howlin, 2021; Patton, 2019). Moreover, employers lack an understanding of the complexities, needs, and tendencies of ASD workers in their workplaces (Chen et al., 2015). Elements such as job attitudes and motivation for this population have simply not been studied at length in the literature and thus, there is a large gap in understanding how this population should be treated to enable them to thrive at work and over a lifetime. To the point, adult outcome studies have provided basic information in the past literature about employment situations of individuals with ASD, yet have been riddled with limitations (Chen et al., 2015; Kim, 2019; Robinson, 2019).

One major limitation is the fact that most adult outcome studies include employment as part of their outcome variables but have been limited on investigating specific employment-related issues (Chen et al., 2015). Robinson (2019) discussed the overall lack of understanding in his study of the needs of adults after completion of secondary school and into early adulthood and speaks about the gap in understanding of special needs of these individuals while seeking and maintaining employment. Issues such as skill improvement over time, learning new skills and elements on the job, fitting in socially and connecting within teams, and maintaining adequate levels of motivation are all identified areas that need more research and focus from researchers as to help workers with ASD stay employed (Brooke et al., 2018).

One specific gap that exists and that has not been tested for this population in intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is a very powerful construct for workers to maintain success at work overtime (Locke & Latham, 2019). With more members of society having a diagnosis of ASD as a ratio (Nazeer et al., 2019), and the fact that 80% of this population is underemployed or unemployed, a social dilemma presents itself. Employers are being exposed to workers that have ASD at a higher rate and are ill-prepared to adjust their practices, policies, and protocols to meet their needs. Johnson et al. (2020) posited in their study that jobs today are simply not constructed to allow workers with ASD to thrive. Moreover, the authors stated that human resource professionals have a general gap in knowledge and must become more educated on the emotional and cognitive needs of these individuals to allow them to attain and retain much needed employment. Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is that there is

a gap in knowledge of how individuals with ASD experience motivation while at work when assigned SMART goals.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore motivational experiences of young adult workers with ASD when they are assigned SMART goals at work. Previous studies related to motivational experiences for SMART goals and goal setting have not addressed the neurodiverse populations. As a result, this study focused specifically on young adults with ASD as pertaining to motivation. I used IPA as the study approach to address the gap in the literature for this topic.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the motivational experiences of young adult workers with autism when assigned SMART goals in the workplace?

RQ2: What are the motivational experiences of young adult workers with autism when self-disclosed negative judgement and negative bias is detected by these individuals as SMART goals are assigned in the workplace?

Conceptual Framework: Goal Setting

The conceptual framework of this study has its foundation in Locke and Latham's (1968) GST. The idea of the establishment of goals for workers in the workplace as a means of improving their intrinsic motivation was introduced by Locke in 1968. *Intrinsic motivation* refers to motivation from within, or the drive to exert effort that is not tied to external factors such as compensation, recognition, or reward. Moreover, the establishment of goals in the workplace to improve motivation of the employees is a

common practice and has been well studied and observed over the past 50 years (Locke & Latham, 2019). However, the scope that has been covered in the literature concerning goal setting has not included exploration of neurodiverse populations. Conversely, in modern times, more workers who have some forms of neurodiversity have entered the workplace at an accelerated pace causing a potential breakdown in goal-setting outcomes given certain cognitive and behavioral differences inherent in these workers (Anderson et al., 2018). One specific type of neurodiversity in the workplace today is that of ASD. Thus, the need to understand how these workers experience motivation when goals are established exists. The goal setting conceptual framework related to the qualitative approach by allowing workers with ASD to describe their experiences when goals are assigned to them while at work. More discussion on goal setting as well as ASD in the workplace is found in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Nature of the Study

This study is a qualitative design, utilizing an IPA approach to explore the idiographic experiences of the participants (Giorgi, 2009). Use of the IPA approach is in alignment with understanding how young adult workers with ASD make sense of their lived experiences regarding motivation when assigned SMART goals. This is the primary focus of this research. IPA is a particularly useful approach for examining topics that are complex, inconsistent, and emotionally sensitive (Smith et al., 2022). Understanding the experiences with workers with ASD is an exemplar of such a phenomenon, where perception may be inconsistent based upon tendencies of the syndrome. IPA is based on three main principles or bases. First is the basis of phenomenology, as IPA seeks to

understand the detailed lived experiences of the participants. Second, IPA seeks to understand lived experience in its own terms rather than terms that are bound by theoretical preconceptions. Last, IPA is idiographic, in that it is committed to examining the unique detailed experiences of each participant prior to moving on to broader interpretation (Smith et al., 2022).

The research intent in this particular approach was to garner an understanding of a specific phenomenon, process, or perspective. In this approach, sampling is designed to collect a broad array of experiences and data that includes information collection procedures such as interviews. The data can then be followed by thematic analysis to analyze the gathered data (Bellamy et al., 2016).

The key concept for this study was motivational experiences of workers with ASD when assigned SMART goals at work. To conduct the study, 10 workers who have a diagnosis of high functioning ASD and are between the ages of 18 and 35 were selected to participate. I had originally planned to select 12 participants, and additional participants were to be sourced should data saturation fail to be achieved within the first 12 interviews. Although the final sample size was only 10 participants, data saturation was achieved. Snowball sampling was also used as a method for gaining access to participants. Certain ASD professional groups and network groups will also be invited to participate. Selected participants were invited to an audio-only video call (video muted) and were interviewed using semi structured questions that asked about their experiences regarding motivation when SMART goals are established at work. These interviews were transcribed electronically, hand coded, and analyzed thematically to determine common

themes and interpretations of motivational experiences when SMART goals are established.

Definitions

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD): A neurodevelopmental disorder caused by irregularities within the brain. Symptoms of ASD are difficulties with social interaction and engagement, restrictive and/or repetitive motions, restrictive and/or repetitive behaviors, and potentially causing different learning methods and differences in focus and attention (Nazeer et al., 2019).

Goal setting: The act of establishing goals in society for the purpose of making personal experience statement goals concrete and to move goals from emotional rhetoric to action steps by providing people with a feeling of accomplishment for otherwise mundane tasks (Latham, 2020).

SMART goals: In modern management, SMART goals are goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (Locke & Latham, 1990).

Motivation: The forces from within that compel an individual to drive them to achieve and exude effort (Grant et al., 2012).

Intrinsic motivation: The drive to perform an activity for its inherent and innate satisfaction rather than in return for external consequence (Neck et al., 2017).

Extrinsic motivation: The drive to perform an activity in return for a specific reward or to avoid punishment if the task is left undone (Grant et al., 2012).

Goal setting theory (GST): In 1968, Edwin Locke presented GST in his paper titled "Toward a Theory of Task Motivation and Incentives". The theory was predicated

on the belief that when SMART goals were established for individuals in the workplace or otherwise, that intrinsic motivation strengthened towards accomplishing the set goals (Locke & Latham, 2019).

Social identity: Social identity is a component of a person's inward concept of themselves that is created from a perceived membership in social groups and networks. Social identity theory was introduced by Tajfel and Turner in 1978 and is a theory that describes intergroup behavior (Charness & Chen, 2020).

Social judgement: Social judgment is a concept developed by Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall in 1965 that establishes that for every topic, people have an anchor, a latitude of acceptance, a latitude of noncommitment, and a latitude of rejection about what they hear or observe. Depending on how differentiated a person's opinion is about a given topic, can make it more difficult to change an already formed opinion (Sherif et al., 1965).

Assumptions

Research has inherent assumptions built within the nature of its very existence. There will always be elements or factors within research where the researcher assumes or believes to be accurate or true (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Consequently, within this dissertation there were certain ontological, epistemological, and rhetorical assumptions made. The ontological assumption was that each person's perception of reality is unique to that person and subjective. Thus, each participant's description of their view of that reality had to be heard and recorded. The epistemological assumption of the study was that by conducting interviews with the participants, I may have introduced bias into the

collection of data due to interaction through the audio call interviews. The rhetorical

assumption was that the research was not seeking an absolute truth but instead sought to

report the reality as determined in the eyes of the research participant.

It was assumed that the experiences to motivation for each of the participants

would be unique to them and potentially different from the other participants. Another

assumption was that the questions asked were understood in their intent and not confused

or misconstrued due to challenges or communication barriers that are inherent with ASD.

A third assumption was that participants answered in earnest and give honest accounts of

their experience for each question asked. Last, it was assumed that each participant had a

diagnosis of having high functioning ASD, was employed by an employer, was at least

18 years old but not older than 35 years old and had no ulterior motive to participate in

the study. As mentioned, assumptions are inherent in all research and the assumptions as

mentioned above were necessary in order to explore the motivational experiences to goal

setting for workers with high functioning ASD in the workplace.

Scope and Delimitations

Specific aspects of the research problem that were addressed in this study are

workers in the workplace that have a diagnosis of high functioning ASD and their

experiences to motivation when SMART goals are established for them at work. I chose

this focus due to a general absence of research on goal setting for neurodiverse

populations, including ASD, in the workplace. The scope and delimitations represent

boundaries in a given study (Gullet, 2017). Selected participants in this study included

workers, 18-35 years of age, who have a diagnosis of high functioning ASD. Participants

who were younger or older than the selected age range were not considered for

participation, nor were individuals who had a diagnosis of moderate to severe ASD or

individuals who were unemployed.

Competing motivational theories such as self-determination theory and needs-

based theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs were not explored in this study.

These theories represent different approaches to motivation that were not the center of

focus for the research. Self-determination theory, as devised by Ryan et al. (1985), is a

motivational theory that is a competing ideology to that of goal setting but relies on the

constructs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to improve intrinsic motivation.

Maslow's needs-based theory relies on the elements of human emotional need to include

physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, cognitive, and self-actualization (Pinder, 2016).

These theories and accompanying research were not transferrable to individuals who

have a diagnosis of moderate to severe ASD and to individuals who are not employed in

the workforce.

Limitations

Limitations in a study, or elements that may affect the outcomes of a given study,

are inherent in research. Limitations for this study lie in the participant pool, whereas

participants were limited to ASD-diagnosed individuals between the ages of 18 and 35

and actively employed in the workplace. Consequently, the study outcome was not

applicable to populations that fall outside of these parameters. Another limitation is in the

nature of the study. This study, having an IPA qualitative approach, relied on a small

number of participants in order to provide an understanding of their subjective

experiences. The transferability of the study was, in turn, limited given the small sample population.

Bias is also an inherent component of a given study. Because I have been an executive in management for over 20 years and have witnessed motivational approaches of all kinds in the workplace, there are certain biases that could influence the outcome and collection of the data. Measures that were used to reduce or mitigate these biases were to express and record thoughts and feelings using a daily journal as the data was being collected and interpreted. Another tactic is that I practiced the interviews with a peer scholar prior to the real interviews with participants. This aided in reducing bias by allowing me to gain feedback on tone, follow-up questions, and question construction in general.

Significance

This study aimed to contribute to the gap in the literature by providing data on motivational experiences of workers with high functioning ASD when subjected to SMART goals in the workplace. The relevancy of the study was based on the general scarcity of research and knowledge that exists today for ASD workers that are actively employed (Underwood et al., 2019). Furthermore, data have shown that workers with ASD have among the highest unemployment/underemployment of all neurodiversity classifications in the workplace and have established a critical need to understand dynamics that cause these individuals to fall out of the workforce at a heightened percentage (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). This study's findings could lead to positive social change by providing new data and knowledge on how workers with ASD

experience motivation, thereby potentially equipping employers with a stronger understanding of how to establish and keep this population motivated.

Summary

Workers with high functioning ASD may experience motivation differently as compared to the general population when SMART goals are established through the goal-setting process at work. Moreover, goal setting is a predominant motivational process used in the workplace in the modern time, and much is written in the literature about the effects of goals setting on motivation when SMART goals are established (Locke & Latham, 2019). Thus, the need exists to explore and understand further how workers with ASD experience motivation as SMART goals are established for them. Chapter 2 contains a detailed description and outline of ASD as a type of neurodiversity as well as goal setting as a motivational tendency. Chapter 3 includes the framework for the methodology and instrumentation utilized within the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is sparse understanding in the literature about motivation in young adult workers with ASD in the workplace (Patton, 2019). This lack of knowledge creates gaps in understanding key psychological elements, such as how these individuals react both cognitively and emotionally to certain motivational tactics used at work. *Motivation*, defined as the psychological forces from within that stimulate an individual to act or behave in a specific or particular manner, is a key construct in attaining success for any individual, group, or organization (Grant et al., 2012). In today's work environment, a common tactic used for motivation of individuals, teams, and organizations is that of establishing goals, specifically SMART goals (Locke & Latham, 2019). Therefore, the social problem for this study is the current gap in knowledge of how ASD workers experience motivation when SMART goals are introduced at work.

The purpose of the study was to explore motivational experiences for workers in the workforce that are diagnosed with ASD in efforts to contribute to the knowledge gap of how SMART goals are experienced. The research problem for the study was the insufficient understanding of how young adult workers with ASD experience motivation when assigned SMART goals. Learning about motivational experiences of these individuals contributes to the knowledge gap pertaining to ASD workers and potentially improve their ability to find and keep employment as adults.

The setting of goals is a process that establishes plans of action towards leading an individual, team, or organization toward a set outcome. Hence, the approach of setting goals is a motivational tactic used to induce behaviors that ultimately drive stronger

performance allowing for stronger outcomes. Moreover, the idea of goal setting has a long history. The ancient philosopher Aristotle suggested that purpose can cause action (Locke, 1968). Even two millennia ago, scholars and societal leaders knew that the idea of giving people a specific purpose to drive stronger production behaviors was an effective motivational approach. In modern times, goals are still a predominate motivational tactic used in daily life and have been well studied. Through observation, one can see today how goals are set in the business world, sports and fitness, academia, and in the daily lives of the people in society. In essence, goals are used in practically every aspect of society. But a question to understand is, do differences in people cause differences to motivational experience when establishing goals? Or is it safe to say that goal setting experience is universal regardless of differences that are inherent among the people? In this study, I explored motivational experiences for workers that have high functioning ASD but have a job in the workplace and are subjected to the same goals that non-ASD workers are on a routine basis. I also sought to understand if by establishing a new purpose for these workers through the use of goals, will motivation be enhanced or improved, stay the same, or be decreased based on the perception of these individuals.

In this literature review, I provide a summary of the existing literature on both goal setting and the condition of ASD itself. I discuss the history of ASD, symptoms of the disease on individuals, capabilities of individuals that have ASD, how ASD is perceived for workers at work by individuals and employers, and what transition processes are in place today that take school-aged individuals who have ASD to the work field. I also cover the construct of motivation as well as the use of goals in today's

workplace for motivational purposes. This chapter is organized to explain literature review strategies, the conceptual foundation, and a summary and transition to subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

Literature Review Strategies

The Walden University library as well as the databases of EBSCOhost, Psych INFO, ProQuest, selected books, and online journals were used predominately in the literature searches. Google Scholar was also used as a retrieval engine and then compared to the Walden library resources to ensure the source was of a scholarly make-up. The initial keyword search terms were *motivation, goals, goal-setting, goal-setting theory, autism, ASD, S.M.A.R.T, high functioning, work, work place, HRD, effort at work, disability, job satisfaction, quality of life, supported employment, qualitative, adults, vocational/labor force participation, self-determination, self-efficacy, self-confidence, judgement, lens model, social judgement theory,* and *self-defeatist.* Specific phrases that I used in the literature search were *goal setting at work, ASD at work, ASD in the workplace, intrinsic work motivation,* and *motivation of goal setting.*

Scholarly articles that were no older than 7 years old were used as the primary focus of this study; however, certain older writings were also selected due to the seminal value that the work represented. Older articles provided a historical perspective on the topic and contributed to the richness and depth of the study. Governmental agencies such as the U.S. Department of Employment were also used to gain access to statistics and relevant data to provide a solid footing for the research.

Conceptual Foundation

Two main concepts were foundational to this study, and both work in tandem to establish a conceptual framework. The first concept, which is the primary foundation of the work, is that of goal setting in the workplace. The second concept, less material in nature but a contributing factor to the foundation, is that of judgment in the workplace.

Goal setting is a motivational tactic commonly used in the workplace setting today to improve workers' intrinsic motivation. GST is a motivational theory that was introduced to the literature in 1968 by Edwin Locke and Gary Latham (Locke & Latham, 2019). This theory establishes that goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART), improve motivation for the individual, group, or organization. Over the years, GST has stood the test of time and is one of the major motivational theories that is widely accepted in the scholarly community today (Locke & Latham, 2019). Hence, goal setting is a major, commonplace concept that is practiced widely in the present time and is used routinely by leaders and managers to motivate individuals and teams to elicit stronger production behaviors.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, industrialists, sociologists, and psychologists have studied motivation at work in an effort to maximize worker output to drive stronger achievement and performance (Aamodt, 2015). With the birth of the industrial revolution in the United States at the turn of the 20th century, greater emphasis was placed on higher outputs from American workers to accelerate the production of goods and services. In 1911, Frederick Taylor authored a book titled "The Principles of Scientific Management," where he showcased a new kind of manufacturing approach

(Hill & Van Buren, 2018). Taylor believed that manufacturing tasks should be reproduced by a singular person with established goals for production each day (Waring, 2016). Prior to this notion, manufacturing followed the craftsman style of production, whereby one worker started and finished an entire assembly without others assisting in any capacity. Taylor believed that a given worker could master the skills needed to maximize productivity for a given task rather than all tasks required to produce a finished product, and through providing them goals to achieve each day, could drive productivity higher and higher. The prevailing psychological beliefs prior were that of behavioralists, who believed that behavior was not reliant on conscience choices (Latham et al., 2018). The concept that a person could actually choose to guide behavior based upon external stimulus was a shift in thinking for the time. Behaviorists posited that goals were merely a convenient concept to study a person's habitual response to a selected object. Taylor's method became known as "Taylorism" and produced the genesis of the modern-day assembly line tactics and ushered in the era of mass production of goods (Hill & Van Buren, 2018). This approach is still in use today in manufacturing although aided mightily by current day technology and automation capability and applied in the global workplace. However ingenious (arguably) this change in manufacturing approach may have been at the turn of the 20th century, it also introduced challenges in how to keep workers continually motivated while performing highly repetitive and mundane tasks for the majority of the workday. This challenge gave rise to the study of motivation at a greater intensity in the workplace. It also established the questions around motivation as a construct, such as, are people born self-motivated or does motivation need to be induced?

In 1968, Locke and Latham worked in tandem on their motivational development project known as GST. Locke captured their work in the article "Toward a Theory of Task Motivation and Incentives" (Locke, 1968). In this article, Locke posited that the establishment of clearly set goals followed with appropriate feedback to the worker once goals were set, improved motivation (Locke & Latham, 2019). As previously mentioned, the principles of GST are established by setting goals for work in the workplace that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART). GST also posits that by providing clear feedback to workers once SMART goals are set, workers become more motivated to perform and produce work (Locke & Latham, 2019).

SMART criteria within goal setting is also well documented. Locke and Latham (2018) established that if goals were specific (the "S" in SMART), and not broad in context, it provided clarity in communication of expectations and eliminated ambiguity and confusion. They found that the clearer and more specific the goal was, the greater the goal commitment became on the side of the employee. Moreover, specificity has been a major component of the theory over time. Kehr (2019) stated that the more specific and narrow-focused the goals are in the minds of the individual, the more motivated they became. Many empirical studies have been conducted over the last century on work motivation. However, these studies utilized vague and general goals versus specific goals that are focused on common objectives, and the literature on the topic illustrates that the more specific that goals are, the greater the induced intrinsic motivation. GST posits that goals also need to be measurable (the "M" in SMART) and have the ability to be assessed as a comparative of actual goal attainment versus the set target goal and to identify when

a goal has actually been achieved. Locke and Latham (1968) found that if goals were not measurable, goal commitment decreased, and motivation waned. The "A" in SMART represents attainability and is considered by individuals and teams as being capable of being achieved. While there is much literature on the importance of goals to be set that are difficult and the more difficult the higher the motivation, they must not be so difficult that they are perceived as impossible to accomplish. Locke and Latham (2019) posited that the appropriate goal setting threshold to maximize motivation is at the 90% percentile of total human capability; thereby creating a goal that is very difficult but not perceived as impossible is the optimal target. Relevance is also a required criteria for goals to be effective (the "R" in SMART). Goal commitment is closely tied to a person's perception that the goal is actually meaningful to the mission of the organization and its core values and is worthy of the effort required. Studies have shown that if a workforce perceives a goal to not have meaning towards the overall mission or purpose of the work or there is a lack of personal identity to the goal itself, an overall lack of relevance had a negative effect on goal commitment and effort waned. The final criterion in establishing SMART goals is to place a restriction on time (T). Locke and Latham found that without a specific deadline that established a sense of urgency to accomplish set goals, that motivation and goal commitment also fell. By setting this criterion, the dynamic of the never-ending marathon for a goal or project can be avoided and keeps teams motivated and focused on time to achieve the goal.

Research on goal setting concerning personality types utilizing the Big Five personality model has also been completed. Latham and Locke (2018) found correlation

to personality type from the Big Five Personality theory and how goal setting impacted motivation. The Big Five Personality theory consists of the personality constructs of agreeableness, consciousness, neuroticism, extroversion, and openness to experience (OCEAN). For this taxonomy of constructs, *agreeableness* is defined as the tendency to be friendly, compassionate, and agreeable versus critical or rational. *Conscientiousness* is defined as the tendency to be efficient and organized versus extravagant or careless. *Neuroticism* is defined as the tendency to be sensitive or nervous versus resilient and confident. *Extroversion* is defined as the tendency to be outgoing and energetic versus solitary and reserved, and *openness* is defined as the tendency to be inventive and curious versus consistent and cautious.

In Latham and Locke's experiment, they found that there was a correlation between these constructs and motivation effect through goal setting and reported their results and corresponding alpha statistic as: Agreeableness (-.51), Consciousness (.35), Extroversion (-.15), Openness to Experience (-.18), and Neuroticism (-.31). Each construct within the Big Five was tested to be statistically significant, and all were found to have slight to significant correlation (i.e., the higher the decimal outcome the more the correlation) to how participant's motivation reacted to goals. It was also found within their study that self-esteem played a part in the correlation. They found that the higher the self-esteem within the individual, the higher the impact on motivation that goal setting had (Latham & Locke, 2018).

The process of co-authoring goals has also been discussed as important to overall motivation. Establishing goals in a mutual fashion has proven to be more effective than

assigning goals cart blanche to employees (Aarts, 2019). There is prominence in the fact

that collaboration with employees to establish goals jointly has a major impact on

acceptance and effectiveness of the goals and ultimately, on performance as well (Aarts,

2019). Hence, the ability to deeply establish set goals in the minds of the people and to

have them identify with the goals as a personal objective is a key factor in improving

motivation. There is also evidence that goals arise from people's conscience decisions but

at the same time, impact the unconscious mind. Aarts (2019) found that overall goal

direction could increase when a goal concept is impacted by external factors. He also

found that externally driven goals are derived from a sensation of urgency. He posited

that goals start in the unconscious mind. Testing this hypothesis, Latham et al. (2017)

conducted a series of experiments where individuals were provided a series of photos of a

man lifting either 20 lb. (not heavy), 200 lb. (heavy), or 400 lb. (extremely heavy). The

individuals were then instructed to press down as hard as they could on a lever as a task.

Individuals that had the most difficult (heavy) photo in advance exerted the most effort,

providing evidence that goals affect our subconscious and trigger effort in our conscience

minds.

The literature review for the conceptual framework is considerable for goal

setting regarding motivation effect. However, literature has lacked, to date, for the

application of goal setting on specific classes of workers. Specific groups, such as

neurodiverse groups, can potentially have inherent differences in make-up, abilities,

personalities, and challenges as compared to non-neurodiverse groups (Goldfarb et al.,

2019). These individuals have not been addressed concerning overall experience to goal

setting and are the focus of this study. ASD is a prime example of a specific neurodiverse population that is in the workplace in increasing numbers and needs to be studied more vigorously in the literature (Sung et al., 2019).

As previously mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, judgement in the workplace plays a secondary but important role in the framework of this study and will be covered in detail later in the literature review. But to briefly discuss it in this introduction, judgement in the workplace is supported by social judgement theory (SJT) and posits that people perceive reality based upon viewing a distal stimulus through a multivariate lens or perception. The theory goes on to state that this perception is affected by variable cues and environmental factors that are imperfectly correlated with each other towards establishing an overall judgement (Dhami & Mumpower, 2018). SJT establishes that these perceptions are unique to the beholder and are based on variables that are true to the individual forming their own perspectives. For mental health in the workplace and specifically the ASD community, these perceptions are commonly negative and tend to establish biases, stereotypes, and judgment. These psychological constructs can be perceived negatively for workers with neurodiversity and create an overall negative experience on sense of self-confidence, self-worth, and self-efficacy. As SMART goals are established in the workplace, studies have shown that if an individual lacks the confidence or feeling of efficacy to achieve the goal, goal commitment falls. Hence, how a sense of being judged in the workplace is a significant construct that must be understood for workers with ASD when SMART goals are established.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

History and Background of ASD

ASD is a serious developmental disorder that affects the nervous system, causing impairment to the ability to communicate and interact with others. It is most commonly diagnosed in childhood after the age of 4, but many individuals with ASD are not diagnosed until well into their adulthood. Symptoms include the following (Sharma et al., 2018):

- difficulty with decision making

- difficulty with establishing relationships

- lack of an ability to make eye contract

- difficulty with regulating emotions

- extreme interests in one topic at a time

- repetitive monologue on the same subject

- over sensitivity/hypersensitivity for specific sounds and smells

- involuntary noises such as coughing or throat sounds

- lack of ability to understand humor

- lack of ability to understand unspoken language

- lack of ability to interpret emotion in others

- repetitive behaviors

- ongoing depression

- general anxiety issues

ASD is now classified into two main core domains: repetitive behaviors/restrictive

interests as well as social/communication impairment. It is also a disorder that is well

known to have comorbidity with other conditions such as attention deficit hyperactive

disorder (ADHD), social anxiety disorder, and clinical depression (Sharma et al., 2018).

Although autism was not formally recognized until the mid-20th century,

descriptions of patients were found in state surveys in the early 1900s describing patients

as having odd psychological tendencies and were deemed as having "idiocy" (Nazeer et

al., 2019). The concept of autism was coined in 1911 by the German psychiatrist Eugen

Bleuler, where he described the symptoms of the disease in its most severe form as

having schizophrenic tendencies (Evans, 2013). Bleuler believed that children with the

disease harbored infantile wishes to avoid the harshness of reality and replaced them with

fantasy or hallucination leading him to believe the symptoms derived from a form of

schizophrenia (Evans, 2013). It was not until 40 years later that psychologists began to

see autism as separate from other diseases including schizophrenia, and that instead of the

disorder causing excess fantastical and hallucinogenic tendencies, children with autism

began to be described as having a void of unconscious symbolic life (Evans, 2013).

Autism is a word that has its origin in the Greek language meaning "autos" or

"self" to describe "self-absorption" or "withdrawal from reality". In the 1940s, Leo

Kanner, an Austrian-American psychiatrist, published a paper titled "Autistic

Disturbances of Affective Contact", where he documented previous case studies of 11

children that had been given alternative diagnoses but had similar symptoms including

anxiously obsessive preservation of sameness and repetitive stereotypies (Harris, 2016).

He documented in his study that the children elicited high levels of intelligence and memory but displayed a powerful desire for aloneness. He later named their condition early infantile autism. The outcomes of his work led to the second edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-II), that was published in 1952 with the definition of autism as a psychiatric condition and deemed autism a form of childhood schizophrenia. The description with this version of the manual characterized symptoms as being atypical with withdrawn behavior, general unevenness, gross immaturity, and inadequacy in development. In parallel with Kanner's work and in 1944, an Austrian pediatrician named Hans Asperger described similar symptoms that he had observed in over 200 children he had treated in his practice over time (Nazeer et al., 2019). Asperger's description differed from Kanner's in that he described the symptoms as having difficulty in communication, having repetitive behaviors, social awkwardness, and unpredictable sensory responses (Nazeer et al., 2019). Asperger did not describe symptoms of cognitive disorder or symptoms of schizophrenia that had been included in Kanner's work and older observations of the time. He referred to these children as "little professors" given their high levels of intelligence that he observed in his study. He mentioned that the disease was not particularly rare and named the condition "autistic psychopathy". Later, the disease would be known as "Asperger's Syndrome" (Nazeer et al., 2019).

In the 1980s, the category of infantile autism was introduced in the third edition *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III), under the interpretative phenomenological term "pervasive developmental disorder," recognizing

autism as distinct and separate from childhood-onset schizophrenia (Harris, 2016). Prevalence of the disease, however, remained low as the criteria of diagnosis was too restrictive. At the time of the DSM-IV version some years later, clinical attention was placed on autism to include Asperger's syndrome as well as Rett syndrome as additional categories of the disease (Harris, 2016). At the present time, and with the creation of the DSM-V, all previous subcategories of autism were collapsed into one category of "autism spectrum disorder" and included both idiopathic as well as syndromic classifications as part of the broader disease. The DSM-V folded all subcategories of the condition into one umbrella diagnosis of ASD and removed subcategories such as Asperger's syndrome and instead categorized the disease into two categories of impaired social communication and/or interaction and restricted and/or repetitive behaviors.

ASD is highly variable in symptoms and causation and is still today not well understood (Mayo Clinic, 2022). This disorder has no single known cause and is believed that both genetic as well as environmental factors contribute to the causation. As it is a developmental disorder, it is considered to be a children's disorder and is most identified in the public school system (Mayo, 2022). However, many individuals with the disorder are not diagnosed until adulthood (Robinson, 2019). From a genetic perspective, there are several different genes that have been found to correlate to causing ASD in children. Yet, in other cases, genetic changes or mutations are associated with causation causing ASD to be associated with genetic disorders such as Rett or Fragile X syndromes, which are genetic conditions that cause a range of developmental problems including learning disabilities and cognitive impairment (Mayo Clinic, 2022). ASD is also known to have

comorbidity with other psychiatric conditions such as depression and anxiety disorders. In some studies, individuals with ASD have been recorded to have comorbidity as high as 89.5% of the sampled population. Underwood et al., (2019) found that of the participants with ASD in their study, 62% were found to struggle with depression and 55% were found to struggle with anxiety. In their study, individuals with the disease were less likely to have been married or be in a work setting or have a job and had more alcohol-related problems. There was a significant correlation in the study to adults with ASD having migraine headaches (42%) as compared to the control group (20%) within the tested population. In addition, Epilepsy and seizure had higher rates of comorbidity in the ASD group (8%) versus the control group (2%).

ASD in the Workplace

The ratio of ASD today in the work force makes up 1 in 54 people (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). This is a drastically rising statistic over the past decade and evidence shows that the ratio is escalating and in need to be understood more effectively (Patton, 2019). Moreover, there has been an increase of ASD diagnoses of over 78% in the United States since 2007 (Hensel, 2017). Reasons for this change range from the expansion of the ASD spectrum to include a broader range of illness (with the publishing of the DSM-V) to a greater awareness of the disease within the medical community (Hensel, 2017). And, as more children are diagnosed in their development years, it yields an escalating number of young adults with ASD entering the workforce. This fact has proven to be more and more challenging as the underemployment of this class of worker is at 80%, the highest of any mental illness in the workforce (Patton, 2019).

In spite of these statistics, workers with ASD have a broad spectrum of abilities depending on the severity of symptoms of the disease. However, employment success for workers with ASD is heavily dependent on the degree of symptoms that they have on the overall spectrum. Individuals with lesser symptoms of the disorder are considered to be "high functioning" and are more capable to have higher levels of social interaction and emotional control and emotional intelligence (Scott et al., 2019). Conversely, the more severe on the spectrum that a person is diagnosed as having, the lesser levels of social interaction and emotional control/intelligence that are possessed, leading to more challenges to attaining and maintaining employment.

Specific markets such as highly repetitive manufacturing, information technology, and communication technology have shown stronger interest in hiring and developing workers with ASD in recent times (Austin & Pisano, 2017). To the point, there are some major corporations in today's marketplace that have made the strategic decision to focus on bringing more of these individuals into their companies (Tomczak et al., 2018). Companies such as Salesforce, Hewlett Packard, Microsoft, Freddie Mac, Ford Motor Company, Ernst & Young, Walgreens, Goodwill Industries, Home Depot, and System, Application, and Products (SAP) have all started programs intended to target and hire these individuals (Holland, 2018). For example, SAP's program was implemented in 2013 with the title of 'Autism at Work' and was created to improve the percentage of workers with ASD within their global workforce to 1%. To date, over 175 employees have been hired into the program due to this initiative (Rudy, 2020). Employer programs such as these were unheard of just 10 years ago and are becoming more prevalent in the

current day corporate environment. Moreover, there are some companies that have made hiring workers with ASD a key component of their corporate mission and overall employee make-up. Organizations such as the Danish company Specialisterne, have established a 'gold standard' of neurodiversity by implementing programs that have successfully accomplished the hiring of 75% of its workforce having the diagnosis of ASD (Holland, 2018). Other smaller regional organizations, such as 321 Coffee in Raleigh, North Carolina, have made hiring neurodiverse employees a key component of their overall identity (321 Coffee, 2022). Founded in 2017, 321 Coffee established as a cornerstone, the importance of hiring workers with neurodiversity and have made the development of these individuals a component of their overall mission. The company has experienced successful operations since their founding and are planning to open a third location within the Raleigh, NC USA metropolitan area in 2022. In general, employers are beginning to see that workers with the disease have unique skills and abilities and are beginning to realize that they have strategic value in the modern workplace. However, and as will be discussed later, there is still considerable bias and judgement placed on these individuals posing significant challenges to them.

ASD Worker Abilities

As previously mentioned, there is an increasing number of workers that identify as having ASD. Unfortunately, there is a gap in understanding on the part of employers as to the differences that these workers possess in the form of behaviors, skills, and attributes (Bury et al., 2018). Studies have shown that adults with ASD have specific advantages in performance and general make-up for selected jobs in the form of

analytical skill set, increased focus, stronger work commitment, superior attention to details, more tolerance to repetitive tasks, and deeper employer loyalty (Bury et al., 2018). In spite of these strengths and abilities, they also face increased challenges in the form of inflexibility, strict adherence to routines, and sensory differences. Although these characteristics represent definite positive and negative behavioral attributes, when looking at the model employee, the potential skills that workers with ASD possess are still not well understood and embraced by the majority of employers (Bury et al., 2018).

Absent of a stronger understanding, these individuals face increased challenges in the form of stigmas, biases, and discrimination surrounding their mental health in the workplace. There seems to be a general disconnect between behaviors common to neurodiverse workers and some of the most researched theories in the Industrial and Organizational Psychology (IOP) field (Patton, 2019). While the mentioned positive attributes of workers with ASD would normally promote stronger job performance, motivation, and engagement for the neurodiverse, the skills do not promote longer employment or stronger hire tendency for the population. Statistics such as these indicate that modern day leadership, along with motivational tactics and certain equity-based theories, need to be adjusted to accommodate for the ever-growing neurodiverse class of worker that is present today (Scott et al., 2019).

Goal Usage in the Workplace

Goal setting has long been a tactic used to improve motivation. Locke and Latham (2019) reviewed the past 50 years of GST in their article titled "The development of goal setting theory: A half century retrospective" and assert that when SMART goals are

established for individuals and groups, motivation improves. They also posited that the

addition of participative goal setting further strengthens the improvement in motivation

beyond setting SMART goals as designed in the theory. Epton et al. (2017) found in their

meta-analysis of over 141 papers, that when goals are set that are challenging, are

established publicly, contained feedback to the worker, and were group oriented,

motivation was improved more effectively than otherwise. The authors also suggest in

their review that when the goal was externally monitored, had less feedback, and the

results were not publicly set, that there was a lesser effect on motivation.

These principles are in action in most organizations on a daily basis. Further,

major corporations have incorporated the use of goals as a significant component of how

work gets done within their organizations. Elements such as employee recognition,

compensation, and promotion are all organizational psychology constructs that have been

tied to goal setting. One example to highlight is General Electric (GE). GE is an

American conglomerate company that manufactures products from aircraft engines to

medical devices. At its pinnacle, where it employed upward of 500,000 employees, the

company made the use of goals a key cornerstone of their very existence in the late

1900's. Jack Welch, the chief executive officer of GE from 1981 to 2001, established the

company as arguably one of the greatest corporations of the 20th century. He established a

system he called "differentiation" as a theme within the culture that utilized SMART

goals for each division, team, and individual. GE established a system where they broke

out each employee as either a top 20%, middle 70% or bottom 10% employee based on

how well that the goals were accomplished (Welch & Welch, 2005). The company placed

the majority of its managerial focus on managing the middle 70% by establishing strong

feedback loops, providing training and development to the employees, and establishing

thoughtful SMART goals with routine feedback loops and co-authoring of set goals.

They believed that the top 20% of the employee group needed very little attention and

had "gotten it" and that the bottom 10% were not salvageable and were eliminated each

year (Welch & Welch, 2005). These determinations were made by how well each

employee accomplished goals that were set. However arguable the merit of GE's

differentiation program was, the fact that goal setting was a major component of the

organization cannot be argued and is still a major focus today.

In today's workplace, goal setting is used as a basis for employee selection,

development, promotion, and rewards and recognition in most organizations. Goals are

well established in all major industries including manufacturing, education, healthcare,

government, and professional. For employee selection, it is common today that hiring

managers and committees to establish SMART goals to guide the type of employees

regarding skills, background, and abilities that they desire to hire and onboard to the

organization. Criteria from specific backgrounds, educational preparation, and previous

skills are linked to scorecards and measured organizationally as to compare actual hires

to the established hiring goals that are set. Development of employees also involves the

establishment of SMART goals to establish training curriculum and participation of

training programs in effort to improve skillset of employees, drive out wasted costs, and

improve workplace attitudes such as employee satisfaction, job involvement, and

organizational commitment (Pinder, 2016).

Internal promotion is also impacted often by goal setting in the workplace. Decisions on which employee to promote can depend on various factors but one of them is goal accomplishment. It is a common practice to promote the candidate that accomplished set metrics most effectively as compared to other competing candidates. Many times, these decisions are based on near term outcomes such as financial performance, or production outcomes of work that can be measured and recorded but are based on set goals and objectives.

Although organizations do utilize goal setting to determine extrinsic rewards and recognition, studies have shown that the actual payout of these incentives has a minimal or neutral impact to overall motivation and vigilance of the employee. Robison et al. (2021) conducted an experiment on working adults related to vigilance decrement. Their experiment tested moderators of vigilance decrement by introducing goals of varying difficulty, feedback, and combining goals with extrinsic rewards for effect (rather than intrinsic). The results revealed that when goals were introduced, vigilance decrement diminished, and sustained attention and focus on tasks increased. The authors mentioned that extrinsic rewards had a nominal to neutral effect on motivation in their experiment indicating that goal setting is a driver of intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation.

Perceptions, Lenses, Judgement and Stigma of Workers With ASD

As previously mentioned, current underemployment/unemployment of workers with ASD is at 80% and the highest percentage of any mental illness classification in the workforce today. There are many reasons that have been discussed in the literature for

this statistic, such as lack of understanding for the disease itself from employers and hiring managers, to barriers to selection processes that accommodate for workers with ASD, and the general perception or viewpoint of these workers from the general work population (Hedley et al., 2017). Of these causations, the perceptional lens of neurodiversity that hiring managers, co-workers, and employment HR departments have is a major challenge for workers on the spectrum. To take a step back, the lens model is an industrial psychology model that was originally conceived as an analogy for perception and later as a component of social judgement theory (Goldstein, 2004). The model got its origin based on Egon Brunswik's concept of probabilistic functionalism. Brunswik argued that the early thinking of the 20th century that included the use of a singular variable to form conclusions was incorrect. He posited that multivariate data needed to exist in order for knowledge of behavior to be valid. SJT was later introduced by Kenneth Hammond based on the work on Brunswik. SJT is based on a perception of a distal stimulus through the use of multiple cues, or environmental factors and attributes, which are imperfectly correlated with each other that are focused through the "lens" of the beholder into specific judgements. To apply SJT and the lens model for workers with ASD, the cues in this example can be the hiring criterion of an organization that are not written specifically for the neurodiverse, past personal experience of a hiring panel member of an individual with ASD, and the training curriculum of an organization that is not written to accommodate a broad range of mental capacities. The theory is predicated on the fact that each judgement that is made on behalf of an assessing individual is variable and correlated to specific cues and thus, unique to the beholder. These

judgements on workers with ASD are rampantly negative in today's workplace given the reasons as, in part, are described above and are a major barrier for ASD workers (Hedley et al., 2017). Certain ASD worker behaviors and characteristics are different from the general population and thus have the potential to be judged inappropriately. This judgement can be perceived by neurodiverse workers and can lead to withdrawal, lack of social identity within groups, and overall performance reduction by the worker. These behavioral outcomes become especially negative when SMART goals are established for individuals and groups, where performance becomes measurable and the pressures of delivering are time-bound. Also, these judgements can lead to stigmas being established, or an overall mark of shame of discredit in the workplace.

Common stigmas in the workplace for neurodiverse workers are that people with mental illnesses lack both the task and social competence for work, people with mental illnesses are dangerous or unpredictable in workplaces, mental illness is not a legitimate illness, working is not healthy for people with mental illnesses, and providing employment for people with mental illness is an act of charity (Krupa et al., 2009). Also, it is important to note that these stigmas and assumptions vary from person to person at work such as co-workers, supervisors, and people with mental illnesses themselves (Krupa et al., 2019). Thus, the compounding effect of perception, judgement, and stigma of workers with ASD coupled with the pressures of SMART goals and the expectations for workers to deliver results, could be a contributor to lower employment for workers diagnosed with ASD.

These stigmas are believed to be driven or fed by fears in the workplace and have been documented in the literature as a phenomenon where workers with ASD are perceived as being incompetent, awkward, cold, unsociable, hypersensitive, aggressive, unintelligent, frightening and even dangerous (Patton, 2019). In terms of the effects of these stereotypes, research has shown that managers have a generalized fear concerning the behavior of workers with a neurological and psychological disorder, yet similar research indicates that a general low expectation of performance exists for these workers including ASD (Erickson et al., 2014; Hurley-Hanson & Giannantonio, 2017; Ren et al., 2008; Santuzzi et al., 2014; Shih et al., 2013). Research has also found that workers with neurodiversity were subject to insensitive and harsh language, patronizing behaviors, and a general condescension that ultimately led to the social exclusion of the individuals (Patton, 2019). For those diagnosed with high functioning ASD formally known as Asperger's disorder, research has shown that these individuals face discrimination in the workplace due to hiring practices, unfair treatment on the job and a general reluctance to adjust or concessions to practice and protocols to accommodate inherent differences these workers possess (Patton, 2019). The social isolation of these workers and poor social treatment can lead to a general barrier to teamwork, innovation creation, positive job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment. It can also lead to lack of self-confidence and self-efficacy in relation to the task and an overall lack of goal commitment, which is an essential component of goal attainment (Pinder, 2016).

Social Identity, Self-Esteem, and Goal Setting

Two of the prevailing moderators to goal setting in the present day are that of

social identity and self-esteem. Social identity is defined as a sense of self as pertains to

perceived membership within a group context or social group. Self-esteem is defined as a

person's subjective evaluation of self and their own worth. In an experiment conducted

by Pilegge and Holtz (1997), the authors found that when social identity increased within

the individual, a strengthening of similarity or feeling of belonging to ingroup members

increased as well, regardless of self-esteem levels. They also found that if self-esteem

was high, along with a high level of social identity, individuals set higher and more

difficult-to-attain goals for themselves in a controlled environment. Goal setting relies on

the ability for people to see the established goal as something that can be attained or

accomplished and thus, worthy to exude or extend effort to achieve.

The literature also supports the notion that social identity is also needed in

conjunction with self-esteem for optimal motivation for goal achievement. Conversely,

without a sense of social identity and self-esteem, goal setting is less effective given a

general self-belief that the goal is unattainable by the individual or there is a lack of a

sense of belonging (Locke & Latham, 2019). Moreover, Gary Latham wrote about the

power of positive psychology and its interconnection to goal setting and stated that

positive people with a strong sense of self identity were more driven to set goals and

extend themselves from a motivational perspective.

Conversely, there is a general lack of literature pertaining to self-esteem and

social identity for individuals diagnosed with ASD. Given that both constructs lend to be

moderators for goal setting as previously mentioned, supports the need to better

understand if adult workers in the workplace experience challenges to either construct

and whether these potential challenges pose challenges to motivational experience to goal

setting. Moreso to the point, most of the studies that are in existence on the topic are not

conducted on working aged adults in the workplace. What is available to review are

studies that have been conducted on children. Of these studies, results are somewhat

mixed. Van der Cruijsen and Boyer (2020) conducted a study of children to determine if

there was a link between self-esteem and psychopathology within a targeted group. The

results of the study revealed that there was a diminished level of explicit self-esteem

within the ASD group as compared to the control group (non-ASD children). Yet in a

study conducted by McChesney and Toseeb, (2018), results showed that participants with

ASD did not show significantly less self-esteem than that of the control group.

ASD Worker Transitioning to the Workplace

As previously mentioned, ASD is well known as a developmental disease and is

widely classified as a childhood disease. However, as children migrate through the school

systems and ultimately graduate, they are faced with a drastic decrease in support

function as they transition into their working years. Given the considerable literature on

school-age autism and the fact that most symptoms of the disease are first detected by

teachers in the classroom, development programs, social support networks, and education

adjustment programs are in abundance for students with ASD as well as their families.

But these systems just simply don't exist commonly post primary and secondary school

completion (Nicholas et al., 2018). Examples of this void of support are in family support

and engagement to young workers, community resources for adults with ASD, and funding and resources for adults with ASD. Children with the disease are accustomed to receiving considerable motivational support from their parents, teachers, and program workers to help them succeed in the classroom and to progress through the school system (Nicholas et al., 2018). This level of support is often frowned upon by most employers once individuals with ASD enter the workplace and parental involvement for the employee on their job is not allowed in most cases. For most individuals that were diagnosed in their development years, familial involvement is a key driver for motivation and success while in school making the absence of these supports a difficult barrier to transition to work.

There is also a void in community-based resources for young workers with ASD. Programs such as social development, communication, and interaction are simply not readily available in most cities in the present time (Nicholas et al., 2018). Without family support and also community programs, the transitioning ASD worker can be faced with an inability to stay employed once a job is attained. And, to reflect on the employment statistics of this population, 80% of workers with ASD in the workplace are unemployed or underemployed. Studies have shown that once a job is lost for this population in the transitioning years, self-confidence is lost and a there is a general lack of motivation to re-enter the workplace environment and they simply stay unemployed.

Given the level of drop-off support from employers as compared to school systems, there is the propensity for increased stress, anxiety, and lack of confidence and self-efficacy for these workers. And as goals are established in the everyday motivational

techniques of the modern workplace, the compounding pressures of a void of support, lack of understanding on the part of the employer of differences in behavioral characteristics for ASD, and the need for employers to employ a workforce to achieve goals when they are set, can triangulate to create an environment that is overwhelming for the young ASD worker (Seaman et al., 2016). However, there have been studies conducted over the past decade that provide some hope for improving the transition into the workplace for these individuals.

Research has shown in these studies that if individuals with ASD can acquire and maintain employment, that they experience decreased anxiety, improved self-esteem and emotional state, financial gain, independence, and enhanced well-being (Johnson et al., 2020). Areas in this research focus on increased collaboration, training and development, and mentoring programs. Outcomes of these studies suggest that if organizations place effort in each of the identified areas, an overall improvement to the transition process for people with ASD can be achieved as they begin their working years (Hedley et al., 2017) (Johnson, et al., 2020). However, more research is needed to further the knowledge of the impact of transition induced stress for individuals as they leave high school and enter the workforce.

Summary and Conclusions

Previously mentioned and has been established, there is a need to further understand motivational tendencies and experiences for motivation in workers with ASD in the workplace. Specifically, for when they are assigned SMART goals. Moreover, there is also little known about ASD in the workplace as we face a growing population of

workers that have the disease. We know that there has been a recent acceleration in the past decade of diagnoses of the disease within the general population. The literature states that as many as 1 in 52 individuals are on the spectrum and these individuals are migrating to the workplace. These individuals are being referred to as Generation X.

Currently, one of the predominate motivational tactics in the modern-day workplace is setting SMART goals, where this approach has been embedded vigorously from recruiting to on-boarding, to training and development, to production. Virtually every facet of work that gets done today uses goals as a motivational tactic. However, goal setting has not been well studied on minority populations that exist in the make-up of the overall workplace such as workers with neurodiversity. One specific neurodiversity in the workplace today is that of ASD. Unfortunately, there is a gap of understanding of this disease in the literature and studies on it are sparse. This dynamic causes a lack of knowledge in both management ranks as well as the general workforce in differences that exist between ASD workers and the general population. This gap also contributes to the tendency to judge individuals with ASD unfairly, to establish negative biases about them, and create fear towards these individuals.

Statistically, these workers struggle to be employed and are the most challenged of any neurodiversity in the workplace to find and keep employment. Sadly, this struggle robs employers of the skills that these individuals possess including advanced quantitative abilities, focus, dedication, reliability, and dependability. As researchers, we simply must know more about the differences in this population and learn how to attract, retain, and help them thrive for an entire career and work life. The simple truth is that the

modern-day employer simply isn't focused on these initiatives and the gaps in knowledge regarding virtually every aspect of them is vast. This dissertation seeks to understand what motivational experiences that workers with ASD have when SMART goals are set for them to achieve. It also seeks to understand how the present judgement and biases affect their motivational experience in parallel when SMART goals are set. By understanding outcomes to these two principles, employers can better prepare managers and their workforce to adjust their approach to motivation through SMART goals as necessary and to decrease negative judgement and bias towards employees with ASD. Both of these adjustments and actions have the potential to improve upon the 80% underemployment/unemployment that exists today within the population.

Within this dissertation, a qualitative research approach was taken to directly hear from participants that have a diagnosis of ASD and that are active in the workplace as employees today. The answers provided helped establish knowledge that contributes to gaps in the literature regarding motivational experience to goal setting for these workers as well as a better understanding of how judgement and bias contributes to this experience. Questions were posed to the participants for how they experience each element of SMART goals included specificity, measurability, attainability, relevance, and timeliness of the goals when set. Questions were posed to inquire how the feeling of judgement or bias is experienced at the origination of goal setting. Chapter 3 of this dissertation will discuss research methods in great detail and will explain the approach to the research to be carried out.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this IPA research was to explore motivational experiences with assigned SMART goals for young adult workers with ASD. This chapter follows the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines to protect research participants from ethical issues while conducting the research. This chapter includes details on the research design and rationale, reviews the research questions, and explains the role of the researcher. It also delves into the qualitative methodology, participant selection logic and approach, inclusion and exclusion criteria, instrumentation, procedures that were taken in the research, participation, data collection, and the data analysis plan. Details on trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability as well as ethical procedures, treatment of human participants, treatment of data, and threats to validity are also discussed.

Research Design and Rationale

The IPA qualitative research approach was used to explore motivational experiences for workers with ASD when assigned SMART goals at work. The research questions I used in this study followed the IPA qualitative methodology and inquiry as described by Howard et al. (2019) and Giorgi (2009) for psychological research. An inductive research approach was taken to explore the motivational experiences of the selected population and was chosen for this study because the approach allowed me to expand on insights into the participants' descriptions, reactions, and experiences.

The research questions for this study were the following:

- RQ1: What are the motivational experiences of young adult workers with autism when assigned SMART goals in the workplace?

- RQ2: What are the motivational experiences of young adult workers with autism when negative self-disclosed judgement and negative bias are detected by these individuals as SMART goals are assigned in the workplace?

In qualitative research, researchers can explore, compare, describe, or examine experiences of participant's perception of a phenomenon being studied (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this case, the phenomenon of motivational experience cannot be assessed accurately by the application of statistical data in the form of numerical assignment measured by correlation, as you would find in a quantitative approach. For this reason, I selected an IPA qualitative design to allow for a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives on the motivational experience. Howard et al. (2019) argued that specific features of IPA, including its commitment to researcher reflexivity and equality of voice, may help to illuminate the unique experiences of autistic individuals.

Central Concepts

The central concept of this study had its foundation in goal setting and is supported by GST. This concept of establishing SMART goals played a critical component in the planned research. Judgement and bias were also concepts that I explored in how motivational experience is affected by both. The research questions were positioned in the study to follow each element of the SMART methodology and at the same time inquire about goal setting, and biases and judgement for this targeted population.

An IPA qualitative approach was chosen for this study because the approach allows researchers to explore and describe the personal account of the participants from their own viewpoint and unique understanding of their own experiences. The research effort with this chosen approach was to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, topic, process, or participant perspective. Sampling was then carried out to obtain a broad array of experiences and data collection to include interviews, along with a tailored semi-structured questionnaire, and then followed by IPA analysis (Bellamy et al., 2016).

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher in this study was to gather participants' information and to record and understand their motivational experiences for the identified research purpose. I did not have any previous relationship, nor did I plan to attain any, with the participants; as such, I did not have any supervisory or managerial influence over them.

My role within this qualitative research was also to conduct interviews with participants that are active in the workforce currently and have a diagnosis of ASD and are assigned SMART goals at work. I explored these participants' experiences, as goal setting effectiveness for the population has not been documented in the literature. Thus, my positionality was to be the primary data collection instrument.

Qualitative Methodology

This section describes the research methodology such that other researchers could follow this particular research and duplicate the study. It includes recruitment, sampling, inclusion and exclusion criteria, instrumentation, pilot study procedures, research procedures, and the data analysis plan.

Once qualified participants were identified, each received an informed consent document detailing the purpose of the research, ethical considerations that were to be taken, and potential risks associated with the research. Each participant received an invitation document along with the informed consent and was asked to respond to me via email with their approval prior to engagement. Participants then participated in a semi structured interview that consisted of open-ended questions asking about their unique experiences. Participants were sourced through various organizational participation including American Autism Association, and Asperger's and Autism Network (AANE). I also plan to network with various business owners that employ workers with ASD and seek their participation in allowing access to their employee base.

Participation Selection Logic

For this IPA qualitative study, I sought to interview 10 to 12 participants as a starting point or more until data saturation was achieved. I sought participants who had been diagnosed as having highly functioning ASD and were actively working in the workforce at the time of the interview. I also looked to limit the ages of the participants to 18–35 years of age. While sample size is not clearly indicated in the literature for similar research studies, various authors (e.g., Creswell, 2014) have indicated a recommended sample size of three to 25. Thus, to gather enough data to reach the saturation point, or the point to where no new information is being collected from each participant, a minimum number of 10 was established (see Ravitch and Carl, 2016).

The intent of the interviews was to adequately collect the necessary data to describe the phenomenon of interest and to satisfy the research questions as formulated.

As previously mentioned, the goal of the research was to explore motivation experience for workers with ASD when assigned SMART goals at work. For sampling, I used the snowball approach after the first participant was identified and asked the participant to forward the research flyer to other potential individuals that might be interested in the study. Snowball sampling focuses on identifying potential participants as well as using that participant to help recruit other qualified participants within their professional or personal networks (Trochim et al., 2016). Individuals who determined that they are interested in participating in the study were asked to contact me via phone or email for details on how to proceed with participation.

Inclusion and Exclusion

This study's selection criteria were delimited and have specific boundaries for inclusion or exclusion. For inclusion, participants had to have a diagnosis of high functioning ASD (self-described), have a job in the workplace, and be between the ages of 18-35 years old. Excluded from the study were individuals who were outside the targeted age range, who had not been diagnosed as having high functioning ASD, who had a diagnosis of moderate to severe ASD, or who had the correct diagnosis but are unemployed.

Instrumentation

For the instrumentation of this study, I used an interview guide that included 10 semi structured interview questions (i.e., IQ1 through IQ10) to collect qualitative data (see Appendix). Follow-up and probing questions were used in order to pull more in-depth and rich experience data from each participant's experience. The interview

questions were formulated to inquire about the participants' experiences for each of the elements within the SMART goal methodology and how each made them feel about motivation towards achieving a given goal as pertaining to goal setting at work. The questions were aligned with the two research questions as outlined for this study and centered around motivational experience to SMART goals when assigned at work, and motivational experience to SMART goals when assigned and a feeling of bias or judgement exists in the work environment.

The interview questions were developed to gain real-life experiences of workers with ASD. Each interview question was aligned with a specific research question for this study by assessing personal experiences as related to SMART goals in the workplace (RQ1), each element of the SMART methodology within goal setting (RQ1), and how the experience is lived when there is a feeling of being judged when goals are established (RQ2).

RQ1 focused on goal setting using SMART goals and is supported by GST. IQ1–IQ4 were all aligned to assess experience of participants for goal setting in general in the workplace. IQ5–IQ9 were all aligned with the specific elements of SMART and inquired about participant experience for each element. IQ10 is aligned with RQ2 and inquired about the participant experience of having assigned SMART goals when there was a feeling of being judged in the workplace. IQ10 is also aligned with SJT. Table 1 illustrates the interview questions and alignment with the corresponding research question and conceptual framework. This alignment table provides sufficiency of the instrument that I used in the study.

Table 1

Interview Questions and Conceptual Alignment

Research question (RQ)	Interview questions (IQ)	Framework
RQ1: What are the motivational experiences of young adult workers with autism when assigned SMART goals in the workplace?	IQ1: Describe to me what you think about goals in the workplace.	RQ1 is in conceptual alignment with goal setting at work. IQ1 is in alignment with goal setting at work.
	IQ2: Describe how you feel when you get to work and there are no set goals for you to work towards for the day.	IQ2 is in alignment with goal setting at work.
	IQ3: Does having a set goal for your workday make you work harder? Can you give me a specific example?	IQ3 is in alignment with goal setting at work.
	IQ4: Would you rather have goals be set that you help to establish? Can you explain one that you helped to create?	IQ4 is in alignment with goal setting at work.
	IQ5: What is your experience to goals that are specific in nature? Can you describe one that comes to mind and how you feel about it?	IQ5 is in alignment with setting SPECIFIC goals, or the S in SMART.
	IQ6: What is your experience to goals that are measurable in nature? Can you share about a specific time that this happened?	IQ6 is in alignment with setting MEASURABLE goals, or the M in SMART.
	IQ7: What is your experience to goals that you feel aren't attainable regarding getting accomplished?	IQ7 is in alignment with setting ATTAINABLE goals, or the A in SMART.
	IQ8: How do you feel when goals are set for you that you feel are not relevant or seem out of place to the job that you are doing?	IQ8 is in alignment with setting RELEVANT goals, or the R in SMART.
	IQ9: How do you feel when goals are set for you that have a specific deadline to get accomplished?	IQ9 is in alignment with setting goals that are TIME BOUND, or the T in SMART.
RQ2: What are the motivational experiences of young adult workers with autism when negative judgement and negative bias is detected by these individuals as SMART goals are assigned in the workplace?	IQ10: When goals are set at work, how is your motivational experience different if you have a feeling of being personally judged by others in the workplace versus not?	RQ2 is in alignment with SJT. IQ10 is in alignment with SJT. IQ10 is in alignment with RQ2.

Note. SMART = specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound; SJT = social judgement theory.

Interviews were conducted by participants logging on to the Microsoft Teams video call platform, where the participants were asked to ensure that their cameras were turned off. A semi structured interview guide was used to collect data from each participant and a copy of it can be found in the appendix. Each semi structured interview was planned to be between 60 and 90 minutes in duration. As an essential component of the interview, I began with the following steps to ensure that the participant was comfortable and to build rapport:

1. I introduced myself as the researcher.

2. I thanked them for their participation in the research and the study.

3. I discussed the importance of privacy and asked each participant if they have concerns, questions, or objections with the informed consent.

4. I ensured they are comfortable with the call being recorded.

5. I conducted the interview and asked each of the 10 interview questions in succession.

6. I asked each participant if they have any concerns or needs to have further dialogue prior to concluding the interview.

Pilot Study

Due to my inexperience as a first-time IPA qualitative researcher, I worked closely with my dissertation chair to ensure each action step taken was correct as required by the selected approach. I sought two colleagues who have experience working with and around individuals who have ASD as a diagnosis and administered the interview guide to them. The hope was that this pilot test would reveal any duplication, ambiguity, or

irrelevance in the interview guide questions and perhaps to develop follow-up questions that could be used for probing deeper into the experience of the participants. Each pilot interview was recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed. The first pilot study was reviewed with my chair for approach and feedback prior to conducting the second one, where feedback was applied.

The interview questions for the pilot interview were semi structured in nature, whereby questions were open-ended and designed to open dialogue with the pilot study participants. The first nine questions focused on the motivational experience when SMART goals are established at work, which pertains to RQ1. The last interview question focused on the experience of being judged as SMART goals are established, which pertained to RQ2.

Research Procedures

IPA qualitative research is a recursive approach to research, in that it builds and depends on the sum of all of the components within itself to make the whole (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). IPA is also a qualitative thematic approach to data gathering that is idiographic, in that it focuses on specific and individual experiences separate from theory or preconceptualized definitions (Howard et al., 2019). IPA is particularly attractive to researchers as its integrative hermeneutic phenomenology aims both to detail how the participant makes sense of life experience and to give detailed interpretation of the participant's account to understand the experience (Tuffour, 2017). For these reasons, the following subsections will provide the components of the research procedures followed in this study, including recruitment, participation, and data collection. The detail that will

be provided is in hopes that future researchers are able to follow how the research was conducted and replicate the study.

Recruitment

For this research project, I am the primary research instrument. My multifaceted approach for recruitment of participants included use of the research website, Research and Me (https://www.researchandme.com) as well as reaching out to the organizational network groups Asperger/Autism Network (AANE) and the American Autism Association (AAA) to allow me to present my research flyer to their membership groups. A third approach to recruitment was to reach out directly to the owner of 321 Coffee in Raleigh, North Carolina, an organization that makes the employment of neurodiversity a corporate mission and employs workers with ASD in concentrated numbers. I forwarded to the company my research flyer in hopes that they would distribute it to their employees. The flyer contained the purpose of the research, the significance of the study to the population, my role as the researcher, my contact information, and a statement of confidentiality and the preservation and protection of all participants' identity.

Participation

Individuals who chose to participate from the recruitment efforts were asked to contact me via phone or email. Because workers with ASD in the workplace are scarce, there was the chance that there could be difficulty in locating individuals that fit the criteria for inclusion to the study. For this reason, a multifaceted recruitment as outlined above was established. Once the participant extended their permission to move forward in the study, a representative participant identifier was assigned to the person to protect

their identity. From the first participants, snowball sampling was utilized to source a target of 12 total participants for the study. Each participant was asked to forward the research flyer to others that they know that might qualify for the study.

Data Collection

Specific data collection procedures that took place in this study were as follows:

1. Deliver research study fliers to Research and Me as well as to the professional organizations mentioned and 321 Coffee in Raleigh, NC.

2. Once contacted by interested individuals to participate in the study, I qualified them for inclusion criteria. Upon approval, I sent them the informed consent document and requested their approval to be sent back to me in the form of an email stating that "I consent" to be included in the study. Scheduling of the interview then occurred.

3. I sent to all approved study participants a copy of the interview guide containing the interview questions at least 24 hours in advance of the scheduled interview time.

4. At the beginning of the interview, I gave participants an introduction to the topic, explained the reason and significance of the study, and reviewed the consent form again with them.

5. I asked each participant for their permission to voice record their responses to the questions, which was accomplished via Microsoft Teams. I took extensive notes for each interview and hand wrote these to document the session.

6. Each participant was asked 10 open-ended and semi structured interview questions.

7. Each session was to be transcribed by utilizing the transcription software within Microsoft Teams and loaded into Microsoft Word. This file was shared back to the participant to perform member checking of the transcript.

Qualitative Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative studies by their very nature produce a significant amount of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I planned on each of the interviews to take 60 minutes in duration, which equated to about 30 pages of transcript. I used the three-pronged approach as described by Ravitch and Carl (2016) that includes data organization and management, writing and representation, and immersive engagement. For data organization and management, I created a transcript for each interview that had the unique identifier as well as the date at the top of each file. I also created a timeline for each file. For writing and representation, I created visual representations for the data in my field notes that documented tone of voice, long pauses, difficulty in answering questions, or significant inflections or emotions that were heard. For immersive engagement, I read each transcription multiple times. From the transcripts, I followed the IPA steps as outlined by Smith et al. (2022), defined as the following:

- Read and re-read each transcription to immerse myself in the data.

- Take initial notes with free association and sematic content (notes in the margin).

- Develop emergent themes by focusing on chunks of transcription and analysis of selected notes that are made into themes.

- Search for connection across emergent themes by abstracting and integrating themes.

- Move to the next case and try to bracket previous themes from previous cases to maintain an open mind to do justice to the individuality of each case.

- Look for patterns across cases by looking for trends and making note of idiosyncratic instances.

- Take the interpretations to deeper levels by utilizing metaphorical referents and bringing in other theories as a lens of which to view the analysis.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness of the data, I delivered a clear and accurate representation of the recorded data while abstaining from corrupting the data with any researcher biases. Given that this dissertation is of a qualitative design, elements of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability work in unison to fortify overall trustworthiness of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Credibility

In a qualitative research design, credibility is achieved if the participants agree with the overall interpretation and construction of the data and that the data accurately records the difficulties or challenges presented by the experiences of the participants. To accomplish this dynamic, focus was made on ensuring high levels of credibility by allowing the participants to review the researcher interpretation and constructions of the

recorded data prior to data analysis beginning. In the final stage of data collection, each participant received a transcript draft of their interview and had an opportunity to make corrections and offer input. This feedback was made through email or phone call back to the researcher and given a full week to do so to allow ample time.

Transferability

Transferability in a qualitative study is the extent to which the research can be applied to other studies, contexts, or constructs and is the representative of generalizability and external validity in a quantitative study (Patton, 2015). This study utilized thick descriptions as well as a conceptual framework of goal setting, which is a predominant motivational tactic in the workplace in modern times and has its foundation on GST (Locke & Latham, 2019). The research followed the dynamics of GST to include SMART goals in the construction of the research questions and interview questions to reveal how goal setting is experienced by the targeted population of this study. Data collected and any interpretations, themes, and conclusions will contribute to similar studies and will be well positioned to speak to motivation of workers with ASD and provide further insight to GST research in the field.

Dependability

Dependability in a qualitative study can be achieved through providing consistency of data collection methods, interpretation, and analysis of research participants over the duration of the study. For this study, I provided dependability by documenting the processes clearly and by thoroughly documenting each interview with transcription notes, transcription software, the use of a pilot study, and the cross checking

of the data with each participant for accuracy prior to analysis. Careful step-by-step

repetition was also kept ensuring that each interview was conducted in a similar fashion

to identify similarities and to enhance findings.

Confirmability

The goal of qualitative research is to produce findings that can be confirmed by

other researchers should the study be replicated (Patton, 2015). As a result, my

positionality and biases in this study was examined closely as I am the sole research

instrument for the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To achieve confirmability, I provided a

detailed audit trail by carefully recording each interview, taking copious notes on each

interview, provided a detailed description on my thoughts on coding and provided

rationale on why codes were established, and themes were created and what they meant.

These steps ensured that the research can be confirmed and is free from bias thereby

allowing a consistent attitude of the participant throughout the study.

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Ethical Procedures

</div>

Ethical considerations and safeguards were instituted throughout this study. It has

been designed and was conducted with the IRB and Walden University guidelines as a

guidepost to ensure protective procedures for the participant's identity that quality and

agree to be included in the research. As a result, confidentiality treatment of the data was

of the utmost importance. IRB approval was sought for and provided prior to any data

being collected as well as each qualified participant signing the informed consent form. A

copy of the informed consent form can be found in the appendix. The identity of each

participant was also concealed and replaced with a numeric identifier given the sensitive nature of the population being studied.

Treatment of Human Participants

Recruitment of participants was achieved utilizing an approved research flier as well as a publicized research announcement broadcasted through email to targeted organizations. Leaders of targeted organizations were informed not to select any particular member of the organization for participation and will instead be advised to make participation completely voluntary. Selected participants received an introductory informed consent form through email that explained their rights to privacy and their right to refuse participation should they feel uncomfortable. Post the consent being acknowledged through email back to me, I scheduled each participant for a day and time for the interview to be conducted.

Treatment of Data

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study for each participant. The names of each participant was not utilized and were replaced with a numeric identifier ensuring that each participant was non-identifiable, unreachable, and non-trackable. Data that was collected was stored on a private personal computer and password protected and written data was stored in a locked and private filing cabinet. Any and all identifiable information was stripped away from data, and this was shared with my dissertation chairperson. All confidential and anonymous data and information will be kept for 7 years, as required by the American Psychological Association (2007).

Summary and Transition

Workers with ASD are poorly understood in today's workplace and how these individuals are motivated is relatively unknown within the literature. This qualitative IPA research study sought to understand how workers with ASD experience motivation when SMART goals are utilized in the workplace. The hope is that the findings of this research study contribute to the gap that exists today for this specific population of workers. It is also the hope that the findings of this study provide insight for future research to be conducted utilizing the findings as baseline and foundation.

This Chapter 3 outlined the topic of interest, the research design, research questions, central concepts of the research, role of the researcher, the qualitative methodology, population and sampling procedures, and inclusion and exclusion approach. The chapter also described the strategies for recruitment and participation, data collection, and finally data analysis. Elements of trustworthiness were also discussed to include how credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were achieved. Finally, ethical considerations were covered in how human participants and data are planned to be treated to ensure security.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this IPA qualitative study was to explore motivational experiences of young adult workers with ASD when they are assigned SMART goals at work. The approach selected provided rich and meaningful data utilizing semi-structured interview questions during interviews with selected participants. Using IPA allows a researcher the hermeneutic ability to interpret the data through the lens of the participant. The uniqueness of the selected population allowed me to use IPA to draw out from the data what is meant versus what was said allowing for a deep and rich knowledge exchange. This chapter will cover the topics of the pilot study, interview setting, demographics of the participants, data collection methods, data analysis methods, evidence of trustworthiness, data results, and summary of the answers to the research questions. Last, a transition will be provided to progress to Chapter 5, which is the interpretation of the data.

Pilot Study

Prior to conducting interviews with participants that fit the selected population for this study, a pilot study was conducted. Utilizing two colleagues of the researcher, the interview questions were asked to each one over Microsoft Teams on video mute. The interviews were transcribed and shared with the study's interview chair for feedback. Follow-up questions were added to IQ1 and IQ2 as well as IQ10 to probe deeper into the intended question to gain deeper data exchange. The pilot interviews also allowed me much needed practice as an interviewer to improve the speed of the interview, thoroughness of the interview, and the tone and tenor of how the questions would be

positioned to participants. Upon the completion of the pilot interviews and adjustments previously mentioned, the targeted participant interviews took place.

Setting

The 10 participants I interviewed lived in various locations across the United States. All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams on Video Mute and were transcribed by me. All 10 participants completed the required interview in one interaction, and interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 60 minutes in duration. The interviews occurred from locations of the participant's choice and ranged from their work offices in their workplace to their homes and took place from December 15, 2022, through March 14, 2023. There were no personal or organizational pressures present in the interviews to influence interpretation of the study results.

Demographics

All participants for the study ranged from 18 to 35 years of age. The mean age was 28. Participants came from a variety of backgrounds including high school teacher, mathematician, restaurant server, finance manager, sales associates for large retail stores, virtual sales associate, and skilled trades in construction. All participants were in the workforce and seven of the 10 had college degrees. Five had bachelor's degrees, and two had master's degrees, while two others had progress made towards a bachelor's degree. Six of the participants were male and four were female. Only three of the participants were married. As the interviews were virtual and on video mute, questions about race, ethnicity, or other background questions were not asked nor were they relevant to the outcomes of this study. Table 2 provides a visual representation of each participant.

Table 2

Demographics of Participants

Age	Occupation	Sex	College levels	Employment
29	Store associate	M	High school	Employed
24	Manager	M	Master's degree	Employed
23	Store associate	F	Bachelor's degree	Employed
30	Mathematician	F	Bachelor's degree	Employed
35	Finance executive	M	Bachelor's degree	Employed
35	High school teacher	M	Master's degree	Employed
24	Tradesman	M	Bachelor's degree	Employed
35	Virtual sales associate	F	Some college	Employed
21	Restaurant server	F	Some college	Employed
28	Sales executive	M	Bachelor's degree	Employed

Data Collection

Upon the official approval from the Walden IRB (Approval no. 12-06-22-1019168) on December 6, 2022, data collection procedures began. The research flyer for the study was sent to a series of organizations that sponsor or promote adults with ASD including Autism Speaks, 321 Coffee, LLC, Turning Point Autism Foundation, The Autism/Asperger Network (AANE), the National Autism Association, and 321 Coffee, LLC. These efforts produced three of the participants who were included in the data collection. Other efforts included using my own professional and personal networks, which produced seven participants. Unfortunately, snowball sampling proved to be ineffective with this population, which was a surprise. Each participant was asked to forward the research flyer to anyone they thought would qualify for the study and would participate, but this request did not produce access to further participants. All 10

participants stated that they were not associated with any other individuals who had been diagnosed with ASD.

Upon the discovery of a qualified participant, I sent the Walden Informed Consent form, as well as a copy of the research flyer, to the individual's email with the request to respond to me with "I consent" in the body of the email. From that point, I reached out to the participant either through email or by phone and scheduled a time and day for the interview to take place as well as answer any questions they may have had. For the interviews, a semi structured interview guide was used to provide a framework for the interviews as well as prepared probing questions. Notes were also taken to describe observed reactions to questions such as tone, extended pauses, and to record any biases that the researcher may have had.

For data collection, each interview took place using Microsoft Teams and was transcribed into a Microsoft Word document and labeled as "Participant 1" to "Participant 10," depending on the sequence of participant for the interview. Interviews took place over a 3-month period and until saturation was achieved in the data. Saturation was achieved by Participant 6, but data were collected from four more participants to ensure no new information was found.

Interviews were conducted from my home office using a personal laptop that was password protected and with the office door locked. Participants were notified prior to the interview that the sessions were being recorded and transcribed but that their names or any other identifying information would not be used during the interview. Transcription

services were performed using the Live Transcribe app (https://www.livetranscribe.app)

from my smart phone and then transferred to Microsoft Word.

Data Variations

There were several discrepancies in methodology from what was originally

proposed. I had aimed to collect data from a minimum of 12 participants but only

collected interviews from 10. The reason for this discrepancy was the scarcity of willing

participants who met the criteria and the fact that snowball sampling simply did not work

for the population. Although there are ASD networks that support these individuals once

they turn 18 years of age, the research found that they do not socially connect with each

other as a rule and as a result, could not provide reference to other participants. This issue

was discussed with the research chair and second committee member and both approved

data collection to stop at 10 prior to the writing of Chapter 4. This approval was

contingent on the study remaining open to other participants in case the last two could be

sourced prior to completion of the study. This allowance was made and took place, but

the final two were not sourced. However, this discrepancy did not adversely affect the

results as data saturation was still achieved.

Another change is that I had planned to utilize Microsoft Teams to both conduct

the interview as well as provide the transcription. However, I could not gain access to the

Teams transcription service and reverted to using the Live Transcribe app on my smart

phone. I simply put the smart phone next to the speaker on my laptop to record the

conversation, which provided a simple solution and worked well.

Data Analysis

The IPA approach taken in this dissertation allowed for a rich understanding of the lived motivational experiences of the participants when SMART goals were presented to them in the workplace. It also allowed me to constantly reflect on what the participants were saying in their responses and to interpret hidden meanings that might extend beyond the spoken language. This methodology also forced me to become engrained in the data and to constantly reflect on the participants' experiences and what was being said in response to each question versus what was meant or not said. For data analysis, I followed the four-step method of IPA: immersion in the data, initial note taking, developing emergent themes, and finally, searching for connections across emergent themes (Smith et al., 2022).

For Step 1, I cut and pasted all the answers given to interview questions into an overall "code book" in order to organize all the participants' responses according to each question. This allowed the coding process to be efficient and contributed to the inductive process of formulating themes for each question. In addition to the transcripts and for Step 2, I added in notes that I had taken in the interviews, including descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual observations. This step helped to reveal how each participant communicated and the meaning in what was being communicated (Smith et al., 2022). For Step 3, I began to populate the code book with codes, then categories, and ultimately themes. These emergent themes represented the patterns and connections of the collected data (Smith et al., 2022). For the final step, I looked for connections across emergent themes and theme clusters (Smith et al., 2022).

I collected all theme clusters for each interview question and aligned them with the corresponding interview question. From this step, I sought commonalities and connections within each cluster across all the participants. This led to the combination of some themes, as they related to other similar themes. The ones that remained after the combination process became the personal experience statements (PESs) of the participants. This process was followed and yielded eight PESs in total.

Coding Process

Each interview took place through Microsoft Teams and was transcribed instantaneously as the participant spoke. At the end of each interview, the transcription was transferred into a coding table that was sectioned off for each research question and interview question. I added my notes and handwritten memos from each interview into this table as well. I then read over each transcript as well as accompanying section of the coding table noting highlighted words and phrases and establishing codes for each section and question per participant. Once this hand coding process was complete, I loaded the data into the NVivo14 qualitative coding software, for additional organization and coding of the data. From this step, codes led to the revelation of categories and, ultimately, to themes. For each interview question, PES themes were revealed toward the creation of conclusions. Figure 5 illustrates the complete IPA approach.

Figure 1

Inductive Process From Transcript to Thematic Creation
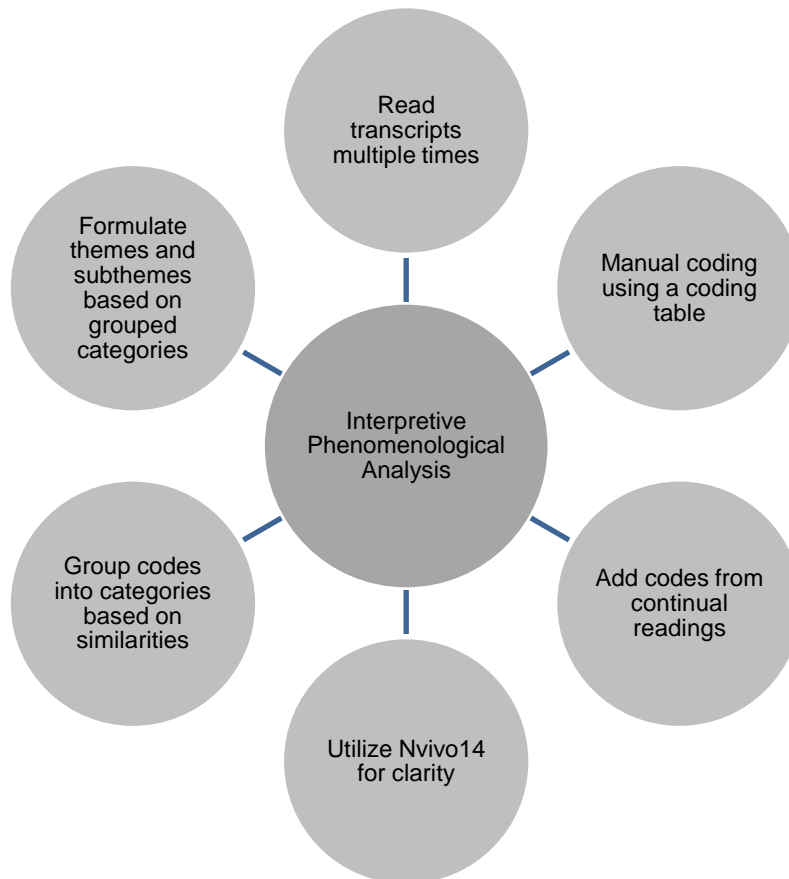
Upon the completion of the first pass of reading the 10 transcripts, and then transferring the data in the code book, 140 codes were produced and grouped into clusters for each interview question. Upon subsequent passes through the data, an additional 49 codes were added. These codes revealed, through the inductive process, 62 categories. From the categories, there were eight PES themes and six subthemes that were associated with the 10 interview questions. Table 3 illustrates the categories and PES themes for each IQ and corresponding participant that contributed data towards the creation of the theme.

Table 3

Personal Experience Statement (PES) and Subthemes Matrix

PES / Subtheme	IQ	Theme cluster	RQ	Participant identifier
PES1	1	Goals are preferred	RQ1	2,3,4,5,6,7,8,10
ST1a		Goals provide guidance and sense of purpose	RQ1	2,3,4,5,6,7,8,10
ST1b	2	Absent of goals, there is a loss of motivation and increase in confusion, frustration, and anxiety	RQ1	2,3,6,8,10
ST1c		Absent of goals, they will build their own	RQ1	1,2,4,5,7, 10
ST1d	3	Goals improve concentration and work intensity	RQ1	5,6,7,8,10
ST1e		Goals create more focus and clarity but also apply more pressure, stress, and anxiety, and too many goals can overload the population	RQ1	2,4,6,7
PES2	4	Prefer to co-author goals	RQ1	2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10
ST2a		Ownership in the goal improves motivation, confidence, and trust and decreases fear of failure and job loss	RQ1	1,5,9
PES3	5	Specific goals provide a clear roadmap of what exactly needs to be accomplished that improves focus and work effort	RQ1	1,2,3,5,7,8,9,10
PES4	6	Goals that are measured improve focus and effort but also carry with them, more stress and anxiety and overall pressure to perform	RQ1	2,3,5,6,9,10
ST4a		Measurement systems must be fair and equitable or motivation wains in the population	RQ1	2,5,6,10
PES5	7	More difficult goals can improve motivation if realistic and not too hard	RQ1	1,2,4,7,8,9,10
ST5a		More difficult goals cause stress, anxiety, and a fear of failure if set too hard for the population	RQ1	3,5,8,9,10
PES6	8	Less relevant goals cause a decrease in motivation and an increase in stress and anxiety	RQ1	2,5,7,9,10
PES7	9	Deadlines are both appreciated and despised by this population and can cause increase in anxiety and decrease in motivation	RQ1	2,5,6,7,9,10
PES8	10	The feeling of being negatively judged has a direct negative motivational experience and a withdrawal from a team environment	RQ2	2,3,4,5,7,9,10
ST8a		The feeling of being judged causes a decrease in self-confidence and willingness to exert effort	RQ2	2,3,4,5,7,9,10

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness of the data as discussed in Chapter 3, I delivered a clear

and accurate representation of the recorded data while abstaining from corrupting the data

with any researcher biases. Given that this dissertation is a qualitative design, elements of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability worked in unison to fortify overall trustworthiness of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Credibility

To accomplish credibility as discussed in Chapter 3, focus was made on ensuring high levels of credibility by allowing the participants to review my interpretation and constructions of the recorded data prior to data analysis. In the final stage of data collection, each participant received a transcript draft of their interview and had an opportunity to make corrections and offer input. Participants could provide this feedback to me through email or by phone call and were given a full week to do so to allow ample time for the participant to review the information.

Transferability

Transferability was provided as mentioned in Chapter 3 by utilizing thick descriptions as well as the conceptual framework of goal setting. The research followed the dynamics of GST to include SMART goals in the construction of the research questions and interview questions. This approach revealed how goal setting is experienced by the targeted population of this study. Data collected and any interpretations, themes, and conclusions contributed to similar studies and were well positioned to speak to motivation of workers with ASD and provided further insight to GST research in the field.

Dependability

Dependability of the study was provided as mentioned in Chapter 3 by providing consistency of data collection methods, interpretation, and analysis of research participants over the duration of the study. For this study, I provided dependability by documenting the processes clearly and by thoroughly documenting each interview with transcription notes, transcription software, the use of a pilot study, and the cross checking of the data with each participant for accuracy prior to analysis. Careful step-by-step repetition was kept ensuring that each interview is conducted in a similar fashion to identify similarities and to enhance findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability of the study was produced as mentioned in Chapter 3 by providing a detailed audit trail. This was done by carefully recording each interview, taking copious notes on each interview, providing a detailed description on my thoughts on coding, and providing rationale on why codes were established, and themes created and what they meant. These steps ensured that the research can be confirmed and is free from bias thereby allowing a consistent attitude of the participant throughout the study.

<center>**Results**</center>

PES1: Goals are Important and Preferred

The first theme, as reflected in PES1, was created from the IQ1, which was related to describing what goals in general meant to the participant. Nine of the 10 participants mentioned that to them they would rather have set goals for their job duties than to not have them. Selected comments from the participants for this theme included:

So, I think they (goals) are important to have and provide structure, (Goals) are

important. Because without goals, what do we have to work for? Or how are we

motivated? In a sense that it gives me personally, goals help me decide what to do

and when something needs to be done, and maybe how it needs to be done.

Subtheme 1a: Goals Provide Guidance and Sense of Purpose

Subtheme 1a was in support of PES1. Nine of the 10 participants mentioned that

goal setting gave them needed guidance and a sense of purpose. Selected comments from

the participants for this theme included:

But I like having specific things I'm working towards. So, I know that I'm, you

know, on the right track and that I'm doing my job, and goals provide structure

for the workplace because it gives everybody, you know, the purpose for what to

do, and what not to do, and kind of guidance for what we're aiming for in our

overall mission, you know, especially in education.

Subtheme 1b: Absent of Goals, There Is a Loss of Motivation and Increase in

Confusion, Frustration, and Anxiety

Subtheme 1b was in support of PES1. Five of the 10 participants mentioned that

absent of goals, there is a loss of motivation and increase in confusion, frustration, and

anxiety. Selected comments from the participants included:

It's almost like I'm in a fog without goals and it is kind of like, I find myself

daydreaming a lot because my mind keeps wandering about what I have to do.

Typically, you know, I have a set thing I need to do if I don't have goals, it can

lead to anxiety.

Again, without goals I have anxiety because I do need a goal to work towards. I don't want to just be left, not knowing what to do. I don't like that. Because it just makes me anxious.

Subtheme 1c: Absent of Goals, They Will Build Their Own

Subtheme 1c was in support of PES1. Six of the 10 participants mentioned that when they get to work without set goals, they will set their own. Selected comments from the participants include:

But your Superior, your coach, your teacher, your boss, what have you, If they're absent of setting a goal for you, I end up making my own.

I'll make my own goals and I'll organize what I need to do throughout the day and by what time I need to do them by if I'm not given very specific goals to achieve.

Subtheme 1d: Goals Improve Concentration and Work Intensity

Subtheme 1d was in support of PES1. Five of the 10 participants mentioned that when goals are set at work, they experience improved concentration and work intensity. Select comments from the participants included:

I tend to be a procrastinator, and I also struggle with concentration sometimes. So, if I have goals set and I need to get these things done by noon, I feel even though the work might not be due till the end of the day, it gives me more motivation.

Goals make me work harder. I mean, especially in my line of work, I'll take, you know, if there's a goal I want to meet, I'll end up taking more tables that I otherwise might not.

Subtheme 1e: Goals Create More Focus and Clarity but Also Apply More Pressure, Stress, and Anxiety, and Too Many Goals Can Overload the Population

Subtheme 1e was in support of PES1. Four of the participants mentioned that when goals are set at work, they experience more focus and clarity but also more pressure to perform, stress and anxiety, and that if too many goals are placed upon them simultaneously, they become overloaded and motivation to exert work diminishes. Selected comments from the participants included:

Having goals set for me helps to know what I need to do every day. When I get to work and can get right to it and not have to ask my boss so much what he expects me to do. I waste less time when I know what to do and that helps me to get more done each day. I also like goals to stay the same for me as I don't like to change very much and if too many goals are put in place, it causes me to stress out and feel overloaded.

Sometimes they (goals) are ok. But sometimes they put the pressure on, you know? Like you get them and think, 'I will do my best but that may not be possible'. And then you try as hard as you can to get it all done. But they help me focus and without them, I feel as though I am drifting.

PES2: Prefer to Co-Author Goals

PES2 was created from IQ4, which asked if the participants would rather have goals be set for them that they had helped to establish versus not. Nine of the participants mentioned that if the choice was offered for them to participate in goal authoring, that

this would be preferable and would produce a higher level of motivation due to goal ownership. Selected comments from the participants included:

> I like doing goals that I helped to establish because sometimes people set goals and I think they make them broadly and in a general sense. So, it doesn't really apply to me or it's not specific to what I'm trying to do, and definitely co-authoring. Because I feel like it's important especially looking at my workload and what's on my plate and I'd like to think that there's a sense of trust if the goal is co-authored and it's going to be easier on both the boss and the employee.

Subtheme 2a: Ownership in the Goal Improves Confidence, and Trust and Decreases Fear of Failure and Job Loss

Subtheme 2a was in support of PES2. Three of the participants mentioned that when they have the ability to co-author goals, it helps them to be more confident and less worried that they will fail or lose their jobs. Selected comments from the participants included:

> I like to have guidance through goals. I like to have input to make sure I am on track, especially if I'm in a new job or something that I'm not sure about. I definitely like having someone there that may be more experienced or my boss or whatever that can tell me, like okay, you need to do this and that. At my current job, I've been working for almost four years, and I've got everything down pat. I don't need a ton of guidance or interference. In these cases, I like to help establish the goals and it gives me more confidence and trust that I can get it done.

PES3: Specific Goals Provide a Clear Roadmap of What Exactly Needs to Be Accomplished That Improves Focus and Work Effort

PES3 was derived from IQ5, which asked the participants to explain their experience to goals in the workplace that were specific in nature. Eight of the participants mentioned that when goals were more specific, that they had more clarity of what exactly needed to get done and that their work effort and focus improved. Selected comments from the participants included:

> 100 percent specific because, like I said, if there is someone telling me exactly what I need to do, like it's 100%, then the task is very clear and framed. If the goal is specific and tells me where I need to be, or where this program needs to be, I can develop steps along the way, I can make it structured in my mind that makes sense to me, and I can get there. But if it's not specific, and again, I tend to fixate on the details where it might be lenient, and I lose focus. For an example, my boss sent a railroad email about what things were doing this week. On Monday, we're doing this and on Thursday we are doing that. We're doing this Friday, we're doing this, and then, he started off the next six days for the next week. After that, with Monday, we're going to do this, Wednesday, and Thursday we are going to do that. My mind just couldn't correlate. The fact that is it this week or is it next week and there was too much confusion? So, he was not very specific about it. So, I couldn't get off that topic until I had to figure out what weeks he was talking about for what task. I had to put my secretary in a bind because she had to ask him, and he wasn't having a good day.

PES4: Goals That Are Measured Improve Focus and Effort but Also Carry More Stress, Anxiety, and Overall Pressure to Perform

PES4 was derived from IQ6, which asked participants to describe their experience to goals that were measurable versus not. Six of the participants mentioned that goals that were measured helped them to improve focus and effort but also caused stress and anxiety and pressure to perform. Selected comments from the participants included:

There's definitely a little bit more pressure with goals that are measured saying that in a work setting say, you know, I get a bonus or something for completing this set of goals for the project. You know, I get a little more nervous thinking that there is now something on the line besides money, or there's some sort of risk/reward if I don't get it done.

Subtheme 4a: Measurement Systems Must Be Fair and Equitable or Motivation Wains in the Population

Subtheme 4a was in support of PES4. Five of the participants mentioned that when measurement systems are applied to goals, they experience a negative feeling if they believe that the measurement system is not fair or equitable from their perspective. Selective comments from the participants include:

I don't mind being measured if it's fair. If the measurement tool that's being used is accurate and fair, I guess I should say that. But I also have a level of anxiety about measurement when I know my work is going on someone's scoreboard or radar. So that when, you know, someone is grading my work, and goals that don't have an actual way to measure them shouldn't be placed in a measurement

system. Like, I think one of the goals that I have set on my company's employment training metrics is to improve the quality of the training. Quality of about questions, quality of what? That's a broad topic, right? Could be a lot of things. I'm supposed to go in and, you know, add a percentage to that goal to show that I've worked on it or that's not really relevant to anything. So having that measurement scorecard must be equitable and air, and just to be held accountable. Then I am motivated.

PES5: More Difficult Goals Can Improve Motivation if Realistic and Not Too Hard

PES5 was derived from IQ7, which asked participants what their motivational experience was to goals that were perceived as very difficult or unattainable. Seven of the participants mentioned that a more difficult goal increases their motivation to exert effort as long as the goal was realistic and perceived as attainable and not beyond reach. Selected comments from participants included:

A really hard goal that I have all the time is taking everything from the shelves and rearranging it to make it a better for the customers to see what is for sale and to help organize things as they should be according to other stores. I like this goal as it makes me work hard to get it done. But the goal has got to be equal to what the other stores have. If the goal is so hard that I don't believe I can do it, I just do what I can, but I don't go all out to do it.

I mean, if it's something, like that is impossible to do, and I don't know, I feel like if I know that it's impossible, that I'm not even going to try. But if it's hard but attainable I would work my butt off to get there. Okay, so if it's on the

veil of possibility, I'm going to be more motivated. Yeah, the normal I mean, I

like a challenge to a certain point.

Subtheme 5a: More Difficult Goals Cause Stress, Anxiety, and Fear of Failure if Set

Too Hard for the Population

Subtheme 5a was in support of PES5. Five of the participants stated that the more

difficult the goal, the more stressful, anxious, and fearful it made them. Selected

comments from the participants were:

If I don't feel like the goal is attainable, chances are I'm probably not going to

achieve it because I'm going to struggle and I'm going to have that anxiety within

that makes me not be able to achieve it. I probably wouldn't be motivated if I

think I can't achieve it. I'm not going to be motivated to do it. Probably try less

just because I think I cannot attain it anyway.

If I feel like it is not attainable, I might seek to understand more of why it

set so hard, I'll probably do my best but, in the end, you know, if it's way out

there and I have no ability to hit it whatsoever, I'll probably just kind of walk

through the motions. I mean, I'll, I'll give it some effort, but it's got to be within

the realm of possibility or it's not a realistic goal to me.

PES6: Less Relevant Goals Cause a Decrease in Motivation and an Increase in

Stress and Anxiety

PES6 was derived from IQ8, which asked participants to describe their

motivational experiences to goals that were set that seemed irrelevant to their current job

function. Five of the participants stated that when this occurs, they experience a

heightened level of stress and anxiety and that their motivation falls off considerably.

Selected comments from the participants included:

I'm going to struggle to get them done if a goal isn't relevant to what I do, because if it doesn't seem relevant to me, then I'm not going to be as motivated to do it and it would probably just stress me out. I'm not sure why. I guess because if I feel like it's not relevant, then why do it?

If someone established a goal that I didn't feel was relevant, I mean obviously I'm not helping to create that goal, but I mean I guess I would walk through the motions and try to achieve it but at the same time I would be questioning what am I really doing here and what's this all about? And you know, am I being seen as relevant myself? To some degree or are they just giving me a goal to give me something to do? To give me something to do as if I'm not relevant myself. And maybe I'm not a person on the team that they want anymore. I would start to wonder is my job in trouble and worry, and stress over it.

PES7: Deadlines are Both Appreciated and Despised by This Population and Can Cause Increase in Anxiety and Decrease in Motivation

PES7 was derived from IQ9, which asked participants to describe their experiences to goals that were time-bound and had a defined deadline. Six of the participants mentioned that they understand the need for deadlines and time-constraints and agreed that they were needed to define "when" work needed to be done, but also mentioned the onset of "time" caused them anxiety and decreased their motivation to exert effort. Selected comments from the participants included:

I think deadlines are important because I'm a type a person that needs time

constraints. Like my planner is color coded. So, I think deadlines are very

important, especially specific deadlines at a certain time. But at the same time,

when I know there is a deadline, I get flustered and stressed as I know if I don't

get it done, my boss will know, and I will get in trouble. So, when I think about it,

it both motivates me to work long hours and stresses me out at the same time. But

then I start to focus on time too much and then I just want to get it done. So, I can

be finished before time runs out and then I won't care about the quality of work. I

kind of have a love-hate relationship with time goals.

PES8: The Feeling of Being Negatively Judged Has a Direct Negative Motivational

Experience and a Withdrawal From a Team Environment

PES8 was derived from IQ10 and refers to RQ2. Participants were asked, when

goals are set at work, how is your motivational experience different if you have a feeling

of being judged by others in the workplace versus not? Seven of the participants

mentioned that when they have feeling of being judged negatively by others that they lost

motivation and want to withdraw for the team and isolate themselves from others.

Selected comments from the participants included:

I am very sensitive to the feeling of being looked upon by others as less or

different. So yes, when I feel like they are judging me, it causes me to shut down.

I also struggle to work in groups because of this and tend to shy away from that

sort of thing. It's something that I have had to deal with my whole life and has

been a barrier for me.

Growing up, I would worry about what other people thought about me. Because in certain situations, it has caused me to fixate on that feeling and not on the goal. I would wonder if I was doing something that might be annoying them by maybe talking too much and maybe I did. Did I interrupt them? So, my mind starts wandering, all the scenarios that are the interactions I've had with this person, and I started to qualify the reasons why they think the way they do and then I fixate on it. So, I mean, I think that's just human nature, but I feel like sometimes when a person has ASD, it can derail them in this situation.

Subtheme 8a: The Feeling of Being Judged Causes a Decrease in Self-Confidence and Willingness to Exert Effort

Subtheme 8a was in support of PES8. Seven of the participants stated that when they have a feeling of being judged it causes a decrease in self-confidence and willingness to exert effort. Selected comments from the participants included:

If I feel like I'm being judged, I'm going to probably go into a corner somewhere and just lament and stress and worry and probably not be very productive. I am very sensitive to being judged by others and highly in tune to it. In my own mind I feel like I've been judged a lot. Was I being judged? I'm not sure. But in my own mind. Yes. So, it's a self-perception of my own abilities, and causes me to have low confidence. I am always thinking that someone else is better and more capable than me.

Without a doubt, 100%. If I feel like specifically in a group setting, if I feel like, you know, like I'm the last person to be picked on the team and they are

giving me Eire, if that's a word. It makes me shut down. I want to escape from

that. I want to find a level of normalcy, a haven to get away from the judgment

that I feel might be happening, whether it's happening or not.

Discrepant Cases

Throughout the study, various participants were found to be in staunch

disagreement from others for all interview questions. For example, while time constraints

for goal setting improved motivation for some participants, it caused others to shut down

and lose motivation altogether. However, while this variation did exist in the study, all

cases had uniformity related to the improvement of motivation with the establishment of

SMART goals within the population. Therefore, there were no significant discrepant

cases found in the results.

<div align="center">

Summary

</div>

This chapter included findings and results that represented a rich amount of data

that was collected in the qualitative interviews. RQ1 was answered in the data as each

participant described their motivational experiences to SMART goals in the workplace by

describing in detail how each element of SMART made them feel as goals were set.

Seven PES were derived from the nine interview questions related to RQ1 as a result of

this data. To summarize, participants described positive experiences to goals in general

and to the elements of specific, attainable, and related (SAR) within SMART goals, but

neutral to negative experiences to measurable and time-bound (MT) of SMART.

RQ2 was answered in the data as each participant described their motivational

experience to goal setting when they had a feeling of being judged. One PES was derived

for the one IQ that pertained to RQ2. In summary, participants had a negative experience

to goal setting when they had a feeling of being judged from others at work.

Last, elements of trustworthiness were discussed within the chapter. Conclusions

and interpretations of the PES as well as limitations and recommendations for future

studies are found in the next chapter, Chapter 5. An overall conclusion closes out the

study at the end of the next section.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this IPA qualitative study was to explore the motivational experiences of workers with ASD when assigned SMART goals in the workplace. In the study, I utilized the IPA method, which allowed me to gain a deep and rich understanding of the described lived experiences from the participants. From the data collected from the participants, I was able to draw down to eight PESs with nine subthemes that speak to the two research questions of the study. In concise summary of the key findings, the data reveal that this population has a mixed experience to goal setting with SMART goals. Whereas some elements of SMART goals are experienced positively, others are experienced neutral to negatively, indicating a need to adjust how SMART goals are set for workers with ASD. The data also revealed that if workers with ASD perceived that they are being judged by others due to their inherent differences (Bury et al., 2018), their motivation declined rapidly, thereby defeating the purpose of establishing SMART goals per GST.

Interpretations of the Findings

Goal setting in the workplace is a leading methodology used to improve the intrinsic motivation of workers (Lock & Latham, 2019). Within goal setting, it is very common that SMART criteria (five elements) are used and introduced to individuals and teams to establish goals in hopes of enticing workers to work with greater intensity. It is also common that goals that are co-authored by both supervisors and subordinates strengthen the intrinsic motivation to achieve work for workers. These dynamics are well

supported in the literature and are principles of GST, which was posited by Locke and Latham in 1968 (Locke & Latham, 2019).

My interpretations of the results from this study confirm the work of Locke and Latham and GST, at least partially. I asked four questions to start the interviews that were related to goals as a principle and asked participants to share their experiences when they are set. All 10 participants confirmed that when goals are assigned at work, they felt more intrinsically motivated as posited in GST (Latham & Locke, 2018) and had more clarity and guidance for the work they were doing (IQ1). There was also a majority consensus that when goals were not present at work or assigned to them (IQ2 and IQ3), that they would create their own goals in order to eliminate confusion and chaos for their workday. For the last broad question about goals in general, there was a majority consensus that the participants preferred to co-author the establishment of goals rather than to be assigned goals where they had limited input in their genesis confirming co-authoring as an improvement to commitment, which is a moderator to GST (Latham, 2016). Similar to the principles of GST, these outcomes indicate the importance that workers with ASD place on the need for direction and clarity provided by establishing goals and that ownership in goal creation drives overall goal commitment and is essential to them.

However, although the results supported overall goal setting as a motivational tactic for this population, there were differences within the data that extend the knowledge for principles of GST. These differences in some cases were somewhat drastic from participant to participant. For example, while most participants strongly preferred goals to be assigned that were specific in nature, two of the participants were in direct

opposition to this and strongly preferred goals to be set that were broad. In fact, of the 10 questions asked, none reached a unanimous agreement among the participants and the highest agreement that was recorded was eight out of 10. While individual variation does exist in GST for non-neurodiverse populations regarding internal and external factors (Locke & Latham, 2019), variation in these data is also likely attributed to the differences and uniqueness related to ASD itself (Brooke et al., 2018). Within the population sample, the participants varied in the range of severity of neurodiverse symptoms as typical of high functioning ASD. The uniqueness of each participant then led to variations in the data and the lack of unanimous agreement for any of the questions. However, there were a few elements that were important to note within the results that were outside of the direct questions and were unanimous. Those elements were that all participants had strong desires to do a good job at work and sought to please their bosses and organizations. Another was that the participants often experienced fear and anxiety about the elements of goal setting mentioned throughout the interviews when goals were established. It was a common theme throughout the questions that fear of losing their job existed and that there was a desire to hide their symptoms from their bosses and co-workers for fear of being singled out or judged by others. These observations are helpful information for leaders in organizations when presenting goals to this population. Leaders and organizational policymakers need to be mindful of the already present levels of anxiety and fear in the ASD workforce and to be cognizant that these workers are eager to do a good job if motivated correctly with goal setting.

Summarizing the eight PESs, it was clear that workers with high functioning ASD respond to SMART goals with increased motivation overall, similar to non-neurodiverse populations (IQ5–IQ9). As mentioned earlier, this confirms GST from the literature. However, there were marked differences. For example, for the elements of measurement (M) and time-boundness (T) within SMART, there was far more fear and anxiety mentioned within the data when those dynamics exist as described in the responses. In fact, 60% of the participants described their experience with measurement and time-bound goals as problematic elements. They stated that while they understood why measurement and deadlines needed to exist, that measurement and time deadlines created much higher levels of pressure, stress, and fear of losing their jobs. They also mentioned an overall decrease in motivation when this occurs. Attainability (A in SMART) also harbored differences in motivation within the data as compared to goal setting concepts. While 70% of the participants stated that hard or difficult goals improved their motivation (similar to GST), they elaborated that if goals were perceived as being too hard, their motivation diminished. Thus, there is a limit for this population to how difficult goals can be without negative ramification to intrinsic motivation. The variations in the data for the elements of M, A, and T are notable and considered different and extending to the principles of GST (Locke & Latham, 2018). For this population, effective goal setting will require policymakers and managers to apply situational adjustments to their normal approach. For example, leaders will need to allow more flexibility in how goals are measured, ensuring that each worker is aware of how measurement will be accomplished and how the measurement will be communicated

without causing increased stress and anxiety in the population. The same is true for

attainability and time-boundness dynamics. Failure to make these adjustments could lead

to an overall demotivation of ASD workers, given the outcomes and results as presented

in the data.

The first research question (RQ1) for this study asked about the motivational

experience of goal setting with SMART goals for workers with ASD. The data and

outcomes as described above extend valuable insights to how this population reacts to

SMART goals similarly to non-neurodiverse populations as well as how they react

differently. For the second research question (RQ2) for the study, which focused more on

social judgement when SMART goals are assigned, the data indicated a higher level of

consensus. Seventy percent of the responses indicated that when the participants

perceived that they were being negatively judged by others in a team environment, they

felt a drastic reduction in intrinsic motivation, regardless of the SMART elements that

were present. This dynamic also extends knowledge for the principles of GST.

Participants mentioned that they were very sensitive to negative judgement from others,

and it diminished their intrinsic motivation drastically when it occurred. They also

mentioned that they had experienced this dynamic often in their lives and from an early

age. This was a profound outcome to me as a researcher and one that proved to be of vital

importance to understand when establishing goals for this population and when assigning

them to work on teams in the workplace. Consequently, leaders must be cognizant of this

perception and sensitivity to judgement and be aware of team personalities when

assigning ASD workers to teams. There is a considerable risk of decreasing motivation in

this population if leaders do not have awareness of workers with ASD pertaining to judgment perception. Placing ASD workers on teams that contain other non-neurodiverse workers without focused training for diversity and inclusion could lead to withdrawal and diminish team performance by the team members with ASD. Thus, training on how workers with neurodiversity have different tendencies and perceptions should be a requirement prior to assembling teams that contain this targeted population.

Limitations of the Study

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the population for this study was very specific and included only individuals 18–35 years of age who were diagnosed with ASD and who had a job in the workplace. The study did run into challenges to find the originally targeted number of 12 participants for the interviews. I was able to only source 10 for the interviews even though all recruitment efforts mentioned in Chapter 3 were employed to limited success. Nonetheless, data saturation was achieved while only interviewing 10 participants.

Transferability in qualitative studies has its inherent limitations given the nature of the study design and the uniqueness of the focus. As such, transferability of this study was not a central focus given the specific population that was sampled. Researcher bias was also mentioned in Chapter 1 as a potential limitation, and this was minimized by the researcher through the use of constant reflexivity, journaling, and audit trails.

A few limitations that should be mentioned are response bias and interpretation bias of the participants. For response bias, there is no way of knowing that the answers each participant gave are accurate and wholly true statements. For interpretation bias,

there is no way of knowing that each participant's account of past experiences was consistent with true occurrences. It is possible that a participant could have interpreted a previous ambiguous social exchange negatively given the high levels of anxiety that existed within the group. Thus, because the participants all had the diagnoses of ASD but were not all at the same place in the ASD spectrum, they may have given different answers to the questions due to their different interpretations of similar life events when compared to others. These dynamics introduce a limitation to the data of this study and needed to be mentioned.

Recommendations

Given the strengths and limitations and results of this study, I would recommend several changes to the approach for this population for future studies. The study results did not support the notion that younger workers would answer the questions differently than older workers, which is the main reason the age was limited in this study. Instead, the data results indicated that the answers were similar from the youngest members of the study to the oldest. Thus, for future research, age should not be a factor in selecting participants. Second, the overall design for the study should be shifted to mixed methods at a minimum or full quantitative to gain more access to data. Given the social interaction challenges inherent with individuals with ASD, some of the interviews were challenging given the social anxiety elicited from some of the participants and getting a rich amount of data took several probe questions. Utilizing a quantitative survey for future research would help to reduce this emotion and would allow for access to more individuals. Third, the sampling method used for the study was the snowball method. This method simply

did not work as the participants did not know others in their social networks that fit the research criteria. Instead, I had to lean on my own professional network to find participants. For future research sampling strategies, purposive sampling should be used for qualitative designs and probability sampling for quantitative designs or mixed method designs.

Last, this study only included workers in the United States and did not include workers from other countries. Future studies could certainly open the qualification criteria to other countries. The differences in culture and work environments on an international platform may yield different motivational experiences compared to those in the United States.

Implications

Contributions to Positive Social Change

There is limited research in the literature on adults with ASD for basic things such as how they interpret stimulus or react to motivational tactics in their adult lives. As such, there is a gap in understanding their unique nature in hopes of gaining the ability to improve their overall quality of life. There is, however, a vast amount of research on goal setting and GST, but not as tested on workers with ASD. This study's outcomes illustrate that for motivational experiences to goal setting, there are dynamics that are different to non-neurodiverse populations and must be carefully managed when goals are set. The results contribute to positive social change by increasing the overall understanding of these individuals in the work environment in how they experience goal setting when SMART goals are established.

Consequently, positive social change can be impacted at all levels including the individual, familial, and organizational levels by contributing to the population's ability to acquire and maintain adequate intrinsic motivation levels at work to achieve goals. Improving the population's ability to achieve goals could lead to an increase in their ability to maintain employment and contribute to the workforce. The skills that are inherent within individuals with ASD such as heightened visual skills, attention to detail, creativity, integrity, and analytical skills are much needed dynamics by organizations in business today and need not be lost in the workplace. Organizations can benefit from keeping them gainfully employed. Benefits extend to the families of this population given the potential of improved economic, emotional, and psychological elements that can be achieved by building a career and providing for their families.

Theoretical Implications

GST and SJT, as well as the concept of goal setting, were the guiding factors for the study and led to the creation of the research questions and interview questions. GST focuses on the establishment of SMART goals to increase the intrinsic motivation of individuals and teams in organizational settings (Locke & Latham, 1968). Additionally, GST posits that goal setting is more effective at increasing intrinsic motivation when employees are allowed to co-author the goals and have ownership in their genesis (Locke & Latham, 2019). This study's results supported this concept as the participants discussed their preference to have goals and discussed their experience to the elements of SMART goals used in goal setting.

SJT posits that people perceive reality based upon viewing a distal stimulus through a multivariate lens or perception (Sherif et al.,1965). The theory states that this perception is affected by variable cues and environmental factors that are imperfectly correlated with each other towards establishing an overall judgement (Dhami & Mumpower, 2018). The study contributes to SJT as the participants discussed how their perception of judgment affected their overall motivation in the workplace when goals are set for them.

Practice Implications

The findings of the study revealed that goal setting for workers with ASD is effective for workers with ASD but must be adjusted depending on the uniqueness of the symptoms inherent in the disease. Therefore, a potential practice implication would be the creation of an ASD education module that could be utilized by organizations to educate leaders and managers on the differences in workers that have the disease and how to set SMART goals more effectively in order to improve their intrinsic motivation and not demotivate them by failure to adjust to their unique needs.

Conclusion

Adults with ASD possess tremendous skills and abilities that we need in our communities, organizations, and overall society. Sadly, they are unemployed at the highest percentage of all neurodiversity classifications in the workplace. And the percentage of people diagnosed with ASD is 1 in 52 and growing, indicating that more people will be identified as having ASD in the future. More effort must be put into

understanding adults with ASD and their individual needs and differences to help them be successful and live full and fulfilling lives.

Goal setting is a predominate motivational tactic used in the workplace today and is highly studied and documented in the literature. However, GST has not been studied extensively on workers with ASD. And since goals are widely used to motivate people to exude work, the need to understand goal setting for the targeted population was paramount. The results delivered in this study were revealing in that there are differences in how goal setting is experienced for the population. And if used incorrectly, goal setting can be a reason in decreased motivation, and overall job dissatisfaction and withdrawal. Applying what was learned from the data can help organizations and leaders make much needed adjustments in how goals are created and applied, thereby improving the ability for workers with ASD to maintain employment. All of this contributes to positive social change.

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Appendix: Interview Questions Guide

IQ1: Describe to me what you think about goals in the workplace.

IQ2: Describe how you feel when you get to work and there are no set goals for you to work towards for the day.

IQ3: Does having a set goal for your workday make you work harder? Can you give me a specific example?

IQ4: Would you rather have goals be set that you help to establish? Can you explain one that you helped to create?

IQ5: What is your experience to goals that are specific in nature? Can you describe one that comes to mind and how you feel about it?

IQ6: What is your experience to goals that are measurable in nature? Can you share about a specific time that this happened?

IQ7: What is your experience to goals that you feel aren't attainable regarding getting accomplished?

IQ8: How do you feel when goals are set for you that you feel are not relevant or seem out of place to the job that you are doing?

IQ9: How do you feel when goals are set for you that have a specific deadline to get accomplished?

IQ10: When goals are set at work, how is your motivational experience different if you have a feeling of being personally judged by others in the workplace versus not?