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The Lived Experiences of Military Contractors and Impact of Stress on Their Perceived Productivity and Job Satisfaction During COVID-19 Mandated Telework

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Abstract

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Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Industrial/Organizational Psychology

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Abstract

The impact of rapidly introduced, mandated telework arrangements on military contractors that traditionally conduct operations in person is not understood, often leaving military contractors obligated to execute the same mission as their active-duty and civilian employee counterparts without the same level of support. Despite the size of the defense contractor workforce and the military's reliance on contractor employees, the federal government does not include defense contractors in its remote working policies, creating a risk to its overall workforce. The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis study is to gather data about how military contractors, forced into teleworking, experience stress as it relates to perceived productivity and job satisfaction. The theories and concepts that ground this study include Goh et al.'s revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping and Savickas's career construction theory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven military contractors that were forced into telework arrangements due to COVID-19 mandates. The data collected examined emerging themes, concepts, and patterns using the modified van Kaam procedural steps. The findings of this study revealed a bifurcation among participants, with approximately half reporting a decline in job satisfaction. The findings of this study can be applied within the military contracting realm by leading to policies that consider contractor employee alongside active-duty military and civilian employees in considering stress as it relates to perceived productivity and job satisfaction, thus increasing overall military workforce strength.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Military contractors, employees of private companies, support military missions and operations alongside active-duty military and Federal employee personnel (Schwartz & Church, 2013; United States Office of Personnel Management, 2020). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, only a small percentage of the military contractor workforce teleworked (United States Department of Defense, 2021). Though the Federal Government has attempted to increase telework capabilities through legislation such as the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, which required each executive agency to establish and implement a telework policy (H.R. 1722-111th Congress: Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, 2021; Inspector General, 2021), as of the end of the Fiscal Year 2018, only 22% of all federal employees participated in some type of telework arrangement (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2020). Pre-COVID-19 telework arrangements were mixed telework and onsite, with 45% of federal teleworkers only working remotely during situational circumstances such as base closures or authorized personal situations (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2020).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the United States military implemented Health Protection Conditions (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, 2020) that forced many contractor personnel into nearly or completely full–time remote working arrangements as the federal workforce implemented emergency telework arrangements (Inspector General, 2021; Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, 2020; United States Department of Defense, 2020). In the Department of Defense (DoD), mandated remote working was implemented rapidly, focusing on technological

requirements, contracting readiness, and information security (Inspector General, 2021; Lopez, 2020). With the priority being technical capabilities and readiness, little attention was paid to the military contractor employee perspective of suddenly working from home or sustained employee job satisfaction, which is alignment of an employee's needs and desires in a job and the needs and desires that job fulfills (Irawanto et al., 2021). Perceived performance, employee behaviors and actions to complete tasks and contribute productively to the organization's goals (Shobe, 2018), was also not considered. DoD training for employees remotely working focused on cybersecurity, information protection, and roles and responsibilities with little or no guidance provided on strategies for successful telework (United States Department of Defense, 2012). The policy does not address DoD employees' new digital workspace or the ability to address potential stress to maintain productivity or job satisfaction outside of the technical capabilities to perform job functions (United States Department of Defense, 2012). The digital workspace, which are the technologies and practices that contribute to employee occupational experiences, heavily contributes to stress on remote workers (Marsh et al., 2022). The Government's follow up analyses of COVID-19 mandated remote working focuses on the technical aspects of remote working (Inspector General, 2021) without looking at the extended elements of the digital workspace, such as organizational culture and readiness to support a remote workforce with conducive practices and policies, managerial approach, and co-worker interaction (Marsh et al., 2022) that impact job satisfaction or perceived productivity.

While there are numerous general studies into the stress caused by COVID-19 quarantine (Brooks et al., 2020; Burhama et al., 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020), studies that identify the effects of stress in remote worker productivity and job satisfaction (Allen et al., 2015; Bentley et al., 2016; Brunelle & Fortin, 2021; Caillier, 2014; Marsh et al., 2022; Suh & Lee, 2017; Zollner & Sulikova, 2020), and recent research into the impacts of COVID-19 telework on employee job satisfaction and productivity (Cushing et al., 2021; Inspector General, 2021; Irawanto et al., 2021), the impact of rapidly introduced, mandated telework arrangements on employees in military contractor organizations that traditionally conduct operations in person is not understood. In fact, military contractors are often overlooked by scholars and policy analysts (Mahoney, 2020). Stress is known to affect employee wellbeing (Pickup, 2020), and with a predicted long–term continuation of remote working (Lopez, 2020; Mlitz, 2021; Young et al., 2021), this study may promote positive social change by helping military contractor organizations, unaccustomed to remote working, to understand the experiences of this population and develop telework policies that positively affect employee perceived productivity and job satisfaction.

Chapter 1 introduces the study by providing an overview of the background of the study and describing the problem statement, purpose, research questions, theoretical and conceptual framework, and nature and significance of the study. Additionally, this chapter discusses the study's assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance.

Background of the Study

There is little research into the effects of telework in public administration (Choi, 2020). Studies done in the general workforce on the effects of teleworking, which is when an employee performs normal job functions from a site other than the normal work location (H.R. 1722-111th Congress: Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, 2021), on job satisfaction and perceived productivity provide mixed findings (Bentley et al., 2016; Caillier, 2014; Suh & Lee, 2017). However, many studies have found a curvilinear effect; job satisfaction and productivity increase with increased telework, plateau, then decrease as telework increases (Allen et al., 2015). During COVID-19, where full-time telework was mandated, one would expect increased job dissatisfaction as full time telework continued. However, recent studies focused on COVID-19 mandated telework continue to provide mixed results; some have found that employees forced into full time telework do experience decreased productivity and job satisfaction (Inspector General, 2021; Irwanto et al., 2021), while others report the same or increased job satisfaction and productivity (Cushing et al., 2021; United States Office of Personnel Management, 2021). Additionally, employees who have engaged in face-to-face work practices for significant periods experience more occupational stress, a physical and/or psychological pressure as a result of unsatisfactory working conditions related to physical conditions (Wushe & Shenje, 2019), than other employees in coping with rapid and fundamental shifts to telework environments (Suh & Lee, 2017). This has held true during the COVID-19 pandemic. Irwanto et al. (2021) found that Indonesian workers, who had a culture of onsite work before the pandemic, struggled to adjust to rapidly implemented

mandatory teleworking arrangements, with occupational stress increasing and job satisfaction decreasing.

Historically, remote working in the government sector has had an element of choice; employees sought out remote work intentionally and worked with employers on mutually agreeable remote working arrangements (United States Department of Defense, 2012). This element of choice increased employee sense of career control, a key factor in job satisfaction (Hartung & Cadaret, 2017; Zhuang et al., 2021). During COVID-19 restrictions, however, governments across nations imposed remote working mandates, removing employee choice in telework options and in how telework was accomplished (Cushing et al., 2021; Lopez, 2020). Full telework in employees with long–standing onsite working arrangements coupled with not having a choice in remote working may put additional stress on workers, impacting their perceived productivity and job satisfaction (Choi, 2020; Inspector General, 2021; Irwanto et al., 2021; Suh & Lee, 2017). Those who have always chosen onsite work now find themselves facing an unfamiliar remote working situation (Cushing et al., 2021; Lopez, 2020) and potential stress of COVID-19 mandated lockdown measures (Horesch & Brown, 2020). Though the use of technology has been used to recreate an office setting in an attempt to replace the traditional face to face interactions military contractors historically rely upon to accomplish their job (United States Department of Defense, 2020), the use of technology and the need to rapidly learn new technology may contribute to feelings of stress (Burhamah et al., 2020; Chiou et al., 2015; Irwanto et al., 2021; Suh & Lee, 2017). There is a known dark side to remote working. Organizations without clear expectations of

work and non-work segmentation, poorly defined expectations on communication response times, and incongruencies between organizational demands and individual employee work style and technology preferences can lead to technostress caused by work-related technology, occupational stress caused by unsatisfactory working conditions, and negative occupational outcomes (Marsh et al., 2022).

Employee job satisfaction and perceived performance are critical aspects of business organizations' capabilities (Shobe, 2018). The goal of every business organization is to be highly productive; the more productive, the more successful the business (Shobe, 2018). Organizational productivity is driven by employees; without a productive workforce, organizations cannot themselves be productive and successful (Singh et al., 2019). There are numerous studies that tie employee stress to job satisfaction which impacts worker productivity (Hoboubi et al., 2017; Shobe, 2018; Storey et al., 2019; Wushe & Shenje, 2018). As far back as 1968, Herzberg (1987) identified the correlation between workers' content with their job and a high-performance level. The Federal Government, though not a business by legal definition (Legal Information Institute, 2021), has many of the same characteristics and concerns of business organizations, chiefly, high productivity (Leipold, 2014).

COVID-19 accelerated the steadily growing trend of telework, and there is no indication that a "return to normal" includes a mass return to office-based work (Bartik et al., 2020). COVID-19 mandated shift to telework highlighted that many organizations failed to prepare for it. Payne et al. (2021) found that 33% of surveyed organizations did not have a telework business continuity plan, 38% of employees were unaware of any

telework business continuity plans, and over half did not have or were unaware of formal organizational telework policies. The United States Federal Government has both continuity plans and a formal telework policy; however, the companies it relies on to provide critical goods and services often do not (Payne et al., 2021). The United States Federal Government has committed to retaining maximum telework options (Inspector General, 2021; Young et al., 2021), bringing organizational challenges in the human resources arena of those contracting companies that support the Federal Government. As the business world moves beyond COVID-19 crisis management, strategic thought in business continuity planning is needed for the next global crisis that requires unprecedented shifts in employee work arrangements. Though studies have been done focusing on the job satisfaction, occupational stress, and productivity of persons directly employed in the public sector and DoD, little is known about these factors in teleworkers employed by private companies supporting these public agencies (Batka et al., 2020). By understanding COVID-19 impacts to contractor personnel, companies that employ this workforce can create policies and business continuity plans to mitigate disruptions of crucial goods and services (Payne et al, 2021) and adapt management practices that maintain organizational functioning in virtual work environments (Contreras et al., 2020).

This study explored the lived experiences of military contractors' stress in relation to perceived productivity and job satisfaction as they navigate through COVID-19 telework mandates which have not been explored. The results of this study provide a foundation for military contractor organizations to develop strategic telework policies that support routine and contingent telework arrangements without significantly

impacting employee job satisfaction or perceived productivity, which in turn impact

support to the United States Federal Government.

Problem Statement

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments across the world

implemented strategies to reduce the spread of the virus (Burhamah et al., 2020; Gavi,

2020). One widespread COVID-19 mandate was a compulsory shift to teleworking

(Irawanto et al., 2021). While remote working has been a steadily growing trend in the

workforce, the COVID-19 pandemic situation forced telework accommodations on

groups of workers that traditionally only experience onsite working arrangements, such

as military contractors (United States Department of Defense, 2020). Military contractors

work alongside military personnel and federal civilian employees to provide essential

support to military operations, contributing expertise in specialized fields (Congressional

Research Service, 2021). The contractor workforce is heavily relied upon during

emerging crisis situations to augment military personnel (Schwartz & Church, 2013);

such was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic when the Federal Government

leveraged contracting capabilities to provide COVID-19 related emergency construction,

transportation, and supply management services domestically and overseas (Saxton &

Cancian, 2021). Though they provide direct support to the government client, military

contractors must balance requirements stemming from client requirements, processes,

and directives and those of their employer (Mahoney, 2020). In essence, they serve two

masters: the United States Government and their employer.

During COVID-19, the Federal Government implemented mandated, full–time telework resulting in a rapid 56% increase in the number of teleworkers (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2021). In many cases, the transition to full-time telework was not smooth; many employees were initially stressed over technological challenges and unclear guidance (Inspector General, 2021). Despite the size of the defense contractor workforce, it is not included in mandated federal reporting (Inspector General, 2021). Current literature addresses COVID-19-related stress in the general worker population (Brooks et al., 2020; Burhamah et al., 2020; Horesch & Brown, 2020), and studies on the effects of COVID-19 mandated teleworking have recently emerged (Belzungeui-Eraso & Erro-Garces, 2020; Brunelle & Fortin, 2020; Cushing et al., 2021; Inspector General, 2021; Irwanto et al., 2021; Monroe & Haug, 2021; Zullner & Sulika, 2021). While there has been research done on the impacts of COVID-19 mandated telework in the Federal employee population (Cushing et al., 2021; Inspector General, 2021; Monroe & Haug, 2021), military contractors have been excluded. Therefore, there exists a gap in knowledge regarding the impacts of COVID-19 mandated teleworking on military contractors. Studying the lived experiences of the study participants provided an opportunity to understand if stress is experienced by military contractors forced into teleworking arrangements resulting from COVID-19 mandates and if their perceived productivity and job satisfaction were impacted. With the problem framed within and primary focused on the discipline of organizational psychology, this study aimed to fill that gap.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study was to gather data about how military contractors, forced into teleworking, experienced stress as it relates to productivity and job satisfaction. The goal was to understand the lived experiences of military contractors forced into teleworking due to COVID-19 to provide a basis for more effective policies and procedures.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

Research Question 1: What was the lived experience related to stress on military contractors forced into telework circumstances due to COVID-19 restrictions on job satisfaction?

Sub-question 1: What were participants' initial responses to stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework and did it impact job satisfaction?

Sub-question 2: What were final outcomes of stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework on job satisfaction?

Sub-question 3: How did participants use control to deal with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding job satisfaction?

Sub-question 4: How concerned were participants with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding job satisfaction?

Sub-question 5: How did participants use curiosity to deal with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding job satisfaction?

Sub-question 6: How confident were participants that they can deal with the stress from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding job satisfaction?

Research Question 2: What was the lived experience related to stress on military contractors forced into telework circumstances due to COVID-19 restrictions on perceived productivity?

Sub-question 1: What were participants' initial responses to stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework and did it impact perceived productivity?

Sub-question 2: What were final outcomes of stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework on perceived productivity?

Sub-question 3: How did participants use control to deal with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding perceived productivity?

Sub-question 4: How concerned were participants with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding perceived productivity?

Sub-question 5: How did participants use curiosity to deal with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding perceived productivity?

Sub-question 6: How confident were participants that they can deal with the stress from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding perceived productivity?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework for the Study

The theories and concepts that ground this study include Goh et

al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping and

Savickas's (2020) career construction theory. The revised transactional model of

occupational stress and coping describes a process of assessing and reacting to, if

necessary, occupational stress (Goh et al., 2010). Career construction theory identifies

how individuals leverage their own vocational personalities to adjust to job changes

(Savickas, 2020). Each of these theories, and their use in previous research, are briefly

described in relation to the current study in this section. A more detailed discussion of the

theoretical framework is found in Chapter 2.

Revised Transactional Model of Occupational Stress and Coping

The revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping originates with

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping and describes a

process by which an individual experiences occupational stress, assesses that

stress relative to his or her wellbeing, and upon determining a threat to wellbeing,

conducts a second assessment and initiates a coping response (Goh et al., 2010). The

coping response is only initiated after the stressful event is perceived as a threat and a

psycho-physiological response occurs (Goh et al., 2010). Paradoxically, activating a

coping behavior may increase levels of occupational stress if the coping mechanism does

not resolve the stressor (Goh et al., 2010). Additionally, a stressful event may be

appraised as insignificant and not require coping behaviors the first time but assessed as

significant during a subsequent experience; this is true even if the stressful event is identical (Goh et al., 2010).

Career Construction Theory

Savickas's (2020) career construction theory is an expansion of Super and Knasel's (1981) career development theory and concentrates on how employees leverage individual vocational personalities to adjust to job changes and the problem–solving strategies and coping behaviors used to adapt and achieve self–efficacy and self–determination that make successful transitions. Career adaptability consists of four components: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Career concern is preparedness for one's own occupational future, planning for future occupational choices and transition by engaging in experiences that promote occupational competencies (Savickas, 2020). Career control is being conscientious, deliberate, organized, and decisive in making vocational choices and occupational transitions; it is a sense of personal responsibility in one's own future (Savickas, 2020). Career curiosity describes an inclination to explore new experiences in the work world that allow realistic and objective choices to occupational change (Savickas, 2020). Career confidence is a belief in one's ability to execute a course of action (Savickas, 2020).

Together, career concern, control, curiosity, and confidence allow an individual to optimistically plan for future occupational choices, explore future occupational possibilities, and intentionally direct vocational choices with confidence of a successful outcome (Savickas, 2020). Ideally, mature levels of each of the four components would determine highly successful adaptability strategies and adapting responses during times

of occupational transition; however, because each component develops at a different rate, and may never reach full potential in an individual, successful career adaptation may not be realized (Savickas, 2020). In short, success in adapting to changing occupational landscapes is highly dependent on an individual's readiness to accept occupational change and internal resources to develop and implement strategies to overcome challenges.

Relationship to the Study Approach

The use of both theories provided a rich framework for investigating the full cycle of occupational stress as it relates to perceived productivity and job satisfaction during COVID-19 mandated telework. As applied to the present study, Goh et al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping defines if, and when, adaptation to COVID-19 telework mandates occurs; Savickas's (2020) career construction theory describes how that adaptation occurs. The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of this study include the idea that a coping response is only initiated after a stressful event is perceived as a threat (Goh et al., 2010). In other words, the underlying factor in the variable of this study, stress caused by COVID-19 mandated telework, in and of itself, is not enough to impact behavior and create a need to implement coping mechanisms. Goh et al.'s theory provided a framework for the specific conditions under which COVID-19 telework-related stress became significant enough to impact perceived productivity and job satisfaction (Singh et al., 2019). Additionally, an employee's internal resources and vocational personality dictate how adaptation was made to accommodate the impact of stress on perceived

productivity and job satisfaction (Savickas, 2020). In this sense, even if a military

contractor perceived COVID-19 mandated telework as stressful enough to impact job

satisfaction and perceived productivity and made adaptations to the new work

environment, individuals adapted differently based on their own internal resources and

vocational personalities (Savickas, 2020). Because of the individualized nature of the

perception of stress, it is important to study the lived experiences of military contractors

to understand not a quantitative level of stress but whether COVID-19 mandated telework

was perceived as stressful and resulted in any impact on job satisfaction or perceived

productivity. The use of both Goh et al.'s and Savickas's theories in this study allowed a

comprehensive understanding of occupational stress as related to job satisfaction and

perceived productivity from initial impacts to adaptations to outcomes.

Nature of the Study

To explore the lived experiences of military contractors forced into telework due

to COVID-19 mandates and any stress as it relates to perceived productivity and job

satisfaction resulting from telework arrangements, this qualitative study used an IPA

study approach (Boudah, 2020; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA research is a method

that focuses on the "user story" of the participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It is

concerned with participants' detailed, lived experiences of certain phenomena, such as

the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of an IPA study is to richly describe each

participant's particular experience; only then can interpretation result in general themes

that can be applied to other military contractor populations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The research method dovetails with the theoretical framework employed, as both allow for individualistic experiences and responses (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The participants consisted of seven military contractors forced into remote working arrangements due to COVID-19 mandates. The participants were in different stages of telework arrangements due to the differences in implementation of mandated telework across military installations (Inspector General, 2021). Because some Federal agencies were unprepared for the information technology requirements needed for mass teleworking, implementation of telework mandates were phased in, resulting in some military contractors having been forced into remote work early in the pandemic and continue to do so and others more recently (Inspector General, 2021). Participants were recruited using social media, university resources, and snowball sampling. The primary recruitment method was through social media sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Research and Me to announce a call for research participants. Additionally, Walden University's Participant Pool was leveraged to recruit participants. Because the candidate pool recruited from social media sites was insufficient, snowball sampling, where current participants nominate others for interviewing (Ghaljaie et al., 2017), was used to increase the candidate pool of participants.

The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews (Appendix E). Semi-structured, in-depth, individual interviews with military contractors will provide individualistic and deep insight into participants' lived experiences during COVID-19 mandated telework. These interviews were conducted using video teleconferencing capabilities through Microsoft Teams. The data gathered during the interviews were

organized into emerging themes surrounding participants' lived experiences regarding COVID-19 mandated telework arrangements and summarized to draw out key issues discussed by the participants. Participants had an opportunity to review the transcript to provide clarification or additional guidance on personal meaning or intent. Interview data was collected via video recordings and interviewer notes to capture non–audible responses, such as body language. I used NVivo analytic software to develop a thematic analysis of the data using codes and categories.

Definitions

The following definitions were used for this research:

Career adaptability: The level of preparedness in individual workers to engage their internal resources of career concern, career control, career curiosity, and career confidence to manage change in the workplace by implementing action when change is needed and, as a result, adapting to new realities in the workplace (Savickas, 2020).

Digital workspace: Technologies and practices that contribute to employee occupational experiences regardless of physical location that extends beyond traditional information and communication technologies. It implies not only the technologies used by organizations for remote workers, but also practices and processes that involve organizational culture, ways of working, managerial approaches, and co-worker interactions within the virtual or remote workspace (Marsh et al., 2022).

Expeditionary contracting: Procuring goods and services to support overseas and domestic emergency operations (Schwartz & Church, 2013).

Government contracting: Legal contracts between private companies and the DoD to supply the DoD with specific services, supplies, or construction in support of military operations (Congressional Research Service, 2021).

Job satisfaction: An alignment of an employee's needs and desires in a job and the needs and desires that job fulfills (Irawanto et al., 2021).

Military/defense contractor: An individual hired by a private company that provides services, supplies, or construction to the DoD (Congressional Research Service, 2021).

Occupational stress: Physical and/or psychological pressure resulting from unsatisfactory working conditions related to physical conditions, interpersonal relationships, and other factors perceived by employees to exceed the abilities and resources of the individual to overcome (Wushe & Shenje, 2019).

Perceived performance: Behaviors and actions taken by the employee to complete tasks and contribute productively to the organization's goals (Shobe, 2018).

Technostress: The point at which stress caused by work-related technology, including the processes to support technology, organizational culture regarding the use and training of technology, managerial approaches, and expectations regarding employee use of technology, and virtual co-worker interaction, exceeds an employee's capability to manage, potentially resulting in negative occupational outcomes (Marsh et al., 2022).

Teleworking: Working arrangements in which an employee performs normal job functions of the employee's position from an approved worksite other than the location

from which the employee would normally work (H.R. 1722-111th Congress: Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, 2021).

Assumptions

This study had four assumptions, which are those elements necessary to conduct the research but cannot be proven true (Simon, 2011). The first assumption was that the participants met the criteria of working in a military contractor role and have been forced into teleworking arrangements due to COVID-19 restrictions. The second assumption is that participants responded honestly during interviews and any follow–up conversations, which was essential for accurate data analysis (Simon, 2011). However, honesty may have been challenging for some participants, who may not have admitted to experiencing stress or reveal experiences that put them in a less favorable light (Cushing et al., 2021). The third assumption was that no participant felt a significant adverse impact from discussing occupational stress. This assumption was essential to ensure that participants did not reframe their interview responses because of additional stress from discussing occupational challenges (Boudah, 2020). The fourth assumption was that I was able to recruit enough participants to conduct the study, allowing me to reach data saturation.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to participants who were remote workers in a military contractor role that began teleworking because of COVID-19 mandates. This made recruiting participants a challenge. However, snowball sampling helped overcome this challenge (Ghaljaie et al., 2017). Participants that are active-duty military or civilian employees were excluded from this study. Participants were recruited from worldwide

locations from all branches of the military and across professional industries using social

media such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Research and Me. As there was no intention to

examine differences in experiences between genders, there was no restriction of gender in

the participant population. Additionally, there was no intention to study differences in

experiences between age groups, which will naturally be restricted to those old enough to

be in the DoD contracting workforce and those who have not yet retired.

Out of scope for this study were stress factors unrelated to COVID-19, such as

long–standing company culture or management practices that impact worker perceived

job satisfaction and perceived productivity regardless of COVID-19 telework mandates.

Similarly, this study only addressed perceived job satisfaction and perceived productivity.

Additionally, there were limits on transferability and dependability in this study.

Transferability, or generalizability, is established when a study provides evidence that its

findings apply to an entire population and not just the sample used in the study (Boudah,

2020). Dependability establishes that a study's research findings are consistent and

repeatable (Boudah, 2020). IPA research is founded on fundamental principles of

phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics, all of which focus on the detailed

description of individual experiences using small sample sizes (Pietkiewicz & Smith,

2014). Focusing on individual experiences makes it difficult to obtain consistent and

repeatable results, as individuals will have different experiences for the same

phenomenon. Further, IPA seeks a homogenous sample to ensure study relevance is

maintained (Noon, 2018). As such, IPA study results may not have transferability to a

more generalized population. Those same foundations, phenomenology, idiography, and

hermeneutics, make it difficult to replicate findings between studies. To address issues of transferability, this study avoided general claims (Noon, 2018) and discussed only perceptions and understandings of the study participants within the limited setting of COVID-19 mandated telework. Dependability in this study was addressed through repetitive analysis of the data using multiple mediums, as interviews were recorded, and I took notes. As suggested by Rodham et al. (2015), IPA data analysis benefits from collecting data in written and recorded form, then analyzing each form independently to ensure rigor in the researcher's understanding and interpretation of participants' responses.

Limitations

There were challenges inherent to this study. One challenge was that some of my employees wanted to participate and could have responded to social media requests. This presented a potential conflict of interest because I am a senior manager for a Federal Government contracting company employing military contractors. However, as participant candidates were easily identified during the initial phase, my current employees were excluded from the study.

A second challenge was the length of time between the actual event of initial mandated teleworking and data collection, which could have impacted participants' recollection of their feelings and responses during this time. Research on the quality and accuracy of human memory show the more distant an event, the more inaccurate the recollection of that event is likely to be due to failed retrieval processes (forgetting), incorrect date estimations, and emotional biases (Muggenburg, 2021). These elements of

memory failure can be mitigated by using pre-interview activities to help participants recall past experiences during initial mandated teleworking arrangements, which in turn provides participants the opportunity to recall and select memories to share (Ellis et al., 2011).

A third challenge was the willingness of participants to honestly identify and discuss issues with stress as it pertains to perceived productivity and job satisfaction. This was first addressed in the consent form, which assured all participants of anonymity in their participation in the study and their responses during interviews and follow–up discussions (Boudah, 2020). Further, anonymity was ensured on all documentation beyond the consent form by identifying participants with a random number generated by Randomizer.org, a research random sampling and random assignment program (Urbaniak & Plous, 2022).

Participant privacy was further challenged by the nature of interview data collection because there was no way to interview a participant anonymously with interviews conducted via video meetings. However, while the identity of each participant was known during interviews, all interview notes, recordings, field notes, transcripts, journals, and other data collection materials, were identified with random identifiers. This ensured participant privacy to the maximum extent possible.

Finally, ensuring that my own biases do not influence the findings was a limitation. I have been a military contractor and have managed teams of military contractors for over a decade. Additionally, at the time of the study, I was a remote worker (though not due to COVID-19 mandates) and have teleworked as my normal

working environment during various points in my career. Therefore, I had my own

experiences with stress, which were certainly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. One

of the foundations of IPA is that the researcher tries to empathize with the participants

(Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). However, empathy makes data interpretation complicated

by the researcher's preconceptions (Noon, 2018); it is nearly impossible to fully suspend

one's own experiences, values, and preconceptions to ensure bias-free data interpretation.

Rodham et al. (2015) suggested that rather than trying to suspend their own biases,

researchers become curious, thus taking a position of seeking understanding of the

unknown rather than assuming knowledge based on their own perceptions and

experiences. To this end, this study aimed to use semi-structured interviews, with non-

directive questions intended to loosely guide instead of rigorously structure the

discussions. As Noon (2018) described, this approach allowed interview questions to be

adjusted depending on participants' responses rather than my preconceptions and led to

discovering unexpected facets of participant experience and developing richer details for

later analysis.

As I was a program manager over military contracts and I worked remotely, I had

natural biases and inclinations to overcome. The use of researcher journaling and data

bracketing helped reduce my own biases. Epoché is intended to separate a researcher's

own knowledge of a shared experience to subjectively attend to qualitative data

collection, such as when conducting participant interviews (Bednall, 2006). Epoché is not

easy in practice; therefore, I followed Bednall's (2006) methods by first assessing my

own feelings and experiences of the study scope and writing those down. This was

intended to help me identify where my biases lie before data collection or analysis began (Bednall, 2006). That list accompanied me on the interviews to refresh myself, and adjust the list if necessary (Bednall, 2006). Additionally, before starting each interview, reviewed my bias list, and cleared my mind of not only those biases, but any daily life concerns that may have distracted me from the interview processes.

In keeping with Bendall's (2006) epoché method, I kept a research journal to record my ideas and feelings that emerged during the interviews. However, to avoid distracting the participants, much of my journal recording was done immediately after the conclusion of each interview (Bednall, 2006). During the actual interviews, only quick and important notes of my own reaction to something said were noted. This was a form of bracketing to identify and remove my own preconceptions during the interview process. Bracketing assists in reducing researcher bias by identifying and setting aside preconceived ideas and personal experiences or knowledge (Tufford & Newman, 2010). By using bracketing to identify my own experiences and knowledge of teleworking during COVID-19 mandates, I reduced the chances of tainting the data collection and data analysis phases.

Significance

Current literature has shown differing degrees of impact from the COVID-19 on persons living through the pandemic (Adamou et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2020; Burhamah et al., 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020). Suh and Lee (2017) showed that employees who had a long history of traditional office work experience higher levels of occupational stress in teleworking environments than workers who are relatively new to

the workforce or have experienced some teleworking arrangements. In moving to telework in response to COVID-19 restrictions, much of the focus was on technical solutions (Lopez, 2020), often increasing work stress by rapidly and fundamentally changing the nature of traditional office workers (Suh & Lee, 2017). Those technical solutions may even contribute to employee stress (Chiou et al., 2015).

There are over 200,000 military contractors (Congressional Research Service, 2021). Because of the importance military contractors play in our nation's military readiness (Congressional Research Service, 2021), there is a need to focus on this population. As with the general worker population, military contractors that experience occupational stress that negatively impacts job satisfaction and perceived productivity are more likely to leave (Batka et al., 2020). The impact to high turnover rates within military contracting are serious; national security, continuity of operations, and wasted tax dollars result (Batka et al., 2020). Though studies of the impact of COVID-19 on the general employee population have been done (Adamou et al., 2020; Merzon et al., 2020), there exists a gap in the research studying this specific employee population (Batka, et al, 2020; Mahoney, 2020).

This research provided an original contribution to the field of psychology by identifying common themes in the lived experiences of military contractors regarding COVID-19 related stress as it pertains to perceived productivity and job satisfaction during mandated teleworking. Furthermore, the results of this study can be applied by human resource professionals in defense contracting companies to help better understand the impact of suddenly implemented telework arrangements on this worker population.

By understanding the challenges of stress associated with mandated teleworking and the impacts on perceived productivity and job satisfaction, military contracting organizations can better support their employees through teleworking policies that consider technical solutions and employee wellbeing. In doing so, military leadership can potentially create operationally dictated teleworking surge capabilities that allow rapid increases and decreases in teleworking arrangements that maintain employee wellbeing, and therefore, employee success (Xu et al., 2017).

The findings of this study may also lead to positive social change within the military contracting realm by leading to policies that consider employee stress as it relates to perceived productivity and job satisfaction on par with other factors, such as technical solutions, when implementing new processes, thus increasing military contractor employee career adaptability during uncertain times. Career adaptability, the ability to adjust to unpredictable work environment changes, directly impacts occupational success (Brunelle & Fortin, 2021; Xu et al., 2017). Organizational support contributes to employee career adaptability, reduces the psychological costs of work, and increases an employee's involvement in job success (Xu et al., 2017).

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the literature on the current COVID-19 pandemic, current studies on the impact of the pandemic, and the implementation of teleworking arrangements in response to COVID-19 mandates. The research problem, purpose, and research questions were identified. The theoretical framework of the study is based on Goh et al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping and

Savickas's (2020) career construction theory, and an explanation of their applicability to this study is provided. The assumptions are explained, and the scope and delimitations of the study are identified. The limitations of the study identify those areas not under my control, as well as mitigating actions that will be put in place. Finally, the significance of the study identifies the implications of the findings of this study and the potential positive social change that may result from this study.

Chapter 2 provides a synopsis of the current literature, providing evidence of the relevance of the problem. It details the literature search strategy and reviews the literature related to this study. Goh et al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping and Savickas's (2020) career construct theory, the foundational theories of this study, are discussed. Lastly, Chapter 2 describes how this study fills a gap in the literature and extends the body of knowledge in the field of psychology.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The current COVID-19 situation has been the catalyst for changing the landscape of telework (Belzungeui-Eraso & Erro-Garces, 2020), with even the staunchly traditional military implementing telework solutions (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, 2020). However, the speed at which it was done meant many organizations did not have well–developed policies, and many only focused on the technical solution without regard to the job satisfaction or perceived productivity of employees (Burhamah et al., 2020). Despite the heavy reliance on the contractor workforce within the United States military (Congressional Research Service, 2021; Schwartz & Church, 2013), there exists a gap in knowledge regarding the impacts of COVID-19 mandated teleworking on military contractors. This study will provide an opportunity to understand if stress is experienced by military contractors forced into teleworking arrangements resulting from COVID-19 mandates and if their perceived productivity and job satisfaction are impacted. In doing so, this study may assist military contracting companies in developing telework policies that positively affect employee perceived productivity and job satisfaction.

Though the United States Federal Government encourages, by statute, teleworking arrangements (H.R. 1722-111th Congress: Telework Enhancement Act of 2010), the numbers of participants have always been low (United States Department of Defense, 2020). When telework was authorized and used by employees, implementing individual teleworking has always been done in a measured manner, with written agreements and expectations as well as employee and manager training conducted before

employees could telework (H.R. 1722-111th Congress: Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, 2021; Monroe & Haug, 2021). Though contractor personnel are not subject to the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 (H.R. 1722-111th Congress: Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, 2021), in the cases that remote work is authorized for federal contractors, many federal agencies follow the same measured process to ensure a smooth transition (Monroe & Haug, 2021). Even so, unique challenges arise with military contractors using telework arrangements. Despite being considered part of the total force concept, many contractors face stigma when not working on site (Batka et al., 2020).

The United States Government has a tradition of working on site; even when telework options are technically feasible and authorization is provided, cultural shifts have not occurred that allow normalization of teleworking and governmental organizations have not kept pace with commercial organizations in implementing telework arrangements (Choi, 2018). The DoD is a highly hierarchical organization where communications are often siloed, autonomy and flexibility are discouraged, and productivity is gauged by physical presence, trust between workers and supervisors is low, and managers resist telework (Choi, 2018; Choi, 2020). Workers with a long history of working in a face-to-face setting may be particularly affected by telework because of the new requirement to cope with fundamental changes to the nature of the work environment and a constant need to keep pace with technological changes (Monroe & Haug, 2021; Suh & Lee, 2017). In moving to telework in response to COVID-19 restrictions, the United States military focused heavily on technical solutions (Lopez, 2020), paying little attention to military contractor employees' new demands in the work

environment (Inspector General, 2021). The speed with which COVID-19 mandated telework was implemented prevented military leadership from accounting for the time employees may need to learn successful telework accommodations and limited the time these employees had to adjust to the new working environment (Cushing et al., 2021; Inspector General, 2021). Those technical solutions, if not properly implemented, likely contribute to employee stress, ultimately affecting perceived productivity and job satisfaction (Chiou et al., 2015; Irwanto et al., 2021; Suh & Lee, 2017). With teleworking expected to stay in the DoD (Lopez, 2020; Young et al, 2021), military contracting companies supporting the DoD will need telework policies that address potential stress as it impacts perceived productivity and job satisfaction in all its workforce.

The following sections begin with a description of the literature search strategy with an overview of the databases accessed, the search engines utilized, and key search terms used. This is followed by a description of the theoretical foundations of this study, providing an overview of the origins, rationale, and relevance. A comprehensive review of the current literature in relation to the key variables and concepts of this study follow. Finally, I summarize the key themes of the current literature and identify the gaps in the literature that this study aimed to address and provide a summary and conclusion.

Literature Search Strategy

A thorough research of the relevant literature was conducted using EBSCOhost, Emerald Insight, PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycINFO, SAGE Premier, ScienceDirect, Walden University Research Library, and government and military websites, limiting searches to publications after 2017. To address the issue of sparse

literature pertaining to military contractors, I used Google Scholar to identify and access

more materials, cross referencing results to more traditional databases. The key search

terms I used were *COVID*, *telework*, *occupational stress*, *job satisfaction*, *perceived*

productivity, *occupational stress coping*, and *military contractors*. Synonyms for key

terms, such as pandemic, remote work, work from home, job stress, and federal

contractors were used to increase search results of relevant literature.

To ensure search results were narrowly focused on the research topic, Boolean

queries were heavily used, combining search terms and phrases using Boolean operators

such as "AND," "OR," and "NOT." For example, to narrow the search result of job

satisfaction during COVID-19 telework, key word searches using COVID AND "military

contractors" AND "job satisfaction" AND "telework" were done. Because there are

several different terms for military contractors and telework, many searches were

repeated using alternative terms such as "federal contractors," "defense contractors,"

"DoD contractors," "remote work," and "work from home" to ensure thoroughness in the

literature review.

Manual searching was used to screen textbooks, peer-reviewed journals,

magazines, conference proceedings, existing studies, government reports, and other

publications that were found using the databases. This allowed quick determination if a

publication found through a database search was relevant to this research topic and

garnered detailed review. Finally, reference lists of relevant articles to find further

literature regarding this research topic were used to expand the relevant literature search.

Theoretical Foundation

The theories and concepts that ground this study include Goh et

al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping and

Savickas's (2020) career construction theory. The revised transactional model of

occupational stress and coping describes a process of assessing and reacting to, if

necessary, occupational stress (Goh et al., 2010). The career construction theory

identifies how individuals leverage their own vocational personalities to adjust to job

changes (Savickas, 2020). In other words, the revised transaction model of occupational

stress and soping identifies when a person reacts to occupational stress; the career

construction theory identifies how that person reacts to it.

Revised Transactional Model of Occupational Stress and Coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) originated the transaction model of stress and

coping, whose premise is that individual stress appraisals and coping strategies influence

the relationship between stressor and stress outcomes. An individual's appraisal of stress

is mediated by the perceived control over the situation; in the occupational world, a high

job demand combined with low job control will create a stressful situation (Goh et al.,

2010). Originating from Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and

coping, Goh et al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping

extends the original model by describing how an individual experiences occupational

stress, assesses that stress, and upon determining a threat, conducts a second assessment

and initiates a coping response. The coping response is only initiated after the stressful

event is perceived as a threat and a psycho–physiological response occurs (Goh et

al., 2010). Paradoxically, using a coping behavior may increase levels of occupational stress if the stressor is not relieved (Goh et al., 2010). Additionally, a stressful event initially assessed and appraised as insignificant may be assessed as significant during a subsequent experience; this is true even if the stressful event is identical (Goh et al., 2010).

Watson et al. (2011) studied the coping processes in men and women to understand if occupational stress and coping differs between genders. As expected by Goh's (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping, Watson et al. (2011) found that the level of response, or coping strategies, depended on the perceived importance of the occupational stressor; the more important the stressor was perceived, the more coping strategies employed. The study found that while the level of occupational stress is the same among both genders, and the coping process is the same, the pathways by which coping strategies are implemented differ (Watson et al., 2011). Women experience stress immediately after primary appraisal of a perceived stressor, identify and implement resources to cope, and conduct a secondary appraisal (Watson et al., 2011). Men do not experience occupational stress until the second appraisal of a stressor; they identify resources for coping but do not implement coping strategies until a second appraisal deems it necessary (Watson et al., 2011).

An extensive literature review did not result in any studies using Goh et al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping theory using military contractors as the study population. However, this theory has been used in studies of other populations to determine the effects of occupational stress on perceived

performance and job satisfaction, which are the focus of this study. Jobe et al. (2021) found decreased overall performance in emergency room nurses after experiencing unexpected traumatic stress. However, the decreased performance was found in secondary workload functions, such as administrative tasks, rather than in primary tasks in patient care (Jobe et al., 2021). There was an increase in productivity for primary tasks; however, that was attributed to increased diligence in participants double-checking their own work, the team-centric and collaborative nature of emergency care, and technical fail safes such as bar code readers (Jobe et al., 2021). This relates to the current study because of the unexpected nature of the traumatic stress; though emergency room nurses and military contractors certainly do not experience the same events that cause traumatic stress, the unexpected nature of the stress is similar.

In looking at job satisfaction, measured by employee engagement and turn-over intentions, during the first and third waves of COVID-19, Raza et al. (2022) found that although all government employees experienced high technostress during the pandemic, whether a negative occupational impact was experienced or not largely depended on the individual employees' assessment of the technostress and individual coping mechanisms employed. Even government employees who responded positively to technology adoption before COVID-19 reported lower employee engagement and higher turnover intentions due to technostress because COVID-19 drastically influenced their thinking (Raza et al., 2022). This study is highly related to the current study. Though set in Pakistan, Raza et al.'s study focused on government employees faced with unexpected

and forced telework in an organization that was ill-prepared to execute it and its employee population was largely unaccustomed to working remotely.

Career Construction Theory

Career development theory (Super & Knasel, 1981), developed to answer limitations in the career maturity construct popular with lifespan, life-space theorists at the time (Hartung & Cadaret, 2017), proposed that career adaptability is defined as readiness to cope with existing or future job roles and changes in the work environment. This theory refers to an individual's ability to smoothly transition to occupational changes (Super & Knasel, 1981). Expanding on Super and Knasel's (1981) career development theory, Savickas's (2020) career construction theory describes how individual employees adapt to work troubles, which are unpredicted and undesired occupational challenges and changes, through resources of adaptive readiness, adaptability resources, adaptability strategies, and adapting responses to adapt and achieve self-efficacy and self-determination that make successful transitions. Employees that prepare for their own occupational future, are organized and decisive in making vocational choices, are inclined to explore new experiences in the work world and believe in one's ability to execute a course of action determine highly successful adaptability strategies and adapting responses during times of occupational transition (Savickas, 2020). However, because each component develops at a different rate, and may never reach full potential in an individual, successful career adaptation may not be realized (Savickas, 2020). In short, success in adapting to changing occupational landscapes is highly dependent on an individual's readiness to accept occupational

change and internal resources to develop and implement strategies to overcome

challenges.

As was the case with Goh et al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of

occupational stress and coping theory, an extensive literature review did not result in any

studies using Savickas's (2012) career construction theory using military contractors as

the study population. However, studies in other worker populations have looked at the

use of Savickas's career construction theory in job satisfaction and employee

performance. Using Savickas's career construction theory as a basis for their study, Fiori

et al. (2021) found that employees in the general worker population with higher career

adaptability had higher job satisfaction and lower job stress even when facing

occupational challenges. Additionally, Fiori et al. found longevity in the results; even one

year after experiencing work troubles, individuals with higher self-evaluated internal

resources such as career adaptability experienced better outcomes in job satisfaction.

Ertop et al. (2020), however, found that occupational ambiguity negated positive

correlations between high career adaptability and job satisfaction. In a study of Turkish

workers across various sectors, Ertop et al. measured the job satisfaction of employees

with ambiguous roles, finding that the higher the role ambiguity, the lower employee job

satisfaction fell. This finding was not improved when career adaptability was considered;

even employees with high career adaptability demonstrated low job satisfaction in the

face of role ambiguity (Ertop et al., 2020).

Gao et al. (2019) and Haynie et al. (2020) studied the effects of career adaptability

as defined in Savickas's (2012) career construction theory on employee productivity. Gao

et al. measured how career adaptability, defined as the stable psychological trait indicated by behaviors in career self-management and career planning, in conjunction with pro-active personality, impacts an employee's performance. They found that employees in a Chinese manufacturing firm that were rated highly adaptable via a self-reported questionnaire had stronger self-reported performance than those employees who rated lower in career adaptability (Gao et al., 2019). Performance was further increased with employees who possess a proactive personality (Gao et al., 2019). This supported the findings by Haynie et al. (2020), who found that supervisor-rated task performance was higher in employees with high career adaptability. This is attributed to the ability of employees with high career adaptability to successfully solve unfamiliar, complex, and ambiguous problems, thus allowing employee internal resources to be dedicated to task completion (Haynie et al., 2020).

Although these studies did not focus on a specialized group such as military contractors, the diversity in job functions provides a good basis of comparison for the current study, where military contractors perform a wide range of professional services for the government. Additionally, the study of role ambiguity (Ertop et al, 2020) is similar to the role ambiguity many military contractors faced once forced into COVID-19 mandated teleworking (Lopez, 2020). The studies conducted by Gao et al. (2019) and Haynie et al (2020) lack an element of occupational stress; however, they are relevant to the current study because they clearly show the relationship between Savicka's (2012) career construction theory and employee productivity.

In summary, the revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping is the basis to describe a process of assessing and reacting to occupational stress only if the occupational stress is perceived as a threat (Goh et al., 2010). This model has been shown to be consistent among both genders; however, the pathways by which women implement coping strategies differs from the pathways used by men (Watson et al., 2011). The career construction theory identifies how individuals leverage their own vocational personalities to adjust to job changes and unpredicted and undesired occupational challenges and changes (Savickas, 2020). Using resources of adaptive readiness, adaptability resources, adaptability strategies, and adapting responses at varying levels of maturity, individual workers manage career adaptation with varying degrees of success (Savickas, 2020). Goh et al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping will be the foundation to understand if those military contractors enduring telework arrangements experienced COVID-19 related stress; Savickas' (2020) career construction theory will be the foundation to determine if stress impacts perceived productivity and job satisfaction. In other words, any stress caused by COVID-19 mandated telework, in and of itself, is not enough to impact behavior and create a need to implement coping mechanisms. Goh et al.'s (2010) theory provides a framework for the specific conditions under which COVID-19 telework-related stress becomes significant enough to impact perceived productivity and job satisfaction (Singh et al., 2019). Additionally, an employee's internal resources and vocational personality dictate how adaptation is made to accommodate the impact of stress on perceived productivity and job satisfaction (Savickas, 2020), which are the variables for this study. In this sense,

even if a military contractor perceived COVID-19 mandated telework as stressful enough to impact job satisfaction and perceived productivity and made adaptations to the new work environment, individuals will adapt differently based on their own internal resources and vocational personalities (Savickas, 2020).

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

The key variable in this research study is the impacts of occupational stress on job satisfaction and the impacts of occupational stress on perceived productivity on military contractors forced into teleworking arrangements due to COVID-19 mandates. Job satisfaction is when an employee's needs and desires are met by an occupational role (Irawanto et al., 2021). Perceived productivity is employee actions to complete tasks and positively contribute to the organization's goals (Shobe, 2018). Both job satisfaction and perceived productivity may be impacted during times of high occupational stress (Contreras et al., 2020; Ertop et al., 2021; Fiori et al., 2021; Jobe et al., 2021).

Impacts of Stress on Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is an indicator of an employee's commitment to that role and the employer (Contreras et al., 2020). Lower occupational stress is associated with higher job satisfaction (Contreras et al., 2020). However, this concept has seen differing results in the research. Using Savickas' (2012) career construction theory as a basis, Fiori et al. (2021) found that in a population across diverse occupations, employees with higher career adaptability had higher job satisfaction and lower job stress even when facing turbulence in the job market and employment instability. Finding that career adaptability protects employees against occupational adversities in the face of negative work events,

Fiori et al. (2021) saw positive job satisfaction and lower job stress even one year later in individuals who have a higher evaluation of own internal resources such as career adaptability.

Ertop et al. (2020), however, found that role ambiguity, where existing or new organizational expectations, tasks, and processes are not well defined, negated previously found positive correlation between high career adaptability and job satisfaction in Turkish employees. Additionally, role ambiguity increases occupational stress, even in employees with high career adaptability (Ertop et al., 2020). This is likely because an employee who does not know what to adapt to cannot mobilize internal resources and implement adapting strategies (Ertop et al., 2020). In effect, even employees with high career adaptability lose the control component when faced with role ambiguity and therefore are unable to successfully adapt, maintain high job satisfaction, and low job stress.

Ironically, job satisfaction can be impacted negatively when a typically positive condition is forced on employees or becomes excessive. Such is the case with teleworking. Studies have found that teleworkers in general have higher job satisfaction than full time office workers (Allen et al., 2015; Bentley et al, 2016; Brunelle & Fortin, 2021; Choi, 2020). However, when teleworking is not an employee's choice or becomes exclusive, job satisfaction falls (Allen et al., 2015; Chitra, 2020). In a study of occupational stress on the job satisfaction of teachers, Chitra (2020) found that during COVID-19, a compulsory shift to online teaching modes increased teachers' occupational stress, negatively impacting their job satisfaction. This supports findings by Allen et al.

(2015) that job satisfaction and teleworking arrangements are positively correlated at lower teleworking levels; at higher levels of teleworking, job satisfaction plateaus and during intense teleworking levels, job satisfaction decreases. Raza et al. (2022) focused specifically on technostress on government employees during COVID-19, finding that although all employees in the study reported high technostress during the pandemic, whether a negative occupational impact was experienced depended on each individual's assessment of the technostress and coping mechanisms used to counter the technostress. Still, even employees who responded positively to technology adoption before COVID-19 reported lower employee engagement and higher turnover intentions due to technostress because COVID-19 drastically influenced their thinking (Raza et al., 2022).

Impacts of Stress on Perceived Productivity

Employee productivity is an organizational demand; high productivity is expected in many organizations (Shobe, 2018). Employee productivity has three components: task performance, contextual performance, and adaptive performance (Koopmans et al., 2011). Task performance are those actions an employee undertakes to satisfy formal job requirements of a specific position and are evaluated by management (Koopmans et al., 2011). Contextual performance are behaviors that go beyond the formally defined work tasks (Koopmans et al., 2011); they are actions that convey social facilitation and job commitment. Adaptive performance is an individual employee's ability to learn new ways of accomplishing tasks and adopting new ways to accomplish the job in times of change (Koopmans et al., 2011). Employee productivity can be impacted by several things; occupational stress is well-known to impact employee productivity (Aquino, et al,

2020; Jobe et al., 2021; Saleem et al, 2021; Shobe, 2018). Traditionally, sources of occupational stress stem from task overload, role ambiguity, and role conflicts (Saleem et al., 2021). However, the emergence of COVID-19 and the resulting workplace mandates introduced occupational uncertainty previously not factored into occupational stress (Saleem et al, 2021).

Using Goh's (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping as a construct, Jobe et al. (2021) studied the effects of high occupational stress on perceived performance in emergency room nurses, finding a decreased overall performance. However, performance did not decrease across all tasks; nurses continued to provide quality performance in critical areas such as patient safety (Jobe et al., 2021). The continued performance in critical areas was potentially due to higher self-scrutiny in those areas, with nurses making extra effort to ensure critical tasks were error-free despite experiencing the effects of stress (Jobe et al., 2021). That continued performance level came at the cost of decreased performance in less critical tasks, and nurses reported lower performance in non-critical areas such as patient load, administrative tasks, and continued education (Jobe et al., 2021).

Saleem et al. (2021) found similar results when studying occupational stress impacts on employee performance of banking employees during COVID-19 lockdowns. Saleem et al (2021) found a significant negative correlation between occupational stress, specifically new COVID-19 occupational stress, and task and contextual performance. With banking employees experiencing higher workplace stress, task and contextual performance suffered (Saleem et al., 2021). In effect, employees worried about COVID-

19 impacts in the workplace not only performed their jobs less well, but they also did not exhibit behaviors that demonstrated social facilitation or job commitment. Interestingly, and in line with Jobe et al.'s (2021) findings, COVID-19 occupational stress increased adaptive performance (Saleem et al., 2021); employees found novel ways to accomplish their tasks despite restrictions imposed to curtail COVID-19 transmission. This was often accomplished using information technology, internet, and other communication technologies (Saleem et al., 2021).

Despite the findings from Jobe et al. (2021) and Saleem et al. (2021), occupational stress may have differing impacts on employees in the public sector than it does on employees in the private sector. In layman's terms, psychological well-being, of which occupational stress is a component, defines employee happiness (Aquino et al., 2020). Aquino et al. (2020) studied the effects of psychological well-being on employee performance in finance and accounting professionals in both public and private sector organizations. The results showed that psychological well-being of employees in the private sector has a direct, positively correlated impact on both task and contextual performance (Aquino et al., 2020). However, in the public sector, happier employees did not correlate to more productive workers; though public workers have higher psychological well-being than private sector employees, they were not higher performing (Aquino et al., 2020).

These studies, though not focused on military contractors, have relevance to the current study in several ways. Both studies conducted by Jobe et al. (2020) and Saleem et al. (2020) focus on occupational stress during the COVID-19 pandemic; both found that

the pandemic has expanded what constitutes occupational stress and that workers are experiencing higher occupational stress because of COVID-19. Additionally, Aquino et al. (2021), Jobe et al. (2020) and Saleem et al. (2020) studied populations in highly regulated industries with unique organizational cultures; these factors are common to military contractors in the current study. Aquino et al. (2021) uniquely compared public employee productivity to private employee productivity across the same industry, providing insight into the two worlds that military contractors must navigate.

Federal Employees and COVID-Related Stress

While no literature specific to COVID-19 related occupational stress in military contractors was found, there has been research done on COVID-19 related occupational stress in the general workforce (Brooks & Ling, 2020; Brooks et al., 2020; Burhama et al., 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020; Zhuang et al., 2021). The findings indicate that employees, regardless of generation, gender, or racial/ethnic groups and across all industries, are experiencing higher levels of stress than before COVID-19, and that the stress is directly related to COVID-19 challenges (Brooks & Ling, 2020; Brooks et al., 2020; Burhama et al., 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020; Zhuang et al., 2021). Brooks and Ling (2020) found that COVID-19 response actions taken by governments across the globe, including mandating remote working, significantly contributed to increased levels of stress.

However, these studies may not adequately consider the unique nature of working for the Federal government and are unlikely to capture the true experiences of Federal employees (Mohd Mahudin & Zaabar, 2021). Military contractors, dual-hatted in roles

beholden to the Federal government customer and employed by private companies, face an even more unique situation. The lack of literature specific to COVID-19 related occupational stress in military contractors requires a literature review of the most similar population, which is Federal employees. The literature on COVID-19 related stress in Federal employees mirror that found in the general worker population. As a result of COVID-19 mandates, government employees experienced a significant shift in occupational environment, put in longer work hours, and felt increased psychological distress and high levels of stress (Mohd Mahudin & Zaabar, 2021). In a recent survey, 57% of Federal workers reported high burnout rates, with one in three reporting high burnout rates directly resulting from COVID-19 related mandates (Eagle Hill Consulting, 2020).

Federal employees do not all experience COVID-19 stress equally; those in supervisory positions and millennials report significantly higher levels of burnout and stress (Eagle Hill Consulting, 2020). Up to 70% of supervisory personnel in Federal workplaces reported higher stress related issues because of COVID-19 changes in the working environment, and 48% lack trust that subordinates are getting work done while teleworking (Eagle Hill Consulting, 2020). Millennials employed by the Federal government are similarly impacted; 64% report higher stress levels and 41% attribute the stress directly to COVID-19 (Eagle Hill Consulting, 2020).

Federal Employees and COVID-19 Related Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is well researched; it is a firmly established topic in work-related behavioral studies (Rainey, 2014). As with occupational stress, however, there is little

research done on job satisfaction of military contractors (Batka et al., 2020). Regardless, occupational stress is known to impact job satisfaction (Batka et al, 2020; Contreras et al., 2020). Wang and Brower (2019) focused on job satisfaction among Federal employees by looking at the interaction of employees and their work environments. They found that Federal employees report positive job satisfaction when there is compatibility between the individual and the job, the individual and co-workers, and the individual and supervisors (Wang & Brower, 2019). This was also found to be true in Federal workers who routinely teleworked before COVID-19; Lee and Kim (2018) found a positive relationship between Federal teleworkers and job satisfaction.

However, even situations that typically produce positive job satisfaction can result in negative outcomes under different circumstances (Goh et al., 2010). Before COVID-19, Federal workers chose telework options, which allowed for some employee control over how and where workplace interactions occurred (Caillier, 2017; Choi, 2018; Choi, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2019). Those that chose and were allowed to participate in this option reported higher job satisfaction than those who were denied the choice (Choi, 2018; Choi, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2018). Caillier (2017) suggested that higher job satisfaction in teleworkers may be influenced by a greater compatibility between the individual and job, co-workers, and supervisors stemming directly from teleworking. However, once COVID-19 mandates forced maximum telework for Federal employees (Inspector General, 2021), personal choice was eliminated and those that had little experience or had never wanted to telework found the transition less easy (Monroe & Haug, 2021). Workers that have traditionally engaged in face-to-face work environments experience lower job

satisfaction when rapidly moved to telework arrangements (Suh & Lee, 2016), and this

was evident during the Federal government's move to telework (Eagle Hill Consulting,

2020). During the initial stages of implementing maximum telework, many Federal

employees reported lower job satisfaction due to lack of management buy-in and support,

absence of standardized telework procedures and expectations, reduced trust and rapport,

and lack of transparent communications (Choi, 2020; Inspector General, 2021; Monroe &

Haug, 2021). As the pandemic continued, Federal employees continued to report a

decrease in morale and job satisfaction (Eagle Hill Consulting, 2020; Mohd Mahudin &

Zaabar, 2021).

Federal Employees and COVID-19 Related Perceived Productivity

As with the previous variables, there is little research specific to military

contractors with regards to productivity during COVID-19 mandated restrictions;

therefore, a reliance on information about Federal employees will continue. With

increased occupational stress and lower job satisfaction, it could easily be assumed that

employee perceived productivity would decrease. However, that is not supported by the

literature.

Caillier (2014) found that Federal employees who telework reported a higher job

satisfaction, but not an increase in work effort. In fact, the reverse was true; in his study,

job satisfaction was found to be inversely related to work effort (Caillier, 2014). Allen et

al. (2015) countered that, finding in their study that job satisfaction in teleworkers

increased employee productivity, except when tasks were highly dependent on others to

complete. Lee and Kim (2018) found similar findings; teleworking led to Federal

employees performing their core tasks more efficiently, thereby increasing individual and organizational productivity. During COVID-19, despite reporting high occupational stress and lower job satisfaction, 70% of Federal employees reported being more productive (Eagle Hill Consulting, 2021; Inspector General, 2021).

Summary and Conclusion

The effects of teleworking are well researched, and the literature supports that the option to telework can lead to lower occupational stress, higher job satisfaction, and increased perceived productivity (Allen, et al., 2015; Brunnelle & Fortin, 2021). However, too much of a good thing can be detrimental; extended or intensive telework has been shown to produce higher occupational stress and lower job satisfaction (Morganson, et al., 2010; Suh & Lee, 2017), negating the benefits seen at lower levels of telework. The reviewed literature suggests that employees able to adapt to occupational challenges, such as extended or intensive teleworking, are more likely to experience less stress and more successful outcomes (Goh et al., 2010); those with mature internal resources can adapt during challenging times (Savickas, 2012). However, the research contradicts itself in certain situations, such as during a global pandemic. Zhuang et al. (2021) studied combined elements of Savickas (2012) career adaptability and Goh's (2010) stress response process in the face of COVID-19 occupational transitions and challenges for recent university graduates entering a very different job market than expected. Zhuang et al. (2021) found that the general workforce population appraised the COVID-19 pandemic as threatening and experienced high perceived occupational stress that consumed internal resources such as self-efficacy and resilience. By consuming

internal resources to deal with pandemic stress, graduates had less internal resources to adapt to the occupational challenges COVID-19 presented (Zhuang et al., 2021). Additionally, ambiguity in one's occupational role, such as might be experienced during a sudden shift to telework, decreases the chances of successful outcomes even for employees with high career adaptability (Ertop et al., 2020).

The current literature investigates the effects of occupational stress due to COVID-19 on the general workforce, (Brooks et al., 2020; Burhama et al., 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020), and studies that identify the effects of stress in remote worker productivity and job satisfaction exist (Allen et al., 2015; Bentley et al., 2016; Brunelle & Fortin, 2021; Caillier, 2014; Marsh et al., 2022; Suh & Lee, 2017; Zollner & Sulikova, 2020). There is recent research into the impacts of COVID-19 telework on employee job satisfaction and productivity in the general workforce (Cushing et al., 2021; Inspector General, 2021; Irawanto et al., 2021), and in Federal employees (Mohd Mahudin & Zaabar, 2021; Monroe & Haug, 2021). However, the impact of telework arrangements on military contractor employees that traditionally conduct operations in person is lacking in the literature (Batka et al., 2020; Callier, 2018). This study will fill gaps in the literature on the effects of COVID-19 mandated teleworking on military contractor employees by providing useful insight for both employers and employees in understanding the impact of COVID-19 related stress in relation to perceived productivity and job satisfaction on remote military contractors and understanding employee wellbeing over quarantine or quarantine–like situations. Additionally, the results of this study should provide practical

applications in organizational psychology and assist employers in developing telework policies that ensure employee wellbeing.

Chapter 3 discusses the research design and rational used to support the research questions presented in this study. The methodology, including recruiting and participation procedures, data collection methods and the data analysis plan are discussed. Chapter 3 also outlines the role of the researcher, concerns for trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and protection of participants.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This IPA study provided an opportunity to understand the experience of stress as it relates to perceived productivity and job satisfaction in military contractors forced into teleworking arrangements resulting from COVID-19 mandates. In doing so, this study may assist military contracting companies in developing telework policies that positively affect employee perceived productivity and job satisfaction. It has been found that extensive teleworking, such as what was mandated with COVID-19 stay at home orders, produces higher occupational stress and lower job satisfaction (Morganson, et al., 2010; Suh & Lee, 2017). Perceived productivity, generally reported higher in teleworkers compared to office workers (Allen et al., 2015; Lee & Kim, 2018), was also negatively impacted from COVID-19 extensive telework mandates when employee tasks were highly dependent on others to complete (Allen et al., 2015). With teleworking expected to stay in the DoD (Lopez, 2020; Young et al, 2021), military contracting companies supporting the DoD will need telework policies that address these concerns. This study was intended to help answer policy and academic questions of the impacts of mandated telework conditions for military contractors.

The following sections describe the research design and rationale, describing the central phenomena of the study, identifying the research tradition, and providing justification for its use in this study. The role of the researcher will be explored, including revelation of any personal or professional connections or biases I may have, and how those were managed. The methodology will be explained, detailing how participants were

recruited and selected, how data were collected, and the data analysis plan. Issue of

trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability

will be discussed. Lastly, ethical procedures and protections are defined, and a summary

and conclusion will be provided.

Research Design and Rationale

The following research questions and sub-questions have been identified to

address the current gap in the literature:

Research Question 1: What was the lived experience related to the stress on

military contractors forced into telework circumstances due to COVID-19 restrictions on

job satisfaction?

Sub-question 1: What were participants' initial responses to stress resulting from

COVID-19 mandated telework and did it impact job satisfaction?

Sub-question 2: What were final outcomes of stress resulting from COVID-19

mandated telework on job satisfaction?

Sub-question 3: How did participants use control to deal with the stress resulting

from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding job satisfaction?

Sub-question 4: How concerned were participants with the stress resulting from

COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding job satisfaction?

Sub-question 5: How did participants use curiosity to deal with the stress resulting

from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding job satisfaction?

Sub-question 6: How confident were participants that they can deal with the stress from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding job satisfaction?

Research Question 2: What was the lived experience related to the stress on military contractors forced into telework circumstances due to COVID-19 restrictions on perceived productivity?

Sub-question 1: What were participants' initial responses to stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework and did it impact perceived productivity?

Sub-question 2: What were final outcomes of stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework on perceived productivity?

Sub-question 3: How did participants use control to deal with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding perceived productivity?

Sub-question 4: How concerned were participants with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding perceived productivity?

Sub-question 5: How did participants use curiosity to deal with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding perceived productivity?

Sub-question 6: How confident were participants that they can deal with the stress from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding perceived productivity?

Because the central phenomenon of this study was how military contractors

experienced stress as it relates to perceived productivity and job satisfaction during

forced telework arrangements required by COVID-19 mandates, the chosen research

tradition must support the ability to explore and understand the richness of each

individual perspective as it relates to a human or social phenomenon. Moustakas (1994)

described qualitative research as the naturalistic means to accomplish this exploration and

understanding, without attempting to control social variables. Having foundations in

philosophy, phenomenology is a qualitative research tradition that has evolved into a

process that seeks to understand individual lived experiences of a specific phenomenon

(Moustakas, 1994; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) and provides rich detail and a deep level

of understanding in a specific situation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Qutoshi, 2018).

Phenomenology research aims to reach the essence of the individual's lived experience

while defining and confirming the phenomenon, without interference from existing

theoretical preconceptions (Qutoshi, 2018). IPA recognizes that reaching the essence of

an individual's lived experience is an interpretative endeavor and aims to investigate how

individuals make sense of their experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). For this study,

IPA is appropriate because it allows exploration of the lived experiences through

narratives, stories, and anecdotes, and offers a way to learn about the central phenomena

through variables that are difficult to measure or observe (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews are the favored means of capturing data in an IPA

study as it allows for first-person accounts to be captured and for researcher-participant

discussion that may yield unexpected results (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Semi-

structured interviews allow for rich details to be captured, even when time limits are likely; additionally, it allows participants flexibility to provide responses that are guided by their feelings and beliefs (Moustakas, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A researcher skilled in interviewing can build rapport and trust with participants to reduce tension and promote more open and honest responses (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Qualitative research superimposes an academically rigorous examination of the data surrounding a phenomenon. To accomplish the needed data analysis, IPA follows a set of flexible guidelines adaptable to differing research objectives; however, it is recommended that the researcher put himself or herself in the participant's shoes as much as possible (Lester, 1999; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) to explore the perceptions and core experiences as lived by the participants. Phenomenological research generates a large amount of data; the process of developing rich descriptions of experiences involves participant interviews, researcher notes, follow-up communications, and possibly other data sources (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To reach the essence of the lived experience under study, I followed modified van Kaam procedural steps as described by Moustakas (1994) to analyze data. In this process, the data was reduced from its raw form to an expression describing the participants' experiences. The data were cleaned of all irrelevant or repetitive statements, grouped into themes having a single meaning (called meaning units), and validated using multiple sources (Moustakas, 1994; Yüskel & Yildirim, 2015). The cleaned, organized data were then transformed into textural and structural descriptions by clustering the meaning units into themes (Moustakas, 1994; Yüskel & Yildirim, 2015). Lastly, the data were transformed into a general psychological structure,

or expression, by combining the textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994; Yüskel & Yildirim, 2015). This process was repeated for each individual participant, then the individual analyzed data sets were processed in the same manner to create a composite narrative (Yüskel & Yildirim, 2015).

Role of the Researcher

The fundamental objective of an IPA researcher is to discover how individuals make sense of their experiences of a phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Moustakas (1994) suggested that the role of the qualitative researcher is to approach the study like a novice, with the aim of capturing even the slightest detail. Qutoshi (2018) disagrees; he recommended the researcher's expertise is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' personal knowledge surrounding a phenomenon. Rubin and Rubin (2012) supported this approach as one of many, depending on the situation. Because I have been in military contracting for over a decade, it would have been impossible for me to adopt a novice stance. Participants would have quickly realized that I was not being authentic, making it difficult to gain trust and confidence during interviews. Additionally, the role of an experienced contractor allowed me to "fit in the crowd" of military contractors and be accepted in this often-closed group (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Lastly, as an expert in the field, I utilized the specialized language used by military contractors, thus overcoming a barrier that a more novice researcher may have experience (Noon, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Because this was a phenomenological study, which requires the researcher to be part of the research process (Noon, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), the role of the

researcher was as an observant participant. In a like manner, study participants actively explore the essence of a phenomenon; therefore, Moustakas (1994) considers them "co-researchers." This creates a structure with primary researchers and co-researchers. Primary researchers are responsible for informing co-researchers of their status and role and how they fit into the research purpose (Yüskel & Yildirim, 2015). Additionally, primary researchers are responsible for developing rapport and trust to encourage co-researchers to be open and share rich data; this can often be done by sharing their own experiences about the phenomenon under study (Yüskel & Yildirim, 2015). Lastly, though no less importantly, primary researchers are responsible for providing ethical checks and balances, analyzing research data, and concluding the study (Moustakas, 1994).

As a military contractor in both subordinate and managerial roles for over a decade, my personal experiences provided the expertise needed to conduct this study in an authentic manner. I have worked remotely during various times over the past decade and have exclusively worked from home during the past 6 years. I weathered the COVID-19 mandates to work remotely just as my staff did, but with an experience in teleworking that they did not possess. Additionally, as a manager of military contractors, I was positioned to understand the challenges and unique nature of supporting the military mission while employed by a private company. However useful, my experience as a remote worker in a military contractor role and a manager over a staff of military contractors forced into remote work made researcher bias a concern and created a

potential ethical issue; both could have influenced the study outcome (Noon, 2018;

Pietkiewcz & Smith, 201; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015; Zahavi, 2019).

To overcome personal bias, I used epoché, or bracketing, and journaling.

Bracketing is a process by which a researcher suspends judgments and dispositions

towards the phenomenon prior to the interviews (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). As suggested

by Chan et al. (2013), I employed bracketing strategies early in the research by using

reflexivity to identify potential biases and influences and set them aside during the

critical stages of data collection and analysis. To accomplish effective reflection, I used a

reflexive diary to write down my own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions (Chan et al.,

2013); this became part of my journaling process. Additional journaling strategies were

to keep a researcher journal to record my ideas and feelings that emerged during the

interviews. To avoid distracting the participants, only quick and important notes were

made during interviews. Much of my journal recording was done immediately after the

conclusion of each interview (Bednall, 2006).

A potential ethical issue could have arisen because I was deeply engrained in the

military contracting community, with both professional and personal relationships that

are extensive and long in duration. To avoid potential conflict of interest, my current

employees were identified in the initial stage of qualifying participants and excluded

from the study. Excluding my own employees eliminated any chance of a misperception

that participation was a condition of employment, the possibility of coercion or undue

influence, and maintained employee confidentiality. It is appropriate, where feasible, to

restrict supervisor interaction with subordinate employees in research endeavors (Resnik, 2016). I simply chose to eliminate it all together.

Methodology

Participant Pool

A participant population refers to a group with identifying characteristics from whom the researcher collects data in support of a study (Boudah, 2020). The research population for this study was military contractors that predominately worked onsite in an office setting before COVID-19 and were forced into telework situations due to pandemic stay at home mandates. This is in line with Qutoshi (2018), who noted that a phenomenological framework works well with relatively homogenous respondents or a population who has experience with the same phenomenon. A precondition for examining the essence of lived experience is choosing participants of the study who have significant and meaningful experiences of the phenomenon in question (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). As a result, for phenomenological studies, criterion sampling, which refers to selecting individuals who fulfill specific criteria, was considered the best method to determine target participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). To ensure a sufficient participant pool, snowball sampling, a method of participant referral, was used (Ghaljaie et al., 2017).

Participant Selection

The primary recruitment method was through social media sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Research and Me to announce a call for research participants. The social media post in Appendix A was used on all sites. Additionally, Walden University's

Participant Pool was leveraged to recruit participants. As the candidate pool recruited from social media sites is insufficient, snowball sampling, where current participants nominate others for interviewing (Ghaljaie et al., 2017), was used to increase the candidate pool of participants. Participant qualifying email invitations (Appendix B) were sent to potential participants which contained a brief introduction, an overview of the research, and a link to informed consent and qualification survey (Appendix D), via SurveyMonkey, to ensure study participant criteria, working as a military contractor in a COVID-19 directed telework arrangement, are met. The informed consent stated (1) Understanding of participation in research, (2) Purpose of the research, (3) Research procedures, (4) Risks and benefits of the research, (5) Voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time, (6) Procedures to protect confidentiality, and (7) After–care resources. The qualification survey (Appendix D) included demographic questions pertaining to current employer (to ensure no participants are my own employees); job role (to determine if military contractor); current working arrangements (to determine if remote working) and when remote working, if that is the current arrangement, started (to determine if remote working is a result of COVID-19 mandates); and when and where remote working takes place. If a potential participant qualified for this study, the final page of the survey stated I would contact them to set up an interview. If a potential participant did not qualify for this study, the final page of the survey advised them of such and invited them to share a copy of the social media flyer with any persons in their network who may be interested.

One important consideration for participant selection was the size of the sample. As generalizability is not the goal of a phenomenological research study, participants' overall representativeness of the general population was not an issue considered (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Instead, phenomenology requires a relatively homogenous group of participants to reveal their shared experiences of the phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). This means also that sample sizes for phenomenological research are typically small. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) suggest a sample size of 6-8 participants is appropriate and provides enough rich data to examine similarities and differences between participants while maintaining manageability of data volume. For this study, I recruited 7 participants.

It was the intent to reach data saturation, the point at which no new information or themes emerge from interview responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Data saturation is important for research quality and content validity; however, it is not easily defined (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation can change depending on study design (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Regardless, there is agreement that data saturation is reached when no new data, themes or coding emerge and the study can be replicated (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Since no new information emerged during the interviews for this study, additional participants were not recruited.

Instrumentation

Research instrumentation is the various processes and methods applied by a researcher to collect data from the research participants; in qualitative data, Boudah (2012) states there are three main sources of data: observation, interview, and document

review. In this study, in-depth phenomenological interviews with participants were

conducted to obtain the rich data necessary to describe an individual's experience.

This form of interview differs from other forms because of phenomenological research's

foundations in the philosophical tradition (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In

phenomenological research, the relationship between the researcher and the respondent

becomes reflexive, and the researcher becomes a vital component of the research process

(Noon, 2014). Therefore, using this approach required me to develop specific research

skills to enable me to explore lived experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Rubin and Rubin's (2012) framework for responsive interviewing was used

during this study. Responsive interviewing is a strategy in which the researcher conducts

an interview in a conversive manner, inviting the participant to tell stories, expand on

explanations, and encourages depth and detail (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Under this

framework, the first stage is introduction to the researcher and the topic, allowing the

participant to "ease into" the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Because some time has

passed since initial COVID-19 mandated telework, an exercise to help participants recall

that situation was useful. Minor memory failure can be mitigated by using activities to

help participants recall past experiences (Ellis, Amjad, & Deng, 2011); this is an optimal

time for these activities. I offered participants a choice of either creating a timeline of

major events leading up to and implementation of teleworking, or the associated feelings

and reactions describing the key segments or scenes that would be included in a movie

about his or her experience during this time (Ellis, Amjad, & Deng, 2011). Either activity

helped participants recall their past experiences and served as an icebreaker at the start of each interview (Ellis, Amjad, & Deng, 2011).

In the second stage, the responsive interview moved into asking easy questions central to the research; this put the participant at ease and allowed me to set the expectation for the rich descriptions needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). During this stage, a technique called funneling was utilized in which I began with broad questions intended to enhance memory recall and obtain as much information as possible (Noon, 2018). I then moved to a more narrowly focused conversation intended to gather the richly detailed information surrounding the study questions (Noon, 2018). Next, I moved on to more sensitive questions, being observant of any displayed stress (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Because IPA research is often concerned with issues that may cause discomfort or stress, it was essential that I monitored participant reactions and responded appropriately to mitigate or eliminate negative participant feelings (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Lastly, I closed the interview, but kept the door open for further communication (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This was crucial for email follow-up when I needed clarification or had further questions. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes, which typically provided enough time to delve into the level of detail needed and investigate novel perspectives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Appendix E provides the list of interview questions that were used in this study, which satisfied the responsive interview stages.

Clarification of data collected during the interviews was sent via a follow-up email (Appendix F), which encouraged accuracy and honesty in answering questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Additionally, this email contained a copy of the participant's

interview transcript to review. Participants were asked to verify the accuracy of the

transcript. Data collection via email interviews or surveys has grown in recent years, and

holds several benefits (Ingley et al., 2019). Online research data collection typically

provides rich detail and reflective responses due to the ease of administration, participant

choice of setting, and increased feelings of anonymity (Ingley et al., 2020), thus

encouraging honest and detailed responses from participants who may have been less

forthcoming during interviews.

Data Collection

Once participants qualified for the study through the demographic questions in the

qualification survey (Appendix D), I contacted them using the participant-provided email

to schedule an interview. During the interview, the participants discussed their

experiences of stress as it relates to perceived productivity and job satisfaction while

teleworking during COVID-19 mandates. To create a relaxing and trusting atmosphere, I

began with a social conversation followed by interview questions guided by the interview

protocol (Appendix E). The interviews were conducted via video native to Microsoft

Teams.

Interviews were audio-recorded using the recording capabilities of Microsoft

Teams. Participant permission and knowledge were noted in the signed consent form

(Appendix C) that will have been previously obtained. To minimize researcher bias and

ensure accurate data reporting, I conducted reflexive journaling before and after each

interview. Additionally, to further ensure accurate reporting of the data and provide a

third source of data for triangulation validation, I made notes of observations such as

body language during the interview. Participant numbers, randomly generated through

Radomizer.com, were assigned to each participant and their respective interview

responses. Microsoft Teams provided organic transcription capabilities, which was

evaluated using test data prior to use with actual study data to ensure validity and

reliability of the instrumentation. Each recording was saved in a Microsoft Word format

for data editing and later data reduction and analysis. Particular attention was given to the

software's ability to transcribe the specialized language used by military contractors.

Transcribed interview data was manually verified against recorded interview sessions to

ensure accuracy of the data.

Once the interviews were complete, I thoroughly reviewed the naïve data

collected from the participant responses, and annotated any further notes regarding the

responses, or questions that arose from the feedback (Broomé, 2014).

Miscommunication, misunderstanding, and errors in recording were mitigated by

contacting all participants for follow-up via email to provide transcripts, review each

interview question, and provide any questions (Appendix F). This further validated and

solidified the responses provided by the participants (Ingley et al., 2020). Email

communications were saved as .pdf files for storage and retention with other study data.

Data Analysis

The first step in data analysis was to set aside my own biases to remain objective

throughout the study. To do this, I assumed the phenomenological attitude, which

suspends the researcher's natural thoughts or biases of a phenomenon caused by

interaction with and existence in that phenomenon (Zahavi, 2021). This was done through

epoché, which required me to adopt a new point of view in order to avoid prejudgments when faced with this very familiar subject or circumstance (Bednall, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2010; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015; Zahavi, 2021). Epoché was accomplished by bracketing my own knowledge and experience of teleworking as a military contractor to identify and suspend my own experience and beliefs of working as military contractor remotely (Bednall, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2010; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015; Zahavi, 2021). To accomplish bracketing, I wrote a complete description of teleworking as a military contractor, noting my own experiences and feelings (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). I read this subjectivity statement before starting data analysis, and during triangulation. To conduct actual data analysis, I used the modified van Kaam procedural steps (Moustakas, 1994) to analyze data.

Horizontalizing and listing all relevant expressions. During this stage of data analysis, I evaluated all data equally, since every statement by the participant had an equal value. Statements that were repetitive, overlapping, or irrelevant to the investigating phenomena were ignored. After cleaning the data, the remaining parts of the data that have textural meaning to the studied phenomenon are called horizons (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). This step was done with a technique called open coding. This type of coding concentrates primarily on text to discover and capture distinct categories from the collected data by comparing one comment with another (Boudah, 2012). I started with separating the data by breaking the data into individual concepts, which can be further broken down into major and minor concepts (Boudah, 2012). This was done by highlighting these concepts and categorizing them, then further separating the concepts

that support the study, and concepts that either do not support the study, or introduce new ideas.

Subjection of invariant constituents to experience a reduction. During this stage, cluster horizons were grouped into themes with each theme having a single meaning thus describing phenomena in textural language (Moustakas, 1994). To more accurately code and capture the true concepts and themes from the collected data, axial coding was utilized. With axial coding, I identified the conditions, contexts, and intervening conditions of each category to identify and discover thematic concepts (Boudah, 2012). While reviewing the data, I confirmed that these previously identified categories accurately reflected the interview responses that were collected from the participants. Once confirmed, I then explored these categories and compartmentalized them into higher order concepts. When these elements were placed together or clustered, it showed trends, revealed similarities and patterns, and facilitated further analysis. This technique allowed me to understand the meaning of the common terms and allowed for uncovering the underlying concepts and themes of the interview responses more thoroughly.

Thematic clustering to generate key themes. During this step, clusters were formed to create themes for the invariant constituents (horizons) which form the core themes of the participants' experience with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Comparison of diverse data sources to validate the constant constituents. In this stage, different themes were derived from the participants' experience and compared with participants' body expressions and literature to ascertain the accuracy of

the data sources. Interview responses were compared among the participants.

Construction of participants' textural descriptions. The textual description explained participants' perceptions of a phenomenon (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015, p.11). In this step, the participants' experiences were described using verbatim excerpts from the interview. Moreover, a narrative format was used to explain participants' experiences with the phenomenon.

Construction of individual structural descriptions. Using textural descriptions, I imagined how experiences occur and then created individual structures for each respondent.

Construction of composite structural descriptions. After writing the textual description for each participant, the textual description was incorporated into a structure explaining how the experience occurred. At the end of each paragraph, the structures were added to generate structural description. This process facilitated understanding a participant's experiences with the phenomenon (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

Combining the texture and structure to form an expression. During this phase, two narratives were created for each participant, one for texture describing what happened during the interview and another to the structure describing how it happened. The meaning units for each participant were then listed. After that, meaning units common to all participants to generate composite textural and structural descriptions of the shared meaning units were created. To create the essence of the phenomenon, individual meaning units from the generated composite description were removed. Lastly, composite structural description with composite textural description

were combined to create a universal description of the study phenomena (Yüksel &

Yıldırım, 2015).

Issues of Trustworthiness

The goal of any research is to present credible and reliable results that

can be trusted by the reader (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The four components of

trustworthiness include credibility, which is analogous to the quantitative construct of

internal validity; transferability, which is analogous to external validity; dependability,

which is analogous to reliability; and confirmability, which is analogous to objectivity

(Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Qualitative research is trustworthy when it represents the

experience of the study participants (Noon, 2018). To achieve this goal within this study,

I will use reproducible and consistent methods such as describing approach to and

procedures for data analysis and methods to be used, clear documentation of the process

of generating themes, concepts, and theories (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Additional

reliability of data will be maintained by checking for obvious transcription mistakes;

following strict coding definitions; providing the opportunity to participants for

confirming the accuracy of interpretation of results and elaboration during email follow-

up communications; rich description of data; reporting of study results which are

conflicting to expected outcome; input from oversight committee such as dissertation

chair; committee member and other university appointed members; the use of epoché and

reflexive journaling; and the declaration of personal bias.

Credibility

Credibility is defined as the truth value of a research's methods through systematic fieldwork and data analysis and the training and expertise of the researcher (Boudah, 2012). To promote credibility, the following techniques were employed: equipment reliability checks, triangulation, and member checking (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). To ensure participant interviews were recorded accurately without garbling or inaudible volume levels, functionality checks on recording equipment were conducted before each interview by having the participant read a simple sentence, and then playing back the recording to ensure clarity and volume. This allowed for equipment adjustments tailored to each participant. Additionally, I used member checks to evaluate the credibility of data collected (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In this process, interview transcriptions were sent to the participants to crosscheck and validate their responses. Triangulation was done by comparing interview responses from different respondents to multiple data sources used in the study as well as to previous literature to identify whether they present credible information (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the idea that the findings of a study might apply to other settings (Rubin & Rubin, 20112). However, phenomenological studies aim to get a detailed description of the experience of specific groups and, therefore, generalizability, which is the extension and transferability of the research findings to other contexts and situations, is often not possible (Noon, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Yüksel &

Yıldırım, 2015). In the present study, I ensured transferability by describing data

sufficient to allow comparison to similar groups in similar circumstance.

Dependability

Dependability is a criterion used to measure the consistency and rigor of a

research study in ensuring that the findings are reliably replicated and credible; it is often

referred to as reliability (Guest et al., 2012). Dependability is often not the most pressing

issue of trustworthiness in an IPA study because replication of the results is not the goal

(Guest et al., 2012). However, dependability is necessary to compare qualitative data

between groups or periods of time (Guest et al., 2012). To enhance the dependability of

this study, several techniques were utilized. As recommended by Guest et al. (2012),

using multiple data sources, monitoring data as it is received, transcribing verbatim data,

single transcribing source, external review of the data collected and data analysis,

triangulation of the data, and the use of verbatim quotes to support themes enhanced the

dependability of this study.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the ability of the study's conclusions to be confirmed by outside

observers; it shows the neutrality of the findings in being free from researcher biases,

motivations, interests, or perspectives (Boudah, 2012). The bracketing (epoché) process

was used to restrict me from making personal judgments and maintain neutrality during

the research process (Bednall, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2010; Yüksel & Yıldırım,

2015; Zahavi, 2021), ensuring the findings are reflexive to maintain validity of the

research. Direct quotes were used to show that the resulting interpretations can be directly linked to the original data, further enhancing confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

The protection of participant rights is a crucial component of ensuring research is conducted in an ethical manner and can produce results consistent with the American Psychological Association, Walden University's Institutional Review Board, and other relevant governing agencies. First, I gained approval to conduct the study from Walden University's Institutional Review Board to ensure ethical standards of compliance in participant recruitment and treatment, data collection and storage, conflicts of interest, and risk identification and management. Researchers must ethically protect and inform participants of the potential harm that may result from study participation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To ensure participants are informed and ensured of confidentiality, each participant signed an informed consent form (Appendix C) before qualification surveys were provided. Because this study was focused on the thoughts and feelings during potentially stressful periods, interview questions may have served to recall previous feelings that may have potentially exposed participants to psychological stress. Participants were allowed to terminate participation at any time during the process and were provided with appropriate informational resources, included in the informed consent (Appendix C). To further protect participant confidentiality, all personally identifiable information was excluded from data analysis and research findings.

To ensure compliance with data storage and destruction requirements, privacy measures were taken in the storage of the data collected. All the data for this study, both

hard and soft copies, were stored and kept in confidential places. Data storage of electronic files was addressed by storing all research data on a password and virus protected personal computer, with additional password on the specific folder containing research data. Personal data was held in a secondary password protected folder. All stages of password protection have separate passwords, ensuring at a minimum, 2 different password requirements to access data. Hard copy files were not generated during this study. Five years after the study is published, the data is slated for destruction via disk wipe software. These privacy measures, of which the participants were made aware, serve to assure participants of the confidentiality of their responses and encourage honesty during interviews.

Summary and Transition

In this chapter, I provided a detailed description of the rationale and purpose for utilizing a phenomenological qualitative approach to exploring the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of stress as it relates to perceived production and job satisfaction associated with forced telework among military contractors. I also defined the research design and methodology and included the role of the researcher during data collection and analysis. Included in this chapter is the criterion for participant selection, including recruitment and sample size. Further, I described the semi-structured interviews that were utilized to collect the data and the methods for analyzing the data. Finally, I outlined strategies to ensure trustworthiness of the data, ethical procedures, and the protection of the participants.

Chapter 4 will describe the results of this study regarding the lived experience of military contractors of occupational stress on job satisfaction and perceived performance when forced into telework arrangements due to COVID-19 mandates. It begins with a restatement of the research questions, and description of the participant selection process, the limitations of the participant pool, and data gathering for this study. Emerging themes will be discussed, and graphical information presented. The chapter concludes with a summary of the themes that emerged during the data analysis process.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of military contractors who were forced into teleworking due to COVID-19 restrictions, specifically in terms of how they experienced stress and how it affected their productivity and job satisfaction. This qualitative study utilized an IPA approach to gather data and provide insight for more effective policies and procedures.

The following research questions and sub-questions were identified to address the current gap in the literature:

Research Question 1: What was the lived experience related to the stress on military contractors forced into telework circumstances due to COVID-19 restrictions on job satisfaction?

Sub-question 1: What were participants' initial responses to stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework and did it impact job satisfaction?

Sub-question 2: What were final outcomes of stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework on job satisfaction?

Sub-question 3: How did participants use control to deal with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding job satisfaction?

Sub-question 4: How concerned were participants with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding job satisfaction?

Sub-question 5: How did participants use curiosity to deal with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding job satisfaction?

Sub-question 6: How confident were participants that they could deal with the stress from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding job satisfaction?

Research Question 2: What was the lived experience related to the stress on military contractors forced into telework circumstances due to COVID-19 restrictions on perceived productivity?

Sub-question 1: What were participants' initial responses to stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework and did it impact perceived productivity?

Sub-question 2: What were final outcomes of stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework on perceived productivity?

Sub-question 3: How did participants use control to deal with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding perceived productivity?

Sub-question 4: How concerned were participants with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding perceived productivity?

Sub-question 5: How did participants use curiosity to deal with the stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding perceived productivity?

Sub-question 6: How confident were participants that they can deal with the stress from COVID-19 mandated telework circumstance regarding perceived productivity?

This chapter includes description of the results of this study regarding the lived experiences of COVID-19 mandated remote working among military contractors. It commences with a restatement of the purpose and the research questions, describes the interview settings and participant demographics and selection process, reviews the data collection process, and describes the data analysis and coding processes. Evidence of trustworthiness is reviewed, and results are described, providing samples of participant responses and emerging and identified themes. A theme analysis is conducted and a summary of the themes that emerged during the data analysis process concluded this chapter.

Setting

The interviews conducted during the study brought to light an unusual circumstance that added an intriguing layer of complexity to the interpretation of the study results. At the time of the study and the interview, one participant was relocating overseas. The personal circumstances of this individual at the time of the study had the potential to significantly influence her perceptions of her experiences of teleworking. Relocation, in itself, is a significant life event that often entails numerous challenges and adjustments. One way in which relocation could affect the study participant during the interview is through the disruption it may cause to her daily routines and work environments; her internal resources would determine the level of impact experienced (Savickas, 2020). Moving to a new location often entails packing, unpacking, coordinating logistics, and adapting to unfamiliar surroundings. This was even more pronounced for this participant, as she had relocated to an overseas location. These

changes can create added stress, disrupt established routines, and potentially impact the participant's ability to separate the stress of moving from any stress she remembered caused by teleworking. Her participation provided a unique opportunity to examine the specific ways in which less than ideal circumstances could influence viewpoints of experiences and perceptions of teleworking. The participant who was in the midst of this relocation process demonstrated commitment by actively participating in the interviews despite the inherent difficulties she was facing. The remaining participants faced no extraordinary challenges, and all felt comfortable during the interview process.

Demographics

For this study, four male and three female military contractors supporting the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Army were selected. Participants were aged 26 – 55 supporting five different military roles. All participants were veterans; no participants had experience in remote working prior to COVID-19 mandated telework. Other demographic statistics include one of the participants being Hispanic, three were Caucasian, and three were African American (see Table 1). To preserve confidentiality, participants' real names were replaced in interview transcripts and all subsequent work products associated with this study with alphanumeric codes P1 through P7.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Breakout

Data point	#	%
Gender		
Males	4	57.1%
Female	3	42.9%
Age		
Under 18	0	0%
18-25	0	0%
26-34	1	14.3%
35-40	1	14.3%
41-55	5	71.4%
56-70	0	0%
Over 70	0	0%
Job role		
Scheduling analyst	2	28.6%
Unit deployment manager	2	28.6%
Military planner	1	14.3%
Intelligence analyst	1	14.3%
Training analyst	1	14.3%
Race/ ethnicity		
African American	3	42.9%
Caucasian	3	42.9%
Hispanic	1	14.3%

Veteran status		
Veteran	7	100%
Non-veteran	0	0%
Prior experience in remote working		
Yes	0	0%
No	7	100%

Data Collection

Walden University's approval number for this study is 11-21-22-0080054. It expires on November 20, 2023. To gather comprehensive data about individual experiences, this study utilized in-depth phenomenological interviews with seven participants. The recruitment process for this study aimed to reach a diverse pool of potential participants. Multiple channels were utilized to maximize the reach and engagement of the recruitment efforts. The following platforms were employed: LinkedIn, Facebook, and Walden University's Participant Pool. Each platform was used for 2 months. Though the use of Researchandme.com was anticipated to recruit participants, enough participants were recruited through other means.

LinkedIn, being a professional networking platform, was leveraged to target individuals with relevant backgrounds and experiences. Through LinkedIn, the study's purpose and criteria for participation were shared in professional groups, relevant forums, and personal networks. This approach aimed to attract individuals who had experience as military contractors and had been impacted by teleworking during the COVID-19 mandates.

Facebook, as a popular social media platform with a wide user base, provided an opportunity to expand the reach beyond professional networks. The study's recruitment posts were shared in relevant groups and communities on Facebook, such as military support groups, remote work communities, and veteran networks. This strategy aimed to engage individuals who may not be actively present on professional platforms like LinkedIn but still had valuable insights to contribute to the study.

In addition to these social media platforms, Walden University's Participant Pool was utilized to tap into the university's diverse student body. By posting the recruitment information within the university's participant pool, the study aimed to reach individuals who were pursuing degrees related to the research topic or had expressed interest in participating in research studies. This platform provided an opportunity to engage individuals with a variety of backgrounds and experiences, contributing to the overall diversity of the participant pool.

Through the combined use of LinkedIn, Facebook, and Walden University's Participant Pool, the recruitment process aimed to attract a broad range of potential participants. By leveraging these platforms, the study sought to ensure that the participant pool reflected the varied perspectives and experiences of military contractors who had been affected by teleworking during the COVID-19 mandates. On each of the platforms, an announcement with my email was provided.

Those who contacted me were sent a qualifying email (Appendix B), which contained the link to the informed consent and qualifying survey (Appendix D) that contained demographic and employment questions, and information about remote

working arrangements. Eighteen participants completed the qualification survey; all were qualified and agreed to participate in the study by providing their email address. I contacted all participants to schedule an interview. However, only seven participants responded to the interview request. The interviews, guided by the questions in Appendix E, lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted via Microsoft Teams, and the platform's built-in recording feature was used to record and transcribe the data. Microsoft Teams has native transcribing capabilities that was activated in real time, allowing me to verify interview content as the interview was taking place.

During the data collection phase, the interviews were conducted in a controlled and focused environment; in all cases, both the participants and I were located in separate private rooms without others present. Minor distractions such as a spouse entering the home office a participant was using or an incoming phone call were encountered, but they did not interrupt the flow or quality of the interviews, nor did those distractions cause concerns with anonymity or confidentiality. These distractions were effectively managed by pausing the interview to ensure the participants' responses were not compromised. Throughout the interviews, I did not observe any significant body language issues or vocabulary that would have indicated any participant was uncomfortable with the interview. The visual aspect of the interviews was generally clear and enabled effective communication. However, during one interview, there was a restriction in audio quality due to bandwidth limitations during the last quarter of the interview. Despite this technical limitation, the audio remained uninterrupted, allowing for a continued and productive conversation.

I conducted all interviews in my home office, which provided a secluded and private setting. This environment ensured confidentiality and facilitated open and honest discussions. To further minimize potential distractions, the interviews were scheduled during working hours when I could be alone in the office, allowing for focused and uninterrupted conversations. To maintain a professional and neutral interview setting, I utilized a Microsoft Teams generated background, which effectively masked any potential distractions that may have been present in my home office environment. This approach aimed to create a conducive atmosphere for participants to share their experiences comfortably (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). With the exception of one participant, who was located in a private, closed office at work, all participants were interviewed remotely from their respective homes. This allowed for flexibility and convenience, ensuring that participants could engage in the interviews from their preferred and comfortable locations.

To ensure objectivity and minimize my own bias during the interviews, I implemented several strategies. One crucial approach was adopting the phenomenological attitude through epoché, which involves suspending or bracketing one's preconceived beliefs, assumptions, and biases to approach the phenomenon of study with a fresh and open mindset (Bednall, 2006). This involved suspending my natural thoughts or biases of the phenomenon being studied, allowing for a fresh perspective. By consciously setting aside my preconceived notions and assumptions about my own experience of COVID mandated telework as it relates to job satisfaction and perceived productivity, I could approach the interviews with an open and unbiased mindset.

To mitigate potential bias, I implemented reflexive journaling as a practice before and after each interview. This technique involved engaging in self-reflective writing to delve into and recognize any personal thoughts, beliefs, or experiences that could potentially shape the way the data was interpreted (Chan et al., 2013). During the journaling process, I focused on several keywords to guide my reflection, including self-awareness, reflexivity, subjectivity, interpretation, transparency, and critical reflection. These keywords helped me examine my own perspectives, biases, and influences, as well as the subjective lens through which I interpreted the data and the potential for interpretation bias. Through this process, I aimed to enhance transparency, minimize bias, and foster critical reflection to ensure a more objective and comprehensive interpretation of the collected data.

I also used bracketing as a means to identify and suspend my own knowledge and experiences related to teleworking as a military contractor. By writing a comprehensive description of teleworking as a military contractor, including personal experiences and feelings, I could separate my own biases from the data analysis process. This active recognition and conscious separation of personal biases helped me maintain a more objective perspective throughout the study (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). By using epoché, bracketing, and journaling as interconnected practices in my phenomenological research, I was able to enhance objectivity, minimize bias, and foster critical reflection. Epoché allowed me to set the foundation by suspending my preconceived judgments and biases, and bracketing specifically addressed my subjective experiences and beliefs. Journaling complemented these practices by facilitating self-reflection and promoting transparency.

Together, they contributed to a rigorous and objective research process that prioritized the participants' experiences and interpretations (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

Additionally, visual cues for bias triggers were monitored during the interviews (Chan et al., 2013). I remained attentive to any non-verbal cues or reactions from the participants that might indicate potential bias. These visual cues, such as facial expressions or body language, were noted and considered during the analysis phase to ensure that any potential biases did not influence the interpretation of the participants' responses. For example, if I noticed a subtle facial expression of agreement or disagreement during a participant's response, I would make a note of it and be cautious not to let it impact my analysis.

Further, I employed my own visual cues in the form of visible notecards with key words from my journaling (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). These notecards were visible to me during the interviews (though not visible to the participants) to help ensure I did not become overly engrossed in my own feelings and experiences when listening to the participants' descriptions. The use of visible notecards served as a gentle reminder to maintain an objective stance throughout the interview process. They acted as a visual anchor, directing my attention back to the participants' narratives and helping me stay attuned to their unique perspectives. These notecards functioned as a proactive measure to mitigate the potential influence of my unconscious biases on the data analysis. It is important to note that the visible notecards were solely intended for my own use and did not influence or affect the participants' experiences or responses in any way. They served

as a personal tool to aid in self-regulation and promote a more objective engagement with the data.

Overall, the data collection process was conducted in a controlled and well-prepared manner, addressing potential distractions and ensuring privacy and comfort for both the researcher and the participants. These measures helped to maintain the quality and integrity of the interviews, allowing for meaningful and insightful data to be gathered. By employing these strategies of epoché, journaling, bracketing, and visual cue monitoring, I actively worked to identify and address my own biases, allowing for a more objective and impartial analysis of the interview data.

To ensure the security and integrity of the research data, a comprehensive data storage approach was employed. The primary storage medium used was a password-protected folder on a password-protected laptop. This double layer of protection ensured that even if the laptop was accessed without authorization, the data within the folder would remain inaccessible. To further safeguard the data, file backup was accomplished using a password-protected thumb drive. This portable device provided a secure and easily accessible location for storing and transporting research data. Data security during interviews, and for recordings was done through an individual Microsoft Teams account, which offered an added layer of protection through two-factor authentication. This ensured that only authorized individuals could access the data stored on the platform. The recordings, once transcribed and verified, were permanently deleted.

In terms of data retention, a minimum period of five years was designated to comply with research ethics and institutional requirements. This extended timeframe

allowed for future reference, data verification, and potential reanalysis, if necessary. By implementing this comprehensive data storage approach, the research data was safeguarded against unauthorized access, loss, or corruption and promoted confidentiality, integrity, and long-term preservation.

<div align="center">**Data Analysis**</div>

After conducting all interviews and verifying transcripts with participants via a follow-up email (Appendix F), the data analysis process began, incorporating the principles of epoché, bracketing and journaling. Following the process outlined in Chapter 3 and drawing inspiration from the modified van Kaam procedural steps (Moustakas, 1994), the first crucial step was to consciously set aside preconceptions, assumptions, and personal, cultural, and experiential beliefs that could potentially influence my interpretation of the data (Bednall, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2010; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015; Zahavi, 2021).

Setting Aside Presumptions

To achieve this state of epoché and bracketing, I adopted a deliberate approach by engaging in reflective practices. I began by reviewing the comprehensive description I had previously written of my own experiences and feelings as they related to teleworking as a military contractor. This subjectivity statement served as a reminder of my own potential biases and allowed me to acknowledge and become aware of my personal background and perspectives (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). In doing so, I deliberately recognized and set aside my subjective interpretations, establishing an environment conducive to open and impartial data analysis. Throughout the data analysis process, I

regularly revisited and reread the subjectivity statement, ensuring that it remained at the forefront of my mind. This practice of referring back to the statement served as a constant reminder to bracket my own preconceived notions and to approach the data with fresh eyes and an open mind. It helped me prevent any potential influence of my personal experiences and beliefs from coloring the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Additionally, I employed triangulation to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis. By considering multiple perspectives and cross-referencing the data with various sources, such as participant interviews, transcripts, and supplementary materials, the analysis process was enriched, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. These methodological steps aimed to enhance the objectivity and validity of the findings, contributing to a more robust and reliable study (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

Cleaning the Data

The second step of the data analysis process involved cleaning the data by carefully identifying and disregarding any overlapping or irrelevant expressions that did not contribute to the understanding of the studied phenomenon. To facilitate the cleaning and analysis of the data, the software tool NVivo was employed. NVivo is a powerful qualitative data analysis software that assists researchers in organizing, managing, and analyzing large volumes of textual and multimedia data (Dhakal, 2022). By utilizing NVivo, the second step of the data analysis process was made more efficient and effective because it allowed me to import and organize the data in a systematic and structured manner. The software allowed for the creation of a comprehensive database

where the transcripts, interview data, and any supplementary materials could be stored

and managed. This centralization of data facilitated easy access, retrieval, and

organization, eliminating the need for manual sorting and reducing the risk of data loss or

misplacement. Moreover, NVivo provided features for data cleaning and organization,

which greatly supported the second step of the analysis process. The software offered

tools for identifying and removing overlapping or irrelevant expressions, streamlining the

cleaning process and ensuring that only relevant and meaningful data remained for

further analysis. This capability proved particularly valuable in this study in uncovering

the frequency, intensity, and significance of particular themes or concepts within the

dataset.

While the second step of the data analysis process involved cleaning the data by

disregarding any overlapping or irrelevant expressions, it is important to note that

repetitive expressions were not discarded, as they held significant meaning in revealing

the frequency and emphasis with which participants reiterated certain points (Moustakas,

1994; Yüskel & Yildirim, 2015). These repetitive expressions provided valuable insights

into the salience and significance of specific aspects related to the phenomenon under

investigation. These meaningful sections of data, often referred to as horizons, possessed

textual richness and depth that shed light on various dimensions of the studied

phenomenon (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

Coding

To uncover and capture distinct categories within these horizons, an open coding

approach was employed. Open coding involved systematically examining the data,

identifying patterns, and assigning initial codes to different segments of the text (Boudah, 2012). This process allowed me to discover significant themes, ideas, or recurring concepts that emerged from the participants' narratives.

To start the coding process, open coding was employed, which involved focusing on the text to identify and capture specific concepts and categories from the raw data (Boudah, 2012). The data was initially broken down into individual concepts, and then further into major and minor concepts before being categorized (Boudah, 2012). These categories were then organized based on their relevance to the research questions or any novel ideas they introduced. As the study was narrowly focused on military contractors forced telework due to COVID-19, it was observed that nearly all concepts were relevant to both research questions on job satisfaction and perceived productivity.

As the open coding progressed, I organized and clustered the identified categories into broader concepts that aligned with the research questions or introduced novel insights. These concepts served as the building blocks for further analysis and interpretation, providing a framework to systematically explore the data in relation to the study's objectives. By categorizing and organizing the data into meaningful concepts, I moved the analysis beyond individual instances to capture the underlying patterns, connections, and overarching themes that emerged from the participants' experiences and perspectives.

To accurately capture the true themes and concepts from the data, axial coding was used in addition to open coding (Boudah, 2012). Unlike open coding, axial coding involves the researcher using his or her own concepts while reviewing the data to confirm

their accuracy in reflecting the participants' responses. Once the concepts were validated, they were explored further and organized into categories. The resulting axial codes included feelings, concerns, differences, beliefs, preferences, and biases.

The iterative nature of this coding and concept development process ensured that the analysis remained flexible and responsive to the richness of the data (Moustakas, 1994; Yüskel & Yildirim, 2015). It allowed for the exploration of both anticipated themes based on the research questions and unexpected patterns or ideas that emerged from the participants' narratives. This comprehensive approach to data analysis facilitated a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, enabling the generation of meaningful findings and the formulation of well-grounded conclusions.

Clustering

The third step of the data analysis process delved into the task of grouping the identified horizons into discernible patterns and sentiments, ultimately aiming to identify and extract the underlying themes that permeated the phenomenon under study (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). By carefully examining the horizons and categorizing them based on their shared characteristics, I sought to uncover the common threads that connected participants' experiences and perspectives. These themes, once identified, were further clustered and organized to highlight the key themes that emerged from the data. This clustering process involved grouping similar themes together to create a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. It allowed me a higher-level synthesis of the data, highlighting the overarching concepts and ideas that resonated across multiple horizons and participants.

Nested within this clustering process, I endeavored to align each of the identified key themes with the specific research questions that were outlined in Chapter 1. By establishing this connection, the analysis ensured that the identified themes were directly relevant to the research objectives, providing targeted insights and addressing the core inquiries of the study. This alignment strengthened the rigor and coherence of the analysis, as it focused the interpretation on the specific areas of investigation and provided a clear link between the themes and the research questions (Moustakas, 1994; Yüskel & Yildirim, 2015).

Throughout this process, I employed a rigorous approach to compare and contrast responses among the participants. This comparative analysis served as a means of validating the data sources and ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the findings (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). In examining the consistency or divergence in participants' accounts, I sought to identify any potential discrepancies or patterns that might shed light on the nuances and variations within the phenomenon being studied. This careful comparison of responses enriched my analysis by providing a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, capturing the diverse perspectives and experiences of the participants.

Finally, notes were made of each participant's experience, creating brief individual structures that described the themes found for each participant during their experience of forced telework resulting from COVID-19 mandates (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). A composite description of the shared themes across all participants was created to

describe the overall experience of the participants (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015)
phenomenon.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

To ensure credibility in the study, multiple techniques were employed, including
equipment reliability checks, triangulation, and member checking (Yüksel & Yıldırım,
2015). Prior to each interview, the recording equipment underwent functionality checks
to guarantee accurate and high-quality recordings of participant interviews. This process
involved having the participant read a simple sentence and then playing back the
recording to assess clarity and volume. Adjustments were made to the equipment as
needed to ensure optimal recording conditions tailored to each participant. Additionally,
the chat feature remained open to ensure transcription was being accomplished. By
conducting these equipment reliability checks, potential issues such as garbling or
inaudible volume levels were mitigated, thereby enhancing the credibility of the recorded
data.

I used member checking, a technique used to assess the credibility of the collected
data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), in this study. After the transcription of each interview, the
participants were provided with the opportunity to review and validate the accuracy of
their responses. This member checking process allowed participants to ensure that their
viewpoints and experiences were faithfully represented in the data analysis, thereby
enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. By involving the

participants in this way, I aimed to minimize potential misinterpretations or misrepresentations that could arise during the transcription process.

Triangulation, another method employed to promote credibility, involved comparing the interview responses from different participants with multiple data sources used in the study and existing literature (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). By examining the consistency and convergence of information across these sources, I verified the credibility of the data and ensured that the findings were supported by multiple perspectives and evidence. This comprehensive approach of triangulation enhanced the credibility of the study by minimizing the potential bias or distortion that could arise from relying solely on one data source or viewpoint (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Furthermore, my practice of journaling and note taking during interviews contributed to the overall credibility of the study (Chan et al., 2013). I maintained a reflective journal, documenting personal observations, reflections, and impressions during and after each interview. This journaling practice allowed for a transparent record of my thought process, interpretations, and potential biases, which were later revisited and considered during data analysis. The thorough note taking during interviews ensured the accuracy and richness of the data by capturing important details, non-verbal cues, and contextual information that further enhanced the credibility of the findings (Chan et al., 2013).

Finally, I ensured participant saturation as a means of credibility. Participant saturation is a crucial factor in qualitative research that contributes to the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Saturation refers to the point in

data collection and analysis when new information or insights are no longer emerging, and the existing data has reached a point of redundancy or thematic saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). While it is reached at different points depending on study design, when saturation is achieved, it indicates that the researcher has gathered a sufficient amount of data to comprehensively explore the research questions and themes under investigation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The attainment of participant saturation enhances credibility in several ways. First, it demonstrates that the researcher has engaged with a diverse range of participants and perspectives, allowing for a comprehensive and well-rounded understanding of the phenomenon being studied. By including a sufficient number of participants, the study accounts for the diversity and complexity of experiences and viewpoints, minimizing the risk of bias and providing a more accurate representation of the broader population or phenomenon (Guest et al., 2006).

Additionally, participant saturation ensures that the analysis is based on a robust dataset that captures the richness and variability of participants' perspectives and experiences. Through repeated exposure to similar themes and patterns across different participants, saturation allows for a thorough exploration of the phenomena under investigation. It enables the researcher to identify commonalities, differences, and nuances within the data, leading to a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis (Guest et al., 2006; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Lastly, saturation enhances the credibility of the findings by minimizing the risk of selective or incomplete reporting (Guest et al., 2006; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). When saturation is

achieved, it indicates that the researcher has thoroughly examined the available data and considered a wide range of perspectives; this helps to mitigate potential biases and strengthens the validity of the study's conclusions (Guest et al., 2006; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Saturation allows for a comprehensive and in-depth analysis that can withstand scrutiny and promotes confidence in the trustworthiness of the findings.

Transferability

Transferability, often discussed in qualitative research, refers to the idea that the findings of a study can be applicable to other settings or contexts (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). However, in the case of phenomenological studies that aim to explore the lived experiences of specific groups, generalizability—extending and applying research findings to other contexts—is often limited (Noon, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Instead, the focus shifts towards ensuring transferability by providing a detailed and comprehensive description of the data, enabling readers to make meaningful comparisons with similar groups in similar circumstances.

In this particular study, transferability was enhanced through meticulous attention to detail and the provision of a rich description of the data. I present the findings in a way that would allow readers to make connections and draw insights from their own contexts or settings. By thoroughly describing the participants' experiences, perspectives, and the contextual factors that shaped their experiences, the study provided a foundation for readers to consider how the findings might relate to their own situations. Additionally, by employing transparent and explicit reporting of the research methods, including the

sampling process, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques, the study ensured transparency and rigor, further enhancing transferability. This transparency will allow readers to assess the applicability of the findings to their own contexts and evaluate the trustworthiness of the research process.

Furthermore, the inclusion of rich, vivid quotes and narratives from the participants throughout the study's findings contributed to transferability. These quotes provided readers with direct access to the participants' voices and experiences, enabling a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Readers can compare and relate these narratives to their own experiences or the experiences of individuals in similar circumstances, thereby facilitating the transfer of knowledge and insights across settings.

It is important to acknowledge that while transferability is a goal in qualitative research, it is not about seeking exact replication or generalizability in the traditional sense (Noon, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Rather, it is about providing readers with enough information and context to determine the relevance and applicability of the findings to their own situations (Noon, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). By offering a comprehensive and detailed description of the data, alongside transparent reporting and participant narratives, this study sought to enhance transferability, enabling readers to consider the implications of the findings within their own contexts.

In addition to the strategies mentioned above to enhance transferability, participant saturation played a crucial role in strengthening the transferability of the

study's findings. Attaining participant saturation is essential because it ensures that a comprehensive range of perspectives and experiences related to the research questions have been captured and examined (Guest et al., 2006; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). By reaching participant saturation, the study included a sufficiently diverse and representative sample of participants, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion of a variety of participants with different backgrounds, characteristics, and experiences provided a broader scope for comparison and consideration of the findings in different contexts. By engaging with a sufficient number of participants until saturation was achieved, the study was able to capture the depth and breadth of the phenomenon, allowing readers to relate the findings to similar groups or contexts. The diverse perspectives obtained through participant saturation enhanced the transferability of the study's findings by offering a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon's various dimensions. Finally, the use of verbatim quotes to support themes enhanced the dependability of this study (Guest et al., 2012).

Dependability

Dependability, which measures the consistency and rigor of a research study in ensuring that the findings are reliably replicated and credible, is often referred to as reliability (Guest et al., 2012). In an IPA study, dependability is not always the most pressing issue of trustworthiness since the goal is not to replicate the results (Guest et al., 2012). However, dependability is necessary to compare qualitative data between groups or periods of time (Guest et al., 2012). To enhance the dependability of this study, several

techniques were utilized. As recommended by Guest et al. (2012), multiple data sources were used, data was monitored as it was received, verbatim data was transcribed, a single source was used for transcription, external review of the data collected was conducted, triangulation of the data was done, and verbatim quotes were used to support themes.

Firstly, multiple data sources were utilized, which included interviews, observations, and documents. By incorporating various sources of data, the study increased the breadth and depth of information collected, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This multi-faceted approach to data collection minimized reliance on a single source and provided a more robust foundation for analysis (Guest et al., 2012).

During the transcription process, verbatim data was transcribed to capture the participants' exact words and expressions. This level of detail in transcription maintained the authenticity and integrity of the data. Verbatim quotes provide a direct representation of participants' actual words and expressions. By preserving the participants' exact language, verbatim quotes capture the authenticity and richness of their experiences. This level of detail and accuracy increases the dependability of the study's findings by ensuring that the participants' voices and perspectives are accurately reflected (Guest et al., 2006). Further, using verbatim quotes from participants increases data dependability because doing so supports interpretations while ensuring researcher reflexivity (Guest et al., 2012). Verbatim quotes provided concrete evidence to support the themes I identified and interpretations in this study. By incorporating participants' own words, I was able to illustrate and substantiate the themes and patterns that emerged from my analysis. At the

same time, verbatim quotes served as a means for me to engage in reflexivity and self-reflection. By including participants' exact words, I was constantly reminded of the original data and the voices of the participants. This helped avoid overgeneralizing or misrepresenting the participants' experiences, contributing to the dependability of the study.

Review of the collected data was done by external review and triangulation, both of which enhanced this study's dependability. External review was conducted through member verification, in which each participant reviewed his or her own transcript data. The external review provided an additional layer of scrutiny and validation, contributing to the reliability and dependability of the study's findings. Triangulation, a methodological approach that involves comparing and contrasting data from different sources or methods checking (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015), was employed to ensured that the findings were supported by multiple perspectives and sources of evidence. This helped to establish convergence and consistency in the analysis and increased confidence in the dependability of the results.

Confirmability

Confirmability is an essential aspect of qualitative research that ensures the study's findings can be validated by external observers, independent of the researcher's biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives (Boudah, 2012). To ensure the validity of the research, I used the epoché and bracketing process to prevent personal judgments and maintain neutrality during the research process (Bednall, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2010; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015; Zahavi, 2021). This process enabled the findings to be

reflexive, enhancing the confirmability of the research (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015) by ensuring I remained critical of my own perspectives throughout the data collection and analysis. These practices enabled me to actively interrogate how my own perspectives and experiences may have shaped my interpretation of the data. Reflexivity through epoché and bracketing allowed me to challenge and refine my own thinking, promoting a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and minimize the potential for personal biases to distort the interpretation of the findings.

Direct quotes were also included to establish a direct connection between the resulting interpretations and the original data, supporting the conformability of a study by promoting transparency, rigorous analysis, and reflexivity. Direct participant quotes help to mitigate potential biases and personal interpretations, allowing the data to speak for itself and increasing confidence in the findings (Guest et al., 2012). By employing these techniques, I ensured that the study's conclusions are grounded in the participants' experiences, contributing to the conformability and trustworthiness of the research (Boudah, 2012; Bednall, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2010; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015; Zahavi, 2021).

Results

Initial Themes

Identified Initial Themes

Figure 1, generated from themes identified during data analysis, shows the overarching initial themes. Remote work was a significant theme, which is expected given the research topic. However, equally important were communication and
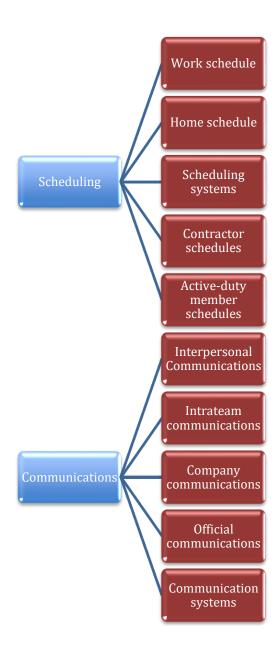
scheduling, which emerged as major themes with several subthemes in each. Communication, for instance, had subthemes related to the type and quality of communication. Communication types included intrateam, military-generated, and employer-generated communication. The quality of these communications varied, with many participants reporting overall communication challenges. As stated by P7, "the biggest challenge in transitioning to remote working was communication." Companies were often slow and vague in providing communication, as noted by P2 who said, "the company wasn't going to make any policy letters or decisions until the government made their decisions and policies because they wanted them to mirror..." Similarly, scheduling was a major theme with several subthemes. As many contractors were responsible for meeting project deadlines and crew scheduling, it is not surprising that this theme emerged.

Figure 1

Identified Initial Themes

Communication

The theme of communication in this study revealed several subthemes that encompassed the type and quality of communication experienced by the participants. Within the realm of communication types, participants reported experiencing three main categories: intrateam communication, military-generated communication, and employer-generated communication. Each type presented its unique challenges and dynamics within the context of remote working.

Participants highlighted that the transition to remote work initially posed significant communication challenges. The abrupt shift from face-to-face interactions to virtual platforms disrupted the established communication routines, often impacting participants' ability to complete tasks. P1 found the lack of in person interaction particularly disruptive: "For the job that I was doing, it involves a lot of interaction with people. Face to face interactions. Visit visiting offices to, you know, convey messages" and that it impacted his perceived productivity: "I always felt a productivity suffered. I always felt that I was more productive in the workplace versus working from home for the reasons I mentioned before. You know, being able to interface with people directly getting that you know eye to eye, you know. Confirmation that hey, yes, you know about this or? Yes. You're going to do this or? No, you can't do this because of ABC, you know. But yeah, primarily the interactions with people." Additionally, many found that information flow between team members initially suffered. P4 said "I don't think we got very far as a team because although I think we were all giving our best that just didn't translate as well between teams. Between shifts." He continued to state, "You just don't

get the same from an email that you do in person and there's little bits that are missed and

we found ourselves redoing a lot of the things that the previous shift and trying to figure

out."

Many participants encountered difficulties adapting to new communication

technologies, such as chat applications and virtual meeting platforms like Teams. Even a

simple phone call could be challenging due to the military's use of Defense Switched

Network infrastructure, the military's phone network. P1 noted: "…one of the issues that

we ran into now and then was the ability to dial base numbers from our phones.

Sometimes, for whatever reason, the DSN would not accept incoming calls from

landlines or mobile numbers." Equipment incompatibilities were common, leading to

delays and frustrations. P1 stated: "Most of the time there were issues beyond our control

at times with regards to the virtual private networks VPNs that we used." The absence of

non-verbal cues and the need to rely solely on digital communication further hindered

effective communication. P4 said: "You just don't get the same from an email that you do

in person and there's little bits that are missed and we found ourselves redoing a lot of the

things that the previous shift and trying to figure out 'Well what did they do when they

came across this?'" Participants expressed a sense of nostalgia for the ease and efficiency

of face-to-face interactions, which were more common in their previous working

environment. P1 was particularly regretful of the lack of face-to-face communications:

"The lack of interpersonal communication [was missing]. Really. You know,

relationships with people. Face to face contact. The convenience of being able to walk

down a set of stairs and take care of something in minutes that's going to take me an hour

or so from home because I have to send a form of communication and then wait for a form of communication in reply and then perhaps send follow up and then wait for follow up and back and forth. That is just extremely inconvenient and ineffective." Even P5, who was not as adamant about needing face to face contact, lamented the extended isolation from her colleagues: "No, it was more of like not to have seen people face to face and laughing and things like that that that, that physical aspect of it, but it was still everyone was still talking. Everyone was still doing what they needed to do, it was just quiet."

Participants mentioned that military-generated communication presented its own set of challenges during the transition to remote work. The structured nature of military communication, which often relies on established chains of command and protocols, had to be adapted to the remote setting. P4 noted that the military relied on unconventional, in a military setting, means of communicating with remote teams: "For the military, it was sent via text or signal chats, and that was sometimes difficult to decipher." Some participants found it difficult to navigate the hierarchical communication structure without the immediate presence of superiors or colleagues and adjustments such as using non-traditional chat functions, were required to ensure clear and efficient communication within the military framework while working remotely. P4, who works with special operations teams, noted: "We're on signal, on chat all the time. So, we have a work group, and we have a team group, and the team group now includes our military folks in it."

In the context of military-generated communication, participants faced additional challenges related to secure or classified communications during the transition to remote work. Military operations often involve handling sensitive and classified information, which requires secure communication channels and systems. Participants noted that the remote work environment posed limitations on their ability to transmit classified data effectively because they did not have access to classified systems. P4 stated: "Where we work in a classified environment, so, there is no way for us to get our work done outside of the office, right?" Due to the restrictions imposed by the lack of classified systems, participants reported difficulties in fully supporting their mission while working remotely. P4, who worked in a fully classified environment, stated "There was no way to support the client the way we were supposed to from home." The challenge of classified communications remained even for those participants whose tasks only partially relied on secure networks. P1 noted "I felt kind of useless sometimes where, you know, there was things that I couldn't do because I was not in the office or because I could not, you know, access the networks that I needed to." Unclassified communication platforms, which were the only available tools used for remote work, did not provide the necessary security measures or infrastructure to transmit classified information. As P4 noted: "It's not like we could get on a Zoom call and pass down information."

This presented a unique set of challenges for participants as they had to navigate the limitations imposed by remote work settings while adhering to the security protocols necessary for classified communications. They had to find alternative ways to fulfill their duties and adapt their communication practices to ensure compliance with security

requirements. This often involved utilizing, plain language communications to skirt

security requirements, alternate schedules to allow dedicated teams in the office to access

classified systems, or other approved methods to maintain the confidentiality and

integrity of classified information. As P4 noted, "the work around for those working from

home is going to be OK do open-source research." However, these techniques did not

fully resolve the problem; miscommunication routinely occurred when another team or

person tried to read between the lines of a plain language message that could have been

fully explained in a classified network. P4 stated: "We all thought we were

communicating great. We complained about the other members of the team, like what are

they doing? But they said the same about us. We thought "Oh we're spot on," but, no.

There was nothing. It was just like, hey, let's just try to be very deliberate, try to be very

detailed in the pass down email." P1 observed that even with alternating schedules that

allowed some time on the classified networks, tasks were still missed or

miscommunicated: "Then going in the following week to pick up where that person left

off, you know, you introduce the variables of a turnover, the variables of not being there

to work on things together or to pass immediate turnover face to face it prove challenging

for sure."

Employer-generated communication referred to communication channels initiated

by the participants' employers or contracting organizations. Participants reported varying

experiences with employer-generated communication. Some participants highlighted

effective communication practices, such as regular updates, clear guidelines, and

transparent information sharing. P7 stated "…from the company, [communication], it

was it was fairly simple, "Hey you do whatever is necessary to support [the military]."

Additionally, P7 noted "It seemed, it felt like everyone was on the same page." For P3,

company communications were clear: "For me it was clear it was clear and how

everything was going to go down." Often, successful company-initiated communications

relied on an active and involved immediate supervisor; P2 said "My team lead was pretty

good. Before he left to go take his GS position, he would always give out some pretty

clear guidance." P5 reiterated this sentiment, crediting her team lead with sending out

timely and relevant emails: "I wasn't anxious being like I was missing a deadline or

anything like that because I was always in communication with my OIC and emails." P6

stated her team lead "…made sure we were included in their thought process and made

sure that we weren't left out."

However, some participants also reported overall communication challenges with

their company, especially in the early phases of transitioning to remote work. It was often

mentioned that contractor companies were slow or hesitant to provide their employees

information for fear of contradicting the military. As P2 stated, "…the company wasn't

going to make any policy letters or decisions until the government made their decisions

and policies because they wanted them to mirror." Delays in company provided

communications was a common sentiment. P6, "I felt we would get maybe information

or official communication from the company and then that would somehow get translated

into whatever the [Fighter] Wing is providing so that we were included in what needed to

happen." However, she acquiesced that never actually occurred: "So we did have

policies put out and then eventually I think that the base leadership learned to include

contractors and not just say military and civilian employee is not realizing you're not capturing contractors, you're capturing your GS employees." P1 reiterated that feeling, stating "There was some communication breakdown" and that the geographical distance between the company headquarters and his duty location created delays: "Yeah, it took some time for the for the company stateside to get on board with what we needed to do over here." P2 was particularly critical of his company, stating "…information flow wasn't great for U.S. contractors" and that his company "…was not that great to get for getting involved in the whole COVID situation."

Scheduling

The theme of scheduling emerged as a significant aspect of the remote working experience, encompassing various subthemes that shed light on the complexities and adaptations made by contractors in meeting project deadlines and managing crew schedules. This theme highlighted the diverse challenges encountered in relation to time management and the ways in which participants navigated these obstacles. P7 noted: "The way that they [military crews] run, … the leadership runs not only the schedule, [but also] the processes with maintenance and all the other parts that the other organizations that go into getting a weekly flying schedule, it becomes even more difficult when you're sitting at home."

One subtheme that emerged was the constant sense of being "on the clock" while working remotely. P7 stated: "There was this feeling, even more so that you were always on the clock, because you now had your computer at home…" Unlike a traditional office setting where work hours are typically well-defined, remote work blurred the boundaries

between work and personal life. Many participants expressed that the transition to remote work resulted in an increased personal expectation of availability and responsiveness, as individuals felt they were always accessible due to the nature of remote communication tools. P7 explained: "If there was a scheduling issue … they would send a message to the group chat and … it was almost a, you know, like this internal. OK, I have to take care of this. I've got the computer right here, so I have to change this now…" It was clear that there was not an expectation from the military of extended employee availability; as stated by P7: "…it wasn't explicit that the contracting scheduler would take care of it…" Though no participants felt this was an expectation from the military, rather a self-expectation, this continuous work mindset often led to challenges in achieving work-life balance and maintaining personal boundaries. As P5 stated, "I worked harder to make sure no one thought or had that could you have an inkling of a perception that I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing." P6 reiterated that sentiment, stating: "…it would be 9 o'clock at night and I would come into the squadron and see if there was any paperwork in the box or if there were any notes on my desk."

Another subtheme centered around the use of alternate and non-traditional scheduling methods to overcome technology challenges and enhance communication effectiveness. Participants reported utilizing innovative scheduling techniques to address issues related to technology constraints. For example, when faced with software functionality issues within a virtual private network (VPN) environment, participants sought alternative solutions. When faced with bandwidth challenges, all the participants modified their working hours to accommodate peak times. P5 explained: "…the VPN

would crash at times, so we knew like, OK, the best time to get on was like early in the morning." They employed tools like Google Schedule to organize and coordinate tasks, avoiding the need for Common Access Cards (CACs) that were required for certain software applications. P5 mitigated the loss of a military scheduling program by using Google: "And so we use a scheduling system via Google, so it made it a lot easier because you didn't have to have a CAC card." The overarching sentiment was continuing the mission; as P3 stated, "And my main priority, my main focus was figuring a way out of how to accomplish my duties."

Furthermore, participants encountered issues related to software functionality within the VPN environment, which had significant impacts to work schedules. The reliance on VPNs for remote access to critical tools sometimes resulted in bandwidth restrictions or compatibility issues with certain software applications. Bandwidth issues were a major hurdle for all participants. As P7 stated, "…being able to log on via VPN from your own home service created a lot of issues for connectivity at the very beginning." Additionally, participants faced challenges when the software they needed to perform their tasks did not function optimally within the VPN environment. As P6 mentioned, "They've all these bases are now working remotely from home and obviously, as a strain on the Internet, it's a strain on what services and who's connecting at what time, and then…GTIMS is a shared server in the U.S." She emphasized "…it was more of a government problem with the VPN router." This added complexity to their daily work routines and required them to find alternative solutions or workarounds to ensure the smooth execution of their responsibilities. As already mentioned, many participants

simply adjusted their daily working hours to accommodate the VPN bandwidth restrictions. P2 stated he "…initially adjusted my work schedule…" and P6 leveraged older family members to help: "I have a high schooler and a kindergartener. So, she's doing her thing and I would start work. And I'm, OK, let me go make breakfast and then I will come back, and I would. So, it worked out, and then in the afternoon my daughter would come in, take [son] so that I could kind of keep working through the day. And then when I was done, she would go to work on her homework."

Positive and Negative Sentiments

Upon analyzing the data, it became evident that participants expressed either positive or negative sentiments regarding their experience, with very few remaining neutral. To confirm this finding, the horizons were coded for sentiment in NVivo. The sentiment was clearly either positive or negative, with no middle ground. This was reflected in the participants' responses; for instance, P1 expressed that he "hated the lack of productivity [he] always felt" and "hated working from home." Similarly, P7 stated if given the choice to work remotely, he "… personally would not have..." because his "…personal preference isn't remote." In contrast, P2 "…loved the remote work atmosphere…" and felt that his "productivity went through the roof" and if given the opportunity, "would take [remote work] up tomorrow." Even participants who, because of classification level of their tasks would not be able to realistically remote work, did not take a neutral stance. Instead, a positive compromise of hybrid work was suggested. P6 stated "If I had the option, I would have worked remote a couple days a week, a good

hybrid balance of work and working from home. I think it would be beneficial to all and probably save people a lot of money."

Word Cloud

Figure 2 is an NVivo 14 Pro Plus generated word cloud of participant transcripts. Word clouds are ways of visually depicting data in a manner that shows the occurrence of themes (see Figure 1). The larger the word, the more often that word was discovered in the responses from the participants, and the smaller the word, the less that word was found in the responses. I queried the 150 most common words in the dataset with five or more letters, with forms of root words (e.g., thinks, thinking, and thought) and synonyms (e.g., believe, expect, imagine and ponder) clustered or collapsed into the most frequent form of the root (such as think). Stop words were used to exclude non-relevant text, such as researcher, that would skew the word cloud results.

Figure 2 shows that the words "think" and "really" were among the most frequent in the dataset. This finding shed light on the rhetorical tone of participants' responses, which often included qualifiers and intensifiers. Qualifiers, such as "I think," were used to preface declarative statements, while intensifiers, such as "really," were used to emphasize certain points. Across the dataset, participants were hesitant to generalize their opinions and perceptions and instead foregrounded the contingent nature of their individual experiences. However, they expressed themselves in strong terms and emphasized that their experiences and perceptions had intense impressions on them. As Figure 2 indicates, other significant words that were prominent in the dataset included *remote, works, office*, *military,* and *things*.

Figure 2

NVivo 14 Word Cloud: Auto-Coded Themes

Code Matrix

After the initial open coding of the raw data, numerous initial themes were

identified. However, as the analysis progressed, discrete categories emerged, which were

then organized based on their relevance to the research questions or any novel ideas they

introduced. To accurately capture the true themes and concepts from the data, axial

coding was employed. Once the concepts were validated, the initial organization of the

concepts was reviewed and grouped into more discrete themes under the categories of

"job satisfaction" or "perceived productivity." New ideas, such as "stressors" and

"technology," were identified as separate themes. It is worth noting that the initial

participant responses to forced telework were a significant theme on perceived

productivity, generating numerous minor themes. The most prominent of these themes

were challenges with the technology and the adaptations participants employed to overcome them.

Transition Difficulty

Overwhelmingly, participants found the transition from in office technology to remote technology difficult; P7 noted that the remote technology "…required the base comm to start adding things to the laptops that that we were taking home and being able to log on via VPN from your own home service so that that created a lot of issues for connectivity at the very beginning." He further states "…the connectivity issues were ridiculous." P2 stated it was an ongoing issue: "I had to end up fighting with the Anyconnect VPN for about half an hour just because it's security layered on security, and it just does not like to connect sometimes." Even when able to connect successfully, many participants noted that the connection was so slow, systems would often time out and work would be lost. P7 noted "…trying to run a scheduling program that would disconnect every two minutes was more than just slightly frustrating." Technical challenges were not limited to VPN connectivity. Participants also encountered problems using cell phones instead of base office phones. P1 stated that "…one of the issues that we ran into now and then was the ability to dial base numbers from our phones. Sometimes, for whatever reason, the DSN would not accept incoming calls from landlines or mobile numbers" and P7 noted that they had "…use your own cell phone to either call the other people's cell phones versus their office number, you know, which maybe you have a list office numbers that you can call or on speed dial, but additionally

you don't have a guarantee when you call via your cell phone to somebody else's cell phone that they're going to answer."

Adaptation

The theme of participant adaptations emerged as another significant minor theme under perceived productivity. In response to the initial challenges of transitioning to forced remote work, most participants developed new ways of working to meet their mission requirements. P2, for example, used a hot spot signal to check emails and would download what he needed to complete tasks that required sustained connectivity, delivering via a disc when no one was in the office. He stated, "I wasn't allowed to be in the office with other people because that was the post guidelines." Several participants also noted a quick adoption of Microsoft Teams, Facebook, and WhatsApp chat to address communication and continuity of tasks concerns. To overcome technical challenges, the majority of participants leveraged technical expertise within their team. P5 found it easy to "just text someone that POC and then they will help you work it," while P2 stepped up to train his team on the technology, conducting "a couple of classes on getting everybody onto the same page of how to use Teams."

External Stressors

In addition, other themes emerged, with the most significant one being external stressors around health concerns. More than half of the participants experienced considerable anxiety due to COVID-19, particularly as the military transitioned from fully remote working arrangements to hybrid working arrangements where teams worked split shifts, alternate days, or modified schedules. P4 observed that despite measures

being in place, leaders were "…picking and choosing who [they] bring in from the other team, which then cross-contaminated us. There were concerns about that, and I thought it went on for some time." P3 wanted "…no part of the COVID disease…" while P5 experienced "…anxiety of being in large crowds."

Local Career Curiosity

In evaluating the career curiosity, or an inclination to explore new experiences, the participants generally displayed a local curiosity in exploring ways to adapt to forced remote working but did not display a global career curiosity to seek new occupational experiences in general. In other words, if COVID-19 had not forced the participants into remote working, none of the participants would have considered it as an option. To overcome the challenges initially experienced in the early days of transitioning to remote work, six of the participants explored new ways of working. From using non-traditional communication means such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp to adjusting working hours to lessen the impact of bandwidth constrictions encountered in the afternoon, the participants were able to evaluate the situation and explore new options. However, none of the participants had ever considered a new career field or remote working on a permanent basis. P2 stated his contractor positions were "…pretty much just all work that I've done in the military." P4 stated "Most of us were military and either got out or retired and into contracting doing the same job" and emphasized that she's "…been working in a classified environment for over 20 years."

High Levels of Career Concern, Control and Confidence

When asked if they felt capable of meeting the challenges they experienced, all 7 participants provided answers that showed a high level of concern, control, and confidence. All participants felt they were capable of meeting the challenges initially presented in and adapting to the new remote environment. Despite 2 respondents reporting there was not enough time to prepare, all the respondents identified specific actions they took to prepare their future occupational transition. P1 stated: "We came to [the] conclusion on our own and procured equipment for us to telework, which was a laptop and CAC…then we split our schedules pretty much to accommodate…a good split of keeping people isolated away from each other…as well as maintaining the required footprint in the office to ensure day-to-day tasks with regards to readiness and so on." P5 and P6 made comments about their confidence in being capable of meeting any challenges; P2 stated: "I could figure anything out just about anything with Internet if I have the ability to Google and YouTube."

Theme Analysis

The primary question used to guide this study was: What are the lived experiences described by military contractors during COVID-19 mandated telework? The primary question was answered by answering the two research questions (and six sub questions) that were derived from it. This presentation of the results of the data analysis is organized by research question.

Research Question 1

The first research question was: *What is the lived experience related to the stress on military contractors forced into telework circumstances due to COVID-19 restrictions on job satisfaction?* Under this research question, there were sub questions pertaining to participant's initial responses to stress as it relates to job satisfaction, final outcomes of stress as it relates to job satisfaction, and how participants used control, concern, curiosity, and confidence to deal with stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework arrangements.

Initial reactions to stress as it pertains to job satisfaction were mixed among the participants. Three respondents reported a decrease in job satisfaction during the early stages of transitioning to remote work. P1 stated he "…didn't feel as accomplished during the time." P7 agreed with an initial decrease in job satisfaction, qualifying the sentiment as "…a byproduct of this [frustration over technological challenges]; again, I can only speak for myself." However, he goes on to state that "It was just this feeling that none of us like what's going on right now." Initial morale, as reported by P4, "…was just beyond low." Many times, major technological issues and procedural challenges were the cause of decreased job satisfaction. P7 stated "We had to scramble because nobody understood how the VPN system worked on their government laptop and connectivity [was bad] and all this kind of stuff." Even without connectivity issues, the military had no procedures in place to continue operations remotely. P2 stated that "The government had to figure out how they were going to run meetings, how they were going to organize everything, how [Microsoft] Teams actually worked because it wasn't something they had in place

before." For 4 participants, initial job satisfaction increased. P2 reported that he "…

love[d] the job when I could remote work because I could get my get my work done." For

him, this increase in job satisfaction was a result in fewer distractions in a remote setting.

He "…could continue…all in the same light and without obviously all the major

distractors [found in the office]." P5 echoed this sentiment: "And so it was less

distraction that is not saying it was bad distraction, but it was just it wasn't as much

[distraction]. There weren't that many distractions to be pulled in one direction."

Ultimately, 2 respondents considered their job satisfaction lower even after

making adaptations and acclimating to remote working conditions. P1 and P7, who

reported initial decreases in their job satisfaction when forced to telework, remained

constant in this assessment. Both participants stated that the stress caused by remote work

negatively impacted their job satisfaction, and neither would choose to remote work. P1

stated: "I hated it. I really did. I really didn't find a whole lot enjoyable about it at all."

Even so, he acknowledged the role COVID may have played in this sentiment: "You

know, there was, there was almost a relief to come back to the office to be able to do

things effectively and efficiently. And you know [COVID-19] may have tainted my

experience too." The remaining 5 participants reported job satisfaction that returned to

pre-COVID-19 levels or higher. P2 stated: "I was very satisfied with the remote work

situation. I was a little bit miffed that we ended up going back to the office." P6

experienced a higher job satisfaction as a result of her professional growth during forced

remote working: "…I learned more just from having to rely on myself." She further

stated that the experience made her learn to own her team lead role, even when she made

a mistake; remote working made her feel more secure and capable. "I think it worked for me really well, especially to learn to communicate with a leadership team and make sure that they also knew what they needed to do. They'll even still ask [her advice]."

Research Question 2

The second research question was: *What is the lived experience related to the stress on military contractors forced into telework circumstances due to COVID-19 restrictions on perceived productivity?* Again, the main research question was answered by answering sub questions pertaining to participant's initial responses to stress as it relates to perceived productivity, final outcomes of stress as it relates to perceived productivity, and how participants used control, concern, curiosity, and confidence to deal with stress resulting from COVID-19 mandated telework arrangements.

The stress experienced from mandated COVID-19 remote working dramatically impacted perceived productivity in the early transition period. All the participants reported initial negative impacts to perceived productivity due to limitations the technological challenges presented. Additionally, 4 respondents reported a lack of continuity between team members as a significant deterrent to maintaining onsite productivity levels. P4 summarized the experience of the participant group as a whole: "Amongst different teams and we could not talk to each other, we could not see each other, we could not come on shift with others because they were really trying to keep us segregated." This lack of continuity in knowledge and task sharing was highlighted in organizations the remained at near full operational capacity during COVID-19 lockdowns. As stated by P7, "The way that they run…the processes with maintenance

and all the other parts of the other organizations that go into getting a weekly flying

schedule, it becomes even more difficult when you're sitting at home."

As with the previous research question, the participants showed high levels of

career concern, control, and confidence. In maintaining perceived productivity,

participants displayed a higher degree of career curiosity than shown for job satisfaction.

P1 noted the technical issues were often outside of the participants' control: "Most of the

time there were issues beyond our control at times with regards to the virtual private

networks (VPNs) that we used." Additionally, access to classified system is not allowed

in offsite settings, further restricting what the participant can control to maintain

perceived productivity. As noted by P4: "There was no way to support the client the way

we were supposed to from home." Despite this, 2 participants reported high confidence in

their own ability to maintain productivity. As stated by P3: "You still got to find a way to

get that apple cart down to the store, so you know after 30 plus years, I was going to

figure a way to get that apple cart down to the store." The remaining 5 participants

reported positive confidence in their ability to continue tasks through a combination of

exploring non-digital workarounds to the technology issues, making adaptations to

existing processes, and leveraging the expertise of colleagues.

The final outcome of perceived productivity saw 5 participants return to pre-

COVID-19 levels or higher. For the 2 participants that continued decreased perceived

productivity, communication issues were the common thread. For P4, the lack of

continuity continued to impact productivity: "I don't think we got very far as a team

because although I think we were all giving our best that just didn't translate as well

between teams. Between shifts." P1 hated the lack of productivity he felt throughout the remote working experience, stating "…I just didn't feel like I was really doing the job as well as I was being paid to do, you know?" For him the inability to interact face to face was detrimental. "The lack of interpersonal communication. Really. You know, relationships with people. Face to face contact. The convenience of being able to walk down a set of stairs and take care of something in minutes that's going to take me an hour or so from home because I have to send a form of communication and then wait for a form of communication in reply and then perhaps send follow up and then wait for follow up and back and forth." Of the 5 participants that reported equal or higher perceived productivity levels, three stated the freedom to manage their day significantly contributed to higher productivity. P2 explained: "I would say it's the freedom to be able to just get the work done and then to be able to do anything else, like a future project." P7 echoed that sentiment: "So, it was just a little bit more freedom, I guess in in the workday and how you choose to use your hours."

Summary and Transition

This chapter presents and analyzes the findings of a study that investigated the experiences of military contractors who were forced to work remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions. The chapter started by restating the research questions and outlining the participant selection process. The limitations of the participant pool were discussed, followed by a description of the data gathering process. The findings were then directly linked to the theoretical framework of the study. Evidence of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) were discussed. Detailed descriptions

of the emerging themes were provided, which are organized into themes and subthemes, and connected to the participant population. This chapter summarized the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Regarding the first research question, which examines the lived experience of military contractors who were forced into telework due to COVID-19 restrictions, interviews with seven participants revealed a range of initial reactions to the stress related to job satisfaction during the early stages of transitioning to remote work. Three respondents reported a decrease in job satisfaction due to technological issues and procedural challenges, while four reported an increase in job satisfaction due to fewer distractions. All participants felt capable of meeting the challenges of the new remote environment and took specific actions to prepare for the transition. While the participants displayed a local curiosity in exploring ways to adapt to forced remote work, they did not display a global career curiosity to seek new occupational experiences on their own. Six participants explored new ways of working to overcome initial challenges, but none had ever considered a new career field or remote work on a permanent basis. Two participants continued to report lower job satisfaction even after making adaptations and acclimating to remote working conditions. The remaining participants reported job satisfaction returning to pre-COVID-19 levels or higher, with one participant experiencing higher job satisfaction due to professional growth during forced remote working.

The second research question in the study was about the experience of stress as it relates to perceived productivity among military contractors who were forced to work

from home due to COVID-19 restrictions. All of the participants reported initial negative impacts to perceived productivity due to technological challenges. Additional findings showed a lack of continuity between team members significantly impacted perceived productivity. However, most participants were able to find ways to adapt and maintain productivity, with some even reporting higher productivity levels due to the freedom remote working afforded them to manage their day. Two participants continued to experience decreased productivity due to communication issues. Overall, the participants displayed high levels of career concern, control, and confidence in dealing with the stress of remote work as it related to perceived productivity.

In Chapter 5, a detailed interpretation of the findings is provided, linking them to the research questions. The participant pool is described, and the perceptions of mandated remote work expressed by the participants are discussed. The limitations and delimitations of the study are also addressed, followed by recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with recommendations for private contracting companies on how to apply the results of this study. Finally, the potential for promoting positive social change through the application of the study's findings is presented.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This descriptive qualitative phenomenological study aimed to understand the lived experiences of seven military contractors who were compelled to transition to telework due to COVID-19 restrictions, focusing on the impact on their job satisfaction and perceived productivity. An IPA study approach was used in order to focus on the user story of the participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The application of an IPA approach allowed for a deep exploration of the participants' individual experiences, uncovering the multifaceted range of emotions they encountered during their transition to telework. The findings of this research shed light on a range of emotions around the experiences related to forced remote work. Many participants expressed feelings of frustration when dealing with ineffective technology, which hindered their ability to effectively perform their tasks remotely. Additionally, they highlighted challenges in intra-team communications, often experiencing difficulties in maintaining the same level of collaboration as in face-to-face interactions. Despite these obstacles, the participants expressed a willingness to adapt to the remote working situation, showcasing their resilience in adjusting to new ways of working. Positive emotions emerged as well; a sense of relief emerged as a prevalent emotion among many of the participants, as they expressed gratitude that their remote work environment limited their exposure to the risks of COVID-19. The study's findings illuminate the complex emotional landscape surrounding forced remote work, shedding light on emotions' impact to personal

experiences and therefore, on job satisfaction and perceived productivity within the context of military contractors' roles.

Recent research has delved into the realm of job satisfaction concerning remote work, shedding light on its inconsistent nature and the absence of universally increased satisfaction (Irwanto et al., 2021; United States Office of Personnel Management, 2021). Expanding on these findings, the present study aimed to explore participants' experiences, levels of job satisfaction, and perceived productivity as they transitioned to mandated remote work. The study identified eight key themes: the impact of remote work on communication, scheduling complexities, challenges in adapting to remote technologies, participant-driven adaptations, concerns over COVID-19 contamination, stress outside of remote working (such as children attending virtual learning), high levels of career concern, control and confidence among the participants, and localized career curiosity.

Regarding the key theme of communication, participants identified various subthemes that revolved around the type and quality of communication. Different types of communication were mentioned, such as intrateam communication, military-generated communication, and employer-generated communication. However, the quality of these communication channels exhibited significant variation, with a notable portion of participants highlighting overall challenges in communication.

The theme of scheduling emerged as a crucial element within the remote working experience, revealing a range of subthemes that provided insight into the complexities and adjustments made by contractors to meet project deadlines and manage crew

schedules. This theme underscored the diverse challenges encountered in terms of time management and illustrated the strategies employed by participants to navigate these obstacles. Additionally, prominent subthemes were identified: the imbalance between work and personal life and the technical difficulties encountered when scheduling work. These subthemes shed further light on the multifaceted nature of scheduling challenges in remote work settings.

The shift to remote technology also emerged as a key theme; initially, all participants found the technology used by the military was not geared towards remote working. Challenges with software functionality within a VPN environment created difficulties in completing tasks and communicating. Additionally, bandwidth issues at specific times of the day impacted participants' ability to continue working. The reliance on mandatory VPNs for remote access to critical tools often resulted in bandwidth restrictions or compatibility issues with certain software applications. For those participants working in a classified environment, no remote technical solution was ever provided to ensure this aspect of their work was accomplished from a remote location.

Despite the challenges encountered, a key theme identified in the study was high levels of career concern, control, and confidence among all the military contractor participants. Despite the stress and challenges associated with remote work, participants displayed a strong sense of concern for their career trajectory, a belief in their ability to navigate the circumstances, and confidence in their skills and competencies.

In contrast to the high levels of career concern, control, and confidence, the research showed a key theme that career curiosity was not as prominent among the

participants. While individuals exhibited curiosity and adaptability in exploring ways to adapt to the forced remote working conditions, their curiosity was primarily focused on local adjustments within the context of remote work. There was a lack of global career curiosity, indicating that the participants did not actively consider remote work or alternative career paths beyond their current military contractor roles.

The results concerning perceived productivity resembled those of job satisfaction. The stress arising from the compulsory shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound negative effect on perceived productivity in the initial transition phase. Every participant acknowledged experiencing a decline in perceived productivity during the initial transition period, primarily due to the limitations posed by technological difficulties. Furthermore, several respondents highlighted that a lack of cohesion among team members significantly hindered their ability to sustain productivity levels comparable to those achieved in an onsite setting. Despite these initial evaluations, the participants' final assessment of their perceived productivity indicated that all but two participants either regained their pre-COVID-19 levels of productivity or surpassed them. The persistent decrease in perceived productivity for the remaining two individuals was consistently attributed to communication issues.

Interpretation of the Findings

Research Question 1

The primary research inquiry sought to investigate the lived experiences of military contractors who were compelled to transition to telework arrangements due to COVID-19 restrictions, specifically with regard to their job satisfaction, by asking: *What*

is the lived experience related to the stress on military contractors forced into telework circumstances due to COVID-19 restrictions on job satisfaction? Under this broad inquiry, a set of subsidiary research questions were developed, and interview questions were established (Appendix E) aiming to explore participants' initial responses to stress in relation to job satisfaction, the eventual ramifications of stress on job satisfaction, and the coping strategies adopted by participants. These strategies included exerting control, expressing concern, cultivating curiosity, and fostering confidence as means to navigate the stress brought about by mandated telework during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The concept of job satisfaction in the context of remote work has garnered significant attention in contemporary research. Several studies, such as those conducted by Cushing et al. (2021), Inspector General (2021), Irwanto et al. (2021), and the United States Office of Personnel Management (2021), have scrutinized the impact of remote work on job satisfaction. These investigations have underscored the heterogeneous nature of job satisfaction among remote workers, suggesting that not all individuals experience an elevation in job satisfaction when transitioning to remote work. As previously highlighted by Hartung and Cadaret (2017) and Zhuang et al. (2021), the element of choice plays a pivotal role in an employee's perception of career control, a significant determinant of job satisfaction.

Expanding on this established body of literature, the findings of this study revealed a bifurcation among participants, with approximately half reporting a decline in job satisfaction during the initial stages of transitioning to remote work. This implies that the compulsory shift to telework, necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, did not

universally result in an augmented sense of job satisfaction. This outcome aligns with

prior research emphasizing the importance of personal choice in determining job

satisfaction (Hartung & Cadaret, 2017; Zhuang et al., 2021).

Considering the aspect of job satisfaction, the study unveiled a division among

participants, with approximately half initially experiencing a decline in job satisfaction.

In line with previous research (Choi, 2020; Hartung & Cadaret, 2017; Inspector General,

2021; Irwanto et al., 2021; Suh & Lee, 2017; Zhuang et al., 2021), the enforced transition

to telework during the COVID-19 pandemic did not lead to a substantial initial upswing

in job satisfaction for the majority of individuals. However, notwithstanding

communication and technological obstacles, the drastic transformation of the telework

landscape, and the rapid implementation of remote work in traditionally office-based

organizations like the U.S. military, most participants reported a return to pre-COVID-19

levels of job satisfaction by the time of the study.

The significance of personal choice emerged as a key factor for several

participants, aligning with prior research that underscores the value of affording

employees various choices and a sense of career control as a means to enhance

satisfaction (Allen et al., 2015; Chitra, 2020; Savickas, 2020). Even when participants

acknowledged that remote work could have been a choice, the prolonged period of

mandatory telework led to a situation of too much of a good thing. As indicated in prior

studies by Allen et al. (2015), Bentley et al. (2016), Brunelle and Fortin (2021), and Choi

(2020), the imposition of a typically positive condition on employees or its excessive

implementation can negatively impact job satisfaction. In parallel with these previous

investigations, participants in the current study reported that exclusive or forced teleworking conditions had a detrimental effect on job satisfaction.

It is noteworthy that the initial dip in job satisfaction was partially attributed to the disproportionate emphasis on technical solutions, which did not adequately address the psychological needs of employees (Aquino et al., 2020), as discussed in Chapter 4. Several participants expressed that their psychological needs were not adequately met during mandatory remote work, particularly with regard to concerns such as cross-contamination among married team members or insufficient enforcement of COVID-19 prevention measures like mask-wearing. Additionally, some participants cited extraneous stressors stemming from family members also compelled to work or study from home, such as children attending virtual school or spouses telecommuting. As shown in previous studies, the emergence of COVID-19 and the resulting workplace mandates introduced occupational uncertainty previously not factored into occupational stress (Saleem et al, 2021). This study underscores the importance of considering these facets in conjunction with technological advancements to enhance job satisfaction.

Furthermore, the study revealed that, as time progressed, participants' overall job satisfaction exhibited minimal improvement compared to their initial experiences. Those who initially reported high job satisfaction maintained their positive sentiments throughout the remote working period, while those who initially experienced low job satisfaction continued to harbor negative sentiments. Significantly, those participants who expressed a reluctance to opt for remote work in the future were those who consistently reported low job satisfaction during mandated remote work. Given that all participants

encountered similar challenges related to remote work, including technological hurdles,

the radical transformation of telework due to COVID-19, and the swift adoption of

telework in traditionally office-centric organizations such as the U.S. military, the study

results suggest that personal choice played a more substantial role in impeding the

enhancement of job satisfaction than did the challenges encountered during remote work.

This reaffirms the conclusions drawn by Allen et al. (2015), which indicate a positive

correlation between job satisfaction and telecommuting arrangements at lower levels of

telecommuting. However, as telecommuting levels escalate, job satisfaction levels tend to

stabilize, with a noticeable decline in job satisfaction observed at intense telecommuting

levels (Allen et al., 2015).

During the urgent shift to remote working during COVID-19 mandates, as it had

during normal remote work operations, the military primarily focused on technical

solutions to facilitate remote working (Inspector General, 2021; Lopez, 2020) with

limited focus on employee psychological needs. Even then, most participants relied on

their own initiative to ensure technical preparedness. One participant shortened her

convalescence to ensure she had the appropriate equipment from the communications

shop and tested it at home. Another participant coordinated assigning and issuing

equipment as well as shared time on the secure network with his counterpart to ensure his

tasks were accomplished. While all of the participants felt that military leadership had

their well-being in mind, it was clear with some of the participants that beyond technical

solutions, the government was not providing support. This mirrors the experience across

the DoD; the United States military focused heavily on technical solutions (Lopez, 2020)

while shifting to COVID-19 mandated telework.

In terms of final outcomes, two participants continued to report lower job

satisfaction even after adapting to remote working conditions. The stress caused by

remote work negatively affected their job satisfaction, emphasizing the impact of stress

on overall job satisfaction levels. However, the majority of participants either returned to

pre-COVID-19 levels of job satisfaction or reported even higher levels. Factors

contributing to this positive outcome included the freedom to manage their own day and

the professional growth experienced during forced remote work.

Research Question 2

The second research question posed: *What is the lived experience related to the*

stress on military contractors forced into telework circumstances due to COVID-19

restrictions on perceived productivity? As with the first research question, several

subordinate research questions and interview questions (Appendix E) were formulated to

explore participants' initial reactions to stress in relation to perceived productivity, the

ultimate consequences of stress on perceived productivity, and the coping mechanisms

employed by participants, such as control, concern, curiosity, and confidence, to navigate

the stress arising from the mandated telework arrangements during the COVID-19

pandemic.

Employee productivity comprises three fundamental elements: task performance,

contextual performance, and adaptive performance (Koopmans et al., 2011). Task

performance encompasses the activities undertaken by an employee to meet the formal

job requirements associated with a specific position, and it is subject to evaluation by management (Koopmans et al., 2011). Contextual performance refers to behaviors that extend beyond the formally defined work tasks (Koopmans et al., 2011); these actions reflect social facilitation and a strong commitment to the job. Adaptive performance, on the other hand, represents an individual employee's capacity to acquire new approaches to task completion and embrace novel methods for carrying out their responsibilities in the face of changing circumstances (Koopmans et al., 2011).

The research findings indicated that the transition to remote work had a negative impact on perceived productivity, specifically on task performance, among the participants. This supports findings in earlier studies, which found that full telework in employees with long–standing onsite working arrangements coupled with not having a choice in remote working may put additional stress on workers, impacting their perceived productivity (Choi, 2020; Inspector General, 2021; Irwanto et al., 2021; Suh & Lee, 2017).

The challenges presented by technological issues and a lack of continuity between team members were major contributing factors to a decrease in task performance. However, because of highly adaptive tasks, the majority of participants were able to regain and restore their productivity levels in an unclassified environment. In line with Goh et al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping , the individuals in this study experienced occupational stress in the form of forced remote working, assessed that stress, and upon determining a threat to their ability to continue their tasks, conducted a second assessment to determine what was needed to

continue working, then initiated a coping response to be able to adapt and find effective

strategies to overcome initial obstacles and maintain or improve their productivity.

Similarly, Goh et al.'s (2010) expectations held true for participants that did not assess

any threat; they felt no need to initiate coping responses. This is clearly seen in one

participant's responses, which signified very little stress, and no perceived threat as she

transitioned to forced remote working. Even though her biggest challenge, technology,

was out of her immediate control, she still did not perceive a threat because she had

prepared for the technical challenges by ensuring she had help desk support at her

fingertips. This supports Raza et al. (2022) findings that while all government employees

faced high levels of technostress during the pandemic, the presence or absence of

negative occupational impacts largely hinged on individual differences.

Several participants expressed frustration with the technical issues that were

beyond their control, which had a direct impact on their perceived productivity in the

remote work setting. For instance, one participant acknowledged that there were times

when he encountered issues with the VPNs used for remote work, and often had to walk

away from the computer to avoid being overly stressed. This supports Raza et al. (2022)

findings that government employees experienced high technostress during the pandemic.

Research Question 2 delves into the interplay between stress, perceived

productivity, and coping strategies; this research shed light on how those initial

challenges impacted perceived productivity. Nevertheless, participants exhibited a

remarkable degree of adaptability in their ability to overcome these obstacles and

maintain productivity levels. Despite facing limitations in terms of controlling certain

technical issues and restricted access to classified systems, participants demonstrated resourcefulness in their approach. They explored alternative, non-digital methods to accomplish tasks, made necessary adaptations to existing processes, and sought assistance and guidance from colleagues who possessed relevant expertise. This supports findings by Goa et al. (2019) and Haynie et al. (2020), who found employee performance was increased in employees who possess a proactive personality (Gao et al., 2019).

Ultimately, the final assessment of perceived productivity revealed encouraging results. The majority of participants either returned to their pre-COVID-19 levels of productivity or reported even higher levels. This positive outcome was attributed to various factors, including the freedom to manage their own schedule and allocate time effectively for future projects. However, it is noteworthy that two participants continued to experience decreased perceived productivity despite the overall improvement. The primary factors contributing to their ongoing challenges were identified as communication issues and a lack of continuity within their respective teams. In contrast, participants who reported equal or higher levels of perceived productivity emphasized the autonomy they had in managing their day-to-day activities and allocating time strategically for upcoming projects.

Applicability of Research Questions to Revised Transactional Model of Occupational Stress and Coping

This study examined the experiences of occupational stress among the participants, considering various factors that influenced their stress levels during the transition to forced remote work and clearly showed Goh et al.'s (2010) model of

experiencing occupational stress, assessing the stress, determining the threat, and implementing coping strategies if needed. Goh et al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping offers valuable insights into understanding psychological and social dimensions within remote working. This model underscores the interplay between individuals' perceptions of stressors and their coping strategies, which together influence psychological well-being (Goh et al., 2010). When applied to remote work during COVID-19 mandates, it became evident during participant interviews that unique stressors, such as concerns over the virus and the challenges of managing family members also isolating at home, significantly impacted individuals' psychological states and job satisfaction. Coping strategies, spanning from problem-focused approaches (like seeking team alignment to reduce COVID-19 exposure) to emotion-focused ones (such as seeking stress relief through hobbies), may have served to mediate the effects of these stressors on psychological well-being during remote work. A particularly illustrative aspect emerged from individual responses to COVID-19 concerns, which revealed diverse impacts on job satisfaction. For instance, one participant whose concerns were unaddressed experienced sustained lowered job satisfaction throughout remote work, attributing it to her unmitigated concern about virus transmission. Conversely, another participant with similar COVID-19 concerns felt that her organization's implementation of safety measures like mask wearing, social distancing, and hand sanitization effectively alleviated her stress, leading to high job satisfaction. This individualized response underscores the intricate relationship between stressors, coping mechanisms, and resultant psychological outcomes.

During the assessment, some participants perceived a threat to their ability to continue previous levels of productivity, in the form of technical challenges or communication issues, while others did not. In line with Goh et al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping, those that perceived no threat felt no need to make a second assessment or implement coping strategies. This was the case for one participant, who perceived no threat as she had already set up all the necessary technology for remote work and therefore did not need to initiate any specific coping responses. She reported minimal impact on her job satisfaction or perceived productivity.

On the other hand, all other participants identified at least a technological threat because they lacked the required equipment to effectively work remotely. This gap in their circumstances prompted them to conduct a second assessment, specifically focusing on the missing resources, such as a government laptop. To cope with the identified gaps, those participants took initiatives to obtain the necessary technology and resources. They made efforts to bridge the technological deficiencies and equip themselves adequately for remote work. These coping behaviors enabled the participants to address the technical gaps that would have prevented them from accomplishing their tasks. While findings on job satisfaction vary for these participants, all reported a significant, negative impact to their initial perceived productivity, which was typically resolved by implementing one or more coping strategies. This supports Goh et al.'s (2010) theory that suggests employees able to adapt to occupational challenges, such as extended or intensive teleworking, are more likely to experience more successful outcomes.

However, it is important to note that using coping behaviors, such as acquiring the required technology, may not necessarily alleviate occupational stress entirely (Goh et al., 2010). This is exemplified by the experience of one participant, who successfully resolved the technical deficiencies but continued to experience stress related to the broader impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The overall impact of the pandemic, such as health concerns, uncertainty, and disruptions to work-life balance, continued to contribute to her occupational stress levels. This supports Goh et al.'s (2010) theory that coping behaviors alone may not be sufficient in mitigating all aspects of occupational stress.

In the present study, control emerged as a crucial factor affecting the experiences of military contractors during the transition to telework. The revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping, proposed by Goh et al. (2010), emphasizes the significance of control in individuals' appraisal of stress. Specifically, the perceived control over a given situation mediates the level of stress experienced (Goh et al., 2010). This holds true in various contexts, including the military, where a combination of high job demands and low job control can lead to heightened stress levels (Goh et al., 2010). The participants in this study consistently expressed their lack of control over the bandwidth issues encountered while utilizing the VPN, which further compounded their stress, and led to initial decreased job satisfaction for the majority of participants and lower initial perceived productivity for all participants.

This study provides strong support for Goh et al.'s (2010) stress appraisal model, demonstrating how individuals assess stress, implement coping mechanisms, and subsequently experience job satisfaction and perceived productivity. In line with Goh et

al.'s (2010), this study found that the participants who perceived a threat to their ability to work initiated coping strategies to address the technological gaps, while those who did not perceive a threat did not feel the need to implement coping strategies. However, as Goh et al. (2010) noted, it is important to note that coping behaviors alone may not fully alleviate occupational stress, and this study found that other factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as health concerns and work-life balance disruptions, continued to contribute to occupational stress levels. Additionally, this study underscored Goh et al.'s (2010) findings that perceived control over a given situation mediates the level of stress experienced.

Applicability of Research Questions to Career Construction Theory

The element of choice also aligns with Savikas' (2020) Coping and career construction theory, which emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy and self-determination in successful career transitions. As control is one of the components of career adaptability, Savickas (2020) suggests that individuals who have a sense of control over their career decisions and actively engage in constructing their career paths are more likely to experience positive outcomes and greater satisfaction. It makes sense, then, that the initial job satisfaction experiences were generally low because the participants lacked control over their transition to remote work.

Savickas (2020) elucidates the concept of career control, which involves being conscientious, deliberate, organized, and decisive when making vocational choices and navigating occupational transitions. It encompasses a sense of personal responsibility for shaping one's own future. As already noted, this notion also aligns with Goh et al.'s

(2010) findings that an individual's appraisal of stress is influenced by their perceived control over the situation. One participant exemplified this notion of career control during the transition to remote work. This participant had been given a few weeks to prepare for the change and felt well-equipped for the shift. As a result, both her initial and final levels of job satisfaction were positive despite the same technical challenges other participants experienced during COVID-19 mandated remote work. This participant's proactive approach and sense of preparedness likely contributed to her positive experience. Another participant experienced a similar sense of control during the transition. She had the opportunity to provide input on the policies implemented for remote work, which fostered a sense of agency and control over her situation. This active involvement in decision-making helped alleviate some of the stress associated with the circumstances. In line with both Goh, et al. (2010) and Savickas (2020) theories on the impact of control in job satisfaction, both of these participants had positive job satisfaction even during the early days of the transition.

The other three components of Savickas' (2020) career adaptability are career concern, curiosity, and confidence. Along with career control, these components collectively shape an individual's ability to proactively navigate occupational transitions and effectively respond to changing work environments. The participants of this study showed high levels of career concern, which involves being prepared and actively planning for one's occupational future (Savickas, 2020) and career confidence, or the belief in one's own abilities to execute chosen courses of action successfully (Savickas, 2020). All participants in this study took proactive steps to prepare for mandated remote

working, even when they were given very little notice. Additionally, all participants had a high confidence in their own abilities to plan for, and execute, the actions needed to make sure their tasks were accomplished. Consistent with Savickas' (2020) career construction theory, the participants in this study demonstrated the ability to navigate and adapt to occupational changes while developing effective strategies to overcome challenges. Despite facing considerable technological obstacles, all participants managed to restore their perceived productivity levels to pre-COVID-19 standards. Additionally, the majority of participants reported the same or even higher levels of job satisfaction, highlighting their resilience and successful adjustment to the new work environment.

When asked about their willingness to choose remote work as a long-term option, all participants agreed that they could develop a plan to make it a reality. Even the two participants who expressed hesitation about remote work in the future acknowledged that if it were their choice, they would be capable of devising and executing a plan to transition to remote work. One participant specifically emphasized the significance of having the opportunity to better plan for remote work, expressing confidence in his ability to adapt if provided with the necessary support and resources. Similarly, another participant, who remained undecided about remote work, exhibited confidence in her ability to plan and carry out remote work successfully, while also highlighting the importance of organizations considering the employee-focused aspects of remote work to ensure its effectiveness.

These responses highlight the participants' belief in their own agency and capacity to shape their career paths, including the possibility of embracing remote work.

Despite any reservations or uncertainties, they expressed confidence in their ability to navigate and adapt to the challenges associated with remote work, given the opportunity and support from their organizations. Their willingness to devise plans and their recognition of the importance of employee-centered considerations emphasize the importance of both individual empowerment and organizational support in successfully implementing remote work arrangements.

In contrast to the participants' high levels of career concern, control, and confidence, the findings of the study revealed a relative absence of career curiosity. While individuals demonstrated curiosity and adaptability in exploring ways to adjust to the remote work conditions imposed by the pandemic, their curiosity was predominantly focused on local adjustments within the scope of remote work. The participants displayed a lack of career curiosity, indicating that they did not actively consider remote work or alternative career paths beyond their current roles as military contractors. This lack of career curiosity is further supported by the fact that all participants were military veterans who had transitioned to similar contractor roles, suggesting a limited exploration of new occupational possibilities. According to Savickas (2020), career curiosity involves an inclination to explore new experiences in the work world that enable realistic and objective choices regarding occupational change. However, in this study, the participants exhibited a diminished level of career curiosity, suggesting a narrower focus on their existing contractor positions. This suggests that if COVID-19 had not necessitated remote work, few of the participants would have actively considered it as an option. Nonetheless,

they did explore new ways of working within the remote setup, utilizing non-traditional communication channels and adjusting working hours to optimize productivity.

This study supported the integration of Goh et al.'s (2010) revised transactional model of occupational stress and coping and Savickas' (2020) career construction theory, and provided a comprehensive understanding of occupational stress, adaptation, and job satisfaction during COVID-19 mandated telework. The combination of these theories allowed for a comprehensive examination of the factors influencing individuals' responses to occupational changes. Additionally, this study supports Goh et al.'s (2010) model on the conditions under which COVID-19 telework-related stress became significant enough to impact perceived productivity and job satisfaction and highlighted the importance of perceived control as a mediating factor in stress appraisal, suggesting that the mere existence of stress caused by COVID-19 mandated telework is not enough to trigger the implementation of coping mechanisms. Rather, it was the individual's perception of control over the situation that determines their adaptive response. Finally, this study supports Savickas' (2020) career construction theory by emphasizing the role of internal resources and vocational personality in adaptation. It showed that even if military contractors perceived COVID-19 mandated telework as stressful and made adaptations, individuals adapted differently based on their unique internal resources and vocational personalities.

Limitations of the Study

There are several important limitations that need to be addressed in this research. Firstly, the potential impact of the time gap between the initial mandated teleworking

event and data collection raises concerns about participants' recollection of their feelings

and responses during that time. Research has shown that as events become more distant,

human memory becomes less accurate, leading to potential inaccuracies in the data

(Muggenburg, 2021). Failed retrieval processes, incorrect estimations of dates, and

emotional biases can further contribute to this issue (Muggenburg, 2021). To mitigate this

limitation, a pre-interview activity (Appendix E) consisting of asking participants to write

down a timeline of events during COVID-19 remote work transition was implemented to

assist participants in recalling past experiences and selecting relevant memories to share.

Secondly, the presence of social desirability bias is a noteworthy concern

(Cushing et al., 2021; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). There are social negative perceptions

regarding productivity; it is often linked to efficiency and effectiveness and therefore,

success as an employee (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). An employee that cannot complete tasks

within a reasonable timeframe may be seen by the organization as inefficient, wasting

time and resources (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Because of this negative connotation of low

productivity, participants may have felt compelled to present themselves in a favorable

light in this area. This bias can lead to potential inaccuracies or omissions in the data, as

individuals may alter their responses to align with societal expectations or desired

outcomes.

Additionally, the homogeneity of the participant pool, consisting solely of

individuals who served in the military, is a limitation that affects the diversity of

experiences within the broader population of military contractors. It is essential to

acknowledge that different individuals may have distinct perspectives, contexts, and

challenges related to teleworking as military contractors. Therefore, the generalizability of the study's findings, even within the targeted population, may be limited. It is worth noting that the sample used in this study exclusively consisted of U.S. citizens, inadvertently neglecting the substantial number of non-U.S. citizens within the global military contractor workforce. It is important to recognize that citizenship can influence individuals' motivations for working in the industry and their acceptance of specific employment conditions, as highlighted by the Congressional Research Service (2021). As a result, the generalizability of the study's findings may be limited when applied to the larger population of military contractors.

Also, the study solely relied on remote data collection methods, such as surveys or online interviews, which excluded the possibility of conducting face-to-face interviews. This absence of in-person interaction could have potentially limited the depth and richness of the data collected, as non-verbal cues and contextual information might have been missed.

Lastly, like any research endeavor, this study may be subject to researcher bias. The researchers' preconceived notions, beliefs, or personal perspectives could have unintentionally influenced various stages of the study, including the design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes (Noon, 2018). It is essential to be aware of this potential bias and strive to mitigate its impact through rigorous methodology, transparent reporting, and peer review (Bednall, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Recognizing these limitations is crucial for understanding the scope and applicability of the study's findings, as well as promoting future research endeavors that

can address these constraints and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Considering these limitations, it is crucial to approach the interpretation of the study's results with caution and to consider the broader implications within the context of these constraints.

Recommendations

Overall, these findings provide insights into the stress, job satisfaction, perceived productivity, and coping strategies of military contractors during the transition to forced remote work. They highlight the complex interplay between stress, individual adaptation, job satisfaction, and perceived productivity in the context of remote work. In order to delve deeper into the consequences of remote working for military contractors, even when it is a voluntary arrangement, and to examine the influences of remote work on job satisfaction and perceived productivity, a number of recommendations have been identified. These recommendations align with both the strengths and limitations mentioned in the limitations section of the study and are consistent with the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2. These recommendations include the long-term effects of remote working on military contractors on job satisfaction, performance, and overall well-being. Given the military's expectation that at least some of its workforce will remain remote for the foreseeable future (Lopez, 2020), it is important to understand the long-term effects of remote working, and comparing the experiences of those who voluntarily choose remote work with those who are mandated to work remotely. Additionally, a greater understanding of factors influencing job satisfaction of military contractors in remote work, exploring variables such as autonomy, flexibility,

communication effectiveness, work-life balance, and organizational support to help

identify key factors that influence job satisfaction and provide insights into how

organizations can optimize remote work arrangements for military contractors.

Implications

In response to the growing demand for workplace flexibility, even within

traditionally structured organizations like the military (Lopez, 2020), it is essential for the

military to address the need for high job satisfaction and perceived productivity in order

to attract and retain talented individuals (Marble et al., 2020). The findings of this study

can offer valuable insights to mitigate the challenges faced by military contractors during

forced telework periods imposed by unforeseen restrictions. The study emphasizes the

necessity for proactive, clear, and unified guidance during times of upheaval. The sudden

shift to remote work disrupted established norms and procedures for military contractors,

requiring swift adaptation to a new mode of operation. In such circumstances, it becomes

crucial for organizations and governing bodies to provide comprehensive guidance that

clearly outlines expectations, remote work protocols, and available support mechanisms.

As noted by several participants of this study, by facilitating proactive communication

and guidance, organizations can alleviate confusion, reduce uncertainty, and enable

military contractors to navigate the challenges associated with remote work more

effectively.

Additionally, transitioning to remote work necessitates reevaluating team

dynamics, communication strategies, and task allocation to ensure effective collaboration

and productivity. The military can proactively plan for and adapt its structures and

processes to accommodate the unique demands of remote work environments. As shown in this study, simply providing flexibility in work arrangements was not sufficient to address the fundamental problems that may arise, such as the issues encountered with those participants working on classified networks. Flexibility, while important, also did not inherently solve issues related to communication, coordination, and maintaining a cohesive team culture for the participants in this study. Ensuring continued team culture requires intentional efforts from military leaders and active-duty team members to establish robust communication channels, implement effective remote work practices, and foster a sense of connection and engagement among contractor team members. By acknowledging these fundamental challenges and providing the necessary support, the military can enhance the success of remote teams, even when unexpected and forced, and optimize its performance in a distributed work environment.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the commitment that military contractors bring to the military mission and should be utilized to educate both military and contracting company leadership to engage in proactive contingency planning for all their personnel. The findings of this study provide a framework for addressing the unique challenges and needs that arise in remote work environments for military contractors. By recognizing the specific requirements of remote work, such as communication, collaboration, and technology, policies can be proactively developed to support contractors and ensure they have the necessary resources and support to thrive in their

roles. In turn, this can ultimately lead to increased effectiveness, satisfaction, and performance among military contractors even during challenging times.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Social Media Post

IRB 11-21-22-0080054 | Date Approved 11/21/2022 | Expiration Date 11/20/2023

Are you a military contractor made to telework during COVID-19?

Study for military contractors who had to remote work during COVID-19 stay at home mandates

Doctoral candidate student is looking for adults over the age of 18 who usually work on site, but were made to remote work during COVID-19 lockdown mandates. This research seeks to discover the experiences of military contractor stress as it relates to job satisfaction and perceived performance during mandated remote working conditions.

Participants will be asked to participate in:
- 1 qualifying survey over email
- 1 interview (approx 90 minutes) via MS Teams
- 1 follow up interview (approx 30 minutes) via email

Are you eligible?
- 18 years or older
- Worked as military contractor during COVID-19 restrictions
- Worked onsite before COVID-19
- Worked remotely due to COVID-19 mandates

Know someone who would be interested? Please pass this along!

Appendix B: Participant Qualifying Email

Good morning/afternoon (NAME),

Thank you for reaching out to me on (SOCIAL MEDIA) regarding my research study on the lived experiences of military contractors' occupational stress on perceived productivity and job satisfaction during COVID-19 mandated telework. I am conducting this study for the fulfillment of the Doctor of Philosophy (Organizational Psychology) degree at Walden University. I am supervised in this research by Dr. Linda Talley.

This study requires participants with specific experience; therefore, before being invited to join, each potential participant needs to be qualified. Therefore, I am requesting that you complete a short qualification questionnaire that can be found at the URL at the bottom of this email. This questionnaire will ask you some personal data questions such as age group, gender, affiliation as a military contractor, and any affiliation with my current employer (Blue Rose Consulting Group). Should you qualify for the study, the questionnaire will re-direct you to a page where you can provide your email so that you may be invited to join the study.

Before completing the questionnaire, the link will first request your informed consent permission.

This questionnaire is completely voluntary, and at any time after starting the questionnaire, you are free to exit the questionnaire and withdraw from any further questions. You are free to not answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

If you have any questions or concerns, or need assistance accessing the questionnaire, please don't hesitate to contact me at (email address).

Questionnaire: (Link to questionnaire)

Laury Hales, Doctorate Student
Walden University
School of Psychology

Appendix C: Qualification Survey

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study on the lived experiences of military contractors' occupational stress on perceived productivity and job satisfaction during COVID-19 mandated telework. I am conducting this study for the fulfillment of the Doctor of Philosophy (Organizational Psychology) degree at Walden University. I am supervised in this research by Dr. Linda Talley.

This questionnaire will ask you some personal data questions such as age group, gender, affiliation as a military contractor, and any affiliation with my current employer. Should you qualify for the study, the questionnaire will re-direct you to a page where you can provide your email so that you may be invited to join the study.

This questionnaire is completely voluntary, and at any time after starting the questionnaire, you are free to exit the questionnaire and withdraw from any further questions. You are free to not answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

Question 1: What is your age group?
- o Under 18
- o 18-25
- o 26-40
- o 40-55
- o 55-70
- o Over 70

Question 2:
Do you currently work as a military contractor, defined as an employee of a private company supporting one of the military branches in daily operational tasks?
- o Yes
- o No

Question 3:
Before March 2020, did you work remotely in your role as a military contractor?
- o Yes
- o No

Question 4: If you answered Yes to Question 3, what is your best estimate of the percentage of time you routinely worked remote in your role as a military contractor?
- o Less than 10%
- o 10%-50%
- o 50% - 75%
- o Greater than 75%, but less than 100%

- 100%

Question 5: During any time after March 2020, did you work remotely to comply with COVID-19 restrictions?
- Yes
- No

Question 6: If you answered Yes to Question 5, what is your best estimate of the percentage of time you routinely worked remote in to comply with COVID-19 mandates?
- Less than 10%
- 10%-50%
- 50% - 75%
- Greater than 75%, but less than 100%
- 100%

Question 7: Where did remote working take place?
- In a home office
- In a location other than normal work site provided by the employer
- In a location other than normal work site provided by the employee (not a home office)
- Other

Question 8: Do you have any current affiliation with Blue Rose Consulting?
- Yes
- No

Non-qualified Page:

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study and time in responding to the qualifying questionnaire. At this time, you do not qualify as a participant. However, if you know someone who may be interested in participating, please feel free to share a copy of the text of the social media post regarding this research. Have a great day!

Qualified Page:

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study. Based on the answers you provided, you are qualified to participate. I will contact you shortly to set up an interview.

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Easing In Phase:

1. Introduce myself and the purpose of the study
2. Briefly explain my own background with military contracting and remote working
3. Re-confirm participant qualifications:
    a. Can you confirm you are working as military contractor before and during COVID-19 remote working conditions?
    b. Can you confirm your work environment was mostly onsite before COVID-19 restrictions were imposed?
    c. Did you transition to remote working because of COVID-19 restrictions?
4. Pre-interview activities (to help participants recall experiences of transitioning to remote work)
    a. I'd like to do a short activity before we get started with the interview questions. Since COVID-19 mandates to work from home were some time ago, a quick activity to help you recall the experience might help you during the interview. I have two activities; you can choose whichever you like. The first activity is to create a timeline of major events leading up to and implementation of teleworking, including the months after the start of full-time teleworking. The specific dates aren't important, just the general timeframe. What I'd like you to focus on is the associated feelings and reactions at each major event in a freeform manner. You can also add in major interactions with other people. The second activity is to pretend you are scripting a movie about your experience leading up to and transitioning into remote working during COVID-19 restrictions. What would be the key segments or scenes that would be included in this movie? Who are the major characters? What are the overall experiences of these characters? I'll give you about 10 minutes for this activity, and I'll be back then. When I return, if you don't mind sharing your work, we'll use that as a start of our discussion. (I will turn off my camera and microphone.)

Participant Experience Phase:
1. Would you mind sharing the (timeline/movie script) you created? (If doing video teleconferencing) You can just text me a picture of it to (provide United States or UK number).
2. Can you walk me through your experience in remote working during COVID-19 restrictions?
3. How did your transition to remote working come about?
    a. Was remote working a choice you would have made, even without COVID-19 mandates imposing it?
    b. Where did you remote work? Was this your preferred location?

4. Thinking back to the first days you started working remotely, how did that work out for you?
   a. Did you have prior experience remote working?
   b. What was your biggest challenge in transitioning to remote working?
   c. What did you find easiest in transitioning to remote working?
5. Thinking back to later in remote working, once you had settled in, how does that compare to the early days of remote working?
6. How was support and communication throughout your remote working experience?
   a. From your company leadership?
   b. From your military leadership?
   c. From your teammates or colleagues?
7. How prepared did you feel to continue your tasks while remote working?
   a. Were the WFH policies provided and clear?
   b. Did your work objectives or tasks change because of remote working?
   c. Were your work objectives or tasks clear while remote working?
8. What was your experience in maintaining your productivity while remote working during COVID-19 mandates?
   a. How would you compare your productivity before remote working to while remote working?
   b. Did you have the tools and resources needed to complete your tasks?
9. How do you feel remote working because of COVID-19 restrictions impacted your stress levels?
   a. Were there other factors in your life at this time that impacted your stress levels?
   b. How did remote working impact your work-life balance?
   c. Walk me through your daily routine or schedule while remote working.
   d. Do you have any tricks or activities that help you maintain healthy stress levels? Did you use these before you started remote working?
10. Did your satisfaction with your job change while you were remote working? If so, how?
    a. What did you like most about remote working?
    b. What did you like least about remote working?
    c. Would you choose to remote work in the future?

Closing Phase:
I've greatly enjoyed our discussion and appreciate all the time you've taken to participate in my study. Are there any last thoughts you'd like to share with me before we wrap it up?

Again, thank you for your time. As explained in the invitation email, I will be sending you the transcript of our discussion for your review. It's very important that I capture your words and meaning accurately, so if you could take the time to review it and let me know if I've mistaken any of your words or interpreted any meaning incorrectly, I'd very

much appreciate it. Also, I may contact you for a quick clarification or two; I hope that is OK. If you have any questions, or want to further elaborate on anything, you can reach me at this contact information (hand participant business card with university email address and local phone numbers). Once more, thank you so much for your time!

Appendix E: Follow Up Email

Dear (PARTICIPANT NAME),

Thank you for your previous time in interviewing for my study. As you may recall, I conducted interviews as part of a research study to understand the experience of military contractors regarding stress as it pertains to perceived productivity and job satisfaction during mandated telework during COVID-19 restrictions.

I am writing to you to follow up on our interview and ask if you could review the transcript of our discussion (attached). It's extremely important that I have captured what you said accurately, so would appreciate if you could review the transcript, and let me know if there are any corrections that need to be made.

Additionally, if I could speak with you one more time so you can provide feedback on my interpretations of our discussion, and if necessary, make any clarifications and share your feedback, I would appreciate the opportunity to do so. This can be done by phone, or over video teleconferencing. If you could let me know a few dates and times convenient for you, I will set up a time to chat.

Again, thank you for your time. If you need to reach me for any reason, my contact information is (email), (phone number). I look forward to your response.

Laury Hales, Doctorate Student
Walden University
School of Psychology