

Under the Microscope: Exploring the Workplace Embeddedness of Young Black Professionals in Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources Careers

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Abstract

In recent years, the agricultural industry has been working to improve the retention of their newly hired Black employees. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, millennial employees across the United States have voluntarily left their jobs in favor of hybrid or remote work, better benefits, or improved work environments. Today, the median tenure of millennials is only 2.8 years on the job, and research has shown that Black employees are 30% more likely to leave their positions than White employees. The agriculture, food, and natural resources (AFNR) sector is more heavily represented in rural America, where the Black population makes up just 7.8% and the White population comprises 78.2%. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the workplace embeddedness experiences of young Black professionals early in their AFNR careers. Job Embeddedness Theory informed the study and seven young Black AFNR professionals participated. Initial, structural, and pattern coding techniques were used to analyze the data, and three major conclusions emerged. First, many young Black professionals have chosen a career in the AFNR sector because they desire to engage with meaningful work related to the agricultural industry. Second, participants had to overcome many obstacles related to their age or race that impacted their abilities to become more embedded in their workplaces or communities. Finally, an extensive network of linkages to other Black professionals at work or in the community provides young Black professionals with more substantial support and visibility. Implications for theory and practice are provided, along with recommendations for future research.

Introduction

Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources (AFNR) organizations in the United States must address the issue of voluntary turnover of their newly hired employees to focus their time, money, and energy on feeding an increasingly growing population. The COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 was a jarring event or “shock” that altered the nature of work for millions in the U.S. workforce (Lambert, 2023). Many employees were sent to work at home or in a hybrid setting for the rest of the year, but their organizations ended these options the following spring in 2021. Once the impending return to normalcy at all costs was on the horizon, Texas A&M University associate professor of management Anthony Klotz predicted, “The Great Resignation is coming,” and indeed, over the next several months, employees across the country left their jobs in droves (Cohen, 2021). For the next two years in the United States, a continuous average of just

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under four million workers quit their jobs each month (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Records were broken in August, September, and November of 2021 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), and the current record of 4.5 million employees voluntarily left their jobs in April of 2022 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

Studies have shown that an average of 60% of millennial employees are leaving their jobs within three years of being hired (Montaudon-Tomas et al., 2022; Schawbel et al., 2013), and Coqual (2019) found Black millennials to be more frustrated at work than older generations of Black professionals. Many young Black professionals have to exert an ample amount of their energy each day to be authentic at work, they feel they are expected to represent their entire race, and more than a third of Black millennials are planning to leave to start their own companies. Coqual also found, “Black employees are 30% more likely to intend to leave than White employees” (p. 7). A study in the agribusiness sector found that 40% of all millennial employees planned to leave their organizations in the next three years, and 62% of the respondents had only worked for their previous employers for less than two years (Tetteh et al., 2021). If AFNR organizations cannot curb attrition and retain their workers, the revolving door of voluntary turnover could put them out of business (Allen et al., 2010; Hom et al., 2017). A key to solving this turnover issue lies in organizations’ abilities to successfully embed their employees within the extensive social systems of their workplaces and communities.

Employers in AFNR organizations who invest in job embeddedness through social relationships, professional development, and benefits packages for their workforce—both on and off the job—will be better suited to retain the young Black professionals they have hired. Job embeddedness refers to employees’ links to their co-workers and activities, how they fit in with their work and community environments, and what they would sacrifice or give up if they left (Mitchell et al., 2001). While AFNR organizations desire specific skills to be developed and practiced by the individuals they hire (Easterly et al., 2017), they must also address the racial gaps in the industry created by the attrition of their current Black employees (Schneider et al., 2017; Wright, 2014; Zhang & Barnett, 2014). Creating opportunities for young Black professionals to be embedded early in their AFNR careers could foster a positive culture where Black professionals remain with their organizations and thrive in their positions.

Over the last several decades, it has become increasingly important for AFNR organizations to implement support systems in a safe and inclusive environment to avoid turnover, improve retention, and address the challenges their young Black professionals face (Trent et al., 2021). When Black employees feel disconnected from the dominant group in their organizations, it can be difficult for their employers to promote their well-being, and the employees will be more likely to leave in favor of a better fit elsewhere (Bronson, 2020; Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Mitchell et al., 2001). In many cases, Black employees feel the need to overcompensate or overexert themselves to show their value in light of the discrimination they encounter at work (Liu et al., 2019). In other cases, Black employees may feel the need to suppress their true selves to fit in with the dominant culture of their organizations, which often leads to lower job satisfaction and higher turnover (Madera et al., 2012). It can be costly when employees leave, and the organization is tasked with recruiting, selecting, and training their replacements (Allen et al., 2010). Therefore, to curb attrition and promote retention, AFNR organizations must implement management practices that create support programs to increase their Black employees’ self-efficacy and embeddedness as soon as they are hired (Eberly et al., 2012; Garcia, 1980; Sendze, 2020).

AFNR Demographics in the United States

As the United States has shifted from agrarian communities to a cooperative system of industrialization, the priorities of the U.S. economy have led to higher efficiency and more significant profit margins due to a more coordinated flow of production, processing, and distribution (Hogeland, 2013). However, these shifts have largely benefited White agriculturists and created barriers for Black workers in the agricultural industry. A century ago, there were nearly one million Black farmers who made up 14.4%

of the U.S. farming population (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1922). Yet today, just 1.2% of U.S. farmers are Black and 95.4% are White (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). Black agriculturists have been involved in the agricultural industry for centuries, yet their representation in AFNR careers today is waning.

Today, over 19.6 million people are employed in AFNR industries across the United States, which comprise 5.2% of the economy and contribute over one trillion dollars to the country's gross domestic product (Kassel & Morrison, 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). However, despite the population shift and the industry's economic impact, the AFNR workforce is still only 11.7% Black compared with 77.4% White, which is not reflective of the overall demographics of the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). The Black population makes up 14.2% of the country's total population, while the White population has decreased from 72.4% in 2010 to 61.6% in 2020 (Jones et al., 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Furthermore, the agricultural industry is more heavily represented in rural America than in metropolitan America when comparing the percentages of all jobs in rural areas with all jobs in metropolitan areas (Davis et al., 2022). Primarily due to the availability of land, resources, and lower wage positions, agricultural jobs in rural areas (7% of all employment) are more prominent versus their number of jobs in metropolitan areas (1.1% of all employment). When compared with industries such as finance (3.2% of all rural; 5.5% of all metropolitan) or professional services (3.4% of all rural; 7.7% of all metropolitan), it is more likely for someone looking for work in the AFNR sector to be required to move to rural America. However, in rural areas, the Black population makes up 7.8%, while the White population makes up 78.2% (Castillo & Cromartie, 2020).

Although Black representation in AFNR organizations is only slightly less than their percentage of the national population, White representation is more than the national average (AgCareers.com, 2018). This racial gap within AFNR has made it increasingly challenging to attract Black workers to careers in agriculture compared with other industries (Wright, 2014). Additionally, those who have continued to pursue careers in either corporate or production agriculture have often experienced microaggressions, a perceived lack of upward mobility, and other adverse effects of racism in agriculture (Apfelbaum et al., 2016; Butler, 1939; Hickley & Hickley, 1987; Hunte, 1992; LaVergne et al., 2011).

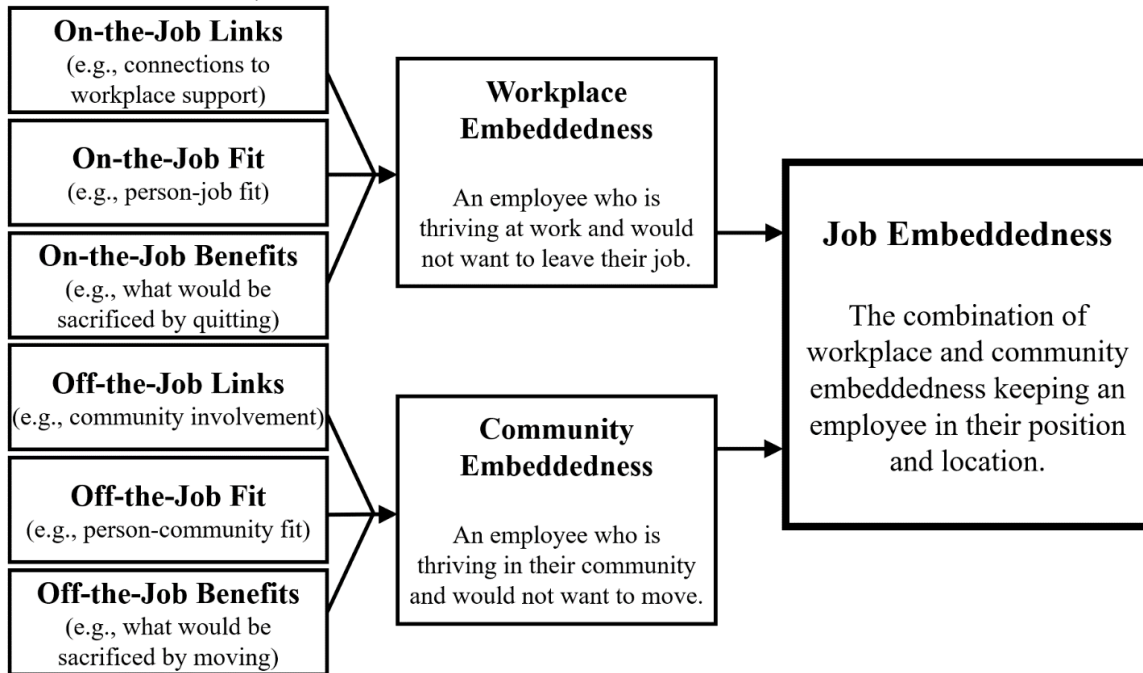
Theoretical Framework

Job Embeddedness

Mitchell et al. (2001) developed a job embeddedness theory to explain the on- and off-the-job indicators that could impact retention. Their model comprises on-the-job or off-the-job links (e.g., connections to workplace support or community involvement), fit (e.g., person-job fit or person-community fit), or sacrifices (e.g., what benefits would be sacrificed by leaving the organization or community) that impact an employee's embeddedness with their job. We refer to sacrifice as "benefits" to be positively connotated with links and fit throughout this study (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Job Embeddedness Theory



Note. Adapted from “Why People Stay: Using Job Embeddedness to Predict Voluntary Turnover” by T. R. Mitchell, B. C. Holtom, T. W. Lee, C. J. Sablinski, & M. Erez, 2001, *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(6), 1102-1121. (<https://doi.org/10.2307/3069391>).

In their earlier work, Lee and Mitchell (1994) determined that employees go through an unfolding psychological process after experiencing jarring events, or “shocks,” in the workplace or their personal lives. While this process usually led to employees leaving their organizations, certain levels of job embeddedness described why others chose to stay. In this study, we focused on the on-the-job links, fit, and benefits that young Black professionals have in their jobs to understand workplace embeddedness better.

Links

Employees who have developed linkages with their coworkers, mentoring relationships, and positive exchanges with their superiors will have a much stronger support group to buffer against adverse shocks or microaggressions (Hom et al., 2017). Having a large number of linkages that are high quality will increase an employee’s likelihood of staying with their organization (Lee et al., 2018). Organizations can manipulate these on-the-job links by creating opportunities for social interactions among different groups in the workplace, developing mentorship programs, and providing greater access to managers or superiors. In this study, identifying the links that connect young Black professionals closer to or further away from their organizations played a role in understanding their embeddedness. Having many high-quality linkages makes employees more likely to stay and thrive, while having fewer linkages makes it more challenging to buffer against unexpected shocks that may occur.

Fit

Person-organization fit (P-O fit) relates to how compatible people are with the organizations where they work (Kristof, 1996). In this way, a perceived match occurs when one entity provides what the other needs, when the two entities share the same values, or both. Regarding job embeddedness, fit should be considered in recruiting and selecting new employees, and then the organization should create opportunities for socialization with the rest of the workforce (Bauer et al., 2007). When selecting new employees,

organizations choose candidates with desired attributes, but they often end up with a homogeneous workforce, which can create several challenges related to their overall effectiveness in their industry (Schneider, 1987; Schneider et al., 1995; Schneider et al., 2017). In this study, the descriptions of young Black professionals' perceived fit in their organizations provided better insight into their embeddedness if the participants felt they fit into their organizational roles. Feeling like a misfit or a mismatch could make it more likely for employees to leave in search of a better-perceived fit; however, when employees perceive they have a strong P-O fit, they will be more satisfied in their current role and less likely to leave (Andela & van der Doef, 2019).

Benefits

The benefits employees enjoy by working for their organizations may have to be sacrificed if they leave their current jobs (Mitchell et al., 2001). Employees are more likely to stay when they would be giving up more benefits by leaving. These could include monetary benefits such as stock options, healthcare, salary, relocation expenses, and pensions, as well as less visible benefits like job responsibilities, opportunities for advancement, and relationships with coworkers or mentors. In this study, identifying the benefits young Black professionals enjoy with their organizations provided a better understanding of their embeddedness. If employees would not have to give up much of their desired lifestyle by leaving, it may make it easier for them to consider quitting after experiencing a shock.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the workplace embeddedness experiences of young Black professionals early in their agriculture, food, and natural resources (AFNR) careers. Specifically, the lived experiences of young Black professionals in their positions for five years or less were investigated through interviews with participants to examine the contributors of their embeddedness.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study to explore the (a) linkages with others, (b) perceived fit, and (c) desired benefits young Black AFNR professionals described regarding their embeddedness experiences at work:

1. What social or relational lived experiences do young Black professionals have within their AFNR organizations?
2. How do young Black AFNR professionals' lived experiences ascribe the on-the-job links, fit, and benefits they have within their organizations?

Methods

Participants

Phenomenological researchers must ensure that all participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using guidelines from Bartholomew et al. (2021), we sought a sample size of five to 10 interviewees. Therefore, we distributed a recruitment flyer that included a quick-response (QR) code to a Qualtrics® questionnaire that was posted on LinkedIn and shared by the authors' networks that called for young Black professionals who had been in their AFNR positions for five years or less. The questionnaire was approved by the Purdue University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and included the consent process for the study and a brief demographic questionnaire about the participants' age, self-identification, and employment history. Once posted on our LinkedIn pages, individuals in our networks from regions spanning the entire U.S. reposted the flyer on their pages as well. Ten individuals responded to the survey, and seven individuals were recruited for the study after ensuring they met the criteria of being a young Black AFNR professional with less than five years of experience in their current position. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym for their name and their place of work, and Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the study's participants.

All participants identified as Black or African American, while one participant was a Black African. Each was between 18 and 32 years of age and had been working for their organization for less than three years. Each participant had at least a bachelor’s degree, while four of the seven also had a master’s degree. All of their degrees were agriculturally focused. John had the least amount of tenure in his current position at eight months on the job, while Jennifer and Michael each had the most with 31 months in their current roles. As reflected in Table 2, Robert and Mary each live in their hometowns, while the other five participants live in different communities from where they grew up. Jennifer and John remain in their home states, while James and Patricia moved away to other U.S. regions and Michael emigrated from Africa. James and Michael live in towns similar in population to their hometowns, Patricia and Jennifer are in towns that are smaller in population than home, and John is in a town that is bigger than his home community now.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Study Participants

Pseudonym	Age Range	Self-Described Racial Identity	Highest Education	Time in Position	Pseudonym Organization
Mary	23-27	African American/Black	Master’s	28 mos	Farm Advisors U.S.
James	23-27	African American	Master’s	12 mos	AgriFuture
Michael	28-32	Black African	Bachelor’s	31 mos	Midwest Seed
Patricia	18-22	Black	Bachelor’s	23 mos	Seed & Pest NA
Robert	28-32	African American/Black	Master’s	21 mos	Food-Family-Fun
Jennifer	23-27	Black	Bachelor’s	31 mos	Seed & Pest NA
John	18-22	Black/African American	Master’s	8 mos	Food Safety First!

Table 2

Geographic Locations of the Study Participants

Pseudonym	Home Community	Current Community	Geographic Change
Mary	Large City	Hometown	None (Pacific West)
James	Midsized City	Midsized City	South Atlantic to Eastern Midwest
Michael	Midsized City	Midsized City	Central Africa to Western Midwest
Patricia	Midsized City	Small Suburban	East South-Central to Pacific West
Robert	Rural-Remote	Hometown	None (South Atlantic)
Jennifer	Large Suburban	Small Suburban	None (South Atlantic)
John	Midsized Suburban	Large City	None (West South-Central)

Note: Geographic regions are based on the U.S. Census Bureau (2021).

Qualitative Approach

This study used a framed exploratory phenomenological approach, as this qualitative inquiry allows researchers to understand how interviewees make meaning of their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The phenomenon in this study was the experience of being a young Black professional in the early stages of an AFNR career. Using Mitchell and Lee’s (2001) theory and Schütz’s (1967) phenomenological methodology allowed us to capture the moments, accounts, stories, and narratives shared by the participants to understand the perspectives they gained from their embeddedness experiences (Patton, 2015). We implemented phenomenological reduction in our methods by determining what prior knowledge we had about the phenomenon being studied and by recognizing how our perspectives could influence our abilities to capture the essence of the participants’ shared experiences.

When conducting interviews with the young Black professionals in the study, two of the authors were outsiders to the phenomenon as White males from rural middle-class farming families currently working in academia. As such, some participants may not have felt as comfortable sharing their lived experiences with us as they would with someone who shared the phenomenon of being a young Black AFNR professional. Therefore, throughout this phenomenological study, we considered our own embeddedness at work to better understand the perspectives, biases, and assumptions we had (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We also bracketed our perspectives to revisit the phenomenon with a fresh perspective.

Trustworthiness

A study's trustworthiness is vital to the credibility of qualitative research, which relies on the researcher's integrity (Patton, 2015). This study established trustworthiness using Guba's (1981) and Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. In their categories, trustworthiness is achieved by (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) confirmability. Our primary goal in establishing credibility was to ensure we were immersed in the literature surrounding young Black professionals' experiences in the workplace and what opportunities exist for organizations to ensure their employees are embedded. We also provided the transcriptions and analyzed data to the participants to verify the accuracy of the data that had been collected, also known as member checking. We kept a memo log of extensive notes throughout the data collection and analysis portion of the study, which served as an audit trail that could ensure the dependability of our research. Memoing allowed us to reflect upon our own experiences and compare them with the ways participants were describing the phenomenon of being a young Black professional in an AFNR career. Keeping a record of our reflective commentary of the research process in this way allowed us to increase the credibility of our study (Rogers, 2018). Finally, we established confirmability or objectivity in this study by bracketing or setting aside any biases or preconceived notions we had about the topic, which is vital to the trustworthiness of phenomenological research (Patton, 2015). Additionally, we developed a semi-structured interview protocol to address the research questions and ensure the participants' perspectives of the phenomenon could be documented accurately based upon their shared experiences.

Limitations

Limitations still exist for this study, despite our efforts to conduct rigorous and trustworthy research. Because the study included individuals from different backgrounds and in various types of AFNR careers, their individual experiences with the phenomenon varied somewhat. However, having participants encounter the phenomenon somewhat differently is expected when conducting a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study only reports the findings on the workplace embeddedness of young Black professionals in AFNR careers. Therefore, not comparing the aspects of their workplace and community embeddedness together was a limitation. Also, this research did not study how the intersecting roles of gender or identity along with race may influence young Black professionals' embeddedness. Due to study design complexity, this research did not explore how the intersecting roles of gender or identity along with race may influence young Black professionals' embeddedness. Because the recruitment of the study was voluntary and random, we did not know if the participants would be individuals who had experienced similar forms of intersectionality. Finally, although we viewed each participant's responses separately from one another in addition to setting aside our biases, we still needed to compare all the data to determine their levels of embeddedness in their organizations. This required a semi-structured approach based on job embeddedness and could have limited other information or experiences that the participants may have shared in an unstructured interview style.

Data Collection

Seven individuals participated in a virtual interview on Zoom with the first author. The semi-structured interview protocol for this study was based on those used in the Morganson et al. (2015) and

Sendze (2020) studies. Participants in the Morganson et al. (2015) study were undergraduates majoring in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM), while participants in the Sendze (2020) study were adults in STEM professions. Each of these studies employed a phenomenological approach for interviewing participants using Job Embeddedness Theory. We adapted some of their questions to fit this study's research questions and purpose. Questions were also categorized with verbiage from Mitchell et al. (2001) for participants to share the links, fit, and benefits contributing to their embeddedness.

Data Analysis

Each interview lasted an average of 75 minutes and was transcribed by a third-party transcription service. Additionally, field notes were captured throughout each interview. Once each transcription was received, we reviewed them for accuracy, redacted identifiable information about the participants, and sent the file back to them for member checking. Only one participant asked for a change to be made, and this was due to the incorrect transcription of an acronym they had used. We then transferred the file along with any field notes from each interview into the NVivo (Lumivero, 2022) qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package to efficiently organize and analyze the transcripts that were collected. Once each interview transcript was uploaded into NVivo, we read it all the way through to holistically understand its essence and then began a two-cycle coding process. This multi-tiered process allowed us to code and recode words or phrases to capture the essence of the interview data (Saldaña, 2021).

In the first cycle, we used an initial coding technique to highlight and assign codes to profound statements and to visualize how the coding process evolved as we progressed (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). We also employed structural coding during the first cycle, which enabled us to index how the research questions were experienced by each individual (MacQueen et al., 2008). With this technique, we coded the embeddedness experiences of each participant within their workplaces. Once each interview was coded, we reviewed the transcripts in a second cycle using pattern coding to connect emerging themes between participants (Saldaña, 2021). Pattern coding within NVivo allowed us to take an overview of all the codes that were compiled during the first coding cycle. In the process of pattern coding, we began to connect how the phenomenon of being a young Black AFNR professional was being experienced by the collective group of participants. The NVivo software capabilities also allowed us to identify the context of the quotes we were analyzing to ensure our perspectives or biases were not hindering our abilities to see the data from the viewpoints of the interviewees.

Findings and Discussion

In exploring the workplace experiences of our participants, we sought to capture the essence of the intersubjective lived experiences of young Black professionals in AFNR careers. Three major themes emerged from the coding process for this study: *Meaningfulness of an AFNR Career for Young Black Professionals*, *Overcoming Obstacles Impacting Embeddedness*, and *Fostering Stronger Support and Visibility Through Resource Groups*. Relevant quotes supporting these themes are listed within each section below.

Meaningfulness of an AFNR Career for Young Black Professionals

The first theme describes how each participant got involved in the AFNR sector and the role agriculture plays in their daily lives. Mary has been connected to agriculture since she was very young and explained how her exposure to the industry led her to her chosen career, "I think just being a part of the culture of it, just knowing that you're helping out a farmer that might be struggling, that might need some assistance on their farm, is very rewarding in itself." Similarly, Patricia recounted how becoming a member of various agriculturally focused organizations impacted her life:

I did 4-H, I did FFA, I also did junior MANRRS [Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences], and I just fell in love with [it]. That's why I chose this

career...just being able to see how every generation is impacted by agriculture and working with each generation I've been able to see the purpose and see the mission.”

On the other hand, Robert had no intention to pursue an agricultural career. He planned to attend medical school, and he heard that a background in food science could benefit his knowledge base as a physician. He recounted, “However, when I got into food science...I just fell in love with agriculture and really what it was and the opportunities and some of the different pathways to careers and really the experiential, hands-on portion of it.”

In addition to their pathways into the AFNR sector, the participants described how difficult it would be to leave the industry they are passionate about. James explained, “I'd have to reevaluate my purpose professionally. My purpose is to continue a legacy that really started with my grandfather...and I think I'd just really be giving up pretty much my personal goals, passion...and I think it's important.” Patricia shared this sentiment about having her purpose aligned with agriculture when she said, “I would be sacrificing a lot. I'd be sacrificing my passion, my joy. I would be sacrificing my happiness, my goals. I really have aligned myself with bettering agriculture and changing the way that people think about it.” At the thought of changing industries, Robert talked about his passion for solving world hunger and being involved in work related to food security. He said, “I honestly cannot even...imagine myself working outside of agriculture [or not] being able to engage in doing food systems work.”

Meaningful work within the agricultural industry has provided the participants with a perspective that their contributions are fulfilling a purpose greater than themselves (Rosso et al., 2010; Stein et al., 2019). This sense of meaningfulness could also impact the participants' determination to stay in the AFNR sector long-term. When considering their commitment to the AFNR sector, moving to another industry outside of agriculture would be a tremendous challenge for each participant, indicating the participants are deeply embedded in the agricultural industry, regardless of how embedded they may be in their current role. As the agricultural industry progresses toward feeding a hungry world, AFNR employees often see themselves as playing a role in achieving that mission (Wright, 2014).

The participants each shared how connecting with agriculture at an early age—either as a child, in high school, or as an undergraduate—made a lifelong impact on their career choice and, ultimately, their passions. Even though they each had a different initial connection that led them into agricultural careers, they all expressed how difficult it would be for them to leave the industry. When the participants engaged in meaningful work that aligned with their passions, they described feeling like they belonged in their chosen professions. Bailey et al. (2017) discovered that meaningful work is a highly sought-after benefit for the majority of the U.S. workforce, and Singh et al. (2017) found the general need for employees to feel they belong was a moderator of their embeddedness.

It was evident that connecting with career opportunities that make a significant impact on the future was valued by each of the young Black professionals in our study (Rosso et al., 2010; Stein et al., 2019). Young Black agriculturists in this study were passionate about their industry due to their connections to agriculture because of family members, youth leadership organizations, or college programs (Esters & Bowen, 2005; Fizer, 2013). Their hands-on agricultural experiences in the past helped them understand the importance of AFNR careers and developed their unique passions for the future. Developing useful skills in agriculture allowed the participants to visualize the meaning that their work had to the AFNR sector and provided them with knowledge that would be valued by their future employers (Brown, 2018; Wooten et al., 2013).

Overcoming Obstacles Impacting Embeddedness

The second theme describes how each participant has experienced certain situations that have caused them to feel less embedded at work. For instance, Jennifer shared how interactions with her

coworkers have caused her to question her long-term commitment, “I haven’t been able to see a lot of work-life balance, and that hasn’t made me want to stay because I understand when it comes to agriculture...there’s stuff you have to do in those long hours and long seasons.” For Patricia, the lack of support from individuals in her organization has slowly caused her to feel less connected to her organization. She described the contrast between her excitement while being recruited into her position and the later frustration of being forgotten by the individual who recruited her, “After she recruited us, there was no[thing] after...and that has been really hard for me and my peers just because we’re new adults. So, it’s hard to find friends...then it’s also hard to find people who are similar to you.”

Although Robert currently lives in his home community, he would have to relocate several states away if his organization prevented him from working remotely, which has allowed him to become more embedded with his work. He went on to mention the benefits he enjoys by living in his hometown, “The comfort of being able to be around family definitely [saves me on] extra expenses...I don’t have to come home and visit them; I don’t have to pay a flight or for a long drive. I’m already here.” However, James could not work remotely for his job, and he shared, “[People] say, ‘Hey, we work from home every day now, and it’s fine.’ And I’m like, ‘Man, wouldn’t that be a luxury...’ That might be something that can pull me [into staying here long-term rather than going somewhere else].” These findings about remote work were similar to those in the Chafi et al. (2021) study on the future of work after the COVID-19 pandemic. Chafi and their colleagues discovered that many employees desired different work environments than what was offered pre-pandemic, and some benefits of remote work were flexibility, autonomy, and improved performance.

Enduring adverse work environments could limit employees’ desires to stay long-term (Allen et al., 2016). Furthermore, once young Black professionals have been recruited, it is vital for robust investment to be made in guiding them toward pathways of advancement (Sims et al., 2019). In addition to these challenges related to work-life balance and newcomer socialization, each participant has experienced being one of the only Black employees at work. On average, only one out of every 10 AFNR organization employees is Black, but eight of the remaining nine are White (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Robert shared how tiring it can be for Black incumbents when such a low number of young Black employees are working in AFNR organizations today, “Nobody wants to be the lone Black person in the room because what ends up happening nine times out of 10 is that you end up speaking for all Black people when there [is] a topic that comes up.”

It was evident in the participants’ statements that many Black employees—especially newcomers who are becoming acclimated to various social norms in the workplace—feel minoritized as one of the few, or perhaps the only, Black employees in their office. The lack of visibility of other Black professionals, feelings of tokenism, and the disconnect between the participants and the dominant race in their organizations left them feeling isolated and as though they could not bring their authentic selves to work (Cooper et al., 2018).

Similar to the experiences shared in the Wright (2014) study among Black agribusiness professionals, the participants in this study each experienced microaggressions or racism in their roles, which were most commonly the side effects of being one of the only Black incumbents. When AFNR organizations are heavily White dominated, it can be easy for White incumbents to overlook the challenges being faced by their Black peers. As a Black African, Michael shared an example of racism he experienced recently at his current job related to how others viewed his expertise as a foreigner and a racial minority, “I got tested...because somebody had a concern [that] I don’t know what I’m doing, but my score was very good...I was confused...but I realized that [it was] because I was the only Black in the whole...plant.” Jennifer had a similar experience with her supervisor at work making assumptions about her because of her race:

[They sat me] down, and I was informed that my experience [of getting to participate in the new rotational program that had been created] is rare, and after that whole conversation and her assuming a lot about my upbringing...one of the things that was mentioned was, “Just because you were raised a certain way doesn’t mean that now that you have these opportunities, you can brag about them.”

The perspectives shared shed light on how a lack of empathy can lead to microaggressions and racism toward Black professionals in the workplace. Experiences like the ones shared in this section can be felt in the form of shocks that can cause employees to begin thinking about their long-term commitment to their organizations (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Therefore, leaders in AFNR organizations should consider how the experiences of their current Black employees might impact their ability to retain incumbents longer than the current median tenure of only 2.8 years (Montaudon-Tomas et al., 2022). Without a firm understanding of the shocks influencing why employees want to leave, there could be a revolving door of turnover for young Black AFNR professionals (Blake-Beard et al., 2019; Lee & Mitchell, 1994).

After Michael and Jennifer were confronted in the workplace during each of their situations, they both stated that it was difficult to be themselves at work afterward. Likewise, Hewlin and Broomes (2019) and Madera et al. (2012) each described the obstacles Black professionals faced in their studies with being authentic at work. They found that Black professionals often hid behind façades to suppress their true selves and conform with the majority when they felt their true perspectives and personalities could disrupt the accepted norms of their workplace. Some participants also described how a lack of support was causing them to consider other work alternatives, which is akin to Sims and their colleagues (2019), who found that organizations needed to highlight the presence and accomplishments of their Black incumbents to curb the attrition of their current and future Black employees. Thomas et al. (2019) and Purdie-Greenaway and Davidson (2019) each described how increasing the number of Black leaders in an organization could normalize diversity and even the odds for Black incumbents’ perceived advancement opportunities. Likewise, Ely and Thomas (2001) noticed more buy-in from Black professionals and other minorities once organizations were committed to cultural change.

Fostering Stronger Support and Visibility Through Resource Groups

The final theme details the role professional systems of support have played in the participants’ feelings of embeddedness at work. All but two of the participants indicated they currently have a mentor, and these relationships seemed to influence their intentions to stay in their positions long-term. For some participants, having a mentor allowed them to visualize pathways toward career success. Robert’s mentor is someone who used to be in his position but who has since advanced through the ranks in his organization:

This person was made my mentor back in 2012, and I would [still] consider them a mentor to this day. We actually still have biweekly meetings...[and] it’s been really great being able to have her as a sounding board...to answer questions or just to give me her perspective on certain stuff, even if it’s not necessarily work-related, but just career-related.

Mary’s organization has made mentoring a priority for their employees, and she described how her professional support systems have helped her and her fellow employees feel embedded:

We do a lot of mentoring within our [organization]—bringing in new people that come in, and kind of wrapping our arms around them, being that support towards them, because graduating from college and just getting into the workforce in itself can be a challenge. And navigating that can be a challenge as well...[so, having] your organization [as] that support to you, it really changes the dynamics of wanting to stay within that organization.

James has had many mentors in various positions that have made him into the man he has become. Whether someone was a mentor to him long-term or for a short time in the past, he shared how important it has been for him to maintain a relationship with each of his mentors. He had the following to say about the value of mentorship in his life, “Oftentimes I make sure I keep up with my mentors. ‘Hey, I’ll see you this coming spring,’ or what have you, because of what they have to share [is so valuable], especially my space, what they’re doing.”

Neither John nor Michael currently has a mentor. While John’s organization assigned him a mentor, the individual assigned to him did not showcase the emotional intelligence (EQ) to manage his own emotions or understand the emotions of John either. This negative experience also diminished John’s intention to stay with his organization long-term, “They tried to assign somebody as my mentor...but he doesn’t have the EQ that goes along with it... So even though they assigned me a mentor, it’s kind of a forced relationship.” Although Michael has served as a mentor to many people in his community, he does not currently have someone to mentor him. As an immigrant trying to navigate life in a new country—moreover a new community—he has been an excellent example to other Black African immigrants who are learning to navigate housing, insurance, grocery shopping, and other challenges related to adjusting to the U.S. culture. Michael expressed the following about the value of having a mentor and how it could have helped him navigate his early challenges at work, “I think with a mentor [it would] make me feel like I have a right to work there, too...but not having a mentor...I don’t even know how I’m going to perform because I don’t know anybody who works there.”

As the participants described the value of mentorship as a system of support, having a mentor gave them someone in their life who could walk them through difficult situations. AFNR organizations who are committed to connecting their newcomers to resources and people could consider developing effective and intentional mentoring programs (Daniel, 2009; Feeley et al., 2008). However, organizations should also be cautious when it comes to forcing mentoring relationships on their newcomers. In the case of John, his assigned mentor was not someone he has maintained any type of relationship with. Positive mentoring relationships could help new employees navigate difficult situations at work.

Several participants also mentioned the value that resource groups in and out of the workplace have had on their feelings of embeddedness, belongingness, and intentions to stay long-term. Patricia benefits from having several ERGs in her organization to connect her with other Black men and women. She said, “Being able to see other people in the space helps me build relationships and want to stay.” However, she also shared how impactful networking with other Black AFNR professionals at national conferences has been to her experience, “Having spaces for us to connect like MANRRS and different organizations like that, it’s so important...I [felt] so much better knowing that I am not the only one who is going through [certain challenges].”

Similar to Patricia, Mary is also part of ERG programs at work with other Black professionals that provide her with a sense of belonging, “We have a Black Special Emphasis Program here...[with people] that have been in their careers for over 20 years...and it is just nice to be able to fellowship...[and] see each other outside of our normal jobs.” John explained how resource groups could create a sense of community with minoritized groups of employees and foster a sense of belonging, “I think if I could sum it up in one word, it’d be teamwork. We have to work with other minorities, work with other Black people, as well as just work with people within our companies.” He also described how efficient teamwork can be for the group’s long-term success, “It’s really a lot of calling people, saying, ‘Hey, I’ve experienced this issue. Have you experienced this before?’...And they can come back to me and say... ‘Yes, I have. Here’s what you can do.’”

The participants shared how important it was to be surrounded by others who were like them. Furthermore, many shared how professional support systems could impact the long-term retention of Black

professionals in the AFNR sector. ERGs can be an excellent tool for larger organizations to create a stronger sense of community among their employees, especially for their employees who are less embedded. However, smaller organizations may not have enough employees to create effective ERGs. In this case, smaller organizations should consider funding conference travel for their employees to network with others, such as what many of these participants have been able to do with the MANRRS conferences. Because AFNR organizations exist primarily in rural communities that are predominantly White (Davis et al., 2022), it can be challenging for young Black professionals to perceive they are a good fit. Therefore, having ERGs made up of other Black professionals in their organizations and national societies such as MANRRS have created stronger feelings of embeddedness for the participants.

Our participants expressed how a lack of linkages to others in the workplace impacted their embeddedness; however, several participants shared how mentorship and support groups have positively impacted their experiences. Our findings were consistent with those of Trent et al. (2021), who concluded that support systems had become an essential tool for organizations that wish to keep their incumbents long-term. On the other hand, when employees feel minoritized at work, the impact of microaggressions can feel much more powerful, and it can be challenging for organizations to keep them long-term (Hom et al., 2017). Likewise, in their study on well-being, Bronson (2020) discovered supervisors were less successful in improving the well-being of Black incumbents if employees did not perceive they fit in with the dominant group in the workplace. Mentoring programs and Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) could foster stronger embeddedness for young Black professionals and decrease employees' feelings of being minoritized in their organizations. Mitchell et al. (2001) and Singh et al. (2017) described linkages to others in the workplace as tools that could make employees feel secure and embedded at work. Our study revealed that participants' relationships with others from the same race were foundational to their feelings of embeddedness, which echoed the findings of Blake-Beard et al. (2019) on workplace diversity and support. Their study also described how relationships with others from the same race could improve belongingness and buffer against adverse workplace interactions. Furthermore, Liu et al. (2019) and Sims et al. (2019) each found that mentoring relationships between two Black individuals have a more significant impact on the mentee than mentoring relationships that do not; nevertheless, Black mentor-mentee relationships are not common in many organizations. In fact, many mentoring relationships in the workplace can feel shallow or forced (Daniel, 2009). For instance, in our study, John was assigned a mentor at work, but he did not consider this person to be a resource to him because the relationship was assigned and there were no commonalities between the two individuals.

Conclusions and Implications

In exploring the workplace experiences of our participants, we sought to capture the essence of the intersubjective lived experiences of young Black professionals in AFNR careers. The three themes discovered during the data analysis process formed the major conclusions of the study. For each conclusion drawn, we have provided a discussion on their contribution to the literature and how they connect to prior studies on the topic. For the first theme, *Meaningfulness of an AFNR Career for Young Black Professionals*, we concluded that many young Black professionals have chosen a career in the AFNR sector because of their desire to engage with meaningful work related to the agricultural industry. The second theme, *Overcoming Obstacles Impacting Embeddedness*, led us to conclude that the participants in our study have had to overcome many obstacles related to their age or race that have impacted their abilities to become more embedded in their workplaces. Finally, we concluded from the third theme, *Fostering Stronger Support and Visibility Through Resource Groups for Black Professionals*, that a network of linkages to other Black professionals at work provides young Black professionals with significant support and more visibility.

Implications for Theory

Job Embeddedness Theory states that individuals who are embedded at work and in their community would be less likely to voluntarily leave their jobs (Mitchell et al., 2001). We used Mitchell and

Lee's (2001) Job Embeddedness Theory to inform our study and interpret the data on workplace embeddedness. Our results indicated that young Black professionals who had developed linkages to others, perceived they fit in, and enjoyed benefits they would not want to sacrifice at work were more embedded than those who had not, which supports Job Embeddedness Theory.

Job embeddedness indicates that employees with more substantial levels of embeddedness in each category (i.e., links, fit, and benefits) will be more likely to stay with their organizations long-term. The findings of our study indicated that participants had positive links with their supervisors and generally felt supported at work. Likewise, when connected with resource groups or mentors, the participants had more robust systems of support, and participants who had more linkages were more deeply embedded than those who had fewer. Our findings supported those of Lee et al. (2018), who explained how many valuable linkages at work could impact embeddedness and retention. Furthermore, our participants felt they had a strong fit with the type of work they did, and each described how the agricultural industry as a whole aligned with their passions. Finally, the participants shared many of the benefits they would not want to sacrifice by leaving.

Race was a unique factor in how our participants experienced job embeddedness, however. While many participants had developed positive linkages with others, some still experienced microaggressions that diminished their other linkages. Likewise, some participants were embedded at work but felt isolated among their coworkers due to their race. Work preferences were another unique factor for our participants' embeddedness experiences. Collectively, our study's findings offered new evidence to support Job Embeddedness Theory and proffered new research recommendations with this perspective discussed below.

Implications for Practice

Following the findings of this study, several practical implications emerged. To begin, AFNR organizations should consider leveraging their young Black employees' passions for the agricultural industry into improved recruitment, retention, and advancement strategies. While AFNR organizations across the United States are heavily White-dominated (AgCareers.com, 2018; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022), this study's findings showed that many young Black AFNR professionals still have deep connections to the agricultural industry. Furthermore, the findings suggest that young Black professionals' connections are so strong that they would want to continue working in agriculture long-term, despite their levels of embeddedness within their current organization. Yet, few young Black professionals in this study felt respected in the workplace, and many were belittled because their entry into the agricultural industry was non-traditional compared to their White counterparts. We suggest AFNR organizations implement the findings of Wright (2014), who expressed the need for organizations to educate all of their employees about the unique contributions Black professionals have made to the agricultural industry in the United States to inspire a shared appreciation for Black agriculturists.

Additionally, we suggest organizational leaders should engage in conversations to understand the pathways leading young Black professionals into the AFNR industry and use this knowledge to recruit more Black employees into their organizations. Furthermore, the burden of being the only Black person at work could be eased when organizations are committed to providing stronger linkages to others for their Black employees. This aligns with suggestions from Blake-Beard et al. (2019), who found that more substantial relationships with supervisors and coworkers improved Black professionals' satisfaction with their work, increased their commitment to their organizations, and had a higher level of perceived fit. Additionally, managers and leaders could attend conferences such as MANRRS to network, build relationships, and engage with Black agriculturists from other organizations across the United States and form partnerships with historically Black land-grant institutions to formulate new recruitment connections.

Finally, AFNR organizations should implement resource groups to improve employees' embeddedness in the workplace. ERGs offer a network of support for employees who share a similar

background, race, or expertise as one another (Hastwell, 2020), which could provide Black professionals with stronger linkages, improved perceptions of fit, and a valuable resource they would not want to sacrifice. Likewise, Daniel (2009) described the value of a network of relationships with others. In her study, Black women benefited from relationships with seasoned professionals who overcame various challenges in their past and relationships with peers who were experiencing similar hardships as her participants. Sharing knowledge and experiences as part of an ERG can help Black professionals feel more satisfied with their work, and organizations could benefit from higher levels of commitment by their employees who feel supported (Blake-Beard et al., 2019; Sims et al., 2019).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study is the first to use Job Embeddedness Theory to explore the experiences of young Black AFNR professionals. Furthermore, while most embeddedness studies have focused on the experiences of incumbents who have been in their positions long-term, this is among the first to concentrate on newcomers who have been on the job for less than five years. Nevertheless, there were limitations to this study that have led us to the following recommendations for future research.

First, this study only explored the experiences of Blackness as it related to the participants' race and their workplace interactions. Although this study had one participant who was not originally from the United States, future studies should assess differences that could exist between the experiences of Black American, Black African, and Black Caribbean employees working in the U.S. agricultural industry. If Black Africans or Black Caribbeans experience language or cultural barriers that are unique compared to Black Americans, other changes may need to be made to ensure they are embedded in their workplaces. Furthermore, future research could explore how the role of age or gender intersects with individuals' perceptions of their Blackness at work.

Second, future studies should focus on the perceptions of Black participants from rural areas versus those from urban areas of the United States. Understanding the embeddedness of young Black professionals from various geographical locations would extend the findings of this study by comparing the experiences of urban and rural participants to identify similarities and differences in the challenges they face at work. Suppose there are several AFNR organizations based in rural locations across the United States in primarily White communities. In that case, more research is needed to determine the embeddedness of young Black professionals both in these locations and with other workplaces in communities with more Black residents.

Third, future studies should incorporate a quantitative research design to engage a larger sample of young Black AFNR professionals. Quantitative and mixed methods research would assist in extending these results and exploring the embeddedness experiences of young Black professionals in their workplaces and communities. For example, a quantitative survey could be administered to recent participants in a national conference such as MANRRS to determine the embeddedness of young Black professionals in AFNR organizations. A larger sample could make comparisons with respondents' embeddedness and other demographic data such as their years on the job, home community, or highest education level. A mixed methods design could provide future researchers with an opportunity to learn more about the responses shared by participants of the survey in follow-up interviews.

Finally, their race and workplace preferences influenced the embeddedness experiences of our participants. Future studies using Job Embeddedness Theory should explore these two tenets further to determine their impact on the U.S. workforce as a whole. For instance, further research should be conducted with other racial or ethnic groups in the agricultural industry to extend the results of this study and compare the embeddedness experiences of other minoritized groups in the United States. Additionally, future studies could compare the experiences of fully remote, hybrid, and in-person employees to explore how their work preferences impact their overall organizational commitment, embeddedness with their work, and embeddedness in their communities.

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