

## **Who Belongs in Agriculture?**

### **Introduction & Relevant Literature**

Agriculture has, for contemporarily marginalized communities, a perception of being straight, cis, White, and male (Granche et al., 2021). According to Burchfield et al. (2022), this perception is confirmed, with the majority of farmers being older, White cis-gendered men. Fry et al. (2021) also discussed that trends in degrees related to agriculture create little expectation that diversity in agriculture will become equitably represented in the near future.

Negative perceptions of agriculture can also be found within agricultural education, which impacts the likelihood that individuals want more involvement with agriculture-related programs or continue involvement after graduation (Hartmann & Martin, 2021; Martin & Kitchel, 2014). However, “acknowledging how homogenous the industry is, is a first step in ... creating space for those who do not fit the box of straight, white, cis, and male” (Granche et al., 2021, p. 23). This recognition will be critical as diversity is needed for the future of agricultural professions and in developing innovative solutions to continuing challenges (Fernandez et al., 2020). That said, current studies within agriculture lack incorporation of marginalized populations’ voices in co-creating what a sense of belonging means to them (McConnell, 2023; Hill, 2022).

Exploring how various marginalized communities sense whether they belong in agriculture can inform how agricultural educators better engage and involve these communities in formal and non-formal programming. This study features Garden Sun Institute (GSI), a non-formal agricultural education program made up of predominantly Black youth participants and their staff, in what they look for in a sense of belonging and how Garden Sun Institute (GSI) helps to create that. Pseudonyms are used throughout this study to refer to the program and to individuals interviewed to maintain anonymity. GSI is the program of interest in this case study due to the involvement of predominantly Black youth participants, as well as some out LGBTQ youth.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This research is guided by the the theory of sense of belonging and a constructivist paradigm. Strayhorn’s (2018) sense of belonging theory “refers to students’ perceived social support...a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important” (p. 4), especially when looking at situations where marginalization can occur. The constructivist paradigm assumes that each individual has their own reality and that researchers and participants co-create the knowledge developed in the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). For example, entering an agricultural program with the perception that an individual is a minority can make them feel vulnerable, leading to a need for a stronger sense of belonging and ties directly into the constructivist paradigm. Due to time constraints, despite using a constructivist paradigm, the researcher established key concepts to guide and create boundaries for the resulting data collection. These guiding concepts were sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018), critical pedagogy of agriculture (Hartmann & Martin, 2021), trauma-inclusive pedagogy (Lynch & Wojdak, 2023), and learner-centered pedagogy (Milliken, 2022).

### **Research Question**

This paper is part of a larger study, the lead author’s master’s thesis, which explored the sense of belonging of historically and contemporarily marginalized youth within the non-formal

agricultural education space of Garden Sun Institute (GSI). This article focuses on the research question related to participants' sense of belonging in agriculture emerging from GSI interviews and observations. The research question was as follows:

1. How do those engaged with GSI describe a sense of belonging within agriculture?

### **Methods**

This research is a single instrumental case study, with GSI being the case, while guided by Rashid et al.'s (2019) checklist. The case study involved interviews with staff; observations of staff and student interactions; observations of the layout of the facility including artwork, posters, and signs; and observations of GSI website content. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with four staff members. The interviews were recorded on Zoom, transcribed by hand, and analyzed for common themes related to sense of belonging, agricultural viewpoints, and the inclusion of educational pedagogies by staff. During the semi-structured interviews, the researcher took field notes on what was noticed at the moment and the researcher wrote a memo after each session of analyzing and coding interviews.

The pedagogies outlined in the Theoretical Perspectives section guided what codes and themes to look for in data analysis. This study occurred in a short period of time, limiting the freedom that a wholly constructivist paradigm seeks. The researcher worked to maintain the constructivist paradigm with the understanding that there is loose framing to guide how and why certain questions were asked and why certain codes and themes were identified.

### **Findings & Results**

Patterns that emerged regarding perceptions of agriculture included: 1) reflection, 2) resources, 3) relationships, and 4) agriculture. Due to abstract length, findings presented are mostly from direct interviews, with some findings from their website and observations of the center throughout.

#### **Reflection**

The theme of reflection appeared frequently when talking about agricultural history and community history. It appeared important to staff members to acknowledge the history that directly impacted how students interacted with the environment, then use reflection to pull focus back to the present. For example, when talking to GSI staff Daniella about noting cotton and slavery as part of agricultural history, she said:

“I know exactly what kind of facial expression I’m going to get when I say, ‘Yes, we are in a predominantly African American community, and yes, we are growing cotton.’ ...but I’m not just gonna say, ‘Hey isn’t it cool you can grow green cotton,’ we’re going to talk about the reality that it was literally illegal in the United States for anyone who wasn’t White to grow white cotton, and you’ve got to be able to just acknowledge those pieces and again not get defensive.”

According to Freire (2018), true reflection also leads to action, and one staff participant, Ylenia, brought up her frustrations when looking at agricultural companies.

“So, and when I say the same, White male, that’s exactly what I mean in agriculture...they have historically shut out others, and it just is what it is. And then their bottom has historically looked completely diverse...it does no good for you to say all these diversity statements and all that and it does not reflect in your hiring practices.”

## **Resources**

Access to resources relevant to a diverse audience also contributed to the staff participants' perceptions of agriculture. Daniella expressed the difficulty of finding examples that were not of an old, White farmer,

“I spend a lot of time thinking about who’s in the pictures and who’s in the video and who’s providing the information. Sometimes, I don’t have a choice. I’ll go through 20 videos and that’s just how it is...If 4-H sends me half a dozen posters, I probably put up two of them. Sometimes three; they’re getting better.”

All four interviews discussed that current access to agricultural resources, both financial resources and resources for the population the center serves, impacts the sense of belonging that they individually felt within the broader agricultural model. Strayhorn (2018) discusses how “ease of life” (p. 23) was a factor in determining sense of belonging, therefore lacking resources creates difficulties for agricultural individuals and degrades that access to belonging.

## **Relationships**

All four staff participants expressed the mindset that everyone belongs and fits within agriculture. Staff member Pallas expressed disbelief that they belonged in agriculture until they became involved with GSI. Two staff participants, Daniella and Ylenia, expressed feeling that they only fit within smaller and student-centered agricultural spaces.

Daniella also expressed frustrations with agricultural companies and programs that do not build a relationship with the community.

“The biggest thing is to not go in and say, ‘Hey, we have this great program, we’re going to teach you.’ I would argue particularly in communities of color or immigrant communities, there are people with deep, long, knowledgeable agricultural roots. Go in and learn from them. Ask them how they would like to see their knowledge passed down to the people in their community...But to go in and say ‘We’re going to invent,’ or, ‘We’re going to provide,’ or, ‘We’re going to establish,’ because it isn’t there when you have it, when you don’t know anything about a community is, is a fools’ errand.”

Relationships were discussed in every staff interview, in staff and student observations, and on website content. In fact, in an interview with Daniella, she said,

“The reason GSI works the way it does is relationality. It takes longer, it’s messier, but that’s how it is effective.”

## Agriculture

Overall agriculture was a major theme, as GSI uses agriculture to connect with broader life topics. This was found in multiple areas of the website, advocating for community empowerment and outreach to increase physical, economic, and mental health. In an interview, Pallas expressed,

“It’s all agriculture, it is, it’s always through agriculture that we’re solving all of the social issues now.”

Three participants expressed having former ideas of what a farmer was before becoming involved with the center. Ylenia said:

“When I started here, I thought of agriculture as, very generic definition by the way, a bunch of farmer guys, I say guys because I’ve never met a woman farmer ever. There’s guys on tractors and probably a White man with a beard. Probably in his 60s, about to pass it down to his son, and then it just continues...And then I remember, I saw the FFA convention, they came to town, and I was like, oh wow, that’s a lot of girls, like I didn’t, I really did not expect that. And there was also like, hmm, still not very diverse at all, so yeah, that’s just the reality of the situation.”

Daniella shared similar ideas about farmer stereotypes and referenced back to an earlier theme of access to resources and the impact that can have.

“So, if you’re talking about populations, one where it was inevitably always an option for someone who might be interested in it, versus it was never even brought up as a concept, and then there is a stereotype image of a White male farmer, older White male farmer, for a reason. And just, the acknowledgement of the baggage that comes with that. So, acknowledging that reality and focusing on the fascination and wonder and how do you bring about an encounter with things that students may not have had an option to engage with.”

Adonis did not share the same stereotype of a White farmer, but instead referenced a stereotype by location,

“I thought people in agriculture were just people that lived in the middle of nowhere, but then when I was like oh you can be in the city and also be a farmer, like, oh so it doesn’t just, like, stop. Like, you can be, you can be in your apartment and have a little hydroponics section, like, I just kept getting open to different opportunities.”

However, observations revealed student examples of expression that they identified with agriculture at GSI. For example, a student was observed to say, “agriculture, that was crazy, that’s us” with a discussion about the discovery of fire.

GSI frames agriculture as a tool rather than stereotypes described by staff. During an observation, there was discussion between GSI staff and students on the connection between agriculture and people being a part of the environment themselves, and having an influence on their community and food access through successful communication. Another discussion between GSI staff and

students was heard during an observation related to weeding being a part of the continual cycle of life, having to thoughtfully remove the bad so that the self can flourish. With the students personally identifying as “agriculture”, GSI was able to separate itself from the stereotypes through communication that used agriculture as a tool.

### **Recommendations**

Raja (2024) discusses that a major roadblock in equitable flourishing of urban gardening is support for individuals and communities that are attempting to reclaim agency and a lack of recognition, reflection, and action by institutions about why there were inequitable resources to begin with. Strayhorn (2018) also discusses how relationships are crucial to a sense of belonging, as the theory itself is relational. The relationship an individual has with being historically and contemporarily marginalized also came up in interviews and is supported by Strayhorn (2018). Participants see a lack of reflection and relationship-building from those in power; if agriculture broadly can begin acknowledging and having these discussions, societal perceptions may begin to change as well.

The ultimate way to change stereotypes and perceptions of a White, male, cis, farmer is to no longer have the majority of farmers look like the stereotypes. Broadening the definition of what a farmer is considered may also help to support changing stereotypes and perceptions, because if the definition changes, the image may as well.

Previous work indicates that the frustration expressed by GSI staff with larger agricultural companies not fully assessing their impacts or communicating with communities is felt by others (Raja, 2024). These impacts include negative health outcomes, gentrification, and disruption of food access, often affecting the most contemporarily marginalized communities (Raja, 2024). Agriculture, while the source of many of these issues, is also the way to start creating lasting change in the lives of others. For example, food justice movements in communities raise awareness of becoming economically stable and becoming healthier physically (O’Hara & Toussaint, 2021).

Individuals in this study described agricultural companies as “valuing” diversity, but not demonstrating that when selecting top leadership. To address this perception, companies might implement hiring practices that result in the entirety of agricultural companies reflecting diverse individuals and ideas, promoting conversations related to the history of agriculture that connect with unsustainable practices today, and building relationships with communities before creating agricultural programs and businesses.

Lastly, the research in this paper can inform School-Based Agricultural Education in recruiting a more diverse demographic of students by supporting a sense of belonging within their classrooms. With a more diverse demographic of students, a wider variety of viewpoints and ideas can be brought to the classroom conversations. The increase in student diversity could also then lead itself to a more diverse job field which then could increase the diversity in ideas proposed to solve challenging environmental issues.

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