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Exploring the job demands and resources of farmworkers in the South African agricultural sector

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Orientation: Farmworkers in the agricultural sector are frequently exposed to a range of occupational stressors. The interplay between job demands and available resources plays a critical role in shaping their work-related well-being.

Research purpose: This study explored the perceptions of rural farmworkers in the Northern Cape province regarding their job demands and available job resources.

Motivation for the study: Farmworkers are a marginalised group highly dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods; however, their experiences are underexplored.

Research approach/design and method: The study employed a qualitative research design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants (N = 20) from five different farming locations. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes.

Main findings: The findings highlight a work environment marked by high job pressure, interpersonal challenges, and adverse working conditions. Despite these challenges, farmworkers identified several supportive resources that positively contributed to their ability to perform their jobs effectively.

Practical/managerial implications: The study shows the need for agricultural organisations to enhance the availability of job resources, particularly through Employee Assistance Programmes and support initiatives.

Contribution/value-add: This research provide insights into the interplay between job demands and resources for farmworkers. Practical recommendations to improve the quality of work-life in the agricultural sector are made.

Keywords: agricultural sector; farmworkers; rural; South Africa; job demands; job resources; work-related well-being; Northern Cape.

Introduction

Agriculture forms a significant part of a country's economic development and contributes significantly to families' food security (Geza et al., 2022). In South Africa, 80% of the total land area is used for agriculture, encompassing small-scale, developing and commercial farmers, making it the most agriculturally productive nation on the African continent (Cowling, 2024). Given that a significant portion of South Africa's population lives in poverty, the growth of agriculture and industry is seen as essential not only for creating jobs but also as a vital strategy for poverty alleviation (Meyer, 2019).

Farmworkers constitute a critical part of the workforce in the agricultural sector although they face various job-related difficulties that require ongoing attention and management (Barwick, 2023). These challenges include labour intensity, occupational risks because of harsh weather and environmental conditions, injuries because of repetitive work, heat stroke and chemical exposures (Harwell et al., 2022; Ramos et al., 2016). Additionally, seasonal and casual farmworkers are employed only during the agricultural season and frequently earn less than the minimum wage set by law, making them more exposed to food insecurity and poverty than permanent farmworkers (Charlton, 2022). Schossow et al. (2023) highlight that 'for farmers, occupational stressors are often out of their control and intertwined with personal stressors, as many farms are both homes and workplaces' (p. 97). This could lead to difficulty in detaching from work when one lives and works in the same area (Elliott et al., 2022). Many farmworkers are also prone to unhealthy lifestyle

choices, such as smoking or drinking alcohol, making them sensitive to any potential secondary health effects (Nye et al., 2022), which all contribute to their negative work-related well-being.

Despite the numerous challenges farmworkers face, their work-related well-being, particularly in rural South Africa, remains underexplored, and more attention should be paid to their experiences in this industry (Asiwe et al., 2015; Beek et al., 2011; World Development Report, 2019). Although farmworkers make critical contributions to the agricultural sector and rural development, little is known about their experiences regarding job demands, available resources and how these factors impact their overall well-being (Hobbs et al., 2020; Pauw, 2007). Curl et al. (2021) also posit that one of the main weaknesses of previous studies is their failure to provide information on the causes and conditions of agricultural workers' poor well-being (Curl et al., 2021).

In addition to the economic significance of agriculture, farmworkers' well-being is an important concern, particularly in rural areas. These rural farmworkers are considered a marginalised group in South Africa, a virtually powerless, invisible population with little public visibility (Botes, 2011). Despite the employment possibilities it provides, this industry is declining as economies are expanding, and agriculture remains the most important economic sector in low-income nations, particularly in rural areas (World Development Report, 2019). Recent research has shown that mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety, are highly prevalent among rural populations in the Northern Cape province of South Africa (Craig et al., 2022). This highlights the vulnerability of farmworkers and further motivates the need to explore their work-related well-being within this region.

Understanding the unique job demands and resources experienced by farmworkers is crucial for improving their well-being and ensuring the sustainability of the agricultural sector.

The specific objectives of this study are therefore:

- *To explore rural farmworkers' perceptions of their job demands.*
- *To determine the job resources available to rural farmworkers.*

Work-related well-being

Jaiswal and Arun (2020) conceptualise well-being as 'an overall positive state of an individual' (p. 331). The fundamental aspects of well-being are physical, social, financial, emotional, psychological, spiritual and occupational well-being (Jaiswal & Arun, 2020). An essential component of an individual's overall well-being is their workplace (Jaiswal & Arun, 2020). A pleasant and rewarding state of mind associated with one's job is referred to as work engagement, which forms part of overall work-related well-being (Radic et al., 2020; Syrek et al., 2022). Work engagement generally reflects positive feelings towards one's work, such as energy, dedication and focus (Galanakis & Tsitouri, 2022; Toyama et al., 2022). A worker's well-being may be positively impacted by a variety of workplace factors, such as job satisfaction, increased status, performance, productivity, social support, favourable evaluations and reduced withdrawal behaviours (Leščevica & Gusta, 2022).

Employees' well-being is demonstrated by their improved commitment to their work, more fluid teamwork and the calibre and productivity of their output (Allan et al., 2021). The holistic experience of well-being in the workplace can be measured by one's job satisfaction, meaningful work and workplace engagement (Allan et al., 2021). Literature found that employees with high well-being were more innovative, engaged and likely to be promoted than those with poor well-being. Furthermore, compared to their dissatisfied counterparts, their healthcare expenses, absence rate and intention to quit were significantly lower (Jaiswal & Arun, 2020). Ray (2021) adds to the above and indicates that higher levels of work-related well-being result from better working conditions, primarily measured by lower levels of job stress and higher levels of job satisfaction. These factors include reduced job demands, stronger job control, improved job security, and increased supervisory support (Ray, 2021).

Employees could experience stress when they discover that some work criteria cannot be met using their skills and resources (Zhou & Zheng, 2022). Individuals with work-related stress often believe they lack the resources necessary to handle the pressures, difficulties and demands of their jobs. Therefore, when job demands are high, job resources have the strongest impact on engagement or motivation at work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In other words, job resources become particularly crucial and relevant in challenging circumstances. Particularly when a person faces significant work demands, job resources become more important and encourage commitment and adherence to work commitments (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Job demands

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) serves as an important framework informing the current study by helping to explain farmworkers' work-related well-being. In line with the JD-R model, every occupation is characterised by job characteristics that are related to employees' well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Job demands are those physical, social or organisational aspects of the job that call for ongoing physical or mental effort and are consequently associated with specific physiological and psychological implications (Galanakis & Tsitouri, 2022). These implications include all elements of the working environment that demand a large amount of energy, such as work pressure, work overload, time constraints, intense physical effort, task complexity, conflict with superiors and co-workers, position ambiguity, job insecurity and numerous unpleasant events (Radic et al., 2020). Literature reports the challenging situations

farmworkers face by working excessively hard to achieve the farms' economic criteria (Beek et al., 2011). In addition to this, because of expenses, language barriers, lack of transportation, inadequate services and disrespectful treatment, farmworkers might be unable to access preventative care to reduce risks from adverse occupational exposures (Ramos, 2018). Malik et al. (2013) report that farmworkers encounter workplace stressors such as role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload, which are thought to directly impact their well-being. The World Development Report (2019) indicates that new technologies and machinery are being implemented within the agricultural sector, which could cause concern and stress among farmworkers as they experience job insecurity because of the fear of being replaced. Agricultural employees, particularly seasonal workers, might face additional stressors such as a shortage of personal time, rising living costs and concerns about job security (Langdon & Sawang, 2018). Financial support is one of the most important resources valued by farmworkers (Curl et al., 2021). Furthermore, perceived team support serves as an organisational resource that contributes to extrinsic motivation, assisting employees in reaching their professional objectives (Shamsi et al., 2021). In other words, when employees perceive their workplace as being helpful, they are more likely to exert the effort and skills necessary to complete their jobs successfully (Shamsi et al., 2021).

Job resources

In contrast, job resources are those elements of the workplace that are essential for achieving work objectives, reducing the impact of work demands or encouraging personal development. A few examples of job resources are autonomy, skill diversity, social support, performance feedback and growth opportunities (Toyama et al., 2022). Consequently, having access to various job resources may help employees feel less overwhelmed when faced with demanding workloads (Galanakis & Tsitouri, 2022). Farmworkers frequently face a lack of essential resources, including familial support, often disrupted by separation, limited social networks, and protective equipment (Curl et al., 2021). Additionally, they are subject to prolonged working hours and often have limited access to occupational safety training, exacerbated by their marginalised position within the broader social hierarchy (Curl et al., 2021). Farmworkers are more likely to have schedules that surpass 50 h per week, especially during peak agricultural seasons, and these excessive hours of labour could be harmful to their work-related well-being (Mares et al., 2020). Furthermore, in the work context, these challenges include the nature of employment, the level of labour intensity, contracts, pay and deductions, as well as dangers to employment and occupational health and safety (Harwell et al., 2022). Compared to non-agricultural employees, especially seasonal and migrant farmworkers suffer from serious health disparities (Harwell et al., 2022). Seasonal and casual farmworkers are exposed to numerous challenges within their working environment, which in turn may affect their well-being negatively. The fact that seasonal and casual farmworkers are employed only during the agricultural season and frequently make less money than the minimum wage set by law makes them more exposed to food insecurity than permanent farmworkers (Charlton, 2022). Literature states when employees have the resources necessary to address these issues at a specific moment and in particular life domains (such as family, career and culture), they are said to be in a condition of well-being. In this way, although the state of an individual's well-being can only be assessed at a particular moment, these points are constantly shifting as people make decisions about their situations (Cumming & Wong, 2019).

The JD-R model highlights the importance of maintaining a balance between job demands and resources to promote positive outcomes such as reduced turnover, higher performance and greater organisational commitment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2023). When an imbalance occurs, with high hindering demands and insufficient resources, such as reported among farmworkers, employees are more likely to experience stress, burnout and disengagement (Fernandez De Henestrosa et al., 2023). Job demands can be categorised into challenging demands, such as meaningful workload and opportunities for skill development, which can foster engagement, and hindering demands, such as role ambiguity and interpersonal conflict, which can impede well-being (Fernandez De Henestrosa et al., 2023). Similarly, job resources can be structural, such as training opportunities, equipment and technological support, or social, such as supportive supervision and positive co-worker relationships (Schwatka et al., 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen structural and social job resources while increasing challenging demands that promote growth and simultaneously minimising hindering demands that negatively impact farmworkers' work-related well-being (Galanakis & Tsitouri, 2022).

Exploring work-related well-being among farmworkers, particularly within the South African agricultural context, highlights a significant gap in our understanding and appreciation of the demands and resources inherent to this sector. Exploring the job demands and resources in this study sheds light on the critical balance between the demands placed on these workers and the resources available, which directly impact their well-being.

Research design

This study followed an interpretivist research paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and subjective, and seeks to understand the meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Interpretivism allowed the researchers to explore the lived experiences of farmworkers, gaining a rich and nuanced understanding of their perceptions of job demands and available resources within their specific rural contexts.

Aligned with this paradigm, a qualitative research strategy with elements of phenomenology was implemented to

explore the lived experiences and perceptions of farmworkers in relation to their job demands and resources.

This approach is particularly suited in providing straightforward, comprehensive summaries of participants' experiences in their own terms, without excessive interpretation (Bradshaw et al., 2017). This strategy enabled the researchers to capture farmworkers' detailed and subjective perceptions regarding their workplace demands and resources.

Study population and sampling

The study was conducted in the Northern Cape province of South Africa, where approximately 52 000 workers are employed in the agricultural community (Cowling, 2024). The Northern Cape province was selected as the study site because of its significant role in South Africa's agricultural sector and the documented prevalence of mental health challenges among rural populations (Craig et al., 2022). The research was conducted on farms in a prominent agricultural region known for relying on irrigation-based farming. This area is a major contributor to the country's export economy, particularly in the production of table grapes destined for European and British markets. Key crops include peaches, dried fruit, raisins, oranges and dates. To explore the experiences of farmworkers within this specialised agricultural context, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 participants ($N = 20$) employed across five large table grape commercial farms in the region.

A combination of non-probability sampling, namely purposive sampling and convenience sampling, was applied in this study. Purposive sampling provides accessible participants, with the added benefit of encouraging the selection of participants with the attributes or experiences necessary for this research (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Convenience sampling refers to participants who are easy to access and willing to cooperate within the study (Bradshaw et al., 2017). This was an appropriate method, especially for gaining access to the farmworkers. Participants were required to be farmworkers residing in rural areas of the Northern Cape. Individuals from all ethnic backgrounds who were proficient in either Afrikaans or English were considered, as the researcher is also proficient in these two languages, and the interviews were conducted in either Afrikaans or English. The age range of participants included adults of working age, with the majority falling between 40 years and 49 years old. A purposive and convenience sampling approach was used to ensure participants had direct experience with the agricultural work environment relevant to the study's aims. Participants further had to be able to read English or Afrikaans to provide written informed consent.

Table 1 provides a summary of the key demographic characteristics of the participants.

TABLE 1: Characteristics of participants ($N = 20$).

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (*n*)	%
Age (years)	20–29	4	20
	30–39	7	35
	40–49	8	40
	50–59	1	5
Gender	Male	11	55
	Female	9	45
Ethnicity	Coloured persons	7	35
	Black African persons (Tswana)	13	65
Educational level	Grade 4–6	1	5
	Grade 7–9	8	40
	Grade 10–12	7	35
	Other (Tertiary Qualifications, Diploma)	4	20

The most significant portion of the sample consisted of individuals aged between 40 years and 49 years, accounting for 40%. The participant group was predominantly male, with a 55% representation, compared to 45% female participants. Black Africans who spoke Setswana were the predominant demographic in the study, making up 65% of the participants. In terms of educational attainment, the majority of participants had completed schooling between Grade 4 and Grade 7. Of the 20 participants, three held junior managerial levels, five held supervisory positions, four were employed in administrative roles and eight served as general farmworkers.

Data collection method

The data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted between July 2023 and August 2023. The researchers requested permission from farm owners within the Northern Cape province by sending an email that included information on the objective of the study, the duration of the interviews and the inclusion criteria of the participants. After having received permission, the researcher approached the farmworkers as arranged with the farm management. Those interested were provided with an informed consent document to obtain their permission to participate in the research study voluntarily. The document was explained to the participants to help them understand the purpose and objectives of the research.

The researcher used a recording device to capture the interviews. The duration of the interviews was approximately 30 to 60 min with each participant. The researcher met the farmworkers in a venue arranged by the farm owners. The venue was private and allowed for a confidential discussion. The researcher asked questions to the participants, ensuring that the questions were easily understood. Most participants primarily spoke Setswana and were not fluent in the study's designated languages, English and Afrikaans. As a result, questions were interpreted and clarified to ensure understanding. Additionally, the English spoken by participants reflected a local dialect. Although the data were collected in a local English dialect, the study was reported in standard English. This created a need for translation to

ensure clarity for an academic audience. A literal (verbatim) translation approach was adopted to retain the authenticity and intended meaning of participants' responses as closely as possible. To translate, an English translator fluent in the local dialect and standard English was employed. As back translation was deemed unnecessary in this case, careful attention was given during the initial translation to maintain the integrity of participants' voices while aligning the text with academic reporting standards. The direct quotations and translated sections are presented in the Results section.

The interview questions, as included in the interview guide, were as follows:

- Please tell me about your job. What do you do?
- What specific things are demanding or challenging in your job, if any?
- What resources do you have at work to perform your work effectively?

Data analysis

The data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After the data had been transcribed, the researchers organised it into preliminary codes or ideas. The researchers searched through the coded and collated dataset for themes. The different codes in the dataset were integrated into more prominent themes that shared commonalities. This process involved identifying patterns, connections and recurring topics within the data.

The researchers chose examples of extracts that demonstrated the themes contained in the data and compiled a comprehensive description of the study's findings. In line with this study's interpretivist and phenomenological approach, the researchers recognised that knowledge is co-constructed through the participants' lived experiences. Rather than seeking objective truths, the aim was to gain a rich, in-depth understanding of farmworkers' perceptions and realities of their job demands and available resources. The study also upheld ethical and quality assurance principles detailed in the following section.

Research rigour

This study was conducted in adherence to ethical research standards. Farm owners granted permission to conduct the study and participants were informed of the study's purpose and procedures when written informed consent was obtained. Participation was voluntary, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms and secure data handling procedures. The framework of "trustworthiness" was used for assessing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with participants and the use of direct quotations to support findings. Dependability was supported through clear documentation of the research process. Confirmability was ensured by keeping detailed notes and maintaining transparency throughout the data analysis. Transferability was addressed by providing rich, contextual descriptions of the study setting and participants.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Faculty of Economic and Management Science's Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) (No. NWU-00627-23-A4).

Results

The findings of the research study were arranged into two main themes and various sub-themes. Figure 1 presents an overview of the themes and sub-themes:

Theme 1: Perceptions of job demands

The first central theme that emerged from the data relates to the various job demands experienced by rural farmworkers. This theme captures the pressures and challenges encountered in their daily work environment, which negatively affect their work-related well-being. These demands stem from the nature of the tasks they perform and the context in which they operate. Participants described feeling overwhelmed by high expectations, interpersonal difficulties and environmental conditions that made their work harder to complete effectively.

Three key sub-themes were identified under this broader theme:

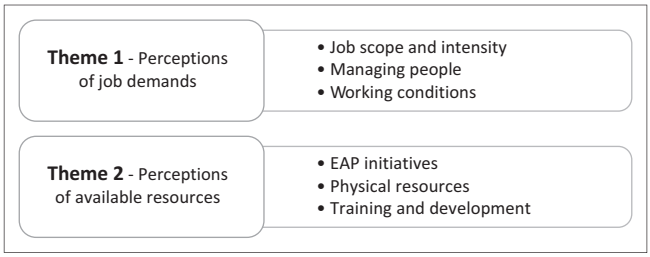
- Job scope and intensity
- Managing people
- Working conditions

Each sub-theme highlights a specific aspect of the demands experienced by participants and is discussed in detail below, supported by direct quotations from participants. As the verbatim transcriptions are mainly in the local English dialect, the meaning of the quotations is placed in square brackets following the direct quotations.

The findings of Theme 1 were obtained by asking *What specific things are demanding or challenging in your job, if any?*

Job scope and intensity

The participants mentioned how certain aspects of the work and seasons added pressure to their workday. Participants described their work as physically demanding and mentally



EAP, employee assistance programme.

FIGURE 1: Overview of themes and sub-themes.

taxing, particularly during high-pressure periods such as fertilising and harvesting seasons. The responsibility to perform tasks accurately added a layer of stress, as even small mistakes could have significant consequences for the crops. The multi-faceted nature of the tasks – such as measuring quantities, applying the correct type of fertiliser and following precise procedures – made the work both complex and cognitively intense, as can be seen from the following excerpts:

> 'Come let me say, that work of the fertiliser is not easy, I can't just throw, that shoots is how many litres I must get and what fertiliser I must throw, makes it a bit bigger, other day we throw the fertiliser, we throw the wrong one, and then the other day we throw the fertiliser, we make just a little bit more.' ['*Let me put it this way – working with fertiliser is not easy. I can't just apply it randomly; I need to know exactly how many litres to use and which type of fertiliser to apply. Sometimes we have to increase the amount slightly. One day, we applied the wrong fertiliser, and on another day, we used a bit more than we were supposed to.*']. (Participant 2, Male, General Worker, Tswana speaking)

According to Participant 1:

> 'It is now with the packing season that is challenging for me. A lot of work, admin work and things, preparation of the box order, packing material I can say. The orders and things must be right, correct numbers, binds must go out and crates must be cut.' ['*It's the packing season that's especially challenging for me. There's a lot of work – administrative tasks and so on – like preparing box orders and packing materials. Everything has to be accurate: the orders must be correct, the quantities need to match, labels have to be attached, and the crates must be prepared properly.*']. (Participant 1, Male, Assistant Manager, Afrikaans speaking)

An interesting aspect of the job scope and intensity among the farmworkers is how responsibility varies across job levels, with higher expectations typically placed on managerial roles. It seems that responsibility influences stress and well-being among different worker groups.

It seems that the participants worked long hours, which added to their workload, which was especially difficult during the hot summer days, as reflected by Participant 13, a male tractor driver:

> 'Sometimes it's the pressure, they give me lot of pressure. Sometimes I work under pressure. It's not oraait. Sometimes they say the work is behind, it's not on date, so we must push, push. Sometimes you must be at work before time for deliver the tools they are working, so on that time. They are not paying me for that time.' ['*Sometimes it's the pressure – they put a lot of pressure on me. I often have to work under stressful conditions, and it's not fair. They'll say the work is behind schedule, not up to date, so we have to push. Sometimes I have to arrive at work earlier than usual to deliver the tools the others need to start working. But I'm not paid for that extra time.*']. (Participant 13, Male, General Worker and Tractor Driver, Tswana speaking)

One participant in a supervisory position noted that it might be challenging to complete the work on time as he needs to put in nine hours of work because some duties, such as watering the vines, must be completed at specified times of the day. It seemed that watering the vines at specific times added pressure to most participants, as seen from Participant 6, a male administration assistant:

> 'That day the grape must get water and I didn't get a chance to give it water to the plant, so my employer can give me a warning.' ['*That day, the grapes needed to be watered, but I didn't get the chance to do it. Because of that, my employer could give me a warning.*']. (Participant 6, Male, Administrative Assistant, Tswana speaking)

The participants reflected on a lack of collaboration from fellow colleagues that adds pressure to their work circumstances and contributes to them not enjoying the work. Participant 16, a male general assistant, said that the lack of collaboration made it difficult to work in the workshop, as one person would put everything they had into a single task while the others merely watched:

> 'And then the other thing is, when we are in the workshop, what I also do not like, is the one works himself dead, while the other one stands one side, but further I don't have problems.' '[*And another thing I don't like is that, when we're in the workshop, one person ends up working themselves to death while another just stands around doing nothing. But other than that, I don't have any problems.*'] (Participant 16, Male, General Assistant, Afrikaans speaking)

Managing people

Supervisors and managers described various relational and leadership challenges associated with managing others. These included the need to understand and support the physical and emotional well-being of subordinates, monitor job performance, enforce discipline, manage team conflicts and ensure that workers were trained and competent. Participants expressed that while overseeing people was part of their role, it came with a significant emotional burden and interpersonal strain. These responsibilities were often complicated by hierarchical ambiguity or a lack of authority when multiple supervisors were present.

One participant expressed frustration about frequent disagreements among supervisors:

> 'What I enjoy the least of my work is we quarrel, you see. No one want to hear someone, because we are all supervisors, you know.'. ['*What I enjoy the least about my work is that we often quarrel. No one wants to listen to anyone else, because we're all supervisors, you see.*']. (Participant 11, Male, Foreman and Supervisor, Tswana speaking)

The participants reflected on how managing employees was quite a demanding part of their job. Some participants mentioned that it placed pressure on the supervisor to be able to know the employees well enough, up to the point where they also understood how to manage their individual well-being. Participant 3, a female general worker in a supervisory role, explained that when the line manager asks about work that is not done correctly, the supervisor should be able to interpret the implication concerning the well-being of the employees:

> 'Is really just, the wellbeing. Here it is really just like I now a lot of people. You just have to know the wellbeing of the people. You must learn to know the person well and they must know you, and when the management comes, and you start to stress about

a mistake that was made.' ['*It's really about wellbeing. Around here, I know a lot of people, and you have to understand their wellbeing. You need to get to know the person well, and they need to know you. But then management comes around, and suddenly you start stressing about a mistake that was made*.']. (Participant 3, Female, General Worker and Supervisor, Afrikaans speaking)

Supervisors also expressed emotional pressure related to their responsibility for the physical safety and well-being of their teams. In addition to coordinating tasks and enforcing discipline, participants were burdened by the fear that one of their team members might get injured under their supervision. This responsibility weighed heavily on them and contributed to feelings of anxiety, stress and emotional discomfort, particularly in the event of an incident:

'Or, maybe someone gets hurt, my team and I hear something will that will make that I that I feel nice.' ['*Or, if someone gets hurt, and my team and I hear about it, it makes me feel upset*.']. (Participant 14, Male, Foreman, Tswana speaking)

This quote reflects the emotional toll of being accountable for others' safety – a form of silent pressure that often goes unspoken but is deeply felt by those in supervisory positions. The fear of harm, combined with the expectation to respond appropriately, added another layer to the already demanding task of managing people.

The participants in supervisory positions mentioned the difficulty of having to give warnings or form part of disciplinary hearings. It seems an additional aspect relates to a language barrier where some workers do not understand, or which leads to conflict, as indicated by Participant 8, a male supervisor:

'Challenging on my job always challenging is like when I stop people, you know we always use warnings. They must sign the warnings and things like that. The challenge that I always get is when I must let the person sign, then they will say they don't understand me, or they get cross with me. That's the challenge I always get. They yes, they don't understand me because I give them warnings.' ['*The most challenging part of my job is when I have to discipline people, like when I give them warnings. They're supposed to sign the warnings and follow the process. But the problem I always face is that when I ask them to sign, they either say they don't understand me or they get upset with me. That's the challenge I constantly deal with, they say they don't understand because I'm the one giving them the warnings*.']. (Participant 8, Male, Supervisor, Tswana speaking)

Another finding reflected from the data was the difficulty of providing on-the-job training, and the responsibility that increases stress on the participants, as reflected by Participant 19, a junior production manager:

'It's a pressure to teach the person the job correctly, how to do the job correctly, how to understand the job.' (Participant 19, Male, Junior Production Manager, Afrikaans speaking)

Working conditions

Participants highlighted the impact of harsh environmental conditions on their daily work. Given that most farm work takes place outdoors, farmworkers are routinely exposed to extreme weather, including intense heat, cold, wind and rain. Adverse conditions affect the workers' ability to perform their duties efficiently and contribute to increased job demands. In summer, the heat was also challenging and made the farmworkers sick, as reflected by Participant 10, a female supervisor:

'The sun is hot, is just the sun, I get sick. It makes me sick.' ['*The sun is harsh. It's just the sun – it makes me sick. I get ill from it*.']. (Participant 10, Female, Supervisor, Tswana speaking)

The weather further had exacerbating effects, such as water that does not stay cold as it is stored in tanks; they had to ensure that they brought their water from home. The participants mentioned working long hours, especially during summer, being exposed to the sun for long hours during the day to which cool water brought relief, as indicated by Participant 4, a female general worker:

'And our water gets finished and hot in the tanks, so if you don't bring water from your house, then you will most of the time drink that warm water. It when it is long hours, it makes you very tired. Nine hours is the day now, you know. It makes me very tired. So, we start to work, summer time is long hours, yes, so we start to work and then we work to afternoon, the sun is hot and it is long hours and you get thirsty. It is a challenge for me, because it is long hours, and the day is long.' ['*Our water runs out and gets hot in the tanks, so if you don't bring water from home, you usually end up drinking warm water. When we work long hours, it makes me very tired. Right now, we're working nine-hour days. In the summertime, the hours are even longer, we start in the morning and work through the afternoon in the hot sun, and you get very thirsty. It's a real challenge for me because the days are long and the heat makes it exhausting*.']. (Participant 4, Female, General Worker, Afrikaans speaking)

Apart from the weather conditions, it seemed that the protective clothing they wear can be uncomfortable and warm. Even though the participants understood the necessity of wearing personal protective equipment (PPE), they reflected that wearing the clothing during the heat was experienced as uncomfortable. Participant 5, an administrative assistant and general worker, reflects on the wearing of PPE:

'… and the PPE is plastic so it is hot. You wear gloves and raincoats. We wear it over our normal clothes, a mask and glasses. I wear prescription glasses but I cannot wear them with the PPE. It is important not to inhale the poison so I have to wear those clothes. And I am think, their small is too big for me.' ['*… and the PPE is made of plastic, so it gets very hot. We have to wear gloves and raincoats over our regular clothes, along with a mask and protective glasses. I wear prescription glasses, but I can't wear them with the PPE. It's important not to inhale the chemicals, so I have to wear the gear. Also, I think the size marked "small" is too big for me*.']. (Participant 5, Female, Administrative Assistant and General Worker, Afrikaans speaking)

Theme 2: Perceptions of available resources

The second central theme that emerged from the data focused on the various resources available to farmworkers that support their ability to carry out their job responsibilities.

Participants' responses highlighted both formal and informal supports that made their work more manageable, enhanced their well-being, or provided opportunities for development. These resources varied across farms and roles, and their availability often influenced workers' perceptions of support and satisfaction in the workplace.

Three key sub-themes were identified under this broader theme:

- Employee assistance programme (EAP) initiatives,
- Physical resources and
- Training and development opportunities.

Each sub-theme reflects a distinct category of support available to farmworkers and is explored below through participants' perspectives and direct quotations. The findings of Theme 2 were from the following question posed to the participants: *What resources do you have at work to do your work effectively?* The participants' responses were analysed, and the following sub-themes emerged from the results: EAP initiatives, physical resources and training and development opportunities.

Employee assistance programme initiatives

Most participants reported access to various EAP initiatives that supported their well-being inside and outside work. These initiatives included visits from psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists and logistical and emotional support from HR departments. Some farms also provided additional benefits such as aftercare services and crèches for employees' children, helping to ease the work-life burden, especially for working parents. Participants shared that this support extended beyond typical workplace needs and contributed significantly to their sense of care and value within the organisation:

> '… If you have a problem, we have psychologists that come in, we have occupational therapists, we have an aftercare, we have crèche, and all that at type of things … You never have to go up to the doctor yourself. When I walk from here, I know, my HR has already arranged for me, that things will be done for me. When I have appointment at at the doctor, then I come here and she makes it for me if I have appointment, if I have to have appointment at the traffic office, she will see makes it for me or she will see to it that everything goes good. They really support very well in things that sometimes have nothing to do with the work.' ['… *If you have a problem, there are psychologists who visit, as well as occupational therapists. We also have access to aftercare services, a crèche, and similar support. You never have to make arrangements with the doctor yourself. When I leave here, I know that HR has already taken care of things for me. If I have a doctor's appointment, I just come here and they make it for me. Even if I need an appointment at the traffic office, they handle it or make sure everything is in order. They really provide strong support, even for things that aren't directly related to work.*']. (Participant 18, Male, Vineyard Monitor, Afrikaans speaking)

Another participant echoed the value of this support, particularly the contribution of administrative and childcare services to making daily work-life more manageable:

> 'We are a very good team of people here also, also with our workshop, our admin, our HR and the other support services that we have on the farm, you know, like the aftercare that look after the children, and the crèche… that also looks after the children. This also helps us a lot to make things easier on the farm.' ['*We have a very good team here, including our workshop staff, administrative team, HR, and other support services on the farm. For example, the aftercare and crèche both provide care for our children. This kind of support really helps to make things easier for us on the farm.*']. (Participant 19, Male, Junior Production Manager, Afrikaans speaking)

Physical resources

Participants highlighted the availability of essential physical resources provided by the farms, which helped them perform their duties safely and effectively. These resources included personal protective equipment (PPE), uniforms, safety gear and work tools. Items such as gloves, safety boots, hairnets, overalls and safety glasses were consistently mentioned as enabling farmworkers to carry out physically demanding tasks with reduced risk of injury. The provision of such resources reflected a sense of organisational support and consideration for worker safety and comfort. Participants appreciated that these items were provided regularly and at no personal cost, which contributed to both productivity and morale on the job:

> '… Maybe you do not know, but it is sturdy nice brown gloves that we get to pick up the stones, you will not… it's not you will hurt your hands or something.' ['… *You might not know this, but we're given sturdy brown gloves for picking up stones. They're strong enough that you won't hurt your hands or anything like that.*']. (Participant 4, Female, General Worker, Afrikaans speaking)

Another participant emphasised the consistency with which these items were made available:

> '… They get overalls, you know, and hair nets. I also get overalls and hair nets, safety boots …' ['… *They receive overalls and hair nets, and I do as well – along with safety boots.*']. (Participant 8, Male, Supervisor, Tswana speaking)

In addition, other participants noted that access to work tools and equipment further supported their ability to carry out their tasks efficiently:

> '… Everything we need to do our job properly – like the tools and the materials – is here. I do not have to worry that something is missing when we start the day.' ['… *We have everything we need to do our jobs properly, tools, materials, everything is provided. I never have to worry about anything being missing when we start the day.*']. (Participant 14, Male, Foreman, Tswana speaking)

The findings show that the participants were also provided with additional tools and materials to make their job easier such as cordless drills and grainers, which are especially useful during times of load-shedding, as reflected by Participant 16, a male general assistant:

> '… now with the loadshedding we can't, with the light switches we must drill on a plug, the company has made it so easy for us. They gave us cordless drills, so we can do our work, not stop everything when the power comes on then you must work hard and fast before the power is off again, so they give us cordless

drills and, grinders so we can do our work.' ['… *Now with loadshedding, we can't rely on the light switches or regular power sources. But the company has made it easier for us, they provided cordless drills, so we can keep working without having to stop everything. Before, we had to rush and work fast when the power came back on, knowing it could go off again soon. Now, with the cordless drills and grinders, we're able to continue our work without interruptions*.']. (Participant 16, Male, General Assistant, Afrikaans speaking)

Furthermore, participants are given tools and equipment to perform their jobs properly. An example of such tools and equipment includes two-way radios that enable better communication on the farms. In contrast, they found it difficult to perform their tasks properly because they lacked the necessary equipment, such as cleaning supplies or protective gear, especially when working in the chemical room. Participant 7, a male gardener, shared his frustration regarding the availability of resources:

'I am now waiting for the things so long. I asked them early morning of yesterday, to maybe ask someone, okay, help me to get some material maybe to work, then he takes maybe two days or three days. How can I enjoy the job? It becomes difficult to me.' ['*I've been waiting a long time for the materials. I asked for them early yesterday morning, just asked if someone could help me get what I need to work. But then it takes two or even three days. How am I supposed to enjoy the job? It makes things really difficult for me*.']. (Participant 7, Male, Gardener, Afrikaans speaking)

In addition to traditional equipment, some participants mentioned being provided with technological devices that enhanced efficiency, particularly in stock-taking, irrigation and fertilisation. These tools reduced the physical strain of manual processes and were viewed as helpful in improving task accuracy and speed. Participant 19, a junior production manager shared:

'We have a lot of technological implementation, such as irrigation which starts using a computer, which limits mistakes, a lot of things are automated which takes away a lot of pressure from me. I can also do other things and not only look at the watering. Also, the fertiliser is automated, you enter into the computer the amount and the size, and it calculates, that is the largest resource we have.' ['*We have a lot of technological systems in place, like computer-controlled irrigation, which helps reduce mistakes. Many processes are automated, which takes a lot of pressure off me. It also allows me to focus on other tasks instead of just monitoring the watering. Even the fertiliser application is automated, you input the quantity and area into the computer, and it calculates everything. That's the most valuable resource we have*.']. (Participant 19, Male, Junior Production Manager, Afrikaans speaking)

Transport was another job resource mentioned by the participants. Farmworkers are provided with transport to and from various parts of the farm and from one farm to the next. One participant mentioned that they have no trouble accessing transportation and that it is readily available when needed:

'Look when we, it depends on where you work, we will always will a tractor, and there will always be a man that have a licence to take us to the specific place where we have to work.' ['*Look, it depends on where you're working, but there is always a tractor available, and there's always someone with a licence to drive us to the specific location where we need to work*.']. (Participant 16, Male, General Assistant, Afrikaans speaking)

Training and development

The participants indicated that they are provided with training and development opportunities on the farm. Participants specifically referred to on-the-job training and training on aspects such as health and safety and interpersonal awareness. Most participants reflected on being adequately trained in first aid, safety, health, self-awareness and self-concept. Participant 2, a male general worker, reflected on how they are trained to work with pipelines and fertilisers at their job and that they received on-the-job training before being hired:

'I just want to learn the things that I can't do, that's why the other of the fertiliser and pipes, I like them. I learn them here and I keep it in my head.' ['*I just want to learn the things I don't yet know how to do. That's why I enjoy working with the fertiliser and irrigation pipes. I'm learning about them here, and I make sure to remember everything I learn*.']. (Participant 2, Male, General Worker, Tswana speaking)

Therefore, it is important and beneficial for farmworkers to receive training in these areas. Such training contributes to personal development, enhances workplace health and safety and supports overall productivity.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how farmworkers perceived the job demands and resources in the agricultural sector within the Southern African context. The study's findings shed light on the complex interplay between the demands placed on farmworkers and the resources available to them. High job pressure, challenging people management and difficult working conditions characterise the work environment, presenting significant challenges to work-related well-being. However, the availability of job resources such as EAP initiatives, physical resources and training opportunities plays a critical role in supporting farmworkers. These resources are indispensable in enabling effective and safe job performance and also in contributing to a more supportive and sustainable work environment.

Research objective 1: To explore the perceptions rural farmworkers have of their job demands

The findings revealed three sub-themes from the data concerning job demands that the participants perceived as negative, that is, job pressure, which can be ascribed to job scope and intensity, managing people and working conditions. The participants faced challenges such as stringent deadlines, exemplified by tasks such as vine watering that needed to be done at specific times, often resulting in extended working hours, which placed added pressure on workers and sometimes led to personal costs, such as fatigue, missed family responsibilities and a sense of being overworked. Agricultural producers are typically subjected to a range of chronic stressors, such as unpredictable

weather, unstable financial conditions and extended work hours. Hull et al. (2022) reported in their study that perceived barriers in farming include the notion that farm work is incessant and never fully completed. As a result of workload, working hours and the demanding nature of the task, employees who spend most of their time at work with few resources, especially in a challenging work environment, may be more likely to develop significant levels of burnout (Beek et al., 2011; Wallace & Coughlan., 2023). These excessive hours of labour may be harmful to their work-related well-being, as long work hours and lack of sleep cause fatigue, which lowers cognitive performance and may have an impact on short-term memory, executive function, response speed, concentration and other factors (Elliott et al., 2022). An interesting dimension that emerged from the findings was the stratification of responsibility across different job levels. While it is generally expected that managerial or supervisory roles carry greater accountability because of their decision-making power and broader operational impact, the study revealed a more complex reality. Lower-level workers frequently internalised pressures typically associated with management, such as meeting productivity targets or correcting operational mistakes. This mismatch between responsibility and control may contribute to elevated stress levels among lower-tier employees, highlighting an area for further intervention.

The perceived lack of collaboration among colleagues further exacerbated this stress, with some feeling overburdened while others appeared less engaged. Hovey and Seligman (2006) noted that migrant farmworkers experienced stressors that included feeling emotionally isolated. Lam et al. (2022) emphasise that overworked employees frequently disengage emotionally and behaviourally from their jobs. In addition, being exhausted results in a higher intention to quit and fewer extra-role behaviours (Becker et al., 2022). Fernandez De Henestrosa et al. (2023) state that with workplace demands such as work overload, high work pressure and emotionally taxing encounters, autonomy and social support become important job resources.

Another theme that emerged refers to those in supervisory roles. Participants in supervisory roles reported significant challenges in managing interpersonal dynamics among farmworkers. These challenges encompassed resolving conflicts, enforcing discipline and ensuring team cohesion, particularly in the absence of higher management. The emotional toll of addressing negative aspects of the job, such as mediating disputes and reporting misconduct, was a recurrent theme. Hovey and Seligman (2006) noted that interpersonal conflicts, along with role-related stressors, are the most commonly cited internal sources of stress for farmers. Furthermore, farmers are at risk of developing stress and other mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression and suicide (Hovey & Seligman, 2006). Additionally, the mental health of supervisors is a growing concern. Exposure to workplace stressors, including managing conflicts and dealing with substance use among employees, has been linked to increased symptoms of anxiety and depression (Johnson & Lee, 2022). These findings suggest that the supervisory role in agricultural settings is not only operationally demanding but also emotionally taxing.

The final sub-theme under Theme 1 related to the challenging working conditions experienced by participants. This theme captured the physical and environmental difficulties encountered on the job, such as extreme weather, which impacted the participants' ability to perform outdoor tasks. Notably, recent news reports confirmed how serious these working conditions were when extreme temperatures resulted in the death of five farmworkers in the Northern Cape (Mthethwa, 2023). El-Khayat et al. (2022) state that farmworkers are particularly susceptible to heat stress because of the demanding nature of their work, which is mostly done in the open air under unfavourable working circumstances. A study conducted in Australia from 2001 to 2010 found the risk of heat stress-related illness during heatwave periods to be approximately seven times higher than during non-heatwave periods (McInnes et al., 2017). However, the literature identifies several workplace-related factors that increase the risk of heat stress among agricultural workers, including the performance of intensive manual labour. To mitigate heat exposure, it is advised to avoid physically demanding tasks during peak temperatures; it is suggested that workers increase their heat tolerance through enhanced physical fitness and that cooling aids are utilised (Minett, 2022; Reay, 2023).

Research objective 2: To determine the job resources rural farmworkers have available

The findings reflected that farmworkers receive various resources contributing to their work-related well-being. Participants of this study indicated that specific job resources they received included EAP initiatives, physical resources and training and development opportunities. Employee assistance programme initiatives included services from professionals, including social workers, psychologists and occupational therapists. Childcare in the form of a crèche on the farm was also mentioned as an additional benefit provided to the farmworkers. According to Bergh (2021), EAPs are holistic health initiatives integrated into or external to the workplace. These services offer diverse activities and services to promote employee and organisational well-being, addressing a wide spectrum of needs and intervention levels. Moreover, organisations that foster a sense of commitment to and concern for employee health and well-being can significantly impact employee perceptions and well-being (Schwatka et al., 2022). This was the case with the current study, as the EAP initiatives were welcomed and experienced as helpful.

Participants reported that their employers provided various physical resources to support their tasks, including personal protective equipment (PPE), tools and equipment. PPE items such as overalls, safety glasses and gloves are commonly distributed to prevent work-related injuries, especially during manual labour (Exposto et al., 2022). While these

resources were appreciated for their protective function, several participants noted that PPE could be uncomfortable, particularly during the summer months. This aligns with findings by Reay (2023), who warns that PPE-related heat stress is a frequent issue among manual workers and should be managed proactively.

In addition to PPE, many participants had access to basic work tools and equipment, such as spades, pruning shears and wheelbarrows. These resources were considered necessary for performing core job tasks safely and efficiently. However, there were also reports of occasional shortages or limited maintenance, which created frustration or slowed down work processes. This contrast in experience suggests variability in resource availability across different farms. According to Mahalakshmi et al. (2023), having appropriate and well-maintained equipment reduces manual effort and increases task accuracy and efficiency.

Some participants also described technological tools and automated systems that simplified certain aspects of their work. Integrating automation into routine agricultural tasks was considered a valuable job resource, making daily responsibilities more manageable and efficient. It also reduced physical strain and allowed for greater precision in work outcomes. Literature confirms that technology in agriculture supports worker performance by increasing productivity and safety (Kroemer & Kroemer, 2016).

Training and development opportunities were also a job resource provided to the farmworkers. Training and development significantly impact individuals' work experiences and organisations' efficacy (Anitharajathi & Gokulnath, 2021). Participants expressly referred to on-the-job training and training on aspects such as health and safety and interpersonal awareness. Conchado Rodriguez and Márquez Sánchez (2020) mention that the majority of workplace accidents are brought on by inadequate safety training, antiquated safety systems that are not adequately adjusted to meet the demands of modern work settings and a lack of preventative measures. Consequently, proactive strategies for workplace health and safety indirectly contribute to the overall well-being of the workforce (Cumming & Wong, 2019). Therefore, it is essential and valuable for these farmworkers to receive training in such matters.

Contributions and implications

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of work-related well-being in rural agricultural settings by applying the JD-R model in a non-traditional, under-researched labour context. It expands the model's relevance by identifying context-specific job demands (e.g., extreme environmental conditions, interpersonal conflict and supervisory strain) and resources (e.g., EAPs, PPE and technology) that influence well-being. This contribution provides a more grounded understanding of how the JD-R model can be applied in low-resource, labour-intensive environments such as farms in the Northern Cape.

From a practical perspective, several actionable implications emerged. Farming organisations should aim to reduce or mitigate job demands where possible. For example, reducing excessive workloads during peak seasons by implementing rotation systems or hiring seasonal support could ease physical and emotional strain. Addressing interpersonal conflict through conflict-resolution training for supervisors and clearly defining leadership roles could also alleviate pressure. Environmental demands such as heat stress should be managed by introducing shaded rest areas, cooling aids and adjusted break schedules.

Regarding job resources, the findings suggest that existing resources, such as PPE, equipment and wellness initiatives, should be maintained and regularly assessed for adequacy and comfort. Investment in training and upskilling opportunities should be increased to empower workers and improve long-term productivity. Communication between employees and management should be actively strengthened, for example, through regular, inclusive staff meetings that give farmworkers a voice in decisions affecting their work environment. Tailored wellness programmes adapted to geographically remote areas such as the Northern Cape would further support employee well-being and retention. Together, these findings provide a practical roadmap for farm managers, policymakers and HR professionals aiming to enhance working conditions and sustainability in the agricultural sector.

Limitations and future research

While the sample size of this study was relatively small ($N = 20$), this is consistent with the aims of qualitative research, which focuses on gaining in-depth, contextualised insights rather than producing generalisable findings. The goal was to explore farmworkers' lived experiences within the specific agricultural and geographic context of the Northern Cape. Although the findings cannot be generalised to all farmworkers in South Africa, they offer valuable insights that may be transferable to similar rural and agricultural settings. The richness of the data allows for a deeper understanding of job demands and resources that could inform future research and context-specific interventions.

Another limitation found in this study relates to a language barrier. As most participants spoke Setswana and were not fluent in the specified languages of study (English and Afrikaans), this led to challenges in communication. The necessity to translate or clarify questions consumed additional time and might have impacted the quality and clarity of the responses.

Furthermore, while the study successfully explored farmworkers' perceptions of their job demands and the resources available to them, it did not examine their perceptions of how these demands could be mitigated. Including participants' insights on potential strategies to reduce or manage job demands could have provided an even deeper understanding of practical interventions. Future research should consider incorporating this dimension to enrich the findings and offer actionable recommendations for the agricultural sector.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore farmworkers' perceptions of job demands and resources within the South African agricultural sector, with a particular focus on those working in rural areas. Through a qualitative approach, the study identified three key job demands: job scope and intensity, managing people and challenging working conditions. On the other hand, participants also recognised several job resources, including EAP initiatives, physical tools and equipment and opportunities for training and development. The findings reveal that while some farms provide valuable resources that support well-being and productivity, farmworkers continue to face high job demands that negatively impact their physical and emotional health. Particularly notable were challenges related to interpersonal conflict, heat exposure while using PPE and the emotional strain of supervisory duties. Considering these findings, farm management and policymakers must adopt a holistic and responsive approach to farmworker well-being. Enhancing workplace health and safety, such as by providing cooling aids, cold drinking water, sufficient shade and structured rest breaks, can reduce environmental and physical stress. Investing in training, conflict management and supportive HR practices can further strengthen employee engagement and morale. By addressing the demands placed on farmworkers and the available resources, agricultural employers can create more productive workplaces, ultimately contributing to long-term sectoral stability and improved worker well-being.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

V.S. conducted this study as part of her master's studies, and she was responsible for the data collection, data analysis, interpretation and writing of the dissertation. L.R. was the main supervisor of the study and was responsible for conceptualising the study; L.I.G. is a professor and co-supervisor of the study and responsible for the data analysis and interpretation and assisting with writing up the article for publication purposes.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, L.I.G., upon reasonable request.

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