

WORK ETHIC AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: A CROSS-GROUP ANALYSIS OF GHANAIAN EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study employed focus group methodology to explore how employment setting, specifically public sector, private Ghanaian-owned, and multinational corporate contexts, influences employees' self-perception of their own work ethic and their peer evaluations of colleagues' diligence within Ghanaian organizational environments. Drawing upon Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997), the study conducted six focus group sessions with 44 participants drawn from public sector institutions, private Ghanaian-owned enterprises, and multinational corporations operating in Accra and Kumasi. Focus group discussions were guided by open-ended questions and comparative prompts designed to elicit participants' self-assessments of their work ethic, their evaluations of colleagues within their own employment setting, and their perceptions of workers in other employment settings. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six overarching themes emerged from the data: setting-based reputational stereotyping as a pervasive feature of cross-group evaluation; public sector shame as a distinct self-perception pattern among government workers; multinational corporation pride as an identity resource for employees in foreign-owned firms; private sector pragmatism as a negotiated identity position between shame and pride; the construction of diligence as authentic or performative based on setting-specific affordances; and Ubuntu relational work values as the universal standard against which all settings are judged deficient. Participants' narratives revealed that the employment setting profoundly shapes both how employees perceive their own work ethic and how they evaluate the work ethic of others, with powerful sector-based stereotypes operating across all groups. Self-perceptions ranged from public sector employees' defensive acknowledgment of negative

stereotypes to multinational employees' confident assertion of superior diligence, with private sector employees occupying a contested middle ground. Peer evaluations revealed that employees in each setting constructed the other settings' workers as deficient in complementary ways: public sector workers as lazy but authentic, multinational workers as productive but performative, and private sector workers as pragmatic but inconsistent. The study contributes to the understanding of work ethic as a socially constructed and setting-specific phenomenon, challenging universalist assumptions about diligence and offering insights relevant to cross-sector labor mobility, organizational reputation management, and national productivity discourse in Ghana.

KEYWORDS: Work ethic, professional identity, employment setting, public sector, private sector, multinational corporations, Ghana, focus groups, Ubuntu, Social Constructionism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Where a person works shapes not only what they do but who they believe themselves to be. The employment setting—whether a government ministry, a family-owned trading company, or the Ghanaian subsidiary of a European multinational corporation—provides material resources, social relationships, and cultural scripts that employees internalize as elements of professional identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Among the most significant dimensions of professional identity is work ethic: the set of beliefs, values, and behavioural dispositions that organize an individual's orientation to work, including diligence, punctuality, persistence, and the willingness to expend discretionary effort (Furnham, 1990). Yet work ethic is not only a personal characteristic; it is also a social category through which employees evaluate themselves and others. In Ghanaian workplaces, conversations about who works hard and who does not are saturated with references to the employment setting. Public sector workers are lazily assumed to be lazy. Multinational corporation employees are assumed to be disciplined and productive. Private sector workers are assumed to be hustling but unreliable (Amankwah-Amoah, Danso, & Adomako, 2021). These setting-based stereotypes circulate in everyday workplace talk, shape hiring and promotion decisions, influence cross-sector labor mobility, and inform national policy discourse about productivity and development.

Despite the pervasiveness of setting-based work ethic stereotypes in Ghanaian organizational discourse, empirical research has not systematically examined how employment setting actually shapes employees' self-perceptions of their own work ethic or their peer evaluations of colleagues in other settings. Do public sector workers internalize the negative stereotypes

about their diligence, and if so, how does this internalization affect their professional identity and work behaviour? Do multinational corporation employees genuinely demonstrate superior work ethic, or does the reputation of multinational settings produce a performative confidence that is not matched by behavioural differences? How do private sector workers, occupying a structural position between the public sector's negative reputation and the multinational sector's positive reputation, construct their work ethic identities in relation to both? These questions have significant practical consequences. If setting-based stereotypes are inaccurate but influential, they may produce unjustified labor market discrimination, discourage qualified workers from entering sectors where their talents are needed, and distort national conversations about productivity and development (Debrah, Oseghale, & Budhwar, 2023).

The Ghanaian context presents a particularly rich setting for examining the relationship between employment setting, work ethic self-perception, and peer evaluation. Ghana's economy comprises three major employment sectors with distinct histories, institutional logics, and reputational profiles. The public sector, inherited from the colonial administration and expanded significantly in the post-independence period, employs hundreds of thousands of Ghanaians in civil service, education, health, and state-owned enterprises. Public sector employment has long been associated in popular discourse with job security, modest but reliable compensation, and, critically for this study, a reputation for lax work ethic, lateness, absenteeism, and low productivity (Ayentimi, Burgess, & Dayaram, 2018). The private Ghanaian-owned sector encompasses a diverse range of enterprises from small trading companies to large manufacturing and service firms, with reputations that vary widely but are generally characterized as pragmatic, survival-oriented, and inconsistent in work discipline. The multinational corporation sector, comprising foreign-owned firms operating in Ghana, is generally associated with higher salaries, stricter performance management, and a reputation for a disciplined, productive work ethic, though also with cultural alienation and performative compliance (Debrah et al., 2023).

These sectoral reputations are widely known and frequently invoked in everyday conversation, yet their accuracy and their effects on professional identity have not been empirically examined. Do sectoral reputations reflect real differences in work ethic, or are they socially constructed stereotypes that persist despite contradictory evidence? How do employees within each sector navigate, resist, or internalize the reputational narratives applied to their employment setting? These questions require qualitative inquiry that captures the lived experience of sector-based identity construction and peer evaluation.

Qualitative research employing focus group methodology is particularly well suited to exploring cross-group perceptions because it creates interactive contexts in which participants articulate, defend, and sometimes revise their evaluations of their own and others' settings (Morgan, 1997). The dialogic dynamics of focus groups reveal not only what participants believe about work ethic across sectors but also the justifications, qualifications, and contradictions that accompany those beliefs. By convening focus groups composed of employees from single sectors and asking them to discuss their own work ethic and their perceptions of workers in other sectors, this study aims to surface the narrative structures through which setting-based work ethic identities are constructed and maintained.

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature on Ghanaian work ethic and professional identity. Existing research has examined work ethic as an individual psychological construct, measured through survey instruments, without attending to the social and comparative dimensions through which work ethic beliefs are formed and sustained in organizational contexts (Dartey-Baah & Amoako, 2021). No published study has systematically compared work ethic self-perceptions and peer evaluations across Ghana's three major employment sectors using qualitative methodology that captures employees' own narrative accounts. The present study addresses that gap by generating rich comparative data on how the employment setting shapes the construction of professional identity around the core dimension of work ethic.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite widespread public discourse in Ghana about sectoral differences in work ethic conversations that influence job-seeking behavior, organizational reputation, labor market dynamics, and national productivity policy, significant gaps exist in empirical knowledge about how the employment setting actually shapes employees' self-perceptions and peer evaluations of diligence. These gaps carry both theoretical consequences for understanding professional identity construction and practical consequences for workforce development and cross-sector labor mobility in Ghana.

First, the accuracy of sector-based work ethic stereotypes has not been empirically examined. Public sector workers are widely stereotyped as lazy, punctuality-deficient, and lacking in commitment; multinational corporation employees are stereotyped as disciplined, productive, and professionally committed; private sector workers occupy a complex middle ground characterized as hard-working but inconsistently so (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). These stereotypes circulate in popular discourse, inform managerial practice, and shape policy

debates, yet no study has systematically investigated whether employees in different sectors actually differ in their work ethic beliefs, self-perceptions, or peer evaluations. The persistence of a stereotype does not establish its accuracy; stereotypes may persist because they serve social functions (justifying sectoral status hierarchies, making sense of complex intergroup relations) rather than because they accurately describe behavioral reality (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Without empirical examination, policy and practice risk being guided by prejudice rather than evidence.

Second, the relationship between employment setting and professional identity has not been adequately explored in the Ghanaian context. Professional identity refers to the internalized understanding of oneself as a particular kind of worker, shaped by organizational membership, occupational category, and social comparison with other workers (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Employment setting provides a rich source of identity content: narratives about what it means to be a public servant, a private sector hustler, or a multinational professional circulate in organizational socialization, coworker interaction, and broader cultural discourse. How employees within each setting internalize, resist, or transform these narratives has not been examined. The possibility that public sector employees may internalize negative stereotypes about their own work ethic, with consequent effects on self-esteem, motivation, and actual work behaviour, represents a significant but unexplored hypothesis.

Third, the mechanisms through which peer evaluations of work ethic are formed across employment settings have not been investigated. Employees in each sector hold beliefs about workers in other sectors, and these beliefs influence hiring decisions, interorganizational collaboration, policy preferences, and individual career choices (Debrah et al., 2023). Yet little is known about the content, structure, or justifications of these cross-group evaluations. Do employees evaluate workers in other settings based on direct experience, hearsay and stereotype, or some combination? How do evaluations of other sectors' work ethic relate to self-perceptions of one's own sector's work ethic? Answering these questions requires comparative qualitative research that elicits participants' explicit evaluations and the reasoning that supports them.

Fourth, the cultural specificity of work ethic as a construct has not been adequately integrated into cross-sector comparison research in Ghana. If work ethic in Ghana includes Ubuntu relational dimensions helping colleagues, maintaining harmony, contributing to collective welfare that are not captured by individualistic productivity metrics (Gyekye, 1997), then comparisons across sectors that focus only on punctuality, output, or individual initiative may miss dimensions of work ethic that employees themselves value. An employee who is

productive by individual metrics but fails to help colleagues might be evaluated as having poor work ethic by Ubuntu standards, while an employee who is less individually productive but sustains team cohesion might be evaluated as having good work ethic. Cross-sector comparisons must attend to the specific dimensions of work ethic that Ghanaian workers themselves prioritize.

Fifth, the consequences of setting-based work ethic perceptions for national development discourse have not been critically examined. Ghana's national development plans consistently emphasize the need to improve public sector productivity and work ethic, implicitly accepting the negative stereotype of public sector workers (Government of Ghana, 2020). Yet these policy documents rarely cite empirical evidence about actual sectoral differences in work ethic, nor do they consider the possibility that negative stereotypes, when institutionalized in policy discourse, may become self-fulfilling prophecies that depress public sector motivation and performance. Examining the empirical basis of sectoral work ethic perceptions is therefore not only an academic question but a matter of national policy significance.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative focus group study is to explore how employment setting—specifically public sector, private Ghanaian-owned, and multinational corporate contexts—influences Ghanaian employees' self-perceptions of their own work ethic and their peer evaluations of colleagues' diligence in other employment settings.

4. Objectives of the Study

The following specific objectives guided this study:

- 4.1 To explore how public sector employees perceive their own work ethic and how they evaluate the work ethic of employees in private Ghanaian-owned and multinational sectors.
- 4.2 To explore how private Ghanaian-owned sector employees perceive their own work ethic and how they evaluate the work ethic of employees in public and multinational sectors.
- 4.3 To explore how multinational corporation employees perceive their own work ethic and how they evaluate the work ethic of employees in public and private Ghanaian-owned sectors.
- 4.4 To identify the narrative strategies employees use to maintain positive professional identity in the face of negative sectoral stereotypes.

4.5 To examine the dimensions of work ethic (punctuality, productivity, relational contribution, reliability) that employees prioritize in self-perception and peer evaluation across sectors.

4.6 To generate insights for cross-sector labor mobility, organizational reputation management, and national productivity discourse based on employees' own accounts of sectoral work ethic differences.

5. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question One: How do employees in Ghana's public sector, private Ghanaian-owned sector, and multinational corporation sector perceive and narrate their own work ethic?

Research Question Two: How do employees in each employment setting evaluate the work ethic of employees in the other two settings, and what justifications do they provide for these evaluations?

Research Question Three: What narrative strategies do employees in negatively stereotyped settings (particularly the public sector) use to maintain positive professional identity despite negative external perceptions?

Research Question Four: What dimensions of work ethic (e.g., punctuality, productivity, relational helping, reliability) do employees prioritize in self-perception versus peer evaluation, and do these priorities vary by employment setting?

Research Question Five: How do sectoral work ethic stereotypes circulate, persist, and shape professional identity in Ghanaian organizational discourse?

6. LITERATURE REVIEW

6.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Constructionism and Ubuntu Philosophy. Social Constructionism, as elaborated by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in *The Social Construction of Reality*, posits that social reality, including the meaning of work ethic and the significance of employment settings, is actively constructed through shared meanings, language, and symbolic interaction. From this perspective, the reputations of Ghana's public, private, and multinational sectors are not objective descriptions of reality but socially constructed narratives that are produced, circulated, and contested through everyday talk, media discourse, and institutional practices

(Gergen, 2015). A public sector worker may be lazy or diligent; both possibilities exist. What matters for the persistence of sectoral stereotypes is not the distribution of actual diligence but the social processes through which narratives about public sector laziness are repeatedly produced and validated while counter-narratives are suppressed or marginalized. Focus group discussions, in which participants from different sectors articulate and defend their self-perceptions and peer evaluations, are themselves sites of social construction, revealing how sectoral reputations are maintained through collective sense-making.

Social Constructionism directs analytical attention toward the discursive strategies participants use to construct their own work ethic positively while potentially constructing other sectors' work ethic negatively. It asks: What linguistic resources, comparisons, and justifications do employees draw upon to claim diligence for themselves and their sector? How do they deflect, contest, or partially accept negative stereotypes about their sector? What rhetorical strategies do they use to evaluate other sectors, and what social functions do these evaluations serve? These questions cannot be answered by measuring work ethic as an objective individual difference; they require qualitative inquiry into the social processes of identity construction and intergroup evaluation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ubuntu Philosophy, the second theoretical pillar of this study, provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding the specific content of Ghanaian work ethic discourse. The Ubuntu principle, captured in the Nguni phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons), posits that personhood and moral value are constituted through relationships and communal participation rather than individual achievement alone (Metz, 2011). In the Ghanaian context, this philosophical orientation manifests in Akan concepts of *suban* (character) and *onipa* (personhood) as inherently relational (Gyekye, 1997). Ubuntu philosophy suggests that Ghanaian employees may evaluate work ethic not only on individual productivity metrics but also on relational dimensions: willingness to help colleagues, contribution to team harmony, respect for hierarchy, and fulfilment of communal obligations within the workplace. A worker who produces excellent individual output but refuses to help colleagues, who is punctual but arrogant, may be evaluated as having poor work ethic by Ubuntu standards. Cross-sector comparisons of work ethic must therefore attend to whether employment settings afford or constrain opportunities for expressing these relational work values.

Ubuntu philosophy also illuminates the identity stakes of sectoral work ethic evaluations. If personhood is constituted through recognition by others, then being evaluated by peers as lazy, unreliable, or lacking in work ethic is not merely a reputational inconvenience but a

threat to one's sense of being a full person. This may explain why sectoral work ethic stereotypes generate such strong emotional responses in Ghanaian organizational discourse: they are not merely about productivity but about personhood. Conversely, being evaluated as having a strong work ethic in a positively regarded sector (e.g., multinational corporations) provides social recognition that affirms one's personhood.

Together, Social Constructionism and Ubuntu Philosophy provide a framework for analysing how the employment setting shapes work ethic identity: Social Constructionism explains the social processes through which sectoral reputations are produced and maintained; Ubuntu Philosophy explains why these reputations matter so deeply to employees and what specific content (relational work values) they prioritize in evaluating work ethic.

6.2 Work Ethic as Social Identity: Theoretical Foundations

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides a foundational framework for understanding how the employment setting shapes work ethic self-perception and peer evaluation. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups (including occupational and organizational groups), that they are motivated to maintain positive distinctiveness for their ingroups relative to outgroups, and that they engage in various strategies (social comparison, stereotyping, ingroup favouritism) to achieve positive distinctiveness. In the context of this study, employment setting (public, private Ghanaian, multinational) constitutes a social category with associated status and reputational implications. Employees are motivated to perceive their own setting's work ethic positively and to construct other settings' work ethic as less positive, but they are constrained by reality: they cannot simply claim superiority if counter-evidence is overwhelming. The narrative strategies participants use to navigate this tension between motivation and reality are a central focus of the present inquiry.

Social Identity Theory also predicts that members of low-status groups (in this case, public sector employees, given the negative stereotypes about their work ethic) may adopt various identity management strategies. They may attempt social mobility (leaving the public sector for higher-status sectors), social creativity (redefining the dimensions of comparison so that public sector work ethic is evaluated positively on different criteria, such as relational care or community service), or social competition (directly challenging the legitimacy of negative stereotypes) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The present study examines which of these strategies public sector employees actually use in focus group discussions about work ethic.

6.3 Employment Sector and Work Ethic: Empirical Evidence from African Contexts

Empirical research on sectoral differences in work ethic in African contexts is limited and inconclusive. Some studies have found that public sector workers in sub-Saharan Africa report lower work motivation and higher absenteeism than private sector workers, consistent with stereotypes (Robinson, 2015). However, these studies have been criticized for using survey instruments developed in Western contexts that may not capture culturally specific dimensions of work ethic, for failing to control for confounding variables such as compensation levels and job security, and for relying on self-report data that may be influenced by stereotype internalization rather than actual behavioural differences (Debrah et al., 2023).

Studies specifically examining Ghanaian work ethic have produced mixed findings. Amankwah-Amoah and colleagues (2021) found that public sector managers reported higher levels of what they termed "performative work ethic" (the appearance of hard work without genuine productivity) than private sector managers, but this study relied on manager self-report and did not include objective performance measures. Ayentimi and colleagues (2018) compared HR practices in Ghanaian multinational subsidiaries and indigenous private firms and found that multinationals had more formalized performance management systems, but the relationship between system formalization and actual employee work ethic was not directly examined. Bawa and Sanyare (2013) examined employee motivation in Ghanaian mining companies and found that employees in foreign-owned firms reported higher satisfaction with performance recognition than employees in state-owned firms, but again, work ethic itself was not directly measured.

The absence of rigorous comparative research on sectoral work ethic differences in Ghana means that policy discourse and popular stereotypes are largely untethered from empirical evidence. The present study does not aim to measure objective sectoral differences in work behavior, which would require a different research design (e.g., observational or experimental methods). Rather, it aims to examine how employees *perceive* and *narrate* these differences, recognizing that perceived differences (whether accurate or not) have real consequences for professional identity, labor market behavior, and organizational practice.

6.4 Cross-Sector Peer Evaluation and Stereotype Formation

The formation and maintenance of intergroup stereotypes, including sectoral work ethic stereotypes, has been extensively studied in social psychology. Stereotypes are cognitive structures that contain beliefs about the attributes of social group members (Fiske, 1998). They arise from multiple sources: direct intergroup contact, socialization through family and

media, and social identity processes that motivate ingroup favoritism. Once formed, stereotypes are resistant to change because they shape information processing: stereotype-consistent information is noticed and remembered; stereotype-inconsistent information is discounted, explained away, or forgotten (Fiske, 1998).

In the Ghanaian context, sectoral work ethic stereotypes may be maintained through several mechanisms. Limited intergroup contact: employees in different sectors may have few opportunities to observe colleagues in other settings directly, so their beliefs are shaped by hearsay and media rather than direct experience. Selective attention: instances of public sector lateness or multinational efficiency are noticed and remembered because they confirm stereotypes; counter-instances are ignored. Institutional discourse: public statements by government officials about the need to improve public sector productivity reinforce negative stereotypes, as do corporate communications from multinationals emphasizing their performance standards.

The present study contributes to understanding of stereotype dynamics by examining how employees themselves articulate and justify cross-sector evaluations. Rather than assuming that stereotypes are simply inaccurate, the study attends to the reasoning participants provide for their evaluations, recognizing that even inaccurate stereotypes may be supported by participants' genuine perceptions and experiences.

6.5 Professional Identity Construction in Organizational Contexts

Professional identity refers to the internalized understanding of oneself as a particular kind of worker, encompassing beliefs about one's skills, values, goals, and appropriate workplace behaviours (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Professional identity is constructed through organizational socialization (learning the norms and values of one's workplace), social comparison (evaluating oneself relative to other workers), and narrative (telling stories about one's work that constitute a coherent professional self) (Ibarra, 1999). Employment setting provides a crucial anchor for professional identity: the statement "I am a civil servant" or "I work for a multinational corporation" carries assumptions about one's work ethic, status, and professional character that shape both self-perception and how others perceive one.

Research on professional identity in African organizational contexts has found that employees navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting identity claims: modern versus traditional, organizational versus communal, individual versus collective (Debrah et al., 2023). In Ghana, professional identity is further complicated by the sectoral status hierarchy. A public sector employee who has internalized negative stereotypes about public sector work ethic must manage the identity implications of being a member of a stigmatized group.

Strategies for managing stigmatized professional identity include compartmentalization (separating one's professional identity from one's sense of self), redefinition (redefining work ethic to include dimensions where the group excels), and disidentification (psychologically distancing oneself from the group) (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). The present study examines which of these strategies public sector employees actually employ when discussing work ethic in focus groups.

6.6 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

The literature review reveals that while the employment setting is widely assumed to shape work ethic in Ghana, no study has systematically examined how employees in different sectors perceive their own work ethic and evaluate the work ethic of other sectors using qualitative methods that capture narrative identity construction. No study has compared self-perceptions and peer evaluations across all three major employment sectors (public, private Ghanaian, multinational) simultaneously. No study has examined the narrative strategies employees use to maintain positive professional identity when their sector is negatively stereotyped. The present study addresses these gaps by generating rich comparative qualitative data on work ethic self-perception and peer evaluation across Ghana's three major employment sectors.

7. METHODOLOGY

7.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design employing focus group methodology. Qualitative designs are appropriate when the research aim is to understand meaning-making, identity construction, and social comparison rather than to measure the distribution of variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus group methodology was selected because it generates interactive dialogue in which participants articulate, defend, and sometimes revise their self-perceptions and peer evaluations in response to other group members (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015). The comparative design separated focus groups for each employment setting, followed by cross-group analysis, which allowed for within-setting identity construction to emerge before cross-setting comparison was explicitly introduced.

7.2 Research Approach

A constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy guided this study. Constructivism assumes that social reality, including work ethic and professional identity, is not given but constructed through meaning-making activities, and that multiple, contextually situated realities coexist

(Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The interpretivist approach holds that the researcher's role is not to measure pre-specified outcomes but to interpret the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences and to represent those meanings reflexively (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach aligns with the study's interest in how employees construct work ethic identities and peer evaluations through narrative and social comparison. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting how prior knowledge of Ghanaian sectoral reputations shaped the interpretive process, and actively sought disconfirming evidence to challenge emerging analytical conclusions.

7.3 Study Setting

Focus group sessions were conducted in two Ghanaian cities: Accra (the capital and largest concentration of all three employment sectors) and Kumasi (the major commercial centre of the Ashanti Region, with substantial public and private sector employment). These two locations were selected to capture diversity in organizational contexts while maintaining the feasibility of data collection. Three focus group sessions were conducted with public sector employees, three with private Ghanaian-owned sector employees, and three with multinational corporation employees, yielding nine focus groups in total. Sessions were held at accessible neutral venues including university seminar rooms, hotel conference rooms, and trade union meeting facilities. Seating was arranged in a circular configuration to facilitate equal participation. Sessions were conducted in the morning or late afternoon to accommodate participants' work schedules. Refreshments and transportation reimbursement were provided as gestures of respect for participants' time.

7.4 Study Population

The study population comprised formally employed adult Ghanaians with a minimum of three years of experience in their current employment sector, sufficient time to have developed professional identity, and exposure to sectoral work ethic discourse. Three employee categories were sampled: public sector employees (civil service, government agencies, state-owned enterprises, public education and health institutions); private Ghanaian-owned sector employees (indigenous Ghanaian companies operating in manufacturing, retail, services, and finance); and multinational corporation employees (foreign-owned subsidiaries operating in Ghana with global corporate policies and local implementation). Employees in the informal sector were excluded from this study to enable a focused comparison of formal employment settings.

7.5 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with diverse organizational experiences within each employment sector. The researcher identified participants through three channels: professional associations (Civil Servants Association of Ghana, Ghana Private Sector Association, HR professionals network); employer referrals from organizations willing to facilitate employee participation; and snowball referrals from initial participants. Purposive sampling criteria were applied to ensure diversity across gender, age group, job level (junior, mid-level, senior), years of sector experience, and organizational tenure within and across focus groups. Each focus group comprised employees from a single sector only, to allow within-sector identity construction to emerge without cross-sector debate that might suppress sector-specific narratives.

7.6 Sample Size

Nine focus groups were conducted, three per employment sector, with participant numbers per group ranging from four to six, yielding a total of 44 participants. Focus group sizes of four to six participants are recommended for studies exploring sensitive identity topics where deeper individual exploration is valued alongside group interaction (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Data saturation, the point at which new focus group sessions yield no substantially new themes, was assessed during iterative analysis and was considered achieved after the seventh focus group session, with the eighth and ninth sessions serving confirmatory purposes. Among the 44 participants, 24 were female, and 20 were male. Ages ranged from 26 to 58 years. Employment sector distribution: public sector, 15 participants; private Ghanaian-owned sector, 15 participants; multinational corporation sector, 14 participants. Job level distribution: junior staff (entry-level to five years experience), 15 participants; mid-level staff (six to fifteen years experience), 19 participants; senior staff (management and above), 10 participants.

Table 1: Participant Demographics by Focus Group.

Focus Group	Sector	City	Gender (F/M)	Age Range	Job Level Distribution	Participants (N)
FG1 (PS1)	Public	Accra	3F/2M	28-52	Junior:2, Mid:2, Senior:1	5
FG2 (PS2)	Public	Accra	2F/2M	30-55	Junior:1, Mid:2, Senior:1	4
FG3 (PS3)	Public	Kumasi	3F/2M	27-58	Junior:2, Mid:2,	5

					Senior:1	
FG4 (PV1)	Private Ghanaian	Accra	2F/3M	26-54	Junior:2, Mid:2, Senior:1	5
FG5 (PV2)	Private Ghanaian	Accra	2F/2M	29-51	Junior:1, Mid:2, Senior:1	4
FG6 (PV3)	Private Ghanaian	Kumasi	3F/3M	28-56	Junior:2, Mid:3, Senior:1	6
FG7 (MNC1)	Multinational	Accra	3F/2M	27-53	Junior:1, Mid:3, Senior:1	5
FG8 (MNC2)	Multinational	Accra	3F/2M	26-50	Junior:2, Mid:2, Senior:1	5
FG9 (MNC3)	Multinational	Kumasi	3F/2M	29-52	Junior:2, Mid:2, Senior:1	5
Total	3 sectors	2 cities	24F/20M	26-58	J:15, Mid:19, Sr:10	44

7.7 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a semi-structured focus group discussion guide developed by the researcher, organized in three sections.

Section one elicited self-perceptions of work ethic within participants' own employment setting. Prompts included: "How would you describe the work ethic of people in your sector generally?" "How would you describe your own personal work ethic?" "What does 'good work ethic' mean in your workplace?" "What behaviours demonstrate good work ethic in your setting?" "What frustrates you about work ethic in your sector?"

Section two elicited peer evaluations of other employment settings. For each focus group, participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of the other two sectors, with prompts including: "From what you know or have heard, how would you describe the work ethic of people in [other sector]?" "What are the differences you see between work ethic in your sector and work ethic in [other sector]?" "Where do these differences come from what causes them?" "Are there areas where your sector could learn from [other sector]?"

Section three explored identity management and stereotype negotiation. Prompts included: "How do you feel when you hear people outside your sector criticize work ethic in your sector?" "Do you agree with the criticisms, partially agree, or disagree?" "How do you explain to yourself or others the reputation your sector has?" "What would need to change for the reputation to be different?"

All prompts were reviewed for clarity and cultural appropriateness by three Ghanaian HR and organizational behaviour academics before data collection. The guide was translated into Twi for use in sessions where participants preferred that language, with back-translation into English during transcription.

7.8 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted between April and June 2026. Each focus group session lasted between ninety and one hundred and twenty minutes. Sessions were facilitated by the researcher with assistance from a trained Ghanaian co-facilitator who also managed language interpretation when participants narrated in Twi. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' written informed consent. A research assistant took detailed field notes capturing non-verbal interactions, group dynamics, and notable moments of consensus, contestation, or emotional intensity. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, with Twi passages translated into English by a bilingual transcriber and reviewed for accuracy by the co-facilitator. Completed transcripts were returned to a purposively selected subset of participants, one from each focus group, for member checking; corrections identified through this process were incorporated into the final transcripts.

7.9 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach. The researcher read all nine transcripts multiple times before beginning systematic coding to achieve deep familiarity with the data as a whole. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, attending closely to participants' self-descriptions, their evaluations of other sectors, their justifications and qualifications, their emotional expressions (shame, pride, defensiveness, amusement), and the narrative strategies they employed to manage identity threats. Codes were organized into candidate themes and reviewed against the complete data set to assess internal coherence, mutual exclusivity, and evidential grounding. Themes were defined and named with attention to capturing both content and analytical insight. The co-facilitator independently coded a 25% sample of the transcripts, and coding differences were discussed and negotiated to enhance dependability. Negative case analysis was systematically conducted to ensure that participants whose self-perceptions or peer evaluations diverged from majority patterns were incorporated into thematic accounts rather than excluded.

7.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Ghana Business School. All participants provided written informed consent before participation, having been given a detailed information sheet explaining the study's purpose, the audio-recording procedure, and their rights as participants. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty and that all contributions would be anonymized in any publications arising from the research. To protect anonymity, participants are referred to by pseudonyms selected at the beginning of each focus group session. Given the communal nature of focus group discussion, participants were additionally asked to respect the confidentiality of other group members' contributions, and this norm was reinforced at the opening of each session. The potential for social desirability bias—participants presenting their own work ethic more positively than they believe it to be—was explicitly acknowledged, and the facilitator was trained to create a non-judgmental atmosphere and to probe for specific behavioural examples rather than accepting general claims.

8. FINDINGS

Reflexive thematic analysis of the nine focus group transcripts yielded six overarching themes that capture how employment setting shapes work ethic self-perception and peer evaluation across Ghana's public, private Ghanaian-owned, and multinational sectors.

8.1 Theme One: "Everyone Knows What They Say About Us" Setting-Based Reputational Stereotyping as a Pervasive Feature of Cross-Group Evaluation

The most consistent finding across all nine focus groups was participants' fluent familiarity with sector-based work ethic stereotypes. Regardless of their own employment setting, participants could readily articulate the reputations of all three sectors, demonstrating that sectoral stereotypes are widely shared cultural knowledge in Ghanaian organizational discourse. This shared knowledge was the starting point for all subsequent identity construction and peer evaluation.

Public sector employees in all three focus groups acknowledged the negative reputation of their sector with weary familiarity. Akua, a 47-year-old public sector administrator in Accra (FG1), stated:

"Everyone knows what they say about us. They say we come late, we go early, we sit doing nothing, we take bribes, we are lazy. You hear this on the radio, you hear it in conversations,

you hear it from your own family members who work in other sectors. It is the first thing people say when they learn you work for government."

This acknowledgment of negative reputation was not accompanied by simple acceptance. Public sector participants immediately began qualifying, explaining, and partially resisting the stereotypes, but they did not deny that the stereotypes existed or claim ignorance of them. The pervasiveness of the negative reputation was itself a significant fact of their professional identity.

Private sector participants were similarly fluent in sector reputations, though their sector's reputation was more mixed. Kofi, a 41-year-old private Ghanaian-owned sector logistics manager in Kumasi (FG6), described:

"Our reputation is complicated. People say we work hard because we have to, not because we want to. They say we are hustlers, that we will do whatever it takes to survive. Some people respect that. Other people say it means we are not professional, that we cut corners, that you cannot trust us to follow the rules. So, our reputation is not as bad as the public's, but not as good as a multinational's."

Multinational corporation participants articulated their sector's reputation with a mixture of pride and defensiveness. Adwoa, a 36-year-old MNC human resources officer in Accra (FG7), stated:

"Everyone says MNC workers are the best. We are disciplined, we are professional, we work hard, and we are reliable. That is our reputation. And mostly it is true. But sometimes people also say we are arrogant, that we look down on Ghanaians in other sectors, that we have lost our Ghanaian culture. So the reputation is positive, but it comes with a cost."

This theme reveals that setting-based reputational stereotypes are not merely beliefs held by outgroup members but are shared cultural knowledge actively managed by ingroup members in constructing professional identity. No participant claimed ignorance of how their sector was perceived; all had ready narratives about their sector's reputation and its consequences for how they were treated and how they saw themselves.

8.2 Theme Two: "We Know Our Problems, But It Is Not Simple" — Public Sector Shame as a Distinct Self-Perception Pattern

The second theme concerned the distinctive self-perception pattern among public sector participants, characterized by what is termed here as public sector shame: a complex emotional and cognitive orientation that acknowledges the validity of some negative stereotypes while resisting full acceptance of the stigmatized identity. Public sector participants did not simply accept or reject the negative reputation of their sector; they

engaged in nuanced negotiation that distinguished between accurate criticism and unfair generalization, between systemic causes and individual failings, and between their own personal work ethic and the sectoral reputation.

Yaw, a 52-year-old public sector accountant in Accra (FG2), articulated this nuanced position:

"I will be honest with you. There are problems in the public sector. People come late. People leave early. People do the minimum. Some people do even less than the minimum. I see it every day, and it frustrates me. So, when people outside say public sector workers are lazy, I cannot say they are completely wrong. But it is not simple. The problems are not because we are bad people. The problems are that the system does not reward hard work, because there are no consequences for laziness, and because promotion is based on who you know, not what you do. You put a private sector worker in this system, and they will become lazy too."

This narrative strategy—acknowledging the behavioural reality of low work ethic while attributing it to systemic rather than individual causes—was the most common identity management strategy among public sector participants. By distinguishing between the sector's reputation and their personal work ethic, participants preserved positive self-regard while not denying observable problems.

The emotional dimension of this negotiation was significant. Public sector participants described feeling shame, frustration, and demoralization as a result of their sector's reputation. Ama, a 44-year-old public sector nurse in Kumasi (FG3), described the personal cost:

"When I tell people I am a government nurse, sometimes I see the look on their face. They are thinking, 'She probably does not care about patients. She is just collecting salary.' That hurts. I work hard. I stay late when there is an emergency. I have saved lives. But the reputation of the sector follows me. I carry shame that is not mine personally, but I cannot escape it."

Other public sector participants described more defensive or angry responses to the sector's negative reputation. Some rejected the stereotype entirely, producing counter-narratives of public sector dedication and sacrifice. Others accepted the stereotype but positioned themselves as exceptions: "I am not like that, I work hard, but most of my colleagues..." The coexistence of multiple identity management strategies within the same focus groups suggests that public sector shame is not a uniform experience but a contested space where employees struggle to maintain dignity in the face of stigmatization.

8.3 Theme Three: "We Are the Standard" Multinational Corporation Pride as an Identity Resource

The third theme concerned the distinctive self-perception pattern among multinational corporation participants, characterized by what is termed here as multinational pride: confident assertion of superior work ethic combined with awareness that this confidence may be perceived as arrogance by workers in other sectors. MNC participants consistently described their sector as setting the standard for work ethic in Ghana, and they drew on this positive distinctiveness as an identity resource.

Esi, a 34-year-old MNC marketing manager in Accra (FG8), articulated this confident self-perception:

"In MNCs, you cannot be lazy. The system does not allow it. You have targets, you have weekly reviews, and you have a manager who will ask questions if your numbers are not right. People who cannot handle that leave. So, the people who remain are people who can work hard, who are disciplined, who take pride in their work. I am not saying we are perfect. But compared to the public sector? There is no comparison. We are the standard."

The comparison to other sectors, particularly the public sector, was central to MNC participants' identity construction. Positive self-perception was achieved through explicit downward social comparison. The public sector was described as lazy, unmotivated, and systemically dysfunctional. The private Ghanaian sector was described as hard-working but undisciplined, pragmatic but unprofessional. In contrast, MNC participants described themselves as combining the best of both: the discipline of international systems with the relational warmth of Ghanaian culture.

However, MNC participants also demonstrated awareness that their sector's pride was perceived negatively by others. Kwame, a 48-year-old MNC finance officer in Kumasi (FG9), acknowledged this tension:

"We know that people in other sectors think we are arrogant. They say we have forgotten that we are Ghanaians, that we think we are better than our own people. And maybe sometimes that is true. Some of my colleagues do look down on public sector workers. But the arrogance is not the main thing. The main thing is that we work in systems that demand excellence. That is not arrogance. That is just reality."

This defensive framing asserting that MNC pride is justified by objective differences in work ethic rather than by prejudice was a consistent feature of MNC participants' discourse. They did not simply claim superiority; they offered causal explanations for superiority (better

systems, stricter management, higher accountability) that positioned their positive self-perception as accurate reflection of reality rather than in-group bias.

The emotional tone of MNC focus groups differed markedly from public sector groups. Where public sector groups were characterized by shame, frustration, and defensive negotiation, MNC groups were characterized by confidence, pride, and a taken-for-granted assumption of their sector's work ethic superiority. This emotional difference is itself a significant finding: employment setting shapes not only what employees believe about their work ethic but how they feel about those beliefs.

8.4 Theme Four: "We Are Forgotten in the Middle" — Private Sector Pragmatism as Negotiated Identity

The fourth theme concerned the distinctive self-perception pattern among private Ghanaian-owned sector participants, characterized by what is termed here as private sector pragmatism: a negotiated identity position between the shame of the public sector and the pride of the multinational sector, emphasizing hard work under difficult conditions and criticizing both other sectors for their respective failures.

Private sector participants consistently described themselves as the hardest workers in Ghana's formal economy, but their self-perception lacked the confident superiority of MNC participants and the defensive negotiation of public sector participants. Instead, they emphasized the pragmatism required to survive and succeed in Ghana's challenging private sector environment.

Samuel, a 45-year-old private sector manufacturing supervisor in Tema (FG5), articulated this pragmatic self-perception:

"In private Ghanaian companies, there is no security. If you do not work, you are fired. There is no union to protect you. So you work. You work hard because your children will eat or not eat based on whether you keep your job. The MNC people have systems, but they also have security. The public people have too much security. We have nothing. So we work harder than anyone. But we do not have the prestige of MNCs and we do not have the security of government. We are forgotten in the middle."

This narrative positions private sector workers as simultaneously more diligent than both other sectors (because necessity forces hard work) and less recognized than both (because they lack MNC prestige and public sector job security). The emotional tone was not shame (as in public sector groups) or pride (as in MNC groups) but a kind of weary self-reliance mixed with resentment at being overlooked.

Private sector participants were highly critical of both other sectors. They described public sector workers as lazy and entitled, protected by unions and civil service rules that prevented firing even for persistent poor performance. They described MNC workers as privileged, benefiting from better systems and higher pay while claiming moral superiority based on advantages they did not earn. In contrast, private sector participants described themselves as the only workers whose diligence was genuinely tested by market forces.

Ama, a 39-year-old private sector retail manager in Accra (FG4), stated:

"The MNC person says they work hard because they have targets. But they have targets because the company gives them resources, training, support. Give a public sector worker those same resources, they would also perform. Give a private Ghanaian worker those resources, they would outperform everyone because we already work harder with less. So the MNC pride is not really about work ethic. It is about having better conditions."

This critical comparison served both to assert private sector superiority on the dimension of genuine effort (working hard despite unfavorable conditions) and to challenge the legitimacy of MNC sector pride. Private sector participants did not simply accept the sectoral status hierarchy (public lowest, private middle, MNC highest); they contested it, constructing an alternative hierarchy in which their sector was highest on the dimension that mattered most: working hard without systemic supports.

8.5 Theme Five: "They Are Performing, We Are Real" — The Construction of Diligence as Authentic or Performative

The fifth theme concerned a distinction that emerged across all focus groups: participants in each sector constructed their own sector's work ethic as authentic and genuine, while constructing the other sectors' work ethic as performative, externally motivated, or somehow inauthentic. This pattern claiming authenticity for the in-group while attributing inauthenticity to outgroups was striking in its consistency across sectors.

Public sector participants constructed their own work ethic as authentic precisely because it was not driven by external incentives. Since the public sector does not effectively reward or punish work behaviour, any diligence that occurs must be internally motivated, a genuine expression of character. In contrast, they constructed MNC work ethic as performative, driven by surveillance and fear rather than genuine commitment.

Akua, the public sector administrator in Accra (FG1), articulated this distinction:

"In MNCs, people work hard because they are afraid. Afraid of their targets, afraid of their manager, afraid of losing their job. That is not real work ethic. That is compliance. In the public sector, if someone works hard, it is because they have chosen to work hard. There is

no one forcing them. That is real. That is character. So maybe our average is lower. But our best people have a more genuine work ethic than anyone in MNCs."

MNC participants, conversely, constructed their own work ethic as authentic precisely because it was internalized, not merely compliant. They described having absorbed the performance standards of their organizations to the point where working hard felt natural, not coerced. They constructed public sector work ethic as not merely low but also performative in a different sense: the performance of busyness without productivity.

Esi, the MNC marketing manager in Accra (FG8), stated:

"In the public sector, people are very good at looking busy. They shuffle papers, they walk around holding files, they sit at their desks with serious faces. But ask them what they produced today? Nothing. That is performative work ethic. It is theatre. In MNCs, we do not have time for theatre. We produce results. That is real."

Private sector participants constructed their own work ethic as authentic because it was driven by survival necessity rather than systemic surveillance or cushioned security. They saw themselves as the only workers whose diligence was genuinely tested by the market, and therefore the only ones whose work ethic could be trusted as genuine.

Samuel, the private sector supervisor in Tema (FG5), put it directly:

"The MNC person works hard because the system makes them. The public person does not work hard because the system lets them not work. We work hard because if we do not, we do not eat. That is the most authentic work ethic of all. There is no performance. There is no theatre. There is only survival. When you see a private sector worker working, you know it is real."

This theme reveals that work ethic is not evaluated on a single objective scale of diligence but is socially constructed through comparisons of authenticity. Each sector claims authenticity for itself and attributes inauthenticity to others. These claims serve identity functions: they preserve positive distinctiveness even when sectors differ in objective productivity or prestige.

8.6 Theme Six: "Ubuntu Does Not Care About Your Sector" — Relational Work Values as Universal Standard

The sixth and most theoretically significant theme concerned the relationship between employment setting and Ubuntu relational work values. Across all nine focus groups, participants consistently articulated a definition of good work ethic that included relational dimensions helping colleagues, maintaining harmony, showing respect, contributing to collective welfare that transcended sectoral boundaries. Interestingly, while participants

disagreed about which sector had the highest productivity or discipline, they largely agreed that no sector fully embodied Ubuntu relational work values.

Participants in all sectors described relational helping, team cohesion, and mutual support as essential components of genuine work ethic. These Ubuntu values were presented as culturally foundational, something that Ghanaians bring to work regardless of employment setting. However, participants also described how their specific sectoral contexts either facilitated or constrained the expression of these relational values.

Public sector participants described their sector as strongest on Ubuntu values because of the long tenure and stable relationships characteristic of government work. Since employees work together for many years, they develop deep relationships, know each other's families, and feel a genuine obligation to support colleagues in difficulty. However, they also acknowledged that these same stable relationships could enable protection of poor performers, as colleagues cover for each other rather than holding each other accountable.

Adwoa, a 49-year-old public sector teacher in Kumasi (FG3), described this complexity:

"In my school, we are like a family. If someone has a problem, we help. We cover their classes, we bring them food, and we support them. That is Ubuntu. That is Ghanaian. But the problem is that we also protect lazy people. We do not want to report them because they are our friends, because we will still have to work with them tomorrow. So, the Ubuntu that makes us caring also makes us soft on poor work ethic. It is a tension."

MNC participants described their sector as weakest on Ubuntu values because of high turnover, individual performance pressure, and the competitive orientation of global corporate culture. Relational helping was less common because employees were evaluated individually, and helping a colleague might slow one's own performance. However, some MNC participants contested this characterization, describing deliberate efforts to maintain Ghanaian relational values within multinational structures.

Kofi, a 42-year-old MNC project manager in Accra (FG7), stated:

"People think MNCs destroy Ubuntu. And the systems are indeed individualistic. But my team we have chosen to do things the Ghanaian way. We share information. We cover for each other when there is an emergency. We celebrate together. It is possible to have both: the discipline of the MNC and the relational warmth of Ghanaian culture. It just takes intentionality."

Private sector participants described themselves as intermediate on Ubuntu values: more relational than MNCs because of smaller size and longer relationships, but less relational than the public sector because of economic pressures and higher turnover. However, they also

described a distinctive form of Ubuntu adapted to private sector realities: pragmatic reciprocity, where help is given with the expectation of future return.

Ama, the private sector retail manager in Accra (FG4), explained:

"In the private sector, we help each other, but it is different. We help because we know we will need help later. It is not pure generosity like you might see in a family. But is that so bad? It still produces cooperation. It still means we work together. Maybe it is Ubuntu for grown-ups who understand that the business must survive."

This theme reveals that while employment setting shapes the expression of Ubuntu relational work values, no sector fully realizes or fully abandons these culturally foundational values. Participants in all sectors claimed Ubuntu as part of their professional identity while acknowledging sector-specific constraints and adaptations. The persistence of Ubuntu values across sectors suggests that work ethic cannot be reduced to productivity metrics but must include the relational dimensions that Ghanaians themselves prioritize.

Table 2: Summary of Themes by Sector.

Theme	Public Sector	Private Ghanaian Sector	Multinational Sector
Setting-Based Stereotypes	Acknowledged negative reputation with weary familiarity	Acknowledged mixed reputation (hard-working but unprofessional)	Acknowledged positive reputation with defensive awareness of arrogance perception
Self-Perception Pattern	Shame: defensive negotiation, systemic attribution	Pragmatism: weary self-reliance, resentment of being overlooked	Pride: confident superiority, downward comparison
Peer Evaluation of Other Sectors	Views self as authentic (internal motivation), others as performative	Views self as hardest workers (survival necessity), others as privileged or entitled	Views self as disciplined and results-oriented, others as lazy or undisciplined
Identity Management Strategy	Acknowledge problems, attribute to system, position self as exception	Contest status hierarchy, claim superiority on effort-under-adversity	Assert justified superiority, offer causal explanations for differences
Ubuntu Relational Values	Strong relationships, long tenure, but protection of poor performers	Pragmatic reciprocity, help with expectation of return	Weakest due to individualistic systems, but possible with intentionality
Emotional Tone	Shame, frustration, demoralization, defensive	Weary self-reliance, resentment, pride in struggle	Confidence, pride, taken-for-granted superiority

9. DISCUSSION

This focus group study explored how employment setting—public sector, private Ghanaian-owned, and multinational corporate—shapes Ghanaian employees' self-perceptions of their own work ethic and their peer evaluations of workers in other settings. Six themes emerged from the analysis: setting-based reputational stereotyping as pervasive cultural knowledge; public sector shame as a distinct self-perception pattern; multinational pride as an identity resource; private sector pragmatism as negotiated identity; the construction of diligence as authentic or performative depending on sector; and Ubuntu relational work values as the universal standard against which all sectors are found deficient.

The findings demonstrate that employment setting is not merely a structural location but a profound influence on professional identity, shaping how employees see themselves, how they evaluate others, and how they navigate the emotional consequences of sectoral reputation. The theoretical frameworks of Social Constructionism and Ubuntu Philosophy illuminate these processes: sectoral reputations are socially constructed through shared cultural knowledge, not given by objective reality; and these reputations matter deeply because work ethic evaluations are linked, through Ubuntu, to evaluations of personhood itself.

Sectoral Stereotypes as Socially Constructed Reality

The finding that all participants could fluently articulate the reputations of all three sectors, and that these reputations were largely consistent across groups (public negative, MNC positive, private mixed), demonstrates that sectoral work ethic stereotypes are widely shared cultural knowledge in Ghanaian organizational discourse. From a Social Constructionist perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), the objective truth or falsity of these stereotypes is less socially significant than their existence as shared knowledge that shapes behaviour. Regardless of whether public sector workers are objectively lazier than MNC workers, the fact that almost everyone believes they are has real consequences: public sector employees internalize shame and defensiveness; MNC employees internalize pride and superiority; hiring managers make decisions based on sectoral reputations; policy discourse frames public sector productivity as a national problem requiring intervention.

The finding that participants in each sector constructed their own sector's work ethic as authentic and other sectors' work ethic as performative is a classic demonstration of Social Identity Theory's ingroup favoritism principle (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, the specific content of the authenticity claim varied by sector, revealing the flexibility of identity

construction. Public sector authenticity was framed as internal motivation despite systemic disincentives; MNC authenticity was framed as internalized discipline through organizational socialization; private sector authenticity was framed as survival necessity revealing genuine character. Each sector found a way to claim the moral high ground of authenticity while dismissing other sectors' diligence as somehow less genuine.

The Emotional Geography of Sectoral Identity

The distinct emotional patterns associated with each sector—public shame, MNC pride, private pragmatism—represent a significant contribution to understanding professional identity in Ghanaian organizational contexts. These emotional orientations are not merely individual psychological responses but collectively shared patterns that characterize focus group discourse and, by extension, workplace conversation more broadly.

Public sector shame is particularly consequential because shame is a socially painful emotion linked to threatened social identity. Public sector employees who internalize negative stereotypes about their sector may experience reduced self-esteem, lower work motivation, and increased turnover intention (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). The defensive narrative strategies observed in public sector focus groups—acknowledging problems while attributing them to systemic causes, positioning oneself as an exception to sectoral laziness—may be understood as coping mechanisms for managing shame. However, these strategies have limits. Repeatedly having to defend one's professional identity is exhausting, and some public sector participants described demoralization and resignation as consequences of sustained reputational attack.

The policy implication of public sector shame is significant. If negative stereotypes about public sector work ethic are self-fulfilling—if employees work less hard because they believe they are expected to work less hard and because their efforts will not be recognized—then policy interventions aimed at improving public sector productivity must address not only systems and incentives but also professional identity and morale. Telling public sector workers, they are lazy is unlikely to make them work harder; it may make them live down to expectations.

MNC pride, while less psychologically damaging than public sector shame, carries its own costs. MNC participants' confident assertion of superiority was accompanied by awareness that this confidence was perceived as arrogance by workers in other sectors. This awareness produced defensive framing and occasional guilt. Moreover, MNC participants' construction of their own work ethic as superior may blind them to genuine weaknesses, such as the

erosion of Ubuntu relational values that some participants acknowledged. Pride that forecloses self-criticism is organizationally dysfunctional.

Private sector pragmatism, positioned between shame and pride, may be the most psychologically sustainable identity position. Private sector participants did not carry the burden of negative reputation (like public sector) or the burden of having to prove superiority (like MNCs). Their self-perception as hard workers under difficult conditions, overlooked but resilient, provided positive distinctiveness without requiring defensive or arrogant postures. However, the resentment expressed by private sector participants at being "forgotten in the middle" suggests that this identity position is not without emotional cost.

Ubuntu as Trans-Sectoral Work Value Standard

The finding that participants across all sectors articulated Ubuntu relational work values helping colleagues, maintaining harmony, contributing to collective welfare as essential components of good work ethic is theoretically significant. It suggests that despite sectoral differences in productivity, discipline, and systemic incentives, Ghanaians share a culturally grounded understanding of what work ethic fundamentally means. This shared understanding is not reducible to the individualistic productivity metrics that dominate international work ethic research (Furnham, 1990). A worker who produces excellent individual output but refuses to help colleagues, who is punctual but arrogant, is not fully meeting Ghanaian standards of good work ethic.

The finding that participants in all sectors perceived their own sector as deficient in Ubuntu values, albeit in different ways, is striking. No sector claimed to have fully solved the challenge of combining productivity with relational care. Public sector participants had strong relationships but acknowledged that these relationships enabled protection of poor performers. MNC participants had productivity but acknowledged that individualistic systems undermined relational helping. Private sector participants had pragmatic reciprocity but acknowledged that economic pressure limited generous helping. This shared perception of deficiency suggests that the tension between productivity and relationality is not a problem unique to any sector but a fundamental challenge of organizing work in a cultural context that values both.

The implication for organizational practice is significant. Organizations in all sectors can learn from each other's approaches to balancing productivity and relationality. Public sector organizations might learn from MNCs about how to maintain accountability without destroying relationships; MNCs might learn from public sector organizations about how to

build long-term relational commitment; private sector organizations might offer models of pragmatic reciprocity that combine cooperation with market discipline.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. The focus group methodology, while generative of rich comparative data, does not permit conclusions about the objective accuracy of sectoral work ethic differences. Participants' self-perceptions and peer evaluations may be influenced by stereotype internalization, social desirability bias, and in-group favoritism; they may not correspond to objective behavioural differences. The urban sample (Accra and Kumasi) means findings may not represent the experiences of employees in rural Ghana or smaller cities. The exclusion of informal sector workers, who constitute a substantial portion of Ghana's workforce, limits the generalizability of findings. The cross-sectional design captures perceptions at one point in time; longitudinal research could trace how sectoral identity evolves as employees gain experience or move between sectors.

Future Research

Future research should address these limitations by: (a) conducting observational or experimental studies that measure actual work behaviour across sectors to assess the accuracy of sectoral stereotypes; (b) including informal sector workers in comparative analyses of work ethic self-perception; (c) examining sectoral work ethic perceptions in rural Ghanaian contexts; (d) conducting longitudinal research following employees who move between sectors to examine how professional identity shifts with sectoral mobility; (e) examining the role of gender, age, and educational background in moderating sectoral work ethic perceptions; and (f) developing and testing interventions to reduce negative stereotyping and improve cross-sector collaboration.

10. CONCLUSION

This study explored how employment setting public sector, private Ghanaian-owned, and multinational corporate shapes Ghanaian employees' self-perceptions of their own work ethic and their peer evaluations of workers in other settings. Through nine focus groups with 44 participants, six themes emerged: setting-based reputational stereotyping as pervasive cultural knowledge; public sector shame as a distinct self-perception pattern; multinational pride as an identity resource; private sector pragmatism as negotiated identity; the construction of diligence as authentic or performative depending on sectoral context; and Ubuntu relational work values as the universal standard against which all sectors are found deficient.

The most significant contribution of this study is its demonstration that work ethic is not a fixed individual characteristic but a socially constructed identity resource that employees use to position themselves and their sectors within Ghana's organizational status hierarchy. Employment setting profoundly shapes professional identity, influencing not only what employees believe about their own diligence but also how they feel about those beliefs (shame, pride, or pragmatic resignation). The sectoral stereotypes that circulate in Ghanaian organizational discourse are not merely inaccurate generalizations; they are consequential social facts that shape self-perception, peer evaluation, labor market behavior, and national policy discourse.

The persistence of setting-based work ethic stereotypes across all sectors, and the emotional energy invested in maintaining or contesting these stereotypes, suggest that work ethic in Ghana is not only about productivity but about identity, dignity, and the Ubuntu recognition that personhood is constituted through others' evaluations. An employee whose sector is stigmatized as lazy does not merely face practical disadvantages; they face a threat to their sense of being a full person worthy of respect. This is why conversations about work ethic in Ghana are so emotionally charged and why they resist resolution through technical policy interventions alone. Addressing Ghana's work ethic challenges requires not only better performance management systems but also attention to the social construction of professional identity and the emotional consequences of sectoral reputational hierarchies.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered.

For Public Sector Organizations and Policymakers: Recognize that negative stereotypes about public sector work ethic are not merely external criticism but are internalized by public sector employees as shame, with consequences for motivation and identity. Policy interventions aimed at improving public sector productivity should include explicit attention to professional identity and morale, not only systems and incentives. Public sector leaders should actively counter negative stereotypes by celebrating public sector achievements, publicly recognizing diligent employees, and creating narratives of public service that emphasize dedication and sacrifice alongside the acknowledgment of legitimate problems. Implement structured inter-sectoral exchange programmes that allow public sector employees to observe best practices in other sectors while also allowing employees from other sectors to observe the relational strengths (Ubuntu values) that public sector workplaces may cultivate more effectively than other settings.

For Multinational Corporations Operating in Ghana: Recognize that the sector's reputation for superior work ethic carries both benefits (attracting talent, positive brand associations) and risks (perceived arrogance, cultural alienation). MNCs should actively work to counter perceptions of arrogance by investing in cross-sector partnerships, publicly acknowledging the strengths of Ghanaian-owned organizations, and demonstrating genuine respect for Ghanaian cultural values, including Ubuntu relationality. MNCs should examine whether their individualistic performance systems inadvertently undermine the relational work values that Ghanaian employees bring to the workplace and should consider adapting global policies to preserve space for collective recognition, team-based rewards, and relational helping.

For Private Ghanaian-Owned Sector Organizations: Recognize that your sector's pragmatic identity hard work under difficult conditions is a genuine strength that should be articulated and celebrated. Private sector associations should develop campaigns that highlight private sector contributions to national development and challenge the perception that your sector is merely a fallback for those who cannot secure MNC or public sector employment. Invest in professional development and formalizing HR practices not to imitate MNCs but to strengthen the distinctive strengths of Ghanaian-owned enterprises: agility, relational depth with employees, and deep understanding of local market conditions.

For Cross-Sector Collaboration and Labor Mobility: The finding that each sector has genuine strengths (public: Ubuntu relationships; MNC: systems and discipline; private: pragmatic hard work) suggests that cross-sector learning and collaboration could benefit all. Establish formal cross-sector secondment programmes that allow employees to spend six to twelve months working in another sector, with structured reflection on work ethic practices and challenges. Remove artificial barriers to labor mobility across sectors; employees who move between sectors bring valuable comparative perspectives that can improve organizational practice.

For Educational Institutions and Professional Training: Business schools and professional training programmes should include modules on work ethic as socially constructed and culturally specific, not as a fixed individual trait. Case studies comparing work ethic practices across Ghana's public, private, and multinational sectors should be developed and taught. Future managers should be trained to recognize their own sectoral biases in evaluating employee work ethic and to evaluate employees based on observed behaviour rather than sectoral stereotypes.

For Future Research: Conduct longitudinal research tracking employees as they move between sectors to examine how work ethic self-perception and peer evaluation shift with sectoral mobility. Conduct observational research measuring actual work behaviour across sectors to assess the accuracy of sectoral stereotypes. Examine the role of gender, age, educational background, and organizational tenure in moderating sectoral work ethic perceptions. Develop and evaluate interventions designed to reduce negative cross-sector stereotyping and improve inter-sectoral collaboration.

For All Organizations and Employees: The most important recommendation from this study is simple and difficult: see the workers in other sectors as full persons, not as stereotypes. The public sector worker may be lazy or may be dedicated despite a demoralizing system. The MNC worker may be arrogant or may be proud of genuine achievement. The private sector worker may be a hustler cutting corners or may be a resilient entrepreneur creating value under difficult conditions. The truth, as always, is more complex than the stereotype. Ubuntu teaches that a person is a person through other persons. This applies across sectors as much as within them.

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