
MEASURING GHANAIAN WORK ETHIC THROUGH DIFFERENT LENSES: COMPARISON OF FINDINGS FROM TRADITIONAL SURVEYS AND FOCUS GROUPS

***Jemima N. A. A. Lomotey**

University of Phoenix, Arizona.

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***Corresponding Author: Jemima N. A. A. Lomotey**

University of Phoenix, Arizona.

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ABSTRACT

The measurement of work ethic in non-Western contexts has relied heavily on traditional survey instruments developed in Western cultural settings. However, the validity of such instruments for capturing the lived reality of Ghanaian work values remains largely unexamined. This qualitative comparative study investigates how findings about Ghanaian work ethic differ when measured through traditional surveys versus focus group discussions, and assesses the methodological impact of each approach. Using a purely qualitative comparative design grounded in an interpretive philosophical approach, the study draws on Cultural Measurement Theory and Social Desirability Response Theory. Forty Ghanaian professionals participated in two sequential data collection phases: first, a traditional Likert-scale survey adapted from Western work ethic instruments; second, focus group discussions with the same participants. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) revealed five major themes of methodological divergence: (1) survey responses favoring socially acceptable punctuality claims contradicted by focus group accounts of fluid time norms, (2) individualistic accountability endorsement on surveys versus relational accountability narratives in focus groups, (3) hierarchical egalitarianism expressed in surveys contradicted by lived deference in focus groups, (4) work-life separation preferences on surveys versus integrated realities in focus groups, and (5) the survey as a performance of professionalism versus the focus group as a site of cultural authenticity. Direct quotations from focus group participants illuminate how survey methods systematically overreport Western-aligned work values and underreport contextually embedded Ghanaian work practices. The findings inform

methodological choices for cross-cultural work ethic research and human resource assessment in Ghanaian organizational contexts.

KEYWORDS: Work ethic, Ghana, survey methodology, focus groups, measurement validity, qualitative methods, cross-cultural research.

1. INTRODUCTION

How we measure something shapes what we find. This methodological truism is nowhere more consequential than in cross-cultural research on work ethic. When a Ghanaian professional responds to a survey question asking whether "being on time for meetings is essential to being a good employee," the answer may reflect not only their actual behavior but also their understanding of what constitutes a good response, their perception of the researcher's expectations, and their desire to present a professional self-image. The same individual, sitting in a focus group with peers, might describe a very different relationship with punctuality: one that accommodates funerals, family emergencies, traffic breakdowns, and the fluid temporality of Accra's daily life. The survey and the focus group are not measuring different work ethics. They are eliciting different layers of the same work ethic. Understanding this methodological gap is essential for any researcher, human resource professional, or policymaker seeking accurate knowledge about Ghanaian work values.

Traditional survey instruments have dominated work ethic research globally. From the Protestant Work Ethic Scale to the Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile, surveys offer efficiency, standardisation, and statistical tractability. These instruments have been administered in dozens of countries, including Ghana, often with minimal cultural adaptation. The implicit assumption is that a Likert-scale response to "I prefer direct communication with my supervisor" means the same thing in Accra as it does in Amsterdam. This study challenges that assumption.

Focus group discussions offer an alternative methodological lens. In a group setting, participants hear each other's responses, challenge contradictions, elaborate on cultural nuances, and collectively negotiate the meaning of work-related values. The focus group does not eliminate social desirability bias, but it surfaces it. When one participant claims to value punctuality above all else and another laughs and says, "But last week you arrived thirty minutes late for the project meeting," the gap between stated value and enacted behavior becomes visible. This visibility is precisely what surveys conceal.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is not to determine which method is "correct" but to compare the findings generated by each method and to assess how methodological choice shapes knowledge about Ghanaian work ethic. By administering both a traditional survey and focus group discussions to the same participants, this study provides empirical evidence on measurement effects that have previously been theorised but not systematically documented.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite decades of cross-cultural work ethic research, the methodological question of how measurement instruments interact with cultural context remains inadequately addressed. This gap is particularly acute in Ghanaian and broader West African research contexts for several reasons. First, the survey instruments most commonly used to measure work ethic were developed in Western industrialised societies. These instruments embed assumptions about time, hierarchy, communication, and accountability that may not translate directly into Ghanaian cultural frames. When a Ghanaian respondent "agrees" or "disagrees" with a statement, the cognitive and cultural processes underlying that response are unknown. The survey produces a number, but the meaning of that number is ambiguous.

Second, existing research on Ghanaian work ethic has not systematically compared methodological approaches. Studies using surveys have reported high levels of endorsement for punctuality, individual accountability, and direct communication. Studies using qualitative interviews have reported more complex, context-dependent practices. It is impossible to know whether these differences reflect genuine variation in samples or methodological artefacts. No study has administered both methods to the same participants.

Third, social desirability effects in work ethic research have been theorised but not directly measured. Ghanaian professionals, particularly those in formal employment, are aware that punctuality, accountability, and efficiency are valued by employers, especially multinational companies. Survey responses may therefore reflect aspirational or impression-managing claims rather than actual workplace behaviour. Focus groups, by enabling peer cross-examination, may partially correct for this bias. Fourth, the practical consequences of methodological uncriticality are significant. Human resource managers who rely on survey-based assessments of work ethic may make erroneous hiring, promotion, and training decisions. Researchers who publish survey-based findings may perpetuate incomplete or misleading characterisations of Ghanaian work culture. Policymakers who design diaspora

engagement or workforce development programs based on such findings may misallocate resources.

This study addresses these gaps by asking: How do findings about Ghanaian work ethic differ when measured through traditional surveys versus focus group discussions? What specific work values show the largest methodological divergence? What do focus group discussions reveal about the limitations of survey-based measurement in the Ghanaian context?

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to compare findings about Ghanaian work ethic generated by traditional survey methods with those generated by focus group discussions, and to assess the methodological impact of each approach. The study aims to produce evidence that can inform the design of culturally appropriate work ethic measurement instruments for Ghanaian and cross-cultural research contexts.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

4.1 General Objective

To compare how traditional survey methods and focus group discussions produce different or convergent findings about Ghanaian work ethic, and to explain the methodological mechanisms underlying any divergence.

4.2 Specific Objectives

- To compare survey-based and focus group-based findings regarding punctuality and time management among Ghanaian professionals.
- To compare findings on individual versus collective accountability across the two methods.
- To compare findings on preferences for direct versus indirect communication and hierarchical relationships.
- To compare findings on work-life boundary preferences and practices.
- To identify the specific survey items that produce the largest divergence from focus group narratives.
- To describe how participants themselves account for discrepancies between their survey responses and their focus group accounts.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Theoretical Review

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Cultural Measurement Theory (adapted from cross-cultural psychology) and Social Desirability Response Theory. Cultural Measurement Theory posits that measurement instruments are never culturally neutral. They carry assumptions about question format, response scales, the relationship between respondent and researcher, and what constitutes a meaningful answer. When a survey developed in one cultural context is administered in another, measurement invariance cannot be assumed. Response category labels such as "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral," "disagree," and "strongly disagree" carry different cultural meanings. In some contexts, extreme response categories are avoided; in others, they are preferred. The middle point may indicate genuine neutrality, cultural ambivalence, or reluctance to disclose. This study applies this framework to understand how survey responses about work ethic may systematically differ from focus group narratives.

Social Desirability Response Theory (Paulhus, 1984) provides a complementary framework focused on the tendency of respondents to present themselves in favourable light. Social desirability has two components: impression management (deliberate presentation of a positive image) and self-deceptive enhancement (unconscious tendency to see oneself positively). In work ethic research, both components are likely to operate. Respondents know that good employees are punctual, accountable, and efficient. They therefore report being punctual, accountable, and efficient, regardless of their actual behaviour. Focus groups, by creating a context where peers can challenge inconsistencies, may reduce social desirability effects and produce accounts that more closely approximate actual workplace practice.\

5.2 Conceptual Review

Traditional survey refers to structured questionnaires using Likert-type scales, administered in written or electronic format, with standardised wording and response options. For this study, the survey was adapted from established work ethic instruments including the Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile (Miller, Woehr, & Hudspeth, 2002) and the Protestant Work Ethic Scale (Mirels & Garrett, 1971), with wording adjusted for Ghanaian professional contexts.

Focus group discussion refers to a moderated group interview with 6–10 participants, lasting 60–90 minutes, in which participants respond to open-ended questions, react to each other's

contributions, and collectively elaborate on themes. The focus group does not aim for consensus but for the range of perspectives and the social negotiation of meaning. Methodological impact refers to the difference in findings attributable to the measurement method rather than to genuine differences in the phenomenon being studied. In this study, methodological impact is assessed by comparing survey responses and focus group narratives from the same participants. Ghanaian work ethic, for the purposes of methodological comparison, is treated not as a fixed set of values but as a repertoire of cultural resources that individuals deploy differently depending on the measurement context.

5.3 Empirical Review

Empirical research on cross-cultural measurement effects in work ethic studies is extremely limited. However, related literature on survey response in non-Western contexts provides useful grounding.

Research on response styles has consistently found that respondents from collectivist cultures show greater tendency toward midpoint responding and acquiescence than respondents from individualist cultures (Harzing, 2006). This suggests that Ghanaian respondents may systematically use survey response scales differently than the Western norm, yet most work ethic surveys are scored without adjustment for response style. Studies comparing survey and qualitative findings on the same topic have found systematic divergence. In health research, surveys tend to overreport healthy behaviours compared to interview-based accounts (Adams et al., 2005). In organisational research, employees report higher job satisfaction on surveys than in interviews, suggesting social desirability effects. No published study was found that directly compares survey and focus group findings on work ethic in any African context. This study therefore represents an original contribution to knowledge.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

This study adopted a purely qualitative comparative design with sequential data collection. All 40 participants first completed a traditional Likert-scale survey. One week later, the same participants took part in focus group discussions. The sequential design enabled comparison of survey responses and focus group narratives from identical participants, isolating methodological effects from sample differences.

6.2 Research Approach

An interpretive research philosophy guided the study. Interpretivism assumes that work ethic is constructed through meaning-making and social interaction, and that different measurement methods activate different meaning-making processes. This approach prioritises understanding how participants interpret survey questions and how those interpretations differ from their focus group accounts.

6.3 Study Setting

The study was conducted in Accra, Ghana, across three professional sectors: finance and banking, technology and telecommunications, and public administration. These sectors were selected because they employ significant numbers of Ghanaian professionals and because multinational companies operating in these sectors have introduced Western-style performance management systems.

6.4 Study Population

The study population comprised Ghanaian citizens currently employed in professional, technical, or managerial roles in Accra. All participants held at least a bachelor's degree and had a minimum of three years of professional work experience. Participants were excluded if they had lived or worked outside West Africa for more than six months, to minimise confounding effects of direct Western acculturation.

6.5 Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation across sectors, gender, age, and hierarchical level. Initial participants were recruited through professional networks and employer partnerships. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved in focus group discussions, defined as the point at which no new themes emerged across consecutive groups.

6.6 Sample Size

Forty Ghanaian professionals participated in the study: 20 women and 20 men, aged 26 to 54 years (mean 38.4 years). Participants were divided into six focus groups of 6–8 participants each, stratified by sector (two groups per sector). All 40 participants completed the survey; all 40 participated in one focus group discussion.

6.7 Data Collection Method

Phase 1: Traditional Survey. Participants completed a 32-item survey adapted from the Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile. Items measured five domains: punctuality and time management (6 items), individual accountability (7 items), communication style and hierarchy (7 items), work-life boundaries (6 items), and attitudes toward inefficiency (6 items). All items used a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Surveys were administered electronically via tablet computers in a private room at participants' workplaces, taking approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Phase 2: Focus Group Discussions. One week after survey completion, the same participants attended focus group discussions in their sectoral groups. Each focus group lasted 75–90 minutes and was moderated by the researcher, with an assistant taking notes. A semi-structured focus group guide addressed the same five domains as the survey but used open-ended questions, probes, and opportunities for participants to react to each other's responses. Crucially, after initial open discussion, the moderator presented selected survey items and asked participants to discuss how they had answered and why. This technique surfaced discrepancies between survey responses and elaborated narratives. All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

6.8 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), with a specific focus on comparing survey and focus group findings.

For survey data, descriptive summaries of response distributions were calculated for each item. For focus group data, transcripts were coded inductively. The analytic strategy then compared the two datasets systematically: for each thematic domain (punctuality, accountability, etc.), survey responses were summarised, focus group themes were identified, and divergence or convergence was assessed.

A total of 187 initial codes were identified from focus group transcripts, collapsed into 25 subthemes and 5 major themes of methodological divergence.

6.9 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through triangulation across methods (survey and focus group), across participants (different sectors), and across analytic phases. Member checking was conducted with 12 participants who reviewed preliminary findings and confirmed that

the divergence between their survey answers and focus group accounts was accurately characterised. A detailed audit trail documented all analytic decisions. Reflexivity was maintained through a research journal in which the researcher noted how her own assumptions about survey validity evolved during the study.

7. FINDINGS

The analysis revealed five major themes of methodological divergence between survey and focus group findings. Each theme demonstrates how the same participants produced systematically different accounts of work ethic depending on measurement method.

7.1 Theme 1: Survey Punctuality Claims Versus Focus Group Fluid Temporality

On the survey, 85% of participants either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement "Being on time for meetings is essential to being a good employee." Only 8% selected "neutral" or any disagree response. By survey data alone, Ghanaian professionals appear to hold punctuality as a near-universal and strongly held value.

Focus group discussions revealed a more complex picture. A 34-year-old male finance professional who had strongly agreed with the punctuality item on the survey explained:

"When I filled your survey, I said yes, punctuality is essential. And I believe that. But let me tell you about last week. I had a 9am meeting with my team. On my way, my sister called. Her child was sick and she needed help getting to the hospital. I turned around. I arrived at the meeting at 10.15am. Was I wrong? In the survey, I am answering about what I believe in the abstract. In reality, life intervenes. The survey does not ask about funerals, sick children, broken-down trotros. It asks about ideals. My ideal self is punctual. My actual self sometimes chooses family over meetings."

A 41-year-old female public administrator added:

"I noticed when I took the survey that I kept wanting to write 'it depends.' But there was no 'it depends' option. Only strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree. I chose agree for most things because that is closer to how I want to be than disagree. But in this group, I can tell you the truth. Punctuality is important, but it is not the most important thing. Relationships are more important. The survey made me sound more Western than I actually am."

Across all focus groups, participants consistently described survey responses as representing their "professional aspirational self" rather than their actual contextual practice. The survey, by forcing discrete responses to decontextualised statements, systematically overreported punctuality as an absolute value.

7.2 Theme 2: Individual Accountability Endorsement Versus Relational Accountability Narratives

On the survey, 78% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with "Employees should take full individual responsibility for completing their assigned tasks." Only 12% disagreed. Survey data suggest strong endorsement of individualistic accountability.

Focus group discussions revealed a relational understanding of accountability.

A 38-year-old male technology professional explained:

"I agreed with that statement on your survey. But now I want to ask you: what does 'individual responsibility' mean when your task depends on three other people who have not done their parts? In Ghana, accountability is not individual. It is relational. I am accountable to my manager, yes. But I am also accountable to my colleague who is waiting for my output. And my colleague is accountable to me. If someone fails, we do not say 'you failed.' We say 'how can we help you succeed?' The survey question assumes a Western individualist framework. That is not how we actually work."

A 45-year-old male banking professional added:

"I have a colleague who was struggling with a report. Deadline was Friday. By Thursday, he had barely started. In the Western system, you would say he failed. He should have managed his time. But we learned that his mother had been hospitalised. Did we punish him? No. We helped him. Five of us worked together and finished the report. The survey would say I believe in individual accountability. But my behaviour says I believe in collective support. Which one is my real work ethic? Both are real, depending on the situation. The survey only captures one."

The methodological divergence here is particularly striking because participants did not perceive themselves as having been dishonest on the survey. Rather, the survey activated a different cognitive frame: abstract beliefs about how work *should* be organised. The focus group activated a narrative frame: accounts of how work *actually* gets done.

7.3 Theme 3: Hierarchical Egalitarianism Expressed Versus Lived Deference

On the survey, 72% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with "Subordinates should not question their manager's decisions." Survey data suggest preference for egalitarian, low-hierarchy workplace relationships.

Focus group discussions revealed continued operation of hierarchical deference.

A 36-year-old female public administrator described the gap:

"On your survey, I disagreed with that statement because I believe good managers should be open to feedback. That is my value. But last month, my manager made a decision that I knew was wrong. I said nothing. I calculated the risk of speaking and the risk of staying silent. Staying silent was safer. The survey asked what I believe. It did not ask what I actually do. Those are different things in Ghana, more different than in the West, I think."

A 44-year-old male finance professional added:

"There is a Ghanaian proverb: 'The child who questions the elder does not live long.' This is not literal. It means respect for seniority is survival. I can believe in flat hierarchies in my mind. But in my workplace, I will not contradict my manager in a meeting. I will wait. I will find a private moment. I will speak indirectly. The survey does not have an option for 'I believe in direct communication but I practice indirect communication because of power dynamics.' So I selected the answer that reflects my belief. But my behaviour is different."

This theme reveals a fundamental limitation of survey-based measurement: the inability to distinguish between espoused values and enacted values.

7.4 Theme 4: Work-Life Separation Preferences Versus Integrated Realities

On the survey, 68% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with "Employees should keep work and personal life separate." Survey data suggest preference for clear boundaries.

Focus group discussions revealed the practical impossibility of such separation in the Ghanaian context.

A 39-year-old female technology professional explained:

"I said yes to separation on your survey because I wish it were true. I wish I could leave work at work. But my manager calls me on Saturday. My colleague sends WhatsApp at 10pm. My staff member needs help with a school fees advance during my daughter's birthday party. Separation is not available to me. The survey measures my preference. The focus group measures my reality. They are not the same."

A 42-year-old male banking professional added:

"In Ghana, your colleagues are not just colleagues. They are your people. When they call on Sunday, it is not an intrusion. It is relationship. The survey question assumes a Western individualist framework where work is a contract and personal life is private. That is not our framework. I said 'agree' on the survey because I thought that was the professional answer. But in this group, I can say: I do not actually want separation. I want integration with boundaries that respect both work and family. The survey could not capture that nuance."

7.5 Theme 5: The Survey as Performance of Professionalism Versus Focus Group as Site of Cultural Authenticity

The fifth theme was meta-methodological: participants themselves articulated an understanding of why their survey and focus group responses differed. They described the survey as a genre that demands performance of professional identity, while the focus group enabled cultural authenticity.

A 37-year-old male public administrator articulated this distinction clearly:

"When I filled your survey, I was performing. Not lying. Performing. I was showing you, the researcher, and showing myself, that I am a professional. I know what good work ethic looks like. Punctuality. Accountability. Direct communication. Separation of work and life. These are the things my multinational employer wants to see. The survey is a test, and I passed it. But this group is different. Here, I am with my peers. We can be honest about how we actually work. The survey got my professional mask. This group got my face."

A 40-year-old female technology professional added:

"I realised something when you asked us to discuss the survey questions. Some of my answers were not really my answers. They were the answers I thought a good employee should give. I did not even notice I was doing it until I heard myself explaining to this group. The survey is too easy to fake, even to yourself. The focus group, you cannot fake because someone will call you out. 'But last week you said something different.' That is why I trust the focus group more. Not because I lied on the survey. Because the survey let me believe my own performance."

This theme has profound implications for cross-cultural work ethic research. The survey does not merely measure with error; it systematically activates a performance mode that

overreports Western-aligned values and underreports contextually embedded Ghanaian practices.

8. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide the first empirical evidence of systematic methodological divergence in the measurement of Ghanaian work ethic. The five themes together reveal that traditional surveys and focus group discussions produce different findings not because participants are dishonest but because the methods activate different cognitive, social, and cultural frames.

The finding that surveys overreport punctuality as an absolute value while focus groups reveal contextual fluidity aligns with predictions from Social Desirability Response Theory. Participants know that punctuality is valued by employers and researchers. They therefore report valuing punctuality. However, the focus group context, particularly the peer dynamic, enables participants to acknowledge the contextual exceptions that define actual Ghanaian temporal practice. The survey answer is not false; it is incomplete.

The divergence between individualistic accountability on surveys and relational accountability in focus groups can be understood through Cultural Measurement Theory. The survey item "Employees should take full individual responsibility for completing their assigned tasks" assumes a Western individualist ontology in which tasks are discrete, environments are predictable, and the individual is the appropriate unit of accountability. In the Ghanaian context, where tasks are interdependent, environments are unpredictable, and the collective is the unit of survival, the same words carry different meaning. Participants endorsing individual accountability on surveys are not expressing a culturally alien value; they are translating a collectivist reality into individualist survey language.

The finding that participants themselves articulate the survey as performance and the focus group as authenticity is methodologically significant. It suggests that respondents are not passive subjects of measurement but active interpreters who adjust their responses based on perceived genre expectations. This has implications far beyond work ethic research. Any cross-cultural study using surveys should anticipate that respondents may be performing cultural scripts that differ from lived practice.

The practical implications for human resource management are substantial. Organisations that use survey-based assessments of work ethic for hiring, promotion, or training decisions may be measuring aspirational performance rather than actual workplace behaviour. Focus group discussions, while more resource-intensive, may provide more accurate insight into how employees actually navigate punctuality, accountability, hierarchy, and work-life boundaries.

9. CONCLUSION

This study compared findings about Ghanaian work ethic generated by traditional survey methods and focus group discussions administered to the same 40 Ghanaian professionals. The findings reveal systematic methodological divergence across five domains: punctuality, accountability, hierarchy, work-life boundaries, and the performance of professionalism. Surveys consistently overreport Western-aligned work values and underreport contextually embedded Ghanaian practices. Focus group discussions enable participants to articulate the contextual exceptions, relational frameworks, and cultural logics that surveys obscure. The choice of measurement method is not merely technical but epistemological: different methods produce different knowledge. Researchers and practitioners seeking to understand Ghanaian work ethic must therefore move beyond single-method survey designs and incorporate qualitative methods that can surface the gap between espoused values and enacted practices.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

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

- 1. Use Mixed-Method Designs for Work Ethic Research:** Researchers studying work ethic in Ghanaian and similar contexts should employ mixed-method designs that combine surveys with qualitative methods such as focus groups or interviews. Surveys alone will overreport Western-aligned values and underreport contextual complexity.
- 2. Develop Culturally Adapted Survey Instruments:** When surveys must be used, they should be culturally adapted to include context-specific response options, situational qualifiers, and opportunities for participants to indicate conditionality.
- 3. Incorporate Peer Discussion in Organisational Assessment:** Human resource professionals assessing work ethic for training or development purposes should incorporate group discussion methods that enable employees to articulate the gap between professional aspirations and workplace realities.

4. **Train Researchers on Methodological Effects:** Cross-cultural research training should include explicit content on how measurement methods interact with cultural context, including social desirability effects and response style differences.
5. **Conduct Replication Studies Across African Contexts:** Replication studies should be conducted in Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and other African countries to assess whether similar methodological divergences emerge.
6. **Fund Methodological Research on Survey Translation:** Funding agencies should prioritise methodological research on how survey items function across cultural contexts, including cognitive interviewing and differential item functioning analysis.
7. **Develop Focus Group Protocols for Organisational Use:** Practical, time-efficient focus group protocols should be developed for organisational use, enabling companies to assess work culture without requiring full academic research designs.

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