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CULTURAL NARRATIVES OF DILIGENCE: FOCUS GROUP REFLECTIONS ON GHANAIAN WORK ETHIC

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study employed focus group methodology and narrative inquiry to explore cultural narratives of diligence and shared beliefs around work ethic among Ghanaian workers. Drawing upon Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997), the study conducted six focus group sessions with 38 participants drawn from public sector, private sector, and informal economy contexts across Accra, Kumasi, and Tema. Focus group discussions were guided by open-ended questions and storytelling prompts designed to elicit personal narratives, inherited beliefs, and observed contradictions around work values. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Five overarching themes emerged from the data: religious and spiritual narratives of diligence; ancestral and intergenerational work stories; economic necessity as the primary driver of work behaviour; communal work values and collective obligation; and generational tensions over shifting definitions of diligence. Participants' narratives revealed a rich yet contradictory cultural landscape in which deeply held beliefs about the moral virtue of hard work coexist with pragmatic survival strategies, communal obligations that sometimes conflict with individual ambition, and intergenerational disagreements about what constitutes genuine diligence in contemporary Ghana. The study contributes to understanding of Ghanaian work culture by foregrounding the lived narratives through which workers construct, transmit, and contest work values, offering insights relevant to organisational behaviour, human resource management, and national development discourse in Ghana.

KEYWORDS: *Work ethic, diligence, Ghanaian culture, focus groups, narrative inquiry, qualitative research, Ubuntu.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Work ethic occupies a central place in Ghana's cultural imagination. Proverbs, folktales, religious teachings, and everyday conversation are saturated with exhortations to diligence, from the Akan maxim obra ye adwuma (life is work) to the biblical injunctions invoked at workplace opening prayers and the aspirational narratives woven into political speeches about national development (Gyekye, 1997). Yet the relationship between these widely shared cultural narratives and actual work behaviour is rarely examined with critical scrutiny. Do Ghanaians genuinely hold diligence as a core value, or has the rhetoric of hard work become a cultural script performed with greater conviction than it is embodied? What tensions and contradictions exist between inherited narratives of diligence and the realities of contemporary working life in an economy marked by inequality, informality, and rapid social change?

These questions sit at an underexplored intersection of cultural psychology, organisational behaviour, and African studies. International research on work ethic has been dominated by the Protestant Work Ethic framework (Weber, 1930/2005), which locates the cultural foundations of diligent work behaviour in Calvinist theological traditions that valorised labour as a spiritual calling. This framework, however, was explicitly developed to explain work values in Western European and North American cultural contexts, and its applicability to African cultural settings remains contested (Metz, 2011). Ghanaian work ethic draws on distinct cultural resources, including Indigenous Akan philosophy, Islamic and Christian religious traditions, colonial economic history, communal social structures, and contemporary development aspirations that cannot be adequately captured through a Western Protestant lens (Aboderin, 2020).

Ghana represents a particularly rich context for examining cultural narratives of work. As one of sub-Saharan Africa's more economically stable democracies, Ghana has undergone rapid economic diversification over the past three decades, moving from a predominantly agricultural and mining economy to an increasingly services-oriented and digitally integrated one (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). This economic transformation has created new forms of work, new occupational identities, and new narratives about what it means to be a diligent and successful worker. At the same time, traditional communal work practices, such as the Akan institution of ‘nnoboa,’ which denotes cooperative labour exchange, and susu, a

rotating savings and credit association, continue to shape work values and behaviours, particularly in informal economy contexts (Clark, 2010). The coexistence of traditional and modern work values creates productive tensions that are visible in everyday narratives about diligence, success, and the meaning of work.

Qualitative research employing focus group methodology is particularly well suited to exploring these cultural narratives. Focus groups generate interactive dialogue in which participants not only share individual perspectives but also respond to, challenge, and build upon each other's contributions, creating a discursive space in which shared beliefs and internal contradictions become visible (Morgan, 1997). The social dynamics of focus group interaction mirror the communal storytelling traditions central to Ghanaian cultural life, making this method particularly culturally congruent for the present inquiry (Liamputtong, 2011). By inviting participants to share stories, proverbs, and lived experiences around work rather than simply responding to survey items, this study aims to access the deeper cultural grammar through which Ghanaians understand and narrate diligence.

Despite growing interest in African management and organisational behaviour, the specific cultural narratives that underpin the Ghanaian work ethic have received remarkably limited empirical attention. Existing studies have tended to examine work ethic as a measurable psychological construct using quantitative instruments developed in Western contexts, without adequately exploring the culturally embedded stories and beliefs that give work values their meaning and motivational force (Dartey-Baah & Amoako, 2021). This study addresses that gap by treating work ethic not as a static trait to be measured but as a dynamic, contested, and culturally constituted set of narratives to be explored through dialogue and storytelling.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite the centrality of work and diligence in Ghanaian cultural discourse, significant gaps exist in the empirical literature on the cultural narratives that shape the Ghanaian work ethic. These gaps carry both theoretical and practical consequences for understanding organisational behaviour, workforce development, and national productivity in Ghana.

First, the dominant frameworks used to study work ethic in international organisational research are poorly adapted to African cultural contexts. The Protestant Work Ethic Scale developed by Mirels and Garrett (1971) and its derivatives measure work values rooted in Western theological and individualist traditions that do not adequately capture the communal, spiritual, and relational dimensions of work orientation in Ghanaian culture (Gyekye, 1997).

The result is a literature that either ignores Ghanaian workers entirely or misrepresents their work values by forcing them into culturally alien categories. This measurement gap makes it impossible to accurately characterise Ghanaian work ethic or to compare it meaningfully across cultural contexts (Dartey-Baah, 2013).

Second, the qualitative dimensions of work ethic, particularly the stories, proverbs, and cultural narratives through which Ghanaians learn and transmit beliefs about diligence, have been almost entirely neglected in empirical research. Work ethic is not simply a set of measurable attitudes; it is a living cultural tradition reproduced through storytelling, socialisation, observation of role models, and participation in communal work practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Understanding how Ghanaians narrativise diligence, including which stories are told, which figures serve as exemplars, and which tensions are acknowledged or suppressed, requires qualitative methods that allow narratives to emerge in their full complexity. Survey research cannot access this dimension of work culture (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Third, the contradictions and tensions within Ghanaian work ethic discourse have not been empirically examined. Public discourse in Ghana frequently invokes strong norms of diligence, yet observers have also noted the prevalence of lateness, absenteeism, and performative work behaviour in both public and private sector organisations (Amankwah-Amoah, Danso, & Adomako, 2021). These apparent contradictions between espoused values and observed behaviour represent a significant theoretical puzzle. Are Ghanaian workers hypocritical in their work ethic claims, or do the contradictions reflect genuine tensions between competing cultural logics, such as communal obligation versus individual performance, or survival necessity versus principled diligence? Empirical exploration of these tensions requires the kind of open-ended, dialogic data that qualitative inquiry can provide.

Fourth, generational differences in work values have not been adequately explored in the Ghanaian context. Rapid economic change, digital technology, international migration, and exposure to global work culture through media and education have created conditions in which younger Ghanaian workers may hold significantly different narratives about diligence from their parents and grandparents (Mensah, 2020). Older workers frequently lament declining work ethic among the youth, while younger workers may be reframing diligence in ways not captured by traditional frameworks. These generational dynamics are best explored through intergenerational dialogue of the kind that focus group methodology can facilitate.

Fifth, the intersection of gender and work ethic narratives in Ghana remains underexplored. Ghanaian women, who constitute a substantial portion of the informal economy workforce and who bear disproportionate burdens of domestic labour, may hold narratives of diligence shaped by different cultural pressures, role expectations, and structural constraints than their male counterparts (Clark, 2010). If work ethic research ignores gender, it risks producing accounts that are implicitly male-centred and that fail to capture the full range of Ghanaian work culture. Focus group discussions with mixed-gender groups can bring these gendered dimensions of work narratives to the surface and allow them to be examined in the context of group dialogue.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative focus group study is to explore the cultural narratives of diligence and work ethic among Ghanaian workers, surfacing the shared beliefs, inherited stories, value tensions, and generational contradictions that shape how Ghanaians understand, articulate, and enact diligence in their working lives.

4. Objectives of the Study

The following specific objectives guided this study. To explore the dominant cultural narratives and stories through which Ghanaian workers articulate and transmit beliefs about diligence and work ethic. To examine the tensions and contradictions that participants identify between espoused work values and observed work behaviour in Ghanaian organisational and communal contexts. To investigate how generational differences within focus groups shape the narration and contestation of work ethic beliefs. To analyse the role of communal, religious, and ancestral frameworks in constructing Ghanaian narratives of diligence. To identify implications of the identified cultural narratives for organisational practice, human resource management, and national development discourse in Ghana.

5. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study. Research Question One: What dominant cultural narratives and stories do Ghanaian workers draw upon to articulate their beliefs about diligence and work ethic? Research Question Two: What tensions and contradictions do Ghanaian workers identify between the cultural narratives of diligence they have inherited and the realities of work behaviour they observe in their occupational contexts? Research Question Three: How do generational differences shape the narration, transmission, and contestation of work ethic beliefs among Ghanaian workers? Research Question Four: What

roles do religious, ancestral, and communal frameworks play in the construction and maintenance of Ghanaian work ethic narratives?

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 their foundational work The Social Construction of Reality, posits that human beings do not simply perceive a pre-given social world but actively construct social reality through shared meanings, language, and symbolic systems. Institutions, roles, and values, including work ethic, are not natural facts but historically produced social constructions sustained by ongoing practices of narration, ritual, and interaction (Gergen, 2015). From this perspective, diligence is not a fixed cultural trait that Ghanaians either possess or lack; it is a contested cultural construction produced and reproduced through the stories people tell, the exemplars they invoke, the proverbs they cite, and the social comparisons they make. Focus group discussions, in which participants collaboratively construct and contest narratives, are therefore not merely a method for accessing pre-existing beliefs; they are themselves a site of social construction in which work ethic beliefs are actively produced and negotiated (Morgan, 1997).

Social Constructionism directs analytical attention toward the question of how work ethic is narrativised rather than simply whether it exists. It asks: What stories do Ghanaians tell about diligent workers? What narrative elements, characters, conflicts, and resolutions recur across these stories? What social functions do these narratives serve? And crucially, what alternative narratives are suppressed, contested, or rendered invisible by dominant work ethic discourse? These questions cannot be answered by survey instruments; they require the kind of discursive, story-rich data that focus group methodology generates (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The Ubuntu Philosophy, the second theoretical pillar of this study, provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding the specifically African and Ghanaian dimensions of work ethic. The Ubuntu principle, encapsulated in the Nguni phrase ‘umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,’ which translates as a person is a person through other persons, posits that personhood, identity, and moral value are constituted through relationships and communal participation rather than individual achievement (Metz, 2011). In the Ghanaian context, this philosophical orientation manifests in Akan concepts such as ‘onipa na ohia onipa,’ meaning a person needs another person, and in communal work institutions such as ‘nnoboa’ that

organise labour as a collective rather than an individual endeavour (Gyekye, 1997). Ubuntu philosophy suggests that the Ghanaian work ethic may be fundamentally relational and communal in its orientation, with diligence valued not primarily as an expression of individual virtue but as a contribution to collective well-being. This framing generates productive tension with Protestant Work Ethic narratives that valorise individual industry, self-reliance, and competitive achievement, and invites exploration of how Ghanaian workers navigate between communal and individualistic work value frameworks.

6.2 Empirical Review of Cultural Dimensions of Work Ethic

The cultural dimensions of work ethic have been examined most extensively through Hofstede's (2001) framework of cultural values, which identifies power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation as dimensions along which national cultures vary. Ghana scores high on collectivism and power distance, suggesting that Ghanaian work values emphasise group loyalty, hierarchical respect, and communal obligation over individual ambition and flat organisational structures (Hofstede, 2001). However, Hofstede's framework has been criticised for treating national cultures as static and homogeneous, overlooking within-culture variation, and applying survey methodology that flattens the richness and complexity of cultural values into numerical scores (McSweeney, 2002).

More contextually sensitive research has examined work ethic in African settings using qualitative and mixed methods approaches. Dartey-Baah (2013) explored leadership styles and work motivation in Ghanaian organisations and found that cultural values of communalism and respect for authority significantly shaped workers' expectations of leaders and their motivation to perform. Bawa and Sanyare (2013) examined factors influencing employee motivation in the Ghanaian public sector and found that social recognition, sense of community, and belonging were more powerful motivators than financial incentives alone, consistent with Ubuntu communal values. Amankwah-Amoah and colleagues (2021) documented the persistence of hierarchical deference norms in Ghanaian workplaces, noting that junior workers frequently performed compliance and diligence for senior observers without genuine internalisation of work values, a finding that points directly to the tension between performed and authentic diligence that this study seeks to explore.

6.3 Narrative and Storytelling Traditions in Ghanaian Culture

Storytelling is a foundational cultural practice in Ghanaian society. The Ananse tradition of spider stories, associated with the Akan people but disseminated across sub-Saharan Africa and the African diaspora, uses the trickster figure of Kweku Ananse to explore moral

dilemmas, social tensions, and the consequences of laziness, cunning, and ambition (Yankah, 1983). These stories function not merely as entertainment but as vehicles for transmitting work values across generations, encoding cultural wisdom about the rewards of diligence and the dangers of idleness in memorable narrative form (Opoku-Agyemang, 1994). Proverbs similarly encode work ethic values in condensed, memorable form. The Akan proverb 'obra ye adwuma, na adwuma nye asem,' which translates as life is work, and work is not a curse, expresses a fundamentally positive orientation toward labour as constitutive of meaningful human existence.

Religious narratives constitute a second major source of work ethic stories in contemporary Ghana. Ghana's high rates of Christian and Muslim religiosity mean that scriptural teachings about work, sloth, and stewardship are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric. Christian sermons in Pentecostal and charismatic churches frequently invoke the parable of the talents, the ant in Proverbs, and the Pauline injunction that he who does not work, neither shall he eat as theological grounding for work ethic exhortations (Gifford, 2004). These religious narratives interact in complex ways with prosperity gospel theology, which frames material success as divine blessing and diligent work as the primary pathway to prosperity, creating a motivational framework that both sacralises work and instrumentalises it in the service of personal advancement.

6.4 Tensions and Contradictions in Work Ethic Discourse

Critical observers of Ghanaian organisational life have noted significant tensions between the strong cultural narratives of diligence and the observable realities of work behaviour in many Ghanaian institutions. Appiah (2010) notes that the same cultural settings that produce powerful normative prescriptions for hard work also generate well-developed social scripts for avoiding work, shifting responsibility, and extracting resources from institutions without commensurate contribution. This apparent contradiction may reflect not hypocrisy but rather the coexistence of multiple competing cultural logics: communal obligation that requires attendance and participation without necessarily requiring individual effort; survival necessity that directs energy toward income-generating activity rather than organisational productivity; and performative compliance with authority norms that requires the appearance of diligence without its substance.

Weber's (1930/2005) original Protestant Work Ethic thesis also suggested that work values are more likely to be behaviourally consequential when they are connected to a broader meaning system that gives work transcendent significance. In the Ghanaian context, both traditional cosmological frameworks, which connect diligent work to ancestral honour and

communal vitality, and religious frameworks, which connect work to divine blessing and moral character, potentially provide such transcendent meaning. However, the degree to which workers have genuinely internalised these meaning frameworks versus performing adherence to cultural scripts is an empirical question that requires qualitative investigation. Weber's framework thus helps explain why the gap between espoused and enacted work values may be particularly pronounced in cultural contexts with strong normative work narratives.

6.5 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

The literature review reveals that while cultural dimensions of work ethic have received some scholarly attention, the specific narratives, stories, and dialogic constructions through which Ghanaian workers constitute their work values remain empirically underexplored. No published study has employed focus group methodology to specifically elicit and analyse the cultural narratives of diligence among Ghanaian workers across generational, sectoral, and gender lines. No study has examined the interplay between religious narratives, ancestral stories, Ubuntu communalism, and contemporary work culture in shaping Ghanaian work ethic discourse. The present study addresses these gaps by generating rich qualitative data on the lived narratives of work ethic in Ghana, contributing both to the empirical literature on African work culture and to the theoretical understanding of how cultural narratives construct and contest work values across generations and social contexts.

7. METHODOLOGY

7.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design employing focus group methodology within a narrative inquiry framework. Qualitative designs are appropriate when the research aim is to understand meaning-making, social construction, and lived experience rather than to measure the distribution of variables in a population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus group methodology was selected because it generates interactive dialogue in which social meanings are co-constructed among participants, reflecting the communal and dialogic nature of cultural narrative transmission in Ghanaian life (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Narrative inquiry, as a theoretical and methodological orientation, treats stories as the primary unit of analysis, attending to the content, structure, and social function of the accounts participants produce (Riessman, 2008). The combination of focus group methodology with narrative inquiry enabled the study to capture not only what Ghanaian

workers believe about diligence but also how they narrate, justify, and contest those beliefs in social interaction.

7.2 Research Approach

A constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy guided this study. Constructivism assumes that social reality is not given but constructed through human meaning-making activities, and that multiple, contextually situated realities coexist within any cultural setting (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The interpretivist approach holds that the researcher's role is not to measure or test pre-specified hypotheses but to interpret the meanings that participants ascribe to their experiences and to represent those meanings faithfully and reflexively (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach aligns with the study's interest in how Ghanaian workers construct, narrate, and negotiate work ethic beliefs rather than in establishing universal causal relationships. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the data collection and analysis process, documenting how prior knowledge of Ghanaian organisational culture may have shaped the interpretive process, and actively sought disconfirming evidence to challenge emerging analytical conclusions.

7.3 Study Setting

Focus group sessions were conducted in three Ghanaian cities: Accra, Kumasi, and Tema, which collectively represent the highest concentration of formal sector employment and the greatest diversity of occupational contexts in Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Two focus group sessions were conducted in each city, yielding six sessions in total. Sessions were held at accessible neutral venues, including community halls, church multipurpose rooms, and meeting facilities at local non-governmental organisation offices. These venues were selected for accessibility, privacy, and comfort, and were arranged with seating in a circular configuration to facilitate equal participation and signal the absence of hierarchy. Sessions were conducted in the morning or early afternoon to accommodate participants' work schedules. Refreshments were provided at each session as a culturally appropriate gesture of respect for participants' time and contribution.

7.4 Study Population

The study population comprised working and recently retired adults in Ghana who had a minimum of five years of work experience in formal or informal sector employment. Three categories of workers were represented across the focus groups: public sector employees working in government ministries, educational institutions, and public health facilities; private sector employees working in manufacturing, retail, financial services, and professional services; and self-employed and informal sector workers, including traders,

artisans, and small business owners. This breadth of occupational representation was intentional, as the study sought to explore how work ethic narratives vary and intersect across different work contexts, economic conditions, and levels of organisational formalisation.

7.5 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with diverse perspectives on the Ghanaian work ethic. The researcher identified participants through three channels: professional associations and trade union contacts in each study location; community organisation networks, including church groups, women's associations, and informal sector associations; and snowball referrals from initial participants. Purposive sampling criteria were applied to ensure diversity across gender, age group, occupational sector, and educational level within and across focus groups. Each group was composed to include a mix of genders and a spread of ages spanning both younger workers aged 24 to 40 and older workers aged 41 to 67, ensuring that intergenerational dialogue would occur within group sessions. Participants with overlapping occupational backgrounds were occasionally grouped together to establish common conversational ground, but gender and generational diversity were maintained across all groups.

7.6 Sample Size

Six focus groups were conducted, with participant numbers per group ranging from five to seven, yielding a total of 38 participants. Focus group sizes of five to eight participants are recommended in the methodological literature as large enough to generate diverse perspectives while small enough to allow all participants adequate speaking time and to facilitate genuine dialogue (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Data saturation, the point at which new focus group sessions yield no substantially new themes, was assessed during the iterative analysis process and was considered achieved after the fifth focus group session, with the sixth session serving confirmatory purposes. Among the 38 participants, 20 were female, and 18 were male. Ages ranged from 24 to 67 years. Occupational representation was distributed as follows: public sector workers, 12 participants; private sector workers, 14 participants; informal or self-employed workers, 12 participants. Two focus groups were held in Accra with a combined total of 14 participants, two in Kumasi with 13 participants, and two in Tema with 11 participants.

7.7 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a semi-structured focus group discussion guide developed by the researcher. The guide opened with a storytelling warm-up prompt inviting participants to share a brief story about a person they considered a model of diligence, whether someone

they knew personally or a figure from cultural or religious tradition. This prompt was designed to surface the narrative raw material, including characters, virtues, and story forms, through which participants understand diligence before moving into more abstract discussion. Subsequent discussion prompts explored beliefs about the cultural sources of work ethic; comparisons between espoused and observed work behaviour; generational differences in work values; the role of religion, cultural tradition, and family upbringing in shaping work ethic; and the meaning of diligence in contemporary Ghanaian society relative to values participants believed their elders had held.

The guide also included a structured contradiction prompt in which the facilitator introduced a hypothetical scenario of an observable gap between stated work values and actual work behaviour and invited participants to discuss explanations for this gap. This prompt was specifically designed to surface the tensions and contradictions that the study sought to explore. All prompts were reviewed for cultural appropriateness by two Ghanaian academic colleagues prior to data collection and revised based on their feedback. The guide was translated into Twi for use when participants preferred to narrate in that language, with subsequent back-translation into English during transcription. The flexibility of the semi-structured format allowed facilitators to follow unexpected but analytically productive lines of discussion as they emerged organically within groups.

7.8 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted between February and April 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 simultaneous interpretation when participants narrated in Twi or other local languages. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' written informed consent. A research assistant took detailed field notes capturing non-verbal interactions, group dynamics, and moments of notable consensus, contestation, or laughter that the audio recording alone would not preserve. 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 six participants, one from each group, for member checking, and corrections or additions 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, which involves six iterative phases: familiarisation with the data, generating initial

codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the written account. The researcher read all six transcripts multiple times in full before beginning systematic coding, in order to achieve deep familiarity with the data as a whole prior to fragmentation into codes. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, attending closely to the language participants used, the stories they told, the metaphors and proverbs they employed, and the moments of agreement, disagreement, and amusement that characterised group interactions. Codes were then organised 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 the content of participants' narratives and the analytical insight they afforded. The co-facilitator independently coded a twenty percent sample of the transcripts, and coding similarities and differences were discussed and negotiated to enhance the dependability of the analysis. Negative case analysis was systematically conducted to ensure that disconfirming instances were incorporated into thematic accounts rather than overlooked in pursuit of thematic coherence.

7.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Grace International Bible University. All participants provided written informed consent prior to 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 anonymised in any publications arising from the research. To protect anonymity within this report, participants are referred to using pseudonyms agreed upon 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 group dynamics to pressure certain participants toward majority views was explicitly acknowledged, and the facilitator was trained to actively invite dissenting perspectives and to monitor signs of social conformity pressure throughout each session.

8. FINDINGS

Reflexive thematic analysis of the six focus group transcripts yielded five overarching themes that capture the dominant narratives, internal tensions, and contested beliefs surfaced in

participants' group discussions. The themes are presented below with illustrative participant quotations. All participant names are pseudonyms.

8.1 Theme One: "God Rewards the Hard Worker" — Religious Narratives of Diligence

The most pervasive narrative structure across all six focus groups framed diligence as a spiritual virtue and hard work as a form of religious duty carrying divine reward. Participants from Christian and Muslim backgrounds alike drew on religious texts, sermons, and personal testimonies to justify and explain their work ethic beliefs. The language of faith saturated accounts of work motivation, with participants consistently connecting diligent work to divine blessing, personal integrity, and moral character.

Abena, a 45-year-old public sector nurse from Kumasi, offered a representative articulation of this narrative: "In my church, Pastor always says that when you work hard, God sees it and He rewards you. I grew up believing this. Even when my boss does not appreciate my work, I tell myself that God is watching. That is what keeps me going." This pattern, in which divine observation substitutes for or supplements human recognition as the primary audience for diligent work, was repeated in variant forms by participants across all three cities and across both Christian and Muslim communities within the groups.

Several participants drew on specific scriptural references to anchor their work ethic narratives. Kwame, a 52-year-old private sector accountant from Accra, cited the Pauline injunction: "The Bible says if you don't work you should not eat. That is clear. Work is not optional. It is what God expects from us." Fatima, a 38-year-old informal sector trader from Tema, described the same principle in Islamic terms: "Allah has given each person ability. To be lazy with that ability is a sin. You are wasting what Allah gave you." The convergence of Christian and Islamic participants around a shared narrative of work as divinely ordained obligation was a striking and consistent feature of the data.

Notable within this theme was the tension participants identified between principled diligence grounded in virtue and the prosperity gospel's instrumentalisation of hard work as a pathway to material blessing. Several younger participants described the influence of prosperity gospel narratives on their work motivation, framing diligent work primarily as a means to divine financial reward rather than as intrinsically virtuous. Kofi, a 29-year-old private sector worker from Accra, articulated this perspective: "We say we work because of God, but honestly, what we mean is we work so that God can bless us with money. The motivation is the blessing, not the work itself." Older participants frequently challenged this framing, contending that it represented a dilution of a genuine work ethic into transactional religiosity that could not sustain diligence when the expected rewards were delayed.

8.2 Theme Two: "Our Fathers Did Not Rest" — Ancestral and Intergenerational Narratives

A second major theme positioned diligence as an ancestral inheritance and an intergenerational obligation. Participants across age groups drew on stories of parents, grandparents, and community elders to articulate models of extraordinary diligence against which their own work behaviour was measured. These ancestral narratives functioned as moral benchmarks, elevating hard work to a form of filial piety and cultural continuity that transcended individual preference.

Ama, a 61-year-old retired public servant from Kumasi, opened the second Kumasi focus group with a story that catalysed extensive group discussion: "My father was a cocoa farmer. He woke every morning before the sun. I never in my life saw him sit idle during the day. He used to say: the farm does not produce for sleeping men. When I started my government job, I took that voice with me. His voice is still in my ear when I want to be lazy." Several other participants responded with their own variants of this ancestral inheritance narrative, describing parents whose physical labour was remembered with near-sacred reverence and whose work ethic set a standard the present generation aspired to but doubted it could fully match.

This theme contained a significant elegiac dimension, reflected in the frequent perception that contemporary workers cannot replicate the diligence of previous generations. Yaw, a 58-year-old private sector manager from Tema, articulated this sentiment directly: "Our parents built this country with their hands and their sweat. They worked with nothing but will. Today we have everything: computers, phones, resources. But the work ethic is not there the same way." This narrative of generational decline, expressed almost universally by older participants, established an important counterpoint to the more optimistic accounts offered by younger participants, and generated some of the study's most animated intergenerational dialogue.

The intergenerational transmission of work ethic narratives through explicit parental teaching and early assignment of work responsibilities was also strongly represented across the data. Akosua, a 43-year-old informal sector trader from Accra, described her mother's pedagogical approach: "My mother never allowed me to sit without something to do. Always she was giving me work. And she would say, the hand that works is the hand that eats. I teach my children the same." These accounts suggest that ancestral work ethic narratives are transmitted not only through stories but through embodied practices of early work participation that inscribe diligence as habitual orientation before it becomes conscious value.

8.3 Theme Three: "The Stomach Drives the Hand" — Survival Necessity and Pragmatic Diligence

The third theme emerged from participants' candid reckoning with the gap between normative narratives of diligence and the motivational realities of daily work. Across all focus groups, participants distinguished between what they described as true or principled diligence grounded in values and character, and what they variously called stomach motivation, hustle, or forced hard work, driven primarily by economic necessity and survival pressure. This distinction generated some of the richest and most contested dialogue of the study, with participants challenging one another's characterisations of their own and others' work motivations.

Emmanuel, a 34-year-old informal sector mechanic from Tema, articulated the distinction with striking directness: "People want to say they work because they love to work, because their father taught them. But the truth? It is the stomach. If I have food, if my children are okay, I relax. The hard work comes from hunger, not from culture." This provoked immediate and spirited disagreement from several older participants in the group, but also reluctant partial agreement from some younger ones. Abena, responding to Emmanuel, said: "I don't fully agree. I work hard even when I have enough. But I cannot say he is completely wrong. Many people in Ghana their diligence has a direct relationship to their account balance."

This theme surfaced important generational differences in how work motivation was framed and justified. Younger participants were more likely to describe their work motivation in explicitly economic terms, presenting hustle culture as a contemporary work value that reflected pragmatic and intelligent adaptation to Ghana's economic conditions rather than a failure of principle. Esi, a 27-year-old private sector worker from Accra, defended this framing against older participants' criticism: "You call it lack of discipline, we call it strategy. In today's Ghana, you have to be smart, not just hard-working. Working hard in one direction all your life and having nothing to show for it, that is not wisdom. That is stubbornness." Older participants in the same session struggled to articulate a counter-argument that acknowledged the economic realities Esi described while maintaining the distinction they valued between principled diligence and opportunistic hustle. This unresolved tension was a recurring feature of the generationally mixed discussion groups.

8.4 Theme Four: "We Work Together or We Don't Work" — Communal Work Values and Ubuntu

The fourth theme centred on the communal and relational dimensions of the Ghanaian work ethic, reflecting the Ubuntu philosophical framework's emphasis on personhood through community. Participants consistently described work motivation and work ethic as fundamentally social phenomena, shaped by and oriented toward collective well-being, family obligation, and community membership rather than individual achievement in isolation. The relational quality of work contexts was repeatedly identified as a significant determinant of both motivation and effort.

References to traditional cooperative work institutions were frequent across groups. Mensah, a 55-year-old community development worker from Kumasi, described the 'nnoboa' institution: "In the village, when you had to clear a large farm, you did not do it alone. You called the community, and they came. And you would go for them also. That is the Ghanaian way of working: together. The idea that a man works alone for himself, that is a foreign idea. It is not how we are built." Several participants extended this point to contemporary workplaces, arguing that the quality of relationships among colleagues was a decisive influence on their work motivation, with poor collegial relationships undermining diligence and genuine communal belonging enhancing it.

Gender dynamics emerged prominently within this theme. Female participants were particularly articulate about the double burden of productive and reproductive work, and about the ways in which communal obligation could simultaneously be a source of motivation and a drain on individual capacity for visible occupational diligence. Adwoa, a 40-year-old private sector banker from Accra, described the complexity: "As a woman, you are expected to work hard in the office and then come home and work hard again in the house. Nobody counts the second shift. When people say Ghanaian women are not diligent, I want to ask: compared to what standard? We work more than anyone, just not always in the places that get measured and rewarded." This observation generated significant affirmation from female participants across groups and thoughtful reflection from male participants who acknowledged they had not previously considered domestic labour as a dimension of work ethic.

Tensions between communal obligation and individual professional productivity surfaced as a site of genuine dilemma. Nana, a 47-year-old public sector administrator from Tema, articulated the conflict: "Your colleague loses someone, you must go and support. To not go is a moral failure in our culture. But your boss is marking your absence. These two

obligations are both real. You cannot just choose one without cost." The inability to resolve this tension through simple choice, a pattern consistent with Ubuntu's emphasis on relational obligation over individual optimisation, was widely shared across the data and represents one of the study's most practically significant findings.

8.5 Theme Five: "The Youth Have Lost the Way" — Generational Tensions and Shifting Work Values

The fifth and most contentious theme across focus groups concerned generational differences in work ethic, with older participants generally advancing narratives of declining diligence and younger participants contesting those narratives with alternative framings of contemporary work values. This theme generated the most animated and at times heated group dialogue of the study, with generational fault lines producing extended exchanges that revealed the complexity and contestedness of Ghanaian work ethic culture.

Older participants across all locations described a perceived erosion of the diligence they associated with previous generations, attributing this erosion to the rise of technology and social media, which they perceived as distracting workers from sustained effort; the influence of Western individualism, which they felt had undermined communal work norms; the prosperity gospel's promotion of instant blessing over patient labour; and a perceived softening of parenting norms that no longer instilled the work habits earlier upbringings had produced. Kweku, a 63-year-old retired teacher from Accra, summarised this perspective: "My generation worked in silence and produced results. The young people today are always talking about working smart. But what they mean is working less and expecting more. That is not a work ethic. That is an entitlement attitude."

Younger participants were not passive recipients of this critique. Several offered sophisticated counter-narratives that explicitly reframed diligence as an adaptive, context-sensitive capacity rather than a fixed, historically rooted virtue. Yaa, a 26-year-old digital entrepreneur from Accra, responded directly: "My grandfather worked hard on a farm and remained poor. My father worked hard in a government job and retired with almost nothing. I work differently: I build multiple income streams, I use technology, and I collaborate internationally. I work harder than either of them, but I work intelligently. Do not tell me I lack work ethic because I do not look like my grandfather doing it." This re-narration of diligence as an adaptive strategy rather than a fixed tradition resonated strongly with other younger participants and prompted genuine, visible reflection among older participants in the mixed-age groups.

Participants in the middle age range of 40 to 55 offered the most nuanced mediating perspectives. This group frequently described themselves as occupying a bridging position, having been socialised into traditional work ethic narratives by their parents while simultaneously adapting to changed economic conditions in their own careers. Their accounts reflected the most visible engagement with contradiction, acknowledging the validity of both ancestral diligence and contemporary adaptability as legitimate expressions of Ghanaian work culture, and positioning the tension between them as a productive cultural dynamic rather than a crisis. Kofi, aged 48, a private sector manager from Kumasi, offered this synthesis: "Maybe we are all right. The old people kept something we must not lose: the discipline, the commitment, the shame of being seen as lazy. The young people have something we must not dismiss: the creativity, the flexibility, the courage to try new paths. A Ghana that keeps both can go very far."

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Key Narrative Elements.

Theme	**Narrative Frame**	**Key Metaphors/Proverbs**	**Primary Tensions**
Religious Narratives of Diligence	God rewards hard work; work as spiritual duty	"He who does not work, shall not eat"	Principled virtue vs. prosperity gospel instrumentalism
Ancestral & Intergenerational Narratives	Work ethic as inherited legacy; ancestors as exemplars	"The farm does not produce for sleeping men"	Ancestral standard vs. perceived generational decline
Survival Necessity & Pragmatic Diligence	Stomach motivation; hustle culture as adaptive strategy	"The stomach drives the hand"	Principled diligence vs. economic survival orientation
Communal Work Values & Ubuntu	Work as collective endeavour; diligence as contribution to community	Nnoboa (cooperative labour exchange)	Communal obligation vs. individual professional performance
Generational Tensions & Shifting Work Values	Decline narrative vs. adaptive re-narration of diligence	"Work smart, not just hard"	Traditional diligence vs. contemporary entrepreneurial adaptability

9. DISCUSSION

This qualitative focus group study explored cultural narratives of diligence among Ghanaian workers, surfacing the shared beliefs, ancestral stories, religious frameworks, survival discourses, and contested generational narratives that constitute Ghanaian work ethic discourse. The five themes generated by the analysis illuminate a work ethic culture that is rich, internally contested, and shaped by multiple intersecting cultural logics that resist reduction to a single characterisation.

The prominence of religious narrative in participants' work ethic accounts is consistent with broader observations of the centrality of faith in Ghanaian public culture (Gifford, 2004). The finding that both Christian and Muslim participants drew on religious frameworks to justify and explain their work values suggests that the sacralisation of diligence is a cross-religious cultural pattern in Ghana rather than a denomination-specific phenomenon. However, the tension participants identified between principled diligence grounded in virtue and the prosperity gospel's instrumentalisation of hard work as a means to material blessing raises important questions about the sustainability of religiously motivated work ethic. If diligence is motivated primarily by anticipated divine financial reward rather than intrinsic value, it may be vulnerable to erosion when the expected rewards fail to materialise or are delayed, a pattern consistent with Social Constructionism's insight that socially constructed meanings require ongoing reinforcement through narrative and social confirmation to remain motivationally compelling (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The ancestral narrative theme illuminates the intergenerational transmission dimension of work ethic construction in Ghanaian culture. Participants' accounts of parents and grandparents as exemplars of diligence function to anchor work values in a temporally extended narrative of cultural identity rather than merely in individual preference or religious obligation. This intergenerational anchoring is consistent with Ubuntu philosophy's emphasis on personhood as constituted through communal and ancestral relationships over time (Gyekye, 1997). The prevalent narrative of generational decline, while it may reflect selective memory that ideally transforms past practice, also captures genuine cultural anxiety about the continuity of work values in the face of rapid economic and social change. The intensity of this anxiety among older participants, and the specificity with which they articulated it, suggests it deserves serious consideration rather than dismissal as mere nostalgic conservatism.

The survival necessity theme introduces the most theoretically challenging tension in the study's findings. The distinction participants drew between principled diligence and stomach-

driven hustle suggests an awareness of a gap between the work ethic they profess and the work motivation they actually experience. Rather than interpreting this gap as evidence of cultural hypocrisy, the Social Constructionist framework suggests viewing it as evidence that work ethic operates as a cultural ideal that is negotiated against rather than straightforwardly enacted. The ideal of principled diligence serves a normative and identity function even when it is not fully embodied, providing a standard against which workers measure and judge themselves and others, and giving work a moral significance that transcends mere economic transaction. This finding has important implications for human resource management, suggesting that interventions should engage with the moral and identity dimensions of work motivation rather than treating diligence as a purely economic or incentive-driven phenomenon.

The communal work ethic theme, particularly the Ubuntu dimension, suggests that Ghanaian organisational behaviour researchers and human resource practitioners may be systematically underestimating the motivational importance of relational and collective factors in Ghanaian work contexts. If diligence is fundamentally relational for Ghanaian workers, as participants' accounts consistently suggested, then management practices that emphasise individual performance metrics, competitive ranking, and atomised work structures may inadvertently undermine the cultural foundations of work motivation. The specific finding that women in the study experienced the double burden of productive and reproductive labour as a significant but invisible dimension of their work ethic points to a critical gap in how diligence is measured and recognised in Ghanaian organisations.

The generational tension theme is perhaps the most theoretically productive finding of the study. The dialogic encounter between older participants' decline narratives and younger participants' adaptive re-narrations of diligence represents a living cultural negotiation over the meaning and future of the Ghanaian work ethic. The bridging narratives offered by middle-generation participants demonstrate that cultural continuity and adaptive change need not be in opposition but can be held in productive tension by individuals who have navigated both frameworks. This finding suggests that intergenerational dialogue about work values, rather than monological transmission from older to younger generations, may be the most productive vehicle for sustaining a Ghanaian work ethic that is both culturally rooted and economically adaptive.

Several limitations of this study merit acknowledgement. The focus group methodology, while generative of rich dialogic data, does not permit conclusions about the prevalence or representativeness of the narratives identified across the broader Ghanaian population. The

urban sample across three major Ghanaian cities means that the findings may not fully represent the work ethic narratives of rural Ghanaians, whose work contexts, communal institutions, and cultural resources differ significantly. Participants with stronger or more articulate views may have shaped group dialogue disproportionately despite the facilitator's deliberate efforts to invite diverse contributions. The researcher's own position as an educated Ghanaian academic may have shaped both the group dynamics and the analytical interpretation, a reflexivity that is acknowledged and that informed the reflective journaling process throughout the study.

10. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the cultural narratives of diligence that Ghanaian workers construct, transmit, and contest in focus group dialogue across three major urban centres. The findings reveal a work ethic culture characterised by five major narrative themes: religious sacralisation of diligence; ancestral intergenerational inheritance; pragmatic survival motivation; communal Ubuntu values; and generational tensions over shifting definitions of hard work. These themes are not discrete or internally consistent; they intersect, contradict, and negotiate with one another in the ongoing cultural work through which Ghanaian workers make meaning of their labour.

The most significant contribution of this study is its demonstration that the Ghanaian work ethic cannot be adequately understood through survey instruments or Western theoretical frameworks alone. It must be approached through the culturally embedded narratives, proverbs, ancestral stories, and communal values that give work its meaning for Ghanaian workers. The tensions within these narratives, between virtue and survival, between communal obligation and individual performance, between ancestral models and contemporary adaptation, are not failures of cultural coherence but productive sites of cultural vitality and ongoing negotiation. Ghana's work culture is not in decline; it is in active evolution, and understanding that evolution requires listening carefully to the stories Ghanaians tell about why, how, and for whom they work.

11. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered. For organisations and human resource managers in Ghana, take the relational and communal dimensions of Ghanaian work motivation seriously. Performance management systems that focus exclusively on individual metrics may undermine the Ubuntu communal values that

significantly drive diligent work behaviour among Ghanaian employees. Group-based recognition, team performance rewards, and work structures that facilitate cooperative rather than purely competitive work may better align with Ghanaian workers' cultural work values and sustain motivation more effectively. Organisations should also develop formal means of recognising the full spectrum of workers' contributions, including the invisible reproductive and communal labour that female workers disproportionately shoulder alongside their occupational roles.

For educational institutions and youth development programmes, engage actively with the generational tension around work ethic narratives rather than simply reproducing older generations' decline narratives. Structured intergenerational dialogue that allows young workers to articulate their adaptive re-narrations of diligence while remaining connected to ancestral and communal work values would be a valuable curriculum intervention. Young people's capacity to reframe diligence for contemporary economic conditions should be recognised as a strength rather than a deficiency, even where it produces work practices that differ in form from traditional models.

For policymakers and national development planners, recognise that Ghana's work ethic discourse already contains powerful cultural resources for productivity and national development. Interventions that engage with and build upon the religious, ancestral, and communal narratives of diligence that are already motivationally compelling for Ghanaian workers are likely to be more effective than imported frameworks that attempt to transplant Western Protestant Work Ethic values onto a culturally distinct context. Public discourse about work and productivity should acknowledge and honour the communal and relational dimensions of Ghanaian work culture rather than defaulting to individualistic frameworks.

For researchers, conduct further qualitative and mixed methods research examining work ethic narratives in rural Ghanaian contexts, which may differ significantly from the urban contexts explored in this study. Longitudinal research examining how individual work ethic narratives evolve across the life course, from early employment through mid-career to retirement, would add an important developmental perspective. Research that specifically examines gender differences in work ethic narration, building on the initial findings regarding the invisible double burden described by female participants, represents an urgent and substantively important future direction. Comparative research examining work ethic narratives across other West African cultural contexts would also contribute to understanding the specifically Ghanaian dimensions of the narratives identified here versus patterns that may be regionally common.

For mental health and counselling practitioners working in occupational contexts in Ghana, be attentive to the moral and identity dimensions of work in Ghanaian culture. For many Ghanaian workers, the perceived gap between the work ethic ideal and their experienced motivation may generate shame, self-reproach, and identity distress that is not reducible to simple performance management problems. Culturally sensitive counselling that acknowledges the multiple and sometimes contradictory cultural narratives of diligence, and that supports clients in navigating those tensions without undue self-criticism, may be more helpful than prescriptive approaches that assume a singular standard of diligence against which all workers should measure themselves.

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