
THE ROLE OF INFORMAL FEEDBACK IN SHAPING WORK ETHIC PERCEPTIONS IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study provides an in-depth analysis of how informal feedback, casual comments, gossip, and peer reviews shape employees' perceptions of work ethic within Ghanaian organizational contexts. Guided by Foucault's concept of the docile body and Goffman's dramaturgical framework, interviews with six professionals across three sectors (banking, education, and civil service) in Accra reveal how informal evaluative discourse operates as a disciplinary mechanism that regulates workplace behavior. Findings identify three primary channels of informal feedback: peer-initiated casual commentary (performance observations, character assessments), gossip networks (reputational transmission, social sanctioning), and informal peer reviews (unsolicited evaluations, corridor consultations). The study examines how these feedback forms shape employees' perceptions of what constitutes "good work ethic," how organizational hierarchies mediate the reception of informal feedback, and how workers negotiate between formal performance metrics and informal reputational assessments. Results indicate that while informal feedback operates outside official channels, its influence on work ethic perceptions is substantial, often outweighing formal evaluations. Gossip networks function as rapid reputational transmission systems, rewarding performative displays of diligence while punishing perceived laziness or unreliability. Casual comments, particularly those framed as "just advising," carry significant disciplinary weight because they invoke shared cultural expectations of reciprocity, respect, and communal responsibility. The study also reveals how organizational seniority and gender shape experiences of informal feedback, with junior employees and women reporting greater vulnerability to reputational damage from casual commentary. This ethnographic perspective highlights the necessity of acknowledging informal feedback as a legitimate force in shaping

workplace behavior and developing culturally sensitive approaches to performance management that recognize rather than deny the power of casual talk.

KEYWORDS: *Informal feedback, work ethic, gossip, workplace culture, Ghana, qualitative research, organizational behavior*

INTRODUCTION

In formal organizational theory, performance feedback flows through structured channels: annual evaluations, supervisor reviews, and documented performance metrics. Yet anyone who has worked in an organization knows that much of what shapes employees' understanding of "good work" travels through different routes—casual comments at the water cooler, whispered assessments during lunch breaks, corridor conversations that begin with "people are saying..." These informal feedback mechanisms operate outside official systems, yet they profoundly shape how workers perceive their own performance, internalize workplace norms, and adjust their behavior to meet perceived expectations (Noon & Blyton, 2007). For employees navigating organizational life, the question "Am I doing well?" is answered not only by quarterly reviews but also by the tone of a colleague's greeting, the absence of an invitation to lunch, or the circulation of a story about someone who "doesn't pull their weight."

This phenomenon is particularly significant in Ghanaian organizational contexts, where workplace relationships are embedded within broader cultural frameworks of reciprocity, communal obligation, and respect for hierarchy (Gyekye, 1996). In Ghanaian workplaces, as in many collectivist cultural contexts, the boundary between formal organizational roles and informal social relationships is permeable. Colleagues are often friends, supervisors may be "aunties" or "uncles" in extended kinship terms, and workplace reputation extends beyond professional competence to encompass moral character, trustworthiness, and social harmony (Amponsah-Tawiah & Dartey-Baah, 2011). In such environments, a casual comment about someone being "too proud to greet" carries as much weight as a formal note about missed deadlines—perhaps more, because it speaks to character rather than competence.

The influence of informal feedback on work ethic perceptions has received limited empirical attention, particularly in non-Western contexts. Existing research has focused primarily on formal feedback systems (Aguinis, 2013) or on the negative effects of workplace gossip (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), with little attention to how informal feedback functions as a positive or neutral disciplinary mechanism that shapes employees' understanding of

appropriate workplace conduct. The absence of research on informal feedback is significant because the gap between formal and informal evaluation systems creates contradictions for employees. A worker may receive excellent formal reviews yet sense, through casual comments and social exclusion, that colleagues perceive them as lazy, arrogant, or untrustworthy. Conversely, a worker with mediocre formal metrics may thrive because colleagues circulate stories of their reliability, helpfulness, and "good heart" (Gyekye, 1996). The Ghanaian context presents unique characteristics that warrant specific investigation. Ghana's workplace culture emphasizes interpersonal harmony, respect for elders, and the value of *suban* (character) alongside *nimdee* (knowledge) (Gyekye, 1996). The concept of work ethic in Ghana is not reducible to productivity metrics; it encompasses punctuality, diligence, respect for hierarchy, willingness to help colleagues, and appropriate social conduct (Amponsah-Tawiah & Dartey-Baah, 2011). Informal feedback, transmitted through *asem* (talk, news, gossip), is the primary mechanism through which these holistic expectations are communicated. Understanding how young professionals in Ghana navigate this informal evaluative environment is essential for developing performance management systems that are culturally congruent and for supporting employees who may be disadvantaged by informal networks.

This study addresses this gap by examining how informal feedback shapes work ethic perceptions among six professionals in Accra, representing diverse sectors: banking (Esi, Samuel), education (Ama, Kojo), and civil service (Adwoa, Yaw). The research focuses on three key questions: (a) Through what channels does informal feedback about work ethic circulate in Ghanaian workplaces? (b) How does informal feedback influence employees' perceptions of what constitutes "good work ethic"? (c) How do organizational hierarchies and gender shape experiences of and responses to informal feedback? Applying Foucault's (1977) concept of the docile body, which illuminates how individuals are disciplined through subtle, diffuse mechanisms rather than overt coercion, and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, which examines how individuals manage impressions in social interactions, this study analyzes participants' narratives of receiving informal feedback, their behavioral adjustments, and their negotiation between formal and informal evaluative systems.

Literature Review

Work Ethic: Conceptual Foundations and Cultural Variations

The concept of work ethic has been predominantly shaped by Weber's (1905/2002) Protestant work ethic thesis, which links hard work, diligence, and asceticism to spiritual salvation in

Western capitalist development. Weber's framework emphasizes individualism, intrinsic motivation for work, and the moral valence of productive labor. However, subsequent research has demonstrated that work ethic is culturally variable, with different societies emphasizing different dimensions: collectivism versus individualism, intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, and the relationship between work and social harmony (Furnham, 1990).

In African contexts, and Ghana specifically, work ethic is embedded within broader frameworks of communal obligation and reciprocal responsibility. Gyekye (1996) argues that the Akan concept of *suban* (character) encompasses both moral and practical dimensions of conduct, including reliability, helpfulness, respect, and contribution to collective welfare. Work is not merely an individual pursuit of achievement but a site of social participation and mutual obligation. An employee who works diligently but refuses to help colleagues, who achieves targets but disrespects elders, or who performs competently but does not share credit fails the holistic test of good character (Amponsah-Tawiah & Dartey-Baah, 2011).

This cultural framing has implications for how the work ethic is evaluated. Formal performance metrics that measure individual productivity may miss dimensions of work behavior that colleagues and supervisors value: willingness to mentor juniors, contribution to office morale, responsiveness to requests for help, and maintenance of social harmony (Abugre, 2018). Informal feedback, transmitted through casual comments and gossip, is the mechanism through which these culturally valued but formally unmeasured dimensions are communicated and enforced.

Informal Feedback: Definitions and Mechanisms

Informal feedback refers to evaluative information about performance or conduct that is transmitted outside formal organizational channels (London & Smither, 2002). Unlike formal feedback, which is documented, scheduled, and attributed, informal feedback is spontaneous, undocumented, and often anonymous or attributed to a generalized "people are saying..." It includes casual comments (e.g., "You were early today, that's good"), gossip (information about absent third parties that is evaluative in nature), and informal peer reviews (unsolicited assessments given in passing). Informal feedback is not necessarily negative; it can be positive, neutral, or ambiguous. Its defining feature is its location outside official performance management systems (Noon & Blyton, 2007).

Research on workplace gossip has demonstrated that gossip serves multiple functions: information sharing, social bonding, norm enforcement, and reputational competition (Foster,

2004). Gossip about colleagues' work habits, who arrives early, who leaves late, who takes long lunches, who volunteers for extra assignments, transmits information about behavioral expectations and sanctions deviance through reputational damage. Kurland and Pelled (2000) found that gossip about work performance was more common than gossip about personal lives in professional workplaces, suggesting that gossip functions as a grassroots performance evaluation system.

However, existing research has focused primarily on the negative consequences of gossip: bullying, exclusion, and organizational politics (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). Less attention has been paid to how informal feedback, including gossip, functions as a disciplinary mechanism that shapes employees' internalization of work norms, what Foucault (1977) would call the production of docile bodies through diffuse surveillance. Moreover, most research on workplace feedback has been conducted in Western, individualistic contexts, leaving open questions about how informal feedback operates in collectivist cultural contexts where social harmony, face, and reputation carry heightened significance.

The Ghanaian Workplace Context

Ghana's organizational culture is characterized by high power distance, collectivism, and particularism (Hofstede, 2001; Beugré & Offodile, 2001). High power distance means that hierarchical relationships shape interactions, with subordinates expected to show deference to supervisors. Collectivism means that group harmony, loyalty, and mutual obligation take precedence over individual achievement. Particularism means that rules are applied flexibly based on relationships, rather than universally.

These cultural characteristics shape how informal feedback operates. In high power distance contexts, subordinates may be reluctant to provide upward feedback, whether formal or informal. However, informal feedback flows freely laterally (among peers) and downward (from supervisors to subordinates), often in the form of "advice" that carries implicit evaluation (Abugre, 2018). In collectivist contexts, maintaining face and social harmony is paramount; therefore, negative informal feedback is often indirect, transmitted through third parties, or framed as concern rather than criticism (Mensah, 2015). The Ghanaian concept of *asem* (talk, news, gossip) encompasses both neutral information transmission and evaluative commentary, and its circulation is understood as a normal feature of social life rather than necessarily malicious.

Research on Ghanaian workplaces has identified reputation as a central concern for employees. Amponsah-Tawiah and Dartey-Baah (2011) found that Ghanaian workers were

highly sensitive to how they were perceived by colleagues, viewing workplace reputation as an asset that affected not only career advancement but also social inclusion and personal dignity. However, the specific mechanisms through which reputation is shaped and maintained, including informal feedback channels, have not been systematically examined.

Theoretical Framework: Discipline and Dramaturgy

This study integrates two complementary theoretical frameworks. Foucault's (1977) concept of the docile body illuminates how disciplinary power operates through diffuse, everyday mechanisms rather than overt coercion. The docile body is produced through surveillance (being watched and knowing one is potentially watched), normalization (comparison to behavioral standards), and examination (assessment against norms). In the context of informal feedback, employees are subject to constant potential surveillance by colleagues, who observe and comment on work behavior. The circulation of informal feedback normalizes certain behaviors (punctuality, helpfulness, visible diligence) while pathologizing others (lateness, isolation, visible idleness). Through this process, employees internalize workplace norms and discipline themselves, producing the behaviors that organizations value without formal enforcement.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework complements Foucault by focusing on the agentic dimensions of impression management. According to Goffman, individuals are performers who manage their front stage (public behavior) and back stage (private behavior) to control the impressions others form of them. In workplaces, employees engage in impression management arriving early, working visibly, offering help, expressing enthusiasm to signal good work ethic. Informal feedback operates as audience response, telling performers whether their performance is credible or whether they have been "found out" as lazy, incompetent, or disingenuous (Goffman, 1963).

Together, these frameworks enable analysis of how informal feedback operates as both disciplinary mechanism (producing docile bodies through surveillance and normalization) and dramaturgical resource (providing audiences to which workers perform and feedback that shapes subsequent performances). This dual perspective captures both the constraining and enabling dimensions of informal feedback.

METHODS

Procedure and Data Collection

As part of a larger research project examining workplace culture in Ghanaian organizations, this study specifically examined how informal feedback shapes perceptions of work ethic. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six participants who were employed in formal organizations in Accra. Each participant completed one semi-structured interview lasting approximately 60-75 minutes. The study was informed by a constructivist epistemological approach, recognizing that meaning is co-constructed through the interaction between researchers, participants, and the broader social context (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The semi-structured interview guide was designed with four specific objectives: (a) to identify the types of informal feedback participants received about work ethic; (b) to trace how informal feedback influenced participants' perceptions of their own and others' work ethic; (c) to examine how participants adjusted their behavior in response to informal feedback; and (d) to explore how organizational hierarchy and gender shaped experiences of informal feedback. Probing questions (e.g., "How did you know that?" "What did you do after hearing that?") were used throughout interviews. Prior to each interview, participants received a study description, and informed consent was obtained. Interviews were conducted in a mixture of English and Twi, transcribed verbatim, and translated fully into English for analysis.

Participants

Following institutional Research Ethics Board approval, professionals in Accra were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. The final sample (N = 6) comprised three women and three men aged 24-35 years, representing three sectors: banking (Esi, female, 28; Samuel, male, 31), education (Ama, female, 30; Kojo, male, 35), and civil service (Adwoa, female, 29; Yaw, male, 24). Professional experience ranged from 2 to 10 years. All participants held university degrees and worked in formal organizational settings. Table 1 provides participant details.

Table 1. Participants.

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Sector	Years of Experience	Position Level
Esi	Female	28	Banking	6	Junior Officer
Samuel	Male	31	Banking	8	Senior Officer
Ama	Female	30	Education (Secondary School)	5	Teacher
Kojo	Male	35	Education (University)	10	Lecturer
Adwoa	Female	29	Civil Service	4	Administrative Officer
Yaw	Male	24	Civil Service	2	Graduate Trainee

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of each interview were transcribed verbatim, and NVivo software was used to organize data during coding. A reflexive thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Through repeated engagement with the transcripts, the first author organized data into themes reflecting channels of informal feedback, mechanisms of influence, and negotiation strategies. These themes were then interpreted through Foucault's concept of the docile body and Goffman's dramaturgical framework, as well as through existing literature on workplace feedback.

Following initial analysis, the critical friend method allowed for "greater capacity for self-evaluation as well as open-mindedness to the constructive thinking of others" (Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 51). A colleague trained in qualitative methods reviewed the analysis, posed probing questions, and examined developing themes through an alternative interpretive lens. This process enhanced trustworthiness by strengthening validity, reducing bias, and supporting reliability.

RESULTS

The findings are organized into four sections. The first examines the channels through which informal feedback about work ethic circulates. The second analyzes how informal feedback shapes perceptions of work ethic. The third examines how participants negotiate between formal and informal evaluation systems. The fourth explores how hierarchy and gender shape experiences of informal feedback.

Channels of Informal Feedback

Participants described three primary channels through which informal feedback about work ethic circulated: peer-initiated casual commentary, gossip networks, and informal peer reviews.

Peer-Initiated Casual Commentary. All participants reported receiving casual comments from colleagues that carried implicit or explicit evaluation of their work behavior. These comments often occurred in passing during tea breaks, as someone left for the day, or while waiting for meetings to begin. Their casual framing ("just saying," "by the way") belied their evaluative weight.

Esi, a banker, described how a seemingly neutral comment about arrival time shaped her behavior:

"One morning, I came at exactly 8 am. My senior colleague said, 'Esi, you are exactly on time today.' That was all. Just that. But the way she said it I knew she meant other days I was late. After that, I started coming at 7:45. She never said anything again, but I knew she noticed."

For Esi, the comment functioned as indirect evaluation. The senior colleague did not criticize or instruct; she simply observed. Yet the observation, because it came from a respected senior, carried disciplinary weight. Esi interpreted the comment as negative feedback ("you have been late") and adjusted her behavior accordingly. The colleague never formally evaluated Esi's punctuality, nor was punctuality a formal performance metric for her role. Nonetheless, the casual comment produced behavioral change.

Yaw, a civil service graduate trainee, described how comments about his demeanor shaped his understanding of professional conduct:

"Someone told me, 'You are always so quiet. Don't you like us?' I thought I was just working. But after that, I started greeting everyone properly, asking about their weekends, laughing at jokes even if they weren't funny. I realized that being a good worker in my office means being friendly, not just doing your work."

Yaw's experience illustrates how informal feedback transmits holistic expectations that extend beyond task performance. The casual comment ("Don't you like us?") framed his quietness as a relational failing rather than a neutral personality trait. Yaw internalized this framing and modified his front stage performance to include social warmth. The feedback was not about productivity but about belonging and Yaw understood that belonging was a prerequisite for being perceived as having good work ethic.

Gossip Networks. Gossip about absent colleagues' work habits was ubiquitous across all three sectors. Participants reported hearing gossip about who arrived late, who left early, who

took extended lunch breaks, who volunteered for extra assignments, and who "sat doing nothing" while others worked. Gossip served as a normative transmission system, rewarding behaviors that aligned with group expectations and punishing deviance through reputational damage.

Ama, a secondary school teacher, described how gossip about a colleague who left immediately after classes shaped collective behavior:

"There was this teacher, Madam Patience. After her last period at 2 pm, she would leave. Immediately. Other teachers would stay until 4 pm, marking or helping students. People started saying, 'Madam Patience doesn't care about the children. She is only here for money.' I heard this so many times. Then new teachers came. They also started staying until 4 pm. No one told them to. They just knew, from the gossip about Madam Patience, that leaving early meant people would say you don't care."

In Ama's account, gossip about an absent third party communicated behavioral expectations to the entire group. New teachers did not need to be formally instructed to stay late; they learned the norm by hearing the consequences of violating it. Gossip about Madam Patience functioned as a cautionary tale: this is what people say about those who leave early. The fear of becoming the subject of similar gossip produced docile bodies that voluntarily extended working hours.

Samuel, a senior banker, described how positive gossip circulated as well:

"When someone does something good stays late to finish a report, helps another department without being asked people talk. 'See how dedicated Kwame is. He is serious about his work.' That talk spreads. Then others want to be talked about like that too. So they also start staying late, helping others. The manager never says anything. But everyone knows what 'serious' means because of what people say."

Samuel's observation highlights how gossip functions as a positive disciplinary mechanism. The desire to be the subject of favorable gossip motivates behavioral conformity without formal incentives. The organization does not need to reward staying late; the social reward of being discussed as "serious" suffices.

Informal Peer Reviews. Participants described receiving unsolicited evaluations from peers, often framed as advice or concern rather than criticism. These informal reviews occurred in corridors, during lunch, or through phone calls after work. Unlike casual comments, which were brief and ambiguous, informal peer reviews were more extended and explicit, though still undocumented and unofficial.

Kojo, a university lecturer, described a conversation with a senior colleague that functioned as an informal review:

"Dr. Mensah called me aside one day. He said, 'Kojo, I'm telling you this as a friend. People are saying that you don't mark assignments on time. Students have been complaining. You have good research, but if people think you are lazy about teaching, it will affect your reputation.' He didn't write anything. He didn't tell the Head of Department. But I changed how I marked after that day."

The informal peer review carried weight because of its source (a respected senior) and its framing ("as a friend"). Dr. Mensah positioned himself as an ally rather than an accuser, making the feedback easier to accept. Yet the content was clearly evaluative: Kojo's marking speed was perceived as inadequate, and this perception was damaging his reputation. Kojo adjusted his behavior not because of formal performance management but because an informal review made him aware of how he was perceived.

Adwoa, a civil service administrative officer, described receiving informal peer feedback that contradicted her formal evaluation:

"My formal appraisal said I exceeded expectations. But my friend in another department told me, 'People think you are too proud. You greet people but you don't really talk to them.' I was shocked. I thought greeting was enough. But after she told me that, I started stopping to chat, asking about people's children, staying for small talk. My formal rating was fine, but I realized that people's perception of me was not good. I wanted both."

Adwoa's experience reveals the gap between formal and informal evaluation systems. She was performing excellently according to official metrics, yet informal feedback indicated that her work ethic was perceived as deficient because she failed to invest in relational labor. The pressure to close this gap—to be both competent and warm, productive and personable—shaped her subsequent behavior.

How Informal Feedback Shapes Perceptions of Work Ethic

Participants internalized informal feedback to develop working definitions of "good work ethic" that extended beyond formal job descriptions. These definitions varied by workplace but shared common elements: punctuality (arriving before the official start time), visible diligence (being seen working, not just working), relational investment (greeting, chatting, showing interest in colleagues), and willingness to help (saying yes to requests, regardless of formal role).

Visibility as Evidence of Work Ethic. Across all sectors, participants emphasized that work ethic was not merely about working but about being seen working. Invisible labor—working quietly at one's desk without social visibility did not generate positive informal feedback. Visible diligence was evident in helping others, staying late, and arriving early while others watched, generating positive gossip.

Samuel captured this dynamic

"There is a difference between doing the work and people knowing you do the work. If you close your door and work hard all day, no one sees. They might think you are sleeping. But if you are in the open office, helping people, carrying files, looking busy, then people say, 'Samuel works hard.' The work is the same. But the perception is different."

Samuel's observation reveals how informal feedback shapes behavior toward performative displays of diligence. The disciplinary pressure is not to work hard but to be perceived as working hard. This produced what participants described as strategic visibility: arranging work to be observable, volunteering for tasks that would be noticed, avoiding work that was invisible even if important.

Relational Labor as Work Ethic. Participants consistently identified relational behaviors—greeting, small talk, showing interest in colleagues' lives—as central to work ethic perceptions. These behaviors were not formally evaluated but were heavily weighted in informal feedback.

Esi explained:

"In my bank, if you do not greet people properly in the morning, they will say you are 'too serious' or 'too proud.' That is a bad thing. 'Too proud' means you think you are better than others. Once people think that, they will not help you, and they will not cover for you. So I make sure to greet everyone, ask about their weekend, and laugh at their jokes. It takes time, but it is part of the work."

For Esi, relational labor was not optional socializing but mandatory work behavior. Failure to perform this labor elicited negative informal feedback ("too proud"), which had material consequences (reduced cooperation and social exclusion). The disciplinary system enforced relational labor as effectively as formal systems enforced task completion.

Negotiating Formal and Informal Systems

Participants experienced tension between formal performance metrics and informal evaluative expectations. This tension required active negotiation: deciding which system to

prioritize, how to allocate limited time and energy, and how to maintain positive standing in both.

Ama described this negotiation:

"My formal evaluation is about student exam scores and lesson notes. That is what my Head of Department checks. But my colleagues care about whether I help them with supervision, whether I attend social events, whether I share teaching materials. If I focus only on my formal work, people will say I am selfish. If I focus only on helping others, my formal work suffers. I have to balance."

Ama's balance required strategic allocation of effort. She described arriving early to complete lesson notes before colleagues arrived, freeing time during the day for relational labor. She described saying yes to helping colleagues but setting time limits. She described attending social events but leaving early when formal work demanded attention. These strategies represent impression management—shaping how different audiences (supervisors, peers) perceived her while managing the competing demands of each.

Adwoa, whose formal evaluation was positive but informal feedback was negative, described a different negotiation:

"After my friend told me what people were saying, I decided to prioritize fixing my reputation. I started staying longer, chatting more, and attending all social events. My formal work dropped a little—I finished reports later than before. But people stopped saying I was proud. For me, that was more important than being perfect on paper."

Adwoa's choice to prioritize informal standing over formal metrics reflects the material weight of reputation in Ghanaian workplaces. Poor informal standing affects daily working conditions: colleagues may withhold cooperation, exclude from social networks, or circulate negative gossip that reaches supervisors informally. Adwoa judged that a slight decline in formal performance was worth improved social standing.

Hierarchy, Gender, and Differential Vulnerability

Experiences of informal feedback were not uniform. Organizational hierarchy and gender shaped who was most vulnerable to negative informal feedback and who had resources to resist or shape it.

Junior Employees and Graduate Trainees. Junior employees and trainees reported greater vulnerability to informal feedback and fewer resources to resist negative reputational transmission. Yaw, the graduate trainee, described constant attention to how he was perceived:

"As a trainee, everything I do is watched. If I leave exactly at 5 pm, people say, 'The trainee doesn't want to learn.' If I ask too many questions, people say, 'He doesn't understand anything.' I am always thinking about what people are saying about me. The permanent staff, they can relax more. But I cannot."

Yaw's experience illustrates how power asymmetry shapes informal feedback dynamics. Junior employees are evaluated more intensively and have less capacity to challenge negative characterizations because their reputation affects their prospects for permanent employment. The disciplinary pressure is intensified by precarity.

Gender Differences. Female participants reported higher sensitivity to informal feedback about relational behaviors and greater consequences for perceived relational failures. Esi and Ama described being labeled "too proud" or "unfriendly" more readily than male colleagues, and these labels having greater weight.

Esi compared her experience to a male colleague:

"There is a man in my office, very quiet, who keeps to himself. People say he is 'focused' or 'serious.' If I do the same thing, people say I am 'proud' or 'I think I am better than others.' Same behavior, different interpretation. So, I have to smile more, greet more, chat more, just to be seen as normal. He doesn't have to do any of that."

Esi's observation reveals how gender shapes the interpretation of identical behaviors. The same quiet focus that signals competence in a male employee signals arrogance in a female employee. Female participants, therefore, performed more relational labor than their male colleagues to achieve neutral or positive informal standing.

Adwoa described a similar dynamic:

"If a man leaves exactly at closing time, people say he is efficient. If I do it, people say I am rushing home to my boyfriend. I heard that once. Now I stay 15 minutes extra even if I have nothing to do. Just to be seen. The men don't have to do that."

Adwoa's strategic extension of work time—working even when no work remained—illustrates the additional disciplinary burden placed on female employees. The need to disprove assumptions about a lack of commitment or competing domestic priorities required extra performative labor.

DISCUSSION

The experiences of the six professionals in this study reveal that informal feedback—casual comments, gossip, and informal peer reviews—functions as a powerful disciplinary

mechanism shaping work ethic perceptions in Ghanaian workplaces. Although formal evaluation systems exist alongside these informal channels, participants consistently reported that informal feedback carried equal or greater weight in shaping their understanding of "good work ethic" and guiding behavioral adjustments.

Informal Feedback as a Disciplinary Mechanism

Foucault's (1977) concept of the docile body illuminates how informal feedback produces conformity without overt coercion. Participants were subject to constant potential surveillance: colleagues observed arrival times, work visibility, relational behaviors, and departure times. The knowledge that one might be observed and that observations might circulate as gossip or casual comments produced self-discipline. Participants did not need to be formally punished for lateness; the fear of becoming the subject of negative gossip was sufficient to produce punctuality.

This disciplinary mechanism operates through normalization. Gossip about Madam Patience established leaving at 2 pm as abnormal, deviant, and evidence of not caring about students. New teachers internalized this norm not through instruction but through overhearing the consequences of violation. The normalizing gaze of colleagues produces what Foucault terms the "docile body": workers who regulate themselves, who arrive early and stay late and smile and greet, not because they have been ordered to but because they have internalized what it means to be a "good worker."

However, Foucault's framework alone cannot explain the agentic dimensions of participants' responses. Participants were not merely passive recipients of disciplinary power; they actively managed impressions, strategized about visibility, and negotiated between competing evaluative systems. This is where Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework is essential.

Dramaturgical Management in Ghanaian Workplaces

Goffman's distinction between front stage and back stage illuminates participants' strategic performances. The front stage is the visible workplace, where colleagues observe arrival times, greetings, visible work, and departure times. The backstage includes private offices, work done at home, or moments when no colleagues are watching. Participants described carefully managing the boundary between these stages: arriving early and being seen arriving early (front stage), completing lesson notes before colleagues arrived (back stage), staying late visibly (front stage) while doing non-urgent work (back stage).

The audience for these performances includes peers who circulate informal feedback. Participants performed for this audience, adjusting behavior based on perceived audience response. Esi's adjustment from 8 am to 7:45 am after a senior colleague's comment illustrates how audience feedback shapes subsequent performances. The senior colleague was not an evaluator in the formal sense, but her comment functioned as an audience response, telling Esi that her performance was not credible.

Adwoa's decision to prioritize informal reputation over formal metrics represents a strategic choice about which audience matters more. She calculated that the peer audience (who circulated gossip about her being "proud") had greater power over her daily work experience than the supervisor audience (who gave her a positive formal rating). This calculation reflects the specific cultural context of Ghanaian workplaces, where relational harmony and reputation shape daily interactions and long-term opportunities.

Cultural Specificity of Work Ethic Perceptions

The finding that relational labor—greeting, small talk, showing interest in colleagues—is central to work ethic perceptions in Ghanaian workplaces reflects broader cultural values. Gyekye (1996) identifies *suban* (character) as encompassing both moral and practical conduct, including how one treats others. An employee who completes tasks competently but fails to greet colleagues, attend social events, or show interest in others' welfare fails the test of good character. Informal feedback is the mechanism through which these culturally specific expectations are transmitted and enforced.

This finding challenges universalist models of work ethic that focus narrowly on productivity, diligence, and individual achievement (Weber, 1905/2002). In the Ghanaian context, work ethic is relational: it includes how one relates to colleagues, whether one contributes to group harmony, whether one demonstrates respect for hierarchy and reciprocity. Formal performance systems that measure only task completion miss these dimensions entirely. Yet employees receive clear informal feedback about these dimensions and adjust their behavior accordingly.

The gender differences observed in this study also reflect cultural patterns. The finding that identical quietness was interpreted as "focused" for men but "proud" for women aligns with research on gendered expectations in Ghanaian workplaces (Amponsah-Tawiah & Dartey-Baah, 2011). Women are expected to perform warmth, approachability, and relational investment to a greater degree than men. Failure to meet these gendered expectations attracts negative informal feedback and requires additional performative labor to repair.

Implications for Theory

This study extends existing literature in several ways. First, it demonstrates that informal feedback functions not only as a source of negative outcomes (gossip as bullying) but also as a normal disciplinary mechanism that produces behavioral conformity. This reframing moves beyond the pathologization of workplace gossip to recognize its role in transmitting norms and maintaining social order.

Second, this study applies Foucault and Goffman to organizational behavior in a non-Western context, demonstrating the utility of these frameworks for understanding workplace dynamics in Ghana. The integration of disciplinary and dramaturgical perspectives captures both the constraining and agentic dimensions of informal feedback.

Third, this study identifies the gap between formal and informal evaluation systems as a source of tension that employees must actively negotiate. This finding challenges the assumption that formal performance management systems are the primary or sufficient mechanism for shaping employee behavior.

Recommendations for Practice and Policy

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge for organizations seeking to manage informal feedback dynamics.

Acknowledge Informal Feedback as Legitimate. Organizations should recognize that informal feedback exists and shapes behavior, regardless of whether it is acknowledged. Denying its existence or treating it as irrelevant to formal management may lead to misalignment between formal incentives and actual behavioral expectations.

Train Managers in Informal Feedback Dynamics. Managers should be trained to recognize how informal feedback operates in their units, to understand that casual comments from authority figures carry disproportionate weight, and to avoid unintentionally shaping norms through offhand remarks.

Address Gender Disparities in Informal Evaluation. Organizations should examine whether female employees are disproportionately burdened by informal expectations regarding relational labor and whether identical behaviors are evaluated differently by gender. Awareness of these patterns may inform targeted interventions.

Create Channels for Positive Informal Feedback. Organizations can design systems that amplify positive informal feedback (recognition programs, peer shout-outs) while reducing the circulation of harmful gossip. Structured opportunities for colleagues to acknowledge each other's contributions may redirect informal evaluative energy toward constructive ends.

Support Junior Employees Navigating Informal Systems. Orientation programs should explicitly address informal feedback dynamics, helping junior employees understand workplace norms around relational labor, visibility, and reputation management. Mentorship programs can provide guidance on navigating informal evaluation systems.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The small sample size ($N = 6$), while appropriate for in-depth qualitative analysis, limits generalizability. The single-city focus (Accra) means findings may not apply to other Ghanaian regions or rural contexts. The occupational diversity across three sectors, while providing breadth, limits depth within any single sector. The cross-sectional design captures perceptions at one-time point; longitudinal research could trace how informal feedback dynamics evolve over career trajectories.

Future research should address these limitations by: (a) expanding the sample to include multiple cities and regions across Ghana; (b) focusing on single sectors in greater depth to identify sector-specific informal feedback patterns; (c) including managerial perspectives on how supervisors use informal feedback, intentionally or unintentionally; (d) conducting longitudinal research following employees as they progress through organizational hierarchies; (e) comparing informal feedback dynamics across cultural contexts; and (f) developing and evaluating interventions to manage informal feedback productively.

Several questions for future scholarship emerge: How do employees in more formalized sectors (e.g., multinational corporations) experience informal feedback differently from those in the public sector or traditional organizations? What strategies do employees develop to resist negative informal feedback or repair damaged reputations? How do digital communication technologies (WhatsApp, email) reshape informal feedback channels? How can organizations design formal systems that capture and reward the relational dimensions of work ethic that informal feedback currently enforces?

CONCLUSION

This project sought to identify how informal feedback, casual comments, gossip, and informal peer reviews shape perceptions of work ethic among professionals in Ghanaian workplaces. Drawing on qualitative interviews with six employees in banking, education, and civil service, this study found that informal feedback operates through three primary channels: peer-initiated casual commentary, gossip networks, and informal peer reviews. Work ethic perceptions shaped by this feedback extend beyond formal task performance to

encompass punctuality, visible diligence, relational investment, and willingness to help. Participants experienced tension between formal and informal evaluation systems, requiring active negotiation about which audience to prioritize. Hierarchy and gender shaped vulnerability to negative informal feedback, with junior employees and women reporting greater disciplinary pressure and more extensive performative labor.

Through the lens of Foucault's concept of the docile body and Goffman's dramaturgical framework, the results reveal how informal feedback produces disciplined, self-regulating workers who internalize workplace norms through surveillance, normalization, and impression management. Participants were not passive recipients of disciplinary power but active performers who strategized about visibility, managed front stage and back stage behavior, and negotiated between competing evaluative expectations.

This study builds on existing literature by examining informal feedback dynamics in a non-Western, collectivist cultural context, an area that has received limited empirical attention. While studies in Western contexts have documented workplace gossip and formal feedback systems, the current study demonstrates that informal feedback carries particular weight in Ghanaian workplaces where relational harmony, reputation, and holistic character evaluation are culturally valued. The findings also extend understanding of work ethic by documenting the relational dimensions that informal feedback enforces, dimensions that formal performance metrics systematically ignore.

The participants in this study successfully navigated informal feedback systems, learning to read casual comments, respond to gossip, and manage their reputations. Yet their narratives also reveal the labor required to do so: the hypervigilance of monitoring what others might be saying, the exhaustion of performing warmth while completing tasks, the frustration of being evaluated on dimensions that have no place in formal appraisals. The question for organizations is not whether informal feedback exists it clearly does but whether they will acknowledge its power and design systems that support employees in navigating it productively. So long as informal feedback remains unacknowledged, unexamined, and unmanaged, employees will continue to navigate double evaluation systems, and organizations will continue to reward behaviors that have nothing to do with formal performance metrics. The gap between what organizations officially value and what they informally enforce will persist, leaving employees to bridge it through individual labor rather than systemic support.

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