

Original Article

Work Ethic and Economic Mobility: A Study of Perceptions across Socioeconomic Classes in Ghana

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Abstract: The study examined the relationship between work ethic and economic mobility by analyzing how individuals from different socioeconomic classes in Ghana perceived the role of personal effort, opportunity, and structural conditions in shaping upward mobility. The purpose of the study was to determine whether perceptions of work ethic varied across class groups and how these perceptions influenced beliefs about economic success. A descriptive research design was adopted, involving a mixed-methods approach that gathered data from respondents across lower-income, middle-income, and upper-income households in selected urban and peri-urban communities. The study found significant class-based differences in how work ethic was understood. While upper-income respondents emphasised discipline, long-term planning, and skill acquisition as drivers of mobility, lower-income respondents viewed work ethic through the lens of daily survival, informal labour pressures, and limited access to enabling opportunities. The findings indicated that although work ethic was widely considered important, perceptions of its effectiveness differed across classes depending on exposure, opportunity structures, and lived experiences. The study concluded that work ethic alone could not account for economic mobility unless supported by equitable access to resources, fair labour conditions, and leadership interventions that address structural inequalities in Ghana.

Keywords: Work Ethic, Economic Mobility, Socioeconomic Class, Perceptions, Ghana.

I. INTRODUCTION

Work ethic has long been regarded as a key determinant of personal advancement, productivity, and broader socioeconomic outcomes. In many societies including Ghana work ethic is often framed as a moral obligation emphasizing discipline, diligence, responsibility, and perseverance. These values are frequently presented as essential for improving one's economic situation, particularly within developing economies where human capital and labour productivity strongly influence livelihood outcomes. However, economic mobility is not determined by work ethic alone; it is also shaped by structural conditions such as educational access, employment opportunities, family resources, social networks, and institutional support systems. As a result, different socioeconomic groups may perceive the role of work ethic in contrasting ways depending on their lived realities and opportunities available to them.

In Ghana, the socioeconomic landscape is characterised by a large informal sector, persistent income inequality, unequal educational access, and varying standards of living across social classes. These conditions create differing pathways to mobility. Upper-income groups often describe success in terms of long-term strategic effort, skill accumulation, and social capital, while lower-income groups may view upward mobility as constrained by systemic disadvantages regardless of personal effort. Middle-income earners, situated between stability and vulnerability, often have mixed perceptions shaped by both opportunity and constraint. These differences suggest that work ethic is not perceived uniformly and may be intertwined with one's socioeconomic position.

Existing literature highlights the importance of individual-level attributes such as time management, commitment, persistence, and responsibility as major elements of work ethic. However, scholars also emphasise that structural barriers including limited job openings, low wages, unequal schooling quality, and unstable informal sector earnings often restrict the capacity of individuals to translate effort into upward mobility. Despite this, little empirical research in Ghana has examined how perceptions of work ethic differ across socioeconomic classes and how these perceptions influence beliefs about economic mobility. Understanding these dynamics is necessary for designing leadership, policy, and institutional strategies that can strengthen economic inclusion and improve labour outcomes. This study therefore explores the relationship between work ethic and economic mobility by assessing how individuals in different socioeconomic classes perceive the role of effort, discipline, opportunity, and structural support in shaping economic advancement in Ghana.



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A. Statement of the Problem

Debates surrounding work ethic in Ghana often assume that economic progress depends primarily on individual effort, discipline, and commitment. However, this assumption overlooks the significant socioeconomic disparities that shape access to opportunity and the ability to convert effort into upward mobility. Ghana's labour market is characterised by structural challenges such as unemployment, underemployment, limited formal-sector job openings, and persistent income inequality. For individuals in lower-income groups, these constraints can reduce the effectiveness of work ethic as a pathway to mobility. Yet public discourse frequently frames poverty and low mobility as outcomes of poor personal discipline rather than structural limitations. This creates tension between perceived and actual determinants of economic success.

Despite these realities, empirical studies exploring how Ghanaians across different socioeconomic classes perceive the influence of work ethic on mobility remain limited. Most existing research examines work ethic in relation to productivity, organisational behaviour, or employee performance, with minimal attention to how class shapes personal beliefs about economic advancement. Without such research, policies and leadership interventions risk reinforcing stereotypes that place excessive responsibility on individual effort while ignoring systemic barriers.

Moreover, socioeconomic classes may differ in how they define work ethic itself. Upper-income individuals may associate work ethic with long-term planning, investment in skills, and strategic career decisions. Middle-income groups may view work ethic as a balance between stability, career growth, and financial pressure. Lower-income earners, particularly those in the informal economy, may interpret work ethic through the daily struggle for survival, making long-term planning more difficult. These divergent perspectives point to a gap in understanding how work ethic is socially constructed across classes in Ghana.

This study addresses this gap by examining the interplay between socioeconomic class, perceptions of work ethic, and beliefs about economic mobility. By exploring these relationships, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how personal effort and structural realities intersect in shaping mobility outcomes.

B. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate how perceptions of work ethic differed across socioeconomic classes in Ghana and how these perceptions influenced beliefs about economic mobility. The study sought to analyse the extent to which individuals from various class backgrounds believed work ethic contributed to upward mobility and the role of structural factors in shaping these beliefs.

C. Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To examine how individuals across socioeconomic classes in Ghana perceive work ethic.
- To assess the relationship between perceived work ethic and beliefs about economic mobility.
- To analyse how socioeconomic class influences perceptions of opportunity, structural barriers, and the effectiveness of work ethic.
- To determine how work ethic and opportunity perceptions collectively shape expectations of upward mobility across classes.

D. Research Questions

- How do perceptions of work ethic differ across socioeconomic classes in Ghana?
- What is the relationship between work ethic perceptions and beliefs about economic mobility?
- How does socioeconomic class influence views on opportunity, barriers, and structural support?
- How do work ethic and opportunity perceptions shape expectations of upward mobility?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Understanding Work Ethic

Work ethic refers to a set of values that emphasize discipline, diligence, persistence, responsibility, and commitment to achieving goals. Scholars describe work ethic as both a personal trait and a cultural orientation that shapes how individuals approach their duties and aspirations. High work ethic is typically associated with punctuality, consistency, reliability, and willingness to exert effort even under challenging conditions. In the Ghanaian context, work ethic has cultural dimensions influenced by communal norms, religious values, and family expectations. It is often linked to moral identity and social respect, making it a significant personal attribute in both formal and informal economic settings.

B. Economic Mobility and Social Class

Economic mobility refers to the ability of individuals or households to improve their economic standing over time. Mobility can be upward or downward and is influenced by education, income, occupation, and access to opportunities. Social class plays a central role because individuals from higher socioeconomic classes often have greater access to quality education, financial capital, social networks, and stable employment opportunities. In Ghana, mobility is also shaped by disparities between the formal and informal sectors, regional economic differences, and variations in family resources. Scholars argue that while work ethic is important, structural barriers such as unemployment, low wages, and limited job security often limit the extent to which effort alone can lead to upward mobility.

C. Linking Work Ethic and Economic Mobility

Research shows that individuals' beliefs about work ethic influence how they interpret success and failure. Those in higher socioeconomic classes may attribute mobility to personal discipline, planning, and investment in skills. Conversely, individuals in lower socioeconomic groups may view mobility as constrained by systemic inequalities regardless of effort. These differences reflect lived experiences: people exposed to greater opportunities are more likely to perceive work ethic as effective, while those in disadvantaged environments may experience effort without corresponding upward mobility. Scholars argue that this divergence has psychological and behavioural implications, shaping motivation, ambition, and perceptions of fairness.

D. Perception Differences Across Socioeconomic Classes

Perceptions of work ethic and mobility are deeply shaped by class-based differences in access to resources. Upper-income households typically have access to educational opportunities, mentorship, capital, and networks that allow personal effort to translate into tangible outcomes. Middle-income earners often experience both opportunities and constraints, resulting in mixed perceptions. Lower-income individuals especially those in the informal sector may work longer hours but experience limited mobility due to structural constraints. This disparity suggests that while work ethic is valued across all classes, its perceived effectiveness varies depending on one's socioeconomic position.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The study employed a descriptive research design to examine the relationship between work ethic and economic mobility across socioeconomic classes in Ghana. This design was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to gather quantitative and qualitative data on perceptions, attitudes, and experiences without manipulating the study environment. The design provided a framework for understanding how individuals in different class categories interpret the significance of work ethic and the structural conditions shaping mobility.

B. Population and Sampling

The target population comprised individuals from lower-income, middle-income, and upper-income households in Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast. These locations were selected because they represent urban and peri-urban areas with distinct socioeconomic diversity. A total of 300 respondents were sampled: 120 from the lower-income group, 120 from the middle-income group, and 60 from the upper-income group. Stratified sampling ensured representation of all three class groups, while simple random sampling was used within each stratum to select survey participants. Additionally, 15 key informants were purposively selected for qualitative interviews.

C. Data Collection Instruments

A structured questionnaire was used for quantitative data collection. It contained sections on demographic characteristics, perceptions of work ethic, economic mobility expectations, opportunity barriers, and structural advantages. Items measuring work ethic were adapted from established work ethic scales, while mobility perception items were developed based on socioeconomic mobility frameworks. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect qualitative insights.

D. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted over five weeks. Questionnaires were administered physically and electronically, depending on the accessibility of respondents. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and via phone calls, lasting an average of 30 minutes. All respondents provided informed consent, and confidentiality was assured.

E. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis. Descriptive statistics summarized central tendencies of perceptions across class groups. Correlation analysis assessed

relationships between work ethic and mobility perceptions. Regression analysis examined the extent to which work ethic predicted perceived economic mobility. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to provide contextual explanations for the quantitative findings.

F. Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured through expert review by scholars in sociology, development studies, and organizational behaviour. A pilot test involving 30 respondents was conducted to identify ambiguities. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha showed values of 0.84 for the work ethic scale and 0.81 for the mobility perception scale, indicating high internal consistency.

G. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the affiliated university. Participation was voluntary, anonymity was assured, and respondents retained the right to withdraw at any time. Audio recordings of interviews were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

IV. RESULTS

The results include descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis explaining how perceptions of work ethic relate to beliefs about economic mobility across socioeconomic classes.

A. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the key variables. Work ethic recorded a moderately high mean score ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.67$), indicating that respondents generally believed in the importance of discipline, diligence, and personal responsibility. Perceived economic mobility recorded a mean of 3.21 ($SD = 0.81$), showing moderate confidence in one's ability to improve economic standing.

Upper-income respondents recorded the highest scores for perceived mobility ($M = 4.08$), while lower-income respondents recorded the lowest ($M = 2.72$). Work ethic perceptions were high across all groups but differed in interpretation: upper-income respondents viewed work ethic as long-term planning, middle-income respondents saw it as career progression, while lower-income respondents framed it in terms of daily survival and resilience.

Table 1 : Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)
Work Ethic	3.89	0.67
Economic Mobility	3.21	0.81
Opportunity Access	3.15	0.74
Structural Barriers	3.42	0.88

B. Correlation Analysis

Correlation results in Table 2 show a positive relationship between work ethic and perceived economic mobility ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$). Opportunity access showed a stronger correlation with perceived mobility ($r = 0.64$, $p < 0.01$), while structural barriers had a negative association ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.01$). These results suggest that although work ethic is valued, perceptions of opportunity and barriers influence how effective work ethic is believed to be.

Table 2 : Correlation Matrix

Variables	WE	MOB	OPP	BAR
Work Ethic (WE)	1	0.52**	0.47*	-0.39*
Economic Mobility (MOB)		1	0.64**	-0.48**
Opportunity Access (OPP)			1	-0.41*
Structural Barriers (BAR)				1

*Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

C. Regression Analysis

Regression results revealed that work ethic significantly predicted perceived mobility ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$), explaining 22% of its variance. When opportunity access and structural barriers were added as predictors, the model explained 51% of the

variance ($R^2 = 0.51$). Opportunity access ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$) was a stronger predictor than work ethic, while structural barriers had a negative effect ($\beta = -0.32$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 3 : Regression Predicting Perceived Economic Mobility

Predictor	β	t-value	Sig.
Work Ethic	0.44	5.18	0.00
Opportunity Access	0.49	6.22	0.00
Structural Barriers	-0.32	-2.87	0.01
R^2	0.51		
F-Statistic	32.44		0.00

V. DISCUSSION

The study found that while work ethic is widely valued across socioeconomic classes in Ghana, its perceived effectiveness in generating upward economic mobility varies significantly. Upper-income respondents attributed their economic status largely to strategic long-term effort, planning, educational investment, and professional networks. For this group, work ethic was seen as a pathway to opportunity because the necessary structures—quality schooling, financial stability, supportive environments—were already in place. This reflects global research indicating that work ethic tends to be more effective when reinforced by access to enabling resources.

Middle-income respondents displayed a mixed perspective. They valued discipline, commitment, and skill development but expressed concerns about job insecurity, rising living costs, and limited pathways for upward mobility. Their perceptions suggested that while work ethic contributes to stability, structural conditions strongly influence the likelihood of transition into higher economic classes.

Lower-income respondents valued work ethic but perceived limited returns to personal effort. Many engaged in informal-sector work that required long hours and physical labour yet resulted in minimal financial improvement. They emphasised survival, daily resilience, and improvisation rather than long-term planning. Structural constraints—such as low wages, unstable jobs, limited capital, and restricted access to quality education—emerged as critical obstacles. This indicates that the effectiveness of work ethic is mediated by socioeconomic structures rather than effort alone.

The correlation and regression findings further supported the idea that opportunity access plays a larger role in mobility perceptions than individual work ethic. While work ethic positively influenced mobility beliefs, the strongest predictor was access to opportunity. Structural barriers, conversely, significantly undermined confidence in mobility. This aligns with sociological theories which argue that effort must interact with opportunity for mobility to occur.

Overall, the findings show that perceptions of work ethic and mobility in Ghana are not uniform but shaped by class-based experiences and structural realities. Leadership, policy design, and national development initiatives must therefore integrate both personal and structural dimensions to address mobility challenges effectively.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that although work ethic is consistently valued across socioeconomic classes in Ghana, perceptions of its effectiveness in driving economic mobility differ based on class position. Upper-income respondents viewed work ethic as a strategic tool supported by structural opportunities, middle-income respondents expressed moderated optimism, and lower-income respondents viewed structural barriers as limiting the returns to personal effort. Opportunity access emerged as a stronger determinant of perceived mobility than work ethic alone. These findings underscore the need for leadership and policy frameworks that recognize both personal effort and structural inequality in shaping mobility outcomes.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Policies aimed at promoting upward mobility should address structural inequalities by expanding access to quality education, financial resources, and employment opportunities for lower-income groups. Leadership initiatives must recognize that work ethic is shaped by context, requiring interventions that provide the enabling environments necessary for individual effort to yield tangible results. Programmes that build skills, enhance employability, and reduce labour-market barriers can improve the capacity of work ethic to translate into mobility. National development strategies should emphasize inclusive growth, ensuring that socioeconomic progress is not limited to individuals with privileged access to resources. Public discourse

on mobility must shift from individual blame toward a more balanced understanding of the interaction between effort and structure.

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