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**Career Choices: Exploring the Rationale Underlying Military Migrants' Enlistment in the British Armed Forces**

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## 1 2 3 **Career choices: Exploring military migrants' justifications for their enlistment in the British** 4 **Armed Forces** 5

### 6 **Abstract**

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9 **Purpose** – Using ‘on justification’ theory, this article explores the rationality and justification  
10 of the West-African military migrants for joining the British Armed Forces.  
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14 **Design/methodology/approach** – We utilise an interpretive qualitative research methodology  
15 in this study. We undertook semi-structured interviews with 42 military migrants who joined  
16 the British Armed Forces between 1998 and 2013.  
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20 **Findings** – We identify various factors that influenced the participants’ decision to join the  
21 British Armed Forces, such as individual aspirations, the need to find a ‘path’ at a crossroad in  
22 life (e.g. a career dilemma or the loss of a parent), economic opportunities, and institutional  
23 incentives. Military migrants’ career motivations are shaped by their deep affection for the  
24 Crown and their desire to give back to the country with which they share a colonial history.  
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30 **Practical implications** – The UK’s Ministry of Defence, government, and policymakers could  
31 gain valuable insights from this study. The findings could significantly shape their recruitment  
32 and retention policies, thereby enhancing the attractiveness of the military profession. This  
33 could be a crucial step in addressing the recruitment challenges and personnel deficit currently  
34 faced by the British Armed Forces.  
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40 **Originality/value** – This study provides a fresh perspective on the dynamics of the military  
41 service of foreign-born veterans. **The article focuses on underrepresented group (West-African  
42 military migrants) to enhance our understanding of their career motivations in the British  
43 Armed Forces. We identify and categorise the motivations and justifications for military  
44 migrants’ enlistment in the British Armed Forces according to seven justifications, each  
45 depicting a career pattern informing the participants’ motivations and justifications for their  
46 enlistment.**  
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53 **Keywords:** career, military, British Armed Forces, recruitment, Commonwealth soldiers,  
54 military migrant, on justification.  
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## Introduction

The British Armed Forces (BAF) is currently facing a recruitment crisis, with the latest data from September 2023 showing a net loss of 5,790 personnel (Sabbagh, 2024). The practical implications of this shortage are evident, as it has hindered the UK's deployment of aircraft carriers for operations against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen and in the event of a major conflict with Russia (Sabbagh, 2024). Between 1990 and 2001, military multiculturalism gained prominence, and inclusivity and cultural diversity became a necessity (Dandeker and Mason, 2003). It was becoming increasingly difficult for European armies to recruit sufficient soldiers from among youths in their respective countries (Ware, 2012). They had to turn to non-traditional recruits to augment their manpower (e.g. ethnic minorities and women). New manpower recruitment policies were implemented to allow them to tap into new pool of human resources (Heinecken and Soeters, 2018; Ware, 2012). Consequently, in 1998, the BAF suspended the five-year residency requirement for the enlistment of foreign and Commonwealth (F&C) citizens. Prior studies (Gee, 2007, 2008; Ware, 2012) show that the BAF actively recruited from Commonwealth countries to bolster its military strength and thus enable it to participate in global operations. The BAF recruited approximately 4.5% of its personnel from F&C nations (Sweeney, 2019). Elsewhere, Miller (2020) reports that nearly 85% of foreign troops are people of colour. This enables BAF to recruit both ethnic minorities and women – thus fulfilling the modern military's inclusivity and equality prerequisites (Ware, 2012, p. xix).

On July 11, 2013, a reinstatement of the five-year residency requirement was announced, because the Ministry of Defence reduced the size of the BAF and the recruitment intake (Gower and Brooke-Holland, 2021; Ware, 2012, pp. xvii, xxviii). In May 2016, a limited waiver was introduced in order to mitigate a skills shortage (Ware, 2016). In November 2018, the five-year residency criterion for Commonwealth applicants was removed to enhance recruitment (Gower and Brooke-Holland, 2021). However, research has indicated that F&C recruits have a less favourable experience of British military life than their British counterparts in the BAF. Greene (2016, pp. 155–157, 203) observe that White foreign recruits tend to integrate into the BAF better and feel more welcome there than other military migrants (MMs) (e.g. Greene, 2016; Ware, 2012).

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3 **Our study, using** ‘on justification’ (OJ) theory, provides a nuanced understanding of the  
4 justification strategies employed by the MMs to justify their choices, actions, and decisions in  
5 such a difficult situation (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). At the core of OJ theory lies the  
6 concept of ‘orders of worth’ or ‘common worlds/polities’, encompassing various criteria,  
7 vocabularies, and logics that individuals may use to justify their actions, choices, and decisions.  
8 These common worlds (CWs) include the civic, domestic, inspired, market, industrial, fame,  
9 and green ‘lenses’ through which individuals interpret, evaluate, and justify their actions,  
10 choices, and decisions (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). This study therefore provides African  
11 perspectives on the broader career development and management discourse, particularly the  
12 career development and management of MMs. The rest of the paper is structured as follows.  
13 First, we review the extant literature on the motivations for career choices and OJ theory. We  
14 then present the research methodology and show our research findings. We conclude by  
15 discussing our findings and the implications thereof for the theory and practice of identity  
16 management.

### 27 **Justifications for career choices**

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30 Within the extant career-related literature, justifications for career choices have received and  
31 continue to receive attention from various perspectives. Many studies investigate the reasons  
32 why people make certain career choices (Guan *et al.*, 2015; Wambu *et al.*, 2017). For instance,  
33 according to Holland’s (1959, 1997) theory of career choice (RIASEC: realistic, investigative,  
34 artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional), people are naturally inclined towards careers  
35 that enable them to engage with individuals who show similar traits. People seek to work in  
36 environments that allow them to apply their skills and abilities; to express their attitudes and  
37 values; and to take on enjoyable challenges and roles (Sheldon *et al.*, 2020). Other studies  
38 (Carpenter and Foster, 1977; Kunnen, 2013) show that there is an intimate connection between  
39 people’s career choices and their personality traits, interests, attitudes, learning experiences,  
40 and life events. Likewise, money, power, and traditional gender roles are considered influential  
41 factors that influence career choices in extant research (Scholes and McDonald, 2022).

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43 Furthermore, the process of making career decisions involves considerations such as job  
44 availability, salary, prestige, genetic endowment, and specific abilities (Värlander *et al.*, 2020).  
45 Similarly, a person’s professional identity (e.g. mastery, a sense of belonging, status, and  
46 esteem), self-interest (e.g. income, opportunities, and work-life balance), personality,  
47 development, education, counselling, and organisational psychology all influence their career  
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3 decisions (Tsakissiris and Grant-Smith, 2021). Bloom *et al.* (2021) suggest that there are  
4 individuals who are naturally suited to specific professions. Career choice involves intrinsic  
5 factors (e.g. interests related to a profession and its societal role), extrinsic factors (e.g. a desire  
6 for recognition and security), and interpersonal factors (e.g. socialisation agents like family  
7 members, friends, teachers, and community members) (Carpenter and Foster, 1977). Shoffner  
8 *et al.* (2015) add that domestic ties, cultural values, family history or background, expectations,  
9 and the need to honour family members are also influential factors in this regard. Likewise,  
10 cultural perceptions can significantly influence an individual's career aspirations and choices,  
11 as different cultures have varying perceptions of what constitutes a desirable or respectable  
12 career. Individualistic cultures emphasise personal interests and self-efficacy when making  
13 career decisions, whereas collectivist cultures prioritise family expectations and societal norms  
14 (Thomas *et al.*, 2024). Mitchell *et al.* (1999) conclude that chance, circumstances, and  
15 unforeseen events can also influence career choices.

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26 Regarding the military, Grigorov and Spiridonov (2018) contend that individuals are motivated  
27 to pursue a military career based on internal factors (achievement, recognition, and autonomy)  
28 and external factors (opportunities for growth and career advancement). Moreover, the  
29 military's recruitment process follows a standard procedure that considers specific military  
30 requirements (such as age, education, health, aptitude test scores, and criminal record)  
31 (Grigorov and Spiridonov, 2018). Kleykamp (2013) argue that the military's entry requirements  
32 (e.g., education, health, aptitude test scores, and criminal convictions) pose challenges for  
33 individuals with low labour market prospects. According to Karlova (2018), there are three  
34 main motives for selecting the military profession: idealism, pragmatism, and scepticism.  
35 Patriots are driven by idealism and a strong sense of duty to protect their homeland. Pragmatists  
36 are driven by the secure and assured job prospects that the military offers, including a good  
37 salary, free training, career advancement, prestige, and the chance to work in law enforcement.  
38 Sceptics may be influenced by advice from parents and relatives, especially if it is a family  
39 tradition to serve in the military. A choice to enlist in the armed forces may be forced by  
40 conscription. Packham (2023) gives the example of criminal court judges determining that  
41 some defendants should serve in the military rather than go to prison.

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55 Nevertheless, there are limited theoretical explorations and scarce empirical research in the UK  
56 in relation to the career journeys and experiences of ex-military personnel in general and British  
57 MMs in particular (Amour *et al.*, 2018). The mainstream career literature does not focus on the  
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3 voices of these minority groups and does not account for their career paths (Cohen and El-  
4 Sawad, 2006; Pringle and Mallon, 2003). Ware (2012) highlights the misunderstanding  
5 surrounding enlistment in the armed forces, as it is often perceived solely as a way of earning  
6 a living and gaining UK citizenship (Gee, 2008). This misunderstanding is due to the limited  
7 knowledge of the career journeys of MMs. To address the research gap and calls in the extant  
8 literature for research on MMs' career journeys and experiences (Grimell and Van den Berg,  
9 2020), the present study explores the life-history narratives of F&C citizens with a focus on  
10 West-African soldiers of Commonwealth descent using OJ theory.  
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### 18 **'On justification' of military migrants' choice to join the military**

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20 The call to investigate the career journeys of MMs using interdisciplinary methods (Gordon,  
21 2016; Ware, 2012) has inspired our use of OJ theory. With narratives dominating the  
22 contemporary discourse (Burke et al., 2018), OJ theory is used in various academic studies.  
23 For example, Patriotta *et al.* (2011) applies the theory in their exploration of how organisations  
24 justify and preserve the legitimacy of their organisational structures. Gadinger (2016), through  
25 OJ theory, explains the rationales, justifications, and criticisms related to the fragile and  
26 normative character and practices of international relations. Regarding security and legal  
27 research, Levi *et al.* (2022) investigate the CWs of arrested suspects of crimes and use OJ  
28 theory to evaluate and provide justifications for police behaviours. Boltanski and Thévenot  
29 (2006) identify six orders of worth (polities/CWs): 1. inspired, 2. domestic, 3. fame/public-  
30 opinion, 4. civic, 5. market, 6. Industrial, and 7. green polities (Lafaye and Thévenot, 1993) –  
31 with corresponding justificatory values, logics, and vocabularies. Each polity is linked to a  
32 general principle describing the differing models of justification (Levi *et al.*, 2022).  
33 Justification of choices, decisions, and actions in the inspired world are driven by excitement,  
34 terror, fascination, love, and passion. In the domestic world or polity, justification is predicated  
35 on customs, conventions, social structures, and familial and interpersonal connections. In the  
36 world of fame and public opinion, justification is grounded on the reality of public opinion,  
37 exposure, self-esteem, and the desire for recognition. Regarding the civic world, justification  
38 is established based on a sense of duty, nobility, and political or social obligation. In the market  
39 world, justification may be grounded on competition and natural rivalries or the need to satisfy  
40 individual desires, exploit opportunities, and own valuable possessions. Furthermore, within  
41 the OJ industrial and green polities, justification may be predicated on the need for  
42 development, progress, advancement, and future sustainability (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006;  
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3 Lafaye and Thévenot, 1993; Patriotta *et al.*, 2011). Nevertheless, OJ theory has been criticised  
4 as being too formal to be effective (Godechot, 2009). Gond *et al.*, (2015) argue further that  
5 CWs only relate to actions related to consensus-building. According to Patriotta *et al.* (2011),  
6 justifying the legitimacy of world/polity arrangements is particularly challenging during  
7 moments of critical questioning. Nevertheless, scholars agree (Gadinger, 2016; Levi *et al.*,  
8 2022) that the CW lens facilitates legitimate resolutions and enables efficient and reliable  
9 constructive dialogues.

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16 **Insert Table 1 about here**  
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19 Table 1 shows and summarises the various justifications provided by the participants to justify  
20 their choice to pursue a military career in the BAF.  
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## 22 23 24 **Research methodology**

### 25 26 *Context selection*

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28 Given the limited understanding of MMs' career paths, we utilise a qualitative exploratory  
29 approach that enables us to understand the intricate and ever-changing nature of the social  
30 world; examine research problems comprehensively; engage with participants closely;  
31 immerse ourselves in their realities; and uncover, create, and interpret their meanings,  
32 experiences, and perspectives (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). Semi-structured interviews with  
33 West-African MMs are the primary data source.  
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### 39 40 *Participant recruitment*

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42 We obtained ethical approval from the Brunel University Ethics Committee and approval was  
43 also obtained from the Foreign and Commonwealth Comrades Network (FCCN), a military  
44 charity group that supports F&C citizens who serve or have served in the BAF. The participants  
45 had to meet certain sampling and inclusion criteria to be considered eligible for participation  
46 in the study. 1. to be MMs of West-African Commonwealth descent; 2. to have joined the BAF  
47 between 1998 and 2013; and 3. to have transitioned from military service to the civilian world.  
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52 The rationale for this sampling logic, which focused on West-African ex-MMs who joined the  
53 BAF between 1998 and 2013, was not to limit the study. This time-limiting strategy was  
54 adopted because the period 1998–2013 (like joining the cavalry in 1914) was presumably not  
55 the best time to be entering the BAF, as the UK was involved in multiple deadly wars in places  
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3 such as Iraq and Afghanistan. The extant literature shows that in 1998, the UK government  
4 removed the five-year residency requirement for Commonwealth recruits (Ware, 2012). From  
5 1998 to 2013, the BAF heavily recruited individuals from Commonwealth countries (Ware,  
6 2012).  
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11 Participants were recruited using the snowballing technique, a chain-referral system in social  
12 networks, which helped us address the sampling difficulties involved in contacting hidden and  
13 hard-to-reach populations, such as MMs (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Hardesty *et al.*, 2019).  
14 **Although it is effective for this reason, the snowball sampling technique has notable limitations**  
15 **concerning representativeness and selection bias, which limit the external validity of the sample**  
16 **(Atkinson and Flint, 2001).** However, Hardesty *et al.* (2019) argue that researchers who study  
17 hard-to-reach populations are well justified in using purposive and snowballing sampling  
18 strategies, since such processes prioritise the opportunity to hear from neglected, vulnerable,  
19 or transitional populations. Once the interviews with the recommended participants from the  
20 first recruitment phase were complete, other potential participants were proposed and  
21 supported through telephone and private messaging, completing the participant recruitment  
22 process. Thus, the first study participant was the recruiter, while each referred respondent  
23 functioned as a recruiter until the desired sample size was achieved (Edwards *et al.*, 2015).  
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### 35 ***Data collection***

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37 We collected the data over eight months through in-depth interviews, field notes, and reviews  
38 of policy documentation. We conducted individual interviews using Zoom, a virtual video-  
39 meeting platform. The interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. Our interviews followed a  
40 life-history approach, an effective and data-rich methodology for systematic data collection  
41 (Burke *et al.*, 2018). **After conducting 20 interviews, we observed key terms and an emerging**  
42 **pattern signifying a theoretical saturation point. We were able to confirm the observed pattern**  
43 **by the 35<sup>th</sup> interview. To test data and theoretical saturation, we conducted interviews until we**  
44 **had undertaken 42 interviews. At this point, we found that no new concepts were being**  
45 **introduced (Gioia *et al.*, 2013).**  
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54 We interviewed ex-MMs of West-African origin (39 males, 3 females) who met the study's  
55 criteria. The participants' military experience varied between 4 and 16 years, and the years  
56 since they left military service and entered civilian work ranged from 3 to 21 years. The age  
57 range of the participants was between 33 and 46 years old, with an average age of 38.2 years  
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3 old. The participants were a diverse group representing various West-African nationalities,  
4 including 28 from Ghana, 1 from Sierra Leone, 3 from The Gambia, and 10 from Nigeria. The  
5 data suggests that each MM's gender, age, rank, or country did not define their experiences.  
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7 Aside from the unique challenges faced by transitioning military personnel, the personal stories  
8 of F&C soldiers showed a commonality in their shared experiences as foreign nationals. The  
9 MMs highlighted the importance of their support networks in navigating their career and  
10 keeping them sane through many challenges. All participants are now residents of the UK,  
11 having naturalised since their service in the BAF.  
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### 18 **Data analysis**

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20 Our data analysis involved thematic coding and interpretation, guided by constant comparison  
21 and reflexivity to interpret the MMs' career journeys. After transcribing the interviews, we  
22 proceeded with the data analysis according to three primary phases: 1. data preparation, 2. data  
23 organisation, and 3. reporting the research findings (Gioia *et al.*, 2013).  
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28 We carefully reviewed the individual transcripts and textual data to understand their context  
29 and uncover valuable insights. This was done to ensure the consistency and authenticity of the  
30 data (Braun and Clarke, 2020). In the first stage of textual analysis, we prioritised the  
31 documentation of the actions and statements of the participants. In the second stage, we focused  
32 on developing conceptual categories by analysing the participants' responses inductively  
33 within their respective contexts (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). Grouping and labelling the first-  
34 order concepts allowed us to identify similar elements based on significant events. We then  
35 came across a broader array of segments and classified them into categories. Our focus in the  
36 third step was on encoding the emerging clusters, their descriptions, and their integration into  
37 a theoretical context. To ensure accuracy and identify important narratives and concepts, we  
38 compared the transcripts and interview data with other data sources, like field notes and policy  
39 documents (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). We gave the participants the opportunity to review the  
40 interview transcripts and provide feedback in order to validate the accuracy and completeness  
41 of our qualitative data. These processes provided external validation and thereby enhance the  
42 study's credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).  
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55 Additionally, the incorporation of OJ theory bolsters the study's reliability and allowed us to  
56 establish connections between the identified themes and theoretical constructs, which in turn  
57 enabled us to determine the vocabularies utilised by the MMs when justifying their decision to  
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3 join the BAF (see Table 1). Using an inductive approach (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), we created the  
4 initial codes based on the broad categories of justificatory vocabularies provided by OJ theory  
5 – in the CWs (e.g. the codes included ‘seeking purpose’, ‘family tradition’, ‘patriotic duty’,  
6 ‘economic stability’, and ‘future sustainability’). We determined the themes by grouping  
7 related codes under the appropriate CWs of justification. The final interpretation involved our  
8 connection of the identified themes to the specific principles and values of each CW in OJ  
9 theory; for example, answering the question of ‘What’s next?’ at life’s crossroad. The decisions  
10 of the participants to join the BAF demonstrate a quest for direction and a way to navigate life’s  
11 uncertainties, and such justifications align with the principles of the inspired world, which  
12 values inspiration, passion, purpose, and seeking new opportunities and direction at critical life  
13 junctures. We found statements related to these during the open-coding process, which were  
14 then connected to the inspired world in the theme development stage. The pursuit of economic  
15 stability and future sustainability as well as the risks, costs, and sacrifices they were willing to  
16 take were identified regarding the MMs’ having entered a Faustian bargain in pursuit of a  
17 sustainable future. The green world’s emphasis on long-term sustainability resonates with the  
18 participants’ quest for a stable future for themselves and their families. Considering economic  
19 and sustainability factors, statements regarding financial stability and future projections were  
20 categorised and associated with the green world in the theme development stage. This led to  
21 the development of an aggregate dimension that systematically connects related statements  
22 through four ubiquitous themes (discussed in the research findings section below), ultimately  
23 answering the study question about how the MMs justify their decision to join the BAF (Strauss  
24 and Corbin, 2008). A summary of the data analysis is presented in Table 2.

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42 Insert Table 2 about here  
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## 45 **Research findings**

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47 Our analysis reveals four themes underlying the MMs’ justifications for their enlistment in the  
48 military: 1. finding ‘a path’ at a crossroad in life; 2. continuing a family history of military  
49 service; 3. the appeal of the prestigious nature of a military career; and 4. entering a Faustian  
50 bargain in the hope of a sustainable future.  
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### 53 ***Finding ‘a path’ at a crossroad in life***

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56 When asked how they justify their decision to join the BAF, the participants provide  
57 justifications using vocabularies that demonstrated their existing (functional) ties to the UK  
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3 before their decision to enlist. Commonwealth nations share similar colonial histories and  
4 strong historical and political links.  
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8 My parents were already here. While in secondary school, during the holidays, I  
9 would come. I have been coming and going from the UK on holidays (Raymond).  
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12 I first came in 2006 on holiday. I would come and go [to and from the UK] on  
13 holiday (Temisan).  
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16 I came to further my studies. I joined the BAF after my first degree in financial  
17 economics (Charles).  
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22 Some participants also commented that their decision to join the BAF was based on their  
23 consideration of the realities of life, a quest and search for ‘a path’ after having reached a  
24 crossroad in life, and the need to plan for the next phase of life. They had considered other  
25 possibilities or opportunities – the available options – considering their changing personal  
26 circumstances or their responses to personal or family circumstances. Similarly, Nkrumah  
27 and Solomon articulated a justification for enlistment because of a traumatic life event – the  
28 loss of their fathers.  
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35 When I completed my studies, I wondered, ‘What next?’ (Esther).  
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38 I abandoned my studies at London Computing College after the first year because  
39 it was like a repetition of what I had done back home. I decided to weigh and  
40 compare my options [what was available] and wondered ‘What next?’ (Abdul).  
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44 I lost my dad and finally had to step up and take responsibility for my family  
45 (Solomon).  
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49 My grandad brought me to the UK when my dad passed away. I needed to ‘man up’  
50 (Nkrumah).  
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54 Some of the participants explained that their enlistment was an opportunity for them to receive  
55 further education, gain new career experience, and focus on their personal growth. The  
56 participants who had completed their first degree ‘back home’ enlisted in the BAF from their  
57 home country and were at different stages in their careers. These participants justified their  
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3 military career decision by using vocabularies descriptive of a quest to do something great  
4 and to have a good career.  
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8 I was a bank trainee at Barclays Bank in Ghana before I came to the UK. But I  
9 wanted something big... (Tutu).  
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12 I used the military as a stepping stone rather than going to compete with the  
13 British nationals who have better chances than I do (Abdul).  
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17 Nkrumah succinctly summarised a narrative that recurred throughout the accounts and stories  
18 of all our MMs. Life challenges and the British government permission of Commonwealth  
19 nationals to enlist was a motivation and justification for some of the participants. Nkrumah  
20 went on to explain that they did not realise all that a military career entailed until they had  
21 arrived at their regiment after training and they were being prepared to be deployed to Iraq:  
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27 When I signed up, I did not realise that I had just signed up to go to war. When I  
28 completed my training and got to my regiment, I realised that they were getting  
29 ready to go to Iraq, and I was part of the soldiers who would be going to war. At  
30 that time, I became very worried – I panicked. I felt like I was going to die  
31 (Nkrumah).  
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37 Other participants explained that joining the BAF, for them, was more like signing up in a leap  
38 of faith to an undefined path. **They lacked sufficient knowledge about the military and**  
39 **enlistment therein. Enticed by promises of better life and good career mentioned in military**  
40 **recruitment materials, they took a leap of faith.**  
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45 It was like going to a place you know nothing about. I knew nothing about the  
46 military before I joined (Raymond).  
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49 I didn't know anything about the army. Adjusting to life in the military was difficult  
50 (Achebe).  
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54 The military may not have been the desired career choice for some participants, but it was a  
55 providential compass and stepping stone for them to achieve a good career and purpose in life.  
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### *Continuing a family history of military service*

This theme relates to the influence of the participants' relatives, friends, and colleagues in making decision to choose a career in the military. Painting a picture of an inherited military career, Evans and Teju explained that they enlisted in the military profession because of their family backgrounds and the legacy of their families' military histories:

I have always wanted to be an army because my uncle was a soldier in the Ghanaian army, and I admired him so much. So, I did not hesitate when I had the opportunity to join the British army (Evans).

I come from an army background – almost half of my family served in the Ghanaian army, and that was the drive (Teju).

Unequivocal about how coming from a military family influenced his military career decision, Kojo recounted how his love for the regimental lifestyle of military personnel and the weekly military chores of his father informed his military career choice:

My dad was a police officer, and we were raised in a police barracks. I saw and felt the regimental lifestyle of military personnel, and I liked it. I loved to iron my dad's uniform and polish his shoes every Sunday night. When I got to know that I could be allowed to enlist... I saw that as an opportunity to achieve a childhood dream (Kojo).

Furthermore, the participants' decision to join the BAF was also influenced by their friends. The following quotations typify this claim:

One of my childhood friends advised me to join the British army (Richard).

A friend in the army told me about it – he directed me to the office, and I took it from there (Evans).

I was [referred to the BAF] by a friend living in the UK. She told me the UK army was recruiting from the Commonwealth countries, so I applied (O'Dunny).

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3 The participants found legitimacy in their choice to join BAF by leveraging their personal  
4 connections and networks, relying on the influence and support of relatives, family friends,  
5 friends, and colleagues.  
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10 ***The appeal of the prestigious nature of a military career***

11 This theme relates to the participants' attraction to the military profession and its prestigious  
12 reputation. The participants' accounts demonstrate that they enlisted in the military because  
13 they were fascinated with the military, attracted to the image of a military career, and the  
14 positive stories about military they heard from friends and family members.  
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20 My friends, uncles, and cousins told me good things about serving in the British  
21 army... These inform my joining the military (Peter).  
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24 My friend influenced my joining the army. I admired his new military life. I was  
25 fascinated and thought the military would be good for me, too (Achebe).  
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29 The participants also demonstrated a love for the late queen of England and her country. Some  
30 participants joined the military based on a strong desire to give back to the country with which  
31 they had a shared colonial history. Others recalled the role of the BAF in restoring peace to  
32 some war-torn West-African countries (such as The Gambia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone).  
33 Joining the BAF afforded Harris, Abdul, and Joe the opportunity to serve and do something  
34 extraordinary for the UK – even if that meant fighting British in wars.  
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41 British army played a key role in bringing peace and freedom to Sierra Leone. It  
42 was always my motivation to help one day...to pay back in terms of what they [the  
43 British army] did for my country. So, I did not hesitate when the opportunity to  
44 join the British army came (Harris).  
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49 I love the queen [of England]. Consider my background – I am from Ghana, which  
50 was colonised by Britain. I saw joining the British army as my way of giving back  
51 to a country with which I have ties (Abdul).  
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55 Grounding their justification in the civic world, the participants demonstrate a sense of nobility  
56 and duty, and obligation to serve when justifying their decision to join the BAF.  
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### *Entering a Faustian bargain in the pursuit of a sustainable future*

This theme addresses how a military career is pursued because of a person's need for stability and security; a need to meet present and future needs; and a need to ensure continuous and long-term sustenance for themselves, and their family back home. The participants risked the dangers involved in military service and the associated restrictions on their rights and privileges, including restrictions on civil liberties contained within military law.

The military is dangerous, and they know that – that is why you are asked to sign loads of documents when you join saying [that] you can die, get injured, and all of that, and there is insurance when you get injured, and the military advises people to get insured (Lawal).

I joined the army because of life's circumstances. I had fears when it came to the issue of deployment...I did not mind because I did not want to go back to the street jobless. Although, I was scared that I might be sent to war but the idea of having to go back home to start all over again removed the fear from me (Solomon).

The participants also explained that joining the BAF was a way for them to have a better life and obtain British citizenship.

One of my aspirations was to become a [UK] citizen, because my siblings were living in the UK. I needed to get closer to them (Temisan).

I joined the army to have a better life and to become a British citizen...and it happened (Nkrumah).

Additionally, some participants joined the BAF because of honour, dignity, and pride that is associated with the profession.

I enlisted because the military is a profession of respect and honour (Peter).

Wherever I go, or wherever I apply for jobs, once I mention [that] I served in the British army, there is a form of respect (Harris).

Emphasising nuances and similarities in the situatedness of the study participants, some participants justify their decision to join BAF based on the justificatory logic of the green polity

grounded on the need for long-term stability, sustainability, and survival for themselves and their family.

## Discussion

In this article, we have highlighted the justifications provided by MMs for joining the BAF. Drawing on OJ theory, we have shed light on the multifaceted motivations and justifications for their enlistment in the BAF. We have also extended the extant literature on motivations for career choices in relation to military career. The military is championed as the career for people who want to have an enriching life and see the world through a dignified lens (Gee, 2008, 2007). Based on the vocabularies employed by the MMs, we identified multiple justifications for the participants' military career choices. These include passion, ambition, and love for the profession. Some participants perceived the military as a vocation, and their decision to join BAF was driven by a genuine passion for the military profession, a love of exploration, and a desire to take advantage of the opportunities the military would offer for travel and adventure. Domestic justifications relate to the influence of familial and friends. The subjective accounts of the participants reveal the significant influence of cultural backgrounds and societal norms on career decisions, influenced by factors such as family and relatives' expectations and influences (Thomas *et al.*, 2024). Indeed, the influence of family values; the need to uphold and continue a family history of military service; and cultural backgrounds played key roles in determining the MMs' career paths.

Furthermore, some MMs decision to join the BAF was influenced by the popular opinions that rated the profession highly (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). Civic justifications highlight a sense of duty and patriotism with some MMs' desire to serve their country and contribute to the greater good. Challenging the common assumption that the service of 'not all' MMs in the BAF was merely a way of earning a living and gaining UK citizenship, our findings reveal that some MMs enlisted in the BAF because of their colonial history with, and sense of duty to the UK, driven by love for the former Queen of England. Market justifications focus on financial security and supply-and-demand dynamics. Some MMs felt was a pressing need to find a means of financial sustenance and survival. Some MMs enlisted in the BAF because of employment security and economic opportunities. Industrial justifications relate to long-term career planning and organisational dynamics. Some of the participants enlisted to advance their professional and personal development and to attain leadership positions. They believed that service in the BAF would be a proactive career path that would provide a solid foundation for

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3 **their career development and advancement.** Green justifications centre on the pursuit of better  
4 living conditions and future sustainability, with military migrants viewing military service as  
5 a pathway to an improved quality of life and opportunities for personal growth (Boltanski and  
6 Thévenot, 2006; Lafaye and Thévenot, 1993).  
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11 An observed common denominator behind the MMs' decision to join the BAF was the  
12 contingency of the MMs' career 'way-finding' into the future – the need to find 'a path', having  
13 found themselves at a crossroads in life (e.g. a career dilemma, traumatic life events and  
14 personal crises, a need to bear family responsibilities or start supporting their family as the  
15 breadwinner/earner of the family, and job/financial security). **For some MMs, the BAF was a**  
16 **lifeline that offered a structured environment with clear benefits by which they support**  
17 **themselves and their family.** The findings of this study affirm extant studies that conclude that  
18 career-making decisions may be influenced by complex composition of interrelated factors  
19 (Grigorov and Spiridonov, 2018; Karlova, 2018; Wambu *et al.*, 2017), cross-cutting intrinsic  
20 factors (e.g. achievement, recognition, and autonomy) and extrinsic factors (e.g. the  
21 opportunity for improvement and career development, a good salary, early retirement, security,  
22 free education, certainty, and workplace predictability), including relational network and  
23 interpersonal factors (e.g. relatives, friends, and colleagues). Our study makes both theoretical  
24 and empirical contributions. Answering the call for multidisciplinary approaches in the field of  
25 military research (Gordon, 2016), our study thus contributes to the extant literature on career  
26 choice, military career, and OJ. Scholars have called for a unifying and all-encompassing career  
27 approach that links both traditional and contemporary career orientations with which an  
28 individual's career path can be studied (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Sullivan, 1999).  
29 Theoretically, our study advances theory by applying OJ theory's CWs as a unifying,  
30 globalising, and pluralist framework that consider both collectivism and individualism –  
31 objective and subject realities. Our use of OJ theory demonstrates an interplay of multi-career  
32 needs, orientations, and patterns driving career choices as expressed by the participants (Table  
33 1). Overall, our findings are consistent with motivations for career choices as stated in the OJ  
34 logic of justifications.  
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54 From a practical standpoint, our study provides a fresh perspective on the dynamics of the  
55 military career decisions of foreign nationals and may have significant implications for  
56 policymakers, particularly in the UK Ministry of Defence concerning the recruitment and  
57 retention of foreign nationals serving in the BAF. Our **findings indicate that the MMs joined**  
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3 the BAF during transitional life phases, seeking new career directions and opportunities. This  
4 discovery suggests that the BAF's recruitment strategies could be enhanced and tailored to  
5 attract individuals at this critical stage in their lives. The findings also reveal the diversity  
6 among the motivations for the MMs' enlistment in the BAF. Recognising this diversity in  
7 motivations is crucial for effective human resource management and retention strategies.  
8 Furthermore, the BAF may consider developing personalised career plans that consider  
9 individual motivations and career aspirations. It may also offer a range of incentives and  
10 benefits that cater to different motivational drivers. Furthermore, the diversity among the  
11 motivations for enlistment in the BAF suggests that long-term engagement and retention  
12 strategies need to be multifaceted and adaptable to individual needs and career stages. In this  
13 regard, to better help the BAF support or manage ethnic minorities within its ranks (Ware,  
14 2012), it may need to regularly review and update its retention strategies based on feedback  
15 from MMs to ensure they remain relevant and effective.

### 26 27 **Limitations and recommendations for future research**

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29 Despite its significance and valuable contributions, our study has some limitations. Since the  
30 MMs' stories are self-reported, they may have been subjective – the MMs may have been trying  
31 to present themselves in the best possible light. Therefore, it may not be possible to exclude a  
32 potential egocentric bias infused by the 'nostalgia and celebratory self-glorification' that  
33 normally makes people embellish their narratives when they are invited to report their life  
34 histories. Additionally, our data only comprise West-African MMs, which may make it difficult  
35 to generalise the study findings to other contexts as the unique socioeconomic experiences and  
36 colonial histories of West African MMs may not apply to MMs from different backgrounds. In  
37 this regard, future research could consider comparative research that would provide a broader  
38 understanding of career motivations across different contexts to ascertain whether similar or  
39 additional insights can be generated.

### 48 49 **Conclusion**

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52 This study has provided insights into career scholarship in the African context and according  
53 to African perspectives. Many studies often address the motivations for military service in  
54 broad terms with many focusing on economic motivations and job security. By considering the  
55 specific historical and cultural contexts of West African MMs, we also explored non-economic  
56 motivations (such as traumatic events or personal crises; the influence of a shared colonial  
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3 history; and love for the former Queen of England). In so doing, we have broadened the  
4 understanding of why individuals choose military careers. A holistic understanding of  
5 enlistment motivations is achieved through contextual integration, which acknowledges the  
6 interplay between individual choices and broader socio-historical factors.  
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**Table 1. Justification of the military migrants' decisions to join the British Armed Forces.**

<b><i>The use of justificatory values, semantic descriptors, or moral vocabularies/languages describing:</i></b>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>(1) Inspired justification/justifier</i></b></p> <p>Fascination; ambition; interest; imagination; admiration; the need to fulfil a passion or fantasy; a love of physical tasks and activities; the need to 'find a path/way', which sometimes calls for sacrifices on their part and for others around them but is also undertaken for the common good of others; a state of deficiency that drives a person to want to do or be better, which includes seeking liberation from a disadvantageous situation; a quest for adventure, including a need to explore or have questions answered; a need to do something 'big', which necessitates the taking of uncertain and dangerous paths.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>(2) Domestic justification/justifier</i></b></p> <p>The influence (negative or positive roles) played by the web of relational networks and the interpersonal ties of family members, friends, and colleagues, church members; the activities of socialisation agents in a person's life; valuing memories of past events and experiences.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>(3) Fame/public opinion justification/justifier</i></b></p> <p>The roles of social influencers and military-profession intermediaries whose high opinions and ratings helped (sometimes not) to legitimise the decision and action to enlist. The popular opinion and high poll ratings of some public social actors; the measure of public recognition and acknowledgement; the degree of visibility as perceived by others; public esteem; external success; validity; respect; honour; and approval.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>(4) Civic justification/justifier</i></b></p> <p>A sense of duty, nobility, and obligation to the society; the joy of performing a service; a sense of moral, social, and political obligation; a sense of patriotism; solidarity; fulfilling a social contract; and fairness.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>(5) Market justification/justifier</i></b></p> <p>A desire for financial security; the laws of exchange not only defined by a business relationship between buyers and sellers alone but also by other transactional relationships of supply and demand (e.g. a demand for workers in the BAF to support its intervention in major global conflicts, and the military migrants could supply that need).</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>(6) Industrial justification/justifier</i></b></p> <p>Strategic future, performance, productivity, and capacity as key parameters in the functionality of an organisation; a person's dignity or a threat to their dignity based on how they are treated; the future of the organisation expressed in the vocabulary 'Tomorrow is what counts'; cost savings; and career progression.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>(7) Green justification/justifier</i></b></p> <p>Making future projections for sustenance and survival to protect the self and future generations; better living conditions; countering adverse conditions back home; the opportunity to integrate into a country with perceived better socio-economic factors.</p>

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**Table 2. Data structure.**

