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

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Career choices: Exploring military migrants' justifications for their enlistment in the British Armed Forces

Abstract

Purpose – Using 'on justification' theory, this article explores the rationality and justification of the West-African military migrants for joining the British Armed Forces.

Design/methodology/approach – We utilise an interpretive qualitative research methodology in this study. We undertook semi-structured interviews with 42 military migrants who joined the British Armed Forces between 1998 and 2013.

Findings – We identify various factors that influenced the participants' decision to join the British Armed Forces, such as individual aspirations, the need to find a 'path' at a crossroad in life (e.g. a career dilemma or the loss of a parent), economic opportunities, and institutional incentives. Military migrants' career motivations are shaped by their deep affection for the Crown and their desire to give back to the country with which they share a colonial history.

Practical implications – The UK's Ministry of Defence, government, and policymakers could gain valuable insights from this study. The findings could significantly shape their recruitment and retention policies, thereby enhancing the attractiveness of the military profession. This could be a crucial step in addressing the recruitment challenges and personnel deficit currently faced by the British Armed Forces.

Originality/value – This study provides a fresh perspective on the dynamics of the military service of foreign-born veterans. The article focuses on underrepresented group (West-African military migrants) to enhance our understanding of their career motivations in the British Armed Forces. We identify and categorise the motivations and justifications for military migrants' enlistment in the British Armed Forces according to seven justifications, each depicting a career pattern informing the participants' motivations and justifications for their enlistment.

Keywords: career, military, British Armed Forces, recruitment, Commonwealth soldiers, military migrant, on justification.

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).

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

Justifications for career choices

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

Furthermore, the process of making career decisions involves considerations such as job availability, salary, prestige, genetic endowment, and specific abilities (Värlander *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, a person's professional identity (e.g. mastery, a sense of belonging, status, and esteem), self-interest (e.g. income, opportunities, and work-life balance), personality, development, education, counselling, and organisational psychology all influence their career

decisions (Tsakissiris and Grant-Smith, 2021). Bloom *et al.* (2021) suggest that there are individuals who are naturally suited to specific professions. Career choice involves intrinsic factors (e.g. interests related to a profession and its societal role), extrinsic factors (e.g. a desire for recognition and security), and interpersonal factors (e.g. socialisation agents like family members, friends, teachers, and community members) (Carpenter and Foster, 1977). Shoffner *et al.* (2015) add that domestic ties, cultural values, family history or background, expectations, and the need to honour family members are also influential factors in this regard. Likewise, cultural perceptions can significantly influence an individual's career aspirations and choices, as different cultures have varying perceptions of what constitutes a desirable or respectable career. Individualistic cultures emphasise personal interests and self-efficacy when making career decisions, whereas collectivist cultures prioritise family expectations and societal norms (Thomas *et al.*, 2024). Mitchell et al. (1999) conclude that chance, circumstances, and unforeseen events can also influence career choices.

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

Nevertheless, there are limited theoretical explorations and scarce empirical research in the UK in relation to the career journeys and experiences of ex-military personnel in general and British MMs in particular (Amour *et al.*, 2018). The mainstream career literature does not focus on the

voices of these minority groups and does not account for their career paths (Cohen and El-Sawad, 2006; Pringle and Mallon, 2003). Ware (2012) highlights the misunderstanding surrounding enlistment in the armed forces, as it is often perceived solely as a way of earning a living and gaining UK citizenship (Gee, 2008). This misunderstanding is due to the limited knowledge of the career journeys of MMs. To address the research gap and calls in the extant literature for research on MMs' career journeys and experiences (Grimell and Van den Berg, 2020), the present study explores the life-history narratives of F&C citizens with a focus on West-African soldiers of Commonwealth descent using OJ theory.

'On justification' of military migrants' choice to join the military

The call to investigate the career journeys of MMs using interdisciplinary methods (Gordon, 2016; Ware, 2012) has inspired our use of OJ theory. With narratives dominating the contemporary discourse (Burke et al., 2018), OJ theory is used in various academic studies. For example, Patriotta *et al.* (2011) applies the theory in their exploration of how organisations justify and preserve the legitimacy of their organisational structures. Gadinger (2016), through OJ theory, explains the rationales, justifications, and criticisms related to the fragile and normative character and practices of international relations. Regarding security and legal research, Levi *et al.* (2022) investigate the CWs of arrested suspects of crimes and use OJ theory to evaluate and provide justifications for police behaviours. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) identify six orders of worth (polities/CWs): 1. inspired, 2. domestic, 3. fame/public-opinion, 4. civic, 5. market, 6. Industrial, and 7. green polities (Lafaye and Thévenot, 1993) – with corresponding justificatory values, logics, and vocabularies. Each polity is linked to a general principle describing the differing models of justification (Levi *et al.*, 2022). Justification of choices, decisions, and actions in the inspired world are driven by excitement, terror, fascination, love, and passion. In the domestic world or polity, justification is predicated on customs, conventions, social structures, and familial and interpersonal connections. In the world of fame and public opinion, justification is grounded on the reality of public opinion, exposure, self-esteem, and the desire for recognition. Regarding the civic world, justification is established based on a sense of duty, nobility, and political or social obligation. In the market world, justification may be grounded on competition and natural rivalries or the need to satisfy individual desires, exploit opportunities, and own valuable possessions. Furthermore, within the OJ industrial and green polities, justification may be predicated on the need for development, progress, advancement, and future sustainability (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006;

Lafaye and Thévenot, 1993; Patriotta *et al.*, 2011). Nevertheless, OJ theory has been criticised as being too formal to be effective (Godechot, 2009). Gond et al., (2015) argue further that CWs only relate to actions related to consensus-building. According to Patriotta *et al.* (2011), justifying the legitimacy of world/polity arrangements is particularly challenging during moments of critical questioning. Nevertheless, scholars agree (Gadinger, 2016; Levi *et al.*, 2022) that the CW lens facilitates legitimate resolutions and enables efficient and reliable constructive dialogues.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1 shows and summarises the various justifications provided by the participants to justify their choice to pursue a military career in the BAF.

Research methodology

Context selection

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

Participant recruitment

We obtained ethical approval from the Brunel University Ethics Committee and approval was also obtained from the Foreign and Commonwealth Comrades Network (FCCN), a military charity group that supports F&C citizens who serve or have served in the BAF. The participants had to meet certain sampling and inclusion criteria to be considered eligible for participation in the study. 1. to be MMs of West-African Commonwealth descent; 2. to have joined the BAF between 1998 and 2013; and 3. to have transitioned from military service to the civilian world.

The rationale for this sampling logic, which focused on West-African ex-MMs who joined the BAF between 1998 and 2013, was not to limit the study. This time-limiting strategy was adopted because the period 1998–2013 (like joining the cavalry in 1914) was presumably not the best time to be entering the BAF, as the UK was involved in multiple deadly wars in places

such as Iraq and Afghanistan. The extant literature shows that in 1998, the UK government removed the five-year residency requirement for Commonwealth recruits (Ware, 2012). From 1998 to 2013, the BAF heavily recruited individuals from Commonwealth countries (Ware, 2012).

Participants were recruited using the snowballing technique, a chain-referral system in social networks, which helped us address the sampling difficulties involved in contacting hidden and hard-to-reach populations, such as MMs (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Hardesty *et al.*, 2019). Although it is effective for this reason, the snowball sampling technique has notable limitations concerning representativeness and selection bias, which limit the external validity of the sample (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). However, Hardesty *et al.* (2019) argue that researchers who study hard-to-reach populations are well justified in using purposive and snowballing sampling strategies, since such processes prioritise the opportunity to hear from neglected, vulnerable, or transitional populations. Once the interviews with the recommended participants from the first recruitment phase were complete, other potential participants were proposed and supported through telephone and private messaging, completing the participant recruitment process. Thus, the first study participant was the recruiter, while each referred respondent functioned as a recruiter until the desired sample size was achieved (Edwards *et al.*, 2015).

Data collection

We collected the data over eight months through in-depth interviews, field notes, and reviews of policy documentation. We conducted individual interviews using Zoom, a virtual video-meeting platform. The interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. Our interviews followed a life-history approach, an effective and data-rich methodology for systematic data collection (Burke et al., 2018). After conducting 20 interviews, we observed key terms and an emerging pattern signifying a theoretical saturation point. We were able to confirm the observed pattern by the 35th interview. To test data and theoretical saturation, we conducted interviews until we had undertaken 42 interviews. At this point, we found that no new concepts were being introduced (Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

We interviewed ex-MMs of West-African origin (39 males, 3 females) who met the study's criteria. The participants' military experience varied between 4 and 16 years, and the years since they left military service and entered civilian work ranged from 3 to 21 years. The age range of the participants was between 33 and 46 years old, with an average age of 38.2 years

old. The participants were a diverse group representing various West-African nationalities, including 28 from Ghana, 1 from Sierra Leone, 3 from The Gambia, and 10 from Nigeria. The data suggests that each MM's gender, age, rank, or country did not define their experiences. Aside from the unique challenges faced by transitioning military personnel, the personal stories of F&C soldiers showed a commonality in their shared experiences as foreign nationals. The MMs highlighted the importance of their support networks in navigating their career and keeping them sane through many challenges. All participants are now residents of the UK, having naturalised since their service in the BAF.

Data analysis

Our data analysis involved thematic coding and interpretation, guided by constant comparison and reflexivity to interpret the MMs' career journeys. After transcribing the interviews, we proceeded with the data analysis according to three primary phases: 1. data preparation, 2. data organisation, and 3. reporting the research findings (Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

We carefully reviewed the individual transcripts and textual data to understand their context and uncover valuable insights. This was done to ensure the consistency and authenticity of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2020). In the first stage of textual analysis, we prioritised the documentation of the actions and statements of the participants. In the second stage, we focused on developing conceptual categories by analysing the participants' responses inductively within their respective contexts (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). Grouping and labelling the first-order concepts allowed us to identify similar elements based on significant events. We then came across a broader array of segments and classified them into categories. Our focus in the third step was on encoding the emerging clusters, their descriptions, and their integration into a theoretical context. To ensure accuracy and identify important narratives and concepts, we compared the transcripts and interview data with other data sources, like field notes and policy documents (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). We gave the participants the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and provide feedback in order to validate the accuracy and completeness of our qualitative data. These processes provided external validation and thereby enhance the study's credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Additionally, the incorporation of OJ theory bolsters the study's reliability and allowed us to establish connections between the identified themes and theoretical constructs, which in turn enabled us to determine the vocabularies utilised by the MMs when justifying their decision to

join the BAF (see Table 1). Using an inductive approach (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), we created the initial codes based on the broad categories of justificatory vocabularies provided by OJ theory – in the CWs (e.g. the codes included 'seeking purpose', 'family tradition', 'patriotic duty', 'economic stability', and 'future sustainability'). We determined the themes by grouping related codes under the appropriate CWs of justification. The final interpretation involved our connection of the identified themes to the specific principles and values of each CW in OJ theory; for example, answering the question of 'What's next?' at life's crossroad. The decisions of the participants to join the BAF demonstrate a quest for direction and a way to navigate life's uncertainties, and such justifications align with the principles of the inspired world, which values inspiration, passion, purpose, and seeking new opportunities and direction at critical life junctures. We found statements related to these during the open-coding process, which were then connected to the inspired world in the theme development stage. The pursuit of economic stability and future sustainability as well as the risks, costs, and sacrifices they were willing to take were identified regarding the MMs' having entered a Faustian bargain in pursuit of a sustainable future. The green world's emphasis on long-term sustainability resonates with the participants' quest for a stable future for themselves and their families. Considering economic and sustainability factors, statements regarding financial stability and future projections were categorised and associated with the green world in the theme development stage. This led to the development of an aggregate dimension that systematically connects related statements through four ubiquitous themes (discussed in the research findings section below), ultimately answering the study question about how the MMs justify their decision to join the BAF (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). A summary of the data analysis is presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Research findings

Our analysis reveals four themes underlying the MMs' justifications for their enlistment in the military: 1. finding 'a path' at a crossroad in life; 2. continuing a family history of military service; 3. the appeal of the prestigious nature of a military career; and 4. entering a Faustian bargain in the hope of a sustainable future.

Finding 'a path' at a crossroad in life

When asked how they justify their decision to join the BAF, the participants provide justifications using vocabularies that demonstrated their existing (functional) ties to the UK

before their decision to enlist. Commonwealth nations share similar colonial histories and strong historical and political links.

> My parents were already here. While in secondary school, during the holidays, I would come. I have been coming and going from the UK on holidays (Raymond).

> I first came in 2006 on holiday. I would come and go [to and from the UK] on holiday (Temisan).

> I came to further my studies. I joined the BAF after my first degree in financial economics (Charles).

Some participants also commented that their decision to join the BAF was based on their consideration of the realities of life, a quest and search for 'a path' after having reached a crossroad in life, and the need to plan for the next phase of life. They had considered other possibilities or opportunities – the available options – considering their changing personal circumstances or their responses to personal or family circumstances. Similarly, Nkrumah and Solomon articulated a justification for enlistment because of a traumatic life event – the loss of their fathers.

> When I completed my studies, I wondered, 'What next?' (Esther).

> I abandoned my studies at London Computing College after the first year because it was like a repetition of what I had done back home. I decided to weigh and compare my options [what was available] and wondered 'What next?' (Abdul).

> I lost my dad and finally had to step up and take responsibility for my family (Solomon).

> My grandad brought me to the UK when my dad passed away. I needed to 'man up' (Nkrumah).

Some of the participants explained that their enlistment was an opportunity for them to receive further education, gain new career experience, and focus on their personal growth. The participants who had completed their first degree 'back home' enlisted in the BAF from their home country and were at different stages in their careers. These participants justified their

military career decision by using vocabularies descriptive of a quest to do something great and to have a good career.

> I was a bank trainee at Barclays Bank in Ghana before I came to the UK. But I
> wanted something big… (Tutu).

> I used the military as a stepping stone rather than going to compete with the
> British nationals who have better chances than I do (Abdul).

Nkrumah succinctly summarised a narrative that recurred throughout the accounts and stories of all our MMs. Life challenges and the British government permission of Commonwealth nationals to enlist was a motivation and justification for some of the participants. Nkrumah went on to explain that they did not realise all that a military career entailed until they had arrived at their regiment after training and they were being prepared to be deployed to Iraq:

> When I signed up, I did not realise that I had just signed up to go to war. When I
> completed my training and got to my regiment, I realised that they were getting
> ready to go to Iraq, and I was part of the soldiers who would be going to war. At
> that time, I became very worried – I panicked. I felt like I was going to die
> (Nkrumah).

Other participants explained that joining the BAF, for them, was more like signing up in a leap of faith to an undefined path. They lacked sufficient knowledge about the military and enlistment therein. Enticed by promises of better life and good career mentioned in military recruitment materials, they took a leap of faith.

> It was like going to a place you know nothing about. I knew nothing about the
> military before I joined (Raymond).

> I didn't know anything about the army. Adjusting to life in the military was difficult
> (Achebe).

The military may not have been the desired career choice for some participants, but it was a providential compass and stepping stone for them to achieve a good career and purpose in life.

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).

The participants found legitimacy in their choice to join BAF by leveraging their personal connections and networks, relying on the influence and support of relatives, family friends, friends, and colleagues.

The appeal of the prestigious nature of a military career

This theme relates to the participants' attraction to the military profession and its prestigious reputation. The participants' accounts demonstrate that they enlisted in the military because they were fascinated with the military, attracted to the image of a military career, and the positive stories about military they heard from friends and family members.

> My friends, uncles, and cousins told me good things about serving in the British army… These inform my joining the military (Peter).

> My friend influenced my joining the army. I admired his new military life. I was fascinated and thought the military would be good for me, too (Achebe).

The participants also demonstrated a love for the late queen of England and her country. Some participants joined the military based on a strong desire to give back to the country with which they had a shared colonial history. Others recalled the role of the BAF in restoring peace to some war-torn West-African countries (such as The Gambia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone). Joining the BAF afforded Harris, Abdul, and Joe the opportunity to serve and do something extraordinary for the UK – even if that meant fighting British in wars.

> British army played a key role in bringing peace and freedom to Sierra Leone. It was always my motivation to help one day…to pay back in terms of what they [the British army] did for my country. So, I did not hesitate when the opportunity to join the British army came (Harris).

> I love the queen [of England]. Consider my background – I am from Ghana, which was colonised by Britain. I saw joining the British army as my way of giving back to a country with which I have ties (Abdul).

Grounding their justification in the civic world, the participants demonstrate a sense of nobility and duty, and obligation to serve when justifying their decision to join the BAF.

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

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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

their career development and advancement. Green justifications centre on the pursuit of better living conditions and future sustainability, with military migrants viewing military service as a pathway to an improved quality of life and opportunities for personal growth (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Lafaye and Thévenot, 1993).

An observed common denominator behind the MMs' decision to join the BAF was the contingency of the MMs' career 'way-finding' into the future – the need to find 'a path', having found themselves at a crossroads in life (e.g. a career dilemma, traumatic life events and personal crises, a need to bear family responsibilities or start supporting their family as the breadwinner/earner of the family, and job/financial security). For some MMs, the BAF was a lifeline that offered a structured environment with clear benefits by which they support themselves and their family. The findings of this study affirm extant studies that conclude that career-making decisions may be influenced by complex composition of interrelated factors (Grigorov and Spirdonov, 2018; Karlova, 2018; Wambu *et al.*, 2017), cross-cutting intrinsic factors (e.g. achievement, recognition, and autonomy) and extrinsic factors (e.g. the opportunity for improvement and career development, a good salary, early retirement, security, free education, certainty, and workplace predictability), including relational network and interpersonal factors (e.g. relatives, friends, and colleagues). Our study makes both theoretical and empirical contributions. Answering the call for multidisciplinary approaches in the field of military research (Gordon, 2016), our study thus contributes to the extant literature on career choice, military career, and OJ. Scholars have called for a unifying and all-encompassing career approach that links both traditional and contemporary career orientations with which an individual's career path can be studied (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Sullivan, 1999). Theoretically, our study advances theory by applying OJ theory's CWs as a unifying, globalising, and pluralist framework that consider both collectivism and individualism – objective and subject realities. Our use of OJ theory demonstrates an interplay of multi-career needs, orientations, and patterns driving career choices as expressed by the participants (Table 1). Overall, our findings are consistent with motivations for career choices as stated in the OJ logic of justifications.

From a practical standpoint, our study provides a fresh perspective on the dynamics of the military career decisions of foreign nationals and may have significant implications for policymakers, particularly in the UK Ministry of Defence concerning the recruitment and retention of foreign nationals serving in the BAF. Our findings indicate that the MMs joined

the BAF during transitional life phases, seeking new career directions and opportunities. This discovery suggests that the BAF's recruitment strategies could be enhanced and tailored to attract individuals at this critical stage in their lives. The findings also reveal the diversity among the motivations for the MMs' enlistment in the BAF. Recognising this diversity in motivations is crucial for effective human resource management and retention strategies. Furthermore, the BAF may consider developing personalised career plans that consider individual motivations and career aspirations. It may also offer a range of incentives and benefits that cater to different motivational drivers. Furthermore, the diversity among the motivations for enlistment in the BAF suggests that long-term engagement and retention strategies need to be multifaceted and adaptable to individual needs and career stages. In this regard, to better help the BAF support or manage ethnic minorities within its ranks (Ware, 2012), it may need to regularly review and update its retention strategies based on feedback from MMs to ensure they remain relevant and effective.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

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

Conclusion

This study has provided insights into career scholarship in the African context and according to African perspectives. Many studies often address the motivations for military service in broad terms with many focusing on economic motivations and job security. By considering the specific historical and cultural contexts of West African MMs, we also explored non-economic motivations (such as traumatic events or personal crises; the influence of a shared colonial

history; and love for the former Queen of England). In so doing, we have broadened the understanding of why individuals choose military careers. A holistic understanding of enlistment motivations is achieved through contextual integration, which acknowledges the 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.

The use of justificatory values, semantic descriptors, or moral vocabularies/languages describing:
(1) Inspired justification/justifier 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.
(2) Domestic justification/justifier 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.
(3) Fame/public opinion justification/justifier 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.
(4) Civic justification/justifier 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.
(5) Market justification/justifier 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).
(6) Industrial justification/justifier 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.
(7) Green justification/justifier 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.

Table 2. Data structure.

First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
When I finished [university], I was like, 'What next?' I wanted to continue my education, because I had a little money, but after that, I could not just take the certificate back to Ghana, because of my background. I need to have something to do that would make my life comfortable. I was sponsoring myself, and I was allowed to do 20 hours as a student. So, I was like, 'I need to find another strategy'. I had to find a way to sort myself out.	A (career) dilemma of not knowing what to do next post-university education. A need for liberation/escape from the limited opportunities and adverse conditions in the home country as well as disadvantageous backgrounds; a desire for a better life; a need to escape socio-economic constraints The quest for security and stability amid traumatic events and personal crises.	Finding 'a path' at a crossroads in life.
The army was already a job option for me when I was a kid, because my uncle was a soldier in the Ghanaian army. I come from an army background – almost half of my family served in the Ghanaian army, and that was the drive. My dad was a police officer, and we were raised in a police barrack. I saw and felt the regimental lifestyle of a force worker and liked it. When I was in school my brother joined the UK army and, I felt motivated to join.	The military as a family job. A family background of military service. A legacy of military history. The military as a calling.	Continuing a family history of military service.
The military has opportunities that can be utilised as well as benefits. More so: I could get trained, gain knowledge. It would bring respect and prepare me for civilian life. So, I decided to enlist. The military is a profession of respect and honour… When people in civvy street know you served, they respect you more. My oldest brother had finished his secondary education in Ghana and got a scholarship to Cambridge University. While studying, he was in the territorial army, he came home. He was in his army uniform and took pictures, and that really attracted me. What necessitated my enlistment is that a friend had already enlisted. We had not seen him in a very long time, and I think one of the weekends he came, he was cooling with his car. I thought, 'He's got a new life'.	The many benefits and opportunities that characterise military service. The enormous skills to be gained. The military's assistance in helping its servicemen become better people and have a good start in life.	The appeal of the prestigious nature of a military career.
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: 'If you have to die, then you die'. The military is dangerous, and we know that. I saw the army as a last resort to stay in this country. That is why I joined – basically, to get my papers. The UK and the BAF were at the peak of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I was scared… However, I felt encouraged, because the military makes for a great start in life. I came here to seek greener pastures for myself and my family. It was not the job I really wanted to do, but I chose it because of my situation when I came to the country. It would help me harness my potential and what I envisioned out of life for me and security for future generations.	The need to meet present and future needs. Achieving a vision for one's life and future. The assurance of continuous and long-term sustenance for oneself, one's family, and one's relatives in the home country. The sustenance of future generations. The legal residency for future integration into British society.	Entering a Faustian bargain in the pursuit of a sustainable future.